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How to become a GMAT natural

By Joe, CC Tutor

I've heard it all before. GMAT test takers tell a variety of lies to themselves:

"I'm just a bad test taker."

"You're either good at these tests, or you're not."

False and false.

"Easy for you to say! My roommate barely did any practice tests and she got a 750!"

You guessed it, false. None of us came into this world knowing critical reasoning and sentence structure.

While intelligence plays a part, a winning psychology separates the "natural" from the "also-ran," and the best way to develop a winning psychology is to actually win.

You can do it.

You are not the past you—establish a clean break. You may have struggled with testing in high school and college. That's okay. But you have the capacity to reinvent your self-image. You've done it before.

Write down 3 skills that you picked up through hard work and disciplined training. For example, I was as athletic as a bowl of chocolate pudding in elementary school. I remembered the humiliation of not being able to bench press 70 pounds in front of my 8th grade class, despite weighing twice that. When I got to 9th grade, I walked right up to our #1-ranked football team's strength and conditioning coach and asked him to make me a workout plan. I lifted three times a week and made a ritual out of it, with my customized workout playlist and

ordered sequence of lifts. By college, I was no longer the little fat kid; I was one of the strongest guys in my dorm.

Children praised with “You must have worked really hard at this!” have a greater drive to succeed and outperform those who were told “you must be really smart!” Both might know that they can achieve, but only the former knows that can succeed at something that used to be difficult for them.

Remind yourself why.

Do you want to develop and market a lifesaving cancer drug? Do you want to start the technology that generates enough carbon-free electricity to power the world? Do you want to provide well for your spouse and children? Nothing worthwhile comes easy. You will have moments of self-doubt. Know what will make you power through.

Know what success looks like.

When I met with a coworker/alum of my top choice business school (MIT Sloan), I expected her to be impressed by my GMAT 780/6.0. Her response? “They’re going to think you’re a dork.” I was disappointed—would they think that at MIT?

Fact is, once you’ve scored above a certain threshold, you’ve “checked the box.” Look up your top schools’ average GMAT scores, and set a goal to beat that. You don’t need an 800.

Publicly commit.

Block off practice time on your calendar, and tell your friends and family that you have done so, and wish not to be disturbed. This builds an accountability network. If they try to sabotage or discourage you, re-evaluate their place in your life. You have no time or energy for those people.

Similarly, schedule your actual test session a month or so out, and plan back to today. Nothing will keep you focused like a hard deadline.

Pay no heed to the braggarts.

We all like looking good in front of our friends, and making our top performances look easy is one way that we do that. Your roommate, above, might have done a million individual practice problems, or even embellish the truth about how much she prepared for the test. Let others’ claims roll off your back.

Take practice tests.

Success builds confidence, and deliberate practice builds success. You can find practice tests online, or in your local library or bookstore; get them from multiple sources so you won't be biased. Take (1) at least 6, or more until you hit your desired score twice in a row, (2) on alternate days, with targeted study on your off-nights, (3) with the last test two days before the real thing, (4) under as close to actual testing conditions as possible.

In high school, my whole class aced our AP Calculus exam because our teacher made us do every AP problem that ever appeared on an actual AP test over the course of the year. Ditto our AP Spanish teacher—we practiced so much that I could deliver a 15-minute presentation without fumbling for words once.

Get TWO good nights' sleep.

Studies have shown that you not only need a good night's sleep the night before the actual test, but also the night before that. Try not to use a sleep aid or drink alcohol, as they may affect sleep quality. If you wake up refreshed and without an alarm, you've done it right.

Take your mind completely off of studying the night before.

Cramming won't work, and might work against you by making you nervous. Watch a movie. Practice a hobby. Call a loved one. I watched YouTube clips of "Beavis and Butthead." Clear your head with at least three hours of relaxation from anything test- or academics-related.

Eat a healthy meal.

You want consistent high energy to get through the test, not a surge and crash. Eat protein and complex carbohydrates. Avoid sugar and caffeine. Don't overstuff yourself. I did the latter before my linear algebra final as an undergrad, and it was most unpleasant...

Arrive at the test location 20 minutes before your appointment.

The day before, map out the route on your GPS, drive to the testing center, and know what the building looks like. Allow yourself time to settle in onsite. Do a deep breathing exercise; partake of inspirational quotes and music. Walk in with your chest out, abs tucked in, and shoulders back.

During the test, know that you have done this before.

If you have followed the plan above, you will know that you can hit your desired score because you have repeatedly done so. The test makers are not trying to trick or discourage you. If you follow the above plan, this will be your 11th practice test, and nothing will come as a surprise.

The New England Patriots have a saying from great military strategist Sun Tzu in their locker room: "Every battle is won before it is fought." The results speak for themselves.

In conclusion, there is no such thing as a "natural," only someone who knows they will succeed because they have already done so.