

# HOW TO PREPARE FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL ENTRANCE EXAMS

by Linda Trevarthen, Manager, Testing Services, Michigan State University

Students who have taken these tests all say the same thing regarding test preparation. Two things make the biggest difference: *Familiarization* with the test rules, format, and content; and the practice of reading widely outside coursework.

For the majority of students, this is easier than you might think and does not require an expensive commercial prep course.

This article will cover:

1. Eliminating the Unknowns related to test rules, format, procedure, and test day administration.
2. How To Do a Self-Diagnostic Test and some additional tips for targeting problem areas
3. Best-kept test prep secret: Read more! How to get more "outside reading" into your everyday life without even trying
4. A successful approach to faster and better studying

## **#1 Eliminating the Unknowns related to test rules, format, procedure, and test day administration.**

First, get the answers to these questions from the school(s) to which you're applying:

*What test is required?*

*What score do I have to get?*

*When does my score have to be received by the school(s) to which I'm applying?*

Get the answers to these questions from the official registration bulletin (usually available in your school's Testing Office) or from the official web site:

*When is the test offered? (year round? or only on a few national dates?)*

*Is there a deadline for application?*

*How do I register? (by phone, mail, web?)*

*Where is the test offered? (at my school? or will I have to drive some distance?)*

*What is the test about?*

*How is it scored, and what is the score range?*

*What are the test day rules?*

*Can I get copies of old tests from the company?*

*How long does it take between test day and receipt of official scores?*

*How much does the test cost?*

*What is the re-test policy? (any waiting period? any limit on how often?)*

*What is the re-schedule policy? (any extra fees?)*

*What is the I.D. policy? ("student" I.D.s are generally not considered "official" I.D.s, so what does constitute an "official" I.D.?)*

*What is the score reporting policy? (any extra fees?)*

Some Additional Suggestions When It Gets Closer to Test Day:

**The Testing Room:** If possible, check out rooms similar to those which will be used for the test and get a "feel" for them. ----Imagine the room full of examinees, imagine sitting there for 4 hours or more. How's the lighting? How's the temperature? Will you want to bring a seat cushion for the chair? What are you going to wear? Wear something comfortable and dress in layers so you can adjust to a cooler or warmer room. Keep in mind that you will be *assigned* to a room and a seat. You will not be allowed to choose your own.

**Parking:** What's the parking situation? Where can you park? Is there a charge for parking? If you're testing at a university, is there a home football game that day? If so, how might that affect drive time to the test, parking at the test, noise distraction during the test, and exiting the campus?

**Test Day Rules:** Review the test day rules and regulations. What kind of ID is required? Make sure you have one or more alternate I.D.s with you! What can you bring into the testing room and what is not allowed? (*Bring a watch - but make sure the alarm on it is turned off! Consider also bringing kleenex, aspirin, extra pencils, and a healthy snack for the break. What about earplugs, seat cushion, breath mints...? Are they allowed?*) How long will the entire test administration take, including check-in, pre-test procedures, exam, breaks, post-test procedures?

**Getting To The Test:** How will you make sure you get there on time? (Set 2-3 alarm clocks? Make sure there's gas in your car, or confirm your ride if going with someone else, or confirm the bus or taxi arrangements. Check the weather forecast. Be prepared for the unexpected!) If you arrive too late, it is likely that you will not be admitted.

## **#2 How To Do a Self-Diagnostic Test and some additional tips for targeting problem areas**

This might be the very best first step in test preparation. It is preparation, familiarization, practice, and self-diagnosis all wrapped up in one package. And it just may save you an enormous amount of time in the long run. So many prospective test-takers ask: "How long should I prepare for this?" Only one person can answer this question for you: you. You might need only a small amount of "familiarization." You might need more extensive preparation. You might benefit from tutoring or from multiple practice tests. How do you find out? Take a practice test and do a "Self Diagnosis."

"Self-diagnosis" means that you do all of this yourself: for yourself, with yourself, to yourself. There is no need to go out and buy a thing called a "self-diagnostic" test. You can find sample tests in your library, and sometimes on the web. (See below.) Then just go somewhere quiet, time yourself while you take the test, chart what you know and don't know, and score it. (Detailed instructions below.) Doing this on your own is an incredibly useful step in test preparation.

So...Where do you find a "sample test"? Some test registration bulletins contain a whole sample test. You can also usually purchase sample tests directly from the company. Nearly all university libraries have a large selection of test study guides, all of which contain sample tests. And you can purchase these study guides in most bookstores, too. It's best to start with the "free" options like the library! If you use a study guide from the library, you won't be able to write in the book, and you probably won't be able to take it home. So, go to the library armed with a tablet of paper, a watch, pencils or pens in 2 different colors of lead or ink, and maybe earplugs, too.)

When you do this self-diagnostic test, keep in mind that you don't have to do it all in one sitting. In fact, it would probably be more helpful and less stressful to do it in several installments. If you're doing the GRE, then you could do the verbal section one day, the math section another day, and the writing section a third day. Do whatever feels best. Stay motivated. Don't burn yourself out.

A self-diagnostic test focuses on two things:

- 1) Getting a feel for the timing; and
- 2) Figuring out "what you know", "what you don't know", and "what lies in between."

While you take each section of your sample test do two things:

**Time yourself:** If you are not finished with the section when the time is up, then mark where you are and change to a different colored ink/lead, then keep on going. When you are finished, score it both ways---how many did you get right in the time limit, and how many did you get right with unlimited time? The point of this is to see

whether you get more correct answers if you have extra time. You need to change the lead/ink color so that, if you go back to a previous question and change your answer, you'll know to count the first answer in your "time limit" scoring and the changed answer in your "unlimited time" scoring. If you get lots more right with more time, you probably just need to practice speeding up. How much extra time did you take? Did you really need it? Did you change many answers? If so, were you right the first time, or was your "changed" answer the correct choice? What else can you learn about your performance under timed pressure?

**Chart what you know and what you don't know:** What this means is that you need to have a very clear sense of what proportion of the test you clearly know already and what proportion of the test is beyond your current level of knowledge. Here's how to "chart" this in a very simple way. (You don't need a detailed graph, you don't need a fancy "data analysis", you just need a good overall picture.) Make some kind of mark by every question you are positive you answered correctly -- e.g., you could write "p" for "positive" next to the question. Also, make some kind of mark by every question about which you are clueless --- e.g., you could "x" those questions as though you are crossing them out. Most people will probably end up marking a few questions with a "p" and a few questions with an "x". It's that middle group, the ones on which you are making an "educated guess", which should be your primary concern in the early stages of preparation. (For now, don't worry about what you 'already know' and don't worry about those questions that are way beyond you.)

Graduate school entrance exams are designed to measure knowledge acquired over a long period, specifically, knowledge acquired through high school and the first several years of undergraduate work, therefore most of the questions on these exams should be at least somewhat familiar to you. These tests are written by faculty from graduate programs around the country and they are governed by boards composed of faculty from around the country. Their purpose is not to trick examinees. Nor is their purpose to require complicated test-taking strategies. Their purpose is simply to provide one additional perspective on your ability to handle graduate-level work.

Take a careful look at all the questions you did not mark with either a "p" or an "x". Is there any kind of pattern to the ones you got right? Is there any kind of pattern to the ones you got wrong? To use a simple example, let's say you're looking at a math section that consisted of arithmetic through calculus... And let's say you studied math up through trig, but no further. You should have been "positive" about all of the arithmetic questions, you probably marked all the calculus questions with an "x" and the rest fell into that "middle ground". In that middle ground, let's say you got most of the algebra questions right, a few of the geometry questions right, and most of the trig questions wrong. The easiest way to begin "studying" for this section of the test would be to put both calculus and trig right out of your mind. You never learned calculus, after all, and your trig memory is obviously the weakest. Focus hard on algebra and focus slightly on basic geometry.

When you feel as though your memory in these two areas is becoming brighter (through review and practice), take another self-diagnostic test in math. Chances are, your score will have improved significantly and all you've done is re-awaken information already in your brain. Repeat this procedure until your score on that section is where it needs to be based on the selection criteria of the schools to which you are applying.

## **Tips for Problem Areas:**

### **Verbal Skills:**

Increase the amount and scope of your outside reading immediately (it's easier than you think---see #3 below) and attend to it daily--if only for 5 minutes. The results of increased intellectually diverse outside reading are like a minor miracle.

Subscribe to a word-a-day website, such as [Merriam-Webster](#) or [Wordsmith](#)

Take a workshop/seminar in critical reading. I

Use your [dictionary](#) more often.

**Math:**

If your basic arithmetic skills are rusty, consider using a high school level study guide to polish them (GED, ACT, SAT). Find these in bookstores, libraries, and on the web.

If algebra and geometry are your downfall, start with high school level study guides (above) and once you're beyond that, look for more sophisticated assistance at the university level.

Look for a workshop/seminar in math review

**Analytical Reasoning/Logic:**

Look for a workshop/seminar in analytical reasoning

Carefully study the analytical sections of a variety of study guides in the library.... not just study guides for the test you're taking (e.g. LSAT, MCAT)

Master the strategies one or two at a time. Practice what you learn.

**Writing:**

Consult your campus Writing Lab

Consult the official web site for the test you're taking

If your skills are extremely rusty, consider a high school level study guide, such as the GED.

**#3 Best-kept test prep secret: Read more! How to get more "outside reading" into your everyday life without even trying**

Verbal reasoning passages are derived from topics in the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and the arts. The single best preparation for the verbal sections of any of the graduate/professional entrance exams is to consistently read from a variety of diverse resources throughout your entire undergraduate experience. If you're already a "reader," great. If you're not, don't despair...even *5 minutes a day*, starting now, can make a BIG difference. To most students, the thought of "reading widely" outside a full load of coursework sounds overwhelming. It's not. Don't approach the task of "reading widely" like it's studying. Approach it from the perspective of relaxation, or diversion, or even as an experiment.

**What:** Start by getting a selection of periodicals (focus on what you can get for free---try your library, ask your friends and profs for personal copies they're about to recycle...). Some suggestions to get you started: (You're looking for meaty reading, stuff that will make you think in ways you may not have done before....) [New Yorker Magazine](#), [Atlantic Monthly](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), [New York Times](#), [Christian Science Monitor](#), [Scientific American](#), [Psychology Today](#), [Smithsonian](#), [New England Journal of Medicine](#), [Harvard Review](#), [New York Times Book Review](#), [New York Review of Books](#)... Add a book of poetry (especially if you seldom or never read poetry!) Find political articles that support an opposite viewpoint from your own. Find religious articles that differ from your own beliefs. Become familiar with the major philosophies. [Remember, these suggestions are merely a starting point...]

**Where:** Next step: Put some of this reading material in your bathroom; put some of it next to your bedside; carry lightweight periodicals in your backpack. In other words, put it in places where you will be able to pick it up and read for 2 minutes, 5 minutes, 10 minutes.

**When:** For the first couple weeks of this experiment (or until you get the hang of it...), don't read these things like you read your textbook. Just pick something up and start reading...even if you only get through a single page or just a few paragraphs.

**How:** At first, don't think about reading to "learn," just read for the sake of reading something different. Don't think about whether you're even paying attention to what you're reading. Just read. ---So, what's the point, you may ask?

**Why:** Why bother? At first, the point is basically to read words and ideas in a meaningful context. It's almost like feeding your brain with a healthy snack. Those words and ideas acquired in a meaningful context may sit dormant for days or weeks, but then one day you'll read or hear something that triggers the memory of what you read last week or last month and suddenly that memory merges with this new information and the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts. Once you get in the habit of reading, all kinds of things may change: you'll be better informed, more interested in the world around you, more interesting to people around you, a better student, a more informed citizen and consumer, and maybe even a little bit happier.

Reading well takes practice, just like anything else. One of the primary test-related benefits of this kind of reading is that your brain is acquiring a lot of new information, new words, new concepts...all in "context" and usually at a time when you're relaxed and receptive. Instead of worrying about lists of words to memorize, you're quietly acquiring information that makes sense. You'll be surprised to find out how often such "contextual knowledge" will help you make the best "educated" guess on those middle-of-the-road test questions.

Once you've gotten the hang of "reading widely outside your course work," you'll find that the articles you begin reading will start to hold your interest and, rather than having a hard time picking up something new to read, you'll have a hard time putting it down. Much like the way exercising is a drudge until the endorphins kick in, reading (for non-readers) feels like a drudge until "reading endorphins" kick in! (i.e., "intellectual stimulation!")

**BEYOND READING:** In addition to reading widely, make a point of listening to [National Public Radio](#) news and commentary. Watch [public television](#) and take in cable tv shows on the [History Channel](#) and other learning channels. Tune in to [C-Span](#). Whenever you read or hear a word that's unfamiliar to you, look it up in your dictionary! (Keep a spot in your notebook free for jotting down words, or just keep a slip of paper in your wallet handy for this purpose.) Keep your dictionary out and convenient----make a point of looking up the meaning of at least 1-2 words a day. Words, meanings, contexts, interpretation, and understanding: what is school all about, if not this? Read. Read often. Read widely. It's the single best preparation for success on your test and success in graduate school...and has the wonderful side benefit of contributing to your enjoyment of life.

#### **#4 A successful approach to faster and better studying**

Nearly every textbook is written in this style: Tell them what you're going to tell them. Tell them. Then tell them what you told them. Use this to your advantage.

**When You First Pick Up Your Textbooks At The Beginning Of The Semester,** look quickly through each book to find out: What are the chapter titles? Are there questions at the end of chapters? Are there pictures/diagrams? Does each chapter contain an overview and/or a summary?

**Before You Read Any Chapter:** 1) Read the overview (or opening paragraphs). 2) Read the summary (or ending paragraphs). 3) Look carefully at every picture/chart/diagram. 4) If there are questions at the end, read them all carefully. Can you answer any of them already? Do the questions seem logical based on the overview and summary you just read? ---Hot Tip: Only after you've done all 4 of these steps should you start reading the chapter in question.

**While You're Reading** the chapter, refer often to the questions at the end (if any) and illustrations (if any) whenever something you come across something that relates to one of them. Keep a dictionary handy and look up any word that is not completely familiar to you.

Even though this may sound like more "work," you'll be surprised to find that this approach will usually get you through the chapter faster and with far more interest than if you had simply started at the beginning with no idea what lay ahead.