

Standardized Test Soup for the Graduate School Soul



By Nikkee Porcaro

GMAT, GRE, NCLEX, LSAT, MCAT, TEAS, DAT...

Graduate-level tests can seem like a nebulous alphabet soup of confusion. What do I take? When? How?

The great news is most of the strategies used on undergraduate-level tests can also be used on graduate-level tests. In fact, many graduate-level tests are quite similar to undergraduate tests in terms of quantitative math levels, and even, to a point, reading passage difficulty levels. The biggest difference is a larger emphasis on logical reasoning and critical thinking skills; essentially, these tests are asking older students to take a chain of reasoning a few links further, to understand the difference between causation and correlation, and, in some cases, to engage with more advanced statistical analysis of data sets. Most tests will also require higher-level writing samples that evaluate a student's ability to play devil's advocate, get to the unstated or implied complexities of an issue or argument, and, of course, demonstrate professional-level grammar and syntax.

What can these tests do for you? Well, for many students, they can overcome a subpar (i.e. below 3.0) undergraduate grade point average (GPA). For others, they can open doors to top schools that require 95th percentile and higher test scores just to be considered. They can also sometimes lead to scholarships or consideration for certain teaching positions once accepted. Don't think of them as a barrier, but rather an opportunity to distinguish yourself from the others applying to graduate school.

A quick overview of the two most common graduate level tests:

The GMAT is often used for business school admission and is scored on a scale of 200 to 800 (much like individual SAT sections) and has quantitative, verbal, integrated reasoning, and analytical writing sections. According to the official GMAT website, two-thirds of test takers score between 400 and 600, so to really stand out, you'll need greater than a 650. The GRE, which is accepted by some business schools but more commonly used for liberal arts, humanities, and education advanced degrees, is scored on a 130 to 170 scale, and the average score is approximately a 151.

Other tests of note include the LSAT for law school (though some schools, such as Georgetown University, are moving toward or have moved to accepting the GRE), the TEAS for nursing and other

allied health programs, and the MCAT for medical school.

Unlike undergraduate admissions, where schools are usually fairly candid about the range of scores they want, graduate schools are often cagey about their score requirements. Quick calls to some of the nation's most popular universities, including University of Maryland, Harvard, and NYU, yielded answers from "we look at applications holistically" to "we're looking for 50th percentile and above" to "students will need 90th percentile scores and above to be considered for highly competitive programs." (These are a sampling of answers from many schools and do not correspond directly to the aforementioned list.)



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The best course of action is to first figure out which degree you're pursuing, and then call the schools you're interested in to ask the admissions office their policies and requirements on test scores. Armed with that information, you can plan the amount of effort and prep time you'll need.

To prepare for these tests, take advantage of practice tests and questions available on their websites. Read analytical writing samples and feedback, both on the website and in prep books (each respective test maker will have at least one, and Kaplan and Barron's tend to be strong as well.) The most important thing isn't how many questions you do, but if you truly understand your mistakes and the concepts around them in order to fix them for test day.

Logical thinking games and puzzles are another a great way to train your brain to think in this new way. It's like exercising a new muscle; it will be sore at first, but once you get the hang of it, you can nail these exams.

Most of all, remember: There are numerous options for graduate school, and what you do once you're there is often more important than a number or a name.

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