

When St. Patrick's Day and Hip Hop Month coincide (well, almost...we hope you enjoyed your Paddy's Day yesterday), it's only natural to compare the GMAT testing center to a House of Pain, although it's probably more appropriate to consider it a house of mental anguish.

The Irish rap group House of Pain is best known – or to most, only known – for its track “Jump Around”, one of the more lasting one-hit wonders of all time. Featured in movies, Strongbow ads, and before 4th quarters at Wisconsin's Camp-Randall Stadium, “Jump Around” has become as friendly and pop-oriented as a Miley Cyrus ringtone – not bad for a song about a drunken Irish brawl. And it's in that ability to be seen in multiple ways that “Jump Around”, even with a title that provides terrible advice for the GMAT as you cannot jump from question to question, can provide you with valuable insight as you study for the GMAT.

In addition to lyrical gems like “I got more rhymes than the Bible's got psalms” (note: that's a Sentence Correction-friendly parallel comparison!), House of Pain drops this piece of GMAT wisdom in the final verse:

*Get used to one style and you know how I might switch
It up, up and around
Then buck, buck you down
Put out your head and then you wake up in the Dawn of the Dead*

Just as they've managed to make an aggressive anthem of violence fodder for movies like “Mrs. Doubtfire”, House of Pain is demonstrating how it can show you one style and flip it around quickly to something you never would have expected. And that's exactly what the GMAT likes to do to you, as well (so if you come to battle, bring a shotgun... metaphorically, of course).

Pay particular attention to that first part of their warning: “Get used to one style...”. That's critical – the GMAT knows what your mind is used to and what it wants to think, and likes to tweak that against you. For example, you're used to thinking of the positive square root of a number, so when the GMAT asks:

Is $x > 3$?

1) $x^2 = 16$

It's preying on the fact that you're likely used to thinking “4”, and it's going to “switch it up, up, and around” to include -4 as the trap – there are two potential values based on statement 1, even though at first glance you might only think of the positive root.

Now, if you've studied this concept for a bit, House of Pain's warning becomes even more important. By the time you've studied the GMAT for a few weeks, you're probably so used to that one style of asking a question – the “trap” is that there are two roots to x^2 – that they can really switch it up, up and around by asking instead:

Is $x > 5$?

1) $x^2 = 16$

Here, there are two roots, but they both give you the exact same answer: NO. Neither 4 nor -4 is greater than 5, so the trick here is that they wanted you to become so used to seeing the $x^2 = \underline{\hspace{1cm}}$ setup as a trap that you lose track of the overall question.

In either event, the GMAT knows that your mind will get used to one style of thinking, and be particularly prone to employing it when working under timed, test-day pressure. Accordingly, you need to keep a fully open mind about the test to anticipate subtlety in wording and key in on exactly what you know and what is being asked.

The same style of “switching it up, up and around” to “buck, buck you down” is evident on the verbal section, as well. Critical reasoning questions are often written so that your natural tendencies toward fairness, compelling conclusions, etc. will work against you if you get too used to seeing what you think should be the conclusion of the argument or the question stem itself, and therefore don’t pay attention to what is specifically being tested. Consider the question:

Company policy: An employee of our company must be impartial, particularly when dealing with family matters. This obligation extends to all aspects of the job, including hiring and firing practices and the quality of service the employee provides customers.

Which one of the following employee behaviors most clearly violates the company policy cited above?

- (A) Refusing to hire any of one’s five siblings, even though they are each more qualified than any other applicant
- (B) Receiving over a hundred complaints about the service one’s office provides and sending a complimentary product to all those who complain, including one’s mother
- (C) Never firing a family member, even though three of one’s siblings work under one’s supervision and authority
- (D) Repeatedly refusing to advance an employee, claiming that he has sometimes skipped work and that his work has been sloppy, even though no such instances have occurred for over two years
- (E) Promoting a family member over another employee in the company

Admit it: the style you’re used to is one that runs against nepotism. But if the policy is that “one must be impartial”, the only answer choice that clearly violates it is the one that is not impartial, and that’s answer choice A. Not hiring the most qualified applicant is a violation of impartiality; the anti-nepotism answers, such as C and E, don’t offer any reason that the action was deserved or not, so we cannot conclude that they are violations of the policy. Most students are so used to the style that favors fairness and runs counter to nepotism, however, that they quickly eliminate the correct answer A.

Much like you wouldn’t anticipate that an angry Irish call-to-arms would become one of America’s favorite cute, fun, party anthems, you may not anticipate the correct answers on the GMAT if you stick too closely to preconceived notions or preferences. But House of Pain is a warning against both prejudices, and heeding that warning may allow you to recite another lyric from “Jump Around” as you jump around celebrating your score: “I’m the cream of the crop, I rise to the top...”.