

## Helping Your Art Students With Homework A Guide for Teachers, Part 1

By Nancy Paulu, Edited by Linda B. Darby

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**Lay out expectations early in the school year.** Before handing out the first homework assignment, go over the ground rules. A written explanation of the homework expectations increases chances that assignments will be completed successfully. Let your students know:

- Homework is important and has meaning; and,
- Doing assignments—or not doing assignments—has consequences, which may include lower grades if assignments go unfinished or undone.

All students need to be held to high standards; research shows that students make greater academic gains when teachers set and communicate high expectations with them.

Let students know how much and when homework will be assigned. Many teachers believe a consistent homework schedule helps students remember to do assignments—every Monday and Thursday night, for example. A consistent schedule can also help busy parents remember when their children's assignments are due.

Parents or other caregivers also need to understand the teacher's homework policy and expectations, particularly parents of younger students, who will be more actively involved in the assignments. All parents, however, need to know that their support and encouragement can be critical to the successful completion of assignments.

Teachers can communicate this information in many ways. Some teachers write notes home laying out their expectations, which parents or caregivers are asked to read, initial, and return. Some talk with parents about homework at back-to-school night. Some telephone parents and caregivers. Special efforts should be made to communicate with those who are hardest to reach.

**Create assignments with a purpose.** Homework is meant to be a positive experience and to encourage children to learn. Any homework is *not* better than no homework at all. Assignments should not be used as punishment. The major academic purposes of homework are to help children:

- Review and practice what they have learned;
- Get ready for the next day's class;
- Learn to use resources, such as libraries, reference materials, and encyclopedias; and,
- Explore subjects more fully than time permits in the classroom.

Homework helps children develop good work habits and attitudes. It can:

- Teach children the fundamentals of working independently; and
- Encourage self-discipline and responsibility, as assignments provide some youngsters with their first chance to manage time and meet deadlines.

**Make sure students understand the purpose.** Most students appreciate understanding the purpose of an assignment, but the purpose may not become evident until students are part way through an assignment or have completed it altogether.

**Make assignments focused and clear.** Focused assignments are easier for students to understand and complete. Homework that tries to introduce or reinforce too many ideas is less likely to contribute to learning. This is particularly true for students whose abstract thinking hasn't developed to the point where they can integrate many concepts successfully.

**Create assignments that challenge students to think and to integrate.** Homework can give students an opportunity to apply a concept beyond the controlled conditions of the classroom. It can also help students pull together and connect information from different places, sources, and subjects. Good assignments often challenge students to break free of their usual way of thinking.

**Vary assignments.** Students get bored if all assignments are similar. Try mixing approaches and styles. Since it's almost impossible for all assignments to interest all students, this approach increases the chances that all students will have some homework that they enjoy.

Short-term assignments can help students review and practice material that has already been covered in class. Long-term projects give students a chance to vary the pace of their work, delve into subjects that interest them, integrate large amounts of information, and learn to manage their time and meet deadlines. Variety can also invigorate teachers.

**Tie assignments to the present.** Students often complain that they can't relate to assignments involving events that took place in the distant past.

**Match assignments to the skills, interests, and needs of students.** Students are more apt to complete homework successfully when assignments:

- Are neither too easy nor too hard;
- Match a child's preferred learning style; and
- Allow students to work on material that they truly enjoy.

Teachers with many students cannot be expected to customize all homework assignments for each student. However, most teachers can provide assignments to a heterogeneous class of students that vary in style, format, and content. This assures that all students have some that suit and interest them.

It is important to provide at-risk students with homework that challenges them to work to their full potential. A student may be at risk because of a variety of factors other than academic ability, for example, a student may be at risk because of Limited-English Proficiency (LEP), poverty, race, geographic location, or economic disadvantages.

An at-risk student could also be in an advanced placement class or a class for gifted and talented students.

Most teachers, however, give students in their advance placement classes assignments that differ from those in non-a.p. classes. The assignments for honors class students are usually longer and require a level of abstract thinking that could frustrate less advanced students.

Teachers can also provide choices. Students may all be expected to master the same material, but they can do so in different ways. Providing choice increases the chances that students will enjoy more assignments. It also helps students feel they control parts of their learning, which enables some to enjoy an assignment more than they would otherwise.

**Provide constructive feedback.** Students are more apt to complete assignments and advance their learning when they get consistent and constructive feedback. Students need to know where they have excelled and where they need more work on an assignment. This conveys the vital message that homework helps students learn and is important.

Teachers can evaluate and review homework in a variety of ways. Many teachers give letter grades, others assign numbers, and many provide written comments. Grading homework motivates many students to do their best work and to learn more, but in some situations grades may not be beneficial.

Feedback is the most helpful when teachers provide specific suggestions on how the homework can be improved and discuss problems and remedies with individual students or the whole class.

Peer feedback can also be helpful. In addition to providing students with another perspective of their work, peer feedback can help students learn cooperative social skills and teach students how to evaluate their own and other's efforts.

**Give praise and motivate.** Adults and children alike respond to praise. "You've done a great job" can go a long way toward motivating students to complete assignments. Praise must be genuine. Children recognize insincere compliments.

## Helping Your Art Students With Homework A Guide for Teachers, Part 2

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**Assign an appropriate amount of homework.** Many educators believe that homework is more effective for children in first through third grades when it does not exceed 20 minutes each school day. From fourth through sixth grades, many educators recommend from 20 to 40 minutes a school day for most students. For students in 7th- through 9th-grades, generally, up to 2 hours a school day is suitable. Ninety minutes to 2 1/2 hours per night are appropriate for grades 10 through 12. Amounts that vary from these guidelines are fine for some students.

A common mistake, particularly among beginning teachers, is to assign too much homework. It can be hard to resist doing so if parents push for more homework and assume that the best teachers assign the most homework. (This is not necessarily the case.) Most often, however, a math teacher can tell after checking five algebraic equations whether students have mastered the necessary concepts.

Teachers also need to coordinate their homework assignments with those of other teachers so that students aren't getting four assignments on a Tuesday night, but no assignments on Wednesday night. This coordination most often requires leadership and support from the principal or other administrator.

Finally, teachers need to keep alert to how long students take to complete assignments. It is natural in a class full of varied students for some to take longer than others. Moreover, it is fine that some students **do** take longer since research shows that students with low test scores who spend substantial time on homework get grades as good as students with more ability who spend less time. If an assignment takes too long, however, this may signal that a student needs more instruction to complete it successfully.

**Encourage and teach good study habits.** Children need good study skills in order to complete assignments successfully and gain the most from them academically. Unfortunately, many students haven't developed these skills, even by high school.

Some school districts provide comprehensive programs that spell out what study skills students in kindergarten through 12th grade are expected to learn each year. This can help to assure that important skills are introduced early and nurtured throughout a student's years in school.

Kindergarten or first grade is not too early to introduce students to bringing work home, completing it, and returning it to school. Early assignments need to be simple. Older elementary school students are ready to learn more advanced study skills. These include:

- Setting a regular time to study that fits in with the student's family schedule;
- Removing distractions (turning off television and discouraging social phone calls during homework time);
- Gathering necessary supplies;
- Recording assignments in an assignment book or on a calendar;
- Note-taking;
- Managing time; and
- Organizing for a test.

Students need to review these study skills in middle school and in junior high as their schedules become more complicated. Many students need to sharpen their study skills still further as they move into high school and find more demands being placed on their time. Many have trouble pacing themselves as they take on more extracurricular activities and accept part-time jobs.

Students often imitate the organizing habits of important adults in their lives. Therefore teachers can set an example by being organized themselves. They can let students know that they, too, keep calendars to avoid forgetting things.

**Give help as needed.** Students who don't understand an assignment need to know that help is available from the teacher or other appropriate person. Students at risk of academic failure or with personal difficulties may need extra support with both academic and logistical aspects of homework. It is important that they know it is okay to ask for help. In fact, it is imperative that they do so.

Teachers schedule time for students in a variety of ways. Some work with them before school. Some do so during free periods or part of the lunch period. Some give out their home phone numbers. Sometimes teachers can be a big help simply by alerting students to the repercussions for not doing an assignment.

**Communicate with parents.** Students learning improves when teachers communicate on a broad range of issues. Among the most vital of these is homework.

Parents are not expected to know or teach specific information to their children, particularly as their children get older. Parents can be an enormous help, however, in creating an environment at home that allows learning to take place. Teachers can also help create situations that allow parents and educators to work together to strengthen all learning, including what takes place at home.

Connecting with some parents can be a challenge. Many parents lead exceptionally busy lives. Some don't place as high a priority on homework as do teachers. The parents themselves may be in turmoil. Not all parents can help with homework to the extent that many teachers might hope. *Reaching All Families*, a U.S. Department of Education publication outlines strategies that schools can use to reach out to all families and help involve them in their children's education.

Teachers can do many things to improve communication:

- Contact parents early in the school year—before problems arise.
- Make a special effort to communicate with parents and caregivers who don't initiate contact with schools and teachers.
- Tell parents how they can reach you, and when.
- Tell parents about homework problems as soon as they arise.
- Tell parents and caregivers how you want them to be involved with homework.

Some ways you might suggest parents be involved:

- Set a regular time for homework—one that works for their child and their family.
- Pick a fairly quiet study area with lots of light and supplies close by.
- Remove distractions. Turn off the television and discourage social telephone calls during homework time.
- Provide supplies and resources such as pencils, pens, erasers, writing paper, an assignment book, and a dictionary.
- Provide aids to good organization, such as an assignment calendar, book bag, and folders.
- Encourage parents to check with you, the school counselor, or the principal if they cannot provide their children with the necessary supplies and resources.
- Look over the homework, but do not do it for them.
- Review teacher comments on homework that has been returned and discuss with their child.
- Contact teacher if there is a homework problem or need they cannot resolve. Teachers may need to be flexible in scheduling meetings with parents to discuss homework problems in order to accommodate inflexible job schedules and other demands.

Provide parents with a list of questions to ask their child:

- What's your assignment today?
- Is the assignment clear?
- When is it due?
- Do you need special measures (e.g., a trip to the library or access to a computer)?
- Do you need special supplies (e.g., posterboard, painting supplies)?
- Have you started today's assignment? Finished it?
- Is it a long-term assignment?
- For a major project, would it help to write out the steps or make a schedule?

Encourage parents to monitor television-viewing and select with their children the programs they may watch. Inform parents that more than two or three hours of television-viewing on school nights is related to lower student achievement.

If problems with homework arise, work out a solution together with the parent(s) and the child. The strategy will depend on what the problem is, how severe it is, and the needs of the student. For example: Is the homework too hard? Does the child need to make up a lot of work because of absences? Has the child been diagnosed with a learning disability or is one suspected? Does the child need extra support, beyond what home and school can give?

In resolving homework problems, make sure communication is clear. End a meeting with a parent only after you are sure that everyone understands the strategy planned to ease the problem. Follow up to make sure that the approach you agreed to is working.

**Show respect for students.** Students are more inclined to complete assignments when teachers and students respect one another. Students sense when teachers care about them and want them to do their best work. Students sense when teachers are committed to their learning and view it as valuable for both students and teachers alike.

**Conclusion.** Homework can bring together children, parents, and teachers in a common effort to improving student learning. Teachers are a vital link in making this happen.

The benefits of homework begin in school. Students who complete their homework successfully improve their chances for academic success. But homework develops habits and attitudes that work to a student's advantage far beyond the classroom. Qualities like self-discipline, responsibility, and a love of learning benefit students throughout their lives.