

Homework Philosophy

Homework can be one of the most frustrating and time consuming aspects of teaching. I have actually seen teachers become so frustrated with homework that they have thrown in the towel, and just don't assign it anymore.

While I think throwing in the towel is wrong, I will say this: I would rather see a teacher not assign homework at all, than assign it in the wrong way.

Let's get one thing straight right away: Teaching is **NOT** a correspondence course. Therefore, homework should **NEVER** be used to teach new material.

Homework should be a fairly short assignment that reinforces what was done in class that day (or even previous days).

So what is the right way to give homework?

You need to start by understanding the amount of homework to give.

The purpose of homework is for students to reinforce and practice a concept learned in class. If you can do that with 10 questions, why give them 25 for homework? The students either understand the concept or they don't. If they do, great, they have practiced it and reinforced it with the 10 questions. However, if they don't, the last thing you want students to do is keep reinforcing the wrong method or wrong concept by making them continue to do more questions incorrectly.

Remember: It is much more difficult to un-teach something than to teach it right the first time. If students are reinforcing incorrect learning, teachers will be forced to un-teach something.

Also, you must keep in mind the amount of time homework will take your students to complete.

Let's say a teacher gave her students 25 math problems for homework and each problem took 2-3 minutes to complete. That teacher just gave her students 50-75 minutes of homework in their math subject alone.

Now please don't kid yourself, this will lead to one thing only: **Good Copiers**. That's right, a handful of students will actually do the homework and the rest will copy it—which is actually better than having students reinforce the wrong concept by having them complete 25 math problems that they don't understand.

A good rule of thumb here is roughly 10 minutes of homework per grade level for the total amount of homework given.

Yes, that means an 8th grade student should have roughly 80 minutes of TOTAL homework. If an 8th grade student has 5 subjects for homework, each should be roughly 16 minutes.

And, don't forget, that homework should be reinforcing what students have already learned, it should NOT teach new material.

Homework & Time Management

One of the major problems teachers have with homework is the impact on time management.

Unfortunately, time management issues lead many to teachers to make poor decisions about homework—not going over homework, not grading homework, or not even assigning homework. These are mistakes.

- First of all, a teacher should not assign homework if the teacher does not intend to go over that homework in some fashion; otherwise, the students will never know if they were doing it right or not. Also, if not going over homework becomes a habit, students will look at it as just “busy work”, rather than something that is important.

Remember: If homework is important enough to give, it is important enough to go over.

- Likewise, teachers must also grade the homework. For one, students must be held accountable for the homework. If teachers don't grade the homework, they will see more and more students simply stop doing it. (Wouldn't you?)

- Lastly, if teachers are not giving homework at all, they are missing out on a great opportunity to increase students' comprehension of the material.

However, here is some good news: Teachers can actually give homework, go over homework, and grade homework in a way that is not time consuming.

The answer lies in how you grade the homework and how much weight you give homework in the student's overall average.

Here is a solution: Homework should not exceed 12-15% of the student's total average. A student's homework average should only raise or lower their overall average by a few points in either direction. Homework grades should never bump a 75 class average to a 95 average. Likewise, a student with an 80 average should never fail a class because he did not do his homework.

Here is another solution: When grading homework, give students one of three grades:

- \checkmark = full credit = 100%
- $\frac{1}{2}$ = half credit = 50%
- x = no credit = 0%

Simply keep a tally and then do some simple division to calculate their final homework average.

For example, if Sally does 10 out of 10 homework assignments and received a \checkmark on all of them then she would receive a 100% averaged in as 12% of her overall grade.

However, if Nick only does 6 out of 10 homework assignments and on two of them received half credit, then Nick would have a 50% averaged in his overall grade (again only 12-15%, Nick should NOT fail the quarter because of his homework average alone).

Of course, none of this addresses how or when to discuss the previous night's homework.

I suggest having students PAIR/SHARE their homework answers at the beginning of the class. Then, as I move about the room during the students' PAIR/SHARE, I quickly write down their homework grade. (I have an individual spreadsheet for each class, and I tally their homework total at the end of each week. At the end of the quarter I just do a quick division problem for each student.)

The PAIR/SHARE of the homework at the beginning of class gives the students time to discuss and reinforce the answers with their peers, and the teacher time to assess the students homework.

Some More Homework Tips

Homework can be a very effective tool if done right. Here is a list of some helpful homework strategies that I follow everyday:

- DO NOT put homework on the board at the beginning of class. Putting homework on the board leads students to focus on getting to the homework as quickly as possible rather than on what you're doing in class. Many students will even try to do the homework in class.
- If you must put homework on the board, wait until the end of class.
- Start homework in class. This is extremely important. Save the last couple of minutes of class time for the students to start the homework. Starting the homework at the end of class will accomplish two major goals:
 1. You will greatly reduce, or even eliminate, the "I didn't know we had homework" response.
 2. Starting homework in class clears up any questions the students may have about how to do the homework.

For most students, the hardest part of homework is getting it started. Using this homework strategy leads to more homework getting done and improves the quality of that homework.

- Put homework online. If your school's web site does not have a homework page (or your school does not have a web site) you can use <http://www.SchoolNotes.com>. This is a free service that allows teachers to post their homework online.

Another "online" option is to start a "blog". I have recently started my own classroom "blog" that allows me to post my homework and other important dates while also allowing parents and students to make comments, ask questions, and provide feedback. You can visit my blog here: <http://www.MrWaxlersClass.com>

- Give homework that goes "beyond the textbook".
It is ok to give reading assignments for homework (as long as students are reading about something they already learned), but use good questions that actually make students think and make arguments. However, don't limit yourself to just reading assignments. Have students write journal entries, letters, or draw pictures that include key terms from that day's lesson. There are many creative homework assignments that students will actually enjoy doing that go "beyond the textbook".