

Writing is a skill that must be exercised to be improved. Without practice, no amount of strategy will make your written expression clear. The earnest student will find that just a little consistent effort, each day, will yield powerful results.

GRE WRITING

You will be given two different writing tasks on the GRE. The first, called an *Issue Task*, requires that you present your own view and construct your own argument, based on a short quotation about a given topic. You will be given two topics to choose from, and 45 minutes to write. It does not matter which topic you choose, just so long as you write about one of them. Nor does it matter what position you take, or even if you take any position at all but rather argue for ambivalence or paradox.

The second task is the *Critical Analysis of an Argument*. You will be given a single paragraph arguing a particular point of view, and 30 minutes in which to critique its logic and conclusions. As with the other task, it does not matter what position you take. What matters is that you reason well, that you communicate clearly the weaknesses or strengths of an argument, recognize sets of evidence, note problematic assumptions and assess conclusions.

Essays are not scored by computer, but by two live ‘raters’ who give each essay a score between 0 and 6, 0 being an ‘unscorable’ essay, and 6 an outstanding one. The score you receive is an average of the two raters’ scores, in half-point increments (1, 1.5, etc) on the following scale:

5.5 and 6: “Outstanding” Essay

- Insightfully presents and convincingly supports an opinion or a critique of the argument
- Communicates ideas clearly and is generally well organized; connections are logical
- Demonstrates superior control of language: grammar, stylistic variety, and accepted conventions of writing; minor flaws may occur

4.5 and 5: “Strong” Essay

- presents well-chosen examples and strongly supports and opinion on the issue or a critique of the argument
- communicates ideas clearly and is generally well organized; connections are logical
- demonstrates solid control of language: grammar, stylistic variety, and accepted conventions of writing; minor flaws may occur

3.5 and 4: “Adequate” Essay

- presents and adequately supports an opinion on the issue or a critique of the argument
- communicates ideas fairly clearly and is adequately organized; logical connections are satisfactory
- demonstrates satisfactory control of language: grammar, stylistic variety, and accepted conventions of writing; some flaws may occur

2.5 and 3: “Limited” Essay

- succeeds only partially in presenting and supporting an opinion on the issue or a critique of the argument
- communicates ideas unclearly and is poorly organized
- demonstrates less than satisfactory control of language; contains significant mistakes in grammar, usage, and sentence structure

1.5 and 2: “Weak” Essay

- shows little success in presenting and supporting an opinion on the issue or a critique of the argument
- struggles to communicate ideas; essay shows a lack of clarity and organization
- meaning is impeded by many serious mistakes in grammar, usage, and sentence structure

0.5 and 1: “Fundamentally Deficient” Essay

- fails to present a coherent opinion and/or evidence on the issue or a critique of the argument
- fails to communicate ideas; essay is seriously unclear and disorganized
- lacks meaning due to widespread and serious mistakes in grammar, usage, and sentence structure

0: “Unscorable” Essay

- completely ignores topic
- attempts to copy the assignments
- is written in a foreign language or contains undecipherable text

Because of the essay scoring process, you will only receive your *unofficial* Quantitative and Verbal scores at the test center. Your Analytical scores, along with your official multiple-choice scores, will be sent to you and those you designate within 10 to 15 days after you take the test.

If you take a paper-based test, scores will be sent to you within six weeks after you take the test.

In addition to following the guidelines for good writing found throughout this chapter, I highly recommend that you explore the examples given in your GRE PowerPrep software for each grade of essay. Be sure to also read the commentaries included for each actual essay, commentaries that open a wide window on the perspective of GRE essay raters.

A significant pool of topics and prompts for the writing tasks you'll be asked to complete on the GRE can be found on the GRE website: www.gre.org/pracmats.html. I also highly recommend that you try the strategies and principles below with at least a couple of examples before taking your next test.

ELEMENTS OF GOOD WRITING

Good writing is a matter of simply expressing what you know, of saying what you mean and meaning what you say. Simply. At the least, it is one of the most necessary skills for further work in academia. But writing simply is, as you can imagine, easier said than done – since most of us complicate our writing quite unnecessarily.

The first thing to keep in mind for GRE writing in particular is that writing an essay is not about making art – it's about expressing an idea or set of ideas clearly, logically and intentionally. The student need never worry that his or her sentences aren't artistic, clever or eloquent enough to make a good essay. Neither should s/he worry that what s/he has to say won't sound 'smart enough'. The point is simply to say what you understand in a meaningful way, and to support what you say with reason and example.

While the GRE raters, when they read your essay, will certainly be paying attention to grammar and the standard rules of writing, their main concern is the structure of your expression, the support for and clarity of your ideas. As such, learning to write for the GRE is not so much a question of learning to write from scratch, but of learning to write *clearly*. Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* is one of the best, if not the best, instruction manuals in this regard. Following them, I've distilled three elementary principles of composition and their corollaries:

(1) Choose a suitable design and hold to it.

Every piece of good writing has a clear, definable structure. Every piece of good academic (I'm speaking here of good writing following the GRE's model) writing has a clear and *logical* design. While our thinking about a particular issue or topic may not necessarily be logical, our written expression of it must be in order to be (academically) effective. We must, then, begin our writing before we type; we must plan our scheme and structure as a prelude to our actual, written expression. According to Strunk and White, the first principle of good writing is that before we write, we determine the 'shape' of our essay.

But keep in mind our basic premise: good writing is a matter of writing *what you know*. For most of us, determining the shape of our essay can only come after the first practical step of investigating what we know – even though we often take it for granted that we know anything at all.

In this regard, the strategies for each of the two GRE tasks you'll be given on your next exam begin with the drawing of a 'mind map', a technique that lets you be deliberate

during a brainstorm (and discussed below). In essence, the good writer knows how to concentrate his or her attention on those areas and examples with which he or she is most familiar. These areas are most easily discovered and uncovered where you can see them – on paper. The mind-map might be thought of as a skeleton, on which the writer may add flesh in any number of ways and colors. The more clearly you perceive the shape of what you'd like to say, the greater are the chances for your success in expressing it.

(2) Make the paragraph the unit of composition.

Your essay is most readily conceived as a succession of well-ordered ideas. Each main idea has its own unit that serves all forms of literary work: the paragraph. As long as your paragraphs hold together, they can be of any size or length.

Ordinarily, a subject requires a division into topics, each of which ought to be dealt with in a paragraph. Our aim in such division is to aid to the reader, of course, but also to aid to ourselves in the full investigation of what we know. Without such (synthetic) divisions as paragraphs, our thinking about a particular issue is often general and without substance. The act of writing, therefore, is one of discovering what we know in the act of explaining in specificity to someone else. The attention to paragraphs often makes clear to the writer as well as the reader just how it is that a subject develops, step by step, in our writing and thinking, and each topic sentence is a signal that we've reached a new step in that development.

Keep in mind that 'paragraphing' is a matter of spatial as well as conceptual design, however. A large block of material can seem daunting to a reader, and practically cause him to lose his way. In general, large ideas ought to split into smaller units, tied together through topic sentences that serve to both introduce new ideas as well as transition – although one need not even do this with too much concern, as long as the two paragraphs plainly function as one unit of thought. On the other side of the spectrum, too many short paragraphs can cause inattention as well. They often make the essay seem choppy and stylized. The point of paragraphing is to provide order, and direction for the reader to whom we are explaining what we know or believe.

(3) Use the active voice.

The active voice takes the reader directly to your point, without ambiguity. For instance,

The second point can be seen as unnecessary.

The second point is unnecessary.

Notice that the first is indefinite, as well as passive. The second conveys not only a sense of confidence, but also a definite meaning and direction. There is no unintended equivocality.

That isn't to say that one might or ought never use passive sentences, but rather that one ought to tailor sentence structure according to need. In the case of the GRE, need

demands that one be bold and intentional.

Corollaries: Strong Sentences

Put statements in positive form.

Such a reading is not likely to help the consumer as much as he or she needs.

Such a reading is usually unhelpful to the consumer

Notice the weakness inherent in the word ‘not’. Positively stated (the second sentence), the sentence makes a definite point, without innuendo. Negatively stated, the reader is left feeling as though the writer is speaking with a sneer, deliberately underplaying his or her point. The reader is left with what is NOT true, rather than what is.

Save words like would, could, should, might and can for situations involving real uncertainty.

The applicant can make a good impression by being neat and punctual.

The applicant will make a good impression by being neat and punctual.

If your sentences admit doubt, your writing will lack authority.

Use definite, specific, concrete language.

As Strunk and White say, ‘Prefer the specific to the general, the definite to the vague, the concrete to the abstract.’

A period of unfavorable weather set in.

It rained every day for a week.

The greatest writers are effective largely because they deal in particulars, and report the details that matter. Your words can only call such specificity to the mind of the reader if you write what you know, and provide example to put the flesh on the skeleton of your essay’s shape.

Omit needless words.

One of the biggest mistakes that writers make is in using many words where a few will do. Vigorous, intentional writing is concise and precise. That’s not to say that sentences must always be short, but that you, the writer (as we began this lesson) ought to say what you mean and mean what you say. Whenever you ‘vamp’, you do a disservice to the attentive reader, who is trying to follow the development of your essay and expression.

THE PRACTICAL ARGUMENT

The essays you'll be asked to write for the GRE are not narratives, they are arguments. As such, there are some practical particulars to keep in mind.

Opening Paragraphs

You can usually blame a bad essay on a bad beginning. A tight beginning is necessary to give your essay character, clear direction and fundamental support. In other words, your beginning ought to be *intentional*, run at least a full paragraph that leads the reader into the subject, and establish the ground for the rest of your essay.

At all costs, keep this first paragraph free of errors and sloppy writing. Often, a reader's perception will (unconsciously, perhaps) be shaped by his or her reaction to an opening paragraph. If you are equivocal and unintentional here, you will seldom be able to make up for a difficult first impression – even with outstanding examples and support. In fact, without a clear thesis, finding and expressing examples and support in an outstanding way is difficult if not impossible. If your point is never made clearly in the first place, then which point, exactly, is the support meant to buttress?

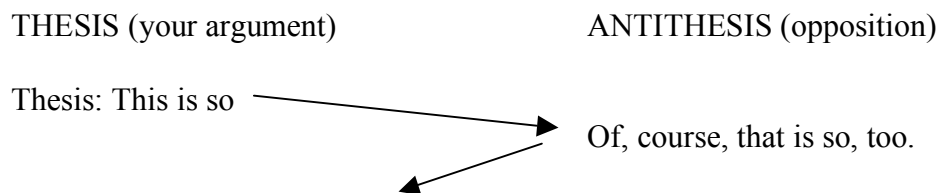
Telegraphing in detail the whole of your essay is never necessary. Rather, you ought to open with a concrete, though generalized statement that leads to your main assertion: your thesis. You are also setting the tone for your essay. Leave the arguments for the body of your paper.

The Logical Body

Many students opt to present only one side of an issue. Good essay writing, however, involves the loyal opposition. An idea on its own can easily be blown over, but one supported and toughened by contradiction frequently holds up well.

This balancing of one side against the other, the thesis with its antithesis, is known as the dialectic order. To present your argument with such a structure always shows a maturity of thought that ideological and one-sided thinking lacks. The basic principle is to dispose of the opposition first, as a stepping-stone for your main argument. We reinforce each step in this way, over the imagined objections of critics, and the thesis is able to cut a clear line to your conclusion.

If the opposition arguments seem slight, then you might include them in a single paragraph, following the model:



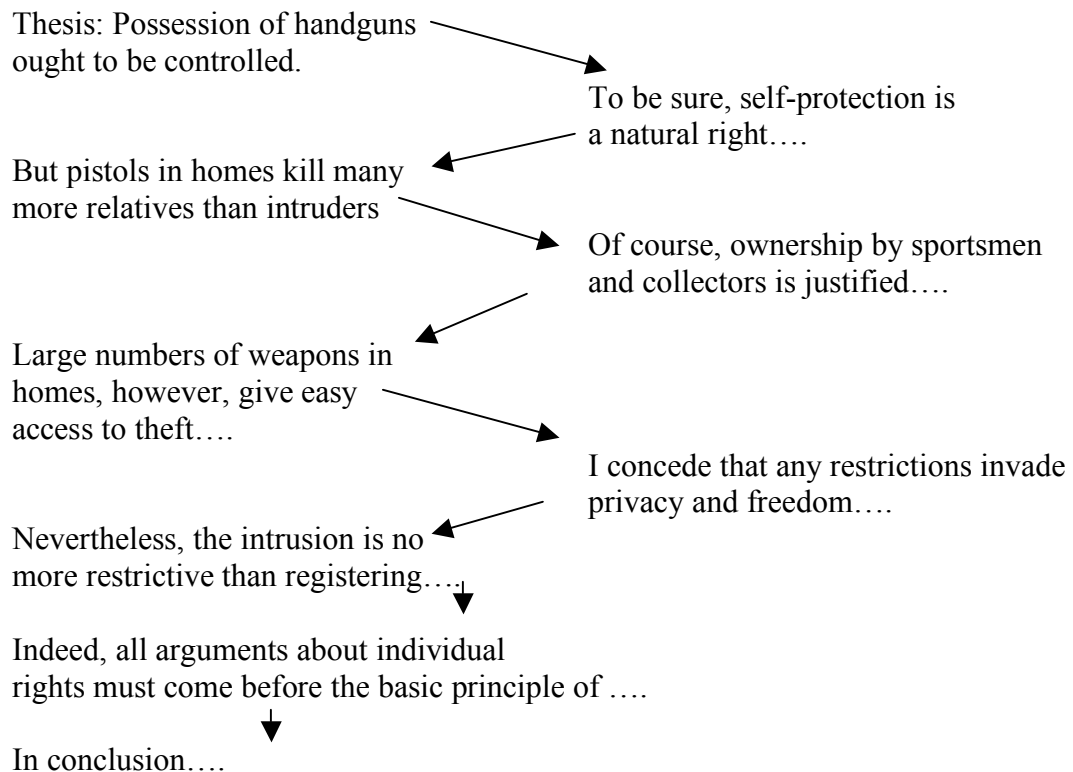
But that is too high a price to
pay for,...

And....

Moreover

Therefore

If the opposition seems more considerable, dispose of it step by step, point by point, paragraph by paragraph. Each paragraph can build to the next, in the order of increasing interest to a potential reader, a succession of developmental steps to be taken to the conclusion:



The Conclusion

Students often make the mistake of simply restating their thesis in their conclusions, obviating the need for the good support of the body of their essays. A conclusion ought to reestablish the ground that has been laid throughout your essay; it ought to combine what you've written into a subtler, more powerful generalization, broadening and re-focusing your thesis; and provide a synthesis of your support and argument that clinches your conclusion.

However your essay goes, you are learning here to write a *deductive* essay, where the examples and support all hang from the big idea presented in your thesis, at the beginning. An *inductive* essay can also be a powerful form, as it builds idea on idea, leading to the conclusion implied but never stated throughout the essay. Most students use a combination of these two forms in their actual writing, even while they design a deductive essay. We might say that your final form will be a deductive essay with inductive attributes, more or less, depending on your individual style and topic considered.

That is not to say that either a deductive or an inductive argument has to lead to a conclusion on one side or the other of any issue. Essays that explore both sides of an issue thoroughly often become ‘outstanding’ through the ambiguity that they reveal. Exploring any issue through dialectic, one is apt to find that all conclusions are partial or presumptuous – and the greatest essay is the one that fully acknowledges its own limitations, often leading not to certainty but to paradox.

WRITING WHAT YOU KNOW: MIND-MAPPING

In any case, and regardless of your topic, your task in any essay is to investigate what you know. Your opening tool, perfect for just such a purpose, is a mind-map. A mind-map lets you note what you know, in a form that facilitates and stimulates your thinking processes. In essence, a mind-map is a picture of your brainstorm. Correctly using the tools of mind-mapping, in a very short time the writer will pinpoint what exactly he or she can say about the topic at hand, and so be able to write a coherent and persuasive essay using the best of all possible persuasions: what he or she is actually familiar with.

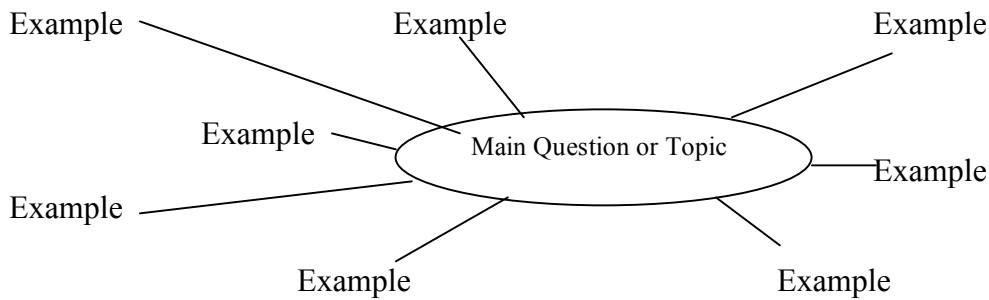
You will find that using the mind-mapping tool makes it easier to write an essay that explores both sides of an issue. The significant point here is that the mind-map is an investigative tool – and any good investigation, even one beginning with hypothesis, proceeds by uncovering evidence rather than supporting a foregone conclusion. As you'll begin to see for yourself, the task of writing an essay is made much easier when we begin with an open mind. Pre-set notions only serve to limit the scope of our thinking, and so the power of our expression and depth of investigation.

The technique is simple, though powerful. Fundamentally, we are mapping the way that our minds associate when we contemplate a particular issue or question. Such a map is usually much more effective than a simple, linear list for a number of reasons. Foremost is that what we note, and the way that we note, reflects as well as directs. What we write down acts as a mirror – and when we look in the mirror, our reflections show us how to adjust. Without such reflection, spinach in the teeth often goes undetected.

Mind-maps also help us add depth and subtlety. When we begin to draw, we draw on the whole brain in our contemplation. Rather than thinking linearly – which by its nature excludes anything outside its pre-set bounds – we open our imagination for examples and evidence associated through a more complex and complicated index. In effect, we let our

minds roam across all our experience – giving our writing much more flesh and flexibility.

The basic form of a mind-map is a central image or phrase, surrounded by a constellation of images or concepts. The constellation radiates from the center in the same way that ripples in a pond radiate from a dropped stone.



Using a mind-map I often come up with more ideas and examples than I can use in a single essay. This is as it should be: your second step in generating a good essay involves engaging your mind-map with an eye toward construction and design, toward using the best of what you have rather than *all* of what you have. In effect, you draw a map of what you know, and then design your essay around the best evidence and most illustrative experience. We'll get into design for each type of essay, below.

You will have 45 minutes to plan and write an essay that communicates your perspective on a given topic. Choose one of the two topics provided. No other topics are admissible for this essay.

The topic is a short quotation that expresses an issue of general interest. Write an essay that agrees with, refutes, or qualifies the quotation and support your opinion with relevant information drawn from your academic studies, reading, observation, or other experiences.

Feel free to consider the issue for a few minutes before beginning your writing. Be certain that your ideas are fully developed and organized logically and make sure you have enough time left to review and revise what you've written.

First Analytical Writing Task: The Issue Essay

You will be given a sentence or two presenting a general perspective or perhaps two sides of an argument. Again, the pool of prompts available on the GRE website will be invaluable for getting to know the sorts of perspectives about which you will be expected

to write -- always debatable, and never socially or religiously controversial.

1. Mind-map what you know, including examples from your own experience, observations, reading or studies. (spend less than 5 minutes)

Your first practical task in writing the issue essay is to make note of what you know in a mind map, and more particularly what you know best about the topic. This is your pool, your store of material with which to work. The GRE raters are looking for diversity in your writing, breadth as well as depth. Keeping these four categories in mind, you'll most likely think in areas that you don't normally think, and give the raters the kind of material they like to see.

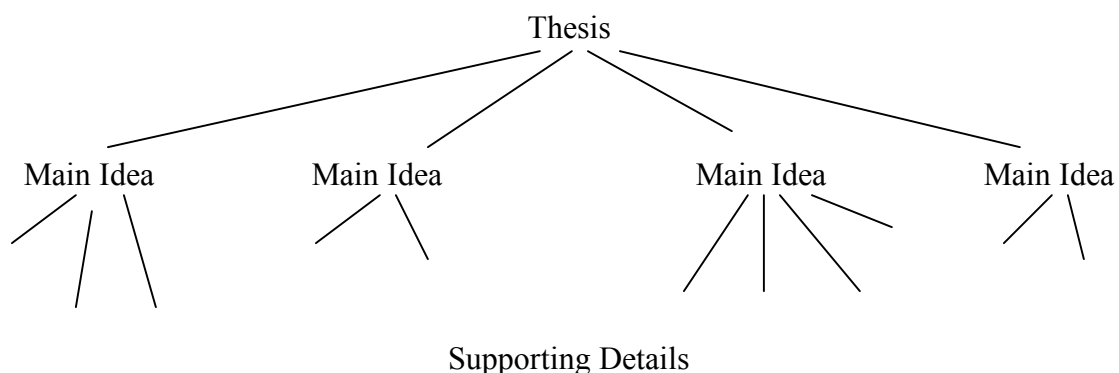
SAT instructor Matt Bianca describes this process as going to the refrigerator in the middle of the night. You don't know what you want to eat; you only know that you're hungry. So you look at everything in the refrigerator, and take out a lot more than you'll actually use. When you find out what you really want, you just put everything else back.

2. Note the conceptions, and the general categories, that naturally link your examples and evidence. These will become your units of composition as you further structure your essay. (spend 2 or 3 minutes)

You'll find that what you know falls into natural categories, that the ideas carry an inherent order. This order will differ, depending on who's mind-mapping, but it will always serve to outline the shape of your argument. Make note directly on your mind-map, using phrases, codes and even images to show the relationships among and between ideas.

3. Organize Your Argument (spend 2 or 3 minutes)

Once you engage your mind-map in this way, you'll be able to sketch your argument in a concept map, like this:



Here you will use all the ideas you've kept to design your essay. There are no rules, but only guidelines: what you say ought to be logical; one idea ought to naturally build and

incline toward the next. Keep your main ideas, each of which represents a paragraph, broad and concrete – and lead with your strongest and most fundamental notion. Save the specifics for the body of each paragraph, for the details of your evidence and the flesh on your argument.

4. Write Your Essay (the bulk of your time – as much as 35 minutes)

Write directly from your structural concept-map. Although every final essay varies from its original conception – simply through the act of writing itself, the original ideas are transformed – the best and most intentional writing is usually fairly consistent with its design. You’ll find that your design is the structure you need to be fully creative in your essay, that by beginning with what you know, you’ll have a lot more good things to say than you think. Further, you’ll be able to draw powerful and supported inferences and come to a solid conclusion. Remember, don’t bury your lead (just make your point – don’t dance around any issue).

5. Proofread (less than 5 minutes)

Take the last few minutes you have to catch whatever errors or difficulties you can. Remember that editing and writing are two necessary, inter-related, though necessarily distinct parts of the overall writing process. If you try to edit while you write, you’ll only keep yourself locked up tight. And if you try to write while you edit, you’ll invariably end up spending too much time on an ultimately minor issue, time that best spent fixing five other difficulties in either form or content.

Remember that the GRE raters are not going to penalize relatively minor grammatical mistakes in an otherwise solid essay. They are looking for coherence and support, and not fastidiousness. Good grammar simply supports the clear expression of ideas. If you are clear in your aim and intention, your grammar will follow – more evidence for our fundamental rule: keep things simple, and to simply what you know.

Again, you should refer to your GRE PowerPrep for examples of essays of every stripe. Most particularly, you ought to note the difference in quality between different scoring levels. Reading the ‘commentaries’ is a most helpful tool in learning to design a high-scoring essay.

Second Analytical Writing Task: Critical Analysis of an Argument

These tasks involve a critique of someone else’s argument. While the guidelines for strong writing still hold, your approach will differ somewhat from the issue task.

Rather than beginning with a mind-map, you’ll need to first determine the ‘shape’ of the argument. Most helpful is attention to five dimensions of an argument:

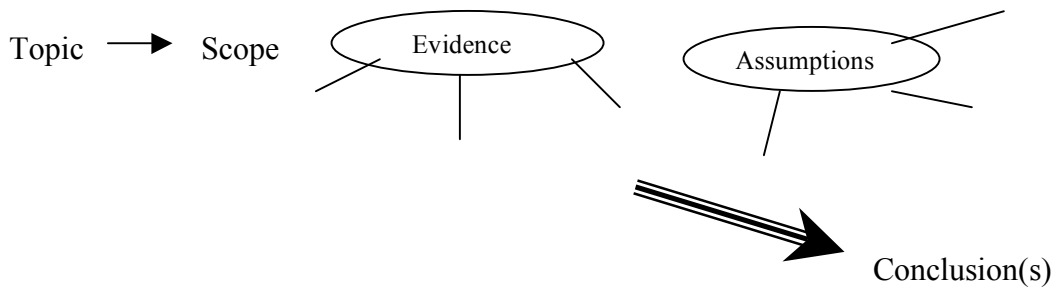
- **Topic**
- **Scope**

- **Conclusions**
- **Evidence**
- **Assumptions**

These five dimensions will be the core of your critique. The **topic** is the broad category of the argument presented in the task. Its **scope** is the specific aspect of the topic with which you'll be dealing, aiming at the **conclusions**. Be clear in your notes: Is there more than one conclusion? What are they? What evidence is given for such conclusions? What assumptions are made? What does the author use as evidence – without explicit acknowledgment, or investigation? What is it that lies unquestioned beneath the arguments, what is the unexamined ground from which they're built? Your task in this second essay is to find the space between evidence and conclusions, to confront every assumption in an argument on the way toward either replacing or repairing its foundation and drawing a firmer conclusion.

1. What do you know? Make a map. (2 or 3 minutes)

Rather than a free-form mind-map, your notes might look a bit like mini-maps, laced with phrases and arrows:



2. Engage your map, and begin the design of your essay. (1 or 2 minutes)

Look at your map for both unfounded assumptions and shaky evidence. Every prompt on the GRE Argument tasks contain them. Which points will you confront when you write? Your job is to find evidence that will either support a counter-argument or make the present one stronger or more coherent. Is there anything relevant that has been omitted? Is there anything noted that might have been noted in more detail, or with more criticality?

3. Structure your essay. (1 or 2 minutes)

As you did with your Issue task, you'll order your ideas and points using a concept-map. Remember that a strong essay includes both sides of an issue. Again, you'll largely be addressing ways in which assumptions are unsupported, and introducing lines of evidence and inquiry that either help support or reject the argument – and explanations for why you'd include them. 'Outstanding' essays tend to take the subject to the next level, often

moving beyond simplistic contradictions to a resolution that might satisfy both sides.

4. Write from your structure. (the bulk of your time, perhaps 25 minutes)

You might begin your essay like this, providing a solid start for a dialectical argument:

The argument that . . . might seem both logical and persuasive at first glance.

5. Proofread (1 or 2 minutes)

Again, take a few minutes to edit your essay. Editing is always easiest when we've laid a solid foundation before actually beginning our writing.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND:

- A strong essay is well-structured one.
- Strong writing is positive, intentional and unambiguous, even while including more than one side to an issue.
- The first paragraph ought to be clear and strong. It is defining.
- The paragraph ought to be the unit of composition, and we ought to pay particular attention to making topic sentences clear and intentional.
- Deep and broad examples, and not opinion, flesh out paragraphs most powerfully.
- 'Outstanding' GRE essays are generally longest; 'Adequate' or 'Limited' ones are usually the shortest.
- Arguments ought to be built so that one paragraph inclines toward the next.
- A strong essay begins with a strong lead.
- A good essay includes a varied sentence structure, tight and loose, short and long, etc. Good writing is rhythmic.
- A good writer says what s/he means, and means what s/he says.
- A good writer uses one active word where five might loiter.
- A good writer uses words correctly, even while reaching for good vocabulary choices: a difficult, though incorrectly used, \$10 word is much more hazardous to your argument than two or three \$2 words.
- A strong conclusion re-focuses the thesis, deepening its implications.