

GMAT Timing Strategy Guide

Don't Let Timing Issues Keep You from
Scoring 700+ on the GMAT!

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Why Focus on Timing Strategy?

Have you already put a ton of hours into your GMAT prep, but still find your practice test scores stuck in the 600s? Are you worried that you will never break through to achieve the 700+ GMAT score that will get you into the business school that you are striving for?

In working with one-on-one tutoring students who are scoring in the 600s, I have often found that the key to breaking through the 700-point barrier is an effective timing strategy. My mission is to spread the word that GMAT timing issues are not hard to address. So, **please** share this guide with anyone that you care about who is taking the GMAT.

As I was saying, fixing GMAT timing issues doesn't have to take a lot of work. However, just as you would in business, you have to be willing to change your approach if it's not working. If you are feeling rushed on either the Quant or the Verbal section, or both, this GMAT Timing Strategy Guide is meant for you.

Before we get into the details, let me give away the punchline: The key to any effective GMAT timing strategy is to **BE WILLING TO LET QUESTIONS GO**. That sounds simple enough, but many people find that it is easier said than done.

In this guide, I'm going to give you some detailed advice and tips on how to strategically let questions go. Keep in mind that the approach I describe is **not** the only way you can implement the idea of letting questions go. You may need to tweak the approach to work best for you, as I do with my one-on-one tutoring students. Still, you must have a strategy for letting questions go if you are going to overcome any timing issues that you are having on the GMAT, and the ideas in this guide are a great starting point.

There may be other things that you need to work on in order to break the 700-point barrier, such as learning concepts or practicing more efficient approaches to questions. However, if you are feeling rushed on the Quant or Verbal section, and you refuse to let questions go, it will be virtually impossible to score a 700 on the GMAT unless you are some kind of super genius. Even then, there are some very smart people who have scored very poorly on the GMAT because they were unwilling to let questions go.

Now that you know why your timing strategy is so important, let's talk about the mindset that you need to effectively manage your time on the GMAT.

A Key Mindset Shift

Many people believe that, in order to achieve a 700+ point score on the GMAT, they need to try their best to get every question right. This is simply not true. Instead, the key to breaking through the 700-point barrier is to not miss easy questions.

Most people don't have enough time to fully work through every question that they get on the GMAT. This means that they need to let some difficult questions go so that they have time to devote to getting easy questions right. If you do this, you will spend less time on questions that you are likely to get wrong anyway, and more time on questions that you are likely to get right.

An important side effect of this is that you spend less time feeling frustrated as you spin your wheels on questions you are going to miss, and more time confidently moving forward on questions that you do know how to do. In addition, you feel less rushed, and as a result you are able to think more clearly and avoid silly mistakes.

Think about it: Two of the things that the GMAT is testing are resource management and ability to perform under pressure. Allocating your scarce resource of time to the questions you are most likely to get correct allows you to maximize your score. In addition, the GMAT punishes you for being stubborn and hanging on to questions, while it rewards you for being flexible and willing to let go of questions when you see that they are not likely to work out well for you.

With this motivation for taking on this new mindset, let's get into the details of my GMAT timing strategy.

Two Ways To Let Go Of Questions

There are two distinct situations in which you will want to let questions go:

- 1) When you have spent some time working on a question and see that you are not making progress, or you just don't understand how to proceed, you will want to guess and move on so that you don't waste any more of your valuable time on this question. I call this "Cutting Your Losses".
- 2) When you know that you are behind on time, you will want to strategically choose questions to not work on at all, so that you can gain back time that you have lost on previous questions. I call this "Punting".

Let's look more closely at these two strategies for effectively managing your time on the GMAT.

Cutting Your Losses

I recommend using the Cutting Your Losses strategy all of the time, regardless of whether you are behind on time or not. The one exception is if there is a section of the test on which you never feel rushed, in which case you don't need to worry about Cutting Your Losses on questions on this section of the test.

Signs that you should Cut Your Losses on a question include:

- You read the question, and you have no idea of how to approach it
- The first way that you did the question did not get you to an answer, and, after taking a step back, you don't see a clear path to get to the answer

The Cutting Your Losses strategy will be particularly important for you if you are feeling rushed on a section of the test and, when you review your timing for that section of your practice tests, you find that:

- You spend more than 4 minutes on some questions, even if you are getting many of those questions right, or
- You are missing most of the questions that take you more than 3 minutes

Tips for Cutting Your Losses on Quant

- You may read a Quant question and have no idea how to approach it. On a question like this, Cutting Your Losses early on in the process can help both your timing and your state of mind. The less time you spend spinning your wheels on questions you don't understand, the more time you have for questions that you do know how to do. You will probably feel better and perform better if you spend less time feeling frustrated by questions and more time feeling confident in your approach to questions.
- There will be other Quant questions for which your first approach does not get you to an answer. If you know that timing is an issue for you on Quant, I suggest Cutting Your Losses at that point, unless you see a clear way at that point to arrive at an answer. Taking multiple time-consuming approaches to a Quant question can get you behind on time in a hurry, so you want to be vigilant about avoiding this if Quant timing is an issue for you.
- Once you have decided to Cut Your Losses, I don't recommend spending a lot of time on your guessing process. If you quickly see reasons that some of the answer choices can't be right, eliminate those and guess from among the remaining answer choices. Remember that your goal in Cutting Your Losses is to save time, so you don't want to spend a lot of time on guessing!
- On some Data Sufficiency questions, you may know what to do with one statement, but not the other. On these questions, first evaluate the statement that you know how to deal with to eliminate 2 or 3 answer choices. If you still don't know how to evaluate the other statement, you can Cut Your Losses by guessing from the remaining 2 or 3 answer choices. That way, you improve your odds over guessing from all 5 answer choices.

Tips for Cutting Your Losses on Verbal

- On the vast majority of Verbal questions, using a process of elimination is your most efficient and effective strategy. If you can eliminate some obviously incorrect answers before Cutting Your Losses, you will improve your chances of getting that question right without spending too much time on the question.
- On Sentence Correction questions, your goal is to find differences between answer choices that make one or more of the answer choices clearly wrong, and eliminate those answer choices. When you run out of differences to use to eliminate answer choices, that can be a good time to Cut Your Losses. Once you decide to Cut Your Losses, I recommend going with your instincts, rather than against them, about which of the remaining answer choices is right.
- When you are down to the last 2 or 3 answer choices on a Critical Reasoning or Reading Comprehension question, there is often a detail that is wrong in all but one of the answer choices. If you can't identify why any of the remaining answer choices are wrong, that can be a good time to Cut Your Losses. When you are guessing between the remaining answer choices, I recommend choosing the one that sounds the most general, because it is least likely to have a detail that makes it wrong.
- When you run into a Reading Comprehension passage that is difficult to understand, I don't recommend Cutting Your Losses on the entire passage. Instead, read the passage with a focus on the organization, and don't worry about understanding the details of the content. You may find that some of the questions are not too difficult to answer. If you don't reach an answer on a particular question, use the tip above to Cut Your Losses on that specific question.

Punting

Unlike the Cutting Your Losses strategy, I recommend that you only use the Punting strategy when you are behind on time. So, how do you know if you are behind on time? I'm glad you asked!

First, let me tell you what **not** to do. Don't look at the clock all of the time. In order to perform your best, your attention needs to be primarily focused on the question that you are working on, so looking at the clock too often will take away from your ability to focus on each question. Instead, I recommend checking your timing at 5 specific points during the Quant and Verbal sections.

Although I am going to recommend a specific set of benchmarks to start with, please keep in mind that the optimal timing strategy can vary from person to person. I typically recommend personalized adjustments to timing strategy when working with one-on-one tutoring students. If you find that the following timing benchmarks don't allow you to finish a section on time, or leave you with a lot of extra time at the end of a section, you may want to adjust the timing benchmarks that you use for that section.

Timing Benchmarks

With that said, here are the timing benchmarks that I recommend:

Quant benchmark	Verbal benchmark	Time left
Start of question 7	Start of question 8	50 minutes
Start of question 12	Start of question 14	40 minutes
Start of question 17	Start of question 20	30 minutes
Start of question 22	Start of question 26	20 minutes
Start of question 27	Start of question 32	10 minutes

When you hit a given benchmark, if you find that you have at least the recommended amount of time left, you don't need to do anything special. Just keep doing what you were doing.

If you find that you have less time left than you should, implement your Punting strategy to catch up, so that you are not rushed later in that section of the test. I recommend that you plan to Punt one question for every 1.5 minutes that you are behind the benchmark time. For example, if you are 1.5 to 3.0 minutes behind, punt 1 question; if you are 3 to 4.5 minutes behind, punt 2 questions; and so on. For each question that you Punt, you will save about 1.5 minutes compared to the average of 2 minutes that you have to do each question, if you make the decision to Punt within the first 30 seconds of starting a question.

Choosing Questions To Punt

Note that you want to be strategic about which questions you choose to Punt. Remember that our goal is to take time away from questions that we are less likely to get right, so that we can allocate that time to questions that we are more likely to get right. So, instead of just Punting the next question that you see, strategically choose questions to Punt by reading each question and choosing to Punt when:

- You aren't sure how to do the question, or
- The only way that you see to do the question looks time-consuming

You may also know that there are particular types of questions that you tend to miss often, or that tend to take you longer than average. If you read a question and you recognize that it is one of these types of questions, these can be good questions to choose to Punt. However, I do recommend at least reading the question even if it is one of these types of questions, just in case you see how to answer the question quickly, in which case I recommend working on the question.

Let's take a look at special considerations for Punting on the Quant, Verbal, and Integrated Reasoning sections of the test.

Tips for Punting on Quant

- Any time you read a Quant question and don't have any idea about how to approach it, that is a good sign that the question is a good choice to Punt.
- Most people take longer, on average, to answer Problem Solving questions than to answer Data Sufficiency questions, so Problem Solving questions are usually a better choice to Punt. Still, don't hesitate to Punt a Data Sufficiency question if you just don't understand it, or you only see a time-consuming approach to answer it.
- If you know that there are specific types of Quant questions that tend to take you a long time, or that you tend to miss most of the time, these can be good choices to Punt. However, I recommend reading the question through once, just in case you can see that this question is easy for you, because it hurts your score most to miss easy questions.

Tips for Punting on Verbal

- I definitely recommend against Punting entire Reading Comprehension passages. You want to choose to Punt specific questions that are difficult for you, and Punting an entire passage does not allow you to do this.
- I usually recommend against Punting single Reading Comprehension questions, because, once you have read a Reading Comprehension passage, each question should not take you very long to answer, so you won't save much time by Punting a typical Reading Comprehension question. However, if you read a Reading Comprehension question and see that it will likely take you a long time, that could be a good question to Punt.
- For most people, Critical Reasoning questions are good choices for to Punt on the Verbal section, because they tend to take longer than Sentence Correction questions. While they are not very common, Critical Reasoning questions that ask you to find an answer choice that mimics the structure of the original argument are often time-consuming and can be good choices to Punt if you see them.
- If you know that certain types of Sentence Correction questions tend to take you a long time, these can also be good choices to Punt. For example, many people find that Sentence Correction questions with long underlined portions take longer to answer, and these may be good choices to Punt.

Tips for Punting on Integrated Reasoning

- Punting can be effective on the Integrated Reasoning section, even though I don't have specific time benchmarks to use. If you know from previous practice tests that you are rushed for time on Integrated Reasoning, plan to Punt 1 or 2 questions.
- Remember that you don't get partial credit on Integrated Reasoning questions. You will need to choose to Punt a question when you are first reading it, so that you Punt all parts of the question, rather than spending time working on one part of the question and Punting a later part of the question.
- As you do on Quant and Verbal, strategically choose which Integrated Reasoning questions to Punt. If you read a question and don't understand how to approach it, that can be a good choice to Punt. You may also know that you are more likely to get certain types of questions wrong; if so, questions of these types can be good choices to Punt.

Cutting Your Losses When You Are Behind On Time

When you find yourself behind on time at one of the first two benchmarks, another way to make up time is to choose to Cut Your Losses earlier in your process on a question. This means being more strict in holding yourself to Cutting Your Losses whenever either of these two criteria is met:

- You read the question, and you have no idea of how to approach it
- The first way that you did the question did not get you to an answer, and, after taking a step back, you don't see a quick way to get to the answer

If you are not far behind a benchmark, you may find that being more strict in Cutting Your Losses is enough to allow you to catch up. However, if you arrive at the last benchmark and find that you are still behind on time, at that point I recommend Punting to give yourself the best opportunity to finish the section without rushing.

Cutting Your Losses Before the First Benchmark

Some people consistently find that they are far behind at the first benchmark and thus need to Punt a lot of questions to catch up. Because Punting a large number of questions can also hurt your score, this is a situation that you want to avoid.

Some people find themselves far behind because they have heard that the first 10 questions on a section are very important, so they choose to spend a lot of time on these questions. However, it is important to realize that you can significantly hurt your score by spending too much time on the questions at the start of a section, if that forces you to Punt a lot of questions later in the section or leaves you unable to complete the section.

If you are often find yourself far behind at the first benchmark, being more strict about Cutting Your Losses before the first benchmark can help you to reduce the number of questions that you need to Punt, or eliminate the need to Punt entirely.

Do Not Be Tempted To Rush!

When they find that they are behind on time, many people are tempted to make up time by rushing through questions. However, this approach leads to making mistakes that can cause you to miss relatively easy questions, and this is what hurts your score the most. To reduce your chances of missing easy questions, do **not** rush through the following:

- Reading the question carefully (note that this does not mean reading a Reading Comprehension passage in detail)
- Doing mathematical calculations (although it is worth taking a step back to ask whether you can avoid doing those calculations, for example by looking at the answer choices or using approximation)
- Identifying differences in the details of Verbal answer choices (with the goal of finding a detail that makes one of the answer choices wrong)

Please don't be tempted to rush through questions when you find yourself behind on time! Remember, rushing through questions leads to making mistakes on relatively easy questions, and I can't emphasize enough how much missing easy questions hurts your score. In addition, not making up the time and failing to answer all of the questions on a section hurts your score even more.

Cutting Your Losses or Punting allows you to make up time without rushing through questions. Instead, you are allocating your time away from questions that you are likely to get wrong, or that would take you a long time, and allocating more of your time to questions that you are likely to get correct in a reasonable amount of time. This is the key to maximizing your score on the GMAT!

What If You Are Having Trouble Letting Questions Go?

There are a variety of reasons why you might have trouble letting questions go. It may go against your nature to “give up” on a challenge. Or you may be concerned that letting questions go will hurt your score, even though in my experience **not** letting questions go and then having to rush through relatively easy questions at the end of the section hurts your score even more.

If you are hesitant to try letting questions go, I recommend trying it in a low-stakes setting. Choose one practice test on which you commit to letting questions go, regardless of the impact on your score, and see how it goes. It may take a few practice tests to really refine your timing strategy so that you maximize your score improvement. However, if you can see on your first try that it at least does not hurt your score significantly, I hope that gives you more motivation to stick with this timing strategy so that it ultimately pays off in terms of a higher score.

Is Timing Strategy The Only Thing I Need To Work On?

Of course, if you have time and want to get the biggest score increase possible, working on your timing strategy is not the only piece of the puzzle. You can also make gains by reviewing and practicing the topics that are most challenging for you, and by learning and practicing approaches that allow you to answer questions more efficiently. However, if you feel rushed at all during practice tests, improving your timing strategy is probably the fastest way to increase your score in a short amount of time.