

Hello again readers, and happy May Twentieth! In honor of that 2 in 5/20 (the day before The End of the World, of course), today's post is dual-purposed in two ways: We have a GMAT challenge question *and* a GMAT tip of the week, and the GMAT tip of the week is actually two in one. First, take a look at this challenge Critical Reasoning question:

A recent Bloomberg Businessweek article cited that the average GMAT score for 20 and 21-year olds is 575, while for 22 and 23 year olds it is only 539. Therefore, all potential business school applicants should be advised to take the GMAT while they're younger so that they can expect a higher score.

Each of the following, if true, would undermine the above conclusion EXCEPT:

- (A) Very few 20 and 21-year olds take the GMAT, and most who do have been tabbed by career planning offices as candidates for elite programs like HBS 2+2.
- (B) Students at age 20 and 21 are less likely to consider regional and part-time programs that have lower GMAT targets than are applicants just a few years older.
- (C) The older an applicant gets, the more likely he is to have professional and familial commitments that can impede study plans.
- (D) A disproportionate number of 22 and 23-year old "boomerang" college graduates have been forced by their parents to take multiple graduate school board exams as part of their career search in a down economy.
- (E) Examinees in their late 20s report average scores well into the upper 500s, perhaps because they can afford more comprehensive test preparation options.

"EXCEPT" questions can throw a twist at you in that there are four "right" answers and your job is to pick the "wrong" one; as such, they tend to be best-handled through process of elimination, as you eliminate the low-hanging-fruit (in this case, answer choices that clearly weaken the conclusion) and work your way toward the remaining answer that does not weaken the conclusion. Here, the conclusion is that all test-takers should be advised to take the GMAT while they're younger, citing the evidence that 20 and 21-year olds statistically outperform their slightly-older counterparts.

As with any weaken question, it's helpful to see the logic between premise and conclusion. The only actual evidence provided is the average score in two groups – 20/21 and 22/23, with 20/21 being higher. But as with any statistics questions, you should ask yourself whether there are alternative explanations for the facts that don't include the stated conclusion; the GMAT loves to do this particularly when statistics are present. Here, the facts show a correlation between youth and success, at least in these two groups, but the conclusion suggests causality. Are there alternative explanations for why the stats would hold without a causal relationship? Sure – say that the 20/21 year old group is disproportionately full of child prodigies and fast-tracked MBA candidates (which may very well be the case...few college students consider the GMAT and those who do tend to be extremely serious and motivated compared to the general population). Or that 22/23 year olds are somehow disproportionately likely to underperform but scores tend to bounce back up. The lone statistics given do not support the blanket, causality-infused conclusion, and four of the answer choices expose that gap in logic.

Choice A hits the point we made above – it's quite likely that the very-young applicants are taking the GMAT for a specific reason (they've been tabbed as elite) and so that pool is skewed toward success compared to the general population. But that doesn't mean that the average student would do better while younger; just that those surveyed happened to be predisposed to doing well whenever they took the exam.

Choice B is somewhat inverse of A; it provides a reason to suggest that the dropoff in scores isn't because the applicants were older. Instead, it's because that demographic tends to feature students less inclined to pursue a very high score, and so the lower scores are a function of their lowered goals, not their lowered abilities.

Choice D is similar to B – if the average age of examinees is mid to late 20s, and we know that there's a chance that the youngest in the pool may already be skewed, it's possible that the 22 and 23 year olds are likely to underperform just because of their circumstances: they're taking the test because they have to and not because they want to, and their

scores may be lower as a result of that circumstance, not that they were any more likely to have done better if younger.

Choice E suggests that older applicants may actually have an advantage, as their scores are higher than the 22/23 group and there are factors in older age that indicate a potential causality in favor of older test-takers.

Only choice C fails to weaken the conclusion – in fact, it strengthens the conclusion by providing a bit more of the causal relationship than the argument alone contains. If the reason for older applicants underperforming is their lessened availability to study, then it's more likely that students should consider taking the test while younger.

C is the correct answer, and brings us to our second tip:

There is something to be said for the advice in this conclusion, even if the logic is unsound by GMAT standards. Those who take the GMAT closer to their college days tend to report an easier study process, most often because they feel fresher with both GMAT skills (algebra, geometry, grammar, etc.) and study habits, and because (as answer choice C suggests) they're freer from binding commitments than they may be later in life.

While it's not an airtight argument that you'd do better on the GMAT while you're younger than while you're older, it's to your advantage to heed this related advice:

**Study for the GMAT when you know that your lifestyle is conducive to it, not necessarily when you absolutely need the score.**

If you think you may apply to business school in the next few years, there's a high likelihood that you can envision a few months' period in that time in which commitments (work, travel, social, fitness, etc.) will be lighter, or you can work now to lighten the load for later. As your score becomes more necessary with impending deadlines, you lose that opportunity to clear your schedule (and your mind), and other commitments (application essays, meetings with recommenders, campus visits, recruiting events) are likely to pop up.

Your GMAT score is good for five years, so if you believe that you'll have occasion to use a score in that time, plan out a schedule that will give you some relaxed study time. In many ways, simply knowing that you're free from the pressure of an impending deadline allows you to learn more proactively and confidently. That situation may well occur more often for younger test-takers, but you need not turn back the clock to realize those advantages; just look for or create a lull in your hectic schedule in advance of your application dates, and you can reap the rewards of youth on the GMAT.