The Essential Guide to Graduate Admission Tests: GRE, GMAT, LSAT, MCAT

BY MANYA CHYLINSKI

Just like in the undergraduate application process, standardized tests are designed to help graduate schools do two specific things: understand your abilities or knowledge, and compare those skills to the other program applicants. Standardized tests also give schools the most objective information possible about your aptitude and skill level. It's all in the name of figuring out if you have what it takes to succeed in the graduate program.

So which test should you take? It depends on the degree you want to earn and the schools you apply to.

The good news is there are only four tests to worry about: GRE, GMAT, MCAT, or LSAT. The (sort of) bad news is that you will likely have to take one of them. Admission requirements vary, so check with your intended school(s) to find out what scores are required or recommended.

How do I prepare for a test?
Back in high school, were you able to breeze through the SAT or ACT on just some flashcards and a large iced coffee? Well, that won't work for graduate admission tests. You need to prepare. For some students, that means taking a course. For others, it means a lot of studying and taking sample tests on their own. It comes down to knowing what works best for you and how much you can or want to invest in the process.

One way to study for any graduate school admission test is to review sample questions as well as examples from past tests. This will help you get comfortable with the types of questions asked, the structure and formatting of the test, and the timing. You don't want to be surprised by anything when you show up on test day.

"Knowing what to expect before the test allows you to focus your
time during the test on reading and answering the questions," says Dawn Piacentino, Director of Communications and Services for the GRE Program at Educational Testing Service. "It also helps you feel more confident on test day so that you can do your best."

Test prep becomes easier when you know what type of student you are and which study methods are most effective for you. "There is no blanket statement about whether or not test preparation courses will help a student be more successful," says Dr. Karen Johnson, Associate Dean for Admissions at Baylor College of Medicine. "You have to know yourself and how you learn. But one thing is sure...you must do something to prepare. That is your best chance to do as well as possible on the test."

**GRE**

The GRE is administered by Educational Testing Service (ETS). They offer two tests: the GRE revised General Test and Subject Tests in seven disciplines. The GRE revised General Test is accepted at thousands of graduate and business schools around the world. It measures your skills and aptitude in verbal reasoning, critical thinking, and writing. The test has three sections:

**Analytical Writing**

Two essays measure your critical-thinking and analytical writing skills, and reading and reasoning abilities. This test is scored by trained human readers, and then the score is reviewed by a computer program.

- **Computer test:** One section with two 30-minute essay tasks
- **Paper test:** Two sections, each containing one 30-minute essay task

**Verbal Reasoning**

Multiple-choice questions measure your ability to understand what you read and how you apply your reasoning skills.

- **Computer test:** Two 30-minute sections, each containing 20 questions
- **Paper test:** Two 35-minute sections, each containing 25 questions

**Quantitative Reasoning**

Multiple-choice questions measure your ability to analyze quantitative information and solve problems, with a focus on basic mathematical skills and concepts in four areas: arithmetic, algebra, geometry, and data analysis.

- **Computer test:** Two 35-minute sections, each containing 20 questions
- **Paper test:** Two 40-minute sections, each containing 20 questions

The GRE revised General Test also contains an unscored section and a research section that do not count toward your score. The unscored section contains questions that ETS is testing for future exams; however, you will not know which section this is, so it is important to treat the entire test equally. The research section is always last and clearly marked.

The Verbal and Quantitative Reasoning sections of the computer test are adaptive by section. This means the computer selects the difficulty level of the second section of the test that you take based on your performance in the first section. Within each section, all questions contribute equally to your final score, which is based on the total number of questions you answer correctly and the difficulty level of the questions in that section.

You can also choose which questions to answer first on the computer test, and you can skip questions, go back to answered questions, and even change your answers. If you are fairly certain you've answered a question wrong, changing your answer could be a good thing. "New ETS research suggests that students who thoughtfully change their answers are likely to improve their scores," says Piacentino. "Most test takers who changed their answers went from wrong to right and boosted their scores. Also, research showed that changing answers helped test takers at all ability levels."

Finally, should you elect to take the GRE more than once, you only have to share your highest score with schools through a program ETS calls ScoreSelect. You can take the test once every 21 days and up to five times within a 12-month period.

Some graduate schools also require or recommend that applicants submit scores for the GRE Subject Test, of which there are seven:

- Biochemistry, Cell and Molecular Biology
- Biology
- Chemistry
- Literature in English
- Mathematics
- Physics
- Psychology

These paper tests measure your knowledge about specific subjects and are intended for students with an undergraduate major or extensive background in a certain subject area. Even if the schools you are applying to do not require a GRE Subject Test, taking one in a subject in which you excel can help you stand out among the applicant pool.

**GMAT**

The Graduate Management
Admission Test is administered by the Graduate Management Admission Council. Most accredited business schools in the United States require a GMAT score as part of their admission packet.

The test is designed to measure analytical skills as opposed to your technical knowledge of specific subject matter. The test sections—Analytical Writing Assessment, Integrated Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning, and Verbal Reasoning—measure your reasoning and critical-thinking skills, such as your ability to make judgments, conduct analysis, and solve problems.

Similar to the GRE, two sections of the GMAT are computer adaptive, with your subsequent questions chosen based on how you answered previous questions. Your score also takes into account the difficulty of your questions and the number of correct responses.

LSAT

The Law School Admission Test, administered by the Law School Admission Council, is required by almost every law school accredited by the American Bar Association. It too measures reading and reasoning skills rather than specific knowledge, particularly key skills that are necessary to be a successful law student.

"This is a test of skills we all have on some level, skills that are used in college work," says James Lorié, Associate Director of Item Development at the Law School Admission Council (LSAC). "If you want to go to law school, practice and develop those skills in your course work while you are still an undergrad."

Questions run the gamut in their difficulty, says Lorié. "The test does not require any specialized background knowledge, but it does presume a general level of knowledge that can be expected of college-educated test takers, as the test is for undergraduates or those who have completed an undergraduate degree. But we make sure not to presume knowledge that is too arcane or obscure. We also work to ensure that the test is not too accessible to one part of the population than another."

The test has five multiple-choice sections: reading comprehension, analytical reasoning, two logical reasoning sections, and an unscoring section with new questions the LSAC is testing. There is also an unscored writing question (per usual, a mystery). Each section lasts 35 minutes.

MCAT

The Medical College Admission Test is administered by the Association of American Medical Colleges. Most US and Canadian medical schools require MCAT scores as part of their admission packet.

The MCAT tests specific scientific knowledge in three areas, as well as critical-thinking and reasoning skills:

- Biological and Biochemical Foundations of Living Systems
- Chemical and Physical Foundations of Biological Systems
- Psychological, Social, and Biological Foundations of Behavior
- Critical Analysis and Reasoning Skills

"The test is not the end-all, be-all of who will be a good medical student and a good doctor," says Dr. Johnson at Baylor College of Medicine. "It is a useful tool to predict who will do well in medical school, a way for us to understand the foundation of a student's knowledge and his or her strengths and weaknesses as a learner."

Baylor has tracked average MCAT scores and medical school GPAs, so they have a good sense of what scores reflect who will succeed in their curriculum. "We look for diversity of academic backgrounds, personal experiences, and attributes. The MCAT is still, however, accepted as a way to determine both funds of knowledge and the application of knowledge for future physicians," says Dr. Johnson.

These tests are just one of the tools admission committees use to decide who will do well in their programs. They help them compare you to other applicants and determine the best students to admit. With years of experience, most schools understand how test scores correspond with student performance, and they know what the test scores tell them.

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