

More Than Math: 4 Steps To Nailing The GMAT Quantitative Section

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The GMAT Quantitative section is about more than just testing your math skills

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©BartekSzewczyk—Basic knowledge of math is necessary but not sufficient for the GMAT

There is no ‘math section’ of the GMAT.

Charles Bibilos of GMAT Ninja stresses that his students do better when they stop thinking about the GMAT as math and start thinking about it as quantitative reasoning. At school, he notes, math is taught as a series of memorized, mechanical steps—this is not an approach that the GMAT rewards.

I spoke to my former GMAT quant teacher and colleague, Shimon Goldchmit, to get his take on how to approach the quant section of the GMAT. Shimon has taught GMAT prep for over a decade and, like all good GMAT prep teachers, he has spent a lot of time thinking about the nuances of the test.

Shimon thinks you need four different components that work in concert to get you your best score.

Step One: Math revision

The first piece of the puzzle is an underlying grasp of basic math. This is the foundation on which the rest of your preparation is built. The GMAT assumes that everyone will have an equal basic knowledge of math. This is the raw material you can manipulate to get to the right answers. If you don't have this basic knowledge, you will need to revise what you covered in school.

Don't get too wrapped up in the math and ignore strategy. This basic foundation—in topics like equations and number properties—is necessary but not sufficient for the GMAT. You don't need to have full grasp math like when they were at school. Excessive focus on basic math skills could lead a student in the wrong direction.

Step Two: Get acquainted with the GMAT

The second part of your approach involves getting acquainted with the format and rules of the GMAT. This comes down to understanding how the test is built to test your quantitative reasoning abilities. Unlike school math tests, it's not necessary to show how you worked out your answer. This allows for different approaches.

Most people can solve GMAT quant questions with time-consuming mathematical solutions, but the time pressure of the GMAT rewards simple logic, strategy, and connection-making. This is one of the reasons why no calculators are allowed. The object of the time constraint is not to increase your speed at complex math, but to fundamentally change your approach to the question.

You also need to familiarize yourself with the question types and tone to make sure you are answering the question being asked. There are two question types in the quantitative section—Problem Solving questions and Data Sufficiency questions.

Problem Solving Questions maintain the format you would expect from a multiple-choice math test: a question and five alternatives. But keep in mind that alternatives could be part of your strategy to solve the questions in a simpler way!

Data Sufficiency questions are unique to the GMAT. They consist of a question and then two statements. You need to work out whether the statements (together or on their own) are sufficient to answer the question, or not. Get familiar with this question type and memorize the answer choice options:

(A) Statement 1 alone is sufficient, but statement 2 alone is not sufficient to answer the question.

(B) Statement 2 alone is sufficient, but statement 1 alone is not sufficient to answer the question.

(C) Both statements taken together are sufficient to answer the question, but neither statement alone is sufficient.

(D) Each statement alone is sufficient.

(E) Statements 1 and 2 together are not sufficient, and additional data is needed to answer the question.

Step Three: Tools and Strategies

The third component of your approach is familiarity with specific tools and strategies that you can use. This includes learning strategies for approaching different types of questions; strategies like back-solving, plugging in numbers and estimating. You will also need to work on improving your mental math abilities: you should know your times tables and decimal table off by heart.

Practice will get you used to the different types of questions and the kinds of concepts tested, as well as to matching the most efficient strategies to different types of problems.

Step Four: Timed Training

The last piece of the puzzle is timed training. Here, you have to get your basic math foundation, your understanding of the test, and your tools and strategies to work, together under time pressure. "It's like when you learn to drive—you learn about the clutch, the steering, the signaling. Then, when you are driving in the street, everything must come together," says Shimon.

While you were learning the concepts, you would have been conscious of time but not been too strict about it. Now, you will want to do full-length practice tests to get an accurate reflection of your score. Your mind responds differently when you are under time-pressure, and you have to get used to that.

The GMAT is a computer-adaptive test: this means it gets easier if you get questions wrong and harder if you get questions right. The level of difficulty influences your final score. Until you do full length tests with this algorithm, it is very hard to know where you stand.

Don't underestimate this phase of preparation. Ideally (and in general), you should spend about a month on time training. You'll also want to go into the actual test with a good timing strategy.

The math concepts tested are not advanced, but the GMAT is not testing your knowledge. It is testing your skill. Like every part of the GMAT, practice is key to building your problem-solving skillset and maximizing your score.