Analyzing an Issue

You will be given one prompt along with one set of instructions for writing about it. There are several dozen possible prompts and six possible sets of instructions, all available online:

http://www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/prepare/analytical_writing/issue/pool

Examples

1. As people rely more and more on technology to solve problems, the ability of humans to think for themselves will surely deteriorate.

   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.

2. Claim: We can usually learn much more from people whose views we share than from those whose views contradict our own.

   Reason: Disagreement can cause stress and inhibit learning.

   Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the claim and the reason on which that claim is based.

3. Some people believe that competition for high grades motivates students to excel in the classroom. Others believe that such competition seriously limits the quality of real learning.

   Write a response in which you discuss which view more closely aligns with your own position and explain your reasoning for the position you take. In developing and supporting your position, you should address both of the views presented.

4. Scandals are useful because they focus our attention on problems in ways that no speaker or reformer ever could.

   Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the claim. In developing and supporting your position, be sure to address the most compelling reasons and/or examples that could be used to challenge your position.
The Topic
The topic you’re given will always be debatable: there’s no one “right answer,” and there are valid points to be made in support of multiple positions. In reading the issue topic, therefore, you’ll need to

- consider the major arguments for and against the claim.
- choose what position you’re going to take.
- identify any keywords you may need to define

The Instructions
Most instructions have multiple parts. In the first example above, the parts are (1) “discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree”; (2) “explain” your reasoning; (3) “consider” ways in which the statement might or might not hold true; and “explain how these considerations shape your position.” You’ll want to make sure you address each part. When reading the instructions, you’ll

- identify how many things you’re asked to do: look for the verbs associated with each.
- note each of these separate elements on your scratch paper.

Your Thesis
Your thesis is up to you. You can agree or disagree with the claim in the prompt; you can agree with one part of it but disagree with another part; you can agree with it under some circumstances but not others. Your essay should acknowledge the complexity of the issue, but you need to make a claim that readers could reasonably agree or disagree with. Ex.:

- Digital technologies help users think for themselves in new ways.
- Digital technologies still encourage users to think for themselves because they create their own problems that need to be solved.
- Increasing reliance on technology takes away many of the tools human need to think for themselves.

AVOID There are strong arguments both for and against the idea that [claim].
AVOID [Claim] is right all the time under every circumstance.

Your thesis may be a simple claim like those above, or it may be more complex. It can acknowledge a limitation or the opposing position; it can give the reader a preview of the points you’ll be making.

- [Claim] because ______, ______, and ________.
- Although other things are needed as well, [claim] because ______ and ________.
- While some people argue [opposite position], [claim] because ______ and ________.

Your Paper
- should be less focused on persuading a reader than on considering the issue.
- should be clearly organized in some logical way.
- must address each element of the instructions you are given.
- should be at least four paragraphs long; the longer the better, as long as you have something to say.
- does not need to be a formal “five-paragraph essay”
• should be packed with lots of specific, concrete detail.
• can include “I” and “me”
• will include a few unimportant mechanical errors, although serious and persistent errors will harm your grade.

Your Beginning
At the barest minimum, your opening should make the topic of your paper clear (preservation of historic buildings, schools’ responsibility to students who may not succeed) and show (even if only by asking a question) that your essay will be taking a position on this issue. If your brain freezes, retype the prompt and ask a question about how true it is.

While you don’t have time to write an elaborate introduction, your opening paragraph should briefly include some... or most... of these standard elements:
• engaging opening sentence: a “hook”
• indication of topic
• relevant background
• road map: “sentence of division”/ “promise sentence”/ “contract with reader.”
• thesis

Your Ending
Your essay should close with a restatement of your thesis, but not with a final paragraph that simply reviews the arguments you’ve already made. The reader hasn’t forgotten your arguments, and you have better uses for your very limited time.

Your restatement may simply be the last sentence of the paragraph you’re writing when time is nearly up. It may also be in a concluding paragraph, preferably with another sentence or two (things you haven’t already said!) to keep it company. But don’t start a whole new topic: you don’t want the reader looking for a next paragraph that isn’t there.

You’re unlikely to write a full conclusion. If you have the time, some ways to give a reader a sense of closure include,
• referring back to your opening “hook,” if you happened to have one.
• returning to the bigger picture, if you’ve been focusing on small parts of it.
• noting what the future might look like if your claim is or is not acted on.
• referring to a memorable detail of an example you’ve mentioned.

Your Process
• Before you write,
  o weigh each side, considering the best arguments for and against the claim.
  o use your scratch paper to list a few examples (the more specific, the better!) for and against the claim.
  o choose the position you’ll take.
  o consider making a rough outline or diagram of the essay you plan to write.
• Partway through,
  o double check your notes on the instructions: did you address each part?
• At the end,
  o reread the first line or two of what you’ve written and make any small changes.
Analyzing an Argument

You will be given one 1-paragraph argument along with one set of instructions. Several dozen possible arguments and nine possible sets of instructions are available online at www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/prepare/analytical_writing/argument/pool

Your Paper

- Should assume that the “argument” is flawed and your job is to find the flaws.
- Must address each element of the specific question you are asked.
- Must focus on the particular argument you are given, not the issue itself.
- Will almost certainly be shorter than a five-paragraph essay.

Examples

1. The vice president of human resources at Climpson Industries sent the following recommendation to the company’s president.

   "In an effort to improve our employees' productivity, we should implement electronic monitoring of employees' Internet use from their workstations. Employees who use the Internet from their workstations need to be identified and punished if we are to reduce the number of work hours spent on personal or recreational activities, such as shopping or playing games. By installing software to detect employees' Internet use on company computers, we can prevent employees from wasting time, foster a better work ethic at Climpson, and improve our overall profits."

   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 these assumptions and what the implications are for the argument if the assumptions prove unwarranted.

2. The following appeared in a recommendation from the planning department of the city of Transopolis.

   "Ten years ago, as part of a comprehensive urban renewal program, the city of Transopolis adapted for industrial use a large area of severely substandard housing near the freeway. Subsequently, several factories were constructed there, crime rates in the area declined, and property tax revenues for the entire city increased. To further revitalize the city, we should now take similar action in a declining residential area on the opposite side of the city. Since some houses and apartments in existing nearby neighborhoods are currently unoccupied, alternate housing for those displaced by this action will be readily available."
Write a response in which you discuss what specific evidence is needed to evaluate the argument and explain how the evidence would weaken or strengthen the argument.

3. A recent sales study indicates that consumption of seafood dishes in Bay City restaurants has increased by 30 percent during the past five years. Yet there are no currently operating city restaurants whose specialty is seafood. Moreover, the majority of families in Bay City are two-income families, and a nationwide study has shown that such families eat significantly fewer home-cooked meals than they did a decade ago but at the same time express more concern about healthful eating. Therefore, the new Captain Seafood restaurant that specializes in seafood should be quite popular and profitable.

Write a response in which you discuss what questions would need to be addressed in order to decide whether the conclusion and the argument on which it is based are reasonable. Be sure to explain how the answers to the questions would help to evaluate the conclusion.

Before You Write

• Read the “argument.” Look for possible weak points and jot down keywords to help you remember them.
• Read the instructions. How will you need to present these problems: as unanswered questions? Missing evidence? Unwarranted assumptions? Alternative explanations?
• Consider making a diagram and/or a very rough outline.
  o You may focus one or two points in depth and mention others more briefly.
  o When developing a point in depth, you might explore what might be true but is unstated in the argument or what might be done to gather missing information.

Your Thesis

Your thesis will always be essentially the same, though you’ll phrase it in words you’re comfortable with:

**TEMPLATE** Although [the idea proposed] may have value, the present argument lacks the [key concept from instructions] to be persuasive.

**EXAMPLE** Although electronic monitoring may have value for Climpson Industries, the present argument makes too many unsupported assumptions to be persuasive.

**EXAMPLE** The city of Transopolis might benefit from adapting the proposed area for industrial use, but the present argument does not provide enough evidence to be convincing.
Things to look for:

- **Numbers.**
  - What numbers can you find? Percentages?
  - What words about quantity (“some,” “many”) can you find?
  - Where COULD there be numbers that are missing?
  - What would change if these amounts were very big or very small?

- **Comparisons.**
  - Are two things being compared? What?
  - How many differences can you find between them?
  - What other differences could possibly exist between them?
  - How could those differences affect the argument?

- **Assumptions**
  - What assumptions does the argument make?
  - What would the opposite of those assumptions be?
  - What would change if those opposites were true?

- **Consequences**
  - Are any costs or risks (financial or otherwise) required to implement/accept the argument? What?
  - Could any costs or risks (financial or otherwise) come as a result of implementing/accepting the argument?
  - How do these costs relate to any possible benefit?

Possible Outlines

Note that these bullet points don’t have to represent separate paragraphs.

- Thesis
  - Most important flaw you see: what it is and why it’s a problem (extended discussion)
  - Next flaws you see: what each is and why it’s a problem (briefer discussions)
  - Because of these problems, the argument is unconvincing.

- Thesis
  - Problems with numbers: problem and explanation
  - Problems with comparison: problem and explanation
  - Problems with consequences: problem and explanation
  - Because of these problems, the argument is unconvincing.