*Note:*

*The following is an abridged transcript of Video 1 for the Analytical Writing portion of our course. This is not an exact transcript because I thought it would be best to spare you from having to read all of my “ums,” “likes,” and stutters, and because I wanted to make some things a little clearer here than they were the first time around. Still, the editing is pretty minimal here, with no accounting for grammar or structure, so it is conversational English and NOT representative of how you should be writing your exam responses (*do as I say, not as I do *in this case).*

*Hope you get some use out of this!*

*Carlos Caetano Leão*

**Introduction**

Alright, welcome everybody to the analytical writing portion of the GRE prep course. My name is Carlos or Cae [depending on where you know me from]. I am a master’s student in Dr. Eme’s lab here at CalState San Marcos, I did my undergrad in Santa Barbara, UCSB, and I will be defending my thesis here next month. Today is just an introductory overview of the analytical writing portion of the test. There will be three videos with possibly a fourth. Basically there will be this overview one then we have one for each of the two portions of the test, we’ll be going over what those are in a bit, and then if we need a fourth video to clarify things I am more than happy to do that. I don’t really foresee that happening but if it needs to happen we’ll do it. I’ll be posting transcripts of these videos because I know some people just work better with written instructions, or if you have some sort of need for a transcript it will be up. My email is on the introductory portion of the Community page so please email me. I have no other way of talking to you guys without getting emails. I have videos of past lessons in this course so I can kind of predict what you might ask based on what people asked in previous years but really that’s no substitute for having actual contact with you guys so please get in touch if you have any questions, concerns, or want me to look at something.

Let’s start with the PowerPoint presentation that should be up on Community by now…

**Overview of GRE: Analytical Writing Section (PowerPoint)**

**Grand Overview**

Basically, there are two tasks for this – two types of writing that you’ll have to do. There is an Analyze an Argument task and an Analyze an Issue task. They’re kind of mirrors of each other (we’ll go over that in a little bit). Each one is 30 minutes long. We’ll go into a breakdown of how to strategize for those 30 minutes. A very key thing is that now that everything is online and asynchronous, we’re used to having several days to write things so it’s very important that to do well on this test, we practice writing with a time limit and practice other conditions of the test that we will be talking about. It is stressful to write in 30 minutes but it absolutely can be done, you just need to practice getting all your thoughts out that quickly. We’ll talk about other intelligent ways to practice in a bit too. The exam interface is super simple, it is not a word doc, it’s a prompt and a very basic writing processor. YOu should have basic tools, we’ll talk about that in a little bit. Scoring is between 1 and 6 (actually between 0 and 6 but a 0 is if you just don’t write anything).

**Rules and Resources**

Let’s look at the rules. There’s no talking, obviously. Don’t write on scratch paper until the exam starts (you are free to write on the provided paper after the exam starts but you have to wait until the timer starts). No personal items, so no cell phones, food, jewelry, etc. I was lucky enough to take the test before everything went online so they provided me with a locker to put my stuff in, I’m sure that it’s similar now if you take the test in person. No jewelry means that if you have a lucky charm or something that you always use for writing, consider practicing without it because you might not get to use it in the future. I know that I like to twirl whatever’s on my wrist when I’m writing but that’s probably a bad habit to be in for this sort of test. Finally, they’ll give you scratch paper and noise reducing headphones (like the type you use for gardening). If you can, practice with that. It’s always a good idea to practice taking the test the way it’s going to be, so if it’s going to be a horrible uncomfortable situation where you’re in big gardening headphones without your favorite jewelry then you’ve got to practice that way, on a time crunch. You also get a 10 minute break after the third section, they will instruct you so don’t worry you don’t need to remember that.

**Exam Interface**

There is a prompt and a processor. It’s extremely simple, they give you a paragraph of writing, instructions, and a very basic text processor. There is no autocorrect, spell check or thesaurus. For all of us who have grown up with the little squiggly line under our writing to tell us when we goofed, this is kind of terrifying. I know that even when I’m filling out an online form and it doesn’t have spell check I’ll write it in word first then paste it over. But that’s just how it is, you have to practice without proofing. If you’re practicing in word, go to your settings and turn off proofing (all spell checking, all thesaurus options, that kind of stuff) and maybe turn it on at the end to see if you got words wrong. Consistency is super important. They really care that if you pick a way of writing something, you are consistent. Say, if you use an Oxford comma once, use it for the whole thing. If you’re not sure how to spell a word, pick one spelling and use it for the whole test. If you flip-flop they’ll dock you more than they would dock you if you spelled it wrong but used the same spelling for the whole thing. If there are words that you frequently get wrong and they’re very common words, practice them! For me it’s “receive” – I always goof on receive so if I want to make sure I get it right I learn a little pneumonic before getting started.

The text processor has basic capabilities like copy, cut, paste, delete, undo. You probably won’t be using too much of this because of the time limit but it is there if you need it.

**[Next slide]**

This is what it looks like. Looks like they made it in 2003 and just kept it around but the simplicity is kind of what they aim for. Notice that you can hide the timer in the top right corner. I don’t super recommend that you do that but if it’s super distracting and you trust yourself to keep time internally you can but definitely turn it on toward the end so that you don’t get caught with your writing not done by the time the timer runs out. You should always practice timed but maybe also turn one on on your screen so you get used to the numbers go down and not stressing out about it.

**Time and Strategy**

You get 30 minutes for each test prompt, which includes time to read the task prompt, time to write a response and time to revise and edit your response. We’re going to go over right now some strategy for how to use that time wisely.

**Strategy**

You don’t need to do this – this is just tried and true methods for using your time effectively, but if you have a different method that works for you and you can do it effectively, just do that. The first few minutes are breaking down the task, we’re gonna go over that in the next step. It’s basically reading the instructions and reading the prompt and thinking critically about what you need to do. (The numbers are time elapsed in parentheses and time per section before it). The next five minutes are creating and prioritizing points. To me this is outlining, so going through and organizing your thoughts with bullet points into an outline. I don’t recommend that you do this with scratch paper. You can if it’s absolutely a part of your process but the more you type, the more you have written already. If you brainstorm on the computer, you will have that stuff written and not have to write it twice. You’d be surprised how physically typing can be the thing that will push you over the time limit. The more you can physically type once, the better. This second step to me is very crucial. If you practice outlining in 5 minutes then you can get very good at organizing your thoughts into a set structure that you’ll always use so try to do this on as many different prompts as you can. Set a timer for 5 or 7 minutes and look through example prompts (I will link them on the Community page) and try to make a quick outline in that time. If you do five or 10 of these you will very quickly develop a drill or protocol for organizing your thoughts that way and you’ll get very good at it. Practice is key.

Next is around one minute for organizing. To me that’s just getting everything in the right order, trimming, putting thoughts where they need to be, maybe adding a couple points. The next 20 minutes are for drafting, which is the actual writing. This is pretty self explanatory, everyone here knows how to write. We’re here to learn what to write about and we will do that when we cover the individual tasks and we will talk about what they’re looking for in terms of writing as well. Just remember that typing is a skill that gets rusty really fast. I know many of you just graduated (in which case I probably saw you walk) and if it’s going to be several weeks between the last time you were in class having to type quickly and when this test starts, practice physically typing because you might not be as fast as you remember. It’s just a good skill to keep practicing. The last two minutes are just for proofing – go back through and check your spelling, commas, apostrophes, all that good stuff.

**Scoring**

Again, scoring is on a 0 to 6 scale, but really a 1 to 6 scale because we’re all gonna write stuff. They say it is “Holistic, emphasizing the effective interrelationship of content, organization, and syntax”. What this means is that the different parts of your writing have to prop each other up and work together. They’re not just looking at if you used enough words or spelled things correctly, it’s a bigger picture. This is a fancy way of describing all writing grading at higher levels – every essay you’ve ever done in college has been graded holistically, for the most part. Every essay is graded by one human and one computer, plus a third if the human and the computer don’t fully agree on the score. The computer is mostly looking at grammar, structure, and vocabulary. So make sure you’re using multiple paragraphs, good sentence and paragraph structure, a varied and academic vocabulary, good spelling, that kind of stuff. We will go over what good and varied structure means later. Scores are returned after 10 or 15 days, just because it takes a while. I think all of your other scores come back pretty much right away but this one does not.

**Task: Argument**

Like I said, there are two tasks in the Analytical Writing portion of the test. The first that we’ll be talking about is the Analyze an Argument task, which “will present a short argument and instructions on how to respond to it. You will assess the cogency –” (cogency is just how clear, legit, and well-supported the argument is or the logic of the argument) “of the argument, analyzing the author’s chain of reasoning, and evaluating the use of evidence. For this essay, you will not develop your own argument but instead will critique the argument presented in the prompt.” Think of this as “critique an argument”. They will give you someone else’s writing and tell you what they want you to write about regarding that writing. Your job is to answer how well that argument was made, if it’s a good argument or a bad argument, and why.

**Task: Argument EXAMPLE**

Let’s look at these instructions: “Write a response in which you examine the stated and/or unstated assumptions of the argument. Be sure to explain how the argument depends on the assumptions and what the implications are if the assumptions prove unwarranted.” Remember, the first thing we do is read the instructions. Read them first then you can read the sample text. If you read the sample text first then read the instructions, you will have to go back and read the sample text again anyway, so just read the instructions first. This is a good strategy for all of life, you want to know what you’re supposed to be looking for first. We are going to get into more examples of both types of writing and both types of prompts and instructions. Just for today, let’s briefly go over the things we are looking for here. Based on the responses from past classes, there are tons of assumptions here that we can go over. Before we go over it, pause the video now and go over the sample text (“In surveys Mason City residents…”) and come up with as many stated or unstated assumptions as you can that were made by the authors of this text. What are they assuming must be true in order for this argument to make sense? See if you can think of some criticisms for those assumptions when we come back. Pause the video *now*.

Welcome back! Let’s look at what past classes have given for some assumptions. Assumption: that the list given really shows people’s favorite water activities. They say this comes from a survey, but what assumptions are made when you use a survey? Survey data is a really good reflection of the people who answered the survey but they don’t say how big the survey is. Was it just like 10 people they found on a river once? Or was it a widespread thing with good sample sizes and such? Maybe the survey data can be questioned. There is a stated assumption in this test that the use of the river for water sports would increase after cleanup. We don’t actually directly know that, right? If we asked people whether they would use the river more after it was cleaned and they answered yes, then that would be a pretty well-supported assumption. As it stands, we’re not really sure that that’s true. Next: the author of this stretch assumes that the money would be going toward water sports but we don’t actually know that. We know that they’re riverside recreational facilities but how do we know they’ll actually use that money for boating, swimming or fishing? There could be a tennis court, soccer field, gym, etc. at the recreation facilities, so where is the link between giving money to these facilities and them spending that money on river sports? Not to mention that swimming doesn’t really require funding, I’ve never seen a recreational center with boats, and fishing is usually a personal thing that people don’t go to recreation facilities to do. These are all assumptions that we can talk about in our response to this prompt. Just a couple more examples. There’s the assumption that the river is appropriate for activities and recovery. Maybe it’s just a very fast, shallow river with the horrible concrete banks like we have in southern California and it’s just really garbage for recreational activity. The Mason City residents may like their watersports but maybe they don’t go to this river not because it smells bad but because it’s a terrible river for these kinds of activities. Maybe they actually go to a lake in the mountains or something to do their water recreation, or the ocean?

These are the sorts of things you need to be doing in the first seven minutes of starting the test. Writing down every single assumption you can think of then picking ones that make the most sense to talk about and going from there. Hopefully you came up with some assumptions of your own. I won’t give you homework or anything like that but if you would like me to take a look at the assumptions that you came up with for this prompt, email them to me. I would be more than happy to tell you what I think of them and if they seem like cool things to talk about for this sort of prompt, just as an exercise.

**Task: Issue**

Ok, let’s move on to the next kind of assignment you’ll have for this test. This is the Analyze an Issue task: “The ‘Analyze an Issue’ task assesses your ability to think critically about a topic of general interest and instructions on how you respond to the issue. You can discuss the issue from any perspective, making use of your own educational and personal background, examples from current or historical events, material you’ve read, or even hypothetical situations. For this essay, you will develop your own argument.” This is kind of the mirror of the Analyze an Argument task. For that one, you’re looking at someone else’s argument and tearing it down. For Analyze an Issue, you’re trying to make an argument that’s unteardownable – make it as good as you can. You want it to be done so that if you were on the other side trying to analyze it you would say “No, OK, this is pretty legit and they have justified assumptions.” There are no right or wrong answers. They just want to see that you can take a stand on something and defend it effectively. It’s about thinking critically and writing persuasively. There are six possible sets of instructions for this test. They are similar but subtly different and the subtle differences do matter. If you have the official GRE prep book, they’re on page 11; if you don’t, don’t worry I will post them on the Community page because books are expensive. We’ll take a look at a couple example prompts in the future. On page 13 there is also a really good overview of things to think about for this task, like:

* “What precisely is the central issue?
* What precisely are the instructions asking me to do?
* Do I agree with all or with any part of the claim? Why or why not?
* Does the claim make certain assumptions? If so, are they reasonable?
* Is the claim valid only under certain conditions? If so, what are they?
* Do I need to explain how I interpret certain terms or concepts used in the claim?
* If I take a certain position on the issue, what reasons support my claim?
* What examples – either real or hypothetical – could I use to illustrate those reasons and advance my point of view? Which examples are the most compelling?

“Once you have decided on a position to defend, consider the perspective of others who might not agree with your position. Ask yourself:

* What reasons might someone use to refute or undermine my position?
* How should I acknowledge or defend against those views in my essay?”

 You’re tying to make a claim, defend your claim, and preempt responses to it. Think, “what would someone use to tear down my argument?” and then get ahead of that.

**Task: Issue Example**

The instructions are: “Discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement and explain your reasoning for the position you take. In developing and supporting your position, you should consider ways in which the statement might or might not hold true and explain how these considerations shape your position.” Let’s look at the example text: “As people rely more and more on technology to solve problems, the ability of humans to think for themselves will surely deteriorate.” Interesting take, I’m sure we’ve all heard some version of this before. Is it true? Up to you – there are no right or wrong answers. Why don’t you pause right now and think about a stance you would take on this, how you would defend that stance, what evidence you would use, etc. And maybe also think of some preemptive counter arguments to criticisms that you might receive on your stance.

Welcome back again. I really wish I could talk to you guys directly but at least I have previous year’s responses to know what people thought about this. Remember, you want to say things like “this would be true if X were the case, but it’s likely not the case so this is probably not true.” The graders want to see you laying out scenarios in which the statement would or would not be true, showing which scenario is closer to reality, then drawing conclusions about the veracity of the statement. What we’re going to do right now is like halfway through that process. We’re looking for possible evidence to support or refute this claim and form an opinion on it. “It depends” + an explanation is the heart of the answer for all of these issues. And when you say “it depends” you have to pick one side.

Let’s look at some previous responses now. People in the past have said “maybe we tend to google things immediately now instead of thinking things out and that has made us worse critical thinkers” or “maybe our spatial reasoning and navigational skills have atrophied since we’ve started using GPS to get around. We need to think, “can we defend this with evidence?” Evidence doesn’t mean you have to cite your sources, you just need to have reasonable claims to make on evidence. You could say that you read in a reputable book that the average person is significantly less likely to find their way home if you dropped them off 100 miles away than they were 30 year ago, that would be pretty good evidence to use for your claim. But don’t lie. Other examples were “complex thought is reduced now since everything is bite-sized (think about when you google something and you just get a two sentence explanation at the top of the search without even having to click anything)” or “we don’t need to know how things like fridges work to use them”. . . These are all arguments that support this claim. If you used these, you would be saying, “Yes, I agree with this opinion, here are my reasons for it.” If you went the other way and said “No, I don’t think that this is true, here’s why…” You could say something like “We have access to tons of information so maybe we are able to do much more complex, knowledge-intensive things now and have bigger-picture ideas that we could possibly have had before when we didn’t have as much access to information.” Again, there is no right answer, you just need to pick one stance and support it.

**Conclusion**

If that felt like too brief of an explanation for the two tasks, don’t worry – it was. In the next two videos, starting with Analyze an Argument, we’re going to go into these individually. We’re going to talk about individual answers to these things, writing strategies, structure, what they really mean by varied and interesting writing. We’ll be looking at three sample prompts and responses for each type of assignment. Those samples will range from not so great to very good, so we’ll have a better idea of how things work in terms of good examples and expectations. Finally, my predecessor was kind enough to make a grid version of the rubric they use to grade these things, which I will post on the Community page. Google Sheets has tabs at the bottom, one for the Issue task and one for the Argument, so make sure you know which one you’re on. The other video should be up soon and the transcript as well. I will see you all soon, please feel free to reach out. See ya!