

Homework That Helps

Ronald L. Partin, Ph.D.

Homework, like any other instructional technique, is only a means to an end. Its value is determined by how well it furthers other educational objectives. If it does neither, it is busy work and serves little constructive purpose.

Many critics argue that too little homework is assigned and that learning time can be increased cheaply by requiring more homework. A recent national study emphasized that more than two-thirds of seventeen-year-olds reported spending less than one hour a night on homework. It is not surprising that the same study revealed that higher achieving students spent more time per week on homework than their classmates and that hours of television viewing and time spent on homework were inversely related.

How much homework you should assign is a complex question. The answer depends upon your students' age, abilities, and habits, and your instructional objectives. It is probably reasonable to expect students to spend an hour per day on homework by the end of elementary school. High school students who have study halls should be able to complete two or three hours of work per day out of class. When students have several teachers, some coordination is needed among the faculty on the homework schedule. Otherwise, some students may end up with five or six hours of homework in an evening, which is an unreasonable amount. Students, like teachers, do need some rest and recreation.

Merely assigning more homework will not guarantee learning gains. Assignments that are not completed or are done incorrectly are of little benefit. Like seatwork, homework assignments that are too difficult or misunderstood will prove counterproductive.

Activities such as reading the text can be done out of class, preserving class time for those activities that cannot be done independently.

Homework can be assigned to provide remedial instruction to students who lag in skill development. When the purpose of homework is to provide remediation, giving the same "blanket" assignment to all students is hardly justified, as students progress at different rates. The assignment of homework provides the golden opportunity for individualization, although it does require advance planning.

Although reading assignments, short essay answers, and drill problems comprise the bulk of homework assignments, long-range projects seem to be of greater benefit. Such projects encourage students to use higher level cognitive skills in gathering information, analyzing data, planning sequences, and synthesizing a variety of skills.

Lastly, do not use homework as a punishment. That practice only communicates to students that homework is an unpleasant activity to be avoided. Such negative attitudes will not benefit either the teacher or the students.

Interesting Homework

Used effectively, homework reinforces practice and synthesis of skills and concepts developed in class. When asked by his father whether he had any homework, a boy replied, "No, the teachers ran out of fluid." This anecdote reveals the lack of imagination of many teachers in assigning homework.

Professional journals, in-service programs, and other teachers are sources for gathering ideas on worthwhile homework assignments. A bit of imagination and planning can yield assignments with high interest value and can accomplish skill development. Here are a few ideas tried successfully by other teachers.

- Interview people about their jobs
- Design an ideal house, car, government, or school
- Develop a creative solution to a problem
- Trace family trees to personalize history
- Interview an older person about a historical event he or she experienced
- Develop an advertising campaign to promote a product, solution, or idea
- Use math skills to measure common objects around the home
- Plan a trip; include itinerary and costs
- Plan a week's balanced menu
- Collect specimens of rocks, leaves, and wood
- Invent a game; teach it to the class
- Develop a budget
- Take sides on an issue' prepare a debate
- Draw a political cartoon
- Plan and produce a film or skit
- Write a new myth
- Conduct experiments
- Design a costume
- Do volunteer work
- Observe and record birds, traffic, or weather
- Draw a map of the neighborhood or yard
- Write new endings to old stories
- Teach someone a skill
- Develop a case study
- Keep a journal
- Attend a public meeting
- Prepare a photo essay on a community problem
- Write a computer program
- Write a handbook for consumers
- Research a topic and create a bulletin board display
- Participate in a political campaign

Such "fun with a purpose" assignments can greatly increase students' motivation. The relevance of the skills you are teaching becomes apparent. They must be not only fun but also must have a legitimate educational purpose to justify their use.

Making Assignments

The first week of school, clarify your expectations regarding homework. Will work not finished in class automatically become homework? If you do not make a specific assignment for the next class, will students be expected to read in their texts or review previous work? The procedures for assigning homework must be taught as part of the classroom routine.

Do not compete with student noise when giving oral directions. Stop talking and wait for their attention. Otherwise you will end up repeating the directions. Save time and stress by putting directions for assignments on the board. If you prefer, cover them with a map until you are ready to discuss them. Many teachers choose to put all assignments on ditto sheets for distribution. This minimizes later student remarks such as, "I didn't hear you" or "I didn't know you wanted it done that way." Be sure to write clearly. Save the master copy for use next year. If any problems of understanding arise in completing the assignment, make a note on the master to refine the directions next year. Avoid shouting the next day's assignment over students gathering books as they scramble for the door.

In assigning major projects, displaying completed sample projects will clarify your expectations and save time answering questions. Some teachers take pictures or slides of completed products for next year's demonstration.

It may be helpful to reserve specific days for regular assignments. For example, on Tuesdays students are to read the next chapter in the text; Thursdays they review the drill questions at the end of the chapter. You will have fewer assignments to plan every week and students will be less likely to forget what their assignment is.

The Homework Lottery

One strategy used successfully by teachers at all grade levels for motivating students to complete homework assignments is the lottery. The idea is

relatively simple and easy to implement yet can encourage otherwise apathetic students to complete their work.

All students who successfully complete their homework for the day put their names on small cards which are dropped in a jar or box. On Friday, a drawing is held, selecting one or more winners.

What the winners receive is quite secondary. Just the recognition of having their names drawn is rewarding for most students. Most will value a privilege, such as being first in line all week or using the tape recorder or computer. Some teachers become proficient at scrounging for freebies such as tickets, posters, coupons, and prizes.

One prize valued by students is a coupon good for one night of no homework.

Instead of handing in homework, the holder may redeem the coupon. If the student did the assignments necessary to win the coupon, one night of missed work will not likely be irreparable.

Students soon learn that the more times their names are in the jar, the greater are their chances of winning. Of course, you must ensure that the only way to get their names in the jar is to complete their homework. It may be wise to specify a criterion of correctness for work submitted if students begin handing in hurriedly completed assignments.

Homework, not busy work, can enhance academic achievement. The directions must be clearly stated, and the homework must hold at least minimal interest for students if it is to succeed.

Originally published as: Ronald L. Partin (1986). Homework that helps. *The Clearinghouse*, 60(3), 118-119. All rights reserved.

Ron Partin, former teacher and university professor, conducts workshops on creative problem solving, time amangement, and goal setting. For more information check his web site at <ronpartin.com>. Contact: ronpartin@bgnnet.bgsu.edu