

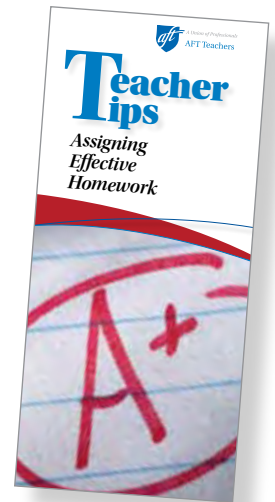
Teacher Tips

Assigning Effective Homework

Each new school year brings high hopes, great expectations and challenges for both new and seasoned teachers. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has developed a series called *Teacher Tips* to help teachers start the year off right and anticipate the year ahead.

Teacher Tips is developed with you, the educator, in mind. The tips in this collection are taken from real classroom experiences and are part of the AFT's Educational Research and Dissemination (ER&D) professional development program.

The AFT is a leader in providing teachers the resources they need to help them succeed. Visit AFT's Web site for teacher resources at www.t-source.org today.



Benefits for Students

Over the past 40 years, most research studies on homework have found that students benefit from doing schoolwork outside of class, both in terms of achievement gains and in developing independence, responsibility, organizational and time management skills, and good study habits.

Research indicates that when learning is extended into the home, the results for students include:

- ◆ Gains in skills, abilities, and test scores linked to homework and class work;
- ◆ A positive attitude toward schoolwork;
- ◆ More cohesion between school and home environments; and
- ◆ An improved self-concept in terms of the student's ability as a learner.

In addition, studies have generally found that students who develop good homework habits tend to be more receptive to the idea that learning can and does take place outside the classroom. The practice of doing schoolwork at home helps students understand that learning opportunities are not limited to school and classroom environments.

Designing Effective Homework

To achieve a positive impact on student learning, homework assignments must be well-designed and carefully constructed. Some specific research findings include:

- ◆ Homework is most effective when it covers material already taught. However, giving an assignment on material that was taught the same day is not as effective as an assignment given to review and reinforce skills learned previously.

- ◆ Homework is most effective when it is used to reinforce skills learned in previous weeks or months.
- ◆ Homework is less effective if it is used to teach complex skills.

Characteristics of Good Assignments

When teachers plan homework, they should consider the characteristics listed below. Good homework assignments:

- ◆ Provide clear instructions for students;
- ◆ Can be completed successfully;
- ◆ Are not too long;
- ◆ Can be completed within a flexible time frame;
- ◆ Use information and materials that are readily available;
- ◆ Reinforce and allow practice of previously taught skills;
- ◆ Are not just unfinished class work;
- ◆ Are interesting to students and lead to further exploration and study;
- ◆ Stimulate creativity and imagination in the application of skills;
- ◆ Encourage students to work cooperatively; and
- ◆ Stimulate home and class discussion.

Importance of Feedback

Providing students with specific, timely feedback is essential to learning. Students need information about their strengths and weaknesses, what they know and don't know, and how well they are performing. Researchers have found that students who received personal, pertinent feedback about

their homework errors outperformed students who received only scores on their homework assignments. Researchers have identified four questions that teachers should ask themselves as they review a student's homework assignment:

1. Is there an error?
2. What is the probable reason for the error?
3. How can I guide the student to avoid the error in the future?
4. What did the student do well that could be noted?

Classroom Management and Instructional Considerations

Students must understand the expectations for homework, and that they will be held accountable for completing their assignments. This depends on effective classroom management and instructional practice.

When giving assignments, teachers should:

- ◆ Ensure that students know the reasons for the assignment;
- ◆ Assign both short-term and long-term homework;
- ◆ Provide a variety of assignments with different levels of accountability;
- ◆ Communicate that homework will be part of the students' grades;

- ◆ Have and inform students of the standard of quality expected;
- ◆ Occasionally allow students to create the assignments; and
- ◆ Occasionally allow for choice.

Finally, teachers should not assume:

- ◆ That students have acquired knowledge or skills taught at an earlier time; or
- ◆ That resources are available outside the classroom.

Are you new to teaching?
Need some advice?
See videos of
teachers giving advice at
www.t-source.org/Advice.aspx.

The screenshot shows the 'T-source' website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'Home', 'About this Site', 'Contact Us', and 'AFT Home'. Below the navigation bar, there are several tabs: 'Teacher Resources', 'Community', 'AFT History', and 'About AFT'. The main content area is titled 'Advice from AFT Teachers' and features a list of teacher profiles with their names and locations. To the right of the list, there are three video thumbnails showing teachers in classroom settings. The text on the page encourages visitors to click on the teacher names to watch advice videos.

Assigning Homework Dos and Don'ts

Dos

- 1. Do** plan homework with topics and skills that:
 - ◆ Are familiar to students;
 - ◆ Have been introduced in class;
 - ◆ Are interesting and challenging;
 - ◆ Can be completed in a reasonable amount of time according to grade and age;
 - ◆ Give students the sense that they are making progress; and
 - ◆ Review and reinforce skills already taught.
- 2. Do** create the general understanding that learning takes place inside and outside of school and classrooms. (Develop a work ethic for at-home assignments.)
- 3. Do** plan ahead so that there is sufficient class time to give explicit directions for the homework assignment and to answer questions.
- 4. Do** ensure that all students have access to all resources needed to complete the homework assignment and that written directions are given.
- 5. Do** designate a special place in the classroom for homework (take-out and turn-in).
- 6. Do** review all homework assignments once students have submitted them.
- 7. Do** encourage parents to support their children's homework effort.
- 8. Do** consider reasonable time frames for homework assignments, based on the intent of the lesson. Some assignments may span more than one day. If this is the case, give careful directions. Also, consider that other teachers may be giving homework assignments with the same time frames.
- 9. Do** establish, teach and publish homework policies and procedures to ensure that students and parents understand them (e.g., when assignments are due, where they are to be submitted, how to make up missed assignments, connections between homework and class grades, if any).

Don'ts

- Do not** assign homework that:
- ◆ Is unfamiliar, boring, impossible to do;
 - ◆ Is uncompleted seatwork;
 - ◆ Requires complex skills or requires unreasonable time frames; and
 - ◆ Is redundant.
- Do not** assign homework as a “time filler” to keep students busy, a “paper-and-pencil babysitter” or a punishment for not doing class work.
- Do not** wait until the last minute to organize and assign the homework. You risk giving useless or impossible tasks and/or giving inadequate directions.
- Do not** assume that all homes have equal resources, that all parents have equal skills and talents to support their children as learners, or that all neighborhoods provide access to resources (e.g., transportation to the library).
- Do not** risk the chance that a completed homework assignment could get lost in a desk, locker or somewhere in the classroom.
- Do not** collect any homework you do not intend to check, review or grade.
- Do not** assign homework that is so difficult and unfamiliar to students that their parents are tempted to:
- ◆ Do the work for them;
 - ◆ Accuse their children of being inattentive in class; or
 - ◆ Accuse their children of failing.
- Do not** assign long-term projects without frequent monitoring by the teacher and scheduled progress reports from the students.
- Do not** maintain vague or subjective practices about homework that result in unfair and inexplicable sanctions against some students and not others (e.g., lowering of a student's grade or taking away classroom privileges) or that result in loss of class learning time spent on discipline and reprimands about uncompleted homework assignments.

Five Great Reasons to Join a Union of Professionals

The American Federation of Teachers:

1 Supports you in the classroom. Effective learning only takes place when high-quality teachers, with the support of other competent professionals, have the materials and assistance needed to accomplish the task. Your union is a strong advocate for quality classroom materials that are aligned to the standards of achievement we expect our students to meet. We also insist that state and district assessments for measuring student progress are aligned with these standards and that the assessments be used appropriately to support student learning.

2 Helps you prepare. No matter how well prepared you may have been before entering the classroom, there is always room for improvement. Ongoing professional development that meets you at your point of need is vital for continued growth as an educator. The AFT and its affiliates deliver some of the finest professional development programs available; and in situations where ours are not available, we advocate and broker for you to receive the best training possible.

3 Stands up for you. Whether the discussion is taking place in the White House, in the halls of Congress, on the floor of your statehouse, in colleges of education or in your local editorial pages, you can be sure that union representatives are weighing in assertively,

ensuring that the collective voice of educators comes through clearly and effectively.

4 Advocates for your profession. No one enters the teaching profession without a strong desire to help children reach their potential. Yet, at times the realities of life make this calling difficult to stick with. Adequate salaries and benefits are essential in order to keep the best teachers, paraprofessionals and support staff in our public schools. Working conditions such as manageable class sizes, adequate teaching materials, and discipline policies that support teaching and enhance student learning are important factors in ensuring that the best teachers remain in the classroom.

5 Keeps you informed. *American Educator* is one of the most highly respected journals available to keep you informed on current thinking in public education by some of the most capable thinkers and doers in the field. *American Teacher* will keep you on top of the challenges and successes of your colleagues across the country. And a host of optional publications, as well as a comprehensive Web site that will assist you in addressing the particular needs of your school and classroom, provide the balance of a professional literature package that is second to none.