



Teachers' Desk Reference: Practical Information for Pennsylvania's Teachers

Designing Effective Homework

As a classroom teacher, one of the challenges you face is the issue of homework. How much homework should you give your students? Should you assign homework every night? Should you grade homework? This issue of Teachers' Desk Reference will answer these questions and more.

Homework Basics

Homework is a formative assessment that allows you to adjust your instructional practice in order to meet the individual needs of students. When appropriate (this may mean daily or less frequently), you should design homework to deepen students' knowledge of informational content or to have students practice a skill, strategy, or process. Homework is an opportunity for corrective feedback and should not be used as formal assessment.

The following are some generalizations gathered from research on homework:

- The amount of homework assigned to students should be different from elementary to high school.
- The purpose of homework should be identified and articulated.
- Teachers should provide feedback on all homework assignments.
- Parent involvement in homework should be kept to a minimum.

The amount of homework assigned to students should be different from elementary to high school.

Research shows that, at the elementary level, homework should not be expected to improve test scores; its purpose is to help students develop good study habits. At the high school level, however, the more homework students do, the better their achievement. That being said, there is a practical limit to the amount of homework that should be assigned. A general recommendation you can follow is to assign homework that students can complete in 10 times their grade level (a 2nd grader would spend 20 minutes, a 3rd grader, 30 minutes, and so on).

Figure 1. Recommended Total Minutes Per Day for Homework

Grade Level	Minutes Per Day
Primary	10-30
Upper Elementary	30-90
Middle School/Jr. High School	50-120
High School	60-180

Students will benefit from defined time constraints for homework. For example, you may want to allow students the opportunity to complete unfinished homework in class. If students are not at the independent stage for practice, they need extra practice time at school, not homework. If a student cannot do the homework in the time allotted, the student either needs more instruction or extra help.

Other considerations include:

- Encouraging your grade-level team to collaborate on assigning homework. As a grade-level team, you can select which days are for specific content areas so that students are not overloaded.
- Developing weekly homework packets. Students learn to manage their own time and teachers can monitor students' progress on the assignments daily.
- Making sure students take scheduled breaks (i.e., lunch and recess). Using homework as a punishment has long-term negative effects.

The purpose of homework should be identified and articulated.

Homework should be assigned for the purpose of enhancing essential learning skills, not as a matter of routine. While all homework assignments will help students learn to work independently and encourage self-discipline and responsibility, each assignment should be appropriate for the learning goals being addressed. There are three purposes for homework:

- Review and Practice – Students are asked to review material or practice a skill with which they have a high degree of familiarity.
- Preparation – Students are asked to start thinking about a concept for new content with which they have some, but not a high degree of knowledge.

- Elaboration – Students are asked to elaborate on a concept that has been introduced. They have some, but not a high degree of knowledge on the concept.

Before assigning homework, ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the purpose of this assignment?
- What is the best assignment for the goal?
- How will you determine the amount of homework?
- How will you ensure that the assignment accomplishes your goal?

When assigning homework, make sure you:

- Define the purpose clearly, for example:
 - Review and practice what they have learned in class
 - Prepare for the next day's class
 - Explore subjects more fully than classroom time permits
 - Extend learning by applying skills they already have to new situations
 - Provide clear instructions
- Ensure homework is at the appropriate level of difficulty
- Provide a list of needed supplies or materials
- Offer students options for different approaches to the same topic or lesson
- Give extra assignments to students who want more challenge
- Give specialized assignments to students who are having trouble in a particular area
- Assign an amount of homework that does not take too much time away from other home activities

Consider implementing an assignment notebook routine:

Subject: _____

Due Date: _____

Assignment (what I have to do tonight):

Learning Goal: As a result of doing this assignment, I should...

Know more about _____

Understand better _____

Be more skilled at _____

Teachers should provide feedback on all homework assignments.

To improve student achievement, use homework as a formative assessment tool. Monitoring and providing feedback on homework will enable you to adjust your instructional practice and therefore make the maximum impact on learning. Feedback should be specific enough to help students understand how their work will contribute to achieving the learning goal.

- You may choose to provide feedback to students one-on-one, in small groups, or as a class.
- Your comments may be oral or written.
- Keep records of homework completion, which are not weighted the same as academic performance. Teacher agreement across grade-level teams is needed for this approach to be successful.

Research on providing feedback indicates that:

- Feedback should be “corrective” in nature.
- Feedback should be timely.
- Feedback should be specific to a criterion.
- Students can effectively provide their own feedback (e.g., keep track of their own speed and accuracy).

Ask yourself: How effective am I when I assign homework? When I assign homework, to what extent do I believe that my students:

- Spend an appropriate amount of time on homework?
- Could describe the learning goals of their homework assignments?
- Complete homework without help from others?
- Receive feedback on their homework that enhances their learning?

Parent involvement in homework should be kept to a minimum.

Children can become dependent on parental support for homework. For the most part, homework should be independent work. Parents should not have to teach their children.

Parent involvement in homework should focus on support for and interest in their child’s learning. Parents can facilitate homework by:

- Making sure their child has a quiet space to work
- Helping their child establish a homework schedule
- Being available for questions and clarification
- Encouraging, motivating, and prompting their child
- Tracking their child’s time, if necessary

Parents should be informed of your expectations regarding homework. They should understand the purpose, the amount of homework that will be assigned, the consequences for not completing homework, and the types of parental involvement that are acceptable.

Homework is a valuable tool for gauging your students’ attainment of skills and understanding of content. Used as a formative assessment, homework will enable you to adjust your instructional practice to meet the individual needs of students, which in turn will increase student achievement.

References

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