



# Graduate Wretched Exam

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The last time I measured a hypotenuse, my biggest problem was finding a prom date. Eighteen years later, at the age of 34, math surpassed even mortgage payments as the paramount stress in my life.

Two years ago I quit my newspaper job, choosing mental health over a \$46,000 salary. I balanced my checkbook, albeit poorly, obliterated my savings account and decided to go to graduate school. Other than traffic school, I hadn't taken a class since 1993, when I finished my bachelor's degree in journalism.

I'd always fantasized about writing a book, though. Endless blank pages that begged for adjectives. At a newspaper, adjectives are the first casualty. I endured eight years of editors slicing my copy into unrecognizable bits. Inevitably, the folks designing the page would carve out a smaller hole than I deemed necessary for effective description. How do you illustrate, in less than 10 paragraphs, the irony of the newly appointed Glendale police chief's citation for owning a pot-bellied pig in a city with an ordinance against domestic swine?

Hungry for creative control, I enrolled in USC's Master's in Professional Writing Program.

## *Writing program.*

I assumed admission would be based on an ability to write witty, creative off-the-cuff pieces that would wow readers. A 3,000-word rant on the absurdity of hipster, bed-head hairdos? No problem. A well-reasoned argument against the Allied occupation of Iraq? Get me to a keyboard. But factoring multi-variable equations? That knowledge, limited though it was, faded into obscurity with my acid-wash jeans and teased bangs.

Sadly, before one is admitted to graduate school, one must pass the Graduate Record Exam. The GRE is a "graduated" version of the SAT that calculates intelligence, based in part on the ability to find geometric arc lengths and determine standard deviation. Otherwise categorized as: "Skills that no writer will ever need to publish successful manuscripts."

However, for the right-brained among us, the other section of the GRE tests a person's verbal abilities. In order to score in the upper percentile of the country - therefore snagging a seat away from some illiterate knob - one must command a vocabulary so stellar as not to furrow a brow when flashed words like "hugger-mugger" and "arabesque." I understood the necessity of a high verbal score but was confounded by admissions officials' sadistic requirement for math. Therefore, I resolved to hone my strengths: analogies, antonyms and sentence completions. I didn't waste my time with

math or reading comprehension. The former I couldn't comprehend even if John Nash tutored me. As for the latter, because I voraciously read news articles, non-fiction books and legal documents, I welcomed the challenge.

The test date loomed like a root canal. Still, with an undergraduate degree in journalism and almost a decade of experience as a daily newspaper reporter, I prided myself on having a firm grasp of the American lexicon. I'd learned quite a bit since I'd shaded those ovals on the SAT: I'd interviewed scientists and politicians; I'd won writing awards. And, I knew a lot of smart people. I resolved to look at the impending standardized test as an intellectual challenge.

Turns out, I was intellectually challenged.

Out of a possible 1600, I scored 970: 580 verbal and 390 quantitative (as if the word math isn't frightening enough). An irksome 30 points below my grad school's required minimum of 1000. While the verbal score wasn't atrocious, it was a bit low for someone clamoring to get into USC's graduate school. But because my program allowed "limited status" students to take up to four classes before "passing" the test and thereby being admitted as a full student, I earned 12 units toward a master's degree before having to face reality. It's easy to procrastinate when you live by the motto, Why do today what you can put off until tomorrow? So for two semesters, I tried to dodge the director of my program.

"Better work on bringing up the verbal," Dr. Jim Ragan would say, catching me before I blushed and inexplicably hurried off.

Finally, I confronted him.

"It's absurd that I have to take a math test at 34 years old. I'm a writer," I drunkenly blurted one night at Brandy's, the off-campus haunt. I paused long enough to watch his eyes narrow, yet I obsequiously continued, "I did really well on the essay section."

"Oh, we don't even look at that," he said.

I could've jabbed a cocktail umbrella into someone's eye.

"Don't worry," Ragan continued, interlocking his fingers over crossed knees. "Study your verbal and take the test again."

I did. Twice. The diabolical test makers over at Educational Testing Services allow people to take the exam up to five times in one calendar year.

By my third failing score, I'd plunged 100 points on the math section. Only three percent of the entire country scored lower than me. I had hoped that a soaring verbal score would allow me to guess wildly on the math section and still net that coveted 1000. But even my verbal dipped 30 points. What was happening? How many times did I have to study those flash cards? More, obviously. I didn't deserve to wear my USC sweatshirt, let alone buy a bumper sticker. Sympathetic, yet bound by school policy, my program director could offer only two pieces of advice: Study harder and take the test again. At \$115 a pop, I considered a student loan just to pay for my entrance into the school.

"What about a GRE Prep course?" Ragan suggested.

His words hung in the air like a cartoon balloon. Listening to someone talk about math for nine hours seemed like a preview to the unending horrors of hell. Then again, getting axed from a program in which I'd earned nearly half the units toward graduation would have crushed my soul. Plus, I really wanted that Trojans bumper sticker. Personal ethics forbade me from slapping a sticker onto my car until I passed that insufferable test. So I pared another \$400 from my savings account and signed up for a weekend-long session of math and verbal review at the Omni Hotel in downtown Los Angeles.

In an apparent attempt to quell any of our testing angst, the GRE instructor began the session by saying, "There's nothing beyond high school math on this test."

As the six other students emitted a collective sigh of relief, I dropped my head backward like a broken Pez dispenser. I never really understood much of high school math, as evident by the three previous GRE tests where I sweated like a pitcher of ice water every time a new problem popped on the screen. But this time was going to be different, I assured myself, straightening freshly sharpened pencils and reciting "Math is my friend," like a mantra. During the next two days I was going to embrace math. I was going to open my mind to quadratic equations, polygons and probabilities. And I was going to sit in the front row to make sure I caught every numerical nuance.

But the only thing I caught was a buzz from the wipe-off marker fumes. Everyone else followed along brilliantly. They chimed right in when he asked questions, dulling their pencil points to scribble the answers. One after another, they eagerly raised their hands like fans doing the wave at a baseball game. My arms and pencils stayed on the table. I felt like a tie-dye T-shirt in a room full of Channel suits.

Before lunch, the instructor taught one final math lesson. It began with the words, "Back plugging on quantitative comparison..." I couldn't listen to the rest of the sentence. With my temple flush against my fingers, I watched him plug some of the multiple

choices into the equation, thereby eliminating the wrong answers. I didn't care that he used the FOIL method to explain factoring, I just didn't get it.

To me, math is like the infield fly rule. No matter how many times my boyfriend explains this baseball phenomenon to me, I just don't get it. I feel like a blind person being asked to describe the Sistine Chapel. Mattel might have been on to something when they introduced that Barbie that exclaimed, "Math is hard!" Well, except for the intimation that women, as a whole, don't understand math. Looking around at the four other female test prep students, foiling away, it was apparent that only I didn't understand math.

By the time the verbal review started, I felt vindicated. All diffidence dissipated. A predator eyeing its prey, I ticked off correct answer after correct answer. And, shockingly, when no one knew the definition of "contentious," I raised my hand and offered "pugilistic" as a synonym. Okay, perhaps a bit pedantic, but I deserved it.

I crammed so many 75-cent words into my brain while studying for the GRE, that I must have pushed some 25-cent ones out. I heard "precipitate" the other day and contorted my face until the meteorologist demonstrated his prediction with rain clouds. But when the instructor dropped "pusillanimous" on us in a sentence, I knew he meant "cowardly."

During an ephemeral review of the reading comprehension portion, one of the answers that followed a passage of text about carbon dating included the phrase "unbridled fervor." The instructor, in a monotone delivery echoing Ben Stein said, "Right away you can scratch that one. This is a hand waving disclaimer that it is the wrong answer. Nothing about the GRE is unbridled fervor."

Believing, well, praying that I absorbed some microcosm of mathematical knowledge, I tackled the Graduate Wretched Exam a fourth time. My hands shook. Perspiration seeped through my sundress. At least half of the problems looked foreign. I don't remember the instructor even mentioning "volume."

Three hours, one headache and a handful of gray hair later, I clicked on the "Get Test Scores" button. Verbal, 670. Quantitative 400. *Oh my god.* I penciled the numbers on my scrap paper to make sure that I added correctly in my head. I did! I scored 1070. I bounded out of the testing center and dialed the Master's in Professional Writing office. With unbridled fervor, Dr. Ragan accepted me into the program. Now, short of graduation, there was only one thing left to do: Buy that bumper sticker.