

GRE Verbal Section: Analogies, Antonyms, and Sentence Completion

About this document:

I have developed and refined these strategies through four years of teaching a GRE prep course. Some of them, such as identifying the relationship types in Analogy questions, are similar to ones found in current best-selling GRE prep books. However, my experimentation with them has led me to modify and extend them in unique ways.

The questions used as examples are from actual past GRE exams published by Educational Testing Service (ETS), the makers of the GRE. This document is offered for exclusively educational purposes and may not be sold.

GRE Verbal Section Overview

30 questions – 30 minutes. *Approximate* breakdown:
6 Sentence Completion, 7 Analogy, 8 Reading Comprehension, 9 Antonym

Antonyms

Step 1: Make an antonym of the target word (the word in caps). What's the opposite of BANAL?
interesting, exciting

Step 2: Eliminate obvious wrong answers

Unless you have absolutely no idea what the target word means, you can usually take out a few of the answer choices. A 50% or even 33% chance is way better than the 20% chance of mere guessing.

BANAL: (A) faithful (B) arresting (C) inclined (D) forced (E) elaborate

Step 3: Make antonyms of remaining answer choices

Let's say we were able to eliminate everything but (B) arresting and (E) elaborate. Which antonym of these words matches most closely with the meaning of BANAL? An antonym of 'arresting' is 'boring'; of 'elaborate,' the most accurate is 'simple.' Does BANAL mean 'simple'? Something boring *can* be simple, but it's not necessarily so. Answer: B.

Antonym Skills to Practice

1. Connotations can sometimes help you answer easier questions because they often contain positive or negative charges.

For example, the prime word FALLACY has a negative connotation. So among your options,

(A) personal philosophy (C) unconfirmed theory (E) valid argument
(B) imaginative idea (D) tentative argument

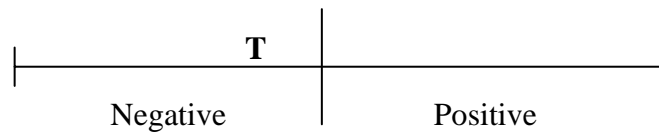
which one has the most positive connotation? Well, (A) is pretty neutral, (B) is somewhat positive, (C) is slightly negative, (D) is neutral to negative, and (E) is positive. Your answer? **E**

On more difficult questions, it's important that the degree of charge also match. For example,

LOLL:

You've heard of someone "lolling around the house." Sounds like a slightly negative connotation. We'll mark it with a **T** for 'Target' word on this scale.

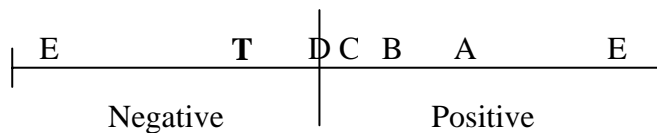
Antonym Connotation Scale



Now, let's determine the connotation charges of the other answer choices:

- (A) comply readily - quite positive
- (B) move vigorously - "move" is neutral, but "vigorously" has a somewhat positive charge
- (C) describe exactly - pretty neutral / barely positive ("exactly")
- (D) notice incidentally - neutral
- (E) insist strongly - could be either positive or negative; quite strong either way

Antonym Connotation Scale



The choice closest to the opposite in connotation charge, then, is B. Does it sound correct? Good.

Now look at this one:

VENERATION: (A) derision (B) blame (C) avoidance (D) ostracism (E) defiance

The connotation scale can help eliminate some answer choices on difficult questions, where all choices have an opposite connotation charge from the prime word. However, sometimes you're reduced to whether you know the words' meanings or not. **Study vocabulary!**

Answer: A

Analogies

Step 1: Relate

LAWYER : COURTROOM ::

- (A) participant : team (B) commuter : train
 (C) gladiator : arena (D) senator : caucus
 (E) patient : ward

What does a lawyer have to do with a courtroom? The answers must be **strong, necessary**, and often quite **specific**. Give it a go.

Strong relationships are the result of answering specific questions about the meaning of each word. They include words like “always” and “must.”

Weak relationships have words like “can” and “sometimes” and phrases like “I can see how” and “They’re both.”

Step 2: Plug the answer options into your “algebraic” equation:

“A lawyer does the work of arguing a client’s case in the physical space of a courtroom.”

becomes

“**X** does the work of arguing a client’s case in the physical space of a **Y**.”

What, then, is the answer to LAWYER : COURTROOM? (C) gladiator : arena

Adjusting the relationship:

JUDGE : GAVEL ::

- (A) detective : uniform (B) doctor : stethoscope (C) referee : whistle
 (D) soldier : insignia (E) lecturer : podium

If you found yourself creating the relationship, “A judge uses a gavel in his job,” you’ll get stuck between B, C, and possibly E. So ask yourself what a judge *does* with that gavel. Keeps order in the court? Sounds good:

“An **X** uses a **Y** to keep order in his court.” Answer? Obviously, C comes closest.

If you find yourself unable to explain away one of two final answer choices on an analogies problem, adjust the relationship.

Example

1. CURIOSITY : KNOW ::

- (A) temptation : conquer
 (B) starvation : eat
 (C) wanderlust : travel
 (D) humor : laugh
 (E) survival : live

Three Analogy Skills to Practice

1. When Deciding between Two or Three Answer Choices, Reverse the Relationship. For example, **CURIOSITY : KNOW**. If you establish “Curiosity is the desire to know” as the relationship, you still might be stuck choosing between B, C, and E.

- Is the desire to eat called starvation?
- Is the desire to live called survival?

2. Eliminate Weak Answer Choices Right Away. You can eliminate answer choices that have **weak** relationships without even knowing the prime pair:

(A) pervade : encompass	(A) equivocate : directness
(B) search : find	(B) elaborate : originality
(C) gather : win	(C) boggle: imagination
(D) agree : keep	(D) manipulate : repression
(E) accumulate : raise	(E) coddle : permissiveness

In the first column, choices A, C, and D have no definable relationship between the word pairs. Choice B could be phrased as “You search in order to find,” while E could be expressed, “To raise is one way to accumulate” (money, for example, but it’s still stretching it a bit).

In the second column, choices B, C, and D represent weak or meaningless relationships. While C sounds familiar, as in the phrase “it boggles the imagination,” there the words are being used together in a sentence, which doesn’t create a relationship between them. The only true possibilities in column two are A (“equivocate” is the opposite of “directness”) and E (to “coddle” a child is a sign of “permissiveness”).

3. Identify Relationship Types and Word-Class Combinations. The GRE people use essentially the same types of relationships for all the analogies. This is helpful information because certain combinations of the section’s three word classes (noun, verb, adjective) rely almost entirely on one or two relationship types. Here are some common relationship types. Some test prep books mention 5 relationship types; others break them down into 12 or even 16. In studying their distinctions, I don’t find the specificity worth the effort it takes to remember them.

This is mainly because I don’t think you should approach an analogy problem by first trying to categorize the relationship. Rather, first you should express the relationship in your own words. If you find that it fits into one of these relationship types, it’s a sign that you’re most likely on the right track. However, since a few analogy questions don’t fit into these four types—or any other prep book’s relationship types, for that matter—it can throw you off if you don’t have practice with putting a relationship into your own words first.

1. Purpose: X is used to make something Y happen.

STUDY : LEARN

ANTIDOTE : POISON

EPITHET : DISPARAGE

2. Degree: X is a better/worse/stronger/nicer/weaker form of Y.

MILK : EXTRACT

USURY : INTEREST

FRUGAL:MISERLY

3. Definition: X is defined by the absence or presence of Y.

BLUSH : EMBARRASSMENT

COGENT : CONVINCING

SURGEON : DEXTERITY

4. Type: X is a type of Y. (This should always invite the question, what type of Y is it?)

EULOGY : PRAISE

LULLABY : SONG

GUST : WIND

A brief grammar review:

NOUN: person, place, or thing. *Spectrum, witness, dehydration, verb*

ADJECTIVE: modifies a noun. *Mysterious, purple, conspicuous, chosen*

VERB: whatever happens, happens because of a verb. *Freeze, prevaricate, turn, is, seem*

Here's how the relationship types and word-class combinations combine:

N-N: by far the most common word-class combination. They can be any kind of relationship. **All Type analogies are N-N, but not all N-N are **type**.

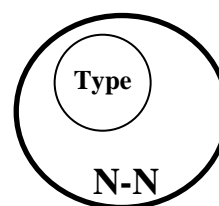
CURATOR : ART

CORRAL : HORSES

LEVEE : RIVER

TABLECLOTH : TABLE

DIE : SHAPING



N-V (V-N): mostly **definition**, also **purpose**.

EPITHET : DISPARAGE

EMOLLIENT : SOOTHE

DISABUSE : ERROR

N-A (A-N); V-A (A-V): almost always relationships of **definition**.

MERCURIAL : MOOD

CHARY : CAUTION

MERCENARY : MONEY

NUMB : INSENSIBLE

IMPLACABLE : COMPROMISE

APOLOGIZE : CONTRITE

V-V, A-A: almost always relationships of **degree**.

MILK : EXTRACT

UPBRAID : REPROACH

STUDY : LEARN

TROUBLED : DISTRAUGHT

STYGIAN : DARK

FRUGAL : MISERLY

1. EVANESCENT : DISAPPEAR

(A) transparent : penetrate

(B) onerous : struggle

(C) feckless : succeed

(D) illusory : exist

(E) pliant : yield

2. TRANSGRESSION : MORALITY

(A) mistake : probity

(B) invitation : hospitality

(C) gift : generosity

(D) presumption : propriety

(E) misconception : curiosity

3. ASSERT : BELABOR

(A) tend : fuss

(B) refine : temper

(C) describe : demean

(D) resemble : portray

(E) contaminate : purge

—Answers and explanations on the next page—

Answers

1. E. EVANESCENT essentially means “fleeting” or “vanishing.” Something evanescent, by **definition**, is likely to DISAPPEAR. (It’s a relationship type of definition.) Hence your relationship is “Something **X** is likely to **Y**.” Only (E) makes sense in this relationship. This one is scary because of the obscure words it represents, but if you study your vocabulary, you’ll see that only two answer choices have actual relationships. Besides E, your only other option is C: “feckless” means irresponsible, careless, and/or feeble. Someone “feckless,” then, is *not* likely to “succeed.” That’s a true relationship, but it’s opposite to the one we’re looking for.

2. D. What is a TRANSGRESSION? Why, it’s a breach in (violation of) MORALITY! If it were a breach of the law, it wouldn’t be called a transgression, it would be called a crime. So: “**X** is a breach of **Y**.” (In case you were wondering, it’s a relationship of definition.) The answer is D because “presumption” is a word we use in English to signify a breach in “propriety.”

3. A. If you think that ASSERT and BELABOR mean the same thing, you’re right. This is a relationship of degree. They can’t mean the same thing to the same degree, or there would be no relationship. In this case, BELABORING is a more intense, annoying form of ASSERTION (it’s all right to change them from verbs to nouns as long as you do the same thing to the words in the answer pairs you’re plugging in. So: “**Y** is a more intense, annoying form of **X**.” You might be tempted with C, “describe” and “demean.” However, “describe” is value-neutral, not negative, and you can’t have a more intense, annoying form of a behavior with a neutral connotation.

4. Lastly, try this one out:

- TROUBLED : DISTRAUGHT ::
(A) annoyed : disillusioned
(B) disturbed : interrupted
(C) covetous : rapacious
(D) outmoded : ostentatious
(E) tranquil : placid

There are two morals here. The most obvious one is to study vocabulary; the second is not to ignore an answer choice with a word in it that you’ve never seen before. When I give this question to students, many of them will completely ignore answer choice C (the correct one) because they don’t know what ‘rapacious’ means. They understand that TROUBLED and DISTRAUGHT are in a relationship of degree in which “Y is a more severe instance of X,” but they don’t trust the process of elimination, which gets rid of every other possibility, including *tranquil* : *placid* because those two words are essentially equal in degree.

Sentence Completion

The motto for this section is **Every word is a choice**. Meaning, each sentence has all of the clues in it necessary for you to fill the blanks correctly. The steps are:

1. Identify phrase and word clues
2. Try filling in the blanks in your own words first. If you can't do it, check the answers and choose the one that comes closest to what you would have wanted to say

Phrase and Word Clues

1. Watch for clue phrases:
 - A. **Grammar.** Be on the lookout for phrases that you could take out of the sentence and still leave it grammatically correct. I'm simplifying here, but for GRE purposes this includes:
 - Everything in between commas and in between a comma and a period
 - All the words after a colon or a **coordinating conjunction** (semicolon or a comma followed by *and, but, yet, nor, or, for, and so*)

For example, here is a GRE sentence completion pared down to a simple complete sentence:

Such diversity ----- the existence of a single Native American culture.

(A) complements (B) implies (C) reiterates (D) argues against (E) explains away

Impossible, right? But what if we added:

Before 1500, North America was inhabited by more than 300 cultural groups; such diversity ----- the existence of a single Native American culture.

Still not convinced? Here's the whole thing:

Before 1500, North America was inhabited by more than 300 cultural groups, *each with different customs, social structures, world views, and languages*; such diversity ----- the existence of a single Native American culture.

All that verbiage from 'Before' to 'languages' contrasts with the concept of 'a single Native American culture'; therefore, the answer choice will be a verb that expresses a rejection of such a concept. Answer: D.

2. Watch for word clues:
 - A. Signposts
 1. *yet, but, although, instead, rather, however, nevertheless* = reversal in thought
 2. *and, since, accordingly, moreover, thus*, the colon : or semicolon ; = continuation in thought
 - B. Pay close attention to **all** adjectives and adverbs! They are unnecessary words without which the sentence could still function grammatically.

