

A.2 · Abstract algebra and number theory

GRE · GRE Subject Test · GRE Mathematics

Scope and prerequisites

Undergraduate GRE preparation. Local objectives within the reviewed ETS scope; this is original teaching, not an official test or score predictor.

Prerequisites: Integer arithmetic, sets, functions and proof by counterexample.

- Use groups, subgroups, homomorphisms and quotient structures
- Distinguish rings, integral domains and fields
- Apply divisibility, congruences and elementary number theory

homomorphism : A map preserving the relevant operation.

field : A commutative ring where each nonzero element has an inverse.

Choose and justify a method

A group needs closure, associativity, identity and inverses. Commutativity is an additional condition.

A homomorphism preserves the operation. Its kernel is a normal subgroup and identifies elements mapping to the identity.

A field permits division by every nonzero element. Integers form a ring but not a field.

Work with congruences modulo n . A residue a has a multiplicative inverse exactly when $\gcd(a, n) = 1$.

Worked reasoning

Modulo 8, 3 has inverse 3 because $3 \cdot 3 = 9 \equiv 1$. But 2 has no inverse because $\gcd(2, 8) = 2$.

Modulo a prime, every nonzero residue has an inverse; this gives a finite field.

Same addition rule; different invertibility

Ring	Multiplicative units	Check
mod 5	1, 2, 3, 4	every nonzero residue
mod 6	1, 5	2 times 3 is zero

Original course illustration; its values belong to the worked example, not the later practice.

Conditions and counterexamples

Do not cancel a factor in a modular equation without checking that it is invertible.

Guided application

Compare the additive groups and multiplicative structures of $\mathbb{Z}/5\mathbb{Z}$ and $\mathbb{Z}/6\mathbb{Z}$. List all multiplicative units in each. Explain why removing zero does not always leave a multiplicative group.

■ Worked solution

Both whole residue sets are additive groups: closure, associativity and identity come from integer addition, and $-a$ is an additive inverse. A multiplicative residue is a unit precisely when its greatest common divisor with the modulus is one. The units modulo five are 1, 2, 3, 4; modulo six they are 1, 5. Modulo six, $2 \cdot 3 = 0$ although both factors are nonzero. The nonzero set is not even closed under multiplication. Modulo five every nonzero residue has an inverse; this ring is a field. A ring, its additive group and its group of units are different structures.

Independent transfer

The reduction map $\phi : \mathbb{Z} \rightarrow \mathbb{Z}/6\mathbb{Z}$ is given by $\phi(n) = [n]$. Determine its kernel, image and quotient. Solve $2x \equiv 2 \pmod{6}$ completely and explain why cancelling 2 modulo 6 fails.

■ Check after attempting

The map preserves addition and multiplication. Its kernel is $6\mathbb{Z}$ and its image is all six residues. The quotient identifies integers with the same remainder, so $\mathbb{Z}/\ker\phi \cong \mathbb{Z}/6\mathbb{Z}$. The congruence means $6 \mid 2(x-1)$, equivalently $3 \mid x-1$. Hence $x \equiv 1 \pmod{3}$, giving residues 1 and 4 modulo six. Both substitute correctly. Cancelling 2 while retaining modulus six would discard 4; 2 has no multiplicative inverse there.