

There may not be a more aptly named question type on the GMAT than “Critical Reasoning,” a question type that rewards critical thinking in a major way. Students are successful by reading critically and economically, quickly noting flaws in logic and embracing their role within each question. Those who buy into the critical way of processing arguments can “click” with critical reasoning quite readily, quickly organizing information into actionable components and anticipating correct answers before even reading them.

Accordingly, we offer these three critical strategies for critical reasoning questions:

1) Know Your Role

Each CR question contains a stimulus (usually one paragraph of 3-5 sentences), a question stem, and five answer choices (four incorrect, one correct). For most questions, it's natural for the student to read by starting at the beginning (it's a very good place to start, according to... Mary Poppins, maybe?). But the trick is this — each stimulus, necessarily, is about “something,” and that “something” tends to frame that you read about it. The human brain processes information by building links between known information and new information, so as you read, say, a stimulus about a mining excavation project, your mind will involuntarily try to link it to something you know — the Chilean miners and their underground plight; the city of Pittsburgh and its turnaround through healthcare and education; the fact that you hated your college geology class... Whatever your built-in link to that information, it's important to note that it will not help you answer the question! Outside information won't be helpful to answering the question, and allowing your mind to stretch in unintended directions can waste time and lead to distraction. Accordingly, you want to set your mind so that you immediately start linking information to the task at hand.

Therefore, you should:

Read the question stem first, to start building information that directly relates to your goal. You'll be asked to strengthen arguments, weaken arguments, draw conclusions, analyze argument structure, etc. If you read the question stem and embrace your role immediately, you can start reading the stimulus through that lens of “my job is to find fault with this argument (WEAKEN)” or “This is my argument and I must defend it (STRENGTHEN).”

Once you've taken ownership of your role, you can naturally start to pick apart the arguments — in a Strengthen case, you want to identify — specifically and exactly — the conclusion that you're asked to support... at this point you have to believe that argument and look for the evidence that will help you to sell it. In an Inference case, you want to assess the information carefully and avoid any logical leaps — the correct answer **MUST BE TRUE** and the answer choices will attempt to bait you toward something that's probably, but not necessarily, true. If you've taken full ownership of your role, you can start reading the information critically as it relates to that question type and your task at hand — it gives you a vested and relevant interest in the material from the very beginning. And that's a very good place to start...

2) The Conclusion is King

Without a doubt the most common mistake that smart people make on CR questions is that they allow themselves to strengthen or weaken a conclusion that isn't exactly the conclusion provided. The authors of these questions know this, and have become quite adept at creating answer choices that perfectly answer the question for that not-quite-right conclusion to which your mind is likely to jump. For example, consider the question:

About two million years ago, lava dammed up a river in western Asia and caused a small lake to form. The lake existed for about half a million years. Bones of an early human ancestor were recently found in the ancient lake-bottom sediments that lie on top of the layer of lava. Therefore, ancestors of modern humans lived in Western Asia between two million and one-and-a-half million years ago.

Which one of the following is an assumption required by the argument?

A) The lava that lay under the lake-bottom sediments did not contain any human fossil remains.

B) The bones were already in the sediments by the time the lake disappeared.

If you liked answer choice A, it's almost guaranteed that you read the conclusion as "the *first* human ancestors..." or "the *earliest* human ancestors..." — but note that the passage only states that (some) human ancestors lived in that region at that time. Choice A is irrelevant — if humans lived in that same area a million years earlier, it doesn't mean at all that they did not live there in that 2-1.5 million years ago time frame at all. The fact that Al Capone lived in Chicago in the 1930s does not change the fact that people live there today, right?

But the GMAT knows how you think and creates answer choices like A to prey upon it. You like to see that things are the first/last/tallest/fastest/best/worst. And you also have preferences when it comes to nepotism in the workplace (you're probably against it) or the length of the workday (you want to see it shorter) — and these are also topics that have appeared on the GMAT, with the incorrect answer choices crystallizing your bias without staying directly in scope of the conclusion.

The remedy — make absolutely certain that you focus on the exact conclusion given! If you've paused to perfectly identify and own the exact conclusion, you can laugh at those answer choices that are perfectly designed to trap a less-savvy test-taker. On any Strengthen or Weaken question, correctly identifying the conclusion is much more than half the battle.

3) Read Critically

The name of the question type is the name of the game in Critical Reasoning — be critical of everything you read and you'll have an exponentially easier time with the correct answers. In a business context, this makes sense — remember that axiom that "smart is believing half of what you hear; brilliant is knowing which half"? The business world is plagued with yes-men who take most arguments, however poorly-constructed, at face value. Business schools are looking for you to recognize flaws in logic, play devil's advocate with conventional wisdom, and ultimately make well-reasoned decisions that consider all the known information. Critical reasoning questions provide a mechanism for assessing that kind of thinking.

As you read CR questions, note that nearly every argument you read is a poor one! Strengthen and Weaken questions are, necessarily, weak, leaving room for you to either strengthen or weaken them. And 4 of 5 conclusions to each Inference question are invalid, as well. If you allow yourself to be critical, you'll embrace the necessary traits to win at CR.

Consider the question:

Citizen: *Each year since 1970, a new record has been set for the number of murders committed in this city. This fact points to the decreasing ability of our law enforcement system to prevent violent crime.*

City Official: *You overlook the fact that the city's population has risen steadily since 1970. In fact, the number of murder victims per 100 people has actually fallen slightly in the city since 1970.*

Which one of the following, if true, would most strongly counter the city official's response?

A) The incidence of fraud has greatly increased in the city since 1970.

B) The rate of murders in the city since 1970 decreased according to the age group of the victim, decreasing more for younger victims.

C) Murders and other violent crimes are more likely to be reported now than they were in 1970.

D) The number of law enforcement officials in the city has increased at a rate judged by city law enforcement experts to

be sufficient to serve the city's increased population.

E) If the health care received by assault victims last year had been of the same quality as it was in 1970, the murder rate in the city last year would have turned out to be several times what it actually was.

Reading critically here means that you don't buy the City Official's argument — you're looking to criticize his assertion that "no, we're doing an adequate job of preventing violent crime; look — the murder rate is down!" What is his flaw? He only provides one relevant statistic — the murder rate — and that's only one type of violent crime. If muggings, assaults, and other violent crimes are on the rise, that negates his murder rate argument, and as E suggests, violent crime is soaring... It's just that people aren't officially dying, so the violent crimes are classified as assaults and not murders.

E is a tricky correct answer — your mind doesn't want to see "health care" at the beginning of the answer choice, but if you've been critical of the argument all along you're looking for an explanation that highlights the argument's inherent weakness — the statistic given is only one factor in a much broader conclusion.

This ideology should guide you on CR — whenever presented with an argument, read skeptically — your job as a test-taker and ultimately as a manager is to not be easily sold (or hoodwinked). The facts given are true, but they seldom will lead directly to the conclusions that they are supposed to support. Be critical when you read and you'll master critical reasoning.