

Effective Instruction

Troubleshooting

1. Homework

Overview

While some have called for an end to homework, it has a positive correlation with academic achievement (Marzano and Pickering 2007). Cooper (2001) identifies the following positive effects of appropriate, productive homework: improved retention, comprehension, and cognitive processes; enhanced critical thinking and concept formation. It also shows benefits through better attitude toward school, study habits, and such nonacademic areas as greater self-direction, self-discipline, and personal organization. What are the specific challenges related to homework?

- Getting students to do it—and do it well
- Designing assignments that contribute to or increase academic achievement
- Determining the amount of homework each teacher can ask a student to do
- Creating work students cannot copy, download, or cheat on
- Giving students work they can do without help from parents

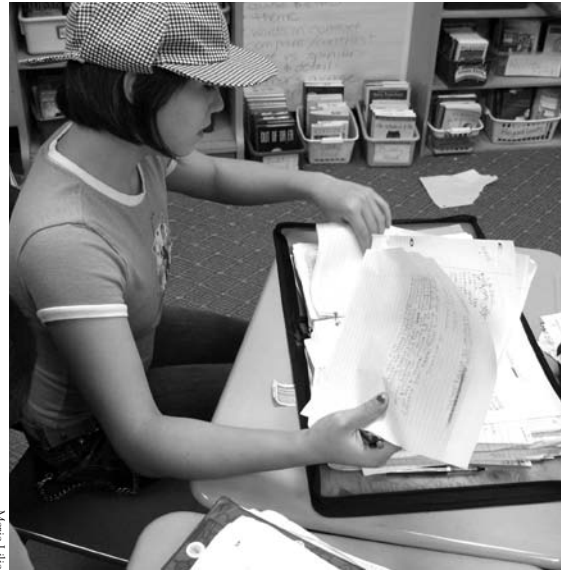
Here, then, are some suggestions for how to improve the quality and completion of homework in your class:

1. All homework assignments should be clearly linked to student achievement and serve an apparent objective related to what students are currently studying. If I am going to have students read a book for outside reading, for example, I should make it clear why they are doing this and structure the assignment to achieve that end.
2. Honor the “ten-minute rule.” Studies have found that the optimum amount of homework is ten minutes multiplied by the student’s grade level. Thus my third grade daughter should, and usually does, have thirty minutes; my eighth grade son, eighty; my tenth grade son close to two hours. Beyond this amount, homework often shows diminished or even detrimental effects. On occasion, just to check myself, I ask students to write in the corner of an

assignment how long it took them. We sometimes forget how much time it takes to do work at the level we hope they will.

3. Begin the homework in class so you can demonstrate it, evaluate students' understanding of the assignment and material, and address any problems before they go home.
4. Assign work that requires no extra help or access to resources students cannot find at school. While computers are seemingly ubiquitous, for example, many kids go home to no computer or one not connected to the Internet. If homework requires access to computers, make sure these are available to students at your school. So, too, do many students go home to parents who are willing to help (sometimes too much!), but others go home to parents who don't speak English or lack the educational background to help; thus you should not assign homework students cannot do on their own.
5. Provide support before, during, and after if students need help completing the assignment. This may be as easy as giving them a few minutes at the end of class to get started or as demanding as offering to meet with students during lunch or after school if they need help.
6. Provide students choice when possible. If, for example, there are ten study questions on the chapter, tell them they must answer whichever five interest them most. English teachers may require students to read at home every night, but they can allow students to choose the book they read for this assignment.
7. Ask students to write down the homework assignment; moreover, write the assignments on the board so they can see it and hear it while you explain and demonstrate it.
8. Avoid homework that requires students to coordinate with others who may not be able to meet such obligations. I don't mean to rule out projects, but the logistics of kids' lives often have them splitting their time between parents' different homes or rushing off to jobs outside school. Provide the time they need to do such work.
9. Be careful about how much homework counts toward their final grade. If their grade is based largely on homework, it reflects effort not learning or achievement.
10. Assign homework they must complete to participate in class the next day. Say, for example, "Go home and read Chapter 10 tonight and take notes on the key aspects of the war in Vietnam. You will use these notes to participate in a forum on the war, so take good notes and be ready to use them to defend your position!"

Recommended Reading: *Classroom Instruction that Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*, Robert J. Marzano, Debra J. Pickering, and Jane E. Pollock (Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2001).



2. Academic Honesty

Overview

Academic honesty has become a serious concern for schools and teachers in recent years. While the Internet is one source of trouble, it is not the sole factor. Others, equally problematic, include increased pressure to succeed, growing amounts of homework (not all of which students see as meaningful), and greater distractions—video games, cell phones, instant messaging, and MySpace, to name a few. Still, none of these is an excuse for cheating. The primary concerns in this area are summed up in the following table from a suburban high school:

Burlingame High School Academic Honesty Policy

Cheating or academic dishonesty is a serious violation of the Burlingame High School Honor Code. Therefore the school has adopted procedures to deal with students who

1. Receive or provide information during a quiz or test.
2. Receive or provide information on quizzes or tests given during an earlier period.
3. Use unauthorized material on quizzes or tests.
4. Use ideas or written material from other sources—students or professional writers—without acknowledging the source in their own writing.
5. Use or copy another student's homework when not authorized by the teacher to do so.
6. Allow other students to use their work on assignments, quizzes, or tests.
7. Turn in the same work as another student(s) when the teacher has required it to be an individual assignment.

This list is not meant to be all-inclusive, and teachers will apply this policy as outlined in their course prospectuses.

Consequences

First Offense

- Student is given a zero on the compromised work.
- Student is ineligible for an honor society during the semester of the offense.
- Parent and student sign a contract that notifies a second offense will lead to the student being dropped from the course with an 'F'.
- Student is referred to his or her counselor.

Second Offense or Additional Offenses in any Course

- Student fails the course.
- Student is ineligible for an honor society during the semester of the offense.

Example: A student receives a first offense in a freshman course "A". The same student has a second offense in junior course "B". The student will fail junior course "B" and be dropped from the course. The same student has another offense in senior course "C". The student will fail senior course "C" and be dropped from the course.

Staff Procedures

1. Teacher identifies a cheating incident and notifies the student that he or she will be referred to the administration.
2. Teacher issues a referral.
3. Administration calls in the student to the office and refers the student to his or her counselor.
4. Administration contacts the parent(s) to communicate information regarding the incident and to explain the consequences.
5. Administration places the student on a contract, if it is a first offense, or refers the student to his or her counselor to be dropped from the course if the incident is a second or additional offense in any course.

The following suggestions should help you prevent or respond to most situations that involve some degree of academic dishonesty. I say “some degree,” because some question whether the student who inserts one or two lines in her essay on Shakespeare that came from a critical essay she read (but did not cite) deserves the same severe penalty as the student who downloads and submits an entire paper on the same assignment. In this situation, which happened to me, the first student received a lowered grade, a conference (with me), and a warning that any future infraction would be considered a second one, to be handled by the administration. The second student, on the other hand, received a stern conversation with me and a roundtrip ticket to the administration which resulted in major consequences that may well have affected his college acceptance results. Again, here are some suggestions to consider:

1. Define clearly and early in the semester what plagiarism is, what cheating means, and how you will handle any incidents. Most schools have clearly defined academic honesty policies to which the teachers must adhere (see the sample from my school which was designed by teachers and administration); if your school has such policies, read them out loud, post them, and revisit them from time to time as you see fit.
2. Evaluate your assignments to determine if they are plagiarism-proof. If, for example, you ask students to write a paper on the causes of the Civil War, you have to realize that students can find thousands of such papers online. Instead, ask them to compare how one civil war (e.g., the Iraq War) is similar to and different from the American Civil War.
3. Avoid assigning work students will see as “busy work.” Students consistently report that such work seems useless and thus are not troubled by copying or dividing it up (e.g., you do 1, I’ll do 2, you do 3 . . . and we’ll meet after school tomorrow to exchange answers). Always be prepared to explain why an assignment is important, what it will prepare them for, and why they need to do it.

4. Evaluate the amount of work you are giving. Many students report resorting to cheating simply because there are not enough hours in the day to do all they are asked to do. Their rationale is *If I don't do it, I get a sure zero, but if I cheat I have a 50/50 chance of the teacher not noticing it, so it's worth the risk.*
5. Have concrete evidence if you *do* find that a student cheated. This might mean asking the student to explain what a Petrarchan sonnet is on the spot. If they cannot do so, you can say, "Well you showed a real understanding of it in this paper. Should I take that as evidence that this analysis of the Petrarchan sonnet structure and Shakespeare's departure from it is not your own work?" It might also mean copying and stapling to the paper the web site from which the offender took the information or the other student's paper that was copied. Without such concrete evidence of plagiarism, it is your word against the student's.
6. Design assignments that go right to the source of the trouble: Ask students to find three different articles on the Internet about the Civil War, for example, and evaluate them for accuracy, insight, and credibility. English teachers, on the other hand, might have the class create its own Cliffs Notes or Spark Notes book which, while allowing students to consult what the original says, will prevent them from using it as their own work.
7. Create tests that cannot be easily copied—alternative versions—so one student cannot look at the same test on another's desk.
8. Do not have students grade one another's tests. Schools repeatedly have trouble with this when students form alliances whereby the student who grades the other's test agrees to change the answers and increase the score. This is particularly common in social studies classes where students regularly take multiple choice exams.
9. Clarify for students when it is permissible to collaborate and when work must be done on their own. Some students come from cultures where it is acceptable to copy each other's work—i.e., what's yours is mine and vice versa—or copy the work of other, greater sources and turn them in as their own work.
10. Avoid humiliating students if you do catch them; use it, instead, as an opportunity to teach them about ethics and choices. Follow through as required by your own policies and those of the school, but realize that the offender will come back the next day and be your student and must learn what you have to teach.



Jim Burke

3. Classroom Management

Overview

It is impossible to be an effective teacher if students are not having or working in ways that foster academic achievement. New teachers consistently cite classroom management as their biggest problem, though it is something experienced teachers are no less concerned about; they simply have more experience to help them figure out what to do. The main concerns in this area include the following:

- Disruptive behavior
- Loss of instructional time
- Teacher-student relationship
- Attendance
- Discipline

Whole books are written about this subject, but here are a few recommendations for addressing these concerns:

1. Create a positive first impression that conveys the sense that you have high expectations for both students' work and their behavior.
2. Develop and maintain a positive, productive relationship with all students, showing them through your actions and words that you are committed to their success.
3. Assign students seats based on their individual and instructional needs. Many students come with actual required accommodations that mandate they sit in the front row. Be mindful of these and follow them carefully.
4. Use your walls to educate, communicate, and celebrate. Schools these days have so many important policies as well as mandates from the state, some of which must be prominently displayed. Covering your walls with policies denies students the chance to publish their work to a greater audience and thereby celebrate their work. Make your classroom a place where their work is honored.
5. Begin and end the period effectively: You have so many things to accomplish that you cannot afford to do otherwise. As the saying goes, "Things only end as well as they begin." Use those first five minutes to set the tone and get them focused; use the last five to address any lingering questions, go over the homework, and make sure the room is restored to order.
6. Provide a disciplined, supportive classroom environment. Students need to have a sense of agency but also know that you, as the leader, are the one in control. Students need clearly defined and consistently enforced limits, especially those who would otherwise undermine the class.

7. Teach self-discipline and personal responsibility whenever possible. Your class offers a series of “learning opportunities,” chances to teach kids how to solve problems, manage their time and attention. Look for and take advantage of these authentic learning opportunities.
8. Administer discipline with dignity. While students can do things that upset us, it is too easy to humiliate them. Look for a way to turn the situation around, making it clear that the student made a major mistake but not shaming him or her in front of the class and thereby making an enemy forever. I usually ask to see a student after class or to step outside if it is more urgent. Though I may want to yell, keeping my calm prevents my behavior from becoming the focus of the moment and creates an air of objectivity.
9. Communicate your policies, procedures, and principles in your syllabus. This is the place where, at the beginning of the year, you can spell out what matters most. Many teachers send these documents home to be signed by both the student and parents.
10. Document any patterns of behavior that pose a particular threat to yourself, others, or the class in general. Keep this record up to date and, when it seems appropriate, bring it to an administrator or counselor. Such situations have potential legal ramifications, so the documentation serves the dual purpose of protecting you legally and helping to make your case to the administration.

Recommended Reading: *The Teacher’s Essential Guide to Classroom Management*, Jim Burke (Scholastic, 2008)

4. Handling the Paper Load

Overview

The old saying is that if we had students write as much as we should, we could never grade it all, and if we assigned only what we could grade, they would not write enough. When it comes to handling the paper load, these are the most common issues for us:

- Keeping up with the volume of papers
- Providing useful feedback that improves students’ writing
- Returning papers in a timely manner with helpful feedback
- Reducing the number of papers or time spent responding to them while still providing quality writing instruction

Here are a few general ways to respond to or follow up with student writing:

1. Comment on instead of correcting their papers, focusing on what they do well and what they can do to improve. Say, for example, “Good examples here. Consider explaining a bit more how they relate to your main idea.”
2. Use scoring guides and rubrics when you don’t have time to respond to papers but want to offer specific feedback about what they did well and need to improve next time. These

have the added advantage of telling them what their grade will be based on and thus communicating to students why they received the grade they did. You can also have students take one aspect of the rubric (e.g., uses examples, quotations, or commentary to develop their argument) and analyze their paper just for that one feature, highlighting examples of these elements in their paper.

3. Set up and teach students how to do collaborative or group scoring on assignments (usually using a rubric). One warning, however: you must still go over the work to make sure the grades reflect the quality of the work. Often teachers who use such scoring will return the papers to the students for another round of revision now that the student knows what it would (roughly) earn and where it could be improved.
4. Confer with students in class or after school to provide more responsive feedback and to allow for a different mode of responding. Such conferences allow for individualized feedback and a more supportive atmosphere in which to discuss students' writing.
5. Cull examples from representative papers and teach (via overhead) to these papers. For example, instead of commenting on all the papers, I will pull out a few papers—usually a C, B, and an A paper—then copy parts of them to overhead transparencies. I put these up in order from proficient (C) to excellent (A) and do a think-aloud about what they each do well and could do better, using the higher example to illustrate what the previous level could have done better. This leaves me more time to focus on what and *how* to teach the next day instead of marking up 70 papers that night.



Bruce Forester

Effective feedback is:

6. Clear and worded in a way that guides revision (e.g., a well-phrased question that suggests what the student can do without doing the thinking for her)
7. Based on instruction and qualities of effective writing—not on a teacher's stylistic preferences
8. Anchored in specific criteria or lessons taught in class; for example, if you have been teaching students to incorporate quotations and add commentary to those quotations, this is what you should primarily focus on.
9. Positive but productive; personal but useful: "Great verbs, Charlene! They really add strength to your description. Consider working on the subjects to make them a bit more concrete."

10. Limited to a few specific items. I will often list three bullets at the top for the student to focus on; this has the added advantage of giving me a cue if we meet to discuss the paper. If I see “Development, passive verbs, and citations” at the top, I know what to talk about.

Recommended Reading: *Papers, Papers, Papers: An English Teacher’s Survival Guide*, Carol Jago (Heinemann, 2005)

5. Academic Study Skills

Overview

As school, at all levels really, becomes more academically oriented, we need to accept responsibility for teaching students how to learn what we teach. This means recognizing and teaching specific study skills needed to do well on tests, learn what is taught, and manage the different demands of school. Some have called this “academic literacy.” The main issues include these:

- Studying for and taking different types of tests
- Taking notes students can use to learn and study
- Managing time and demands
- Setting goals and making priorities
- Getting the help students need to succeed

While most study skills books focus on what *students* need to do, the focus of this book is on what you, as their teacher, can do to help them learn and improve these skills. Here are some suggestions:

1. **Set goals.** Take time, especially with those in transitional grades like sixth and ninth, to have them set both personal and academic goals. When I do this with freshmen, we spend time discussing the qualities of effective goals and use those criteria to evaluate the goals they set, revising them as needed so that they are useful. Setting goals is the first step, but it is important to regularly loop back around and revisit them to remind students of what they said they wanted to achieve. Periodically, I will pause—at the end of the week typically—and ask them to reflect on these goals and their progress toward them, telling them to focus on what they are doing that is and is not helping to reach them.
2. **Take notes.** Taking notes is a definite skill, one that requires direct instruction. First, there are a range of methods and formats. Teach students to evaluate the importance of information—in lectures, books, and videos—so they learn what is important enough to include. Also, teach them ways to be efficient by showing them how to abbreviate, use telegraphic writing, and incorporate short cuts. Provide examples of effective notes so students see what such notes look like. I will copy samples onto overhead transparencies and explain what makes them effective. Finally, introduce students to a variety of note-

taking strategies (e.g., Cornell notes, graphic or cluster notes, outlining) and discuss which one is most appropriate in different situations or for different learning styles.

3. **Studying for tests and learning in general.** Students need explicit instruction in how to study for tests, as it is far from instinctive. This means not just providing them with review sheets but talking about how to turn these mere lists of words into dynamic learning tools that improve both understanding and recall. When I worked with struggling students, for example, I would take their social studies review sheets and teach them how to evaluate their current level of knowledge by asking them to rank (1-3) each item, a three meaning they “knew it cold” and a one meaning they had no sense of it at all. I then taught them how to create study cards for those items that were a one or two. Study cards, for which I provided examples, had the key word(s) on the front, along with a visual cue and likely exam questions; on the back, of course, were the answers and any other notes to help them recall the information. Other techniques include teaching them how to cull likely exam questions from past exams and formulate probable exam questions based on headings and other details in the textbook or the teacher’s lectures. Finally, it is important to talk to kids about how you see successful students studying. I often mention to students, especially freshmen, that I see groups of students at Border’s bookstore café next to the university studying all day but making it social, fun, interactive; by pooling their resources and intelligence, they learn in deeper ways that translate into higher scores. Or I might mention the AP students in my class whom I hear quizzing each other prior to tests or discussing certain problems after the exam to further clarify and reinforce their knowledge. The point, which I emphasized again and again, is that students can learn how to study and learn to do it better and better if they reflect on how they learn and what helps them most.
4. **Taking tests.** Teach students the classic techniques common to all good test takers: process of elimination; underlining key words in the directions or question stems; trying to answer the question before looking at the answers; scanning back over the text for information that they can use to answer the question; or leaving a question unanswered and returning to it later, perhaps with new information they have gleaned while going through other parts of the test. If it is an essay test, remind them to underline key words in the prompt and make a quick outline before writing; then return to the prompt throughout the allotted time to ensure they are addressing all elements in it.
5. **Remembering information.** Many students have trouble remembering what they study. It is new material, often connected to nothing they already know, thus making it difficult to “stick” in their memory. You, of course, have spent years learning how to remember information for tests throughout college and the years you have taught. Each subject has its own type of learning to remember, but most have terms, dates, processes, ideas, and events to remember and connect to larger concepts in the curriculum. Some content lends itself to memory games (e.g., create a song with the fifty presidents’ names in it) or strategies like mnemonics; other information has visual content that can be better remembered if it is color-coded and otherwise visually represented so students can see it in their mind when they try to recall it. Some students find it helpful to create study cards, quiz themselves using their notes, or devise a rhythm as they utter the periodic table of elements, using the more tactile sense of

walking to create a connection, a rhythm that helps them recall the information, as the beats would help a singer call to mind the lyrics. I also always take time to have students reflect after the test on which of these devices and strategies helped them the most, how it helped, and why so they can adjust and use it in the future for even better results.

6. **Following through: After the test.** Students often think the test marks the end of that unit and they can forget about it. Effective teachers, however, realize that the time *after* a lesson, a test, or experience, is ripe for learning. Now the student can see what their efforts achieved and reflect on how they could do better next time. You might consider doing one of the following after an exam to improve not only their learning for this unit but students' process for subsequent tests in your class or others':
 - Have students list what they did to prepare for this test, why they did that, and how it did or did not help; follow this up by asking them to consider what they might do next time to improve this technique if they thought it was effective.
 - Identify those items on the exam that showed a clear pattern of confusion of misunderstanding and put these representative problems on the overhead, copying the questions directly onto a transparency. Analyze the question and their approach, taking time to make their decisions the focus on the conversation; that is, instead of worrying about how to get it right, concentrate on the steps they followed and identify the breakdown in their problem-solving process. Extract key understandings and discuss possible solutions that could improve future performance.
 - Provide opportunity for “revision and redemption” after the test or big paper, giving students the chance to revise their work based on your feedback and new understandings so they can not only improve their grade but deepen their understanding.
7. **Managing time and resources.** You cannot take responsibility for everything; after all, you do have your curriculum to teach. Still, if students don't learn to manage themselves and their resources, they will be forever at a loss. Some teachers ask students to predict how long it will take them to complete a certain assignment, and then follow up by asking how long it took. This makes room for focused but useful discussions about students' work habits and how they solve problems they encounter while working on assignments. Many teachers require students to use binders with designated sections to organize their materials; others create planner pages to help students learn to keep track of what they must do, for whom, and by when. While it will vary in each class, all teachers have the opportunity to incorporate these personal management skills into their curriculum.
8. **Participating in class.** Fundamental to academic success is participating in group and class discussions. Of course, not all students are eager participants. Contributing to class discussion requires support, guidance—and instruction. Students need the language for such participation, but they also need the content, to know what to actually discuss. Teachers facilitate participation by using such strategies as these:
 - Having students read a portion of a text or passage to prepare them for the subsequent discussion. Typically, a teacher might say, “I want you to read this passage with the following question in mind, and then be prepared to discuss what the

article says about that subject.” Teachers might take the extra step of having students write about the passage or identify three key ideas about it prior to the group or class discussion.

- Providing prompts or other cognitive idea starters (e.g., on a handout, the board, or a poster on the wall) to use when discussing texts for a specific purpose or those which are more difficult than previous texts. Examples might include “The most idea in this text is....,” “This reminds me of...,” and “To understand this better, I need to know....” See Figure 1.2 for more examples).
- Organizing the class around engaging topics or questions that motivate students to participate in activities and discussions.

6. English Language Learners (ELLs)

Overview

English Language Learners (ELLs) represent an important new challenge to teachers, especially those in areas where such students are a new reality. Regardless of what you teach, ELLs raise important and complex issues to you, your colleagues, and the school in general. These issues include the following:

- Identifying who your ELLs are and what level of English proficiency they have
- Creating a climate of respect for all students, cultures, and languages
- Assessing student learning
- Finding and using those instructional strategies that will help all ELLs succeed
- Determining what they know and need to learn so they can succeed in your class

The following suggestions offer useful ways to address these different concerns:

1. Organize the curriculum around themes and Big Questions to which you regularly return throughout the unit and semester.
2. Ensure a respectful, safe, and productive environment for all students. Should conflict or disrespect occur, address the issues immediately, focusing on the causes and the importance of the learning that should be taking place. If you are unsure how to proceed, consult your colleagues in the ESL department or the students’ counselors.
3. Communicate with students effectively to ensure they understand. This includes using gestures; speaking clearly (but not unnaturally slowly); writing important information and directions on the board; using visual aids; paraphrasing what you’ve already said; monitoring their understanding by pausing to ask if they understand; and moving from concrete to abstract, especially when introducing new material.

4. Make sure all students have access to the materials, resources (e.g., computers), and experiences needed to complete your assignments. Some ELLs lack access to many things we take for granted. For example, at a Latino Parents Group meeting at my school, we learned that of the sixty people there, only ten had computers at home, only six of which were connected to the Internet.
5. Use graphic organizers and other structured, more visual approaches to help ELLs learn in general and read and write in particular.
6. Teach background knowledge as well as academic and specialized vocabulary through direct instruction, frontloading this information to ensure their success on the subsequent assignment. Also, such instruction should not be isolated but rather integrated into the study of the content of your class.
7. Make connections—and have *students* make them, also—to their own culture, knowledge, and experience. This includes using and asking them to choose culturally relevant texts, some of which may be in their primary language (e.g., for independent reading).
8. Give students time to learn, practice, and apply the strategies you teach them.
9. Provide regular opportunities for students to interact, especially as a way of using oral language in the context of learning the content of your course. During such opportunities, make sure ELLs are mixed with native speakers.
10. Use a variety of instructional approaches, especially those that allow for hands-on learning and integrate multiple language skills (e.g., reading, writing, speaking, listening).

Recommended Reading: *Sheltered Content Instruction: Teaching English-Language Learners with Diverse Abilities*, Jana Echevarria and Anne Graves (Allyn and Bacon, 2003). See also, *English Language Learners: The Essential Guide*, David Freeman and Yvonne Freeman (Scholastic, 2007).

7. Grading

Overview

So much could be said about grading that it seems almost absurd to say anything in the brief space I've allotted, but it is a daily challenge for us to evaluate work in ways that enhance our instruction. The primary issues about grading include the following:

- What to grade and how to grade it
- How to use grades to support instruction
- How much weight and value to give specific assignments
- How to ensure my grades are consistent with other teachers'
- What factors to consider when grading student work

When grading or preparing to grade work, try the following suggestions:

1. Establish clearly and up front not only what a successful performance looks like but what the elements of that successful performance are. When having students write, for example, show them a sample of that type of writing (e.g., a business letter or persuasive essay) and the scoring guide that lists the criteria for different grades.
2. Work with other teachers to establish grading standards for certain assignments to ensure consistency between teachers and across students. Consider, for example, having an anchoring session with colleagues who teach the same class and curriculum. At this anchoring session, everyone reviews and clarifies the grading standards, then reads the papers, each giving the grade they think most appropriate to the criteria. Afterwards, everyone checks to see if there is any variation and if there is, works to resolve those differences and tighten the consistency between teachers on what, for example, an "effective argument" means and looks like on this assignment.
3. Create rubrics which you can give students ahead of time to use as a guide; the rubric also helps to clarify what matters most through its descriptors. Rubrics can also be used by students to self-assess their own papers or projects.
4. Review your grading policies to determine if they support learning and measure progress. For example, some teachers allow students to revise work after turning it in on time to improve their performance in light of the teacher's remarks. Others consider the arc of student progress, trying to reflect in the final grade the growth the student has shown over time even though the final percentage score may not reflect that improvement due to early trouble in the class.
5. Be transparent about how you grade, making it clear what you will consider and how much it will count. In the AP classes in our English department, for example, we adopted the College Board AP Literature scoring rubric as our official guide. This allows us to communicate to the students how we grade and provides increased validity across teachers

who meet to discuss what, exactly, a score of 8 or 5 looks like as described by the rubric. Later, we can use student examples to illustrate and further demystify what a 4 looks like.

6. Avoid non-academic considerations when assigning grades for an assignment or class. Some teachers, for example, will give credit for such non-academic actions as bringing in tissues for the class, thus confusing obedience with academic performance. Grades should be based on academic performance, not on intangibles such as effort, behavior, or attendance. Teachers can provide feedback about these other areas, explaining how they undermine academic performance. Marzano (2000) found in his research that three areas were appropriate to consider: subject matter content, thinking and reasoning skills, and general communication skills (39).
7. Consider more supportive grading policies, at least on certain assignments such as essays where the focus is on learning and improving. For example, instead of A-F, consider using an ABC-I system which says anything below a C receives an Incomplete and must be revised.
8. Limit the number of assignments you grade to ensure that every grade counts and that you use your time in ways that improve performance. For example, many small assignments, those done along the way during a unit, can be given checks to note they were done, but only the culminating performance is graded.
9. Consider which form of assessment is most appropriate and helpful as a means of assessing students' knowledge or performance. Such assessments include forced-choice tests, multiple choice exams, essays, short written response, oral reports, performance tasks, teacher observations, and student self-assessment (Marzano 2000, 87).
10. Don't grade students while they are still learning; instead, provide feedback on their performance and offer suggestions for improvement, waiting for a suitable time to ask them all to demonstrate their proficiency on a culminating assessment or performance.

Recommended Reading: *Transforming Classroom Grading*, Robert Marzano (Association of Curriculum and Supervision Development, 2000)

8. Teaching with Textbooks

Overview

Textbooks have become both more common and more problematic in the years since the standards movement began. They are more common as a complete solution to the problem of how to teach all that the standards mandate; however, they are also problematic because they are often difficult to use, hard to read, or too intrusive on the larger curriculum we aspire to teach. One thing is for sure: if your district spent tens of thousands of dollars to buy the textbooks, they certainly expect you to use them. Not doing so could lead to poor evaluations and, ultimately, not being rehired for untenured teachers. Several key problems come up with discussing the effective use of textbooks:

- Finding time and ways to supplement them with other readings that allow for more current topics, more relevant readings, and more insightful discussion.
- Working with the textbooks in ways that improve student achievement while also increasing engagement and motivation
- Using the books in ways that do more than “cover” the material and thus get beyond the superficial details of such complex subjects as the Civil War
- Teaching students how to make sense of all the text features--fonts, colors, boxes, sidebars, web links, images, and so on--that clutter the pages, disorienting the reader, who wonders not only where to begin reading but what, in fact, should be read
- Teaching through the textbook limits your creativity and instructional options, leaving you little room to make more relevant, pressing connections between what you teach, the students’ lives, and the world in which we all live

Some textbooks are better than others, but what follows are some general recommendations based on how experienced teachers use a textbook to improve student achievement.

1. Teach students how the textbook functions, focusing on the different features and what they mean. If, for example, there are headings of different colors and sizes, point these out and help students understand what the 18-point red subheadings mean so they can be intelligent users of the text. When working with struggling readers, I have often photocopied representative pages onto overhead transparencies and analyzed them for the class in detail.
2. Organize your curriculum, regardless of how the textbook is structured, to examine essential questions; then use the book as one of several sources to explore these questions. For example, the Language Arts textbook my school uses is fairly traditional in its structure; however, the book contains a rich array of short fiction, nonfiction, and poetry within which I have found compelling material we use to explore the question, “What does it take to be a survivor?”

3. Provide students with choices when using the questions at the end of the chapter. Out of eight questions, three or four might genuinely interest a student or be appropriate to their comprehension level. Allow students to choose the four questions they most want to answer, then use those as the basis for discussion.
4. Supplement the textbook selections with additional readings from a range of sources to provide alternative perspectives on the subject. In a History class, for example, a teacher might add journals, letters, essays, and historical fiction to round out the study of the Civil Rights era. In my English class, when students read Tim O'Brien's story ("Where Have You Gone, Charming Billy?") about Vietnam in the textbook, they also read several articles comparing the Vietnam War and the Iraq War; they watch a brief excerpt from *Letters From Vietnam*, a documentary with real letters read as voice-overs while primary source footage of the Vietnam era appears; and they read Yusef Komunyakaa's poem "Facing It," in which a soldier returns to confront his past at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.
5. Teach students specific reading strategies—making connections, drawing conclusions, summarizing—to help them comprehend the content of the textbook. If possible, have students keep a pad of sticky notes handy and annotate the book, posing questions as they read, which they can then use for subsequent class discussions.
6. Use targeted, short selections that focus on a particular issue as the basis for writing and discussion activities in class. Such passages, which might include a primary source document in a social studies text or an article on, for example, an ethical question in science, can be read and, if necessary, reread, to prepare students to participate in such discussions.
7. Teach students various note-taking techniques which they can use when reading to make the reading experience more active, more interactive, and thus productive. One such technique, particular well-suited for science and social studies textbooks, is Q Notes, a method I created. Q Notes asks students to take a header for a section, or even the subject of a paragraph (e.g., Causes of the Depression) and turn it into a question, which they write in the margin. As they read to answer this question, they list the details that answer it in the body section of the notes, using bullets to arrange the answers.
8. Hold students accountable for what they read in their textbook. Many teachers assign readings, yet students in such classes soon learn that the exams and quizzes are based on what the teacher says in class, during lecture; thus they soon ignore the textbook when it is assigned, realizing that the information they need will come to them in lectures. Whether such assessments come from the publisher or the teacher is up to you; the point is to hold students accountable in useful ways that improve student achievement.
9. Preview the textbook assignments yourself prior to assigning them to students. This allows you to evaluate the difficulty, identify key background knowledge they may need, determine which vocabulary words may need to be taught up front, and decide which reading strategies or note-taking techniques they should use when reading it.
10. Create study guides that complement the text and ensure students learn from the text what you want them to know. In addition to being aligned with your own high standards, such study guides should also be aligned with those of the state content area standards for your subject.

9. Reading

Overview

Most students today enter content area classes unprepared to meet the demands the texts will make on them; thus reading comprehension undermines students' success in our classes. Yet there are concrete steps you can take, most of which require little additional preparation or time to implement, and all of which yield consistent results and improved performance. The key challenges in the area of reading stem from the fact that students:

1. Do not do the reading.
2. Cannot comprehend what they do read.
3. Lack fluency in reading and making sense of different types of texts.
4. Are unable to troubleshoot their own misunderstandings for lack of strategies.
5. Approach reading as a generic activity regardless of text type.

Try the following recommended actions to improve comprehension, engagement, and fluency:

1. Break the reading process down into three stages—before, during, and after—and teach students specific strategies to use during each stage. Examples include the following:

Before

- Access background knowledge such as technical or academic vocabulary, relevant cultural literacy (e.g., people, events, ideas, allusions)
- Make predictions about the text (e.g., what will happen, what it will say)
- Identify and make use of text features such as headings, captions, graphics, and footnotes
- Generate questions about the topic or type of text that will help students read it

During

- Take notes of some sort; some recommend “structured note-taking” such as a worksheet formatted around similarities and differences” or key ideas and supporting details.
- Draw or use other graphic techniques that help students visualize what they read
- Ask questions (e.g., the “Reporter’s Questions”) as they read
- Monitor comprehension as they read and diagnose when and why they do not understand so they can make informed requests for help

After

- Evaluate their comprehension, identifying what they don’t yet understand
- Summarize the key points of what they read
- Reread portions they still do not understand or for other, more advanced purposes
- Identify main ideas and supporting details
- Decide what is important enough and how they can remember it for future use on assignments or tests

2. Provide direct, explicit instruction in the strategies and processes needed to read different types of texts in each content area.
3. Choose a wide range of texts that engage and challenge students.
4. Provide, when possible, choice about what they read and how they respond to what they read.
5. Have students write about what they read, responding to, summarizing, or explaining it to others.
6. Give students instruction in the vocabulary needed to read the assigned texts.
7. Ask students to make connections between the text and themselves, the world, or other texts and classes.
8. Read aloud to your students, no matter the age, grade level, or class. This helps them hear what the language should sound like and develops their fluency. I consistently hear from my advanced students how much reading aloud helps them understand what more sophisticated texts mean.
9. Use graphic organizers to help students read by giving them a purpose and a tool to help them achieve that purpose.
10. Have students discuss what they read to improve their understanding of the text and how its ideas relate to the larger subject you are studying.

Recommended Reading: *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension for Understanding and Engagement*, Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis (Stenhouse, 2007). See also *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy*, Giana Biancarosa and Catherine Snow available online at the Alliance for Excellent Education web site (www.all4ed.org).

10. Writing

Overview

Writing demands hard work of both students and their teachers. Yet it is essential to students' success in all academic domains and, increasingly, the vocational realm. Roughly fifty percent of those freshmen entering the University of California each fall fail the English placement test and are thus placed in remedial writing. American businesses estimate the cost of poor writing skills and the subsequent remediation to be around two billion dollars a year. Key concerns in the area of writing include these:

- Students not knowing how to write academic or expository papers
- Students writing papers that lack effective focus, organization, or development
- Students lacking strategies to help them begin, complete, and revise a writing assignment.
- Teachers not using writing for other purposes, most notably as a means of learning in content area classes.

The best and most recent summary of effective writing strategies for secondary content area teachers appears in a report titled *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* (Graham and Perin, 2007). In this report, the authors recommend the following elements of effective writing instruction:

1. **Writing Strategies**, which involve teaching students strategies for planning, revising, and editing their compositions
2. **Summarization**, which involves explicitly and systematically teaching students how to summarize texts
3. **Collaborative Writing**, which uses instructional arrangements in which adolescents work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions
4. **Specific Product Goals**, which assigns students specific, reachable goals for the writing they are to complete
5. **Word Processing**, which uses computers and word processors as instructional supports for writing assignments
6. **Sentence Combining**, which involves teaching students to construct more complex, sophisticated sentences
7. **Prewriting**, which engages students in activities designed to help them generate data to help them develop ideas and content for a particular writing task
8. **Inquiry Activities**, which engage students in analyzing immediate, concrete data to help them develop ideas and content for a particular writing task
9. **Process Writing Approach**, which interweaves a number of writing instructional activities in a workshop environment that stresses extended writing opportunities, writing for authentic audiences, personalized instruction, and cycles of writing
10. **Study of Models**, which provides students with opportunities to read, analyze, and emulate models of good writing
11. **Writing for Content Learning**, which uses writing as a tool for learning content material (4).

Recommended Reading: *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools*, Steve Graham and Dolores Perin. This report is available online at the Alliance for Excellent Education web site (www.all4ed.org).