Warning: GRE Changes Are Closer Than They Appear

On the passenger side rearview mirror, you’ve seen this: “objects in mirror are closer than they appear.” Well, there are major changes brewing for the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) General Test that go into effect August 2011. So if you are planning a graduate school application Fall 2011 or Spring 2012, you’ll need to be careful about your planning and study strategies, depending on when you take the GRE. I’ll update you here on the key changes to consider, but for more complete information, I highly recommend you check out http://ets.org/gre/revised_general/scores/ for the most up-to-date information. Most of the information in this article is courtesy of the Educational Testing Service (ETS): http://ets.org/gre/.

Changes to the GRE General Test

The current GRE is divided into three sections: Verbal, Quantitative, and Analytical. Those three sections remain, but substantial changes will occur within these sections. For the Verbal section, there will no longer be antonym nor analogy questions, but there will be new text comprehension questions, sentence equivalence questions, and an increased emphasis on reading comprehension. In some cases, you will be asked to highlight parts of a reading that yielded the answers you chose for the item. The idea is to measure a student’s higher-level verbal skills in this revised section.

For the quantitative section, there will be an increased emphasis on answering questions based on real-life scenarios, as well as how to interpret data. For some problems you will enter your answer (called numeric entry), rather than select from multiple-choice alternatives. Additionally, an on-screen calculator will be available during these sections.

For the Analytical section, more focused responses will be the goal of the revised instructions and prompts. The one analytical section will have two separately-timed writing tasks. As the different sections of the GRE are presented, the Analytical section will always be first.

Speaking of timing, the revised GRE will be a bit longer that the current GRE test; the revised GRE will take about 3 hours, 45 minutes to complete. You’ll start with the Analytical writing section, followed by more sections (and these sections can occur in any order): two Verbal sections, two Quantitative sections, one unscored section (could be either Verbal or Quantitative), and perhaps a research section (if you have a research section, it will be labeled as such and not scored—this is how the GRE continues to develop new items to be used in the future). Within a section, you’ll now be able to “preview and review,” which means you can skip a question and come back to it later. Within a section, you can change and edit your answers.

How The Scoring Is Changing

There are huge changes in store for the Verbal and Quantitative sections of the GRE. Rather than scores from 200 to 800 in increments of 10, each subsection will be scored on a scale from 130 to 170 in 1-point increments. Thus, no longer will there be “V+Q = 1000” as a guideline for graduate admissions, but it might look like V+Q = 298. As of now, there is not a conversion formula available to equate old scores with the new scoring system; it will probably take a couple of months of test-takers to provide GRE with the data to make that conversion table reliable (which may explain the 50% savings offer—see below).

I think this also means that during the transition, graduate schools will have a more difficult time judging what the new GRE scores mean. We have decades of experience knowing what V+Q score generally represent; graduate programs that required a 1200 V+Q will now have to recalibrate their cutoff scores based on the new metric; this could be time-consuming and confusing during the transition, so students need to be aware of this (and perhaps consider taking the “current” test before it is out-of-date). I recommend that you check with specific graduate schools you are applying to and inquire if they have a preference for “current” or “revised” during this transition period.

The Timeline for Changes

You can start to take the revised GRE starting August 2011, but the first scores for the revised GRE will not be available until mid-November 2011. So if your graduate program needs your GRE scores prior to November 15, plan on taking the current test prior to August 2011. Once the new scoring system (and presumably mean scores and other descriptive statistics) is in place, GRE estimates that the regular reporting period of 10-15 days should return by December 2011. If it suits you, ETS is offering a 50% off deal on the revised GRE if you take the test between August 1 and September 30, 2011. Remember, however, these scores won’t be sent to schools until mid-November.

The ETS folks who prepare the GRE are quite generous in their sharing of resources, so be sure to check out their web site (http://ets.org/gre/revised_general/prepare) for free preparation materials, free software that simulates the GRE test taking experience, and a free PDF practice book based on the revised GRE. Also, you can visit your favorite local bookstore or Amazon.com for scores of books designed to help you on the GRE General Test. Good luck!

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