

AS SEEN IN DEANS DIGEST

Demystifying the GMAT: What Is on the GMAT?

By Lawrence M. Rudner

GMAC routinely conducts studies and surveys to identify the skills expected of incoming management education students. Business schools tell GMAC that their programs demand more than basic quantitative and verbal skills. That is why the GMAT exam is a test of higher-order skills and not a test of basic skills.

Because the GMAT exam is designed to help identify examinees capable of succeeding in one of the most rigorous graduate level fields of study, it is very rigorous test. The test preparation companies consistently tell us that the GMAT exam is indeed harder than other examinations. In fact, many test preparation companies pay a premium to their GMAT instructors.

We make the GMAT exam rigorous primarily by including test questions that tap higher order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The Quantitative section measures the ability to reason quantitatively, solve quantitative problems, and interpret data. The Verbal section measures the ability to draw inferences from written material, to critically evaluate arguments, and to correct written material.

Consider the following Quantitative question:

If v and w are different integers, does $v=0$?

(1) $vw = v^2$

(2) $w = 2$

The task is to identify whether statements (1) or (2) alone are sufficient to answer the question, each alone is sufficient, both together are needed, or if the problem cannot be solved with the available information. The answer to this problem is that (1) alone is sufficient. Looking at (1), if $v=0$ then (1) would reduce to $0=0$. Thus, v could be 0. Could it be anything else? If $v \neq 0$, then the statement would reduce to $w=v$ which, according to the problem is not possible, v and w are different integers. Thus, by (1) v must be zero. Looking at (2), v could be zero, but it could also be any integer other than 2. Thus, (2) does not provide any information, not even in conjunction with (1).

The question requires a collection of higher-order skills, including analysis of the elements, analysis of relationships, production of a plan of operations, formulating hypotheses, and evaluating

hypotheses in terms of internal evidence. Yes, some basic algebra is required, the test taker must know about multiplying by zero, converting a square to a product, and simple equation reduction. But the question is not about algebra skills of the test taker. Rather it is about the collection of higher-order skills.

A Verbal question might present a short, two- to five-sentence paragraph and then ask, "Which of the following, if true, would most seriously weaken the argument above?" or, "The argument depends on which of the following assumptions?" The test taker must examine and break down information into parts, evaluate statements against the stimulus paragraph and draw conclusions based on the evidence. Yes, the test taker must possess basic decoding skills and literal understanding of written English. As with the Quantitative questions, the Verbal questions are not about assessing of basic skills. Rather they are about applying higher-order skills to handle complex concepts.

There is no doubt that there is a basic skill component to the GMAT exam. A test taker lacking basic algebra, arithmetic, geometry, reading, and verbal reasoning skills will not do well on the test. But the basic skills here are just building blocks for creating questions to tap the higher-order skills that are most relevant to management education.

Lawrence M. Rudner, PhD, MBA, is vice president of research and development and chief psychometrician at the Graduate Management Admission Council. He can be reached at lrudner@gmac.com.

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