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The Process for Tackling Any Critical Reasoning Problem

I've been in full-on writing mode lately as we update our [Strategy Guides](#) (look for the 5th edition in 2012, in time to start prepping for the Next Generation GMAT!). A couple of our teachers have been doing extensive research on every available official Critical Reasoning problem, and now we're synthesizing everything. Although we're still in development mode, I want to share some of our take-aways with you so that you can start to benefit from them right away!

One 4-Step Process for Any Critical Reasoning Problem

First, there's one overall process we're going to use for any Critical Reasoning problem:

- Step 1: Identify the question.
- Step 2: Deconstruct the argument.
- Step 3: State the goal.
- Step 4: Work from wrong to right.

Those steps might sound obvious to some people and very vague to others. I'll explain each in more detail below, but I want to say first: each step is there for a very important reason, and each step has been split off from the others for a very important reason.

Identify the Question

Most arguments are followed by a question (there is actually one exception, but we're not going to discuss that here). There are several different types of CR problems, and the wording of the question stem (the part below the argument itself) allows us to identify which type of Critical Reasoning problem we're about to have to answer. It's critically important to identify that question type right away because we need to employ different kinds of reasoning depending upon the type of Critical Reasoning problem we have.

We want to know, right from the beginning, how best to work through the current problem, and we can accomplish that by identifying the question Family and the specific question type (see below for more).

Deconstruct the Argument

Arguments are made up of building blocks, such as premises, counterpremises, assumptions, and conclusions. When reading the argument, we want to take very brief notes that allow us to deconstruct the argument into its building blocks. What kinds of information do we have and which pieces lead to which other pieces?

Knowing all of this allows us to do what we call reading with a purpose. We know what we need to find, so we can actively look for these things, and we know what kind of reasoning we need to do in order to answer the question, so we can begin to think things through a bit while we're reading. (This assumes that we know what we're doing for each question type; more below.)

State the Goal

This is a short but often overlooked step: what exactly am I trying to do when I answer this question? What's my goal? I know what kind of question I have, I understand the argument and how it fits together now, I know my conclusion (if there is one); now what?

At this stage, we need to remind ourselves what it is we're actually trying to do when we start attacking the answers, and this goal depends upon the type of question that we have. Let's say that we have an Inference question. Our goal is to find an answer that must be true given at least some (but not necessarily all) of the information in the argument. As we continue to study, we'll also learn that trap answers on Inference questions often do too much; that is, they offer something that could be true or maybe is even somewhat likely to be true given the premises in the argument, but the answer doesn't have to be true.

By the time we get to test day, we want our goals for each type to be so ingrained in our brains that we can just say to ourselves, Okay, Inference. Go!

Work from Wrong to Right

On Verbal in general, we're asked to find the best answer. We're going to use a two-step process in order to accomplish this. First, we look through all five answers and eliminate as many definitely wrong answers as we can. On this first pass through the answers, we're not actually trying to decide which is the right one, only which ones are definitely wrong.

If we only have one answer left, great; we're done. If we have two or more answers left, then we do a second pass to compare those remaining answers. Because we've also reminded ourselves of our goal before looking at the answers, we're better able to distinguish between the tempting but wrong answers and the right ones.

The 3 Major Question Families

We can group the vast majority of question types into 3 major Families that share common structures, reasoning requirements, and trap answers. There are some minor types that don't fit neatly into the three major Families; our new Strategy Guide will address those types, but we're not going to discuss them today.

The first major family is the Structure Family. We introduce this one first not because it's the most common (it's not) but because these questions are all based upon a solid understanding of the structure of the argument, and structure is the first major thing we learn about CR. Indeed, we can't learn to deconstruct arguments until we understand how they're structured in the first place. The two common question types in this Family are Describe the Role (more commonly called boldface arguments) and Describe the Argument. Both require us to identify the components of the argument and both employ abstract answers. For example, a Role answer choice might read:

The first is a judgment that counters the primary assertion expressed in the argument; the second is a circumstance on which that judgment is based.

Yuck. See what I mean about "abstract" language? It takes some work to learn how to handle these efficiently and effectively.

The second major family is the Assumption Family; this is the most frequently-tested of the three Families. Assumption Family questions rely on at least one assumption made by the author of the argument, and all contain conclusions. Assumptions, by definition, are not stated in an argument; they represent something the author believes must be true, but has not stated, in order to draw his or her conclusion. There are five different ways in which we might be asked an Assumption-based question, but all five have one thing in common: we have to identify an assumption in order to answer the question correctly.

We may be asked, for example, simply to identify an assumption (called the Assumption question type) or a Flaw (the author is assuming XYZ but we don't know whether that's true). We may be asked to identify something that Strengthens a conclusion. This would involve making an assumption explicit—actually stating (in the answer) that some assumption is in fact true. Alternatively, we could be asked to Weaken a conclusion, in which case an answer will tear down or call into question an assumption made by the author. Finally, we might be asked to Evaluate a conclusion: what hasn't the author established that would be useful to know in order to decide whether the conclusion is a good one? Our goal here is to find a statement that would test an assumption made by the author in order to determine whether that assumption is valid.

The third major Family is the Evidence Family. These questions all lack conclusions—they consist entirely of premises! On these, we're essentially asked to find a new premise that must be true according to the information given (Inference questions), or a new premise that resolves a problem or contradiction (Explain the Paradox questions). (Note: if you are using our current materials, the 4th edition guide, the Draw a Conclusion questions are the same as the newly-named Inference category.)

Take-Aways for Any Critical Reasoning Problem

- (1) Read the question stem first. Identify the question type. Know what you're supposed to be doing and what the traps tend to be for that type.
- (2) Deconstruct the argument according to what your goals are. For example, if it's a Structure Family argument, it's important to label the different pieces of the argument carefully. If it's an Assumption Family argument, you need to find the conclusion. If it's an Evidence Family question, don't waste your time looking for a conclusion!
- (3) Remind yourself of your goal. At first, you might take 20 or more seconds to do this; as you get better, you'll only need a few seconds to remind yourself.
- (4) Cross off wrong answers first, then worry about finding the right answer. Don't waste time trying to decide whether B is actually correct when you haven't looked at C, D, or E yet. Eliminate, then compare any remaining answers and think about which is correct. Watch out for traps! During the preceding steps, you'll have already reminded yourself of what traps to expect for this type. ?

Must-Use Strategy for Critical Reasoning

I've been speaking with students lately who aren't entirely sure how to approach Critical Reasoning (CR) questions when a new one first pops up on the screen. In particular, a lot of students do one thing they shouldn't be doing: they read the argument too soon.

How can someone read the argument too soon?

It may seem kind of strange to say that someone reads the argument too soon. After all, isn't that the first thing we do on a CR question? Actually, reading the argument is *not* the first thing we should do. The first thing we should do is read the question stem.

Then, we're ready to read the argument, right? Not so fast.

The question stem can tell us several things that will make it easier to do the rest of the problem. First, the question stem tells us what kind of question we're about to do. Is this a Find the Assumption question? A Weaken the Conclusion question? Maybe it's one of the Minor question types?

(Note: The categories I discuss in this article are all based on how ManhattanGMAT classifies different CR questions. Different companies will have different categories; it doesn't matter which company's categories you know, as long as you do know them!)

Second, *some* question stems provide additional information beyond the basic question. We can divide question stems into three basic categories: (A) Basic, (B) Clue, and (C) Conclusion!

(A) Basic Question Stems

A Basic question might say something like, The conclusion drawn above is based on the assumption that _____. This is a Find the Assumption question.

(B) Clue Question Stems

A question stem may also provide additional information in the form of a clue that will help us to find the conclusion. A Clue question might say something like, Which of the following, if true, provides the best grounds to doubt that the president's plan will succeed? Now, we know several things. Best grounds to doubt tells us that this is a Weaken the Conclusion question. The additional information tells us that the argument talks about a president and a plan that the president has " and, more importantly, that president's plan has something to do with the conclusion of the argument. Most likely, the president's plan, whatever it is, is the conclusion. Now I know I should pay extra attention when the argument starts talking about the president's plan.

(C) Conclusion! Question Stems

A question stem can also contain the argument's conclusion. Sometimes, the conclusion will be repeated in the argument text and sometimes the conclusion will be contained only in the question stem. An example of this type might read, Which of the following, if true, best supports the president's plan to reduce costs by switching to a cheaper raw material? Bingo! Now, not only do I know this is a Strengthen the Conclusion question, but I also know the conclusion, so I can start analyzing the argument the moment I start reading it.

Okay, I've read the question stem. I've identified the question type. Maybe I've even found something out about the conclusion. Now it's time to read the argument, right?

Maybe. We still have one more thing we should know how to do.

Know what you're about to do

You're about to answer a certain kind of question. You should know what it is that you have to do in order to answer a question of that type. While studying, make sure you can answer these four questions about every CR question type:

- (1) What kind of information do I need to find for this CR question type?
- (2) What kind of analysis will I need to do on that information?
- (3) What characteristics should I expect of the right answer?
- (4) What characteristics should I expect of the wrong answers?

For example, if this is a Find the Assumption question, I know that an assumption is something that the author of the argument *must* believe to be true *in order to draw* that conclusion. (Note: I might disagree; I might think that assumption doesn't have to be true.) The assumption is something the argument's *author* must believe and the argument's author must believe that piece of info specifically in order to get from one of the argument's premises to the argument's conclusion. So, now I know that I need something the author must believe to be true specifically in order to tie together one of the premises with the conclusion; that answers questions 1 and 2, above.

Right answers on Find the Assumption questions will often be closely tied to the conclusion. They will not make the conclusion definitely true, but they may make the conclusion seem more valid or, at the least, it may be easier to understand why the *author* believes the conclusion is more valid. Right answers must bridge some gap between one of the given premises and the conclusion; it isn't enough just to address the conclusion. Finally, if the right answer is negated (if we say that assumption is not true or doesn't have to be true), then the author's conclusion should make a lot less sense.

The trickiest wrong answers will often address just a premise or just the conclusion, without bridging a gap between a premise and the conclusion. Wrong answers also may follow on from the conclusion, or talk about what would happen after the conclusion is accepted as valid. And, as always, some wrong answers may simply be out of scope, addressing something that isn't the point of the argument. If the wrong answer is negated (if we say the assumption is not true or doesn't have to be true), the author's conclusion shouldn't be affected much.

Take-aways On all Critical Reasoning questions:

- (1) Read the question stem first. Identify the question type. If additional information is present, use it to help you find / know the conclusion as quickly and easily as possible.
- (2) Once you've identified the question type, quickly remind yourself of what you need to do on questions of this type. (If you've done the necessary studying, this should only take a few seconds.)
- (3) Anticipate. If there are certain traps you tend to fall into on questions of this type, know why you tend to make those mistakes and set up a process to help you avoid them.

How to Master Every GMAT Critical Reasoning Question Type

Has GMAT Critical Reasoning been driving you crazy? Do you keep getting tangled up in arguments, agonizing back and forth between answers, or picking an answer confidently only to find that you fell straight into a trap? This article is here to save you. 😊

It's going to take some work, but if you follow these steps, you'll see your CR performance improve significantly. Ready? Let's do this!

Open up an Excel spreadsheet (Seriously!)...

Now, set up this template on the first worksheet:

Step 1	Identify the question
	Know the clues that will help to signal a particular kind of question. This will tell you:
	1a) question type
	1b) argument components to expect (eg, conclusion or no conclusion? etc.)
	1c) the kind of reasoning you will need to do (brainstorm an assumption? will new information be okay? etc.)
Step 2	Deconstruct the argument
	Goal is to take very light notes on the flow of the argument: which pieces lead to which other pieces. Know the building blocks that these kinds of arguments tend to contain (premises, conclusions, counterpremises) and how to identify these different pieces of information.
Step 3	Pause and state the Goal
	Remind yourself, in just a few words: what's the goal for this particular kind of question? What characteristic must the correct answer have or not have? What kind of traps will likely be used in the wrong answers?
Step 4	Work from wrong to right
	Use your knowledge of the above to start eliminating answers.
	Know:
	4a) Any necessary characteristics for correct answers on problems of this type.
	4b) The common traps used for questions of this type.

Label this first worksheet your Key.

Are you wondering why I didn't just give you an Excel file with this template? I specifically want you to type out each step and think about what it means. You're about to apply this analysis to the different question types; you'll do so more effectively if you have a solid understanding of what you're trying to accomplish.

If you aren't using Manhattan Prep's CR book, then read my blog post on [our CR process](#). It explains the four steps listed above.

Now, create new worksheets in the spreadsheet.

You're going to need a total of 10 worksheets, including the first worksheet that you already created above. Copy that worksheet 9 times.

Now label those other 9 questions in this way (and in this order!):

- Assump (for Find the Assumption)
- Str (for Strengthen the Argument)
- Weak (for Weaken the Argument)
- Infer (for Inference)
- Discrep (for Find the Discrepancy)
- Role (for Describe the Role) (could also call this BF for Boldface)
- Eval (for Evaluate the Argument)
- Flaw (for Find the Flaw)
- DA (for Describe the Argument)

I put these in this order because this is the rough order of importance based on the frequency with which these are tested. The three most common types are Assumption, Strengthen, and Weaken; you will most likely see more than one of each of these. After that, the next four (Infer, Discrepancy, Role, and Evaluate) are about equally common; you will most likely see just one of each. The Flaw and

Describe the Argument questions are the least frequently seen; you may or may not see one of these.

Start filling out your templates!

Each question type now has its own worksheet with the template. Your task is to start replacing the template with your answers to those questions for each question type. Get going!

Is that all?

Okay. I'll give you a little more. 😊☐

Here's what I have in my template for the Describe the Role question type. (I chose a medium-frequency one because I really want you to put the three most common ones in your own words. You're going to use those the most.)

Step 1	Identify the question
clue words	Boldface font in the argument; something about "role" in the question stem.
components	Will have premises and a conclusion. Likely to have counterpremises and maybe even a counterconclusion.
reasoning	Have to find the conclusion and then figure out how the boldface relates to the conclusion.
Step 2	Deconstruct the argument
Important Parts	Find the conclusion! If the argument is really long, I can just concentrate on the parts that help me find the main conclusion. Then, I have to figure out how the boldface portions relate to that conclusion. Three possibilities: (C) It is the conclusion; (P) It supports the conclusion; (X) It goes against the main argument (or, at least, is just not part of the main argument).
Step 3	Pause and state the Goal
Goal	Find an answer choice that is consistent with the labels I gave to the boldface statements. E.g., if I decide that it's statement 1 = P and statement 2 = X, then the answer should fit those labels.
Step 4	Work from wrong to right
Right answer	Has to fit the labels I assigned.
Wrong answers	TRAP: some answers will fit one label but not both. TRAP: some descriptions will be almost perfect, but one word (like "not" or "oppose") will change everything.

Ready? Set? Go!

Okay, you've got your instructions—now go make it happen! This template will help you to know exactly what to ask yourself and what to examine while you're working through any CR problem. Want to test out your templates? Take a look at this [Master Resource CR article](#). It contains links to articles on every type of CR problem with the exception of Describe the Argument (these are really pretty rare). Each article gives you a problem to try (from the free resources in GMAT Prep®) and then analyzes it thoroughly using this same 4-step process.

How to Tackle Every Single CR GMAT Problem (Seriously!)

Welcome to part 5 of our series on how to answer every single GMAT problem you'll ever see. ? If you haven't already read the earlier installments, [start with part 1](#) and work your way back to me.

Last time, I left you with a Critical Reasoning question from the free questions that come with the GMATPrep® software. Let's talk about it!

"According to the Tristate Transportation Authority, making certain improvements to the main commuter rail line would increase ridership dramatically. The authority plans to finance these improvements over the course of five years by raising automobile tolls on the two highway bridges along the route the rail line serves. Although the proposed improvements are indeed needed, the authority's plan for securing the necessary funds should be rejected because it would unfairly force drivers to absorb the entire cost of something from which they receive no benefit.

"Which of the following, if true, would cast the most doubt on the effectiveness of the authority's plan to finance the proposed improvements by increasing bridge tolls?

"(A) Before the authority increases tolls on any of the area bridges, it is required by law to hold public hearings at which objections to the proposed increase can be raised.

"(B) Whenever bridge tolls are increased, the authority must pay a private contractor to adjust the automated toll-collecting machines.

"(C) Between the time a proposed toll increase is announced and the time the increase is actually put into effect, many commuters buy more tokens than usual to postpone the effects of the increase.

"(D) When tolls were last increased on the two bridges in question, almost 20 percent of the regular commuter traffic switched to a slightly longer alternative route that has since been improved.

"(E) The chairman of the authority is a member of the Tristate Automobile Club that has registered strong opposition to the proposed toll increase."

Ready? Before we dive into the GRW process for CR, you might have already learned the [4-step process](#) we use for CR questions:

Step 1: Identify the Question

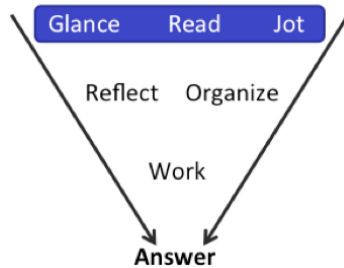
Step 2: Deconstruct the Argument

Step 3: State the Goal

Step 4: Work from Wrong to Right

If you're now wondering why I'm introducing a new process...I'm not! Those 4 steps actually go right along with the GRW model; we just didn't make that model explicit to you before.

Okay, where do you think you should *Glance* first on CR?



The question stem! CR questions can be split into a bunch of sub-types, and your first goal is to figure out which type this one is. What do you think?

The language *if true, would cast the most doubt* indicates that this is a Weaken the Argument question. As soon as you know this, you (should!) immediately know a bunch of other things:

- the kind of information to expect in the argument
- the kind of reasoning needed to answer the question
- the characteristics the correct answer should contain
- the kinds of traps the wrong answers will tend to contain

For a Weaken question:

- the argument will contain a conclusion; there will be at least one unstated assumption between the premise(s) and the conclusion
- to weaken, you need to find an answer that makes the argument at least a little less likely to be valid
- the correct answer should be a new piece of information that makes the argument at least a little less likely to be valid (but doesn't necessarily completely kill the argument)
- trap answers are likely to: strengthen instead of weaken; weaken a related idea or conclusion, but not the given argument; make an irrelevant distinction or comparison between groups discussed in the argument

Plus, there's a bonus on this particular question stem. Notice that it includes information about the specific argument. When this happens, that information is usually the conclusion or refers to the conclusion. Read it and try to understand what you can, but also make a mental note to read it again once you've read the argument.

All right, you've finished *Step 1: Identify the Question*. What's next?

Read this thing, of course! While you're reading deconstruct the argument (Step 2!) and jot down any relevant notes to help yourself keep track.

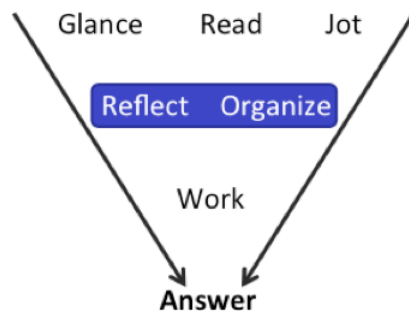
TTA: improve rail → ↑ ↑ riders
 5 yr: ↑ auto toll nearby
 Author: unfair!
 drivers don't benefit

Okay, so repairs to the railway are needed...but, wait, they're going to get the money by charging drivers? If I were a driver in this town, I'd be pretty unhappy, just like the author. (See what I'm doing there? If you can put yourself in the argument, it'll be easier to remember the details and to think about possible assumptions and implications.)

Okay, so why is this unfair?

No, wait! Remember what we said before: the last step to reading and deconstructing the argument is to re-read the question stem (when the stem contains specific information about the argument).

Ah. Okay, the question is asking us to weaken the TTA's *plan*. (You've now completed *Step 2: Deconstruct the Argument.*) What's next?



Reflect. What's the plan? They're going to raise money by increasing a toll for drivers. We've got to find something that indicates that this financing plan might not be such a great idea after all. (We've just completed step 3: state the goal.) If you've already got any ideas about assumptions the TTA is making or where the weak points of the argument are, jot them down or star them in your notes.

One thing I'm thinking: okay, you're going to raise money by imposing a toll on these drivers, but will it be enough money for all of the improvements you want to make?

Ready to *Work* on this thing? It's time to go to those answer choices and start crossing off the wrong ones in pursuit of the correct answer (step 4!).

"(A) Before the authority increases tolls on any of the area bridges, it is required by law to hold public hearings at which objections to the proposed increase can be raised."

People are already raising objections—look at the author of this argument! And notice that the author's objection is not about whether the plan will be *effective*; rather, he complains that it isn't *fair*. It isn't

sufficient to say that someone raising an objection will be showing how the plan might not be effective. Eliminate.

“(B) Whenever bridge tolls are increased, the authority must pay a private contractor to adjust the automated toll-collecting machines.”

So...these would be part of the improvements. This is an expense, yes, but this is just one of the things they’re raising this money for in the first place. This is mildly tempting, so I’ll leave it in for now, but I’m going to keep an eye out for something better.

“(C) Between the time a proposed toll increase is announced and the time the increase is actually put into effect, many commuters buy more tokens than usual to postpone the effects of the increase.”

That sounds smart; I think I’d do that myself. This only postpones the effects, though; eventually, people will have to start to pay the increased tolls and the TTA will make money. So there’s no reason to believe the plan won’t work over 5 years. Eliminate.

“(D) When tolls were last increased on the two bridges in question, almost 20 percent of the regular commuter traffic switched to a slightly longer alternative route that has since been improved.”

Hmm. If 20% of the traffic switches, then that’s 20% of toll revenue lost. *And* that other route has been improved since last time? Okay, then there’s a good chance it’d happen again this time. If lots of people stop taking the toll route, the TTA is going to be losing a bunch of expected revenue. This definitely weakens the argument.

Note: at this point, I would go back and look at answer (B) again. The adjustment of the machines is a one-time expense (even if it wasn’t already planned for), but the loss of a customer who used to drive the toll route multiple times a day or week is a significant, ongoing loss. Answer (D) is stronger.

Check answer (E) to make sure!

“(E) The chairman of the authority is a member of the Tristate Automobile Club that has registered strong opposition to the proposed toll increase.”

This is kind of like answer (A): it might be a reason why the plan will struggle to be implemented (because too many people object for various reasons), but it doesn’t touch on whether the plan itself is or could be *effective*. Remember what you were asked to analyze: not whether the plan will be implemented but whether the plan is effective. (Plus: just because he’s a member doesn’t mean he agrees with the Club’s opinion.)

The correct answer is (D).

What did you learn here? Come up with your own takeaways before you read mine below.

Key Takeaways for Every Single GMAT Problem You Will Ever Do:

(1) On CR, your first *Glance* is at the question stem: what kind of CR question is it? The question type gives you a wealth of knowledge regarding what you’re about to do. Also note that, if the question stem contains specific information about the argument, plan to re-read that part once you’ve read the argument.

(2) Next *Read* and deconstruct the argument, *Jotting* down notes or a little diagram as you go. On Weaken questions, find the conclusion and, if possible, brainstorm any assumptions. Try to figure out where the weak points of the argument are.

(3) Pause for a moment and *Reflect* on what you know so far. Remind yourself of the goal of a Weaken question: to find something that makes the argument at least a little less likely to be valid. Then jump to those answers and start *Working* from wrong to right. Cross off the ones you know are definitely wrong, and compare any tempting answers against each other. ?

How to Infer on the GMAT

We're going to kill two birds with one stone in this week's article.

Inference questions pop up on both Critical Reasoning (CR) and Reading Comprehension (RC), so you definitely want to master these. Good news: the kind of thinking the test-writers want is the same for both question types. Learn how to do Inference questions on one type and you'll know what you need to do for the other!

That's actually only one bird. Here's the second: both CR and RC can give you science-based text, and that science-y text can get pretty confusing. How can you avoid getting sucked into the technical detail, yet still be able to answer the question asked? Read on.

Try this GMATPrep® CR problem out (it's from the free practice tests) and then we'll talk about it. Give yourself about 2 minutes (though it's okay to stretch to 2.5 minutes on a CR *as long as you are making progress*.)

"Increases in the level of high-density lipoprotein (HDL) in the human bloodstream lower bloodstream cholesterol levels by increasing the body's capacity to rid itself of excess cholesterol. Levels of HDL in the bloodstream of some individuals are significantly increased by a program of regular exercise and weight reduction.

"Which of the following can be correctly inferred from the statements above?

"(A) Individuals who are underweight do not run any risk of developing high levels of cholesterol in the bloodstream.

"(B) Individuals who do not exercise regularly have a high risk of developing high levels of cholesterol in the bloodstream late in life.

"(C) Exercise and weight reduction are the most effective methods of lowering bloodstream cholesterol levels in humans.

"(D) A program of regular exercise and weight reduction lowers cholesterol levels in the bloodstream of some individuals.

"(E) Only regular exercise is necessary to decrease cholesterol levels in the bloodstream of individuals of average weight."

Got an answer? (If not, pick one anyway. Pretend it's the real test and just make a guess.) Before we dive into the solution, let's talk a little bit about what Inference questions are asking us to do.

Inference questions are sometimes also called Draw a Conclusion questions. I don't like that title, though, because it can be misleading. Think about a typical CR argument: they usually include a conclusion that is...well...not a solid conclusion. There are holes in the argument, and then they ask you to Strengthen it or Weaken it or something like that.

When the test writers asks you to infer something, they are not asking you to draw that kind of conclusion. They're not even asking you to infer in the way that we normally use that word in the real

world. Rather, they are asking you to deduce *something that must be true* according to the available information in the argument or passage.

Cats are my favorite type of pet. What can you infer from that statement?

In the real world, you might think that I have a cat, or that I'll play with or pet your cat if I come over to your place, or that if you asked me to choose between a free pet cat and a free pet lizard, I would obviously choose the cat.

There's just one little problem. I'm seriously allergic to cats. So, while those scenarios might be generally likely for someone who says that cats are her favorite type of pet, not one of the scenarios has to be true.

What does have to be true? I don't like dogs as pets better than I like cats as pets. (To all my dog-lover readers: I do like dogs. They just require more care. And anyway, I'm allergic to both, so the point is moot for me. J)

It also must be true that I am familiar with at least one other type of pet; otherwise, I couldn't make the judgment call to say that cats are my *favorite* type of pet.

This, then, is what we need to find among the answer choices: something that must, unequivocally, be true according to the evidence they gave us in the argument or passage.

Okay, ready to talk about the problem?

Step 1: Identify the Question

What kind of question type is it? The word *inferred* is the giveaway: this is an Inference question type. They may also use language like (emphasis added):

Which of the following *assertions* is most strongly supported by the evidence above?

Which of the following *conclusions* can most properly be drawn from the information above?

Once you know the question type, you also know that the argument will contain only premises, no conclusion, and your task will be to deduce something that must be true from that information.

Step 2: Deconstruct the Argument

Okay, now let's tackle the crazy technical language of the argument.

Here's what I thought and wrote while I did the problem. Your own thought process won't be exactly the same as mine and, of course, your notes will probably look quite different, since we all have our own ways of abbreviating things. (Note: Inf = inference.)

The Argument	What I Write	What I'm Thinking
"Increases in the level of high-density lipoprotein (HDL) in the human bloodstream lower bloodstream cholesterol..."	Inf? A B C D E	Huh? Wait. Start again.
" Increases in the level of high-density lipoprotein (HDL) in the human bloodstream lower bloodstream cholesterol levels by increasing the body's capacity to rid itself of excess cholesterol."	Inf? A B C D E >> HDL → << chol	Increases in X cause something else to go down. Okay. Increases in HDL lower cholesterol. That sounds like a good thing; I know high cholesterol is bad. This happens because...er, I'll read that again later if I really need to know.
What I did here: First, I used my Sentence Correction skills to just get the subject and verb. Increases in one thing lead to decreases in something else. Then I put back in some of the technical terms (HDL and cholesterol) and tried to relate that to stuff I already know (to help my brain remember it). Finally, I noted that they do tell me how this works...but I decided not to take time to understand that piece of detail right now. I do know it's there, though, so I'll come back to it if needed.		

" Levels of HDL in the bloodstream of some individuals are significantly increased by a program of regular exercise and weight reduction. "	Inf? A B C D E >> HDL → << chol	Let's use that trick again. Levels of something go up a lot if I exercise and lose weight.
See what I did there? I put myself in the sentence. I can wrap my head around exercising and losing weight. Okay, now go back for more technical detail.		
"Levels of HDL in the bloodstream of some individuals are significantly increased by a program of regular exercise and weight reduction."	Inf? A B C D E >> HDL → << chol HDL can go up w/gym + lose lb. So: gym → >> HDL → << chol!	Oh, cool, I know high cholesterol is bad, but I can increase my HDL by exercising and losing weight. The first sentence shows that increasing my HDL will lower my cholesterol. Nice!

Okay, maybe I should motivate to exercise more. But right now I have to finish this GMAT problem. 😊

Step 3: State the Goal

The goal on Inference questions is to deduce something that must be true from the given information. It's not necessary to use all of the given information. It's only necessary to avoid going beyond the given information.

Work from Wrong to Right

As I work through the answers, I keep track of my thoughts on my scrap paper, either crossing letters off or giving them little ~ symbols if I'm going to keep them in and come back to them later.

Answer Choice	What I'm Thinking
"(A) Individuals who are underweight do not run any risk of developing high levels of cholesterol in the bloodstream."	<i>They didn't say anything about people who are underweight. I don't think I can conclude this definitively. Eliminate.</i>
"(B) Individuals who do not exercise regularly have a high risk of developing high levels of cholesterol in the bloodstream late in life."	<i>Maybe. Come back to this.</i>
"(C) Exercise and weight reduction are the most effective methods of lowering bloodstream cholesterol levels in humans."	<i>Most effective? The argument didn't actually mention any other methods of lowering cholesterol, so who knows what's most effective? Eliminate.</i>
"(D) A program of regular exercise and weight reduction lowers cholesterol levels in the bloodstream of some individuals."	<i>Maybe. Come back to this.</i>
"(E) Only regular exercise is necessary to decrease cholesterol levels in the bloodstream of individuals of average weight."	<i>The argument says "regular exercise and weight reduction"; it doesn't mention any exceptions where you'd only need exercise. Eliminate.</i>

Okay, I need to compare (B) and (D).

"(B) Individuals who do not exercise regularly have a high risk of developing high levels of cholesterol in the bloodstream late in life."

"(D) A program of regular exercise and weight reduction lowers cholesterol levels in the bloodstream of some individuals."

They both match a lot of the language in the passage, but when I re-read carefully, I noticed an extra detail in answer (B): "late in life."

The argument doesn't say anything about when this stuff happens: when we're young, middle-aged, old. I could imagine that people have higher risk later in life...but that's the same as you imagining that I would play with your cat, since I like cats so much. It might be true, but it doesn't have to be true.

Answer (D), on the other hand, doesn't go beyond the scope of the argument at all. In fact, it matches the final chain we put together for the argument: I go to the gym and lose weight, that raises my HDL, and that lowers my cholesterol. Yay! Note also that this answer choice is very middle-of-the-road: it claims that this will work only for "some individuals," which is exactly what the argument says.

The correct answer is (D).

Looking for more practice on Inference questions? Here's another [CR Inference problem](#). If you'd like to try some RC, check out [this compilation article on all RC question types](#).

Take-aways for Inference and science-y questions:

(1) Your goal on an inference question is to deduce something that must be true given the evidence in the argument or passage. Don't go beyond what the text says and don't make a "real-world" inference (something that could be true but doesn't have to be true).

(2) Ignore the science! Well, no, you can't ignore it entirely. But you can ignore some of it. Start by using your SC skills to look at just the basic sentence: the subject and the verb. Then start adding in the extra info, piece by piece.

(3) Did you notice that we never had to go back to that last part of the first sentence, exactly how the body's cholesterol levels are lowered? Sometimes, you can ignore some of the technical info forever. If possible, just try to understand *why* it's there, not necessarily *what* it's actually saying, so that you'll know later whether you need to come back to it. (In this case, I knew that it was trying to explain why cholesterol levels went down. But I never needed that info!)

GMAT Critical Reasoning: Infer like a Master

Inference questions can appear in GMAT Critical Reasoning, Reading Comprehension, and Integrated Reasoning, so it's crucial to master what the test is—and is not—asking you to do. The good news? Your goal is the same, regardless of the question type.

Try this problem from the free questions that come with the GMATPrep® software and then we'll talk about how Inference questions work!

Roland: The alarming fact is that 90 percent of the people in this country now report that they know someone who is unemployed.

Sharon: But a normal, moderate level of unemployment is 5 percent, with one out of 20 workers unemployed. So at any given time if a person knows approximately 50 workers, one or more will very likely be unemployed.

Sharon's argument is structured to lead to which of the following as a conclusion?

- (A) The fact that 90% of the people know someone who is unemployed is not an indication that unemployment is abnormally high.
- (B) The current level of unemployment is not moderate.
- (C) If at least 5% of workers are unemployed, the result of questioning a representative group of people cannot be the percentage Roland cites.
- (D) It is unlikely that the people whose statements Roland cites are giving accurate reports.
- (E) If an unemployment figure is given as a certain percent, the actual percentage of those without jobs is even higher.

Let's start by talking about what you need to do for Inference questions in general. Then we'll tackle the problem.

Inference arguments will provide you mostly with a series of premises and they'll ask you to *infer* or to *draw a conclusion* in some way.

Now, here's the key: the test does **not** want you to infer or conclude in the way that you likely would in the real world. (Did I emphasize that word strongly enough? ?) In the real world, we conclude things that are *likely* to be true, given certain information.

On GMAT Critical Reasoning, you'll need to hold yourself to a higher standard: What *must* be true, based on the information you were given? (Not just what is *likely* or *reasonable* to believe.)

Okay, let's dive into this problem and see how this "what must be true?" concept works.

Step 1: Identify the Question

How do you know that this is an Inference question in the first place?

The question stem refers to the answer choices as possible conclusions:

“lead to which of the following [the answers] as a conclusion?”

GMAT Critical Reasoning (CR) questions may also ask you what can be *inferred*. (On Reading Comp and Integrated Reasoning, you might see the words *suggest* or *imply* in the question stem.)

In all cases, the question is asking you what must be true based on the information you’ve been given so far.

Step 2: Deconstruct the Argument

Roland finds it *alarming* that 90% of people say they know someone who is unemployed.

Sharon’s response starts with the word *but*, so she doesn’t agree with *something* that Roland said. What?

According to Sharon, a *normal, moderate level* of unemployment is 5%. If you know 50 people who work, then 5% = 1 person.

So, if the unemployment rate is 5%, then you’d know 1 person who is unemployed. She seems to think that it’s not a big deal that 90% of people know someone who is unemployed.

Do you know 50 people who work? You may not be close friends with 50 workers, but chances are you do know 50 people who work—your co-workers, your friends and family, acquaintances at the gym, the servers at your favorite restaurant, etc.

Hmm. Sharon seems to think that it’s not a big deal that 90% of people know someone who is unemployed and maybe she has a point! If I know 50 people who work, and if just one is unemployed right now, that reflects an unemployment rate of just 5%—not a very high rate. So most people probably do know someone who is unemployed at the moment.

Note that Sharon doesn’t dispute Roland’s statistic. She just says that his figure *isn’t surprising*. She thinks it’s pretty normal and explains why.

Here’s what my notes looked like, taken as I read the argument:

R: Alarm! 90% of ppl know unemployed

S: BUT normal level is 5% of ppl
So if know 50 ppl, 1+ likely unempl.
[ie, this is normal]

The bracketed text at the end was not stated in the argument. This is my own conclusion, in my own words. I use the brackets to signal to myself that I’m doing my own thinking here; I’m not writing what the argument actually stated.

Step 3: State the Goal

On Inference questions, the goal is to find the answer that must follow from the given information in the argument.

The most common trap on this question type is an answer that goes too far—what I call a real-world conclusion. A real-world conclusion *might* be true, and even might be *likely* to be true, but it doesn't have to be true...so it's not the right answer on the GMAT.

Step 4: Work from Wrong to Right

All right, let's dive in.

(A) The fact that 90% of the people know someone who is unemployed is not an indication that unemployment is abnormally high.

Roland is alarmed. Sharon isn't and she has a reasonable explanation for why Roland's statistic isn't actually alarming. This choice fits Sharon's argument: she doesn't think that Roland's statistic indicates that unemployment is unusually high.

(B) The current level of unemployment is not moderate.

This one is a double trap. First, this goes along with what Roland is saying, but the question asks about Sharon's argument, not Roland's. That's trap #1.

Trap #2: We don't technically know what the current level of unemployment is! The argument says only that 90% of people currently know someone who is unemployed.

If anything, we could possibly real-world infer from Sharon's argument that the current level is somewhere around 5%, and she calls this level *normal* and *moderate*. So a choice that says it is not moderate does not match what Sharon is saying.

(C) If at least 5% of workers are unemployed, the result of questioning a representative group of people cannot be the percentage Roland cites.

This one is directly contradicted by the information given; if you follow Sharon's math, she shows that a 5% unemployment stat could easily lead to 90% of people knowing that someone is unemployed.

They're trying to trap you into thinking that Sharon's "but" means that she disputes Roland's statistic in the first place. She doesn't; she just thinks that his interpretation of what the statistic means is wrong.

(D) It is unlikely that the people whose statements Roland cites are giving accurate reports.

This is another trap based on Sharon's starting word, *but*. Sharon is not disputing Roland's statistic, just how he interprets it. He finds it alarming; she finds it normal.

(E) If an unemployment figure is given as a certain percent, the actual percentage of those without jobs is even higher.

In the real world, this may very well be true. The method used to estimate the percentage may be missing certain categories of people or something like that. The argument, though, doesn't provide enough information to conclude that this *must* be true. I'd call this one a real-world trap: it probably is true a lot of the time in the real world, but it doesn't have to be true.

The correct answer is (A). Sharon's argument is set up to conclude that Roland's 90% figure actually isn't unusual and so unemployment isn't necessarily abnormally high. If anything, Sharon's figures seem to

show that the 90% figure goes along with “normal, moderate” levels of unemployment, not unusually high levels.

What did you learn on this problem? Come up with your own takeaways before you read mine below.

Key Takeaways for Inference Problems

- (1) Know how to identify the question type. On GMAT Critical Reasoning, this usually means some mention of the word *infer* or some reference to a conclusion *in the answers below* (not in the argument above).
- (2) Lay out the facts very clearly. Articulate to yourself what the facts do and don’t tell you. Don’t assume anything and don’t try to draw any real-world conclusions!
- (3) Look for an answer that must follow from the information you were already given. Be wary of “real-world conclusion” traps: ones that *might* be true or are even *prettylikely* to be true but don’t *have* to be true. You’re not looking for a “reasonable” conclusion. You’re looking for a “must be true” conclusion. ?

Tackling a GMATPrep Critical Reasoning Inference Problem

This week, we're going to discuss one of the most common critical reasoning problem types: Inference. (Note: our current materials call these questions Draw A Conclusion, but we're changing the name next month!) If you haven't yet, [read this article](#) before we try our GMATPrep problem. Then set your timer for 2 minutes and go!

* When a polygraph test is judged inconclusive, this is no reflection on the examinee. Rather, such a judgment means that the test has failed to show whether the examinee was truthful or untruthful. Nevertheless, employers will sometimes refuse to hire a job applicant because of an inconclusive polygraph test result.

Which of the following conclusions can most properly be drawn from the information above?

- (A) Most examinees with inconclusive polygraph test results are in fact untruthful.
- (B) Polygraph tests should not be used by employers in the consideration of job applicants.
- (C) An inconclusive polygraph test result is sometimes unfairly held against the examinee.
- (D) A polygraph test indicating that an examinee is untruthful can sometimes be mistaken.
- (E) Some employers have refused to consider the results of polygraph tests when evaluating job applicants.

Okay, now that you've got an answer, let's use our 4-step CR process.

Step 1: Identify the Question

First, we read the question stem:

Which of the following conclusions can most properly be drawn from the information above?

The key identifying language is typical in this example. The language which of the *following conclusions* indicates that the answer choices contain conclusions, or inferences. This, coupled with the language can most properly be drawn, indicates that we have an Inference (or Draw a Conclusion) question.

The question language is generic in the sense that it doesn't provide us with any details about the argument. We do know several things, though. First, the argument we're about to read will not contain any conclusion itself " it will consist only of premises, and those premises are usually fairly factual on this question type. Second, our task will be to find an answer that must be true given some or all of those premises.

Step 2: Deconstruct the Argument

I already know that all of the sentences will contain premises " but what will be the flow of the information? Will the premises all be separate or will some pieces of information lead to others?

The first sentence indicates that (a) it's possible for a polygraph test to be inconclusive and (b) when this happens, it doesn't tell us anything about the examinee. Rather, the second sentence says, this just means that the test has failed to do what it was supposed to do. The *test* has failed, not the examinee. The third sentence begins nevertheless " what does that word mean? It means Despite what I've told you so far, some contradictory thing comes next. Despite the fact that an inconclusive result only means that the *test* has failed, employers sometimes decide not to hire someone *because* of that inconclusive result.

That's ridiculous! It's not my fault that the test failed! (You don't really need to go this far in your thinking while reading the argument, but sometimes putting ourselves into the situation can help. :))

Your notes might look something like this (though there are lots of ways to write notes!):

Inconcl PT = test fail; don't know about employee
BUT employer st won't hire b/c of that

Note that I used abbreviations; you can use any you want as long as they make sense to you. My typical abbreviation for sometimes or something is "st." Note that I didn't label anything the conclusion " because there isn't one. Those are all just facts.

Step 3: State the Goal

Our goal is to find an answer that must be true given some or all of the information presented in the argument. Note that we do not need to use all of the information. There will be only one answer that must be true, given the information in the argument.

The most common trap on this type is something that could be true and might even be likely to be true but does not absolutely have to be true.

Step 4: Work from Wrong to Right

(A) Most examinees with inconclusive polygraph test results are in fact untruthful.

I have no idea if this is true. The argument didn't address whether the people who receive inconclusive polygraph results are likely to be truthful or are not likely to be truthful. In fact, it specifically says that we can't tell. Eliminate A.

(B) Polygraph tests should not be used by employers in the consideration of job applicants.

I can believe that there are some people who would believe this or advocate for this, but the author of the argument never comments on how the tests should or should not be used. This doesn't have to be true.

(C) An inconclusive polygraph test result is sometimes unfairly held against the examinee.

Let's see. If an examinee were to get an inconclusive result and then not be hired specifically *for that reason*, then that would be unfair, yes " since the inconclusive result doesn't actually mean that the person was being untruthful. Does this ever happen? Yes, the last sentence says that employers will *sometimes* do this " just as the answer choice says that this *sometimes* happens.

In other words, it is possible to be truthful and get an inconclusive result, and it is possible to be untruthful and also get an inconclusive result. Sometimes, people will not be hired because they have an inconclusive result, so it's possible to be truthful and yet not get hired. According to the argument, this answer choice is true; let's keep it in and check the remaining answers.

(D) A polygraph test indicating that an examinee is untruthful can sometimes be mistaken.

I can believe that this is true in the real world but the argument never discusses a situation where a person gets an untruthful result from the test. The argument only discusses the case of the inconclusive result. So I can't infer anything for sure about an untruthful result.

(E) Some employers have refused to consider the results of polygraph tests when evaluating job applicants.

Again, I can believe that this is true, but this circumstance doesn't apply to the argument. The argument mentions employers who do use the polygraph results, not those who do not.

The correct answer is C.

Answers A, B, D, and E all represent speculations "things that we might brainstorm about such a situation, but that may or may not be true. Maybe an inconclusive result happens most often when someone knows how to beat polygraph tests, and so the person lies but gets away with it. If that were true, then answer A might be true but we were given no actual evidence to support this idea.

Key Takeaways for Solving Inference CR Problems:

(1) Know how to recognize this type. The question stem will typically use some variation of the word conclusion or infer. It will also mention something along the lines of most properly drawn or best supported by. Be careful about one thing: Inference questions can sometimes include the words strongly supports and this language also shows up in Strengthen questions. If the question contains this language, check to see whether it refers to the answers as conclusions or inferences " if so, this is an Inference question, not a Strengthen question. (Strengthen questions will contain a conclusion in the argument, not in the answer choices.)

(2) Know what to do with Inference questions. The argument will contain fact-based premises and no conclusion. Our goal is to find an answer that *must be true given some or all of the premises*. We don't need to use all of the information in the argument.

(3) Watch out for traps! The answer choices usually contain Real World inferences: things that might be or are even likely to be true in the real world but they don't absolutely have to be true. These are tricky because we're used to making reasonable assumptions in the real world when drawing a conclusion or inference " but we can't do that on the GMAT.

Tackling Find the Assumption CR Problems

Last week, we discussed the [general process for tackling Critical Reasoning problems](#). This week, let's go through a specific problem together using our process.

First, a reminder. Our 4-step process is:

- Step 1: Identify the question.
- Step 2: Deconstruct the argument.
- Step 3: State the Goal.
- Step 4: Work from wrong to right.

Okay, set your timer for 2 minutes and try this GMATPrep problem:

With a record number of new companies starting up in Derderia and with previously established companies adding many jobs, a record number of new jobs were created last year in the Derderian economy. This year, previously established companies will not be adding as many new jobs overall as such companies added last year. Therefore, unless a record number of companies start up this year, Derderia will not break its record for new jobs created.

Which of the following is an assumption on which the argument relies?

- (A) Each year, new companies starting up create more new jobs overall than do previously established companies.
- (B) Companies established last year will not add a greater number of jobs overall this year than they did last year.
- (C) This year, the new companies starting up will not provide substantially more jobs per company than did new companies last year.
- (D) This year, the overall number of jobs created by previously established companies will be less than the overall number of jobs lost at those companies.
- (E) The number of jobs created in the Derderian economy last year was substantially larger than the number of jobs lost last year.

Step 1: Identify the Question

The question stem contains the word assumption, which is a pretty good clue that this is a Find the Assumption (FA) question. I'm expecting to find a conclusion when I read the argument and, if I can, I'm going to brainstorm any assumptions I can think of without taking too much time.

Step 2: Deconstruct the Argument

The Argument	What I Write	What I'm Thinking
With a record number of new companies starting up in Derderia and with previously established companies adding many jobs, a	FA A B C D E rec new Cos + old Cos add jobs â†’ rec. # new jobs last yr	<i>These are facts, so this is a premise. A lot of jobs were added last year from 2 sources.</i>

record number of new jobs were created last year in the Derderian economy.		
This year, previously established companies will not be adding as many new jobs overall as such companies added last year.	FA A B C D E rec new Cos + old Cos add jobs â't' rec. # new jobs last yr old Cos adding â't" new jobs this yr	<i>Prediction. Could be a conclusion, but doesn't feel that big. Okay, so companies that already exist aren't going to be adding as many new jobs this year.</i>
Therefore, unless a record number of companies start up this year, Derderia will not break its record for new jobs created.	FA A B C D E rec new Cos + old Cos add jobs â't' rec. # new jobs last yr old Cos adding â't" new jobs this yr © D NOT brk rec this yr UNLESS rec # new Cos	<i>Therefore = conclusion. D will NOT break the jobs record UNLESS there's a record # of new Cos this year. [Really? What if there's one new Co that has a million new jobs?]</i>

D established a record for new jobs last year because a lot of new and old companies added a bunch of jobs. This year the old companies aren't going to add as many jobs, so the author claims that D can't break its new jobs record unless even more new companies start up this year. (Note: you would probably say this to yourself more quickly in actual practice.)

Step 3: State the Goal Okay, well I've spotted one potential assumption. This author assumes that you have to have a certain number of new companies in order to reach a certain number of new jobs, but that's not necessarily true. You could have just one new company that adds a huge number of new jobs.

This is an assumption question, so I have to find something the author MUST believe to be true in order to draw this conclusion. One thing I've thought of: the author's assuming that you have to have more new *companies* in order to have more new *jobs*.

Work from Wrong to Right

Answer Choice	What I Write	What I'm Thinking
(A) Each year, new companies starting up create more new jobs overall than do previously established companies.	FA A B C D E rec new Cos + old Cos add jobs â't' rec. # new jobs last yr old Cos adding â't" new jobs this yr © D NOT brk rec this yr UNLESS rec # new Cos	<i>Hmm. Well, if this were true, it would generally help the idea that we need new companies to help add jobs but this is too general. This doesn't have to happen each year forever in order to conclude that D won't break the record this year. Eliminate A.</i>

(B) Companies established last year will not add a greater number of jobs overall this year than they did last year.	FA A B C D E rec new Cos + old Cos add jobs $\hat{+}$ ' rec. # new jobs last yr old Cos adding $\hat{+}$ " new jobs this yr © D NOT brk rec this yr UNLESS rec # new Cos	<i>Hmm. The companies that were new last year aren't going to add even more jobs this year. This does help the idea that D won't break the record. I'll keep this one in for now.</i>
(C) This year, the new companies starting up will not provide substantially more jobs per company than did new companies last year.	FA A B C D E rec new Cos + old Cos add jobs $\hat{+}$ ' rec. # new jobs last yr old Cos adding $\hat{+}$ " new jobs this yr © D NOT brk rec this yr UNLESS rec # new Cos	<i>New companies this year will NOT add more jobs per company per company! That's good. That's kind of what I said before "what if you have one company that adds a million new jobs? Keep this one in, too.</i>
(D) This year, the overall number of jobs created by previously established companies will be less than the overall number of jobs lost at those companies.	FA A B C D E rec new Cos + old Cos add jobs $\hat{+}$ ' rec. # new jobs last yr old Cos adding $\hat{+}$ " new jobs this yr © D NOT brk rec this yr UNLESS rec # new Cos	<i>Jobs lost what impact does that have on the argument? They never talk about jobs lost or about <u>net</u> new jobs. Just new jobs, period. This is a distraction answer. Eliminate D.</i>
(E) The number of jobs created in the Derderian economy last year was substantially larger than the number of jobs lost last year.	FA A B C D E rec new Cos + old Cos add jobs $\hat{+}$ ' rec. # new jobs last yr old Cos adding $\hat{+}$ " new jobs this yr © D NOT brk rec this yr UNLESS rec # new Cos	<i>Jobs lost again. Still a distraction. Eliminate E.</i>

We still have two answers left, B and C, so now we compare them.

Let's see. Answer B talks about companies established last year. Are those considered new or old now? When talking about this year, the argument says previously established companies "meaning previous to this year" so companies established last year are old companies now. So the answer's saying a subset of the old companies won't add even more jobs this year wait a second! The argument says all the old companies combined won't be adding as many new jobs. It might be reasonable in the real world to think that just this subset of the big group "companies-started-last-year-but-old-now" also won't add more new jobs, but those kinds of real-world likely to be true inferences are deadly on the GMAT. Plus, it doesn't matter what this subgroup does; I already know that the overall group is not going to add more jobs than last year. B's not looking so good anymore.

What about C? New companies this year will NOT offer a lot more jobs per company yes, that's what I said before I even looked at the answers. The author is assuming that we need to have a huge number of new companies in order to have a huge number of new jobs, but if each new company just offers a larger number of new jobs, then D could break the jobs record even though there isn't a record number of new companies this year. So the author must assume that's not going to happen. Bingo!

The correct answer is C.

Take-aways for Find the Assumption (FA) CR questions:

- (1) Know how to identify the question type. Most FA questions contain some form of the word assume or assumption, though occasionally the question will ask what information is required or what information would allow the conclusion to be more properly drawn.
- (2) Deconstruct the argument according to the goals for this type. FA questions all have conclusions and they all hinge on finding some assumption, so I should be looking for these things as I read the argument. I don't have endless time to brainstorm assumptions; I'll have a better shot at thinking of one or two efficiently if I know to think about it while I'm reading the argument for the first time.
- (3) Remind yourself of your goal. At first, you may need to say to yourself: For FA questions, I need to find something that the author must believe to be true in order to draw that conclusion. Some trap answers might involve something the author could believe to be true, but that's not good enough. Longer term, you may be able to say to yourself, simply, "Find Assumption" and know what that entails.
- (4) Cross off wrong answers first, then worry about finding the right answer. Don't waste time trying to decide whether B is actually correct when you haven't looked at C, D, or E yet. Eliminate first, then compare any remaining answers, as we did on this problem. Watch out for traps! On Assumption questions, one common trap answer tells us something that's reasonable to believe could be true in the real world, but the author doesn't absolutely have to believe that it's true in order to get to his conclusion.

Tackling Find the Assumption Critical Reasoning Problems More

Find the Assumption questions are very common Critical Reasoning question types. If you don't yet know the [general process for tackling Critical Reasoning problems](#), learn how before you keep reading this article.

Ready to try a question? Set your timer for 2 minutes and try this GMATPrep problem:

In a study conducted in Canada, servers in various restaurants wrote Thank you[☺] on randomly selected bills before presenting the bills to their customers. Tips on these bills were an average of three percentage points higher than tips on bills without the message. Therefore, if servers in Canada regularly wrote Thank you[☺] on restaurant bills, their average income from tips would be significantly higher than it otherwise would have been.

Which of the following is an assumption on which the argument relies?

- (A) The Thank you[☺] messages would have the same impact on regular patrons of a restaurant as they would on occasional patrons of the same restaurant.
- (B) Regularly seeing Thank you[☺] written on their bills would not lead restaurant patrons to revert to their earlier tipping habits.
- (C) The written Thank you[☺] reminds restaurant patrons that tips constitute a significant part of the income of many food servers.
- (D) The rate at which people tip food servers in Canada does not vary with how expensive a restaurant is.
- (E) Virtually all patrons of the Canadian restaurants in the study who were given a bill with Thank you[☺] written on it left a larger tip than they otherwise would have.

Got your answer? Let's start going through this one!

Step 1: Identify the Question

The question stem contains the word assumption,[☺] which is a pretty good clue that this is a Find the Assumption (FA) question. This question type always contains a conclusion and I know it's important to find that conclusion. Also, if I can, I'm going to brainstorm any assumptions I can think of without taking too much time.

Step 2: Deconstruct the Argument

Here, I'll show you what I'm thinking while I read the argument and also how I would take notes. Your own thought process won't be exactly the same as mine and, of course, your notes will probably look quite different, since we all have our own ways of abbreviating things.

The Argument	What I Write	What I'm Thinking
In a study conducted in Canada, servers in various restaurants	FA A B C D E Can: random TY bill	<i>Fact. They're just setting up the scenario.</i>

wrote Thank you ² on randomly selected bills before presenting the bills to their customers. ²		
Tips on these bills were an average of three percentage points higher than tips on bills without the message. ²	FA A B C D ECan: random TY bill Result: tips 3% $\hat{\mu}$ [why?]	<i>They're telling me the result "tips were 3% higher" but there's absolutely no information about WHY. I can already tell what's going to happen: the author's going to make some big assumption about that.</i>
Therefore, if servers in Canada regularly wrote Thank you ² on restaurant bills, their average income from tips would be significantly higher than it otherwise would have been. ²	FA A B C D ECan: random TY bill Result: tips 3% $\hat{\mu}$ avg [why?] $\odot$ all TY = $\hat{\mu}$ avg tips	<i>And here we go. I can see multiple places to pick this apart. Significantly? Is 3% really significant? Also, will this always work? Maybe customers will get used to it and start ignoring it.</i>

I've thought of a couple of different lines of attack. First, maybe there's something around the word significant.² Also, the author is assuming that what happened during the study will continue to happen in future, but maybe there's some reason why that wouldn't happen. I can imagine that I might respond by giving a larger tip the first couple of times I saw Thank you,² thinking the server had taken extra care to write the note but if everybody did it, it wouldn't have the same impact.

Note: I'm not really articulating all of the above to myself in so many words "there's not enough time. But quick ideas or impressions come to us as we read these arguments, and the above would be my general impression for this one.

Step 3: State the Goal

This is an assumption question, so I have to find something the author MUST believe to be true in order to draw this conclusion (that writing Thank you² on the bill will result in significantly² greater tips on average).

Work from Wrong to Right

Answer Choice	What I Write	What I'm Thinking
(A) The Thank you ² messages would have the same impact on regular patrons of a	FA A B C D ECan: random TY bill Result: tips 3% $\hat{\mu}$ avg [why?]	<i>Regular vs. occasional? I don't remember the argument making that distinction I glanced back at the argument and, nope, they don't say anything about the <u>type</u> of</i>

restaurant as they would on occasional patrons of the same restaurant.	© all TY = $\hat{\alpha}^+ \hat{\alpha}^+$ avg tips	customer. Wrong. (This one is what we call the irrelevant distinction trap. They're trying to get us to think that a certain distinction might matter, but the argument doesn't even talk about different types of customers.)
(B) Regularly seeing Thank you written on their bills would not lead restaurant patrons to revert to their earlier tipping habits.	FA A B C D ECan: random TY bill Result: tips 3% $\hat{\alpha}^+ \hat{\alpha}^+$ avg [why?] © all TY = $\hat{\alpha}^+ \hat{\alpha}^+$ avg tips new Cos	Would NOT lead this sentence is a little confusing. Let's see. If I saw Thank you all the time, then I would NOT go back to giving lower tips. Hey, this is kind of what I said earlier: maybe if people see it all the time, they'll stop giving good tips. So, yes, this does seem like something the author would have to assume to be true. I'll leave this one in.
(C) The written Thank you reminds restaurant patrons that tips constitute a significant part of the income of many food servers.	FA A B C D ECan: random TY bill Result: tips 3% $\hat{\alpha}^+ \hat{\alpha}^+$ avg [why?] © all TY = $\hat{\alpha}^+ \hat{\alpha}^+$ avg tips	That's interesting. This answer gives a possible reason why someone might tip more when seeing Thank you. But it's only a possible reason; the author doesn't <u>have</u> to believe that this particular reason is definitely true in order to draw the conclusion. This answer would be fine if this were a strengthen question, but it's not "it's an assumption question. Wrong.
(D) The rate at which people tip food servers in Canada does not vary with how expensive a restaurant is.	FA A B C D ECan: random TY bill Result: tips 3% $\hat{\alpha}^+ \hat{\alpha}^+$ avg [why?] © all TY = $\hat{\alpha}^+ \hat{\alpha}^+$ avg tips	Hmm, maybe there <u>are</u> differences in how people tip depending on the level of the restaurant. How would this affect the conclusion? Oh, wait. It wouldn't affect the conclusion at all. The conclusion doesn't make any claim about the type or level of restaurant. This is another one of those irrelevant distinction trap answers, just like answer A!
(E) Virtually all patrons of the Canadian restaurants in the study who were given a bill with Thank you written on it left a larger tip than they otherwise would have.	FA A B C D ECan: random TY bill Result: tips 3% $\hat{\alpha}^+ \hat{\alpha}^+$ avg [why?] © all TY = $\hat{\alpha}^+ \hat{\alpha}^+$ avg tips	Let's see. In the study, the people who did get the Thank you bills gave larger tips than they otherwise would have. Yeah, you would have to assume that the servers didn't randomly happen to choose people who were going to give those larger tips anyway. In other words, you do have to assume that the Thank you note

		<i>did change people's behavior. I'll leave this one in, too.</i>
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We still have two answers left, B and E, so now we compare them.

Wow, I was pretty convinced when I read answer B, but now that I've read E, I think that one is it! Argh.

Okay, answer B addresses the issue of whether there would be an unintended consequence of seeing "Thank you" all the time "if people who see it all the time then start ignoring it and go back to their old tipping habits, then the servers aren't going to maintain that increase in their tips. Does the argument say that the result (significantly more in tips) would be short-term? No, it implies that this increase would be permanent. It wouldn't be, though, if people did revert to their old tipping habits, so the author really does have to assume that people won't go back to their old habits. B is still looking good.

What about E? I still like the fact that this answer says that the "Thank you" people gave larger tips than they otherwise would have. But both answers can't be right! Is there anything else here? Oh, I think I see. At the beginning, the answer says that virtually all patrons gave higher tips. Is it necessary to assume that they all or almost all gave higher tips? Maybe a smaller portion gave much higher tips, and so the overall increase averaged to 3%. Let me just check the conclusion yes, I've got it! The conclusion also just talks about an average increase, so the author is not assuming that everyone gives higher tips "just that some people do.

The correct answer is B.

Also, I'm pretty impressed by that wrong answer E. One part of it is an actual assumption "the author does have to assume that the "Thank you" note did specifically cause the change in behavior. The problem with E was that it went too far in assuming that virtually all of the people changed their behavior. That was seriously tricky.

Take-aways for Find the Assumption (FA) CR questions:

(1) Know how to identify the question type. Most FA questions contain some form of the word assume or assumption, though occasionally the question will ask what information is required or what information would allow the conclusion to be more properly drawn.

(2) Deconstruct the argument according to the goals for this type. FA questions all have conclusions and they all hinge on finding some assumption, so I should be looking for these things as I read the argument. I don't have endless time to brainstorm assumptions; I'll have a better shot at thinking of one or two efficiently if I know to think about it while I'm reading the argument for the first time.

(3) Remind yourself of your goal. At first, you may need to say to yourself: For FA questions, I need to find something that the author must believe to be true in order to draw that conclusion. Some trap answers might involve something the author *could* believe to be true, but that's not good enough. Longer term, you may be able to say to yourself, simply, "Find Assumption" and know what that entails.

(4) Cross off wrong answers first, then worry about finding the right answer. Don't waste time trying to decide whether B is actually correct when you haven't looked at C, D, or E yet. Eliminate first, then compare any remaining answers, as we did on this problem. Watch out for traps! On Assumption questions, one common trap answer tells us something that's reasonable to believe could be true (such as answer C), but the author doesn't absolutely have to believe that it's true in order to get to his conclusion. Another common trap is the irrelevant distinction trap, where the answer tries to make a distinction between two or more groups or categories, but those distinctions do not actually matter to the given conclusion, as in answers A and D.

Tackling a GMAT Prep Critical Reasoning Strengthen Problem

This week, we're going to discuss one of the most common critical reasoning problem types: Strengthen the Conclusion. Strengthen questions belong to the Assumption Family of questions; we'll talk more about that later.

If you haven't yet, [read this article](#) before we try our GMATPrep problem. Then set your timer for 2 minutes and go!

In many corporations, employees are being replaced by automated equipment in order to save money. However, many workers who lose their jobs to automation will need government assistance to survive, and the same corporations that are laying people off will eventually pay for that assistance through increased taxes and unemployment insurance payments.

Which of the following, if true, most strengthens the author's argument?

- (A) Many workers who have already lost their jobs to automation have been unable to find new jobs.
- (B) Many corporations that have failed to automate have seen their profits decline.
- (C) Taxes and unemployment insurance are paid also by corporations that are not automating.
- (D) Most of the new jobs created by automation pay less than the jobs eliminated by automation did.
- (E) The initial investment in machinery for automation is often greater than the short-term savings in labor costs.

Okay, now that you've got an answer, let's use our 4-step CR process.

Step 1: Identify the Question

First, we read the question stem:

Which of the following, if true, most strengthens the author's argument?

The key identifying language is typical in this example. The language most strengthens coupled with if true indicates that we have a Strengthen the Conclusion question. The question stem itself does not provide any information about what that conclusion is; we'll have to find it in the argument. In addition, our task will be to find an answer that makes that conclusion at least a little bit more likely to be true or valid. Finally, this is an Assumption Family question, so we may be able to brainstorm some assumptions while we read the argument.

Step 2: Deconstruct the Argument

I thought this argument was challenging "it wasn't easy to spot the conclusion. They didn't give us the usual language clues (such as thus or therefore).

The first sentence indicates something that's going on right now: companies replace employees with automated equipment because they can save money (or think they can save money). The corporations, then, are essentially concluding that doing this (replacing workers with equipment) will save money.

The second sentence starts with the word *however*, a contrast word. Recall that the question specifically asks us to strengthen the *author's* argument. What point of view does the author hold? Not, apparently, the same point of view as the corporations " because the author is now objecting to what the corporations assume to be true. The second sentence tells us that the corporations will end up having to pay more in taxes and unemployment insurance payments, implying that they may not be saving money after all, or at least not as much as they think. The author bases this claim (what the corporations will have to do) on another claim: the laid-off employees will end up needing government assistance.

Your notes might look something like this (though there are lots of ways to write notes!):

Corp: replace ppl w/machines → save \$

Auth: ppl will need govt help → corp pay > tax, unemp

[so corp may not save \$, or at least not as much]

Note that I used abbreviations; you can use any you want as long as they make sense to you. Also note that I added an extra note of my own in the parentheses; the argument didn't say this directly, but it was implied.

Is the argument implying or assuming anything else? It's assuming that there's at least a possibility that the taxes and other money could end up costing more than the money saved on employees " otherwise, the author wouldn't have used the word *however* to introduce his point of view.

Step 3: State the Goal

Our goal is to find a new piece of information that makes the conclusion at least a little more likely to be true or valid. The answer does not need to make the conclusion perfect or definitely true.

The most common trap on this type of question is the Reverse Logic trap (the answer weakens the conclusion instead of strengthening it). In addition, because the corporations had their own conclusion (the action will save money) but the author goes against that (with the word *however*), I have to make sure that I'm strengthening the right thing: the author's argument, not the corporate argument.

Step 4: Work from Wrong to Right

(A) Many workers who have already lost their jobs to automation have been unable to find new jobs.

If this is true, then what will happen to those workers? They won't have any money, so they'll likely need government assistance. This is exactly what the author says will happen. Oh, I see " there's an assumption here that I didn't spot before. The author was assuming that many of these people will not be able to find new jobs; if they did, then they wouldn't need government assistance, and so the company wouldn't have to pay a bunch of money. This one looks good; keep it in.

(B) Many corporations that have failed to automate have seen their profits decline.

If this is true, then it might provide evidence that these corporations should automate. But the issue at hand is not whether they should do so. The conclusion we're addressing has to do with these companies paying a bunch of money because their former employees will need government assistance. This answer

is out of scope and, if anything, actually supports the corporations' plan " but we're not trying to support the corporations' plan. This is a trap. Eliminate B.

(C) Taxes and unemployment insurance are paid also by corporations that are not automating.❏

Let's see. You have to pay this stuff regardless of whether you're automating. But we're only concerned with the corporations that are automating, and this choice is about the ones that aren't. Further, the argument explicitly says that these corporations will have to pay *more* in these two categories " that's what is actually the problem (according to the author). This one doesn't work. Eliminate C.

(D) Most of the new jobs created by automation pay less than the jobs eliminated by automation did.❏

If this is true, then the companies will pay less in salaries once they automate. That supports the idea that the companies will save money by following this plan " but we don't want to strengthen the company plans. We want to strengthen the author's conclusion. This one's another trap! Eliminate D.

(E) The initial investment in machinery for automation is often greater than the short-term savings in labor costs.❏

This seems reasonable " you have to buy a bunch of machines up front, and that costs money. But there are two problems with this answer. First, it says only that the *initial* investment is greater than the *short-term* savings. Longer-term, the savings could be worth it. Second, the author's conclusion specifically addresses additional costs that will be incurred when laying people off who then need government assistance. This answer choice doesn't address any of that. Eliminate E.

The correct answer is A.

Key Takeaways for Solving Strengthen CR Problems:

(1) Know how to recognize this type. The question stem will typically use some variation of the word support or strengthen. It will also use the language if true❏ or a synonym. Be careful about one thing: Inference questions can also include the words strongly supports❏ (or similar). If the question contains this language, check to see whether the question stem contains the words if true❏ " if so, it's a Strengthen question. Further, Strengthen questions will also refer to the conclusion *in the argument*. (Inference questions will not contain a conclusion in the argument; the possible conclusions will be in the answer choices.)

(2) Know what to do with Strengthen questions. The argument will contain premises and a conclusion, and may also contain counter-premises. Such arguments always have assumptions, and we should note any that we might brainstorm. Our goal is to find an answer that makes the conclusion at least a little more likely to be true or valid.

(3) Watch out for traps! The answer choices usually contain Reverse Logic traps (that weaken rather than strengthening). These traps become especially tempting if the argument contains counter-premises or even a counter-conclusion. Make sure you're addressing the right conclusion!

Tackling a GMATPrep Critical Reasoning Weaken Problem

This week, we're going to discuss one of the most common critical reasoning problem types: Weaken the Conclusion. If you haven't yet, [read this article](#) before we try our GMATPrep problem. Then set your timer for 2 minutes and go!

* ⓂTiger sharks are common in the waters surrounding Tenare Island. Usually tiger sharks feed on smaller sharks, but sometimes they have attacked tourists swimming and surfing at Tenare's beaches. This has hurt Tenare's tourism industry, which is second only to its fishing industry in annual revenues. In order to help the economy, therefore, the mayor of the island has proposed an ongoing program to kill any tiger sharks within a mile of the beaches.

Which of the following, if true, most strongly calls into question the likelihood that implementation of the mayor's proposal will have the desired consequences?

- (A) Even if not all the tiger sharks that come close to the beaches are killed, the existence of the program would reassure tourists.
- (B) Business owners who depend on tourism are willing to pay most of the cost of implementing the program.
- (C) Tourists come to Tenare Island for its beaches, even though the island features a number of other tourist attractions.
- (D) The small sharks on which tiger sharks prey feed on fish that are commercially important to the island's fisheries.
- (E) Not all tourists who come to Tenare Island enjoy swimming or surfing.Ⓜ

Okay, now that you've got an answer, let's use our 4-step CR process.

Step 1: Identify the Question

First, we read the question stem:

Which of the following, if true, most strongly calls into question the likelihood that implementation of the mayor's proposal will have the desired consequences?Ⓜ

The key identifying language is not as straightforward as usual on this one. The language if trueⓂ indicates that we probably have either a strengthen, weaken, or paradox question. (It's possible to have a different question type, but if trueⓂ language indicates one of these three types the vast majority of the time.)

The language indicates that the mayor has some kind of proposal with certain desired consequences " basically, the mayor has a plan that is supposed to lead to some certain conclusion or outcome. The question asks us to call this into questionⓂ " in other words, we're looking for something that's going to weaken the conclusion.

Now we need to go read the argument and figure out what the mayor's conclusion is!

Step 2: Deconstruct the Argument

In this argument, the first sentence is background information: a certain kind of shark lives in a certain region. The second sentence also contains facts. Now we know that tiger sharks normally eat other sharks, but they have been known to attack people. The third sentence contains more facts: the shark attacks have hurt tourism and tourism is important to the region (along with fishing).

Finally, we get to the conclusion in the final sentence. First, note the opening language: in order to help the economy. This is really important. Some plan is going to be proposed in order to help the economy. In other words, it's pretty likely that helping the economy is the final conclusion. Read on. The mayor wants to kill the tiger sharks that are close to the beaches. Why? In order to help the economy.

Notice how they're trying to trick us! The word therefore comes right before the plan to kill the sharks, not right before the in order to help the economy language, so it would be very easy to say that the plan itself is the conclusion. But why is the mayor implementing this plan? If the plan succeeds, then what will happen? The economy will get better in some way.

Your notes might look something like this (though there are lots of ways to write notes!):

Usu: TS eat sm S
 BUT st atk ppl → tour ind #2 (#1=fish)
 © kill TS near bch → econ

Note that I used abbreviations; you can use any you want as long as they make sense to you. My typical abbreviation for usually or normally is Usu: (with the colon after). It's fairly common for an argument or RC passage to talk about how something is usually or typically done, so that's why I have a standard abbreviation that I always use. (And I'm unlikely to confuse Usu: for some other word or meaning.) I use the abbreviation "st" to mean either sometimes or something (in this case, it means sometimes). I also used horizontal arrows to show when one thing led to another, and up and down arrows " these can be used to show something that's getting better or worse, or for quantities (more or less of something) and so on. Finally, I used a c with a circle around it to indicate the conclusion.

While I've been doing this, I've also been looking for assumptions. What are assumptions?

Assumptions are NOT stated in the argument, but they are things that the author (whoever's drawing the conclusion) must believe to be true in order to draw that conclusion. In this case, the mayor is drawing the conclusion that killing the tiger sharks in the area will help the economy. What is the mayor assuming must be true?

The mayor is assuming that they can actually find and kill the tiger sharks. The mayor is assuming that there aren't so many that they'll just keep coming. The mayor is also assuming that killing the tiger sharks won't have an unexpected consequence that could actually hurt the economy rather than help it. For example, what if tourists found out about the plan and decided not to vacation on the island in protest?

I don't need to brainstorm all of the possible assumptions " I don't have time! " but I do have some general ideas: the plan has to work in the way that the mayor is assuming it will, and the plan can't have the unexpected consequence of hurting the economy in some way instead of helping it. These two

generalities are often true on problems in which there is some kind of plan that is designed to lead to a specific goal.

Step 3: State the Goal

Our goal is to find an answer that makes the mayor's plan a bit less likely to succeed. (On weaken questions, we do not have to find an answer that completely destroys the argument; it's enough to make the conclusion less likely to be true or valid.)

Glance at the wording of the question again: it specifically asks us to find something that will hurt the ability to achieve the desired consequences. In other words: somehow, something will actually make it more likely that the plan would fail to help the economy. We need to find that thing.

Step 4: Work from Wrong to Right

(A) Even if not all the tiger sharks that come close to the beaches are killed, the existence of the program would reassure tourists.

Let's see. We put the plan into place. We kill some sharks. We can't kill all of them, but the tourists are reassured. This would be likely to help tourism, which would help the economy. That doesn't weaken the conclusion. Eliminate A. (This is a Reverse Logic trap: we want to weaken the conclusion; this answer strengthens the conclusion.)

(B) Business owners who depend on tourism are willing to pay most of the cost of implementing the program.

Oh, that's interesting: maybe the flaw in the plan is that it will cost money and so that will hurt the economy somehow! Hmm. Wait, but this says that the business owners are willing to pay the costs, not that they're protesting the costs. That doesn't hurt the mayor's plan; in fact, it sounds like the business owners approve of the plan! Eliminate B.

(C) Tourists come to Tenare Island for its beaches, even though the island features a number of other tourist attractions.

If the tourists do vacation here primarily in order to go to the beach, then the tiger shark problem is definitely a big problem " they'd better solve it! But they already know that; that's why the mayor is proposing this plan. If nobody cared about the beaches or the tiger shark problem, then they wouldn't have to bother implementing this plan. This doesn't weaken the idea that the plan will succeed. Nor does it strengthen the idea. This choice just does nothing at all to the conclusion. Eliminate C.

(D) The small sharks on which tiger sharks prey feed on fish that are commercially important to the island's fisheries.

This one kind of seems like it's out of left field. Who cares about the small sharks that the tiger sharks eat? Let's see. The tiger sharks normally eat these small sharks, and the small sharks normally eat fish that the fisheries are using or catching. So the small sharks are actually bad for the fishing industry because they eat up the fish. So what?

Oh, I think I see. Right now, the tiger sharks may be keeping the population of the smaller sharks under control " there aren't too many because the tiger sharks are eating them. If we get rid of all of the tiger

sharks, then the smaller sharks will likely start increasing in number, which means they'll be eating more fish, which means bad for the fishing industry. And the fishing industry is a major part of the economy; in fact, according to the argument, the fishing industry is even more important than the tourist industry. (Notice that the conclusion only says we're trying to help the economy " overall. It doesn't say that we're only trying to help the tourist economy!)

Wow, really? I'm a bit unsure whether I can really take that many steps. But the first three were definitely wrong. Well, I'll leave this one in for now and check answer E.

(E) Not all tourists who come to Tenare Island enjoy swimming or surfing.

Okay, maybe some people don't really care about the tiger sharks because they're not there to use the beach. How does that affect whether the mayor's plan will work?

It doesn't. It doesn't address the plan at all " this answer is out of scope. They're trying to get us to think Oh, maybe the shark thing isn't such a big problem after all, because some people don't care about the beach. But the argument flat-out told us that the tourism industry is already being hurt, and the question asked us to find something that weakens the mayor's specific plan. This answer doesn't address any of that. Eliminate E.

The correct answer is D.

Okay, raise your hands: how many of you eliminated D because it seemed like it was going way too far " totally out of the scope of the argument? This is a tough question; I'm sure a lot of people eliminated D for this or other reasons. How do we make sure that we're not eliminating too quickly?

First, when you have a strengthen, weaken, or paradox question, be aware that the correct answer will be more out of scope than we're allowed to be for other question types. Answers to inference and find an assumption questions have to be very tightly tied to the original information, but strengthen, weaken, and paradox questions are actually asking us to find a new piece of information to insert into the argument. So resist the urge to eliminate something immediately because you think it's out of scope " check to make sure.

How do we check? Glad you asked. =) On strengthen and weaken questions, we're specifically asked to strengthen or weaken the *conclusion*. First, then, we have to make sure we find the conclusion. Second, we have to examine the answers from the point of view of how they affect the conclusion.

Answer E was truly out of scope because it did not affect the conclusion (whether the plan would or would not help the economy). Answer D, on the other hand, was very much in scope, because it did affect the conclusion: if answer D is true, then it's somewhat less likely that the plan will actually succeed in its goal to help the economy. It might help the tourist economy, but at the expense of the fishing economy " which is the #1 source of annual revenues.

Key Takeaways for Solving Weaken CR Problems:

(1) Know how to recognize this type. The question stem will contain if true or equivalent language, as well as language such as most weakens, most seriously undermines, casts the most doubt, calls into question, or something similar.

(2) Know what to do with Weaken questions. Find the conclusion and identify the main supporting premise(s), then brainstorm assumptions. Our goal is to find an answer that makes the conclusion at least a little less likely to be true. We don't need to find an answer that completely destroys the conclusion.

(3) Watch out for traps! These questions usually contain a Reverse Logic trap (they ask us to weaken, and the answer strengthens instead, or vice versa). In addition, be careful not to eliminate too quickly because you think something is out of scope. Check to see whether it affects the conclusion in any way. It's only out of scope if it does not affect the conclusion. (If it does affect the conclusion, then that answer either weakens or strengthens the conclusion.)

Weaken the Conclusion: Breaking Down a GMATPrep CR Problem

In this post, we're going to analyze a challenging GMATPrep Critical Reasoning question.

First, set your timer for 2 minutes and try the problem!

Twelve years ago and again five years ago, there were extended periods when the Darfir Republic's currency, the pundra, was weak: its value was unusually low relative to the world's most stable currencies. Both times a weak pundra made Darfir's manufactured products a bargain on world markets, and Darfir's exports were up substantially. Now some politicians are saying that, in order to cause another similarly sized increase in exports, the government should allow the pundra to become weak again.

Which of the following, if true, provides the government with the strongest grounds to doubt that the politicians' recommendation, if followed, will achieve its aim?

- A) Several of the politicians now recommending that the pundra be allowed to become weak made that same recommendation before each of the last two periods of currency weakness.
- B) After several decades of operating well below peak capacity, Darfir's manufacturing sector is now operating at near-peak levels.
- C) The economy of a country experiencing a rise in exports will become healthier only if the country's currency is strong or the rise in exports is significant.
- D) Those countries whose manufactured products compete with Darfir's on the world market all currently have stable currencies.
- E) A sharp improvement in the efficiency of Darfir's manufacturing plants would make Darfir's products a bargain on world markets even without any weakening of the pundra relative to other currencies.

Read the question stem first. This allows you to determine at least one and possibly two things:

- (1) The type of question
- (2) (Sometimes) the conclusion or something about the conclusion

In this case, strongest grounds to doubt that something will achieve its aim signals a weaken the conclusion question type. The politicians' recommendation will achieve its aim tells us that the politicians' recommendation is the conclusion. Now, we just have to keep an eye out for that when we read the argument.

Start reading and diagramming the argument (taking very brief notes):

12ya and 5ya, pun weak; v. val prods brgn so exps

Ps: let pun get weak exp like b4

I'll translate this into real words, but your notes shouldn't be full sentences; your notes should look something like the notes above (with your own abbreviations and symbols, of course).

12 years ago and 5 years ago, the pundra was weak; it had a very low value relative to other countries' currencies. This caused D's products to be a big bargain for other countries, so exports rose a lot.

The politicians say that if the government lets the pundra get weak again, then exports will be boosted to a similar level.

The second part is the conclusion “ it tells us what the politicians recommend and what they predict will happen as a result. We need to weaken that conclusion. The first thing we should think is: well, just because something happened a certain way before doesn’t mean it’ll happen that way again. The politicians are *assuming* everything will be exactly the same as before.

What would need to happen in order for the plan to work the way the politicians say? First, the government has to be able to let the pundra get weak on purpose “ and the pundra would have to get weak enough to trigger an unusually low value relative to other currencies. Then, if the situation were to trigger much larger demand for the products, then the companies would also have to be able to make more of the products in order to satisfy that increased demand.

There may also be some other thing we haven’t thought of yet that could have been one way 12 years and 5 years ago but different today. Whatever the specifics, though, the correct answer should highlight some difference between the two previous periods and today and that difference should weaken the plan.

Note: the correct answer only has to make it *somewhat less likely* that the conclusion is valid. The correct answer does *not* have to completely invalidate the conclusion.

Before we dive into the choices, let’s talk about how we evaluate Weaken the Conclusion answer choices in general. On your first pass through, very quickly assign one of three labels to each choice:

- (1) S (for strengthen)
- (2) W (for weaken)
- (3) / (a slash, for does nothing to the conclusion)

If you aren’t sure (let’s say you’re debating whether a choice is S or /), then put both symbols down (S/) and move on. Don’t get hung up on any one answer choice. (Especially this one “ we want a W, so it doesn’t matter whether the category is S or /. They’re both wrong!)

Go try that right now with all five answer choices before you continue reading. I’ll wait. 😊

A) Several of the politicians now recommending that the pundra be allowed to become weak made that same recommendation before each of the last two periods of currency weakness.

Wow. Maybe their ability to make these predictions helped to get them elected! Is this S, W, or slash? I could go with either / or S here, so I’ll put both down and move on.

B) After several decades of operating well below peak capacity, Darfir’s manufacturing sector is now operating at near-peak levels.

So that means that they’re already making almost as much as they can today. In addition, they were not making anywhere near as much as they could 12 years ago and 5 years ago. That’s a change from the last two times when exports went up a lot. Does that change actually matter? If they can only make a little more product, will they be able to fill the demand if it goes up a lot? This one’s looking like it could weaken the situation.

C) The economy of a country experiencing a rise in exports will become healthier only if the country's currency is strong or the rise in exports is significant.?

The economy will become healthier? Is the goal to make the economy healthier? That certainly sounds like a good goal. Is that what the argument says? No, the plan is more specific: to increase exports. This choice does mention something about a rise in exports, though, and the wording's a little confusing, so I'm not going to think about it anymore " I'm going to give it W and slash and move on. (Not because I think this does weaken but because I just don't know, so it's possible that this is the right one.)

D) Those countries whose manufactured products compete with Darfir's on the world market all currently have stable currencies.?

Hmm. Is the issue whether other countries have stable currencies? Do we know about those other countries during the previous 2 periods (12 years ago and 5 years ago)? No " not from the argument and not from this choice. Slash.

E) A sharp improvement in the efficiency of Darfir's manufacturing plants would make Darfir's products a bargain on world markets even without any weakening of the pundra relative to other currencies.?

This might be true; perhaps this is a better plan overall... but they didn't ask me to find a better plan. They asked me to weaken the given conclusion. Does it address the stated conclusion, which is to increase exports specifically by weakening the currency? No. Slash.

Here's what my answer sheet looks like:

- A) S/
- B) W
- C) W/
- D) /
- E) /

Now, evaluate. It's definitely not A, D, or E; cross those off. Take a look at B and C one more time. If you thought B was a weaken and you weren't sure about C, then you can just pick B " if it does weaken, then it fulfills the requirements of the question. If you want to examine C further, though, try diagramming it.

The answer choice is in the form: X will occur ONLY IF Y is true OR Z is true. Reverse and split the info:

- If currency strong → econ healthy
- If sig. rise in exports → econ healthy

The first one certainly doesn't apply here; we want to make the currency weak. The second says that IF exports go up a lot, THEN the economy will be healthy. Does this have any bearing on whether making the currency weak will cause the exports to rise? No; this new information occurs only after the exports have risen. Slash.

The correct answer is **B**.

The major take-aways here:

1. Read the question stem first in order to determine the question type and (possibly) the conclusion or something about the conclusion
2. If step 1 didn't already give you the conclusion, find the conclusion. Briefly brainstorm weaknesses / holes in the argument. Remind yourself that weaken means makes the conclusion *less likely* to be valid.
3. Quickly assign S, W, or / to each answer choice. If you're not sure, assign two categories and move on; don't get hung up on one choice.
4. Evaluate your labels for each choice. Eliminate those that definitely can't be right. Evaluate any remaining possibilities more carefully, including diagramming the information if necessary.

Tackling a GMATPrep CR Evaluate Problem

This week, we're going to discuss Evaluate critical reasoning problems. Evaluate what? We're trying to evaluate an assumption the author uses to draw a conclusion, so these Evaluate questions are a subset of the Assumption Family² of questions.

Let's say we're given this argument:

In order to increase its profits, MillCo plans to reduce costs by laying off any non-essential employees.

Does that sound like a good plan? Profits equal revenues minus costs. What's MillCo assuming in claiming that laying off non-essential employees will result in increased profits? For one thing, MillCo is assuming that revenues won't drop as much as or more than the expected cost savings; if that occurred, MillCo's profits wouldn't increase.

An Evaluate question might say something like what would be most useful to know in order to evaluate MillCo's plan?³ A correct answer might read:

Whether revenues will be affected adversely enough to threaten MillCo's profit structure.

Let's say that answer is no: MillCo's revenues won't be affected adversely enough. In that case, MillCo's argument is strengthened. If, on the other hand, the answer is yes, MillCo's revenues *will* be affected adversely enough, then MillCo's argument is weakened. This answer, then, is designed to test the assumption; it helps to determine whether the assumption is valid. It does not tell us, however, that the assumption definitely is, or is not, valid.

We can pretend we're scientists testing a hypothesis "we devise some test to help us determine whether the hypothesis is more or less likely to be true. The author's claim is the hypothesis. The correct answer should be structured in such a way that there are at least two possible paths⁴ "one direction will make the argument a little more likely to be true (validate the hypothesis) and the other direction will make the argument a little less likely to be true (invalidate the hypothesis).

The incorrect answers will also be presented in this two paths⁵ format, with one key distinction: whether the response to the answer is "yes" or "no" makes no difference at all to the claim we're trying to test. What if we had this answer choice?

Whether MillCo might reduce its costs by eliminating any contract workers.

If MillCo *can* reduce costs by eliminating contract workers, that doesn't tell us anything more about whether laying off non-essential *employees* will help to increase profits. If, on the other hand, MillCo *cannot* reduce costs by eliminating contract workers we still don't know anything more about whether the plan regarding the employees will work.

This answer choice is trying to distract us by offering a different way to increase profits but we aren't asked to find alternate ways to increase profits. We're asked to evaluate whether the *existing argument* is valid.

If you haven't yet, read this article before we try our GMATPrep problem. Set your timer for 2 minutes!

* ² Columnist: People should avoid using a certain artificial fat that has been touted as a resource for those whose medical advisers have advised them to reduce their fat intake. Although the artificial fat,

which can be used in place of fat in food preparation, has none of the negative health effects of fat, it does have a serious drawback: it absorbs certain essential vitamins, thereby preventing them from being used by the body.

In evaluating the columnist's position, it would be most useful to determine which of the following?

- (A) Whether increasing one's intake of the vitamins can compensate for the effects of the artificial fat
- (B) Whether the vitamins that the artificial fat absorbs are present in foods that contain the fat
- (C) Whether having an extremely low fat intake for an extended period can endanger the health
- (D) Whether there are any foods that cannot be prepared using the artificial fat as a substitute for other fats
- (E) Whether people are generally able to detect differences in taste between foods prepared using the artificial fat and foods that are similar except for the use of other fats

Okay, now that you've got an answer, let's use our 4-step CR process.

Step 1: Identify the Question

First, we read the question stem:

In evaluating the columnist's position, it would be most useful to determine which of the following?

The key identifying language is pretty straightforward on this one: in evaluating and most useful to determine. This language reflects an Evaluate problem type.

Step 2: Deconstruct the Argument

In this argument, the first sentence tells us an opinion: the columnist thinks we shouldn't use this artificial fat. The second sentence tells us two facts, but these facts are competing "they're not on the same side. First, the columnist acknowledges that the artificial fat doesn't have any of the bad effects of real fat, BUT it does have its own bad effect: it prevents us from absorbing certain essential vitamins.

Your notes might look something like this (though there are lots of ways to write notes!):

C: don't use AF ©

AF > real fat in some ways

BUT AF prevents absorb some vit

Note that I used abbreviations. AF = artificial fat. The c with the circle around it indicates the conclusion. I used the greater than symbol to mean better than.

What does this mean in normal, non-GMAT language? The columnist knows that this fat has a serious drawback and therefore concludes we just shouldn't use it. What's the columnist assuming? That there's no way to fix or get around that drawback "if there were, then maybe we wouldn't have to avoid using the artificial fat.

Step 3: State the Goal

As we discussed earlier, our goal here is to find a two-path statement that will test one of the author's assumptions. If that assumption is valid, then the argument will be at least a little bit stronger. If the assumption is not valid, then the argument will be at least a little bit weaker.

We haven't discussed this yet, but we'd also want to remind ourselves what kinds of tempting traps we're likely to see on questions of this type. Evaluate traps typically address some part of the premises but don't actually address the conclusion, or they try to address some alternate way of reaching the conclusion. The answers look like they're relevant (because they address something in the argument) "but they don't actually address the right thing: what additional information could help to test some assumption that is already in the argument.

Step 4: Work from Wrong to Right

(A) Whether increasing one's intake of the vitamins can compensate for the effects of the artificial fat

If the answer is yes: then we could eat the AF and still get our vitamins. That weakens the columnist's claim.

If the answer is no: then the columnist's claim is a little bit better. Possibly there's still another work-around that'll let us eat the AF and still get our vitamins, but a no answer here knocks down one possible way.

This one looks good so far; leave it in.

"(B) Whether the vitamins that the artificial fat absorbs are present in foods that contain the fat"

Think of a real-life scenario here. I use olive oil to cook vegetables, meat, pretty much anything in a pan. So let's say that I replace my olive oil with a new oil product that contains this artificial fat instead.

If this new oil product also contains the necessary vitamins, that's bad: now I can't absorb them. So the columnist is probably right that I shouldn't use this new oil.

What if the oil doesn't contain those vitamins, though? Then it doesn't matter and I can use this new oil, right?

Oh, wait. Am I eating that cooking oil all by itself? No, of course not; I'm using it to cook other foods! Okay, so if any of those foods contain the necessary vitamins, not just the oil, then the columnist is still right: it's not a good idea to use this oil made from the artificial fat.

It doesn't actually matter whether the vitamins are present in the specific food made with the replacement fat. As long as you eat more than one thing at once (which is what people tend to do!), you're affecting your ability to absorb these vitamins—and the columnist's argument is strengthened. Cross this one off; it doesn't both strengthen and weaken the argument.

"(C) Whether having an extremely low fat intake for an extended period can endanger the health"

If the answer is yes: then people should make sure not to have extremely low fat intake but wait how does artificial fat play into this? I'm not sure. Nor does the argument indicate anything

about *extremely* low fat intake. The argument only talks about people who need to reduce their fat intake.

If the answer is no: then people don't have to worry about getting enough fat but again, this whole artificial fat and vitamin thing isn't impacted at all here.

Cross this one off.

“(D) Whether there are any foods that cannot be prepared using the artificial fat as a substitute for other fats”

If the answer is yes: then people won't be able to have the AF in those foods. So what? The argument doesn't claim that *all* foods have to be able to be prepared with this AF stuff.

If the answer is no: then people can have AF in anything that contains regular fat. Again, so what? Cross this one off.

“(E) Whether people are generally able to detect differences in taste between foods prepared using the artificial fat and foods that are similar except for the use of other fats”

If the answer is yes: then people might be less likely to use the AF if it tastes funny (or more likely if it tastes better!). But that doesn't affect whether we're getting our vitamins.

If the answer is no: then people won't know whether something contains the AF or regular fat. But that doesn't address the issue about the vitamins and whether people can still get the vitamins they need if they eat food with AF in it.

Cross this one off. The correct answer is A.

Key Takeaways for Solving Evaluate CR Problems:

(1) Know how to recognize this type. The question stem will likely use some form of the word evaluate, determine, or useful / important to know.

(2) Know what to do with Evaluate questions. Find the conclusion and identify the main supporting premise(s), then brainstorm assumptions. Our goal is to find an answer that *tests* an assumption. We're trying to test the author's claim as scientists “ we test a hypothesis, and the answer could go either way (could make the claim more or less likely to be true, depending upon the answer to our test).

(3) The correct answer will be able to both slightly strengthen and slightly weaken the hypothesis, depending upon whether the information in that choice goes one way or the other. Incorrect answers might *only* strengthen the conclusion, or they might address a premise without affecting the conclusion, or they might distract us by trying to talk about some other aspect of something in the argument that doesn't actually relate to the conclusion.

Tackling A Flaw Questions on GMAT Critical Reasoning

We've talked about various types of Assumption Family questions in the past (find the assumption, strengthen, weaken, and evaluate the conclusion), but we haven't yet tackled a Flaw question. This is the least frequently tested of the 5 Assumption Family question types, so you can ignore this type if you aren't looking for an extra-high score. If you do want an 85th+ percentile verbal score, though, then you have to make sure you know how to tackle Flaw questions.

If you haven't yet, [read this article](#) before we try our GMATPrep problem. Then set your timer for 2 minutes and go!

* Reviewer: The book *Art's Decline* argues that European painters today lack skills that were common among European painters of preceding centuries. In this the book must be right, since its analysis of 100 paintings, 50 old and 50 contemporary, demonstrates convincingly that none of the contemporary paintings are executed as skillfully as the older paintings.

Which of the following points to the most serious logical flaw in the reviewer's argument?

- (A) The paintings chosen by the book's author for analysis could be those that most support the book's thesis.
- (B) There could be criteria other than the technical skill of the artist by which to evaluate a painting.
- (C) The title of the book could cause readers to accept the book's thesis even before they read the analysis of the paintings that supports it.
- (D) The particular methods currently used by European painters could require less artistic skill than do methods used by painters in other parts of the world.
- (E) A reader who was not familiar with the language of art criticism might not be convinced by the book's analysis of the 100 paintings.

Okay, now that you've got an answer, let's use our 4-step CR process.

Step 1: Identify the Question

First, we read the question stem:

Which of the following points to the most serious logical flaw in the reviewer's argument?

The key identifying language is typical in this example. The language most serious logical flaw² indicates that we have a Flaw question. The question stem itself does not provide any information about what that conclusion is; we'll have to find it in the argument. This is an Assumption Family question, so we may be able to brainstorm some assumptions while we read the argument. If so, that will help us with our task: to find an answer that points out a flaw in the reasoning of the argument.

Step 2: Deconstruct the Argument

First, the argument was written by the reviewer² and I was asked to find a flaw in the *reviewer's* argument. I need to keep that in mind.

The first sentence tells me the *book's* conclusion: European painters today aren't as good as European painters of the past. The reviewer then agrees with this premise because, according to the reviewer, a certain piece of evidence demonstrates (this) convincingly. The reviewer's argument, then, is contained in the second sentence "and that's what I need to attack."

Your notes might look something like this (though there are lots of ways to write notes!):

R: AD says EP today worse than EP before

R: book is right bc 100 pntg anal shows this

[assumptions: the 100 paintings are fully representative of both eras; the author didn't selectively choose 50 great old paintings and 50 mediocre contemporary paintings, etc.]

Note that I used abbreviations; you can use any you want as long as they make sense to you. Also note that I added some assumptions that I brainstormed; I may not actually write these down on the real thing, but I wrote them down for you.

Is the argument implying or assuming anything else? I'm brainstorming a scenario: the paintings that still survive from 200 or 300 years ago are only the absolute best paintings from those eras "so it's literally impossible to pick bad examples for the 50 old paintings set, because the bad paintings no longer exist. That would skew the argument, so the author is assuming that this has NOT happened.

Step 3: State the Goal

Our goal is to find an answer choice that points out a flaw in the reasoning of the argument. We can think of this flaw as a bad assumption: the author is assuming a certain thing to be true, but the author might be wrong. The wording of the correct answer, then, will tell us the opposite of the assumption. For example, if I say that Marielle must be a great basketball player because she's six feet tall, I'm assuming that all you need to be a great basketball player is height. The flaw might be worded in this way: It's not necessarily the case that someone will be a great basketball player simply because she's tall. Alternatively, the flaw might be: someone can be tall and still not be a great basketball player.

The most common trap on this type of question is one involving an irrelevant distinction or comparison. For example, an incorrect answer choice might discuss alternate plans or paths when we were asked to comment on a particular plan given in the argument. Alternatively, an incorrect choice might discuss a detail or distinction that does not actually affect the conclusion.

Step 4: Work from Wrong to Right

(A) The paintings chosen by the book's author for analysis could be those that most support the book's thesis.

This is similar to one of the assumptions I brainstormed: the reviewer assumes that the chosen paintings are fully representative and that the book's author didn't have a skewed group of paintings for some reason. If the book's author specifically chose paintings that most support a predetermined thesis, then that would be a major flaw in the reviewer's argument that the evidence of the 100 paintings validates the book author's thesis. This one looks pretty good so far but let's check the other answers.

(B) There could be criteria other than the technical skill of the artist by which to evaluate a painting.

I agree, there are certainly other ways by which to evaluate a painting! This doesn't address the particular argument at hand, though: finding a flaw in an argument that is specifically about the technical skill of European painters today and in the past. This is one of those irrelevant distinction or comparison answer choices: we don't want to talk about other criteria because the argument itself focuses on technical skill. Eliminate B.

(C) The title of the book could cause readers to accept the book's thesis even before they read the analysis of the paintings that supports it.

Once again, I agree that this is a potential danger. We were asked to find a flaw in the *reseNavigator's* reasoning, however, and this answer discusses a flaw in the readers' reasoning. Eliminate C.

(D) The particular methods currently used by European painters could require less artistic skill than do methods used by painters in other parts of the world.

This is yet another irrelevant distinction trap! The argument is very specific in comparing contemporary European painters with European painters of the past. Painters in other parts of the world are not a part of this argument. Eliminate D.

(E) A reader who was not familiar with the language of art criticism might not be convinced by the book's analysis of the 100 paintings.

This sounds familiar " it sounds a bit like answer C. This would be a problem with the reader's reasoning, but we were asked to find a flaw in the *reseNavigator's* reasoning, and the *reseNavigator* doesn't address what the readers might think or do. Eliminate E.

The correct answer is A.

Key Takeaways for Solving Flaw CR Problems:

(1) Know how to recognize this type. The question stem will typically use some variation of the word *flaw*, though it can occasionally contain alternate wording, such as *vulnerable to criticism*. Note: Weaken questions can also use the word *flaw* in the question stem. Weaken questions will also use some variation on the language *if true*. Flaw questions will *not* use *if true* language.

(2) Know what to do with Flaw questions. The argument will contain premises and a conclusion, and may also contain counter-premises. Such arguments always have assumptions, and we should note any that we might brainstorm. Our goal is to find an answer that points out that a particular assumption might *not* be true or valid.

(3) Watch out for traps! The answer choices often contain irrelevant distinction or comparison traps, trying to draw us away from the scope of the argument. We saw examples of this in all 4 wrong answers on this problem. B and D tried to change the details on us so that we were no longer talking about the primary issues or situation discussed in the argument. C and E answered the wrong question: we don't care what the readers think. We care about the reviewer's reasoning.

Tackling a Critical Reasoning Explain the Discrepancy

Going for 90th+ percentile on verbal? Chances are you've spent most of your Critical Reasoning study time focused on the major question types, and that is a good place to start. If you're going for a very high verbal score, though, then you'll also need to tackle the minor question types.

That's what we're going to do today; below is a GMATPrep CR problem. Give yourself about 2 minutes to do this problem.

In Asia, where palm trees are non-native, the trees' flowers have traditionally been pollinated by hand, which has kept palm fruit productivity unnaturally low. When weevils known to be efficient pollinators of palm flowers were introduced into Asia in 1980, palm fruit productivity increased by up to 50 percent in some areas but then decreased sharply in 1984.

Which of the following statements, if true, would best explain the 1984 decrease in productivity?

- (A) Prices for palm fruit fell between 1980 and 1984 following the rise in production and a concurrent fall in demand.
- (B) Imported trees are often more productive than native trees because the imported ones have left behind their pests and diseases in their native lands.
- (C) Rapid increases in productivity tend to deplete trees of nutrients needed for the development of the fruit-producing female flowers.
- (D) The weevil population in Asia remained at approximately the same level between 1980 and 1984.
- (E) Prior to 1980 another species of insect pollinated the Asian palm trees, but not as efficiently as the species of weevil that was introduced in 1980.

(Note: if you aren't yet familiar with the 4-step process for answering CR questions, [take a look at this article](#).)

Step 1: Identify the Question

This question stem contains the classic clues for an Explain a Discrepancy question. These questions, like Strengthen and Weaken questions, typically include the words *if true* (or the equivalent). Further, the question literally asks what would *explain* something.

Step 2: Deconstruct the Argument

All right, this is a Discrepancy question. The argument won't contain a conclusion. It'll contain some facts, at least one of which is surprising in some way. It won't fit with the rest of the information.

Here's what I thought and wrote while I did the problem. Your own thought process won't be exactly the same as mine and, of course, your notes will probably look quite different, since we all have our own ways of abbreviating things. (Note: ED = Explain Discrepancy)

The Argument	What I Write	What I'm Thinking
In Asia, where palm trees are non-native, the trees' flowers have traditionally been pollinated by hand, which has kept palm fruit productivity unnaturally low.❓	ED A B C D EP hand-pollin â+â+“ prod	<i>Interesting”pollinating by hand must be tough. I’m going to guess that both Asia and non-native are pieces of background info, but I’ll keep them in mind as I continue to read, in case I need to write them down.</i>
When weevils known to be efficient pollinators of palm flowers❓	ED A B C D EP hand-pollin â+â+“ prod	<i>Some animals? insects? let’s call them animals* some animals can do a better job of pollinating these palm flowers. That’s good.</i>
were introduced into Asia in 1980, palm fruit productivity increased”by up to 50 percent in some areas”but then decreased sharply in 1984.❓	ED A B C D EP hand-pollin â+â+“ prodW â+ >> prod 1980BUT â+“â+“ 1984	<i>And they had the expected result at first. But then why did productivity decrease sharply❓ four years later? There must be a reason.</i>
		<i>Maybe a lot of the weevils died off for some reason?</i>

*Weevils are beetles. I pretended I didn't know because you don't really need to know that; don't worry if you don't know what weevils are and don't waste time deciding what to call them in your mind!

Step 3: State the Goal

This is a Discrepancy question, so I have to find the thing that doesn't fit❓ in the argument and figure out what new piece of information would help the argument make sense.

In this case, the introduction of the weevils worked at first, but then production dropped again for no apparent reason. There must be some reason why, and I've already brainstormed one: maybe something happened in 1984 to cause a bunch of the weevils to die, so they were no longer able to pollinate the trees at the same level.

Work from Wrong to Right

Answer Choice	What I Write	What I'm Thinking
(A) Prices for palm fruit fell between 1980 and 1984 following the rise in production and a concurrent fall in demand.❏	ED A B C D EP hand-pollin â' â'“ prodW â' >> prod 1980BUT â'“â'“ 1984	<i>This answer choice goes along with the other details of the story; it would make sense that prices fell when production rose. But this doesn't explain <u>why</u> production dropped in 84. Not it.</i>
(B) Imported trees are often more productive than native trees because the imported ones have left behind their pests and diseases in their native lands.	ED A B C D EP hand-pollin â' â'“ prodW â' >> prod 1980BUT â'“â'“ 1984	<i>Okay I have no idea whether the trees were imported or native. The weevils were imported but they aren't trees. This one would only work if they told me that they replaced all of the imported trees with native trees or something. Not it.</i>
(C) Rapid increases in productivity tend to deplete trees of nutrients needed for the development of the fruit-producing female flowers.❏	ED A B C D EP hand-pollin â' â'“ prodW â' >> prod 1980BUT â'“â'“ 1984	<i>That's interesting. So, for four years, fruit productivity increased by up to 50 percent. I think that can reasonably be described as rapid.❏ If that then depletes the trees of necessary nutrient to continue being productive, then this explains why the trees did well for a few years and then production suddenly dropped.</i>
(D) The weevil population in Asia remained at approximately the same level between 1980 and 1984.❏	ED A B C D EP hand-pollin â' â'“ prodW â' >> prod 1980BUT â'“â'“ 1984	<i>This is the opposite of what I was thinking before: that the weevil population dropped in 84. If it stayed the same, then the story is even more of a mystery: why did production suddenly drop? Eliminate D.</i>
(E) Prior to 1980 another species of insect pollinated the Asian palm trees, but not as efficiently as the species of weevil that was introduced in 1980.	ED A B C D EP hand-pollin â' â'“ prodW â' >> prod 1980BUT â'“â'“ 1984	<i>I'm trying to figure out why production dropped in 84, not what happened before 1980. Not it.</i>

The correct answer is C.

Notice that wrong answer (D) did address the weevil population”just not in a way that would help explain the story. Answer (A) is also tricky. It provided a detail that made sense with the story, but that detail didn’t answer the specific question asked: why productivity decreased in 84.

Take-aways for CR Discrepancy questions:

- (1) The question stem will usually contain the words *if true* along with a request to *explain* something.
- (2) Once you realize you have a Discrepancy question, look for the surprising event or disconnect in the argument. The correct answer is going to hinge on this!
- (3) Watch out for trap answers that do go along with the argument but don’t specifically explain the discrepancy (like answer A in this problem). Also watch out for trap answers that seem to address the detail at issue, but instead just make the surprising event even more surprising (like answer D in this problem).

Can you fix this GMAT Critical Reasoning discrepancy?

The GMAT Critical Reasoning question type “Explain a Discrepancy” has a very specific goal. If you know what your goal is, you’ll be much more likely to answer the question correctly. If you don’t, it can be very easy to get turned around and fall into a trap.

Try this problem from the free questions that come with the GMATPrep® software and then we’ll talk about how Discrepancy questions work!

“Products sold under a brand name used to command premium prices because, in general, they were superior to nonbrand rival products. Technical expertise in product development has become so widespread, however, that special quality advantages are very hard to obtain these days and even harder to maintain. As a consequence, brand-name products generally neither offer higher quality nor sell at higher prices. Paradoxically, brand names are a bigger marketing advantage than ever.

“Which of the following, if true, most helps to resolve the paradox outlined above?

“(A) Brand names are taken by consumers as a guarantee of getting a product as good as the best rival products.

“(B) Consumers recognize that the quality of products sold under invariant brand names can drift over time.

“(C) In many acquisitions of one corporation by another, the acquiring corporation is interested more in acquiring the right to use certain brand names than in acquiring existing production facilities.

“(D) In the days when special quality advantages were easier to obtain than they are now, it was also easier to get new brand names established.

“(E) The advertising of a company’s brand-name products is at times transferred to a new advertising agency, especially when sales are declining.”

Got your answer? Before we dive into the solution, let’s talk about what you are supposed to be doing for Discrepancy questions in the first place.

Discrepancy arguments will present some kind of surprising series of facts—a paradox, to use the word that the argument above uses. The question is asking you to find a new piece of information that will *resolve* or *fix* this discrepancy. You’re looking for the answer choice that provides a new fact that will cause you to say, “Oh, I see! There really isn’t a discrepancy at all. This new fact explains everything; the situation makes sense now.”

Okay, let’s dive into this problem!

Step 1: Identify the Question

How do you know that this is a Discrepancy question in the first place?

First, the question stem for this type will always contain the language “if true” (or a synonym). This language signals that the answers will represent *new* information. Be careful about crossing something off just because it seems out of scope. (By the way, three question types have the “if true” language in the question stem: Strengthen, Weaken, or Explain a Discrepancy.)

The question stem will also contain language asking you to *explain* something or to *resolve* a problem.

As soon as you identify the question as a Discrepancy question, you now know that you'll need to articulate the actual discrepancy from the argument. Let's do that!

Step 2: Deconstruct the Argument

The first sentence indicates something that *used to* be true: people paid more for brand-name products because the products were better than others. Nowadays, though, quality is a lot more equal across lots of products. Now, brand-name products are no longer higher quality and they don't cost more money.

BUT brand names are still a huge marketing advantage! That seems weird. How can that be?

Here's what my notes looked like, taken as I read the argument:

B4: brand = superior → prem \$\$\$

Now: no qual adv

BUT brand = > market adv than B4

[why still an adv?]

It seems like brand-name products have lost all of their advantages: they're not higher quality and the companies can't even charge more money for them anymore. So why are brand names *even more* of a marketing advantage than they used to be? There must be some other advantage to a brand name that the argument hasn't articulated.

Step 3: State the Goal

On Discrepancy questions, the goal is to find an answer that fixes the discrepancy. The correct answer will cause the whole scenario to make sense. Also, remind yourself of the most common trap on these problems: a Reverse Logic trap. Some answers will actually heighten the discrepancy, making it worse! Your job is not to make the discrepancy worse. Your job is to fix the discrepancy.

Step 4: Work from Wrong to Right

All right, let's dive in.

“(A) Brand names are taken by consumers as a guarantee of getting a product as good as the best rival products.”

Hmm. Consumers see a brand name as a guarantee of a certain *level* of quality, even if that quality isn't necessarily *higher* than the quality of rival products. Yes, that's an advantage. Even though companies can't charge more for brand-name products nowadays, they can sell more (in volume) since consumers still perceive an advantage to buying a brand name. This one looks good; keep it in.

“(B) Consumers recognize that the quality of products sold under invariant brand names can drift over time.”

I had to pause a moment over the word *invariant*. It's not a commonly used word. If you're not sure what it means, here's how you can decode it: *vary* = change. *Variant* = something different. *In-* at the

beginning of a word means “take the opposite meaning.” For example, *possible* means that something can be done. *Impossible* means that it can’t.

So if *variant* means something different or changing, then *invariant* is something that doesn’t change. An *invariant brand name*, then, is a brand name that stays the same over time; it doesn’t change. This choice is saying that a product sold under the same brand name may have “drifting” quality over time. That’s not good!

This is a Reverse Logic answer: it heightens the discrepancy. If consumers can’t count on the quality of a particular brand-name product, then why would they be more likely to buy that product? They wouldn’t. This choice doesn’t go along with the idea that the brand name is a bigger marketing advantage than ever. Eliminate.

“(C) In many acquisitions of one corporation by another, the acquiring corporation is interested more in acquiring the right to use certain brand names than in acquiring existing production facilities.”

This certainly supports the idea that brand names are a bigger marketing advantage than ever! It’s just missing one thing: it doesn’t explain *why* this is so. Your job is to fix the discrepancy, not to support the idea that brand names are a bigger marketing advantage than ever. Someone who mistakenly thought this was a Strengthen question would likely pick this answer. Eliminate.

“(D) In the days when special quality advantages were easier to obtain than they are now, it was also easier to get new brand names established.”

We’re trying to resolve a discrepancy that exists right now, but this choice is about something that was true in the past. That past situation doesn’t apply to the present-day paradox. Eliminate.

“(E) The advertising of a company’s brand-name products is at times transferred to a new advertising agency, especially when sales are declining.”

I’m sure this happens, but it doesn’t explain why brand names are a bigger marketing advantage than non-brand names. Any company could use any advertising agency for any kind of brand-name or non-brand-name product. Eliminate.

The correct answer is (A). it provides an alternative benefit that was not articulated in the argument: the brand name still has value because people trust that this product will be at least as good as other, similar products.

What did you learn on this problem? Come up with your own takeaways before you read mine below.

Key Takeaways for Discrepancy Problems:

- (1) Know how to identify the question type (*if true + explain, resolve, account for*) and what you’re trying to do: find a choice that fixes the discrepancy.
- (2) What is the discrepancy in question? Articulate this clearly to yourself *before* you go to the answers.
- (3) Watch out for trap answers. The most common trap answer on a Discrepancy question will heighten the discrepancy, not fix it. Other traps might answer the wrong question, as answer (C) did in this problem (it potentially strengthened the idea that the brand name is a bigger advantage than ever—but that’s not what you were asked to do!)

What Kind Of Critical Reasoning Question Is This (Blank)?

I was talking to a student today about Complete the Passage CR arguments (people also call these the Fill in the Blank questions). The student was struggling with these and talking about them as though they were their own category. The problem: they're not actually a separate category at all!

Try this GMATPrep © problem out (it's from the free set that comes with the software) and then we'll talk about it. Give yourself about 2 minutes (though it's okay to stretch to 2.5 minutes on a CR as long as you are making progress.)

"Which of the following best completes the passage below?

"People buy prestige when they buy a premium product. They want to be associated with something special. Mass-marketing techniques and price reduction strategies should not be used because

 "(A) affluent purchasers currently represent a shrinking portion of the population of all purchasers

"(B) continued sales depend directly on the maintenance of an aura of exclusivity

"(C) purchasers of premium products are concerned with the quality as well as with the price of the products

"(D) expansion of the market niche to include a broader spectrum of consumers will increase profits

"(E) manufacturing a premium brand is not necessarily more costly than manufacturing a standard brand of the same product"

Step 1: Identify the Question

The blank line immediately leaps to eye of course: as soon as you see that, you know you have an argument in the "complete the passage" format.

What kind of question type is it? Actually these fall into one of the regular types that you already know: Strengthen, Weaken, Find the Assumption, Inference, and so on. The trick is that it's a bit harder to tell which type.

The majority of Complete the Passage questions are Strengthen. The second most common category is Find the Assumption. Typically, if you see the word *because* or *since* right before the underline (as in this problem), then you probably have a Strengthen question. The word *because* (or *since*) indicates that the correct answer will add a piece of evidence to support some statement. You'll need to read the argument to be sure, but you can have a pretty strong hunch.

Step 2: Deconstruct the Argument

This is likely a strengthen question, so it should contain a conclusion.

Here's what I thought and wrote while I did the problem. Your own thought process won't be exactly the same as mine and, of course, your notes will probably look quite different, since we all have our own ways of abbreviating things. (Note: S = strengthen; at first I put a question mark next to it because I wasn't 100% sure until I finished the argument.)

If the conclusion is NOT to use mass-marketing techniques and price reduction strategies *because* of some reason, then that reason must support that conclusion. This is, indeed, a Strengthen question.

Step 3: State the Goal

The goal on Strengthen questions is to find a new piece of information that makes the conclusion at least a little more likely to be valid. I'm trying to validate the idea that you should NOT use certain strategies. (Note: in Complete the Passage format, sometimes the correct answer won't really be new; it will mostly just restate something that the argument already said. This is acceptable as long as it strengthens!)

Why not? The first two sentences said that premium products are all about prestige and "something special." If you're trying to sell premium products, then, mass-market techniques probably aren't going to make people feel "special." Likewise, a *reduction* in price doesn't scream "premium product!" We expect premium products to cost more and we don't expect everyone in the world to have them.

I'm going to keep that in mind while I examine the answers!

Work from Wrong to Right

The correct answer is (B).

Note that answers (A) and (D) both seem to go along with the idea that we might *want* to use mass-marketing techniques or price-reduction strategies. Both are trap answers designed to catch someone who didn't notice or forgot that the conclusion says these strategies should NOT be used.

Looking for more help on Critical Reasoning? Check out the Master Resource List for Critical Reasoning.

Take-aways for Complete the Passage formats:

- (1) These are not a separate question type. A "complete the passage" question falls into one of the same categories as all other questions; you have to figure out which it is.
- (2) Most often, these questions are Strengthen (as in the above case) or Find the Assumption. If you see the word *because* or *since* right before the underline, you probably have a Strengthen question. If you see something else, then you may have an Assumption question instead.
- (3) As with any CR question, the key is to identify the type of question and follow the standard process from there!

What Kind Of CR Question Is This (Boldface)?

We've been on a CR kick lately! In the first two parts of this series, we talked about how to tackle [Fill in the Blank](#) and [Complete the Passage](#) questions. This time, I've got something different for you: a question that looks very familiar at first glance but turns a bit... well, weird.

Let's try it before I say anything more. This GMATPrep® problem is from the two free exams that come with the GMATPrep software. Give yourself about 2 minutes (though it's okay to stretch to 2.5 minutes on a CR *as long as you are making progress*.)

"On of the limiting factors in human physical performance is the amount of oxygen that is absorbed by muscles from the bloodstream. Accordingly, entrepreneurs have begun selling at gymnasiums and health clubs bottles of drinking water, labeled "SuperOXY," that has extra oxygen dissolved in the water. Such water would be useless in improving physical performance, however, since **the amount of oxygen in the blood of someone who is exercising is already more than the muscle cells can absorb**."

Which of the following, if true, would serve the same function in the argument as the statement in **boldface**?

- “(A) world-class athletes turn in record performances without such water
- “(B) frequent physical exercise increases the body’s ability to take in and use oxygen
- “(C) the only way to get oxygen into the bloodstream so that it can be absorbed by the muscles is through the lungs
- “(D) lack of oxygen is not the only factor limiting human physical performance
- “(E) the water lost in exercising can be replaced with ordinary tap water”

Step 1: Identify the Question

The boldface font is immediately obvious, of course. Boldface denotes a Describe the Role question.

The question stem does have one little idiosyncrasy, though: it asks what answer would *serve the same* function. Normally, Role questions ask *what* function the boldface statement plays in the argument. The question stem also contains “if true” wording, which we normally see on Strengthen, Weaken, or Discrepancy (paradox) questions.

Glance at the answers. Notice anything? This is not what Role answers typically look like! Usually they say something such as “The statement provides evidence supporting the author’s claim” or similar.

What’s going on here? Read the argument.

Step 2: Deconstruct the Argument

Here’s what I thought and wrote while I did the problem. Your own thought process won’t be exactly the same as mine and, of course, your notes will probably look quite different, since we all have our own ways of abbreviating things. (Note: R = role; note that I put a question mark next to it because I wasn’t 100% sure what was actually going on).

The Argument	What I Write	What I'm Thinking
"On of the limiting factors in human physical performance is the amount of oxygen that is absorbed by muscles from the bloodstream."	R? A B C D E Limit: O from blood to musc	<i>This is a fact. It's kind of technical, which is annoying. How much do I really need to remember this?</i>
"Accordingly, entrepreneurs have begun selling at gymnasiums and health clubs bottles of drinking water, labeled "SuperOXY," that has extra oxygen dissolved in the water."	R? A B C D E Limit: O from blood to musc OXY: extra O in water	<i>This is another fact. The word "accordingly" implies that this water is supposed to help us get more oxygen into our muscles?"</i>
"Such water would be useless in improving physical performance, however..."	R? A B C D E Limit: O from blood to musc OXY: extra O in water OXY = useless	<i>Claim: this water is useless. Is it the conclusion?</i>
"since the amount of oxygen in the blood of someone who is exercising is already more than the muscle cells can absorb."	R? A B C D E Limit: O from blood to musc OXY: extra O in water © OXY = useless b/c lots of O already in blood	<i>The word "since" indicates that this is information supports the previous claim. So that claim was the conclusion. The OXY water is useless because our blood already contains lots of oxygen; the problem is that the oxygen isn't getting to the muscles.</i>

So back to that weird question stem. If this were just a straight Role question, then what would the answer be? The boldface statement is support for the conclusion; it's a premise.

But what's the goal for this question?

Step 3: State the Goal

The answers don't describe the existing boldface statement. Rather, they contain *newfacts* that we're supposed to accept as true. Further, the question asked us to find an answer that "would serve the same function" as the original statement. What function did the original statement serve? Aha! The original statement served as a premise to support the conclusion. So we need to find another statement that serves that same purpose.

Will it support the conclusion in exactly the same way? I'm really not sure. (Seriously! When I first saw this question, I didn't know!) So I'm going to keep an open mind and look for anything that could support the conclusion in general.

Work from Wrong to Right

Answer Choice	What I Write	What I'm Thinking
"(A) world-class athletes turn in record performances without such water"	R A B C D E Limit: O from blood to musc OXY: extra O in water © OXY = useless b/c lots of O already in blood	<i>Does this support the idea that OXY is useless? Maybe... but I don't love it. Maybe the athletes would have even better performance if they used this water! I'm going to leave this in for now, though, in case I can't find anything better.</i>
"(B) frequent physical exercise increases the body's ability to take in and use oxygen "	R A B C D E Limit: O from blood to musc OXY: extra O in water © OXY = useless b/c lots of O already in blood	<i>That's a good thing to know. But it doesn't have a bearing on whether OXY is useful or useless. Maybe it's only necessary to exercise more. Or maybe OXY will work better for people who exercise more because it helps put more oxygen into the body!</i>
"(C) the only way to get oxygen into the bloodstream so that it can be absorbed by the muscles is through the lungs"	R A B C D E Limit: O from blood to musc OXY: extra O in water © OXY = useless b/c lots of O already in blood	<i>If oxygen must be introduced to the bloodstream through the lungs... then the extra oxygen in OXY really might be worthless. We don't drink water through our lungs! Water goes into our stomachs. This answer supports the argument better than (A) does, so I'm going to cross that one off.</i>
"(D) lack of oxygen is not the only factor limiting human physical performance"	R A B C D E Limit: O from blood to musc OXY: extra O in water © OXY = useless b/c lots of O already in blood	<i>I'm sure this is true. This fact does not, however, provide any additional information about the claim that OXY is useless. Eliminate.</i>
"(E) the water lost in exercising can be replaced with ordinary tap water "	R A B C D E Limit: O from blood to musc OXY: extra O in water © OXY = useless b/c lots of O already in blood	<i>That's good to know for the next time I exercise, but the argument is not concerned with replacing water. It's concerned with getting more oxygen into our systems. This answer doesn't affect the OXY claim.</i>

The correct answer is (C).

Interesting. We just learned something new. Most Describe the Role (or Boldface) questions ask us to describe the role of the *given* statement. We might be asked, though, to demonstrate our knowledge of the role by finding a different, completely new statement that serves the same role as the original statement in the argument.

What do we have to do? We have to “decode” the original statement (in the above case, we had a premise supporting the conclusion) and then we have to find another statement that could also serve as a premise.

That new premise might be really different from the original premise. In this problem, the original premise focused on the oxygen already in our blood. The new premise, answer (C), provided a different piece of the puzzle: we have to take oxygen in through our lungs in order to get that oxygen into the bloodstream. Either piece of information serves to support the idea that OXY is useless, but each does so in different ways.

Take-aways for “Same Function As” Role Questions:

- (1) The standard task on role questions is to describe the role of the statement given in the argument.
- (2) You might see a variation on this standard task: you may be asked to find a new statement that plays the same role as the original.
- (3) This new statement may discuss a different aspect of the argument. That’s perfectly all right as long as the statement overall plays the same role as the original boldface statement.

Want a 750+? Do This Critical Reasoning Question in Less Than 60 Seconds.

I'm happy to oblige: here's a GMATPrep CR problem. The normal timeframe is about 2 minutes—but if you're going for a 750+, you'd need to be able to answer something like this much more quickly.

Correctly measuring the productivity of service workers is complex. Consider, for example, postal workers: they are often said to be more productive if more letters are delivered per postal worker. But is this really true? What if more letters are lost or delayed per worker at the same time that more are delivered?

The objection implied above to the productivity measure described is based on doubts about the truth of which of the following statements?

- (A) Postal workers are representative of service workers in general.
- (B) The delivery of letters is the primary activity of the postal service.
- (C) Productivity should be ascribed to categories of workers, not to individuals.
- (D) The quality of services rendered can appropriately be ignored in computing productivity.
- (E) The number of letters delivered is relevant to measuring the productivity of postal workers.

Got your answer? Let's start going through this one

Step 1: Identify the Question

This question stem is unusual—it doesn't actually contain the typical markers that we'd expect to see on a CR problem. That fact makes this question harder and it's also the key to cracking the question if we want to have a hope of answering it correctly at all, let alone very quickly.

This question stem actually contains a wealth of information! The first few words tell us that there's some kind of opinion and counter-opinion in the argument (someone is *objecting* to something) but that counter-opinion is only *implied*, not stated outright.

Hmm. What kind of information is implied but not stated in an argument? Assumptions, that's one possibility. But imply language can also point to Inference questions. Keep reading.

Next we learn that some sort of *productivity measure* is described in the argument. If someone is objecting to whatever this thing is, then presumably there's some kind of conclusion about the productivity measure. Assumption Family questions do have to contain conclusions, while Inference questions don't, so we're building evidence here for some kind of Assumption question.

Finally, the question tells us that this implied objection is based on *doubts about the truth* of something. The objection must be based on something about the argument in general—the premise, the conclusion, or an assumption used to draw the conclusion. Further, because the question stem asks about the *truth* of something, it's got to be either a premise or an assumption (since the conclusion itself is always a claim). All of this evidence is pointing us towards a Find the Assumption question.

If you want to answer this one correctly, then you need to get to this point in general. If you want to answer it correctly and quickly, you need to be able to decode this within about 15-20 seconds.

Step 2: Deconstruct the Argument

All right, we've got an Assumption question. I need to find the conclusion and try to brainstorm assumptions.

Here, I'll show you what I'm thinking while I read the argument and also how I would take notes. Your own thought process won't be exactly the same as mine and, of course, your notes will probably look quite different, since we all have our own ways of abbreviating things.

The Argument	What I Write	What I'm Thinking
Correctly measuring the productivity of service workers is complex.	FA A B C D E	<i>Background—they're just telling me something is complex.</i>
Consider, for example, postal workers: they are often said to be more productive if more letters are delivered per postal worker.	FA A B C D E Some: >> l/w deliv ât' PW >> prod	<i><u>Some</u> people conclude that the more l/w (letters per worker) delivered, the more productive those workers are.</i>
But is this really true?	FA A B C D E Some: >> l/w deliv ât' PW >> prod Obj:	<i>This guy doesn't necessarily agree: here comes the objection.</i>
What if more letters are lost or delayed per worker at the same time that more are delivered?	FA A B C D E Some: >> l/w deliv ât' PW >> prod Obj: cld be >> lost/delay too	<i>Here we go. The objector doesn't dispute that more letters per worker are delivered, but points out that there might also be an increase in bad outcomes at the same time. Can you really claim that somebody's <u>more</u> productive if they're also losing a bunch of letters?</i>

Here's the key: there are two separate people/groups arguing here. The first (unnamed) group believes that the measure of letters per worker delivered indicates how productive the workers are: the more l/w delivered, the more productive. (Let's call this the original argument just to keep things straight.)

The author of this particular argument, though, isn't so sure that's valid—and his objection is implied in that last question. (Let's call this the author's objection.)

Now, what's the assumption of the people with the main argument here? This is really important: I'm trying to figure out what some people are assuming, not what the objector is assuming. The objector doubts the truth of an assumption made by that initial unnamed group.

Maybe they're assuming that an increase in the number of letters per worker will not result in any bad consequences, such as a higher number of lost letters. Or maybe they're simply assuming that measures of other things, including bad consequences, don't matter at all—the only thing that matters is the number of letters delivered per worker.

Step 3: State the Goal

This is an Assumption question, so I have to find something that the proponents of the original conclusion **MUST** believe to be true in order to draw this conclusion (that a greater number of letters delivered per worker = more or better productivity).

Work from Wrong to Right

Answer Choice	What I Write	What I'm Thinking
(A) Postal workers are representative of service workers in general.	FA A B C D ESome: >> I/w deliv ât' PW >> prodObj: cld be >> lost/delay too	Tricky. We might guess that someone <u>could</u> object to the original argument on these grounds, but this isn't how the author objects—plus, the question doesn't even ask how the author objects. Rather, the question asks what the unnamed proponents of the original argument assume.
(B) The delivery of letters is the primary activity of the postal service.	FA A B C D ESome: >> I/w deliv ât' PW >> prodObj: cld be >> lost/delay too	Neither the original argument nor the author's objection to the argument depends upon the idea that delivering letters is the postal service's primary activity.
(C) Productivity should be ascribed to categories of workers, not to individuals.	FA A B C D ESome: >> I/w deliv ât' PW >> prodObj: cld be >> lost/delay too	Again, someone could object to the original argument on these grounds, but the author doesn't use this objection, nor is this the actual question. The question asks what the unnamed proponents of the original argument assume.
(D) The quality of services rendered can appropriately be	FA A B C D ESome: >> I/w deliv ât' PW >> prodObj: cld be >> lost/delay too	Bingo! This could actually qualify as an assumption for the original argument. Note that it's not really a <u>good</u> assumption—in fact, you'd probably disagree if someone said this to you in conversation—but the original

ignored in computing productivity.		<i>argument does actually assume that the complete quality of the service is irrelevant as long as the letters per worker metric increases.</i>
(E) The number of letters delivered is relevant to measuring the productivity of postal workers.	FA A B C D E Some: >> l/w deliv ât' PW >> prodObj: cld be >> lost/delay too	<i>Another trap! As with A and C, this represents a possible objection to the original argument; it does not represent an assumption that would be made by the people who believe that original argument.</i>

The correct answer is D.

Notice something very important: 3 of the 4 wrong answers represented things that the author could have used to oppose the argument—but that wasn't what the question asked. Why do so many of the wrong answers come in this same format? It's precisely *because* the question stem is so tricky/difficult to read. If someone reads just the first few words of the question stem (the objection implied above) and then starts skimming or losing concentration or just glazing over the words, he or she is going to think that the question is about an objection to the argument. Instead, they're asking for essentially the opposite: an assumption that would help to make the argument true!

Take-Aways for CR Questions with Unusual Question Stems

(1) In general, know the common ways to identify each question type. When you get to a strangely-worded question stem, use what you do know about each question type to help decode the weird question stem.

(2) In this case, several clues in the question stem helped us pinpoint the question as a Find the Assumption type. You could even pretend that you're arguing with someone and try to re-word the question stem in a more me against you way (pretending that you're the author).

Original question: **The objection** implied above to the productivity measure described **is based on doubts about the truth** of which of the following statements?

Re-wording: **The objection** I made to your argument **is based on my doubts about the truth of** what you believe. What you believe is in one **of the following statements**.

(3) When the question stem is unusual at all, take a little more time to pick it apart! (And make sure to practice these very carefully in advance.) The wrong answers are more likely to be based on a bad reading of the question stem. In this case, someone might think that the question is asking about the objection itself—and three of the wrong answers would be tempting! ?

The Master Resource List for Critical Reasoning

Which Critical Reasoning question type drives you crazy? Boldface? Find the Assumption? Inference? I've put together what I'm calling the Master Resource List for Critical Reasoning. A couple of disclaimers. First, this list includes only free resources, no paid ones. There are a lot of good resources out there that cost some money—they're just not on this list!

Second, this list for Critical Reasoning is limited to my own articles. I'm not trying to claim that only my articles are good enough to make such a list—far from it. I'm most familiar with my own articles, so that's what I'm using. (And, okay, I will admit that I think the Manhattan Prep Critical Reasoning process is the best one out there. But I'm biased. ?)

The Critical Reasoning Process

Before you dive into individual question types, it's critical to know the [overall CR process](#). A few key notes:

- There are 4 major and 5 minor question sub-types* and each one has its own particular technique details.
- Your job is to learn the overall process/strategy for CR as well as the techniques specific to each question sub-type.

**Every now and then, a question pops up that doesn't quite fit one of the 9 main categories. There are exceptions to every rule in the universe.* In order to master Critical Reasoning, you should be able to answer the following questions about each question type:

1. How do I recognize this question type?
2. What kind of information should I expect to find in the argument, based on this question type? What kind of information is going to be the most important?
3. What is the goal for this question type? What characteristics must the correct answer have?
4. What kinds of traps will be set for me? What are the common wrong answer types for this question type?

The Assumption Family

Assumption Family questions always contain a conclusion. This group consists of five sub-types:

Find the Assumption: What does the other *assume* is true when drawing the conclusion? Want to [try another](#)?

Flaw: The flip of Find the Assumption. The author assumes something, but that thing might not be true. What is the *flaw* in the author's reasoning?

Evaluate the Argument: What information would help to determine *whether* the conclusion is more or less likely to be valid?

Strengthen the Conclusion: What new information would help to make the conclusion a little *more likely to be true*?

Weaken the Conclusion: What new information would help to make the conclusion a little *less likely to be true*?

The Evidence Family

Evidence Family questions really don't have conclusions (never big conclusions, like the Assumption arguments, and usually no conclusions at all). This group consists of two sub-types:

Inference: Given the information in the argument, which answer choice must be true?

Explain a Discrepancy: The argument contains some surprising information or outcome. Which answer choice provides some new information that clears up this surprising situation?

The Structure Family

Like Assumption questions, Structure questions do contain conclusions. The answer choices are usually in more abstract form, discussing characteristics of pieces of the argument.

Describe the Role*: aka **boldface**. The boldface portion(s) plays what kind of role in the overall argument?

Describe the Argument: These are a variant of the boldface question and they're so rare that I don't have an article for you. If you're really worried about these, you can take a look at our CR Strategy guide—but my best advice for you is not to worry about these. ?

**Note: this Describe the Role article is old enough that it doesn't use our new CR process, introduced nearly 2 years ago. I'll do another in an upcoming article!*

What Do I Really Need to Study?

The four major Critical Reasoning types are Find the Assumption, Strengthen, Weaken, and Inference. The majority of your CR questions will be in one of those four categories. If you're going for up to about 75th percentile on Verbal, concentrate just on those.

Of the minor types, the most common are Discrepancy, Describe the Role, and Evaluate. If you want to break the 75th percentile on Verbal, then also take a look at those three minor types, but spend more time on the major types. If CR is your weakest Verbal area, you can also skip whichever of those three minor types is hardest for you—some people really hate boldface questions and others think Evaluate questions are the worst.

If you're looking to break the 90th percentile on Verbal, then you have to study everything. You can still pick one minor type as your *I'll guess/bail quickly if I have to* question type, but you have to try it first.

Great, I've Mastered Critical Reasoning! Let's test that theory, shall we? *After* you've studied all of the above and you feel pretty comfortable with CR, try [this problem](#) out. I'm not even going to tell you which type it is (in fact, that is one of the things that makes this problem very hard—what is it, in the first place?). If you struggle with it, don't get discouraged. It is a very challenging problem. Instead, use it as an opportunity to get even better!

Test your Critical Reasoning Skills: Are Top GMAT Scorers Less Ethical?

Some interesting —and alarming—articles have been making the rounds lately, following on the heels of an academic study published by professors at the University of Akron and Cleveland State University. The [more reputable articles](#) report such sweeping conclusions that I actually wondered whether the journalists got it wrong, so I went to the source (I can [link only to the abstract](#) here, but I did read the full study).

When I read the study’s methodology, I knew I had my next article topic. We’re going to test our Critical Reasoning (CR) skills on an actual academic study! You might have to do something similar in business school (admittedly with a business case, not an academic study), so let’s test your b-school readiness now!

(Note: I refer to the “more reputable articles” because some blogs have picked this up and publishing under headlines such as “Is the GMAT the root of all evil?” As much as you may hate studying for this test, I think we can agree that this characterization is a bit over the top. :))

Correlation vs. Causation

We need to define a couple of terms first. You may already have learned about correlation and causation in your CR studies; here’s a refresher.

Correlation: two phenomena tend to occur or appear at the same time or in conjunction with one another

Causation: one phenomenon causes another phenomenon

[Correlation does not imply causation](#). One of two correlated phenomena could cause the other but those two things could also have absolutely no causation between them. Alternatively, the two things could both be caused by a third thing. The two things could even cause each other! (Predator-prey dynamics are an example of this kind of two-way dependency.)

For example, have you ever noticed how, when the ground is wet, people often seem to be carrying around umbrellas? Those two phenomena are correlated. Which one causes the other?

Neither of course. A third thing (rain!) causes both.

Academic studies typically first seek to establish correlation. If correlation can be established, then the next step is to explore—systematically!—every possible causal relationship in order to rule out all but one. Doesn’t that sound like fun? This is why such studies can take years or even decades to draw broad conclusions. In addition, typically one or multiple studies will establish correlation and then other studies will tackle the possible causation.

Assumptions

Unless you haven’t started studying CR yet, you’ve already run across assumptions, which are a part of any arguments that contain conclusions. When drawing a conclusion, the author assumes certain things to be true without stating them outright in the argument.

In an academic study, any such assumptions actually will be stated upfront. If the study makes any significant but unstated assumptions, the authors are likely to be criticized and the study might not pass the peer-review process.

On the GMAT, we have to brainstorm these assumptions ourselves (since they aren't actually stated) and then ask ourselves what the weak links might be in such assumptions. When reading a business case or an academic study, you will want to analyze any stated assumptions and try to figure out whether any unstated assumptions affect the information presented or the conclusions drawn.

The Argument

I can't, of course, reproduce the full 20-page study here—and you're probably not particularly interested in reading it. I've picked out a few tidbits, though, to create a GMAT-like argument that we can analyze. (Note: by definition, this is going to leave out many major aspects of the study. GMAT arguments are only a paragraph long. But we're not trying to recreate the academic study here; we're just stretching our critical reasoning brain cells.)

Let's start with two of the stated assumptions in the study, followed by a piece of evidence (cited from an earlier study), and a conclusion of this study. I'm going to number the paragraphs so that we can refer back to these quotes more easily as we discuss. (All quotes from Culture, Gender, and GMAT Scores: Implications for Corporate Ethics, R. Aggarwal et al. Journal of Business Ethics. July 2013.)

1. "In this study we are implicitly assuming that populations of GMAT test takers in respective countries are reflective of their respective national cultures."
2. "In this paper we start from the view that *cultural dimensions that partially determine GMAT scores* also partially determine the cultural landscape of cohorts of graduate business."
3. "Getz and Volkema (2001) conclude that both high-level public officials and members of the underclass are more susceptible to unethical behavior (bribery, extortion) in high power distance cultures." (Note from Stacey: "high power distance" means a society with a greater incidence of hierarchies; there is a "power distance" between junior and senior members of an organization, for example.)
4. "Power distance [is] negatively significant, suggesting that greater societal hierarchy and greater differences in gender roles are associated with lower GMAT scores."

Okay, attack! Are the assumptions solid or can you think of other interpretations or counter-assumptions? Are there any gaps in the argument? How would you weaken it?

In statement 1, the authors appear to be referring to the country in which someone takes a test as opposed to the national origin of that person (though I'm not entirely sure; the language isn't precise enough).

Is that a solid assumption? If I were to take the test in Germany or China, then I would be counted as part of that "national culture." That may or may not be appropriate. If I had lived in China for 15 years, then perhaps it's reasonable to assume that my cultural outlook would be much closer to Chinese culture than to that of my native country. On the other hand, if I'd only moved there a year ago, then

presumably my cultural outlook would be much closer to that of my native country (or wherever I'd lived before going to China). What do you think?

Given the ambiguity in the hypothetical China situation, we've got a problematic assumption. This begs a broader question. Is it reasonable to assume that all people living in a certain country share the same general cultural and ethical outlook? Likewise, is it reasonable to assume the same about everyone who grew up in a certain country? There are so many variables—regional differences within a country, differences in work and life experience, differences in religious and moral upbringing, and so on.

In short, people are very different! Assumptions that are based on whole-country averages or statistics for something as complex as ethical behavior... well, such assumptions are suspect for good reason. That brings us to the second assumption. The italics are mine; the original quote does not emphasize that text. Go back up and think about what that text might mean before you read the next paragraph.

The italicized text states that the authors assume that there are cultural dimensions that affect GMAT scores. In other words, the authors have assumed causation at the beginning of the study, not the end of it. The only thing they leave open is which specific cultural traits are correlated with certain GMAT scores—that's what the study is for. But do cultural dimensions actually affect GMAT scores in the first place?

Remember our correlation and causation discussion? The second assumption seems to have things backwards. Rather than look for correlation first and then try to determine causation, the study assumes causation and then looks for correlation. (In a fun twist, the study later takes those correlations and assumes more causation... but I didn't actually give you the information you would need to analyze that. You'll have to take my word for it.)

So far, as with GMAT arguments, we've found a decent amount to question in the assumptions. Let's take a look at the evidence and conclusion.

The third statement, the premise (evidence), tells us that an earlier study, conducted by Getz and Volkema, concluded that high power distance cultures are more likely to have unethical behavior going on. Without reading the actual study, we can't know whether their conclusion is sound, but the authors of this study are citing the Getz and Volkema study as evidence in support of their position. (In the paper, the authors also cite a later study by Volkema that "suggests" that a greater power distance is also "associated with the use of dubious negotiation practices.")

Okay, so the premise is that greater power distance is correlated with unethical behavior. That is, the more hierarchical a society is, the more likely it is to display characteristics of unethical behavior in the workplace.

What about the conclusion? I'll repeat it here:

4. "Power distance [is] negatively significant, suggesting that greater societal hierarchy and greater differences in gender roles are associated with lower GMAT scores."

What does that mean? Think it through.

A greater power distance (more hierarchy) is correlated with lower GMAT scores. Hmm, and the earlier piece of evidence said that greater power distance is also correlated with unethical behavior... what does that mean? Let's recap:

Getz and Volkema: higher power distance is correlated with more unethical behavior

Aggarwal et al: higher power distance is correlated with lower GMAT scores

With those two pieces of data, you would hypothesize one of two things. Either there is no correlation between ethical behavior and GMAT scores (just because they're both correlated to power distance doesn't mean they're correlated to each other) or the correlation goes along with those two statements—that is, more unethical behavior would be correlated with lower GMAT scores.

The ultimate conclusion of the study, though, is that more unethical behavior is correlated with *higher* GMAT scores, not lower ones. Now, the study does include its own mathematical analysis that purports to support this view (I haven't shared it with you here because it's highly technical).

The problem is that the paper essentially shows that both correlations are potentially valid—that is, that higher GMAT scores may be correlated with more ethical behavior *and* less ethical behavior. If that's the case... well, more work needs to be done to settle the correlation issue before we can even start to think about causation.

I'll add one more thing: that potential discrepancy isn't even the most disturbing issue (to me) in the paper. In the Discussion section at the end of the paper, the authors suggest that business schools should implement some changes in the way that they use the GMAT. But the authors haven't actually established any causation! The study details never addressed causation at all, only correlation (and, as we saw, even that correlation argument has some issues). In fact, I gave the paper to a couple of statisticians to read and they were so distracted by the fact that the study simply assumed causation that they both had to read it a second time in order to delve into the mathematical analysis.

Now, I think there are probably some good changes that can be made with respect to the way schools and employers use the GMAT. I definitely think some are using the GMAT more heavily than they should or in a way that isn't appropriate given the nature of this test. The GMAT is only one measure of a certain kind of potential, but any one measure cannot and will never catch all of the "best" people for a certain job or career. There are just too many variables that can lead to success. (And that's a great thing, isn't it? :))

The academic study does mention several puzzling aspects that are worth further exploration, such as the fact that women tend to have lower GMAT scores, on average, but women and men perform similarly in business school. In addition, one of the strongest predictors of performance is wealth. The study doesn't explore these phenomena, though. Rather, the conclusions are focused on the ethics argument.

(By the way, it also used to be true for decades that boys scored higher than girls on the SAT, even though girls had better grades at university. Today, on average, boys still score higher than girls on the math section, but girls score better on the essay section, and the two groups are about equal on critical reasoning.) So, what do you think? If you're finding this discussion interesting, [hop on over to LinkedIn](#) and join the conversation—or post a comment down below!

GMAT Mastery: Manage Time and Avoid Traps on Critical Reasoning and Reading Comprehension

On Verbal, we're asked for the "best" answer—not the "objectively correct" answer that we need to find on Quant—so it can be really easy to fall for tempting traps, especially on Critical Reasoning (CR) and Reading Comprehension (RC).

Learn to work super-systematically, though, and you'll navigate through those tempting traps to land on the right answer. (Well...most of the time, anyway. ?) Here's what to do.

Know Your Verbal Processes

There comes a moment for Critical Reasoning and Reading Comprehension when you're ready to tackle the answer choices, and that's what we're going to concentrate on today. I'm going to assume that you already know what you're doing in general for each question type. If not, here are some resources on the overall processes.

Both [Critical Reasoning](#) and [Reading Comprehension](#) contain different question "sub-types." You'll need to know how to recognize what's what so that you can apply the right kind of reasoning. Those links will take you to compilation articles that show you how to tackle any kind of CR or RC problem.

Note: Sentence Correction works a little bit differently, though some of what we talk about today will still apply to SC. When you get a chance, take a look [at this SC process](#) involving "vertical" reading and comparisons of answers. You've only got about 1 minute 20 seconds on average for SC, so you've got to learn to work fast without giving up accuracy.

(Note: If you have Manhattan Prep's [Strategy Guides](#), you don't need to follow those links. The articles are just shorter versions of what is already taught in our books.)

Tackle The Verbal Answer Choices: 1st Pass

All right: you've read the argument or passage, you've identified the question type, you know what you're trying to find, and you're ready for the answers. First, assume that you are going to take two full passes through the answer choices. (This sounds like it will take forever. It won't. Just stick with me here.)

Have you ever done this? (I know I have.)

"Yep, (B) looks good; the passage does talk about that. [Reading the remaining answers because I know I'm supposed to do so.] Hmm, I wonder how I'm doing on the test. Is my time okay? Yeah, not too bad. [I've read through answer (E) but I haven't really been paying attention.] Can't wait until this is over. Okay, so (B) is the answer."

Basically, once you decide that a certain answer is the correct one, your mind is already moving on. The problem comes when answer (E) was actually better than answer (B)...but I didn't notice, either because I didn't read answer (E) in the first place, or (even worse) I did read it but I wasn't actually paying attention. Now, I've lost time *and* I'm still going to fall into the trap. 😞

So delay your “What’s the right answer?” decision. On your first pass through the answers, your decision is strictly “No vs. Maybe.”

No = I am never looking at this answer choice again.

Maybe = I think this might be the right one...*or* I think this might be wrong but I’m not totally sure yet...*or* I have no idea what this answer choice means.

In short, cross* off everything that you’re sure is wrong and leave everything else. Don’t agonize over the “everything else.” Don’t think about whether it really is right or wrong. Just leave it and go look for more stuff to cross off until you’ve gotten through all five answers for the first time.

*When I say “cross off,” I mean “keep track on your scrap paper.” I write “A B C D E” at the top of my current page, spaced out a little bit, and then I keep track *below* those letters. I just move to a new row on my scrap paper for every new problem. (Remember that the scrap paper on the test is already lined—it’s graph paper.)

I use an X for No, a squiggle (~) for Maybe, and a question mark (?) for Huh?!? (i.e., I’m not sure what this answer means.) When I’ve finally decided what to pick, I put a circle around that one and then I go pick it on the screen.

I do that all the way down the page and only rewrite A B C D E when I have to turn to the next page.

Tackle The Verbal Answer Choices: 2nd Pass

At the end of your first pass, there are three possible outcomes:

1. You’ve crossed off 4 answers: pick the remaining one and move on
2. You haven’t crossed off *any* answers: this one’s too hard, so pick your favorite letter and move on
3. You’ve crossed off some wrong answers but not all 4 of them: now it’s time for your 2nd pass through the answers

During this second pass, you’re going to go through the remaining answers, but this time you’re going to closely compare them to each other. Before, you may not have noticed a particular difference between answers (B) and (E), but now that you only have a few answers left, you can actually compare and think about what those differences mean.

For instance, let’s say that you’re answering a Main Idea RC question. You notice this:

(B) Talks mainly about the second paragraph

(E) Talks about both paragraphs

When you first saw (B), you may have thought to yourself, “Yes, the passage does talk about that,” so you naturally left it in. Once you compare (B) to (E), though, you might realize that (B) is too narrow. Answer (E) better addresses the *entire* passage, so now you know that (B) is likely a trap.

On Verbal, the “best” answer actually implies a comparison. There’s no way to know that (B) is too narrow until you’ve read (E). If (E) didn’t exist, in fact, then maybe (B) would be the best answer out of the available answers.

And voilà: we’ve avoided the trap! Note that this all works generally for SC too with the sole difference that, for SC, you are directly comparing answers right from the very beginning.

When Warranted, You Can Take a 3rd Pass

What if you’re not down to one answer after the 2nd pass? You can’t just keep going forever, so how long is too long?

After the 2nd pass, there are again three possible outcomes:

1. You’ve crossed off 4 answers: pick the remaining one and move on
2. You have more than 2 answers left: this one’s too hard; pick your favorite letter and move on
3. You have exactly two answers left: you’re allowed to do one more pass, directly comparing these two answers

Did I emphasize that word one enough? If you do get down to two answers after the 2nd pass, then this is a tough problem but you have also made decent progress so far. At this stage, it’s worth investing another 20 to 30 seconds to do one final comparison...but that’s it.

Do not agonize back and forth. After the first direct comparison between the final two, you will either have a hunch or you won’t. If you have a hunch, pick it now; it’s not going to change the 5th time you compare them. And if you don’t have a hunch, pick one now anyway; you’re not going to suddenly develop a hunch the 5th time you compare them. Give yourself one chance, sure, but then you’re done.

I Keep Narrowing to Two and Guessing Wrong...

That’s so frustrating, isn’t it? Let’s talk about how to study in a way that will help you make that hard decision between the right answer and the most tempting wrong answer.

First, though: you don’t always guess wrong. Rather, you’re noticing when you get it wrong *because you got it wrong*. When you get it right, how often do you really tell yourself, “Oh, yeah, I just went with a hunch there, but I actually got it! Woohoo!” If you’re like most people, you don’t notice that as often because you’re concentrating on the ones you got wrong.

(By the way, you *should* point out to yourself when you narrow to two, guess, and get it right. Show yourself that this actually does work out a lot of the time!)

Okay, back to the main point: how to get better at recognizing and eliminating those tempting trap answers? Here’s what you’re going to do:

1. As you work, mark any problems on which you narrowed to two answers before guessing. Use a consistent symbol—an asterisk or whatever. This will allow you to find *all* of these after, not just the ones on which you end up guessing wrong.

2. Do ask yourself what you're probably already asking yourself (Why is the right one right? Why is the wrong one wrong?), but don't stop there.
3. Ask yourself why the wrong one looked good. What was tempting about this choice? Why did you pick it or consider picking it? Now you know not to use that reasoning to pick an answer in the future, since that reasoning can lead to picking a wrong answer.
4. Ask yourself why the right one looked worse than the tempting wrong one. Somehow, they got you to doubt the correct answer. Why did you eliminate it or consider eliminating it? Again, now you know not to use that reasoning in the future to eliminate an answer.

Takeaways

1. Work systematically on all Verbal questions. Keep track of your answer eliminations on your scrap paper.
2. On your first pass, concentrate on crossing off everything that is definitely *wrong*. Don't actually decide what's *right*—not yet. If you can't cross anything off, forget it; guess and move on.
3. On your second pass, directly compare any remaining answers. If you can't get down to at most two answers at this stage, the problem is too hard; guess and move on. You're allowed to make one more direct comparison between the last two answers...but only one more. Then choose and move on.

Good luck and happy studying! ?