

Episode 3: Spoiler Alert! Take the GRE.

Welcome to Grad-Post! I'm your host, Brian S. Mitchell, and we're here to talk about life before, during, and after graduate school, and whether an advanced degree is right for you.

Today's topic is the GRE – the Graduate Records Examination. If you are at all considering applying to graduate school, you may be getting conflicting information on whether the GRE is even necessary or how much it will affect your chances of getting accepted into graduate school. This podcast isn't a high-drama, fast action feature film, so let me spoil the ending right away and tell you that my recommendation is to take the GRE general test if you think you might be applying to graduate school next year. But let me also cover some important points as objectively as I can before justifying my recommendation.

I should start by saying that I am not affiliated with the company that administers the GRE, Educational Testing Services (ETS). I have not served on their board of advisors although I know people who do and I have never accepted any funds from them. I have been affiliated with the Council of Graduate Schools in various capacities through the years for whom ETS is an important partner and funder of some of their initiatives. And while ETS may be a random advertiser on my hosting site, I am under no financial obligations to ETS and am free to speak my mind. So, here it goes.

There are three aspects of the GRE I want to talk about: first, what it does and doesn't say as a standardized test about your abilities; second, what it means to others - that is - how it is used in the admissions process; and finally, what it means to you.

The GRE – like all standardized tests – is inherently biased. There are persistent differences over time in GRE scores among racial and ethnic groups as well as between genders. The GRE is also not a reliable predictor of success in graduate school. It sometimes correlates with first semester graduate GPA, but as an overall predictor of successful completion – especially in research-based degrees like the PhD where scholarly output is an important measure of success – it fails. As a result, some programs have made optional or totally eliminated the GRE as an admissions requirement.

[This was especially true during the global pandemic](#) when testing centers were closed and people were reluctant to travel much less sit in a crowded room with other people. That trend is starting to reverse, however, and there are discussions going on around college campuses about [reinstating GRE requirements](#), just as there are for reinstating the [SAT and ACT at the undergraduate admissions](#) level.

Despite its shortcomings, the use of the GRE persists, and you may be wondering what a particular score means to you. There are three components to the GRE General Test: Verbal Reasoning (V), Quantitative Reasons (Q), and Analytical Writing (A). [ETS routinely provides statistics](#) on the average scores among recent test takers on their website. Between 2019 and 2022, the means scores were 151 (V), 155 (Q), and 3.6 (A) (values rounded for simplicity). There's plenty of additional information on standard deviation and percentage distributions, but none of that really helps you when determining how your scores stack up to other applicants to a specific degree program at a specific university.

Here's how I suggest you look at these scores. If your scores are significantly higher than the average across the board, then you're golden. If your scores are average across the board, consider how other things like your undergraduate GPA or research experience compare to other applicants. Were you also an average student in the classroom? What percentage of your classmates did an undergraduate thesis? If you are just average across the board – then congratulations! There's nothing wrong with being average. However, if one or more of your scores is significantly below average, you will want to think about how this impacts your competitiveness for admission. While students with lower scores routinely get into graduate programs and many of them excel due to the unique differences between the graduate and undergraduate experience, some can struggle in the first year when coursework is the key measure of success. I would never discourage someone with low GRE scores from applying to graduate school. There are too many avenues to success. But you should manage your expectations on the type of program you apply to, and certainly address any shortcomings in your personal statement if one is required or allowed. Do you have some learning disability that has affected your performance on standardized tests? Did you recently go through a personal loss that affected your ability to adequately prepare for the test? Was English not your primary language of instruction as an undergraduate? All these factors can affect so-called

“high stakes” test performance. Be up front about it and highlight what you have done to overcome barriers. Personality concepts like “persistence” and “grit” are also part of the admissions review process.

Which brings us to how the GRE is used in the admissions process. This is a much deeper subject than we have time for here, and you can get deep into the weeds very quickly. There are certainly [plenty of opinions online](#). Mine is just one more opinion. I can tell you from many years of graduate admissions – both as the person reading the applications and the one reviewing graduate programs admissions practices – that the GRE is a critical piece of information to have. When you have hundreds – even thousands – of applications, all with similar GPAs from good undergraduate programs but [no longer an ability to overtly consider intangibles like gender, race, or ethnicity in the admissions process](#), how is that admissions officer supposed to make holistic decisions? There are good answers to that question (look for my upcoming podcast on holistic admissions practices) but having an additional piece of information – even one that carries numerous caveats and conditions with it – is important. The danger is that the GRE will be used as the sole determinant for further consideration – what’s called a “cutoff” score. While that certainly used to be the case, it is less true now. ETS has worked very hard to educate admissions staff on the proper use of the GRE as one piece of information in the admissions decision-making process. But admissions decisions are often made at the program level, so not only is there variation on how the GRE is used across programs, but from year-to-year as faculty rotate on and off graduate admissions committees. Ideally, the GRE would be used – if at all – as part of a broader holistic admissions process in which all aspects of an applicant’s background are considered. You will need to do your homework on each institution to which you apply to determine if this is the case or not.

So, the GRE is a biased test with no predictive value that is used differently by different admissions offices. Why, then, should you take it? **Because of what it means to you.** It’s an indication to yourself that you are serious about obtaining an advanced degree. Sure, there are other ways of proving that to yourself like actually submitting the application and paying the application fee if there is one, or visiting the campus, or even turning down a job offer to go to grad school. But this is the first step in the process, and if you don’t make it a forceful and positive one, then you run the risk of second-guessing yourself throughout. Go back to your days before college and how you prepared to get into the school you wanted. Maybe that was easy – get good grades and go to the state school with low tuition. Or, don’t get good grades and work your butt off in an open admissions college. But some of you did a lot of extra work to bolster your chances of getting into your preferred school. You volunteered, you led student organizations, you worked part-time jobs, you learned a third language. There are many good reasons for all these activities, of course, ranging from altruism to economic need. But be honest, a part – even a small part – was because that activity or experience might look good on your college application. Otherwise, why even include it on the application? It’s the same thing with the GRE. It might be optional (just like volunteering), but it shows commitment and dedication. In an environment where other people are opting out of taking the GRE, why not make yourself stand out?

Like most things, you have to do the cost-benefit analysis for yourself. There is the literal cost of taking the test, plus the time preparing and actually taking the test. But the potential benefits are enormous. What if you do really well on the GRE? Maybe you are underselling your abilities. Maybe your grade point average wasn’t that great. Worse yet, what if you find out that your application wasn’t as competitive because it didn’t have GRE scores, even though it technically wasn’t a requirement for admission? Better safe than sorry.

As a footnote to this topic, you may also be wondering whether you should pay for a GRE prep course. If I’m going to take this exam, why not be prepared? I’ll keep my answer short: don’t pay for a prep course or spend a lot of time preparing for it. Since the purpose of the GRE is really for your benefit, then you want it to reflect where you are now in your cognitive development, not how well prepared you are for test taking.

We’ll revisit this topic periodically as things can change rapidly. Just like the anti-GRE sentiment rose, known as “GRExit” during the pandemic, and is now finding its way back, consumer and expert opinions can lead to change almost overnight. As of 2024, my advice is to take the GRE, but do not pay for test preparation.

Thank you for joining me today. All of the links referred to in this podcast are available on my website at [grad-post.com](#). There you’ll find additional podcasts and resources to help you plan your adventure for an advanced degree.

The GRE is just one arc on your 360° degree application analysis. Every degree counts.

Resources and Links

<https://www.science.org/content/article/gre-exit-gains-momentum-ph-d-programs-drop-exam-requirement-amid-pandemic>

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/admissions/traditional-age/2024/01/17/reigniting-standardized-testing-debate>

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2024/02/05/dartmouth-reinstates-sat-admissions-requirement/>

GRE Guide to the Use of Scores, 2023-24, Educational Testing Service, Washington, DC.,

<https://www.ets.org/pdfs/gre/gre-guide-to-the-use-of-scores.pdf>

https://www.reddit.com/r/gradadmissions/comments/14h2448/should_i_take_the_gre/

Bleske-Rechek, A., and K. Browne, "Trends in GRE scores and graduate enrollments by gender and ethnicity,"

Intelligence, 46, 25-34, (2014) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intell.2014.05.005>

<https://www.brown.edu/about/administration/provost/scotus-admission-decision-brown-faqs>

Moneta-Koehler, Liane, et al. "The limitations of the GRE in predicting success in biomedical graduate school." *PloS One*

12.1 (2017) <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0166742>