



# HOMWORK GUIDE

*Practical, actionable,  
research-based tools  
for K-12 educators*

FALL 2024



# Introduction

Homework has, and continues to be, a topic educators grapple with on a regular basis.

*What kind of homework works best? How much time should it take my students? How will I know if they found it helpful? How should I grade it?*

This toolkit offers research-based strategies to help answer these questions and is designed to help teachers learn specific strategies for creating effective assignments for all students.

## HOMEWORK + STRESS

What we know from our surveys of middle and high school students is that they consistently report homework and workload as one of their top sources of stress, and many students believe that what they are being asked to do is busywork.

Research shows that middle and high school students need to be engaged and interested in the assignment, able to complete it independently, and understand its purpose. However, we know that despite the best efforts of teachers, students may struggle with homework.

## DIFFERENCES BY AGE

We also know that for elementary students, there is very little evidence that homework is linked to student achievement. However, since reading for pleasure is linked to achievement, in the elementary setting, we hope educators will encourage free reading as much as possible – building a solid foundation of literacy skills through discovering topics and characters that are enjoyable for each individual student.



## IN THIS GUIDE YOU WILL LEARN HOW TO:

Enhance student interest  
in the work

Determine how long  
homework is actually  
taking students

Ensure that students  
understand the  
assignments

Respond to students'  
anxiety about grades

Make homework more  
equitable and accessible



## #1: CLARIFY THE PURPOSE

**We know that homework is more effective when students understand the purpose of the assignment, and when the assignment helps students understand the big ideas of the unit.**

Homework can be particularly effective as preparation for an upcoming middle or high school class. Teachers might assign homework where students read materials in order to meaningfully participate in the next day's lesson or assign homework to help students study for an assessment. Homework might also be used to help students connect concepts to real world situations and extend their learning.

### PERCEPTION OF BUSYWORK

Our surveys reveal that over 30% of students report that almost all of their homework is busywork. This doesn't necessarily mean that you are assigning busywork, it may just be that your students don't understand the purpose of the assignment. When students do not understand the purpose, they are more likely to perceive the assignment as busywork.

PURPOSE	QUICK HOW-TO	INTENDED OUTCOMES
To increase engagement by ensuring that students see how the assignment connects to the big ideas of the unit.	Try out the homework cover sheet at the end of this guide to help students understand the purpose of each assignment and show how it connects to the big picture, central topic, or enduring understanding of the unit.	Students are more likely to complete and turn in the assignment and less likely to see it as busywork.



## #2: VOICE & CHOICE

**The extent to which students perceive their homework as interesting, relevant, and meaningful to their learning has been shown to positively impact the likelihood that they will complete the assignment and increase valuable engagement with learning.**

### OFFER CHOICES

Choice is about providing options. For instance, you could give students the opportunity to pick one problem that they find interesting from each section of an assignment and just complete those. Even that little bit of choice makes a big difference and can help motivate students to do the work. For writing assignments or other projects, you can give students a list of topics to choose from, or let them choose their own topic and run it by you before they start.

### PERSONALIZE IT

To increase student voice, try to make the assignment interesting by making it personal to the student. When you choose topics and assignments that students can relate to and offer opportunities for them to make connections to their own lives, they will find the homework more engaging.

For example, you may find ways to connect the topics to real, pressing concerns in the students' communities, such as health inequities, climate and transportation issues in their neighborhood, etc. Or, you might give them the chance to explore the history behind the music they love or the sport they enjoy most.

PURPOSE	QUICK HOW-TO	INTENDED OUTCOMES
To increase engagement by connecting the work to topics of interest to students.	Provide choices and opportunities to make the assignment culturally relevant and/or personally interesting.	Students are more engaged in the work and see the relevance of it to their lives. Therefore, they are more likely to complete and turn in the assignment and less likely to see it as busywork.



## #3: DIFFERENTIATE

If homework is too hard or too easy for a student, then it probably isn't an effective assignment.

As educators, we strive for the “just right” challenge for each student and differentiate when necessary. Differentiation means modifying the homework according to the needs of different students.

If you notice, for example, that one student can finish the whole assignment in five minutes while another needs ten minutes to complete the first problem, that may not be an effective assignment for either student.

You may want to assign a set of easier problems for some students and a set of harder problems for others or provide additional scaffolding for students who are struggling.

PURPOSE	QUICK HOW-TO	INTENDED OUTCOMES
To ensure homework is effective for each learner.	Offer “just right” challenge for each student according to their needs.	Students are more likely to complete and turn in homework that is neither too easy or too challenging.



## #4: PROVIDE CLEAR INSTRUCTIONS

**Every great author needs a great editor, and the same is true for assignment creators! When you have crafted a new homework assignment, take a small amount of additional time to ensure your instructions are clear using one of these strategies.**

- 1) Before the end of class, take a few minutes to review homework instructions and invite students to ask questions and provide feedback. Make notes for yourself so you can adjust the directions the next time you use the assignment.
- 2) Ask a colleague to look over your instructions; when another educator or peer, ideally from a different subject area, provides feedback on the clarity of your instructions, you can likely improve the effectiveness of the homework for your students.

PURPOSE	QUICK HOW-TO	INTENDED OUTCOMES
To ensure instructions are clear for students so they can complete the assignment independently.	Review instructions at the end of class and/or ask a colleague to provide feedback before giving the assignment to students.	When students understand the instructions, they are more likely to complete and turn in the assignment.



## #5: HOMEWORK AUDIT

One way to check your assumptions about the homework you are assigning is to conduct what we call an in-class homework audit or observation.

### OBSERVE + ADJUST

For a few days in a row or a full school week, provide 10-20 minutes at the end of class for students to do their homework. By observing how they approach the work, you'll be able to see how long the assignment will actually take, respond to the questions students have, and see where students are getting stuck. By watching students do the homework in front of you, you will be able to identify any problems with the assignment and make appropriate changes.

### SUPPORT HEALTHY HABITS

From the students' perspective, this in-class audit activity is really useful because they will be able to see how much work they get done when they are not distracted or overly tired. It's a win-win for everyone involved.

### I CAN'T GIVE UP INSTRUCTIONAL TIME!

You might be thinking that using time during class for a homework audit will have a negative impact on how much content you cover that week. While it will take some time out of your teaching, you will certainly gain an understanding of whether your instructions are clear, how long the work takes your students, and if certain students need modifications. It's worth it!

PURPOSE	QUICK HOW-TO	INTENDED OUTCOMES
To check quantity, clarity, and challenge level of work and determine if you are assigning too much.	<p>Students spend 10-20 minutes a day for 3-5 days in a row doing homework at the end of class.</p> <p>Use the Homework Audit sheet at the back of this guide to get started.</p>	<p>Teachers understand how long the homework takes, if instructions are clear, and if differentiation is needed. Students see how their environment influences how much they can accomplish.</p>



## #6: RESPOND TO WORRIES ABOUT GRADES

A predominant concern reported by students in our surveys is the pressure from academic workload and expectations, contributing significantly to their overall stress. Students consistently report overall workload, homework, tests/quizzes, finals, and assessments as their top sources of stress.

Grading homework can also be tricky because you don't have a window into how it's being done, or whether a student is receiving support. If you have a lot of students who are worried about their grades on homework assignments, here are a few options to consider:

### REVISION + REDEMPTION

Allow revision and redemption opportunities. For example, you can allow students to redo the homework assignment if they didn't understand it or if they got a low grade. This approach works for anything you grade - tests, quizzes, papers, etc. The deepest learning happens after you give students feedback (not just a grade) and then allow them to correct their mistakes and try again.

### DON'T GRADE IT

Another approach we've seen work well is not grading homework at all. The credit students receive is for completing the assignment, but the work itself is not graded. In this scenario, students aren't unnecessarily penalized for their lack of understanding or resource limitations. This is one way to make homework a little more equitable.

For some teachers, that may sound like a big leap, so you can start small. For example, try not grading one assignment per week, giving students a choice about which assignment is graded, or allowing them to drop the lowest homework grade.





## #6, CONTINUED: RESPOND TO WORRIES ABOUT GRADES

### RECONSIDER THE WEIGHT OF HOMEWORK

If you are going to grade homework, you may want to consider how much weight it carries in the gradebook. Recognizing that there are real differences in kids' home lives and their access to resources is a significant equity concern. We must consider if it is fair to put so much weight on homework grades when not everyone has all the resources they need to complete it.

### ELIMINATE ZEROS

Another approach is to consider not giving any zeros. It's incredibly difficult for students to raise their overall course grade when they have a lot of zeros in the homework category pulling their grade point average down.

In some cases, students rack up a lot of zeros because they're not turning in homework, but they're doing just fine on tests, quizzes, essays or other assessments. This may indicate that these students did not need to do the homework in order to achieve mastery.

If you want to go even further, you could experiment with making homework optional at times, giving students the agency to decide whether or not they need the extra practice.

PURPOSE	QUICK HOW-TO	INTENDED OUTCOMES
Ease students' anxiety around homework grades.	Allow re-dos; provide credit for completing the assignment, not for the accuracy of answers; allow students to choose which assignments count for grades; don't give zeros; lower the weight of homework in the gradebook.	Students complete homework in order to prepare for class, practice, and make connections, rather than as an assessment.

# Conclusion

If you take away only one thing from this guide, we hope that you will consider the purpose of homework for your courses. Research shows that effective homework offers opportunities for students to connect concepts to real world situations, extend their learning, and prepare for subsequent lessons, rather than as a way to assess student knowledge.

In the end, we don't know how the homework was done, who did it or helped with it, or if all students had the necessary resources available to succeed on the assignment. We must keep in mind that not every student has access to a quiet place to do homework and/or the resources they need, such as internet access or an adult who can offer help. Some students may also have jobs or family obligations, such as caring for siblings, that require substantial time outside of school.

Try to keep students' different home lives and obligations in mind when assigning work to be done outside of the classroom so as not to perpetuate inequities students are already facing.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES & REFERENCES FROM CHALLENGE SUCCESS



[Free Online Tools & Tips  
for Schools & Families](#)



[Book: Overloaded &  
Underprepared](#)



[Book:  
"Doing School"](#)

*Note: For more information on the research mentioned  
in this guide, see our [homework research brief](#).*



# Homework Cover Sheet

Use this tool while designing an assignment to make sure it is effective for all students.

## PURPOSE

What is the purpose of this assignment?

How clear is the purpose of this assignment?

How connected to a big idea is this assignment?

*not at all clear*

*somewhat clear*

*very clear*

*not at all connected*

*somewhat connected*

*very connected*

## ENGAGEMENT

How long would the assignment take a student to complete?

To what degree does the assignment encourage voice and choice?

How relevant would students find the assignment to their own lives?

*no voice and choice*

*some voice and choice*

*lots of voice and choice*

*not at all relevant*

*somewhat relevant*

*very relevant*

## ACCESS & EQUITY

How clear are the instructions for the assignment?

*not at all clear*

*somewhat clear*

*very clear*

Could this assignment be differentiated for various needs?

*no differentiation possible*

*some differentiation possible*

*lots of differentiation possible*

Would all students have the resources needed to complete the assignment?

*not equitable / accessible*

*somewhat equitable / accessible*

*very equitable / accessible*

## HOW COULD THIS ASSIGNMENT BE IMPROVED?



# In-Class Homework Audit

1. BEFORE the audit: Fill in the left column.
2. DURING the audit: Fill in the right column to check your assumptions.
3. AFTER the audit: Make adjustments to the assignment based on your observations.

EXPECTED time for a student to complete the assignment:

Notes on TIME from in-class audit:

MAXIMUM amount of time a student should spend on this assignment:

In your opinion, what is the VALUE or PURPOSE of this assignment to a student?

Notes on VALUE & PURPOSE from in-class audit:

Rate the CLARITY of the assignment, for a student:

- Unclear: needs instructions, resources, or context.
- Somewhat clear
- Mostly clear
- Completely clear: a student who missed class would be able to complete it independently.

Notes on CLARITY from in-class audit:

Rate the ENGAGEMENT value of the assignment, for a student:

- Not engaging: does not allow for exploration of skills relevant to students' identities, communities, or futures.
- Somewhat engaging
- Mostly engaging
- Completely engaging: a student would want to do this assignment whether or not it was required.

Notes on ENGAGEMENT from in-class audit:

Rate the level of ACCESS and EQUITY, for a student:

- Highly dependent on external resources, including adult support, specific experiences or knowledge not explicitly taught previously, supplies, etc.
- Could be completed somewhat independently
- Could be completed mostly independently
- Completely independent: a student could do this assignment alone and on public transit if necessary.

Notes on ACCESS & EQUITY from in-class audit:

# About Challenge Success

## MISSION

Challenge Success partners with school communities to elevate student voice and implement research-based, equity-centered strategies that improve student well-being, belonging, and engagement.

## VISION

Our vision is that educational systems value each student for their unique identities, assets, and individual definition of success and effectively prepare students for the variety of opportunities and challenges they will encounter in school and beyond.

## EQUITY COMMITMENT

Challenge Success continuously examines and revises our work and seeks to disrupt patterns of inequity to further well-being, belonging, and engagement for each student, especially those for whom identity, culture, or socioeconomic status has resulted in barriers to access, success, and engagement. We believe:

- Change starts with self, including active self-reflection to notice our own implicit biases and recognize how our lived experiences influence our perspectives and decision-making.
- All students, families, and communities have assets to build on and sustain.
- Centering design on those most marginalized by the current system benefits all students.
- Approaches to change must be systemic, context-based, and targeted at policies and practices.



### LEARN MORE

If you found this guide helpful and are looking for more support, please contact us about working with your school directly.

*Challenge Success is a 501c3 nonprofit affiliated with the Stanford Graduate School of Education*

P.O. Box #20053  
Stanford, CA 94309  
[info@challengesuccess.org](mailto:info@challengesuccess.org)

