

NEW!  
OFFICIAL HALF-LENGTH PRACTICE GED TESTS

*Read the following excerpts, taken from the website of the American Council on Education in May 2009, and then answer Question 1.*

*Congratulations on taking one of the most important steps of your life—earning your GED credential!*

*Millions of people like you have taken the GED tests to get a better job, continue their education, or fulfill their personal aspirations.*

*Free half-length and full-length GED practice tests, comparable in content, difficulty, and format to the GED tests, are available in English, Spanish, French, and Canadian versions. It includes tables to convert the number of correct items to GED standard scores; self-scoring answering sheets are also available. Visit [www.GEDpractice.com](http://www.GEDpractice.com) to learn more.*

Question 1: *Which of the following may be correctly inferred?*

- (1) *In May 2009, free half-length and full-length GED practice tests were available at [www.GEDpractice.com](http://www.GEDpractice.com).*
- (2) *In May 2009, a few GED practice questions were available at [www.GEDpractice.com](http://www.GEDpractice.com), but a print version of the half-length practice test would cost you \$21.95.*
- (3) *In May 2009, a few GED practice questions were available at [www.GEDpractice.com](http://www.GEDpractice.com), but a print version of the half-length practice test would cost you \$21.95—and you would find this particularly galling because the GED test itself was only administered on paper, rendering online practice questions supremely dissimilar in “content, difficulty, and format” from the GED tests.*
- (4) *The word “it” in the second sentence of the second paragraph referred to the “free half-length and full-length practice tests,” even though someone who used a pronoun in the singular (e.g., “it”) to refer to an antecedent in the plural (e.g., “tests”) in the language arts and writing segment of the GED test would be penalized for that grammatical error.*

*Read the following five-part essay on the GED test, and then answer Question 2.*

## I.

If you had asked me six months ago, I would have said that GED stood for Graduation Equivalency Degree and that a GED was interchangeable with a high school diploma. I would have said that, while there were other tests meant to determine a student's skill at a particular discipline (the APs, the IBs) or a student's aptitude for college (the SAT, the ACT), it was the GED alone that really mattered, because the GED, alone among such tests, answered the central question of our national life, the question the public schools themselves were created to address: whether or not a given citizen had reached the level of intellectual competence necessary to be a free-functioning, autonomous adult.

There are, after all, any number of reasons why a fellow might not have a high school degree—a flippant adolescence, or a tragic childhood, or the inexorable workings of dumb circumstances and dumb advice—so if that fellow one day announces, “I want to go back and get my GED,” it is a brave and honorable moment. “I don't want to settle for what I have, I want to improve my lot and my mind, I want to show that I'm ready to carry my full share of the work.” How brave, how honorable! A book that actually helped that fellow get his degree would be something to be celebrated. So it was with enthusiasm that I read the newly released half-length *Official GED Practice Tests* (Steck-Vaughn Co., \$21.95).

The *Official GED Practice Tests* are brightly packaged affairs, and the American Council on Education (ACE), which administers the GED, promotes them as “Your All-In-One Test Kit.” Each kit comes in a cardboard box and consists of six purple booklets corresponding to the different sections of the GED test, as well as one orange-hued answer sheet with bubbles that may be darkened using a No. 2 pencil. The elements of the kit—the six purple booklets, the orange answer sheet, the one gray page of instructions—are all bound together by a plastic belt bearing the code

978-0-7398-5433-4

0-7398-5433-X

which is a nice touch. Opening the kit and finding that my materials were bound in a coded plastic belt gave me a palpable thrill, the sense that the GED practice tests had been sealed and certified, and that by breaking the belt, I was committing myself to the regulations and responsibilities handed down by a principled and venerated authority. When the back of one test booklet advised me that

you will have 40 minutes to answer the 25 questions in this booklet. Work carefully, but do not spend too much time on any one question. Be sure you answer every question.

I even felt nervous. For the first time since leaving school, I was going to be graded.

## II.

It was dispiriting, then—after I had set my stopwatch and located a No. 2 pencil—to actually read the questions in the “calculator use allowed” portion of the mathematics section of the *Official GED Practice Tests*:

Juanita had her car windshield replaced at a cost of \$250. After a \$50 deductible is applied (i.e., Juanita pays the first \$50), her insurance company will pay 80 percent of the remaining balance. In dollars, how much will the insurance company pay?

For this our educational authorities think that Americans should need a calculator? It was even worse in the portion of the mathematics section where no calculator was allowed:

The scale on a hiker’s map states that 1 inch = 2000 feet. Anna wants to know how far it is to her next campsite. On the map, the next campsite is 5 inches from her present location. What is the actual distance, in feet, between Anna’s present location and her next campsite?

There were a total of twenty-five such questions (thirteen with calculator, twelve without) and I had forty-five minutes in which to solve them. This left me some time to compose a few mathematical questions of my own. For example:

Do free-functioning, autonomous adults really get stuck with such crummy auto insurance policies?

Or:

If someone needs to look for campsites every 10,000 feet, is she really ready to carry her full share of the nation’s work?

The mathematics sections are by far the easiest in the entire battery of exams, but still: If questions like those on the *Official GED Practice Tests* are sufficient to distinguish those Americans who have earned high school diplomas from those who have not, then something is wrong with American secondary education.

Of course the institution that administers the GED tests, the ACE, cannot be held accountable for the condition of America’s high schools. What the ACE can be held accountable for is the condition of its website.

### III.

It turns out that GED stands not for Graduation Equivalency Degree, but for General Educational Development. Who knew? Consequently, you cannot “get a GED.” You can only “take a GED *test*” or “earn a GED *credential*.” And as for whether or not that credential was interchangeable with a high school diploma, in May 2009, the ACE’s website had this to say:

To pass the five-test battery, the GED test-taker must demonstrate a level of knowledge and skill that meets or surpasses that of approximately 60 percent of graduating high school seniors.... A standard score is used to compare a test-taker’s performance on a test to the performance of graduating high school seniors who took the test.

The scoring is constructed such that results approximate a normal distribution, with a mean score of 500 and a standard deviation of 100. The website goes on:

For the 2002 Series GED Tests, the minimum passing standard set by the GED Testing Service® is an average standard score of 450 or greater across the five content area tests (a total standard score of 2250 or greater) and, in addition, a standard score of 410 or greater on each content area test.

This is puzzling: If the mean score is 500 and the standard deviation is 100, then a test taker who scores 450 has been outperformed by more than two-thirds of the other test-takers. So how is it that a student who takes all five parts of the GED test, and who does worse than two-thirds of U.S. graduating high school seniors on all five parts, can earn a credential saying she has demonstrated “a level of knowledge and skill that meets or surpasses that of approximately 60 percent of graduating high school seniors?”

Well, she cannot.

The ACE’s *Technical Manual* (available for download on its website) explains the statistics underlying the GED in some detail and states unequivocally what it means to earn a GED credential:

It was estimated that the new passing standard was met by 58 percent of graduating high school seniors in the norm group.

In other words, in May 2009, the ACE’s own website had it backwards: It is not the case that the GED test taker must demonstrate a level of knowledge and skill that meets or surpasses that of approximately 60 percent of graduating high school seniors. Rather, it is the

case that approximately 60 percent of graduating high school seniors will meet or surpass the level of knowledge and skill that it takes to pass the GED test.

I do not believe that the ACE was trying to mislead anyone; all that happened, I suspect, was that when the ACE wrote its website, it made a mathematical mistake. Still, if the ACE cannot manage to avoid making mistakes relating to the very knowledge and skill that the GED test presumes to judge, what sort of indicator of the test takers' knowledge and skill can the GED test be?

#### IV.

Probably not a fair one. The *Official GED Practice Tests* include a letter from Joan C. Auchter, executive director of the GED Testing Service, stating that the *Official GED Practice Tests* are "similar in content, difficulty and format to the actual GED Tests." It seems fair, then, to judge the actual GED tests based on the practice ones. And consider:

Question 15 in the social studies booklet refers to a graph titled "Deaths from International Wars, 1820–1980." For each decade from 1820 to 1980, this graph shows how many millions of humans were killed in international wars. Question 15 then reads:

Which question about the history of international wars can be answered by using information in the graph?

- (1) Why did the number of deaths caused by war increase in the twentieth century?
- (2) During which decade in the twentieth century did war cause the most deaths?
- (3) To what extent did the number of war deaths change in 1990?
- (4) How many civilians, compared with soldiers, died in international wars?
- (5) Which areas of the world have been most severely affected by war?

Choice (1) is wrong because the graph contains no information about the reasons for the casualties. Choice (2) is wrong because the graph contains no information about the last two decades of the twentieth century. Choice (3) is wrong for the same reason. Choices (4) and (5) are wrong because the graph contains no information about civilian versus noncivilian casualties, and no information about geographical regions. Does the actual GED test also contain questions like this sample one, i.e., multiple-choice questions with no correct choice provided among the answers?

Then there are the multiple-choice questions that have multiple correct answers. In the

science section of the exam, Question 3 reads:

Which of the following statements could be derived directly from the fact that Earth rotates on a tilted axis while revolving around the Sun?

- (1) Earth is widest at the equator.
- (2) While the Northern Hemisphere experiences winter, the Southern Hemisphere experiences summer.
- (3) Most of Earth's surface is covered by ocean.
- (4) The desert area of East Africa increases in size every year.
- (5) Erosion occurs in a west-to-east pattern.

Choice (2) is certainly the expected answer, but choice (1) is also correct, because one result of the Earth's rotation about an axis is that the planet has an equatorial bulge. In some ways, choice (1) is even better than choice (2): The only thing an astronomer needs to know in order to conclude that a celestial body the size of Earth has an equatorial bulge is that the celestial body rotates about an axis; thus, choice (1) can be derived unequivocally from the facts presented. But an astronomer can only conclude that a planet with a tilted axis experiences seasons if she assumes that the planet's axis does not rotate annually relative to the axis of that planet's sun; thus, choice (2) cannot be derived unequivocally from the facts presented.

And then there are the questions where the test descends into nonsense. Here is Question 24 from the science section of the exam:

In order to cut her grass, Georgette recently purchased a string trimmer with the following instructions.

**Mixing Instructions for 2-Cycle Engine Oil**

Mix 2-cycle oil with unleaded gasoline in a 24:1 ratio of gasoline (gallons) to oil (ounces). Use the mixing instructions from an 8-ounce container of 2-cycle engine oil as listed in the following table.					
Ratio	16:1	20:1	24:1	32:1	40:1
Gas (Gal)	1.0	1.25	1.5	2.0	2.5
Oil (Oz)	8.0	8.0	8.0	8.0	8.0

Georgette needs to fill the trimmer's engine properly before she uses it. Which amount of gasoline should she mix with the contents of the oil container?

- (1) 1.0 gallon
- (2) 1.25 gallons
- (3) 1.5 gallons
- (4) 2.0 gallons
- (5) 2.5 gallons

The author of this question could not decide what she was writing: the instructions that came with the string trimmer or the instructions that were printed on the 8-oz. container of oil. If she was writing the instructions printed on the container of oil, then why did she say they were the instructions that came with the string trimmer? But if she was writing the instructions that came with the string trimmer, why did she have them include a table with such explosive and/or carcinogenic gas-to-oil ratios as 16:1 and 40:1, when, according to the premise of the question, the manufacturer of the string trimmer knows that the only sane ratio is 24:1? Yet, is the ratio 24:1? As in 1 *ounce* of oil to 24 *ounces* of gas? In which case 8 ounces of oil would need to be mixed with 192 ounces—or 1.5 gallons—of gas? Because that would seem, based on the available answers, to be what the author of the question believes. And yet, in the opening sentence of the instructions the author write that the ratio 1 *ounce* of oil to 24 *gallons* of gas, meaning that of every 1 ounce of oil requires 3072 ounces of gas and that 8 ounces of oil require no fewer than 24,576 ounces of gasoline? What knowledge and skills are tested by this question, except the knowledge and skills of ignoring the idiocy of the question? And anyway, what the fuck does putting gas into a weed whacker have to do with science?

A multiple-choice question is fair only if it poses one (and only one) clear problem, and only if it presents one (and only one) correct solution. The questions in the *Official GED Practice Tests* fail to meet this standard far too often.

## V.

The ACE prefers to project optimism. The instruction sheet accompanying its *Official GED Practice Tests* is written with characteristic cheer:

The GED diploma is widely recognized by universities, colleges, community colleges, training programs, employers, and in some cases, the U.S. military.... Well-known GED graduates include entertainer and author Bill Cosby, Wendy's founder Dave Thomas, U.S. Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell, comedian Chris Rock, ABC News anchor Peter Jennings, and Parade magazine publisher Walter Anderson.

So it is curious how abruptly the tone shifts in the language arts section of the exam. That section has two halves, reading and writing. In the reading exam, test takers are presented

with page-length excerpts from such works as *My Antonia*, and are then asked questions that Willa Cather herself would not want to answer:

On the basis of Antonia's character as revealed in this excerpt, how would she most likely act toward Jim if he returned in the future?

She would probably

- (1) accuse him of ignoring her
- (2) demand that he leave again immediately
- (3) welcome him with friendship
- (4) cling to him passionately
- (5) insist that he stay with her forever

In the writing exam, test takers are presented with more page-length excerpts, and are then asked to identify the grammatical and stylistic errors that have been planted within those texts. The excerpts that appear in the reading half are:

- The Paul Laurence Dunbar poem *Sympathy*, which is the poem ending in the line "I know why the caged bird sings!"
- A few dozen lines from Willa Cather's aforementioned *My Antonia*. The narrator, Jim, having moved away and become a lawyer, returns to Antonia and listens to her romantic attempts to console herself for a past that is lost.
- A fictional excerpt from the *Strathmore College Employee Handbook*, listing off all the reasons that employees of the college can be fired for just cause, including insubordination, intoxication, excessive absenteeism, and sexual harassment.
- A few dozen lines from Neil Simon's *Barefoot in the Park*, in which Mother visits Corie's and Paul's apartment and is horrified by how small and wretched it is.

In the writing half, the excerpts are:

- A fictional letter from Debra Weddington to a Michael Carper, threatening litigation over the outrageously bad service Debra received when she purchased a sofa from Mr. Carper's furniture store.
- A fictional letter from Michael Langford to Carlos Montanez, telling Carlos about the advantages of taking a one-year, \$450 correspondence course from the Trotter Institute of Electronics and thereby earning a certificate of electronics.

- An essay on how to take photographs that includes such insights as: “Black-and-white photographs, still high in popularity, create a very artistic mood. Color, on the other hand, may be more appropriate for pictures of the family reunion or autumn landscapes.”

So, no, the America of the language arts exam is not an America where a GED credential ensures success; it is not an America of Bill Cosbys and Chris Rocks and Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbells. No, this America offers only cramped apartments, only ugly rooms furnished with sofas sold by sleazy extortionists who take your money and won't give it back until you threaten them with lawsuits. This America offers only cut-rate correspondence courses, taken at home and resulting in degrees of dubious value. The college campuses of this America are not places to earn a BS or a BA, but rather places that pay \$1 more than minimum wage to run a weed whacker around the quad, which you need to do in order to afford your unconscionable auto insurance premiums; they are not places to meet other bright young citizens, but places that discipline you for your perennial intoxication, your constant absenteeism, your filthy habit of sexual harassment. This America offers one way to express your “very artistic moods”: black-and-white photography. Success? No. In this America, the only success went to the children who were diligent enough to graduate from high school and law school, who were shrewd enough to move far away.

And so we find a paradox at the center of that quintessentially American institution, the GED test. According to the promotional materials put out by the women and men who wrote the test, every American gets a second chance, every American mistake can be corrected, every American miseducation can be atoned for; yet according to the test itself, this is a hard life, and nothing ever works out. In other words, to judge by the ACE's marketing, America as a nation is fair; to judge by the *Official GED Practice Tests*, the GED as an exam is not. Every year, thousands of brave and honorable citizens study for the GED; and when they are done, they get the results.

*Question 2: On the basis of the reviewer's character as revealed in this five-part essay on the GED Test, how would he most likely feel toward someone who tells him that they have recently earned their GED credential?*

*He would probably feel*

- (1) *The same as he feels toward 60 percent of American high school graduates.*
- (2) *The same as he feels toward 40 percent of American high school graduates.*
- (3) *The same as he feels toward author Willa Cather.*
- (4) *The same as he feels toward ACE executive director Joan C. Auchter.*
- (5) *Some admiration and some pity.*