

Introduction

Hi folks,

I'm a long-time lurker around GMAT Club's awesome platform. I have learnt so much from this forum and its members, and I am so glad I can finally give something back to the community here. (:

I haven't been able to contribute great posts on GC that have helped a lot of people on this platform, so I'd like to at least share my GMAT slog story in hopes of providing some small inspiration to anyone who might be feeling low or wants to give up on this test. This will be a long read (pardon me for the length & detail as it's a way of writing to find closure to my GMAT chapter).

My entire GMAT experience lasted over 4+ years from beginning to end, its length partially extended by a 1-year break I took in between for work. My first attempt on a GMAT exam was on a GMAT Prep mock exam 3.5 years ago when I did a 610 (Q40, V31) despite having gone through a few months of self-prep and classes. My first attempt on the real GMAT exam was only 4 weeks ago, managing a 710 (Q49, V37); 4 weeks later, I would do a 760 (Q50, V44).

I would like to share with you what I did in the initial stages of my study and what I did differently in my 2nd attempt that helped me take my score to a different level.

Together with this debrief, I have attached my ESR reports for both of my actual attempts, so you can have an idea of the accuracy you would need for a 700+ score. I have also put in the longer version of my debrief as an attachment.

Here's the summarized version:

Background

I am what many would call a 'scrapper' and am not naturally inclined at studying. I did my undergrad in Singapore with majors in Economics and Psychology, and a social science student through and through. I have never been great at taking standardized tests and am in some ways, a relatively slow test taker, and I do require quite a bit of rote prep prior to each exam. Despite my shortcomings and my tendency to do a significant amount of prep per unit gain on test-taking confidence, I am tenacious and very conscientious. Every day after work, I'd grab dinner quickly and hit the books for about 3-4 hours for almost all nights of the week. Overall, I would say neither quant nor verbal were dealbreakers for me in general.

However, the GMAT does not care about ANY OF THESE. Why?

It's a whole new level of a beast, likely because GMAC has had 67 years to refine this test carefully and over possibly billions of data points, and because the test sported an adaptive element that I had never experienced before and that I actually found much difficulty with its unique way of testing one's ability to reason logically under great time pressure by using a very efficient method to do so.

Here's what worked for me:

Verbal

SC

No house is stable without its foundations. Get your house in order first by focusing on being really, really solid at the 500-600 level questions (>90% accuracy for each practice you do). At this level, grammar is king – learn the various areas key foundational areas (e.g. SVA, Verbs, Pronouns, and especially Modifiers, Parallelism, and Comparisons) really well, and don't rush – work at it till you're 100% confident. Review all question answer choices instead of looking at only the correct answer because you'll be leaving 80% of the learning on the table if you do.

After I got the basics right, I started working on my ability to recognize patterns and meaning changes in sentence structure – grammatically correct answers can have wildly different meanings. Use your well-honed knowledge of modifiers, usage of 'comma + and' structures that may or may not apply for related information, and tenses to establish those common tricks that the GMAT uses. In my experience, a sentence is overall easier to understand and

to analyze once you get the intended meaning of the sentence – sometimes of which you may not get until you see the answer choices carefully to analyze which makes sense and which don't. Meaning at 700-level questions is king and meaning can be changed using a few tricks such as placement of modifiers, nested parallelism (omitting 1 element changes the list and therefore the meaning) etc.

In my first attempt, I deviated from my question strategy i.e. under test anxiety, I started to rush into the answer choices without first trying to understand the intended meaning and given structure of the sentence. I ended up spending much more time getting to the right answer because I wasn't structured.

In my second attempt, I forced myself to follow the process of understanding the sentence structure in the context of meaning, and my results improved significantly because I was able to get to the meaning quickly and efficiently by using cues in the sentence structure from the answer choices to select the right answer (despite battling a headache throughout the exam).

CR

For CR questions, I found that Pre-thinking makes sense only if you understand the conclusion and the reasoning link involved. Therefore, I worked hard on first identifying the type of CR question and the reasoning involved (e.g. X, therefore Y; A is B, therefore C is also B etc.) before applying question strategies such as negation or being super conservative for inference questions. This can be tricky to understand but I found PowerScore Bible's CR book more than sufficient to get me going on this.

Another trick I used was to in a way personalize the argument and stand in the person's shoes – if I were him and I was hiding something, how can I strengthen / destroy my own argument? Then, I worked from that angle and thought about potential answers for a bit before starting on the answers. Quite often, I don't find an exact match of the answer I thought of, but more critically, the process of anchoring that argument to a clear reasoning pattern and conclusion allows you to weed out irrelevant and seemingly valid answers that validate another unrelated conclusion.

RC

This was the section I had the most improvement on, particularly on inference type questions. Overall, the main difference on my second GMAT attempt was working on RC and making sure that I apply the right reading strategies and doing active, effortful interpretation of the passage.

In my first attempt, I zipped through the passage in hopes of saving time for the questions. However, I realized that I often took longer trying to understand the question and look for clues in the passage. Especially for inference questions, I was unable to apply an evidence-based approach to get the answer (as you can see in my ESR). Particularly for RC, I did the second attempt differently this time by focusing on summarizing the idea for each paragraph, and noting the logical, overall structure of the content e.g. "Oh so this paragraph is about doing X to get Y, it's been an idea scientists have tested since the 1930's, and author is reporting that there's actually 2 ways to do X."

In addition, I also followed closely the evidence stated from the passage. One of the tricks on the GMAT is that for RC questions, they will give you answer choices that are similar in thought, content, but tweak some part of it that makes it slightly wrong. Therefore, to do well on RC questions, you need to adopt a mindset of "Prove it to me, willya?" – if it's not something you can support from using the passage's evidence, or have to make extra assumptions to get to it, those are likely to be the wrong answers. Once I was able to recognize and use a strict evidence-based approach, it really turned my performance around on the harder RC inference questions (as evident from my ESR).

[E-GMAT's role in my journey]

I took up the course midway through my preparation and found it tremendously useful. The course is very structured, allowing me to learn at my own time and build proficiency sub-section by sub-section. This was especially useful for a working professional like me who has been out of college for some time and had varying working hours to capitalize on the self-learning platform.

The methodology and process advocated by E-GMAT involves understanding the problem, utilizing pre-thinking based on that clear understanding, then analyzing the answer choices accordingly. It was very useful in that I learnt not just what was right with the correct answer, but also what was wrong with the wrong answers. In addition, E-GMAT does

advocate for you to approach the question by first understanding the broad idea intended in the Verbal problem at hand. As mentioned, meaning differences are crucial to achieving 700+ level proficiency and I have personally been tested on this right until my last question on the actual test.

I also utilized the platform's library and test-builder function Scholaranium to practice my subsections and hone accuracy before scaling up on speed. Another very useful feature that was critical to my retake success was that I could approach E-GMAT's support to conduct an ESR analysis for my first exam. Nava, the E-GMAT instructor who worked with me on my retake study plan, was able to analyze and pinpoint my weaknesses and recommended clear areas for improvement. I am very thankful for his close support and would similarly recommend the course for non-native speakers especially.

Quant

In my retake preparation, I primarily focused on Geometry and Counting/Sets. I started first by going through my concepts again, then by doing harder questions and eventually improving on my timing. Timing is an outcome of proficiency in concepts and nuances on the GMAT, so I went back to basics to revise my notes on Geometry and Counting/Sets while focusing on achieving >90% accuracy in 600-700 level questions. I filtered 600-level questions using GMAT Club's question bank features and solved up to 30-40 questions a day, going through them without a timer first to consolidate my understanding. Slow-walking through the questions allowed me to understand where my conceptual gaps were on mid to higher level questions. Then, I started using timers to time myself on 600-level questions.

Once I gained proficiency, I started on 700-level questions. I wasn't able to do a lot of 700-level questions as I took time to understand each question and its nuances, and would often do the same slow-walk through the question to understand what were my gaps in conceptual areas. Therefore, I was basically going through 700-level questions without actually worrying too much on timing – the focus was on developing my ability to understand the concept and develop conceptual nous for such questions.

To freshen up other concepts, I went through GMAT Club Tests I did before and basically solved them on a timer but did not click on the correct answer – I merely went through the fixed selection of questions and compared whether I managed to make improvements on incorrect questions.

Overall, I only did 1 full-length mock test for the entirety of the re-take preparation – I did a reset of GMAT Prep 1 as they seem to have more questions in the test bank. Some questions were repeated but I wasn't too concern about the validity of the inflated score (790), as I was focused on learning the process and conceptual improvement. I also worked on timing (i.e. don't get stuck on the first 10 questions, don't hold on beyond 2.5 minutes etc.) and deliberately trained myself to let go of questions by making educated guesses using elimination of clear wrong answers.

General Evidence-based Study Tips:

Part 1: Active Recall – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ukLnPblffxE>

Part 2: Spaced Repetition – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-zNHHpXoMM>

Useful observations

Preparing:

- 1) Quality over Quantity – review not just the right answer, but also the wrong answers and why you picked the wrong answer. Understanding the right answer only means you leave out 80% of the other potential learnings on the table. If possible, try to predict how a small tweak would make an easy wrong answer much harder to eliminate.
- 2) Don't rush your preparation; develop and follow a tested process and trust that it will bring you there.
- 3) Don't do GMAT Prep questions until you have already achieved your basics and fundamentals – do not waste these official questions, ever.
- 4) Use an error log to go through the habit of scrutinizing your approach and revisiting problematic questions (whether correct or incorrect), especially for beginners.

- 5) Exercise and keep your mind fresh; sleep well as good sleep helps in memory consolidation (your hippocampus uses sleep time to encode your learnings into long term memory).
- 6) Have patience and faith, don't give up (ever) – GMAT is a game of perseverance and application, and it rewards people who are structured and methodical in their approach to problem-solving (Note: people who try 'silver bullets' will find that there are none, especially if you want to hit 700+ level).

Testing:

- 1) Wake up earlier the day before the exam so that you'll feel a bit more tired and will sleep earlier. Avoid caffeine or intense exercise / revision. Chill out and don't do too much 1 day before the exam.
- 2) Follow your question strategy/process and DON'T DEVIATE FROM IT.
- 3) Learn to let go and make educated guesses when you cannot solve that question (trust me, this is harder to do than it sounds – you have to find your own way of deciding the trigger point, though the clock timer is one way).
- 4) If you're doing well, don't be over-confident; if you're finding it tough and every question seems a killer, try your best to be unaffected and continue to power through till the end. If you're finding that you're getting seemingly easy questions served continually, don't be disheartened – it may not necessarily mean that you're doing badly. Treat each question as a separate, independent challenge.

Starting Out (Part 1)

Having been out of college for about 3 years, I was looking for an opportunity to upgrade myself down the road and saw the need to head back to school as part of my career development. However, I felt rusty and didn't think I'd have it in me to do self-study. I signed up for classes at a prep-class service with a friend who was also looking at an MBA down the road. Picking up the fundamentals again was difficult for me, primarily because it was just so hard to kickstart an academic frame of mind again. Coupled with the fact that I wasn't as naturally inclined in math, say compared to my GMAT buddy (math Olympiad who represented Singapore), I took quite a bit of time to pick up the fundamentals but continued to struggle to get enough consistency and speed on solving questions.

After about 4 months, having completed the prep-classes and reviewed my notes as well as attempting a large part of the OG, I felt confident enough to at least try out my first attempt at the exam to see how I'd do. I believed that I was definitely not at a 700-level proficiency yet, but I should still score say within 30 points of 700, given my consistent prep over 4 months. I mean, it's just a trial test, right? It shouldn't have any bearing on my confidence, right?

My first GMAT Prep experience was a disaster. 5 minutes into the test, I already felt that I was taking so long to solve supposedly easy to medium difficulty questions. I had difficulties "seeing between the lines" for 3D Geometry questions under time duress, and I had been selecting answers that 'sound right' for Sentence Correction questions but turned out to be completely wrong, despite me following the grammar rules I've learnt in prep class. While I could answer certain questions correctly, I was inefficient with time and would often stumble in relatively easy questions (on hindsight). Upon reviewing the errors, I felt that I was lacking very much, not in content, but in how to do proper application of concepts in questions that are not so straightforward.

The experience and the 610 score shook me quite badly and I remember going home feeling disappointed, confused, and with a splitting headache. Was I being too harsh on myself for a first test? Quite likely. Did I have lots more to think about in terms of my own knowledge and application gaps? Absolutely. Overall, I felt that I didn't have much of a strategy and had assumed that I was able to 'bridge' the gaps in understanding somehow, eventually; this never happened and my performance plateau-ed at a certain level.

At the same time, I was preparing for job interviews and had been practicing cases fairly often. It was difficult to continue juggling both types of practice as I had a very difficult work schedule and decided that getting out of my job was of greater immediate concern than continuing the prep for the test. I decided to put the GMAT away for the time being and focused on getting job offers. The decision to postpone my GMAT prep was a good one as I secured a post-MBA role with an opportunity to work overseas in Hong Kong.

Point of Inflexion (Part 2)

After about 14 months in Hong Kong, I was back home and travelling out of Singapore for regional projects. I decided to continue where I left off on GMAT as I knew it was only a matter of time that I wanted to pursue an MBA – it made perfect sense as part of my development on a general management career path. However, I was apprehensive as the bitter experience from the prep test still rang in my mind. I picked up my prep notes and started studying again, going through Quant only, followed by Verbal.

I found it difficult to maintain proficiency in both sections as, despite having put in many hours, I still feel that I lacked depth and nuance in my ability to answer questions. I was either somehow forgetting a certain rule or taking on silly mistakes that should have been avoided. It did not give me the confidence that I was moving toward the proficiency level I wanted. Yet, I continued to rely on the material from my previous prep class. I realized after a while that the material was insufficient for preparing me to take my proficiency to the next level in that it was only as good as the discussion that went on in class that day. I realized that I just didn't have the grounding in each sub-section area to be proficient enough to tackle hybrid-themed questions. I was just all over the place and didn't have a clear strategy in hand to navigate the depth of learning required.

After about 2 months re-starting my prep, I was looking for better prep materials and chanced upon GMAT Club in late 2017. This old-ish looking forum (back then it did look like that) would turn out to be a life-changer and had a wonderful collection of questions and free materials to choose from – study plans, question banks, and most importantly, user comments and discussions on the questions.

a) Quant Strategy

I remember downloading the GMAT Club Quant Book for the first time and found it very comprehensive; it had many different nuances on the same content I had covered.

This was the beginning of the uptick in my Quant abilities - I decided to spend time to re-learn each subsection carefully and properly, before moving on to the next sub-section. I spent the next 3-4 months working on sub-section by sub-section, and I did not move onto new sub-sections until I was very, very familiar with most of the standard ways that such a question could be asked. I would focus on Quant only before moving to Verbal, taking 3.5 hours after work every single day when possible to go at it.

One of the key things that really helped me was following **Bunuel's** explanations. The way this GC masked vigilante approached the stem information and rephrasing/breaking down the stem's requirement was eye-opening, and I'm sure hundreds of thousands have benefitted from his explanations. Although I doubt that I would be able to replicate such an elegant approach to solutioning, I followed Bunuel's explanations closely to help me achieve crystal clear clarity on my fundamentals and to think out of the box. This would prove critical on 700++ level questions for me subsequently.

I would use GMAT Club's question bank function to practice on a selected sub-section, starting from 500-level questions first before proceeding further.

Initially, I was anxious to do well and pushed ahead to 700-level questions but realized that I was unable to maintain any decent level of accuracy and had fluctuated greatly in consistency. Realizing that there are still fundamentals to be ironed out, I went back to basics again and made sure I could solve really well the 500-level questions and 600-700 range of questions first, before moving to 700++ level questions later.

Because GMAT Club's question bank included questions from a wide variety of prep sources, I found it a cost-efficient manner to practice questions many different question types while benefitting from the many excellent, wonderful explanations from many experts as well as GC members on the forum.

After spending quite some time on the forum, my Quant abilities improved greatly. I picked up valuable skills that I never managed to do consistently e.g. rephrasing and breaking down the stem to its core question, tricks in overlapping sets questions (e.g. 2-Groups minus 3-groups = 2-only), and many, many more. I was getting better at 700-level questions and would be able to do them fairly consistently, although somehow, I still felt inadequate.

This insecurity came from the fact that I had difficulties tying all the concepts together in a coherent manner and would struggle to cross-apply concepts on a consistent basis for hybrid questions which are commonly tested on higher level questions.

My 'quant-um' leap in ability came when I started utilizing an error log (daimn I should have done this way earlier) and when I started utilizing GMAT Club tests. While an error log may work for some and not for others, it definitely helped for me, given my tendency to forget things. More importantly, it forced me to go through strategically each question and its answer choices.

- **Before:** I used to review attempted questions by looking at the right answer and making sure my approach was okay, and if I answered that question incorrectly, I would only pick up that correct answer's method and move on quickly. This meant that I was losing out on thoroughly analyzing my approach and strategically reviewing my overall ability to approach each question from at least 2-3 angles.
- **After:** The change I made this time was, instead of only understanding what was the right answer and why, I took the time to go through what was wrong with each answer and sometimes also experimented with how an easy wrong answer would have been made very difficult by tweaking it slightly. This made me realize my missing concepts and forced me to be thorough in my concepts. Such as exercise forced me to really know and understand why wrong questions are wrong, why I picked the wrong answer, why the right answer is right, why I picked the right answer (2x2 matrix: Correct thinking? (Y/N) x Correct Answer? (Y/N); Why Y/N?)

In addition, my subscription to GMAT Club Tests (made available from another related purchase) would help me achieve the consolidation of concepts that I sorely, sorely needed. I found GMAT Club Tests extremely useful because

the questions are actually very GMAT-like – elegant in design, yet killer in its difficulty (most likely designed by Bunuel, again).

The questions would really test me via twists to the same knowledge and concepts that I thought I knew. For example, in remainders, there was a question that required solving by using the fact that divisors would always be greater than the remainder, to form an equation and therefore solve for a related inequality. The concept is simple, but realizing and applying that concept under duress is another matter altogether.

I did at least 15 tests of 25 of GMAT Club's tests and it really helped me consolidate my learning and concepts, while I wrote my error log inside each question (a feature which GMAT Club tests provides for user remarks). In addition, the GMAT Club Test's various new analytics features meant I could easily zoom in on my strong and weak areas. I have indicated my GMAT Club Test results for both Quant and Verbal in a latter section.

I continued to utilize GMAT Club tests to refresh old concepts, consolidate new ones, and keep the overall ability intact while I moved my preparation to Verbal. I did a 45-minute Quant review every 3-4 days and longer on the weekend. On weekend quant reviews, I followed through by taking a mock GMAT Club Test or by reviewing the questions I have attempted thus far. This helped me to reduce the decay rate on my Quant concepts and build on concepts instead, regular reviews that interrupt the forgetting curve and force me to do effortful recall and properly spaced repetition.

b) Verbal Strategy

I was unable to achieve a breakthrough in my Verbal abilities and felt the need to search for a better alternative than self-prep. I used GC's course review functions and found that E-GMAT has very good reviews. I decided to invest into the course and it really turned out to be a very, very good decision. It also gave me access to GMAT Club Tests which were a godsend and helped further consolidate my concepts.

The course helped me go back to basics on my sentence formation basics (things that I had taken for granted). It made me realize that my years of schooling had inculcated a fundamentally wrong approach in that we were taught to more to memorize how certain sentences are correct and others not. Over time, it became an ingrained habit of 'listening' out for the right sentence and whether something 'sounded' right.

Let me tell you this. **The GMAT is absolutely brutal in making use of this fact to trick you into using wrong answers** – I can attest to this timeless truth that the GMAT was testing me on this, right until the last question on the final GMAT exam I took. The test-makers will start the sentence off to make sure that it sounds right, then use tricks such as a single, subtle modifier placement to render the entire sentence wrong in meaning.

Take my word for it – don't make the mistakes I did, unlearn this habit (if you ever had one), and learn English again from the perspective of the GMAT (for the sake of passing this test). Especially for non-native speakers like myself, it is crucial that you put aside your assumptions and check your blind spots for this.

(Back to the course) I found that the E-GMAT course was very structured and that it advocated a similar approach to what I did for Quant: getting sub-sectional ability right before moving on. The course is divided into SC, CR, and RC but within each main section, there are many sub-sections e.g. modifiers, comparisons, idioms etc. which comprised a "learn the concept, apply it immediately to build proficiency" approach. Whether you end up using the course or not, such an approach is critical especially for anyone struggling with the basics (as I did when I assumed my English education would help on the GMAT).

I continued doing this for all 3 sections and practiced via Scholaranium, E-GMAT's testing feature integrated with its own Verbal questions. I continued to re-visit my concepts and would often re-do sub-section ability tests and concept classes. The online nature of the course allowed me to adapt my time for study depending on my work schedule, and it suited me very well given my demanding work schedules.

Similar to my approach for Quant, I maintained an error log, carefully analyzing each answer choice and improving from my initial approach of only analyzing the correct answer. I managed to gain a lot more by understanding the wrong answers, than I did from the right one. What became more important was the need to gain clarity from my thought processes and correct them to form the right habits.

Final push (Part 3)

My plan was to have as much full-length, test-taking experience simulated as possible before I actually even took the GMAT Prep exam (goes back to fears from my first GMAT Prep experience). If my performance on the CATs were consistent enough, I would book the GMAT exam at a physical test center approximately 5 weeks from my first GMAT Prep test. I planned to do 6 MGMT CATs over 1.5 to 2 months, then 6 GMAT Preps in one month with a week's break before the actual exam.

Next, I purchased additional mocks from GMAT Prep and Manhattan GMAT. I knew that I preferred more of a gradual, step-wise fashion to gaining confidence on the test, so I planned to complete MGMT CATs before even touching GMAT Prep. I did not want to practice on more mocks already as I was experiencing fatigue, which I guess is more than understandable since I was already more than 2.5 years into my prep since I restarted it.

My thought process was that if it's true from reviews that MGMT CATs are much harder than GMAT Prep ones, then I stand to only gain from testing on MGMT's 'tough' experience. It would be sufficient for the real exam.

a) MGMT CATs

MGMT CATs actually dented my confidence more than anything else and continued to be so throughout my course of completing the 6 CATs. I have listed my scores in this post. As I attempted MGMT CATs, I often started searching for "correlation between MGMT CAT scores and actual GMAT scores" to allay my fears. I couldn't find many useful posts although generally people would mention that they did better on the real GMAT.

So, I took it on purely training purposes – the MGMT CAT Quant questions are incredibly tough and are actually good for training you to LET GO of questions when you couldn't solve them. That was the main takeaway for me – other than that, the high level of mathematical calculations involved in getting to the answer would be good for learning purposes but wasn't entirely reflective of my actual GMAT Quant experience.

Why was this so? Actual GMAT quant questions are more similar in length to GMAT Club test questions, with lesser intensive / formulaic calculations required. They are elegantly designed but can be absolute killers in that the question is actually testing you A LOT on concepts and application even though it appears to be relatively straightforward with a non-complicated stem, and asks for less intensive calculations from you.

Nevertheless, I maintained error logs of these questions and continued to trudge through – I just told myself that somehow these knowledge will come round to serve me well so I should just have faith and learn the most from it.

b) GMAT Prep

By this time, I was already quite familiar in test format and relatively durable in terms of test stamina. I felt ready to confront my GMAT Prep demons. I planned for an average of 3.5 days in between each GMAT Prep exam, giving myself time to review both Quant and Verbal sections (plus a small break) before doing the next mock, culminating in a month's final prep to the real thing.

I managed a record high 770 on my first GMAT Prep test, dramatically shattering my inner demons. I continued to employ a similar approach of reviewing each question in detail in an error log, and although I had a blip on Prep 3 (it seems that the Quant was harder than usual for me), the rest of my test scores reflected a fairly consistent average of approximately 760 – I felt ready to do the real thing.

Final week to first GMAT Test:

I did my final GMAT Prep test 4 days before the test and basically spent the rest of the time reviewing concepts and my error log. I exercised, ate well, slept decently, and tried to not focus too much on the upcoming test. I didn't feel burnout from having done that many mocks in a row. I knew that I wanted this more than anything – this would be my last push (hopefully).

Day before first GMAT Test:

I ate plainly (fish soup) – nothing too oily/risky that would upset my stomach potentially. I also went for a light run in hopes of shaking off test anxiety and making myself a bit more tired so that I could sleep earlier and better. For some reason, I couldn't help but feel insecure about my chances; I started reviewing my error logs again in detail till about

11pm and went to bed. However, test anxiety still got to me and I ended up sleeping only at 3:30am for a 12pm test scheduled the next day.

Test Day (1st Attempt: 4th August 2020)

I woke up relatively rested and got up around 9:45am. As the test center was not too far from me, I could afford to relax and make my way there relatively later.

I decided to go have my favorite pasta at a joint near my house, and watch peaceful, non-commentary YouTube videos of this guy named Kraig Adams hiking scenic mountains and trails. I made sure I stopped my fluid intake about an hour before the test timing so that it doesn't affect my test-taking experience. I took half a cup of coffee and made my way to the test center.

At the test center, I checked in relatively quickly and had no issues getting to the place. I had scouted the place prior and knew how to get there. The receptionist was very friendly, and I similarly reciprocated in kind – in fact, putting myself in a positive mood helps me to allay some of the anxiety building up.

I brought mini-chocolates and a Gatorade to help replenish sugars during the break, laying them out clearly and in an easily accessible manner so that I can save time taking them out from my bag during the break. With that done, I went into the testing room.

Testing:

After going through security and palm scans, I was seated in a corner of the room. The screen's wording actually looked larger than I was used to. It was uncomfortable and I had to sit slightly further away from the table, extending my arms fully to maintain an eye-to-screen distance that I was comfortable with.

I selected the Verbal-Quant-IR-AWA sequence as I have always tested with that and that I always believed that I needed a clear mind to do well on Verbal.

(Verbal)

Verbal section started and I was being extra careful with the first 9 questions – it actually ate up quite a bit of my time as I tended to be suspicious of my own choices and actually reviewed them quite a few times. Quite a few of the questions actually seemed foreign from what I experienced for GMAT Prep and test anxiety probably exacerbated the differences and perceived difficulty. Having reviewed countless posts about how the first 10-15 questions are so important and how the first 10 questions did not really matter so much, I surmised that in general it would be important to get as many of them correct as possible so that the test could serve me more difficult questions. Because of this impression, I spent more time than I should and ended up scrambling for time on RC passages (2 long, 1 medium, 1 short). This affected my score in RC especially on the inference questions which you really, really need to pay attention to the RC passages for clear evidence (you will see from my first ESR that my inference questions are out of the window). The second block of questions on Verbal were immediately much more difficult in nature and I felt incredibly challenged, sometimes deviating from my approach/question strategy.

Nevertheless, I powered through till the end but I was scrambling for time on the last section – I had marked the last question but did not manage to press 'submit' on time before the timer was up. I was horrified that I had made such a schoolboy mistake and had given away at least a 3-percentile penalty for not completing the section. Fortunately, I realized that GMAT also takes into account marked answers for the last question, and I avoided that penalty. Overall, I felt that I did not perform as well as I wanted to.

(Break)

I realized that security takes up more time than I thought it would, and I had essentially less than 5 minutes of actual break time. I gobbled down a mini-chocolate (didn't want huge portions as it would cause a crash) and drank close to a quarter of the Gatorade. I scrambled back in again and realized that I had been late by 50 seconds – the timer automatically deducted that from my section time. (Urgh)

(Quant)

Overcoming a slight distraction from being late, I was determined to put Verbal behind me and focused intensely on Quant. The questions I encountered in the first block were straightforward but I still took time to do them carefully, often checking more than required due to my heightened sense of suspicion from many months of training.

The second block of questions had many more questions with increased difficulty, which actually made me spend more time than expected on trying to get it right. The pitfall made here was that while I did get that right, I took an average of 2:45m per question – a move that significantly reduced my time for the tougher questions later on. As it turns out, although I answered all 14-15 questions of the first two blocks correctly, I suffered in BOTH accuracy and timing on the last two blocks. Some of the questions looked immensely difficult (hybrid geometry questions) which I decided to randomly guess under the time pressure I had created for myself – I guessed approximately 5 questions especially those that were from Geometry. I was left with quite a bit of time for a counting problem at the end but I realized I was careless on hindsight, and got that wrong as well (upon recalling and reviewing the question from memory). I did not feel that I did both sections as well as I wanted.

(IR & AWA)

I generally did not prepare as much other than the regular full-length tests that I did. I followed **chineseburned's** AWA template but made sure I added my own style and customized it for the question at hand by varying word choice, transitional words, having a mix of long and short sentences, a combination of passive vs. active voice structure, and varied my sentence beginnings. I did not have many issues on both IR & AWA sections, and in addition the duress of the two most important sections (Verbal & Quant) were no longer there.

Post-test

When the score flashed 710 (Q49, V37), I was glad that I cleared the 700 mark. But I felt the result was a far cry from what my real ability was and didn't justify my preparation hours invested. In fact, 10 minutes after leaving the center, I felt immensely disappointed given the amount of preparation I had done over the years and the consistency of my score on the GMAT Prep. I went home feeling very down, and I didn't answer texts/calls for the remainder of the day.

However, I was determined not to let this test experience prevent me from improving. My plan was to take the test again not too long thereafter to make sure that I still had preparation momentum going into the next exam. However, I knew that I needed a much different plan this time round. So, I sat down the night of the test day to analyze my performance and wrote down salient things I observed to the best of what my memory allowed. Funny thing is, for traumatic experiences such as the GMAT, the brain remembers more things from the experience than it should. I noted down certain problematic questions, key crossroads in decision-making, and why I did what I did, and how I thought I could have managed them better.

In summary, I realized that 'first-attempt' nerves, an inability to let go of questions I couldn't solve while trying to get the first 10 questions correct (thereby spending more time than needed), deviating from my question strategy, and lingering test management issues prevented me from getting the score I needed. In addition, my question strategy for certain sections were not good – primarily RC and Geometry/Counting. Given that I had a Q49 but a V37, I was leaving a lot more points on the table for Verbal and needed to maintain my Quant accuracies. I immediately booked the GMAT Exam for about a month later on 7th Sept 2020 to secure a good timing (afternoon slots are rare) and I knew I could always reschedule without a fee since GMAC offered waivers in COVID times. With that, I decided to focus on Verbal for the next 1 month.

I had read **fanfan1247's** debrief and was really encouraged by how she managed to improve her Verbal score within such a short period of time (3 weeks). I realized that she also reached out to E-GMAT for help and she was given suggestions and a detailed study plan for the next few weeks. I reckoned that I could do the same and reached out to e-GMAT's team for suggestions. Nava, an E-GMAT consultant, helped me analyze my ESR and highlighted the key issues I had with timing and difficulty levels, recommending a structured plan to tackle my areas of improvement on all sections for Quant and Verbal. It made my life easy as I need not think about the plan, but more importantly, I had to learn to trust the process of tackling questions again.

Strategy for 2nd retake (1 month)

(Week 1 - 2.5) - Verbal

I went back to basics again, this time placing extra focus on my approach in Verbal and sticking to the process of answering the questions. I did not look at timing and basically did a slow-walk through each question and being clear of all the various decision points made as I progress through the analysis of the question. Following Nava's plan for me, my approach was to get the process absolutely right again, before slowly speeding up. This also meant going through all of the concept lessons and sub-sections again in E-GMAT, which I did for all 3 sections (SC, CR, RC).

For SC, I went through the sub-sections carefully again, focusing on anchoring my approach using the intended broad idea first, before going down to technicalities of tenses and other grammar rules. Still, I would say I did not manage to do this correctly all of the time, often relying on reading the answer choices to get a sense of what the intended idea of the sentence was. I guess for a non-native speaker like me, things would just be slightly more difficult – but I tried my best, anyway.

For CR, I made it a point to NOT look at the answer choices first. I would force myself to spend a bit more time to understand the structure of the argument and the reasoning link, rather than jump straight in as I did last time. I would say that thinking of a potential answer before you look at the answers is helpful, but ONLY IF you understand very clearly the argument's reasoning. Sometimes, using common sense might make you end up with a wrong answer if you don't know the conclusion and reasoning pattern well. I tried to overcome this by trying to map out the argument's reasoning type but did not focus on choosing an answer e.g. If X, then Y → weakener would be Y, but not X / Y causes X etc.

Particularly for RC, I did it differently this time by focusing on summarizing the idea for each paragraph, and noting the logical, overall structure of the content e.g. "Oh so this paragraph is about doing X to get Y, it's been an idea scientists have tested since the 1930's, and author is reporting that there's actually 2 ways to do X."

In addition, I also followed closely the evidence stated from the passage. One of the tricks on the GMAT is that for RC inference questions, they will give you answer choices that are similar in thought, content, but tweak some part of it that makes it slightly wrong only. Therefore, to do well on RC inference questions, you need to adopt a mindset of "Prove it to me, willya?" – if it's not something you can support from using the passage's evidence, or have to make extra assumptions to get to it, those are likely to be the wrong answers. Once I was able to recognize and use a strict evidence-based approach, it really turned my performance around on the harder RC inference questions (as evident from my ESR).

I continued to solve a mixed variety of Verbal questions each day, ranging from 10 to 20 questions as I went into Quant preparation. I used GMAT Club and E-GMAT's platform to practice these questions.

(Week 2.5 – 4) – Quant

I was advised to focus on doing harder questions and improve on my timing. Timing is an outcome of proficiency in concepts and nuances on the GMAT, so I went back to basics to revise my notes on Geometry and Counting/Sets while focusing on achieving >90% accuracy in 600-700 level questions. I filtered 600-level questions using GMAT Club's question bank features and solved up to 30-40 questions a day, going through them without a timer first to consolidate my understanding. Then, I started using timers to time myself on 600-level questions.

Once I gained proficiency, I started on 700-level questions. I wasn't able to do a lot of 700-level questions as I took time to understand each question and its nuances, and would often do the same slow-walk through the question to understand what were my gaps in conceptual areas. Therefore, I was basically going through 700-level questions without actually worrying too much on timing – the focus was on developing my ability to understand the concept and develop conceptual nous for such questions.

To freshen up other concepts, I went through GMAT Club Tests I did before and basically solved them on a timer but did not click on the correct answer – I merely went through the fixed selection of questions and compared whether I managed to make improvements on incorrect questions.

Overall, I only did 1 full-length mock test for the entirety of the re-take preparation – I did a reset of GMAT Prep 1 as they seem to have more questions in the test bank. Some questions were repeated but I wasn't too concern about the validity of the inflated score (790), as I was focused on learning the process and conceptual improvement. I also worked

on timing (i.e. don't get stuck on the first 10 questions, don't hold on beyond 2.5 minutes etc) and deliberately trained myself to let go of questions.

(1 day before 2nd Attempt)

I read from BB and a few other users that they woke up earlier on the day before test day, so that they would feel tired and actually sleep better. I tried this method and felt that it helped quite a bit. Although I was still waking up from test anxiety, I only broke sleep in between once and generally felt more rested than I had done for the previous attempt.

The day before the exam, I scheduled a call with a friend from Chicago Booth who was starting school the same week, waking up early to chat with her. Then, I had lunch and tried to do minimal revision (light revising), writing out my question strategies, walking through timing markers, and making sure I am mentally prepared to be a little faster this time round for the first 2 blocks. This time round, I did not go for a run as I was afraid the surge of adrenaline would prevent me from falling asleep and exacerbate the test anxiety. Instead, I completed my revision by 7pm and watched 'Cast Away' on Netflix – and reminded myself that I would not die alone on GMAT Island but I should ride the waves as hard as I can and break out for a chance of survival. It also helped me put my situation into perspective – I am healthy, have a certain degree of intellectual ability, and have the chance to pursue my dreams. Let's just go through this with no fear. I then went to bed at 10.30pm.

More often than not, the journey maketh the man, and I felt that the end result would be an outcome that I was ready to go with and move on without any regrets – because I had tried my best and I know I would be able to live with it.

Test Day (2nd Attempt: 11th Sept 2020)

I woke up at 9am for the test scheduled at 1pm. I wanted to delay eating till about 11:45am so that I would have some time to manage the sugar rush and also not run on empty tank towards the end of the exam. I then consumed some walnuts and grapes before going through some light practice to warm the mind up (4-7 questions for each section). Wrote my question strategy down again to remind myself of my game plan.

At about 10:30am, I started developing a headache – not sure why this happened but it seemed to get worse. I popped two painkillers and stopped revising to avoid worsening the headache. I checked GMAC's test scheduling system and tried to reschedule the exam, but this was not possible as GMAC does not allow you to do this via online on the day of the exam (take note). I would have to call a hotline and pay a fee for rescheduling on the day itself. I was irked by this, I told myself to nevertheless go try out the exam as if it were a mock exam and accustom myself for the next shot at it when I was in better condition.

I packed grapes this time round and picked a light isotonic drink (avoided Gatorade as it was too sweet and left me thirsty somehow). I also decided to wear thermal protection layer below my jacket as the test center was super cold – this turned out to help me very much. I went to have a double fillet burger from McDonald's as there were not many options open nearby at this moment. After having a quick lunch, the sugar helped alleviate my headache a little but it continued to throb. I arrived at the test center 20 minutes ahead of time and checked in smoothly.

I told myself that there's no pressure to perform well and that I should simply use the test to try out if my preparation for the retake had been going in the right direction. With that, I started the exam.

(Testing)

I followed the same testing sequence (Verbal-Quant-IR-AWA) as I have always prepared. I quickly zipped through the initial school selection pages and instructions as I knew that it was likely I wouldn't do as well and therefore it would not matter which school I would send the scores to. I did pick the same schools as I did earlier and went onto the test.

Verbal

I started Verbal relatively well – the questions in the first block were not difficult and I applied my approach for each question type accordingly. Seeing that the question approach worked well, I looked to save as much time as I could for the latter sections. Most of the questions seemed more comfortable this time round and when RC came, I made sure to apply my reading strategies (stop and reflect, summarize the point, establish the overall main idea without

getting caught in the details etc). I had 1 reading comprehension passage in each block, but all 4 passages came earlier in the block, compared to the previous exam in which I had the passages coming in only from the middle to latter parts.

I was expecting the general difficulty of the question to go up but somehow, I felt I was being served easy questions continually. I realized that this probably meant I did not do well and that I should take heart since I was having a headache – no pressure, just keep going. I continued to answer the questions as per my question strategies and because I was in no pressure, I had some head space to even be intrigued at the content of one of the passages. My timing was good (hell I wasn't even thinking I was doing well; must be that easy questions helped me gain on timing) and I completed the section with 5 minutes to spare. I marked my last answer and waited out to gain more time to rest my headache before the break.

(Break)

I gobbled down my grapes and drank only 2-3 sips of isotonic water, before going back in. "No pressure", I told myself, and checked in with 1.5 minutes left in the break.

Quant

The section started and I generally did not have issues with the first block. I paid extra attention to getting the easy questions right and double-checked quickly. However, in the second block, I could feel my energy dropping from the headache and struggled with seemingly easy questions; I also felt that I was repeatedly served easy questions (I know this from having taken countless 500 and 600 level difficulty questions on GMAT Club). Taking heart, I told myself that I should then try to get as many of the easy / medium difficulty questions right. Whatever the outcome, I would have done my best. I completed the section with 3 minutes to spare and took my time to mark the last question, which was another relatively straightforward question on remainders.

IR / AWA

By this time, my energy dropped significantly and I struggled to complete the IR section. By the time AWA came, my mind was already exhausted and I took a good 4-7 minutes to rest my mind before starting on the AWA. I was just glad to be done with the exam finally.

Post-test

The screen flashed 760 (Q50, V44, IR4) and I was very surprised – I couldn't believe my eyes and that despite somehow trudging through almost the entire test, I had managed to do much better than expected. I was elated but more importantly, relieved that I have finally reached the end of a long journey.

Key learnings

- 1. The GMAT is only just a test. You, on the other hand, are a whole, complete individual who is smart and good.**

For many, there will be times you feel that your sense of self-worth is intertwined with your performance on the GMAT. Remember that you would feel this way only as much as you allow it to. The GMAT is really a game of confidence in application, and I learnt this only after such a long time in preparation. If you feel down, take time out to relax. I would de-stress by playing computer games such as Heroes III or allow myself some downtime to socialize with friends. Afterall, life is so much more than just the GMAT.

- 2. Prioritize quality over quantity throughout your preparation**

Carefully reviewing both the right answer AND the other wrong answers. On top of that, analyze your own approach – slow-walk through the question and your thought process, making sure you get the decision-making and analysis correct before speeding up. Right methods and processes always trump quick shortcuts as the GMAT will eventually make you pay for not taking a methodical approach.

- 3. Prioritize accuracy over speed when first developing competency.**

Don't rush to do 600-level questions when you've not mastered 500-level ones, and don't do 700-level ones until you've completely mastered the concepts at both 500 and 600 level questions. You will save a lot of time going back to basics when you've built a strong foundation. 700-level questions often test upon the same

foundations but add a twist to it. Without strong basics, you would find it difficult to hit 700-level questions consistently. Therefore, commit to learning the basics – one subsection at a time – before moving onto higher level questions.

4. Develop a tested and tried core process to answer each of your question types.

Don't deviate from them during test day. Deviating from question strategy means you will spend extra time figuring out an alternative approach on test day and you may take a long time to do so. Worse, you didn't and you end up losing time and accuracy. GMAT is a game of perseverance and application, and it rewards people who are structured and methodical in their approach to problem-solving (Note: people who try 'silver bullets' will find that there are none, especially if you want to hit 700+ level).

5. "No battle plan survives the enemy"

It is important to accept the fact that no matter how much you plan, there will be some questions that will throw you off. It is then important to know it is okay to make an educated guess and move on. According to the GMAT, good guesses and mistakes have only a small effect on your test score. Do not lose the forest for the trees, they say. That is especially true on the GMAT as you could have spent that additional time finishing up the easy and medium level questions that play a huge role in bumping your score up to a 700+ level. You do NOT need to answer all questions correctly to obtain an elite score. My ESRs are proof that even if you take time to achieve perfection in some subsections, you will be penalized equally for other questions that you don't spend sufficient time on and therefore answer incorrectly, especially when you're perfectly able to solve those missed questions to begin with, given good time management. Give yourself permission to LET GO of questions – I know this was difficult for me because my traditional schooling taught me the habit of getting every question right. Unlearning these habits will take you to an elite score on the GMAT.

6. You don't need to master EVERY 700-level question to be able to get a good score.

In general, you should look at the key ways in which a certain subsection topic can be asked at a 700-level question – the key to knowing this is to do enough questions and noting the core patterns involved. Whenever I see a pattern that's really an outlier, I try to understand but then I'm not to be too bothered about it appearing because the probability of such a pattern coming up is really low and would not be worth spending a lot of time learning these outliers. What is also true is that test prep companies deliberately come up with really complicated and calculation-intensive Quant questions that don't even reflect what GMAT's questions are. The difficult Quant questions I encountered on the GMAT are elegantly designed and simply worded, but they test a few concepts at once and involves usually a non-formulaic approach i.e. you cannot just solve for variables the hard way and expect to get an answer. You might, but you will surely end up losing much time with that method. Therefore, remember that the GMAT is a reasoning test (not a test of formulas) and that each question can more or less be solved within 2 minutes.

7. Find your source of courage and motivation to carry on, and don't give up.

I often went back to my initial motivation as to why I did why I did and anchored that firmly. I also accepted that I may not test as well as I would like to, but I would not let a test determine my sense of self-worth (see Point 1). Whatever the outcome may be, I knew that I would be okay to move forward with it. This sense of acceptance that I got towards the end was liberating – it lifted much of my fears and helped me take on the test with confidence.

As Adrian asked Balboa famously in Rocky III:

Adrian: "What's so bad? Tell me, what?"

Rocky: "I'M AFRAID! ALL RIGHT?!"

Adrian: "Why? You're human, aren't you?... But it doesn't matter what I believe because you're the one that's got to carry that fear around inside you... Get rid of it!"

Balboa: "And if I lose?"

Adrian: "Then you lose. But at least you lose with no excuses, no fear. And I know you can live with that."

If I can do it, so can you. Keep it going!

Mock Scores

I have listed all of my scores on the prep exams I have taken, examples of scores that some have tried to compile, compare, and correlate for their own mock vs. estimated actual performance on the GMAT – hopefully this provides some general indication but more importantly some encouragement if you find your test scores fluctuating wildly or not reflective of what you think your actual performance would be (and conversely, not be over-confident if you have always done well).

Here are my scores on the mock exams:

Manhattan GMAT

MGMT 1 – 720 (Q51, V37); MGMT 2 – 710 (Q46, V41);

MGMT 3 – 680 (Q46, V37); MGMT 4 – 710 (Q49, V37);

MGMT 5 – 730 (Q48, V41); MGMT 6 – 700 (Q47, V38)

GMAT Prep

Prep 1 – 770 (Q50, V46); Prep 2 – 770 (Q51, V44)

Prep 3 – 720 (Q48, V40); Prep 4 – 780 (Q51, V46)

Prep 5 – 750 (Q48, V44); Prep 6 – 750 (Q50, V41)

GMAT Club Tests

Quant: (in order of test sequence from first to last)

41, 51, 49, 50, 49, 49, 50, 50, 51, 51, 50, 50, 51, 49, 50, 47, 47

Verbal:

45, 35, 37, 38, 39, 43, 33