

# BUSINESS INSIDER

By Robin Madell, May 5, 2020

<https://www.businessinsider.com/how-to-prepare-excel-online-gre-test-from-home-teachers-experts>

## What you need to know to prepare for and excel at the online GRE, according to testing experts and instructors



Coronavirus closed in-person testing, so prepare to take the GRE online. [Shutterstock](#)

- **With in-person testing shuttered amid the coronavirus pandemic, people seeking graduate school education can still take the GRE exam online.**
- **The test mimics in-person testing to the best of its ability, including a human proctor overseeing your tests.**
- **To optimize your environment and excel, make sure you have all the proper software and note-taking materials set up in a quiet room.**

- **Use your time at home not only to study up, but to hone other key skills that graduate programs are looking for in candidates.**

If you hope to get into graduate school or an [MBA program](#), sitting for the [GRE exam](#) is one of the key steps you must take.

More formally known as the Graduate Record Examination, the GRE is an admissions test of both quantitative and verbal skills that's required by thousands of graduate schools and business programs worldwide, regardless of what field you plan to enter. You can see the extensive list of MBA programs that accept the GRE General Test scores for admission to their programs [here](#), with [average GRE scores of top business schools around a 325](#).

But with COVID-19 raising health and safety concerns about in-person group educational experiences, taking the GRE is no longer business as usual: Tests are being rescheduled, some schools are waiving the requirement altogether, and GRE administrators are constantly updating rules and availability. (You can see COVID-19 testing updates by region [here](#).)

And you can now take it online: The [at-home](#) version of the exam is available in all locations that the computer-delivered GRE General Test is offered, except for mainland China and Iran. While the Educational Testing Service (ETS), which runs the exam, describes this option as temporary, there is no end date noted for this opportunity.

With no end to the pandemic in sight, the home version will be more or less mandatory, said Joseph Ingram, head admissions consultant for graduate schools at [SOSAdmissions.com](#) and a former GRE and GMAT instructor at Stanley Kaplan.



Joseph Ingram. [Joseph Ingram](#)

"Home test taking is the best thing since sliced bread," Ingram said. "It is less stressful to take a test in the comfort of your own home rather than an unfamiliar test center. [Students] are less likely to panic in a home setting."

But not all aspects of the online testing process are easier.

Business Insider tapped seven educational testing experts, teachers, and GRE instructors for their insights on what you need to know to excel at the exam from home.

## Don't fear the human proctor

The ETS says the test "is identical in content, format, and on-screen experience to the GRE General Test taken at a test center." That includes a human proctor monitoring test takers through the screen.



David D. Schein. David D. Schein

"The restrictions for testing online with a live proctor are demanding," said David D. Schein, associate dean, professor, and director of graduate programs at the Cameron School of Business at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. "Candidates should become very familiar with the rules and procedures for the online GRE as soon as possible."



Pierre Huguet. Pierre Huguet

Pierre Huguet, CEO and cofounder of college consulting firm [H&C Education](#), explained that a good way to get ready for this is the online practice tests. He noted that while students can access [two free practice tests](#) on the ETS website, these simulate the computer-delivered test given in testing centers, not the at-home exam.

"The online practice is similar to the computer-delivered and doesn't necessarily prepare one for the at-home version: no human proctor, screen sharing, and so forth," Huguet said.

## Make sure your software, hardware, and environment is ready

To be able to take the at-home GRE, you must have a computer that meets specific requirements, as well as what ETS describes as "a room that provides an acceptable environment for the test." With this in mind, Huguet advised going through the "[Equipment and Environment](#)" [checklist](#) on the ETS site to confirm that you'll be able to meet all listed criteria before registering for the at-home exam.



Sheila Akbar. Sheila Akbar

"The only challenge that's new because of COVID-19 may be the technology you can use to access the test," said Sheila Akbar, president and COO at tutoring and test prep company [Signet Education, LLC](#).

Both the type of device and the operating system required to take the at-home GRE are very specific. You can't use a tablet or mobile device, nor can you use an iOS operating system — only a Windows operating system will do, though you can use a Mac computer if Windows is installed on it.

Huguet prompted students to read the checklist's fine print for other important details. For instance, he pointed out that while students are allowed to use a built-in camera on their computer or a separate webcam, the camera must provide the proctor a 360-degree view of the room and desk before the test.

"This means that if you work at a desktop computer with a built-in camera, you probably won't be able to show a 360-degree view of the room without either breaking your back or unplugging your computer," Huguet said.

The checklist also provides detailed guidelines about the room in which you will take the test, what you should wear, and what you can and can't use to take notes.

Huguet highlighted that test takers should be aware that they won't be able to take notes on regular paper.

"Before the test, students should buy a whiteboard with an erasable marker; or, they can use 'paper with a transparent sheet protector and erasable marker,'" he said.

Other important things to know about the required environment and testing space in your home include:

- You must be alone in a room during the entire test — as Jeff Thomas, executive director of admissions programs at [Kaplan Test Prep](#), explained, "That might mean going into a private room in your home, cleaning up the workspace, and even locking the door. If someone walks in while you are taking your test, it's safe to say your score would be invalidated," he said.
- Your computer must be on a desk or table surface with nothing else on it except the tools approved for use during the test.
- You can't eat or drink during the test, and your ears must remain visible (no hats or long hair obscuring them).
- You'll need to erase all of your protector notes, with the proctor watching online, at the end of the exam.
- You'll need to be prepared to share your screen with an online proctor. Thomas shared the feedback that not every student is comfortable with the proctoring company "essentially taking over a student's computer" during the process, and some have raised privacy issues about this practice. "We would point out that you are also being watched carefully at a testing center," Thomas said. "Others have said they are concerned about having additional software on their computer. We understand these concerns, but we don't think it's enough of an issue to postpone taking the exam for a long period of time."

"Screen sharing can slow even the most capable computers, so a fast internet connection is mandatory," Huguet added.

# Use quarantine time to study up, and consider if now's the right time to take the test

Ingram suggested using your pandemic time productively by committing at least 100 hours preparing for the test. Within that 100 hours, he advised taking a practice test at the beginning of your studying, after 50 hours of studying, and again after 25 additional hours, with the last 20 hours or so of studying reserved for continuously taking practice tests and reviewing incorrect questions.



Karin McKie. Loren Santow

Educator and educational consultant [Karin McKie](#), who tutors for the GRE/GMAT and other standardized tests, added that despite the uncertainty of this period, COVID-19 has bought many prospective GRE test takers the "unavoidable yet precious gift of time." She suggested that students use these unexpected hours at home to thoughtfully reassess their skill sets and prepare for the exam in a more in-depth way that may not have been possible before the days of social distancing.

"Learners have space to take and score full practice tests to establish a baseline, as well as a diagnostic to take deep dives into areas of concern," McKie said. "Now we have the time and space to relieve boredom with targeted study."

At the same time, if now isn't the right time to take the test, consider rescheduling.



Jeff Thomas. Jeff Thomas

"For instance, some people may have difficulty finding a quiet space without interruption from other people," said Thomas. "In these and other similar situations, especially for those without a strict deadline to complete the GRE and are in no rush to apply to graduate school, it may be worth waiting for centers to reopen."

Take note that all fees for rescheduling the GRE have been waived at this time, so if you feel unprepared or don't have what you need to take the GRE at home, you can take advantage of this by rescheduling the test.



# Focus on parts of the exam that matter most for the program you're interested in

While the test-taking logistics are different with the at-home GRE than when you take the exam in a testing center, the test itself remains the same — and according to educational testing experts, so do the strategies to do well on it.

"The home version is not fundamentally different than the old-fashioned test-center version. Preparation is the same," Ingram said, adding that home test takers may have an advantage in the essay section, since people usually type faster on a computer they own and are familiar with.

Huguet suggested that students should "respond to every question, since there's no penalty for guessing, learn the format of the exam, identify the most difficult parts, set a target score for the programs you're interested in, and take several practice tests."

He also advised focusing on the section of the test — either quantitative or verbal/analytical — that matters the most for the program you're applying to. Ingram recommended aiming for a percentile, rather than a numbered score.

"You should target the 90th percentile since there are diminishing returns to improving your score above the 90th percentile," Ingram said. "A 99% score will not significantly improve your chance of admissions much more than a 90% score."

And keep in mind that the GRE isn't everything; in fact, it's not the most stressed part of your application at all.

"I've seen many students with below average GRE scores get into top graduate programs in the US; this isn't uncommon at all," Huguet said. "Things like research or work experience or published papers carry much more weight in a grad school application than your GRE score."

With that in mind, he suggested that if your goal is to get into a top graduate program, you should try to differentiate yourself in your field by undertaking personal projects and research, or by working at one of your favorite professors' labs while in college.

"While we're all living in a very stressful time, a quarantine is also a great moment to start working on a research paper, for instance, and show admissions officers that you've been proactive during your quarantine," Huguet said. "Impactful experiences in your field are much more important than your GRE score alone."

*Do you have a personal experience with the coronavirus you'd like to share? Or a tip on how your town or community is handling the pandemic? Please email [covidthips@businessinsider.com](mailto:covidthips@businessinsider.com) and tell us your story.*

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