

# A Strategy for Getting Students to Do Their Homework

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Would you use more class time for active learning (discussion, small group tasks, etc.) if the students arrived with the assigned reading already read and understood? I learned the following procedure at a critical thinking workshop conducted by Richard Paul, Director of the Center for Critical Thinking at Sonoma State University.

Here is the basic procedure:

1. In addition to the assigned daily reading, assign a daily written product based on the reading (summary, response, application, notes, questions, etc.).
2. When students arrive in class, initial or rubber stamp the homework, glancing at it only long enough to see that it is indeed today's homework for your course (less than two seconds each).
3. For the students who are prepared, design meaningful small-group active-learning tasks that ask students to apply what they read and wrote about. Exclude those who have not received your initials or rubber stamp.
4. Collect the daily homework (which students save in a notebook) 2-3 times a semester or at the end of the course and grade a random sample of their homework assignments.

To explain the procedure more fully, here are some notes on each of these steps. During the twelve years that I've been using this strategy, my students are far more prepared, and I have a smaller student dropout rate.

### **1. Assign a daily writing assignment based on the reading.**

At the beginning of the course, teach the students how you want them to read the textbook chapters and other readings. Train students how to apply reading strategies to the textbook in your course; model the reading and note-taking process you want them to use, ask them to apply it, and in the first few class sessions give them feedback on how well they did it. Show them what to underline, how to annotate pages, how to take notes, how to use visual cues (such as headings), what to do with illustrations, how to summarize, when to read skeptically, when to read for understanding, how to handle new vocabulary. When students take on the task of reading and understanding, you will not need to lecture on the textbook material. Listening to your lectures will not become the students' reading strategy.

Always ask for a written product in response to the reading. Vary the kinds of responses you ask them to write. (See other handouts for suggestions.) Keep these writing-to-learn tasks informal, engaged personal writing—not formal, grammatically correct spell-checked writing. Writing for a grammar judge shifts students' goals from learning the material to pleasing a teacher.

### **2. Stamp or initial the daily writing assignment.**

Begin each class with a homework check. Stamp it or sign your initials. (I have a collection of rubber stamps, which I vary each day). Just glance at their notebooks long enough to assure yourself that it is indeed homework for your course, not their notes from their previous class. Don't collect it or read it or provide feedback on it—you'll burn out from overwork. Although a good rule is that all assignments must be done by the end of the semester, late work does not get a stamp—no matter how good the excuse. Allow a safety net of a few late, unstamped assignments for emergencies. (I allow four late, unstamped assignments in a course that meets twice a week--no questions asked.)

### **3. Design meaningful small-group active-learning tasks based on the written homework.**

In class use the assigned reading and writing in a meaningful way. There is an enormous variety of tasks students can do: apply textbook concepts to concrete cases, answer teacher-posed questions; select the "best" homework using teacher-assigned criteria or their own, critique and revise written work, synthesize, compare/contrast, evaluate, support a position. (My own small-group tasks in my course in writing and analyzing arguments almost always ask the groups to produce a written outcome; in their discussion and negotiation about what to write in the group's report, the students apply the kind of reasoning the course teaches). If your active-learning tasks are designed well, fit well with the course objectives, help the students prepare for tests and assigned papers, most students will see these tasks as meaningful and worth their participation. An important rule is that students who have NOT done the day's written homework cannot participate in the group work; they sit at their desks alone and do their unfinished homework—no matter how valid their excuse for not doing their homework. Busy adults with families and employers have valid reasons for not doing every single homework assignment, and if they accept the rationale behind your procedure, they will not feel ostracized or punished for not getting their homework done. Do a good selling job explaining that your procedure is sensible and in their self-interest. (See "Explaining the Procedure" below.)

#### **4. Grade a random sample of the writing assignments.**

The students' incentive for doing a good job on their daily written work is both intrinsic and extrinsic. Their intrinsic motivation comes from their daily intellectual engagement in the course material, their sense of satisfaction in understanding what's going on in the course, and their sense of being prepared for class and not getting hopelessly behind. Their extrinsic motivation comes from their knowledge that you will grade their daily homework at scheduled times or at the end of the course. You don't need to read and grade everything. That takes too much time—you'll never do it again. Select a random sample. Richard Paul's method is to collect their portfolio of assignments at the end of the course, select one daily writing assignment from the first third of the course, two from the second, and three from the third. My method is to skim them all three times during the semester. Make your grading criteria clear at the beginning of the course. I grade using two criteria: attention to the assigned task and thoroughness. Assign the homework notebook/portfolio an appropriate percentage of the course grade. (Mine is 30 percent; their writing assignments count for the other 70%.)

#### **Sell the Procedure**

It's important that you present the procedure to students in a way that lets them see that the procedure serves their interests, not yours. In the first class session I ask students to jot down a few strengths and weaknesses of the lecture method as a way of learning. Then they list the strengths and weaknesses of small group tasks as a way of learning. Now we're ready to discuss the features of passive learning and its benefits and limitations. And we also discuss active learning and its benefits and limitations. Someone (sometimes me) raises the problem of unprepared students dragging down the level of discussion in small groups. Last we discuss personal goals in the course; nearly everyone has the goals of keeping up their daily assignments and doing well in the course. Aha. I now introduce the procedure described here that keeps small-group discussion interesting and accomplishes their personal course goals. And I begin the rubber stamping and excluding from small groups the very next class.

Do the students see the procedure as punitive or mickey mouse? A very few do. But in informal evaluations halfway through the course, over three-fourths of them say it is very helpful in encouraging them to keep up and in ensuring that only prepared students participate in groups. Even the few who complain of the continual pressure applied by the procedure acknowledge its value and appreciate its purpose.

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