

What Makes a Good Piece of Homework?

The completion of homework has long been linked to higher academic achievement in secondary school students. However, in order to see the real value of homework, the work set must be worthwhile. There are numerous variables that need to be considered when setting homework to ensure you see the desired outcomes. We've outlined 6 key points that should be followed to ensure a great piece of homework is created.



Purpose

Homework should both have a purpose and be purposeful to the student.

No piece of homework should ever be set without a purpose. Any task that is set should be done so with the intent to engage pupils and further their learning as these are the key purposes of homework. This can be done by framing the task in a way that lends itself to individual learning styles in order for students to see the greatest benefits from it.

For example, the task for a language lesson may be to 'Write the spellings for each word 3 times' - the purpose of this assignment being to practice the spelling of these words correctly. However, the way in which the task is framed does not appeal to all learning styles. A more inclusive way to position this task would be to ask students to practice these spellings in a way which is best suited to them. When it comes to memorising spellings, there are multiple ways in which this can be done, if your students are older they are more likely to know the learning style that suits them and the task could be phrased as the following:

'Practice the spellings and definitions of the words learnt today during class in a manner that suits your learning style. There will be a short quiz next lesson!'

However, younger students may still be getting to grips with the learning style that best suits them. To help them explore various rote memory techniques, the task could instead be presented as the following:

'Practice the spellings and definitions of the of the words learnt today in class, choose one of the following options to help you learn this or explore a different way which will work best for your preferred learning style:

- Record yourself saying the spellings out loud
- Stick post its around the house with the French spelling of the object
- Practice by writing the spelling words in a sentence
- Copy the spellings and test yourself

There will be a test in class next week.'

Efficiency

Effort vs. reward. Is the homework task you set worth the time it takes to complete it?

It can be difficult to get the balance right between assigning homework that appeals to students but also works towards raising attainment and deepening their understanding of a topic. The danger in setting 'fun' homework activities is that they can be perceived as busy work. Home-learning tasks such as creating posters and building models are a creative way for students to display what they've learnt, but unless they are structured and have a clearly defined grading rubric, they may not be getting the desired learning outcomes from your class.

When inclined to set 'fun' homework, such as creating a poster or building a model to showcase students' knowledge of a topic, explore new avenues which involve more academic skills and demonstrate a deeper understanding.

For example, the homework task, 'Create a poster detailing what causes volcanic eruptions' could be turned into, 'Create a step-by-step guide detailing the science behind volcanic eruptions'. The second task removes the less academic aspect of the home-learning, and also reduces the amount of time that needs to be spent on it, so you can ensure students aren't spending more time than they need to on a task and are also going to get the intended value from it. With these tasks you may still want to include an artistic element to entice students, just be sure that you steer students' focus toward the academic aspect of the task at hand.

Another alternative could be to swap the task of building a model to represent the solar system to creating a presentation on the workings of the solar system and present this to the class. This turns a task which is time-consuming and whose academic benefits may be overlooked, into a task that will take less time, but allows for a similar level of creativity. This ensures that students are retaining the knowledge you want them to, but also gives you a better idea of how well they have understood the topic.

The main concern with such a homework task is the amount of time it takes to complete, rarely worth the understanding and progression students gain in return. This is why, when trying to set homework that is creative or fun, it's important that the creativity doesn't detract from the content. You can ensure this by having a clear grading scheme accompanying the homework, so students know the criteria they are being judged on and you can successfully evaluate how well they've understood the topic.

Ownership

A good piece of homework is one that students want to complete and take ownership of.

When a student takes complete control of their homework, this signifies that you have created a task which resonates with them and into which they will put sufficient effort. In order for students to take ownership of their work, it needs to be specific to them and their learning style, as well as giving them sufficient free reign.

The key to engaging students is to make the homework work for them, so they can create a personal relationship between themselves and the content. This can be done by allowing students to approach the task in their own way. Encouraging students to do their own research surrounding a topic allows them to hone in on the parts they find most interesting and sparks their own interest in a subject.



For example, instead of simply asking students to research a topic for a History class, ask them instead to take on the persona of one of the historical figures and present their findings as though they were that person either through a presentation, debate or diary entries.

Competence

Can the student complete the work you are setting? One size doesn't fit all.

Every single student in your class is different and the homework you set should be reflective of this. Setting a blanket piece of homework won't ensure that you get the most out of your students, instead it will be too hard for some, leaving them feeling disheartened, and too easy for others, subsequently not stretching them to achieve their full potential. When it comes to homework, one size does not fit all. Instead, differentiation is key - a good piece of homework will extend a student's current academic knowledge regardless of where they are academically in the class.

Mixed ability classes are common practice in today's schools, however, even in classes where students are grouped based on their academic ability, there will be differences in their progression and catering to this is paramount to their success. With each piece of homework you set, you want all of your students to feel confident when they sit down to complete it.

When differentiating your tasks, remember that the time it takes for students to complete it should be the same for all students, regardless of their ability. You can differentiate tasks in multiple ways; the setting of 'trays' is a popular method used by many teachers, whereby the first tray contains homework to stretch lower achievers, and as the trays progress, so does the difficulty of the task within. In this scenario, the marking rubric may also differ for each tray.

Differentiating homework can seem like a time-consuming task in itself, however it can be simplified. Offering extension tasks appeals to those who are further ahead in class and making activities time-based as opposed to task-based means you can cater to all abilities and paces in one homework set. For example, instead of assigning students the task of completing 20 algebra problems in one evening, ask them instead to work on algebra problems for 1 hour. This will give you an indication as to how well students have grasped the subject you're teaching and who needs additional help.

Aesthetic Appeal

First impressions count, think about how your homework is presented.

Some students will naturally engage more with and therefore put more effort into a visually pleasing homework task, regardless of the content. It is for this reason you need to ensure your homework is aesthetically appealing. This doesn't necessarily mean you have to use visual aids to make it appear enticing, although this is always a possibility, but more generally that homework should be presented in a nice, clean, uncluttered fashion.

1. In order to make your homework aesthetically appealing, ensure that proper paragraph styles are used to break up large chunks of text to avoid overwhelming students.
2. Bullet point the separate steps and directions students are expected to follow so they're clear and easy to digest.
3. Use a font that is easy to read and if the task requires any attachments, ensure these are readily available to your students.
4. If tasks are photocopied, make sure they are done so to a quality that doesn't hinder students' ability to follow the content.
5. Always consider the environment when asking students to print documents at home, or in school. If your presentation needs to be printed, think twice about how you can reduce the ink costs!



Aesthetic appeal is important, but can be overlooked when we're rushing to get a task out on time. If you follow a structure that doesn't involve too many visual aids, the setting of homework that is uncluttered and easy to follow will become second nature. Try to envision being on the receiving end of the homework you are setting and if it looks dull and unappealing, you know that your class are going to be less inclined to complete it.

Clarity

Communicate everything that is needed to complete the homework to the standard you expect.

A good piece of homework will give students all the information they need to complete it to the highest possible standard. If you want students to put time and effort into their homework and take ownership of it, it not only has to be specific to them, but they also need to know exactly what is expected of them. If the desired outcome isn't clear, it may detract from students completing the homework, or worse, end up in them doing it wrong.

When setting homework there are some core, simple steps that you can follow to ensure that the delivery of your homework is communicated clearly and effectively.

1. Include the grading scheme and the requirements students need to hit to achieve their desired result.
2. Give clear directions for students to follow, that aren't overly complicated and detail everything you want them to achieve in the task.
3. If the homework requires students to reference external resources, ensure that you list these or provide students with attachments or links. Not providing the supporting material needed to complete homework is one of the most common reasons students will give for not completing the task at hand.
4. Clearly state the due date and give students enough time to complete the work to an adequate standard.
5. Provide students with the amount of time they are expected to spend on the task. This will ensure that they don't over or under work themselves and avoids unnecessary stress.
6. Specify how you would like the work submitted, whether it's online, in person or via an external site. Not knowing how to submit the homework can cause confusion and add to teachers' workloads.

Setting a good piece of homework shouldn't be hard. Tailoring your homework to cover these 6 bases will ensure that the tasks you are setting will work with students to help them achieve their full potential, and ultimately save you time in the long run. Knowing that the homework you set does what was intended will make the setting of tasks much quicker and give you the peace of mind that each piece you set is worthwhile.

