Score Architect

FREE GUIDE

GRE® Quant and Verbal Traps

Twenty ways a careful test taker picks a wrong answer, each shown on an original example, with the tempting choice and the habit that prevents it.

- Ten Quantitative Reasoning traps, from comparisons to data sets
- Ten Verbal Reasoning traps, from pivot words to argument questions
- What ETS itself warns about, quoted in substance and cited
- A one-page check to run before you confirm an answer



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How to use this guide

A trap is a wrong answer that a careful person can reach by a reasonable-looking route. This guide shows twenty of them on the GRE® General Test, so that you recognize the route before you take it.

ETS, which makes the test, publishes tips for every question type, and many of those tips are warnings about specific mistakes.[1, 2] Where ETS warns about a trap, we report what it says and cite the page. The names, the grouping and all the examples are ours. We have no data on how often each trap appears on the test or how much it costs, so we make no claim about either.

- **Every example is original.** It was written by Score Architect for this guide and is not an ETS question. The Quantitative examples were checked by computation.
- **Each trap has the same four parts:** the pattern, an example, the tempting answer, and the fix.
- **Use the codes** (Q1 to Q10, V1 to V10) in your error log, so that you can count which traps you actually fall into.

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1 The rules that make the traps possible

Several traps exist only because of how the question formats work. These are the format rules, from ETS.

FORMAT	RULE
Quantitative Comparison	The four choices are always the same: Quantity A is greater; Quantity B is greater; the two quantities are equal; the relationship cannot be determined from the information given.[1]
Multiple-choice, select one or more (Quantitative)	Select all the correct choices and only those. The question may or may not say how many to select, and there may be only one correct choice.[1]
Numeric Entry	You type the answer: an integer or a decimal in one box, or a fraction in two boxes. There are no choices to check your answer against.[1]
Text Completion	One to three blanks. Five choices for a single blank, three choices per blank otherwise. Every blank must be right; there is no credit for partially correct answers.[2]
Sentence Equivalence	One blank, six choices, two answers. Both must be right; there is no credit for partially correct answers.[2]
Reading Comprehension	Three formats: select one of five choices; select one or more of three choices, where you must select all the correct ones; or select a sentence in the passage.[2]

TWO FACTS THAT CHANGE HOW YOU HANDLE A DOUBTFUL QUESTION

Nothing is subtracted from your score for incorrect answers, so ETS says it is best to answer every question.[3] And within a section you can mark a question, move on and come back while time remains.[4] A trap usually costs you when you commit quickly; marking the question and returning costs nothing.

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2 Quantitative Reasoning traps

THREE CONVENTIONS TO SETTLE BEFORE THE TRAPS

- **0 is an even integer** and is neither positive nor negative. **1 is not a prime number**; primes are integers greater than 1.[5]
- **A range counts both ends.** ETS gives the example that "the integers from 0 to 9, inclusive" refers to 10 integers, with or without the word "inclusive."[5] By the same counting, the multiples of 3 from 15 to 63 number 17, not 16.
- **Numbers in a question are exact**, and unless stated otherwise the "difference" between two quantities is the positive difference.[5]

Q1 Testing only friendly numbers

In a Quantitative Comparison with a variable, the first numbers that come to mind are small positive integers. They are also the numbers least likely to show the whole picture.

ORIGINAL EXAMPLE

$x > 0$

QUANTITY A	QUANTITY B
x^2	x

Try $x = 2$: 4 against 2. Try $x = 1$: 1 against 1. Try $x = 1/2$: 1/4 against 1/2.

Answer: the relationship cannot be determined from the information given.

The tempting answer. "Quantity A is greater," after trying 2 and 3. A square feels bigger than the number itself.

The fix. Before you settle on A or B, run the cases the conditions allow: 0, 1, a negative, a fraction between 0 and 1, a large number. ETS gives the same list: zero, positive and negative numbers, small and large numbers, fractions and decimals.[1] One case each way is enough to prove the last choice.

Q2 Choosing "cannot be determined" because the numbers look hard

The last choice in a Quantitative Comparison is for missing information. It is not for arithmetic that looks unpleasant.

ORIGINAL EXAMPLE

QUANTITY A	QUANTITY B
$2^{30} - 2^{29}$	2^{29}

2^{30} is 2×2^{29}, so $2^{30} - 2^{29} = 2^{29}$.

Answer: the two quantities are equal.

The tempting answer. The last choice, because the powers seem too large to compare. Or "Quantity A is greater," because it contains the bigger exponent.

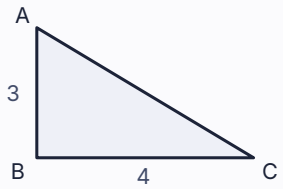
The fix. If both quantities are fixed numbers, the relationship is fixed too. ETS puts it plainly: never select the last choice if it is clear that the values of the two quantities can be determined by computation.[1] Then simplify instead of computing; ETS advises transforming the quantities only as much as the comparison needs.[1]

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Q3 Trusting the picture

A figure that looks like a right angle, a midpoint or a pair of equal sides proves nothing unless the question says so.

ORIGINAL EXAMPLE



In triangle ABC, AB = 3 and BC = 4.

QUANTITY A	QUANTITY B
The length of AC	5

Nothing says angle B is a right angle. All we know is that AC is between 4 − 3 = 1 and 4 + 3 = 7.

Answer: the relationship cannot be determined.

The tempting answer. "The two quantities are equal," from the 3-4-5 right triangle the drawing suggests.

The fix. Use what is stated or marked. ETS says geometric figures are not necessarily drawn to scale: do not assume lengths and angle measures are as they appear. You may assume that lines shown as straight are straight, that points are in the order shown and that objects are in the relative positions shown.[1] The opposite holds for coordinate systems and for graphs of data, which are drawn to scale.[1]

Q4 Adding percents that do not add

Two percent changes in a row apply to different bases, so they cannot be added or subtracted.

ORIGINAL EXAMPLE

The price of a jacket is raised by 25 percent, and the new price is then reduced by 20 percent. The final price is what percent of the original price?

A 95%
B 100%
C 105%
D 120%
E 125%

1.25 × 0.80 = 1.00. **Answer: B.**

The tempting answer. C, from 25 − 20 = 5. The 20 percent is taken from the larger, raised price, so it removes more than a fifth of the original.

The fix. Turn each change into a multiplier (up 25 percent is × 1.25, down 20 percent is × 0.80) and multiply. If you prefer numbers, start from 100: it goes to 125, then to 100.

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Q5 Solving for the wrong thing

You do the algebra correctly, find a value, see it among the choices and select it. The question asked for something else.

ORIGINAL EXAMPLE

The length of a rectangle is 3 more than twice its width, and its perimeter is 36. What is the area of the rectangle?

A 5
B 13
C 18
D 65
E 130

Width w, length 2w + 3: 2(3w + 3) = 36, so w = 5 and the length is 13. Area = 5 × 13 = 65. **Answer: D.**

The tempting answer. A or B, the width and the length. Both appear on the way to the answer, and both are offered. C is half the perimeter.

The fix. Before you select, reread the last sentence of the question and say what it asks for: here, an area. ETS gives the same instruction for Numeric Entry questions, where no choices guide you: read the question carefully and make sure you provide the type of answer required.[1]

Q6 Stopping early on "select one or more"

When a question asks you to indicate all the choices that apply, the first correct choice you find is not the end of the question. You are asked for all the correct choices and only those.

ORIGINAL EXAMPLE

If n is a positive integer and n^2 is divisible by 12, which of the following must be divisors of n? Indicate all such numbers.

A 2
B 3
C 4
D 6
E 12

$12 = 2^2 \times 3$, so n needs a factor 2 and a factor 3, and therefore 6. Take n = 6: 36 is divisible by 12, but 6 is divisible by neither 4 nor 12. **Answer: A, B and D.**

The tempting answer. D alone, because 6 is the "biggest" true statement. Or E, because 12 divides n^2.

The fix. Judge every choice as its own true-or-false question. ETS tells you to consider all of the choices, determine which are correct, and select all of those and only those, and notes that there may be only one correct choice.[1] For "must be" questions, look for the smallest case that fits (n = 6) and test each choice against it.

Q7 The right number in the wrong form

Numeric Entry has no choices to warn you that your answer is in the wrong unit or the wrong form.

ORIGINAL EXAMPLE

A pump fills 3/8 of an empty tank in 45 minutes. At that rate, how many hours does it take to fill the whole tank?

[ ] hours

One eighth takes 15 minutes, so the tank takes 120 minutes, which is 2 hours. **Answer: 2.**

The tempting answer. Typing 120. The work is in minutes, and the label after the box says hours.

The fix. Read the label next to the box before you type. ETS tells you to pay special attention to units such as feet or miles, to orders of magnitude such as millions or billions, and to percents as compared with decimals.[1] If the question asks for rounding, carry exact values through and round only the final answer to the accuracy required.[1]

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Q8 Averaging the averages

The average of two rates is not the average rate, unless each rate applies for the same amount of time.

ORIGINAL EXAMPLE

A cyclist rides 30 miles at 10 miles per hour and returns over the same 30 miles at 15 miles per hour. What is the average speed, in miles per hour, for the round trip?

A 11
B 12
C 12.5
D 13
E 25

Time: 3 hours out, 2 hours back. Average speed = 60 miles / 5 hours = 12. **Answer: B.**

The tempting answer. C, the midpoint of 10 and 15. The cyclist spends more time at the slower speed, so the average sits closer to 10.

The fix. Go back to the definition: average speed is total distance divided by total time. The same holds for any average of groups: the mean of two class averages is the overall mean only if the classes are the same size. Find the totals first.

Q9 Mixing up amount, percent and percentage points

In a data set, "greater increase" and "greater percent increase" can point to different rows.

ORIGINAL EXAMPLE

STORE	2023 SALES	2024 SALES
P	$200,000	$260,000
Q	$50,000	$80,000

Which store had the greater percent increase in sales from 2023 to 2024?

P: 60,000 / 200,000 = 30 percent. Q: 30,000 / 50,000 = 60 percent. **Answer: Store Q.**

The tempting answer. Store P, whose sales rose by twice as many dollars.

The fix. Underline the word that names the measure: amount, percent or share. A percent change divides by the starting value. A share that goes from 20 percent to 25 percent rises by 5 percentage points, which is a 25 percent increase. For data sets, ETS advises paying attention to the axes and scales, the units and any notes, and being aware of broken scales and of bars that do not start at 0.[1]

Q10 Forgetting that a variable can be negative

Multiplying or dividing an inequality by a variable is only safe when you know its sign.

ORIGINAL EXAMPLE

$x/y > 1$

QUANTITY A	QUANTITY B
x	y

If x = 2 and y = 1, then x is greater. If x = −2 and y = −1, the ratio is still 2, but now y is greater.

Answer: the relationship cannot be determined.

The tempting answer. "Quantity A is greater," after multiplying both sides by y to get x > y. That step reverses the inequality when y is negative.

The fix. Treat every variable as possibly negative, zero or a fraction until the question rules it out. ETS states that all numbers used are real numbers,[1] which is a much larger set than the positive integers. Write the sign condition next to the inequality before you multiply or divide.

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3 Verbal Reasoning traps

On the test, a reading question with a single answer has five choices.[2] To save space, the single-answer reading examples in traps V6 to V8 and V10 show three.

V1 Reading past the pivot word

One small word can reverse the direction of a sentence. If you miss it, the blank seems to ask for more of the same.

ORIGINAL EXAMPLE

Although the committee's report was praised for its thoroughness, its recommendations were so _____ that no agency could act on them.

A detailed
B vague
C persuasive
D timely
E comprehensive

"Although" sets the recommendations against the thorough report, and "no agency could act" tells you how. **Answer: B.**

The tempting answer. A or E. Both echo "thoroughness," the most memorable word in the sentence.

The fix. Find the structure words first. ETS advises identifying words that emphasize the structure of the passage, and names "although" and "moreover" as examples.[2] Then say in your own words what the blank must mean ("unclear, unusable") before you look at the choices.

V2 A familiar word with an unfamiliar meaning

Some choices are common words used in a less common sense. You reject the right answer because you think you know what it means.

ORIGINAL EXAMPLE

The reviewer's praise for the novel was _____: she admired its ambition but found the final chapters rushed.

A effusive
B qualified
C unanimous
D insincere
E belated

The part after the colon describes praise with a reservation. "Qualified" here means limited, not competent. **Answer: B.**

The tempting answer. D, because praise followed by criticism can feel dishonest. Or dismissing B because "qualified praise" sounds like praise from an expert.

The fix. When a common word seems out of place among the choices, ask whether it has a second meaning before you cross it out. Learn words with their senses and an example sentence for each, not as one-word definitions. ETS makes the same point about passages: many words have different meanings in different contexts.[2]

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V3 Filling the blanks one at a time and never rereading

In a completion with two or three blanks, a word can fit its own blank and still break the passage. And one wrong blank makes the whole answer wrong.

ORIGINAL EXAMPLE

The new director was known less for (i)_____ than for persistence: her projects rarely began with a striking idea, but she (ii)_____ each one until it worked.

BLANK (I)	BLANK (II)
originality	abandoned
diligence	refined
caution	announced

"Rarely began with a striking idea" fixes blank (i); "until it worked" fixes blank (ii). **Answer: originality, refined.**

The tempting answer. "Diligence" for blank (i), because it sits naturally beside "persistence." But the sentence says "less for ... than for," so the blank must contrast with persistence, not repeat it.

The fix. Start with whichever blank has the clearest clue; ETS notes that this is not always the first.[2] After choosing, reread the whole passage with your words in place and check that it is logically, grammatically and stylistically coherent, as ETS advises.[2] There is no credit for partially correct answers.[2]

V4 The synonym pair that does not fit

In Sentence Equivalence, two choices that mean the same thing are not automatically the answer. They also have to fit the sentence.

ORIGINAL EXAMPLE

Because the witness's account was _____, the jury gave it considerable weight.

A	plausible	**D**	hesitant
B	rambling	**E**	discursive
C	credible	**F**	hostile

The jury trusted the account, so the blank is positive. **Answer: A and C.**

The tempting answer. B and E. "Rambling" and "discursive" are close in meaning, and a test taker who scans the list for a matching pair finds them first.

The fix. Read the sentence and predict before you look for pairs. ETS warns against simply looking for two words that mean the same thing, because the choices may contain pairs of words that mean the same thing but do not fit coherently into the sentence.[2]

V5 The word that fits but has no partner

You predict a word, find it among the choices and then cannot find a second one. The usual reason is that the sentence supports a different reading.

ORIGINAL EXAMPLE

Critics found the senator's speech _____, noting that it ran for an hour without committing him to any position.

A	protracted	**D**	noncommittal
B	evasive	**E**	concise
C	impassioned	**F**	candid

The stronger clue is "without committing him to any position." **Answer: B and D.**

The tempting answer. A, from "ran for an hour." It fits the sentence, but no other choice means "long," so it cannot be half of a correct pair.

The fix. ETS describes this situation directly: if you find a word similar to what you expected but cannot find a second one, do not become fixated on your interpretation; see whether other words among the choices fill the blank coherently.[2] The two correct words need not be exact synonyms. What matters is that the two completed sentences mean the same thing.[2]

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PASSAGE FOR TRAPS V6 TO V9 (WRITTEN FOR THIS GUIDE)

For decades, urban planners assumed that widening a congested road would shorten travel times. Studies of several metropolitan areas have complicated that assumption. When a road is widened, driving on it becomes more attractive for a time, and some people who had used transit, traveled at other hours or stayed home begin to drive. In many of the cases studied, congestion returned to roughly its earlier level within a few years. The researchers do not conclude that road building is pointless: added capacity lets more people travel, even when it does not let them travel faster.

This is a practice passage. Like a passage on the test, it is to be read for what it says, not checked against what you know about the subject.

V6 True, but not the answer

A choice can repeat something the passage really says and still be wrong, because it answers a different question.

ORIGINAL EXAMPLE

According to the passage, what happened to congestion on the widened roads in many of the cases studied?

- **A** Planners had assumed that it would ease.
- **B** It returned to roughly its earlier level within a few years.
- **C** Driving on the roads became more attractive for a time.

Answer: B. The fourth sentence of the passage says so.

The tempting answer. A or C. Each is a faithful paraphrase of a sentence in the passage. Neither says what happened to congestion.

The fix. Hold the question in mind, not the passage in general. ETS warns twice against this trap: do not pick a choice simply because it is a true statement, and do not be misled by choices that only partially answer the question.[2]

V7 One word too strong

The passage says “in many of the cases studied.” The choice says “never.” Everything else matches.

ORIGINAL EXAMPLE

Which of the following statements is best supported by the passage?

- **A** Widening a road never shortens travel times.
- **B** In many of the cases studied, the relief from widening a road did not last.
- **C** Cities should stop widening roads.

Answer: B. The passage limits its claim twice: “in many of the cases studied” and “within a few years.”

The tempting answer. A, which turns a limited finding into a universal one. C goes further and adds a recommendation that the last sentence of the passage argues against.

The fix. Compare the strength of the choice with the strength of the passage, word by word: never, always, all, only, must, should. A choice that is partly true is still wrong; ETS tells you not to be misled by answer choices that are only partially true.[2]

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V8 The wrong speaker, or your own knowledge

Passages report views that the author or the people quoted do not hold. Questions also tempt you with facts that are true in the world and absent from the text.

ORIGINAL EXAMPLE

According to the passage, the researchers would most likely agree that

- **A** widening a congested road is a reliable way to shorten travel times
- **B** a widened road can serve more travelers without serving them faster
- **C** widening roads worsens air quality

Answer: B. It restates the final sentence.

The tempting answer. A is the planners' assumption, which the studies complicated. C may be something you have read elsewhere; the passage never mentions air quality.

The fix. For each claim in a passage, note who holds it. Then answer from the text. ETS says to answer each question based on the information provided in the passage and not to rely on outside knowledge, and to take special care when your own views conflict with those presented.[2]

V9 Treating "select one or more" as "select one"

Some reading questions offer three choices and ask for all that apply. One, two or all three may be correct.

ORIGINAL EXAMPLE

Consider each of the choices separately and select all that apply. The passage indicates that which of the following can follow the widening of a road?

- **A** Some people who had used transit begin to drive.
- **B** More people are able to travel.
- **C** Travel times become permanently shorter.

Answer: A and B. A is in the third sentence, B in the last. C contradicts the fourth sentence.

The tempting answer. Selecting A and moving on, or assuming that the answer cannot be more than one choice.

The fix. Evaluate each choice separately on its own merits, as ETS advises, and do not be disturbed if all three seem correct, since these questions can have up to three correct answers.[2] You must select all the correct answers; there is no credit for partially correct answers.[2]

V10 Answering the opposite question about an argument

In a question about what weakens an argument, a choice that strengthens it is relevant, memorable and wrong.

ORIGINAL EXAMPLE

After a city installed brighter street lamps, reported nighttime bicycle accidents fell by a third over the next year. Officials concluded that the brighter lamps had made night cycling safer. Which of the following, if true, most seriously weakens the officials' conclusion?

- **A** During that year, the city closed its two busiest bicycle routes at night for construction.
- **B** Cyclists surveyed said that they saw road hazards more easily under the new lamps.
- **C** The new lamps cost more to operate than the old ones.

Answer: A. It offers another explanation: fewer people cycling at night.

The tempting answer. B. It is about the lamps and about safety, but it supports the conclusion. C is true to life and beside the point.

The fix. Before reading the choices, state the conclusion and the direction you need: "I want a reason the lamps might not be the cause." Then look for an alternative explanation of the evidence. ETS lists identifying the strengths and weaknesses of a position and considering alternative explanations among the skills that reading questions test.[2]

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4 The check before you confirm

This page is advice. It turns the twenty traps into a short routine. In practice sets, run it on every question until it becomes automatic; on the test, run it on the questions you marked.

Quantitative Reasoning

- [ ] **What was asked?** Reread the last sentence. Is it the width or the area, minutes or hours, percent or amount? (Q5, Q7, Q9)
- [ ] **Which numbers did I try?** In a comparison with variables: 0, 1, a negative, a fraction, a large number, as far as the conditions allow. (Q1, Q10)
- [ ] **Are both quantities fixed numbers?** Then the last choice is out. (Q2)
- [ ] **Did I use the picture?** Use only what is stated or marked in a geometric figure. Graphs of data are drawn to scale. (Q3)
- [ ] **Is there more than one base?** Successive percents multiply; averages need totals. (Q4, Q8)
- [ ] **Did I judge every choice?** On "indicate all," each choice is its own question. (Q6)

Verbal Reasoning

- [ ] **Where does the sentence turn?** Find although, but, yet, despite, rather than, less … than. (V1, V3)
- [ ] **Did I predict before reading the choices?** A prediction protects you from the echo word and the easy pair. (V1, V4)
- [ ] **Could this word mean something else?** Check the second sense before crossing out a common word. (V2)
- [ ] **Do both completed sentences mean the same thing?** And does each one make sense? (V4, V5)
- [ ] **Does the choice answer this question?** True is not enough. (V6)
- [ ] **Is the choice as cautious as the passage?** Whose view is it? Is it in the text at all? (V7, V8)
- [ ] **Did I judge every choice, and the right direction?** (V9, V10)

OUR ADVICE (NOT AN ETS RULE)

Count your traps, then train the top two. After each practice test, tag every miss in your error log with a code from this guide or with "concept gap" if you did not know how to do the question. After a few tests, look at which codes come up most often. Those are the habits to drill first.

A trap is avoided before the choices, not among them. Almost every fix in this guide happens before you read the answer choices: predict the word, state the question, write the sign condition. Once a tempting choice is in front of you, it is harder to resist.

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5 Where to practice each trap

Each trap is taught in a section of the Score Architect courses. The codes are the ones used in our study plan.

TRAP	COURSE SECTION
Q1	QR-T5 S2, Quantitative Comparison: Testing Cases
Q2	QR-T5 S1, Quantitative Comparison: Answer Logic and Simplifying
Q3	QR-T3 S2, Triangles
Q4	QR-T1 S5, Percent and Percent Change
Q5	QR-T2 S6, Word Problems: Setting Up Equations
Q6, Q7	QR-T5 S3, Multiple-Choice and Numeric Entry Strategies
Q8	QR-T1 S7, Rates: Speed, Work and Unit Rates
Q9	QR-T4 S3, Tables, Bar Graphs, Line Graphs and Circle Graphs
Q10	QR-T2 S4, Inequalities

TRAP	COURSE SECTION
V1	VR-T1 S2, Signal Words and Sentence Structure
V2	VR-T2 S2, Vocabulary in Context: Roots, Connotation and Secondary Meanings
V3	VR-T1 S3, Two- and Three-Blank Completions
V4, V5	VR-T2 S1, Finding the Equivalent Pair
V6, V9	VR-T3 S3, Detail and Multiple-Answer Questions
V7	VR-T3 S4, Inference
V8	VR-T3 S6, Author's Perspective, Tone and Vocabulary in Context
V10	VR-T4 S2, Strengthen and Weaken
All	Test Mastery tm-c7, Psychology of the Exam: How Wrong Answers Are Built

Sources

Every numbered statement in this guide was checked against the ETS page or document listed here on November 13, 2026. ETS changes fees and policies from time to time, so confirm anything that affects your registration on ets.org before you pay.

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