

Critical Reasoning Basics

A short guide to reading arguments carefully, and to answering the Critical Reasoning questions on the GMAT

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First written September 2005 • Revised 2026

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How to use this guide

Sections 1 to 6 explain the machinery. Section 7 applies all of it to six full-length questions, one for each of the common question types. If you are short of time, read section 3, then work through section 7 with a pen and paper, and keep the quick reference at the back beside you while you practise.

Arguments and Logic

At a glance

- Validity belongs to arguments; truth belongs to statements; soundness is both.
- A premise is a statement from which another is inferred or follows as a conclusion.
- An argument is a group of related propositions which serve to support a proposition called the conclusion.
- Accept the premises as given. You are graded on the reasoning, not on the topic.

Logic

Logic is a system of consistent reasoning that allows us to arrive at conclusions using available data and critically check the validity of these conclusions. It can help us with significant choices (e.g. decision making) and can help us analyze data and integrate the relevant parts to decide a future course of action.

In general, we can respect the directness of a path even when we don't accept the points at which it begins and ends. Thus, it is possible to distinguish correct reasoning from incorrect reasoning independently of our agreement on substantive matters. Logic is the discipline that studies this distinction by determining the conditions under which the truth of certain beliefs leads to the truth of some other belief.

Although logic is undoubtedly a powerful tool for critical thinking, it is but a means to help us arrive at a conclusion and is of little help to examine the validity of the premises which have been used. Logic can therefore give us a consistent and reliable method of inferentially arriving at a conclusion but cannot guarantee the validity of the statements used in constructing an argument.

A note on the word “valid”

The three paragraphs above use *valid* in its everyday sense. In formal logic the word is narrower, and the distinction matters on the test:

Validity is a property of arguments, never of individual statements. An argument is valid when its conclusion follows from its premises. Whether those premises are actually true is a separate question.

Truth is a property of statements. A premise is true or false; it is never valid or invalid.

Soundness is both together: a sound argument is valid *and* has true premises. Only a sound argument guarantees a true conclusion.

So a valid argument can have a false conclusion, if one of its premises is false. Throughout the rest of this guide, *valid* is used in the strict sense.

Arguments

The chief concern of logic is how the truth of some propositions is connected with the truth of another. In Critical Reasoning we will usually consider a group of related propositions. An argument is a set of two or more propositions related to each other in such a way that all but one of them (the premises) provide support for the remaining one (the conclusion). The transition from premises to conclusion, the logical connection between them, is the **line of reasoning** on which the argument relies.

What distinguishes an argument from a mere collection of propositions is the conclusion that can be drawn from the statements in the argument. “I had a haircut today. My computer has crashed yet again. I need new shoes.” is a collection of unrelated propositions: the truth or falsity of each has no bearing on that of the others.

“Abhay is a doctor. So Abhay went to medical school, since all doctors have gone to medical school.” is an argument. The truth of its conclusion, “Abhay went to medical school”, is inferentially derived from its premises, “Abhay is a doctor” and “All doctors have gone to medical school.”

One and the same proposition can, and often does, appear as the conclusion of one line of reasoning and also as one of the premises of another.

What the GMAT actually asks of you

In GMAT Critical Reasoning you are tested on your ability to analyse a given thought stimulus, and never on your opinions about the subject matter. You accept the premises of the passage without debating whether they are true in the world. For example, you might be given this:

All actors are emotional people
All emotional people are psychopaths
Therefore all actors are psychopaths

The conclusion is factually absurd. The argument is nonetheless valid, because if both premises were true the conclusion would have to be true as well. Your job is to judge the connection, and to leave the content alone.

Terms Used in Logic

At a glance

- Premise: stated support. Assumption: unstated support the argument requires.
- Inference: an unstated partial conclusion the premises allow you to draw.
- Conclusion: the central claim the whole passage exists to support.
- Assumptions run downwards into the argument. Inferences run upwards out of it.

Premises

A premise is a statement from which another is inferred or follows as a conclusion. It is also termed an assertion or a proposition, and it forms the basis for a **conclusion**: a judgment or decision reached on the basis of one or more premises.

If an argument is **valid** and its premises are **true**, the conclusion must be true. If the conclusion is false, then either the argument is invalid or at least one premise is false, or both. Note the asymmetry: a false premise does not make the conclusion false. It only removes the guarantee that the conclusion is true.

Assumptions

These are premises that are accepted as true or as certain to happen, without proof. **Assumptions are unstated premises, and they can make or break the conclusion of the thought stimulus.** For example:

Chinmay is a student of IIT Powai (Premise)

Therefore Chinmay is intelligent (Conclusion)

The premise cannot be challenged: it is an observation, and it happens to be a fact. The conclusion can be shown to be possibly invalid, and the gap is not immediately apparent. Anyone who has heard of the IITs will agree that IITians are generally intelligent, and the conclusion quietly rests on something stronger than that. Making the missing premise explicit gives us:

Chinmay is a student of IIT Powai (Premise)

All IIT Powai students are intelligent (Assumption)

Therefore Chinmay is intelligent (Conclusion)

Watch the quantifier

The stated fact is that IITians are *generally* intelligent. The conclusion about one named student needs *all* of them to be. That slide from *most* to *all* is the actual flaw, and it is one of the most heavily tested moves on the GMAT. To weaken this argument you need only produce a single IIT Powai student who is not intelligent.

If the assumption is true, the conclusion still has to be supported by the premises. If the assumption is false, the conclusion loses its support. This is the basis of the negation test in section 6.

Inferences

These are unstated partial conclusions that can be drawn from the given premises. An inference can serve as a link in the line of reasoning, and it differs from a conclusion: a conclusion addresses the central idea of a thought stimulus, whereas an inference serves only to support it.

Students who get at least seven hours of sleep at night tend to be more alert the next day than those who don't get seven hours of sleep.

The ability to get a good score in any competitive exam depends on one's level of alertness.

What can one *infer* from these premises? That if you are a student, **you are likely to be more alert** the next morning if you get seven hours of sleep.

What can one *conclude* from them? That **students wishing to do well in competitive exams should try to get at least seven hours of sleep** on the day before the exam.

Assumptions and inferences compared

Both are links in the chain of reasoning, and the difference is the direction of travel. Assumptions are premises the author takes for granted, and they sit underneath the argument. Inferences are what the reader can deduce from the premises, and they sit on top of it. On the test this decides the answer: assumption questions want what the argument *needs*, and inference questions want what it *yields*.

Finding the Conclusion

Almost every Critical Reasoning question becomes easier once you have identified the conclusion, so do that first, every time, before you read the answer choices. Three methods, in order of reliability.

1. Look for the signal words

Conclusion markers: **therefore, thus, hence, so, consequently, it follows that, clearly, we can conclude that, this shows that, as a result.**

Premise markers: **because, since, for, given that, in view of the fact that, after all, as indicated by.**

These are helpful but they are not decisive. Many GMAT passages contain no marker at all, and some contain a marker attached to a sub-conclusion rather than the main one.

2. Apply the “therefore” test

Take the two statements you suspect are premise and conclusion and place *therefore* between them, both ways round. Only one order will make sense. The statement that ends up after *therefore* is the conclusion.

3. Ask what the passage is trying to sell you

Every argument exists to make you accept one claim. Everything else in the passage is there to get you to accept it. Ask yourself: if I only believed one sentence here, which one would the author most want it to be? That is the conclusion.

The commonest trap

The conclusion is frequently **not** the last sentence. Passages that open with a claim and then defend it are extremely common, and so are passages that end with a restatement of a premise. Locate the conclusion by its function in the argument, never by its position on the page.

Paraphrasing

Once you have the conclusion, restate the whole argument in your own words, as briefly as you can manage. Paraphrasing strips out the qualifiers, the examples and the emotive language that exist mainly to distract you, and it

leaves the skeleton visible. A passage of eighty words will usually reduce to about fifteen.

The pre-eminence of television in modern political campaigns has produced several deleterious effects on our democratic system. Because the attention span of television-trained audiences has been artificially shortened, candidates are forced to encapsulate their programs and ideas in 30- or 60-second summaries, mere slogans embellished with emotionally evocative imagery. And because television commercials are so costly, candidates must spend much of their campaign time raising money instead of delving deeply into the issues confronting our nation and its leaders.

Paraphrased, and rearranged so the reasoning runs forward:

*Short attention spans force candidates into 30 to 60 second summaries.
Costly commercials force candidates to spend their time fundraising.
Therefore television has harmed our democratic system.*

Two separate lines of reasoning, converging on one conclusion. Notice that the paraphrase has also made the argument's weak points visible: it now depends on short summaries being genuinely uninformative, and on the fundraising time being time that would otherwise have gone into the issues.

Diagramming an Argument

At a glance

- Diagramming and paraphrasing are the two tools for exposing the line of reasoning.
- Solid boxes are stated. Dashed boxes are assumed or inferred, and they are where the credited answer usually sits.
- In the exam you will rarely have time to draw a full diagram. Use it while you practise, so that you learn to see the structure without drawing it.
- If you do draw during the exam, draw the dashed boxes only.

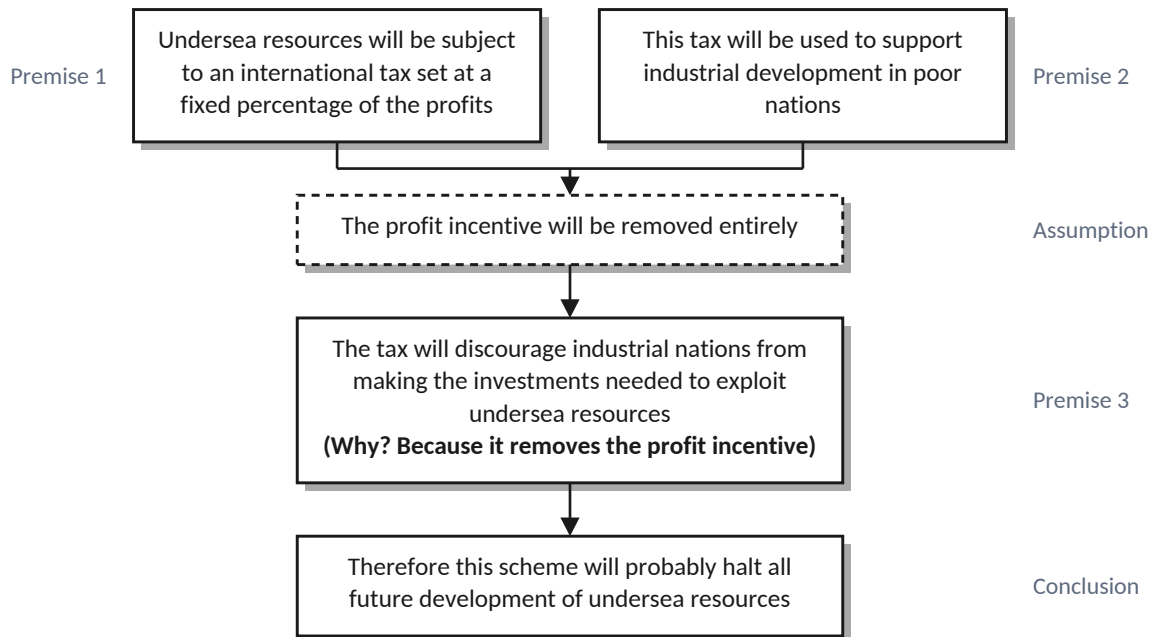
Diagramming rearranges the thought stimulus so that it follows a syllogistic pattern and gives you a clear line of reasoning. Boxes hold statements, arrows carry the logic downwards, and the conclusion sits at the bottom where everything converges.

Throughout this guide, **solid boxes** hold statements the passage actually makes, and **dashed boxes** hold the steps it leaves unstated: assumptions and inferences. The dashed boxes are where the answer to a question usually lives.

Example 1

A recently proposed international treaty would place all undersea resources under the control of an international authority, and would subject them to a tax to be set at a fixed percentage of the profits. The revenue would be used to support industrial development in poor nations. Because the tax removes the profit incentive entirely, it will discourage industrial nations from making the investments needed to exploit undersea resources. This scheme will therefore probably halt all future development of undersea resources.

Diagrammatic representation of Ex. 1

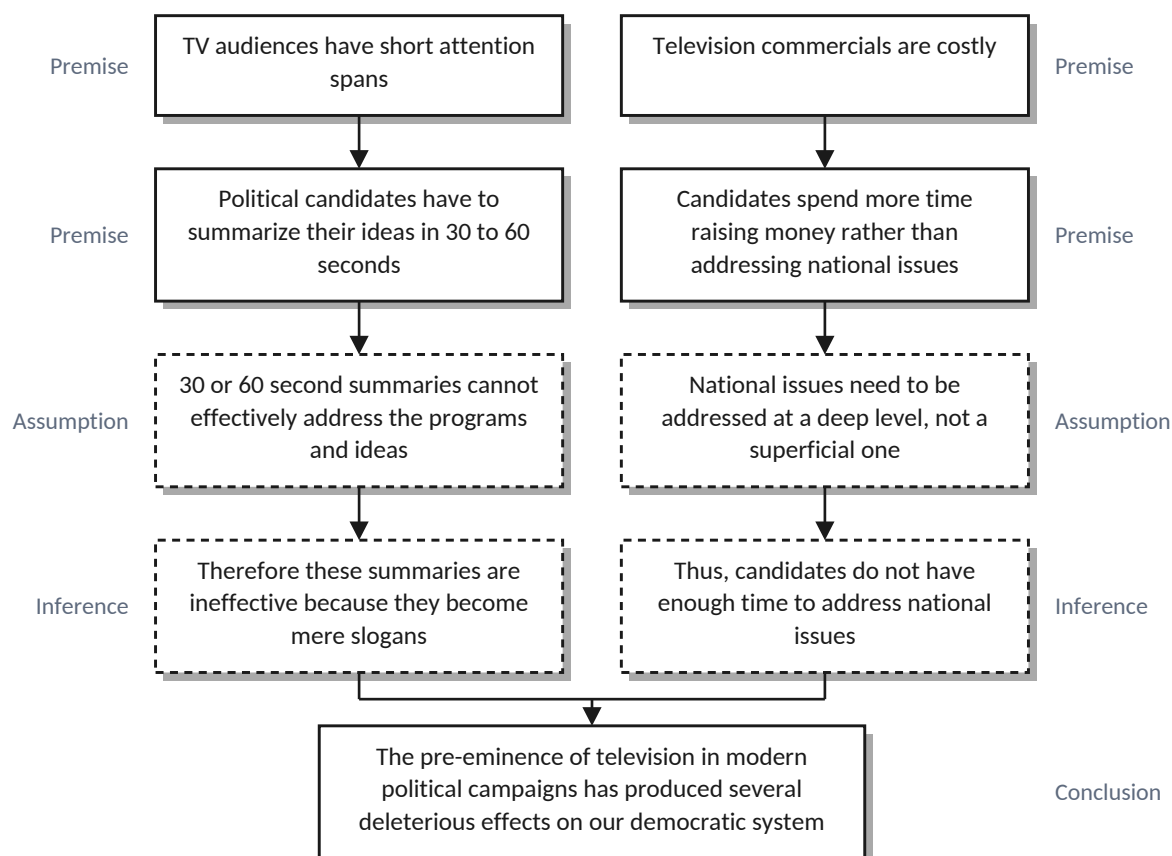


The whole argument rests on the single dashed box. A fixed percentage of the profits leaves some profit in place, so the incentive is reduced rather than removed. Once you can see that box, you can answer an assumption question, a weaken question or a flaw question about this passage without re-reading the passage.

Example 2

The television passage from the previous section has two independent lines of reasoning that converge. Diagrammed, they look like this.

Diagrammatic representation of Ex. 2



When two chains converge

An argument with two independent supporting chains is harder to weaken than it looks. Knocking out one chain leaves the other standing, so the conclusion survives in weakened form. The strongest weakener for a converging argument attacks something both chains depend on, or attacks the step from the chains to the conclusion itself.

Quantifiers and Conditions

At a glance

- All, most and some are not interchangeable. One counterexample destroys an all.
- All A are B puts A inside B. Only A are B puts B inside A.
- Sufficient conditions guarantee. Necessary conditions are required, and guarantee nothing on their own.
- Affirm the antecedent or deny the consequent. The other two directions are fallacies.

A large share of wrong answers on Critical Reasoning are wrong for one of two reasons: they change a quantifier, or they reverse a conditional. Both errors are invisible at reading speed and obvious once you know to look.

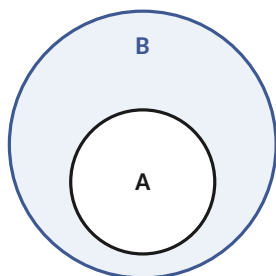
All, most, some

All means every single one, with no exceptions. **Most** means more than half. **Some** means at least one, and it is compatible with all. These are not interchangeable, and an argument that is given *most* and concludes *all* has already failed.

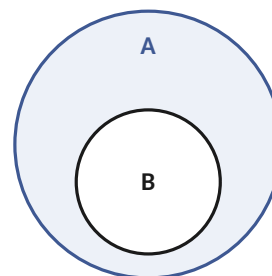
To disprove an *all* statement you need exactly one counterexample. To disprove a *most* statement you need to show that half or more fall the other way, which is much harder. This asymmetry is worth remembering, because it tells you how much work a weakener has to do.

“All A are B” against “Only A are B”

These two look symmetrical and they mean opposite things.



All A are B. Every A sits inside B, and B may contain much else besides.



Only A are B. Every B sits inside A. Some A need not be B.

All A are B tells you that being an A is enough to make you a B. Every doctor went to medical school.

Only A are B tells you that being an A is required in order to be a B, and it says nothing about whether being an A is enough. Only medical school graduates are doctors: every doctor is a graduate, and plenty of graduates are not doctors.

A correction to the 2005 edition

The original version of this guide said that in “Only A are B”, A and B are one and the same set. That is wrong. The statement puts B *inside* A, and leaves room for members of A that are not B. The two sets coincide only when you are also told “All A are B”, in which case the correct phrasing is “A if and only if B”.

Necessary and sufficient

Consider: *If it rains, the match is cancelled.*

Rain is **sufficient** for cancellation. Rain guarantees it. Cancellation is **necessary** for rain, in the sense that if the match went ahead, it cannot have rained. Written as a conditional, rain implies cancellation.

Two moves are valid and two are not, and the GMAT tests all four:

Move	Given	Conclude	Verdict
Affirm the antecedent	It rained	The match was cancelled	Valid
Deny the consequent	The match went ahead	It did not rain	Valid
Affirm the consequent	The match was cancelled	It rained	Invalid
Deny the antecedent	It did not rain	The match went ahead	Invalid

A correction to the 2005 edition

The original guide presented denying the antecedent as if it were a rule of inference. It is a fallacy. The match can be cancelled for a dozen reasons that have nothing to do with rain, so “it did not rain” licenses no conclusion at all about the match. Only the two valid moves in the table above are safe.

The Question Types

There are roughly seven things a Critical Reasoning question can ask you to do. Identify which one you are facing before you read the choices, because the same passage will have a different credited answer depending on the question stem.

Assumption	<i>What does the argument need in order to work?</i> Find the gap between the premises and the conclusion, and pick the choice that fills it. Use the negation test: negate the choice, and if the argument collapses, that choice is the assumption.
Strengthen	<i>What would make the conclusion more likely?</i> Usually this means closing the same gap, or ruling out an alternative explanation. Strengtheners do not have to prove the conclusion.
Weaken	<i>What would make the conclusion less likely?</i> Attack the link between premises and conclusion, not the premises themselves. Offering an alternative cause is the most common correct move.
Inference	<i>What must be true, given the passage?</i> The credited answer is the safest, weakest, most boring statement on the list. If a choice needs anything at all from outside the passage, it is wrong.
Flaw	<i>What is wrong with the reasoning?</i> Name the error in the abstract before you look: confusing correlation with cause, a quantifier slide, a reversed conditional, an unrepresentative sample.
Paradox	<i>Why do these two facts coexist?</i> The right answer adds a fact that lets both statements be true at once. It does not deny either of them.
Boldface	<i>What role do these sentences play?</i> Label each bold portion yourself as premise, conclusion, counterposition or intermediate conclusion, then find the choice that matches your labels.

The negation test, in detail

This is the single most useful technique for assumption questions, and it converts a judgement call into a mechanical check.

- Take a candidate answer choice.

- Negate it. “Will” becomes “will not”. “All” becomes “not all”, which is *not* “none”. “Some” becomes “none”.
- Re-read the argument with the negated statement inserted.
- If the argument now falls apart, the original choice was a necessary assumption. If the argument survives, it was not.

Negating carelessly is the usual way this technique goes wrong. The opposite of “all cats are grey” is “at least one cat is not grey”, and it is not “no cats are grey”.

Six Worked Questions

One for each question type

About these questions

The six questions that follow were written for this guide in the style, structure and difficulty of official GMAT Critical Reasoning items. They are not reproduced from any official test, because official questions are the copyright of the Graduate Management Admission Council and cannot be republished.

For genuine official questions at no cost, use the **GMAT Official Starter Kit** on mba.com, which includes around 90 sample questions and two full practice exams, and then the current **GMAT Official Guide**. Work through the six below first: they are built to isolate one technique each, which official questions are not.

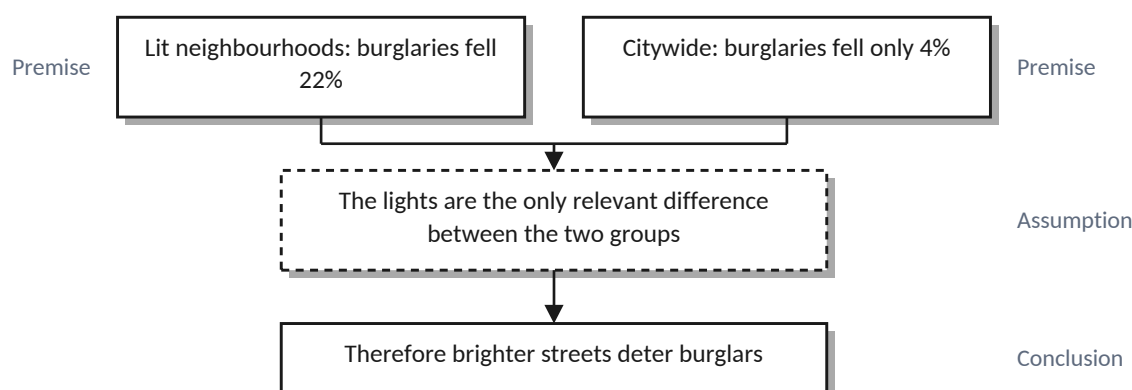
Question 1 | Weaken

For the past five years the Brindale city council has funded a program installing additional streetlights in residential neighbourhoods. Over that period, reported burglaries in the neighbourhoods that received the lights fell by 22 percent, while burglaries across the city as a whole fell by only 4 percent. The council concludes that brighter streets deter burglars, and it plans to extend the program citywide.

Which of the following, if true, most seriously weakens the council's conclusion?

- (A) Some burglaries in Brindale occur during daylight hours.
- (B) The neighbourhoods selected for the lighting program were those that had reported the sharpest increases in burglary in the year before the program began.
- (C) The cost of the lighting program exceeded the estimated value of the property it protected.
- (D) Two neighbouring cities that installed similar lighting saw burglary rates fall by about 15 percent.
- (E) Residents of the lighted neighbourhoods report feeling safer walking at night.

The argument, diagrammed



Correct answer: B

The neighbourhoods were chosen precisely because their burglary figures had just spiked. Unusually high figures tend to fall back towards normal on their own, whatever you do to them, so a large drop in exactly these neighbourhoods is what you would expect even if the lights did nothing. This attacks the dashed box directly: the lights are no longer the only relevant difference between the two groups.

Why the others fail

- (A) True but irrelevant. Daylight burglaries would dilute the effect in both groups equally, so the 22 against 4 comparison is untouched.
- (C) Attacks the wisdom of the program, and leaves the causal claim standing. The council concluded that lights deter burglars, and not that the program is worth the money.
- (D) Strengthens, if anything. Independent cities getting a similar result makes the causal story more credible.
- (E) Feelings of safety are a different outcome from burglaries. This is the classic swap of one measure for another.

What this question tests

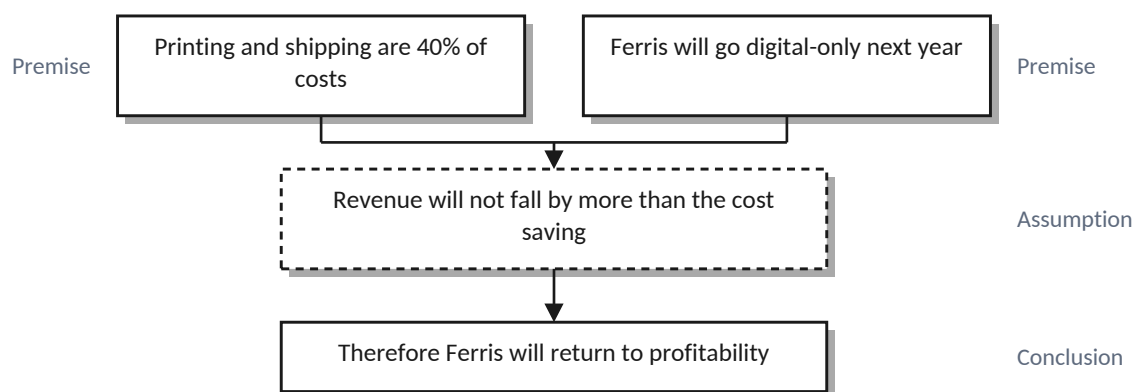
- Correlation plus a plausible story is not causation.
- On weaken questions, look first for how the two compared groups were selected.
- A choice that attacks cost, popularity or fairness is attacking a conclusion the passage did not draw.

Question 2 | Assumption

Ferris Publishing will move its entire catalogue to digital-only distribution next year. Printing and shipping currently account for 40 percent of the company's costs. Eliminating those costs will therefore restore Ferris to profitability.

The argument above depends on which of the following assumptions?

- (A) Digital distribution will cost Ferris nothing at all.
- (B) Ferris's revenue will not fall by more than the amount the company saves by ending print distribution.
- (C) Most of Ferris's readers already prefer digital books to printed ones.
- (D) Ferris's principal competitors will also move to digital-only distribution next year.
- (E) Printing and shipping costs have risen in each of the past ten years.

The argument, diagrammed

Correct answer: B

Profit is revenue minus costs, and the argument only ever talks about costs. Negate the choice: revenue *does* fall by more than the saving. The company is then worse off, and the conclusion collapses immediately. That collapse under negation is what identifies a necessary assumption.

Why the others fail

- (A) Far too strong. The argument needs digital distribution to be cheaper than print, and it does not need it to be free. Negate it and the argument survives comfortably.
- (C) Would support the argument, and the argument does not require it. Ferris could go digital-only and stay profitable even if readers were merely willing rather than eager. Support is not the same as necessity.
- (D) Irrelevant. What competitors do has no bearing on Ferris's own arithmetic.
- (E) Background colour. The trend in past costs says nothing about whether removing them next year produces a profit.

What this question tests

- Assumption questions ask what the argument needs, and never what would help it.
- Negate the choice. If the argument still stands, the choice is not an assumption.
- Watch for arguments that reason about costs and then conclude about profit.

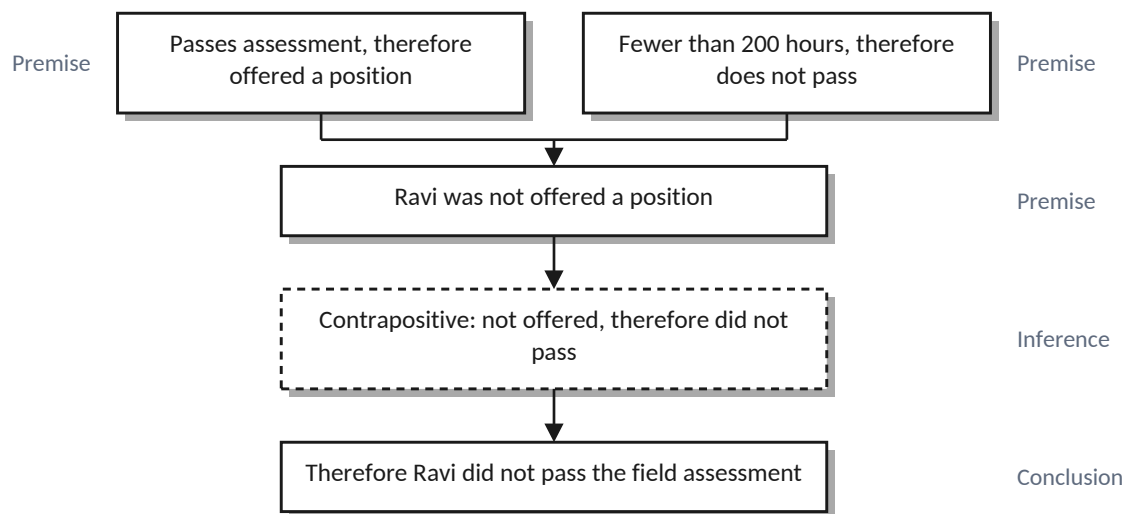
Question 3 | Inference

Every trainee at the Aldon Institute who passes the field assessment is offered a position. No trainee who has fewer than 200 logged hours passes the field assessment. Ravi is a trainee at the Aldon Institute who was not offered a position.

If the statements above are true, which of the following must also be true?

- (A) Ravi has fewer than 200 logged hours.
- (B) Ravi did not pass the field assessment.
- (C) Every trainee with at least 200 logged hours passes the field assessment.
- (D) Some trainees with 200 or more logged hours are not offered positions.
- (E) The Institute offers positions only to trainees who pass the field assessment.

The argument, diagrammed



Correct answer: B

The first premise says that passing guarantees an offer. Denying the consequent is valid, so no offer guarantees no pass. Ravi received no offer, therefore Ravi did not pass. This is the only choice the passage forces on you.

Why the others fail

- (A) Reverses the second conditional. Fewer than 200 hours guarantees failure, and failure does not guarantee fewer than 200 hours. Ravi may have logged 500 hours and failed on the day.
- (C) Affirms the consequent of the second statement. Being told that under 200 hours means failure tells you nothing about what 200 or more hours produces.
- (D) Ravi might have fewer than 200 hours, so this is possible rather than necessary. On inference questions, possible is wrong.
- (E) This is the “only” trap from section 5. The passage says passing implies an offer. This choice says an offer implies passing, which is the reverse and is not established.

What this question tests

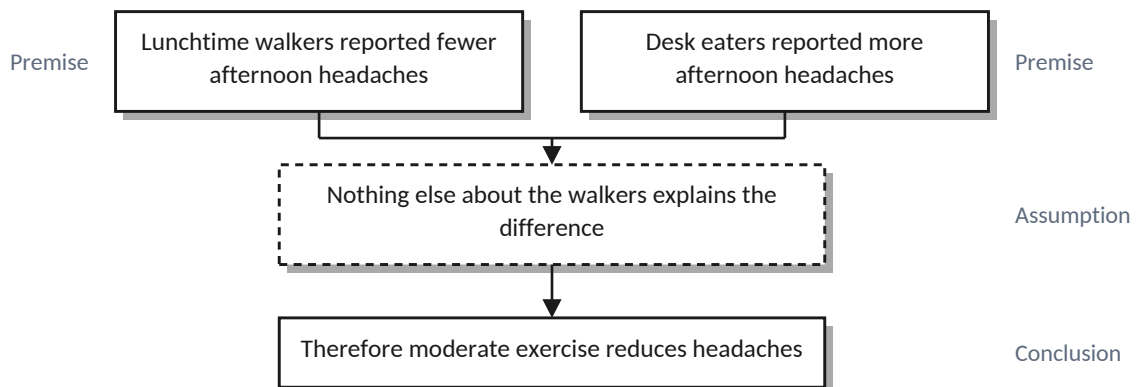
- Inference answers must be forced by the passage, and not merely consistent with it.
- Denying the consequent is valid. Denying the antecedent is not.
- The word only reverses a conditional. Read it slowly, every time.

Question 4 | Strengthen

A study of 3,000 office workers found that those who took a 20-minute walk during their lunch break reported fewer afternoon headaches than those who ate at their desks. The researchers concluded that moderate exercise reduces the incidence of headaches.

Which of the following, if true, most strengthens the researchers' conclusion?

- (A) Workers who walked at lunch also tended to drink more water during the afternoon.
- (B) When desk-eating workers in the study were later assigned to take lunchtime walks, their reported headaches declined by a similar margin.
- (C) Headaches are among the most commonly reported workplace health complaints.
- (D) Some workers who walked at lunch still reported afternoon headaches.
- (E) The study was conducted over a period of six months.

The argument, diagrammed

Correct answer: B

The weakness in the original study is that the workers chose for themselves whether to walk, so the two groups may differ in a dozen ways. Taking the desk eaters and moving them into walking removes the self-selection: the same people, changed in one respect, changed their outcome. That is as close to a controlled comparison as the choices offer.

Why the others fail

- (A) Weakens rather than strengthens. It supplies an alternative cause, hydration, that could explain the whole difference without exercise doing any work at all.
- (C) True but irrelevant. How common headaches are says nothing about what reduces them.
- (D) Weakens slightly, or does nothing. The conclusion is about incidence across a group, so individual exceptions were never ruled out.
- (E) Duration on its own establishes nothing. A six-month study with a self-selected sample has the same flaw as a six-week one.

What this question tests

- The strongest strengthener usually removes an alternative explanation.
- Self-selected groups are the standard weakness in any study-based passage.
- A choice that introduces a new plausible cause weakens, however helpful it sounds.

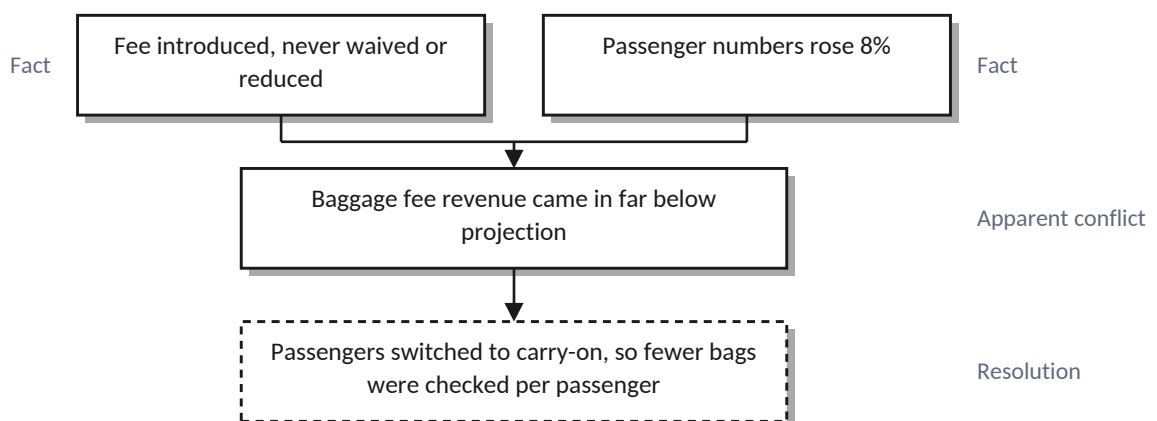
Question 5 | Paradox

In the year after Kestrel Airlines introduced a substantial fee for checked baggage, the airline's revenue from baggage fees was far lower than it had projected. Yet the number of passengers flying Kestrel rose by 8 percent over the same period, and Kestrel neither reduced nor waived the fee for any passenger.

Which of the following, if true, best explains the discrepancy described above?

- (A) Kestrel's principal competitors introduced similar baggage fees during the same year.
- (B) Passengers responded to the fee by packing their belongings into carry-on luggage instead of checking bags.
- (C) Kestrel added several long-haul routes during the year in question.
- (D) Kestrel's revenue projections were based on the previous year's passenger numbers.
- (E) Several passengers complained publicly about the new fee.

The argument, diagrammed



Correct answer: B

Fee revenue is the fee multiplied by the number of bags checked, and not by the number of passengers. If passengers avoided checking bags altogether, the number of chargeable bags could fall sharply even while passenger numbers rose. Both facts are now true at once, which is exactly what a paradox question requires.

Why the others fail

- (A) Explains why passengers did not leave Kestrel, and it leaves the revenue shortfall entirely unexplained.
- (C) Runs the wrong way. Passengers on long-haul routes check more bags, not fewer, so this deepens the puzzle.
- (D) Also runs the wrong way. Passenger numbers *rose*, so a projection built on the previous year's lower numbers should have been beaten, not missed.
- (E) Complaints are not behaviour. A passenger can complain loudly and check a bag anyway.

What this question tests

- A paradox answer must leave both stated facts true. Anything that denies one is wrong.
- Check the units. Revenue per bag is not revenue per passenger.
- Two or three choices will deepen the puzzle rather than resolve it. Test the direction of each one.

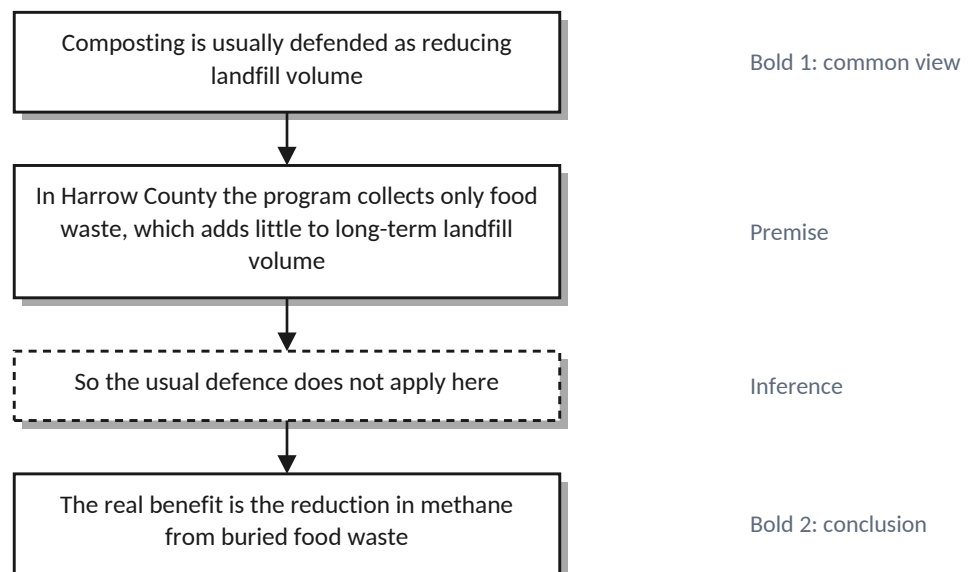
Question 6 | Boldface / role of statement

Municipal composting programs are commonly defended on the grounds that they reduce the volume of waste sent to landfill. In Harrow County, however, the composting program collects only food waste, which decomposes quickly and contributes very little to long-term landfill volume. **The real benefit of the program lies elsewhere: it substantially reduces the methane that food waste generates when it is buried.**

In the argument above, the two portions in boldface play which of the following roles?

- (A) The first is a claim the argument rejects outright; the second is the evidence offered for that rejection.
- (B) The first is a common justification that the argument judges inadequate; the second is the conclusion the argument draws in its place.
- (C) Both are conclusions that the argument endorses.
- (D) The first is the argument's conclusion; the second is evidence supporting it.
- (E) The first states a position the argument supports; the second is an objection raised against it.

The argument, diagrammed



Correct answer: B

The word *however* is the hinge. The first bold sentence reports the standard justification, which the author then shows does not hold in this county. The second bold sentence supplies the author's own conclusion about where the benefit actually lies. Label the parts yourself before reading the choices and this becomes a matching exercise.

Why the others fail

- (A) Two errors. The argument narrows the first claim rather than rejecting it outright, and the second bold portion is a conclusion rather than evidence.
- (C) The author does not endorse the first claim. The middle sentence exists to undercut it.
- (D) Inverted. The first is the view being examined, and the second is the author's own position.
- (E) Also inverted, and it makes the author's conclusion into an objection against the author.

What this question tests

- Find the pivot word first: however, but, yet, although. It separates the two roles.
- Label each bold portion in your own words before you read a single choice.
- Most wrong choices in this type are correct labels attached to the wrong portion.

How Wrong Answers Are Built

Wrong answers on this section are engineered, and they fall into a small number of families. Learning to name the family is faster than reasoning each choice out from scratch.

True but irrelevant	The statement is perfectly true, and it has no bearing on the link between premises and conclusion. This is the most common wrong answer of all, because it feels safe. Ask what the choice does to the argument, and never whether it sounds correct.
Out of scope	Introduces a term, a group or a comparison the argument never made. If a choice mentions something absent from the passage, it needs a very good reason to be there.
Right answer to the wrong question	A genuine weakener offered on a strengthen question, or an assumption offered on an inference question. Re-read the stem before you commit.
Too strong	Uses all, never, must, entirely or only where the argument supports something more modest. Common on inference questions, where the correct answer is usually the least dramatic one available.
Reversed logic	Swaps cause and effect, or turns an if into an only if. Section 5 covers the machinery. In practice, read any conditional in a choice twice.
Half right	The first clause is impeccable and the second is wrong, or the other way round. Read every choice to the end. Boldface questions live on this.
Comparison never made	The passage discusses one group, and the choice compares it to another. Nothing in the passage licenses the comparison.

Working by elimination

On a five-choice question you are better at spotting what is wrong than at recognising what is right. Read all five, strike out the ones you can name a fault in, and then choose between whatever survives. Two choices will usually remain, and the difference between them is almost always a single word: a quantifier, a comparison, or a conditional.

The one-word difference

When you are down to two choices, put them side by side and find the word they disagree on. Then ask which version the passage actually supports. This is quicker and much more reliable than re-reading the passage a third time.

Timing and Exam Strategy

The Verbal Reasoning section of the GMAT Focus Edition contains 23 questions in 45 minutes, which works out at a little under two minutes per question. Roughly 13 of those 23 are Critical Reasoning, and the rest are Reading Comprehension. Sentence Correction is no longer part of the exam.

A workable budget for a single Critical Reasoning question is around two minutes: about 40 seconds reading the passage and identifying the conclusion, 10 seconds on the stem, and the rest on the choices. If you are past three minutes, you are no longer solving the question and you are negotiating with it.

Order of operations

- **Read the question stem first.** Knowing whether you need an assumption or a weakener changes how you read the passage.
- **Read the passage once, properly.** Skimming and then re-reading three times is slower than reading carefully once.
- **State the conclusion to yourself before looking at the choices.** If you cannot, read the passage again. Everything downstream depends on this.
- **Predict the answer.** Even a vague prediction makes the correct choice much easier to recognise and makes trap choices much easier to reject.
- **Read all five choices.** The GMAT rewards the best answer, and the second-best is often placed earlier in the list.

On guessing

The GMAT Focus Edition lets you flag questions and return to them within a section, and it has no penalty for a wrong answer. So never leave a question blank. If a question has cost you three minutes, eliminate what you can, pick from the survivors, flag it, and move on. Two questions answered calmly are worth more than one answered perfectly.

How to practise

Practising by doing large numbers of questions quickly is the least effective way to use the time. A better routine, and the one this guide is built around, has three steps.

- Do a small set of questions under real time pressure.
- Then go back over every question you got wrong *and* every one you got right by guessing, and write down the specific reason each wrong choice was wrong, using the families in section 8.
- Keep a running list of your own recurring errors. Most people have two or three, and they repeat for months until they are written down and looked at.

Diagramming, in the way section 4 sets it out, is a practice tool rather than an exam tool. Draw the boxes while you are learning, and by the time you sit the exam you will see the structure without drawing anything.

Quick Reference

Before anything else	Read the stem. Find the conclusion. State it in your own words.
Assumption	Find the gap. Negate each candidate. The one that destroys the argument is the answer.
Strengthen	Close the gap, or rule out an alternative cause.
Weaken	Attack the link, not the premises. Supply an alternative cause.
Inference	Pick the safest, weakest, most boring statement. Nothing from outside the passage.
Flaw	Name the error before you read the choices.
Paradox	Both facts must remain true. Check the units.
Boldface	Label each portion yourself first. Find the pivot word.
All A are B	A sits inside B. Being A is sufficient for being B.
Only A are B	B sits inside A. Being A is necessary for being B.
Valid moves	Affirm the antecedent. Deny the consequent.
Invalid moves	Affirm the consequent. Deny the antecedent.
Negating all	Not all, which means at least one is not. It does not mean none.
Timing	About two minutes a question. Past three minutes, eliminate, pick, flag and move.
Never	Leave a question blank. There is no penalty for a wrong answer.

Critical Reasoning Basics was first written in September 2005 and revised in 2026. The revision corrects the treatment of validity, of “only” statements and of conditional reasoning, adds the six worked questions in section 7, and updates the timing guidance for the GMAT Focus Edition. The opening section on logic is reproduced as it was originally written.

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