

## ***Homework***

Many teachers inappropriately include homework as a specific part of grades. Most of the time, homework is formative and, therefore, should not be part of a grade.

Homework should be a risk-free chance to experiment with new skills. Homework should require students to apply what they have learned so they find out what they really do understand and can return to class to ask questions about what was not understood. (Carr & Farr, 2000, p. 200)

Wormeli (2006) supports this view, as he believes that “homework is never to learn the material the first time around” (p. 116). He further states that “homework is given after students have already mastered the material. It is given so that students can practice, reinforce, elaborate, prepare and extend their understanding, not to learn something ‘cold’” (p. 117).

Another aspect of “handling homework” is addressed by Winger (2005). He observes that in the past, students often got good grades in his classes because they completed their homework, while students who did not turn in homework got low grades. However, these grades were frequently at odds with the results of tests of their understanding. He concludes that when he did this, “a grade may be a more accurate measure of a student’s effort than of his or her learning” (p. 63). He also recognizes that “it is obvious when an assignment is not turned in at all, we can draw no conclusions

about the offending student's knowledge or skill" (p. 64). As a result, he now "consider[s] a student's diligence in doing daily homework as a non-academic grade component and his or her in-class assessments as a measure of learning" (p. 64). Unfortunately, he does include "work habits" as 10–20 percent of the grade, but at least he makes the important distinction between work and achievement.

Susan Christopher (2007/2008), a middle school Spanish teacher in Clayton, Missouri, has taken the step of not counting practice homework as any part of grades. She sees homework as "a safe place to try out new skills without penalty, just as athletes and musicians try out their skills on the practice field or in rehearsals" (p. 74). She says that "I still collect and comment on student homework (although not all of it), and I still report to parents whether or not their child is completing homework assignments, but I set the weight as zero" (p. 74). She notes that she has been pleasantly surprised that after this change in her practice, there has actually been an increase in "the number of students completing and turning in assignments" (p. 74). The "story" of Gary Nunnally, another teacher who stopped giving points for homework, can be found in Pollock (2007, pp. 19–23).

Trowbridge (2007) suggests that homework is one of the "rituals (that is, practices 'prescribed by custom') that we have in schools that could be considered counterproductive for students" (p. 398). He believes that "we give homework for practice," and asks, "If kids already understand the material, why are they practicing it? If they don't, why would we want them to practice doing it wrong?" (p. 398).

Patterson (2003) asks why teachers grade homework and answers by saying, "In many cases they do so because it is the only leverage they have to get students to do it" (p. 572). But, as have others, he notes that this only works for students who are concerned about their grades.

Students who are willing to accept lower grades and those who rebel by refusing to spend time on "busy work"—as much of their homework seems to be—remain unaffected by the homework hammer. Many students who refuse to jump through the myriad educational hoops paced before them receive poor or failing grades because of the zeroes they received on homework, even though they may have learned the material well. (Patterson, p. 572)

A helpful approach to homework was developed by the Elmbrook School District in Wisconsin; homework is classified as practice, preparation, or integration with descriptions of the desirable characteristics and examples of each type (see Figure 4.5).

Excluding formative assessment scores from grades does not mean that they are unimportant.

**Figure 4.5** Three Types of Homework Assignments**Practice assignments**

- must be related to instructional objectives.
- review and reinforce newly acquired skills or knowledge.
- give independent practice for a new concept/skill.
- should have an allowance for mistakes as part of the learning process.
- should be commented on or spot-checked but not counted as a part of the academic grade.
- demonstrate effort, not mastery of concept.
- Examples: Ten math problems using the algorithm taught in class; writing a paragraph with a strong lead after a lesson on leads in writing; rehearsing foreign language verb tenses that have been introduced this week

**Preparation assignments**

- provide background information for upcoming lessons.
- indicate with completion effort, not outcome mastery.
- Examples: Reading the description of an experiment prior to the date of the experiment; bringing in a newspaper article related to a current event being studied; selecting a favorite poem to share with the class the following day; using the textbook to label a map of an area, which will then be discussed in class the following day

**Integration assignments**

- are frequently long-term, continuing projects that parallel classwork.
- enrich classroom experiences and deepen the student's understanding.
- provide opportunities for problem solving and critical thinking.
- integrate skills applying many different skills and knowledge sets to a task.
- require students to apply previous learning to complete these assignments.
- require students to be provided support and materials if needed.
- require project expectations and grading procedures for the assignment to be clear to students and parents.

SOURCE: Used with permission from the School District of Elmbrook, Wisconsin.

**Think About This . . .****Reasons for Not Including Formative Assessment**

1. Students concentrate on learning from mistakes instead of suffering the disappointments of lowered grades.
2. Students endure less anxiety about "work" that "counts."
3. Students engage in less cheating or avoidance.
4. The stage is no longer set for other grading abuses like giving zeros or "docking" for late work.
5. Student-teacher relationships improve.
6. Students learn more and perform better on summative assessments.
7. Student comparisons of teacher grading systems vanish.

—Hugh O'Donnell, 2007, school board member  
and retired middle school social studies teacher, Hillsboro, Oregon

## Concern About Excluding Formative Assessment Scores

It is very important to emphasize that excluding formative assessment scores from grades does not mean that they are unimportant. Formative assessments are critical to the learning process because “they provide feedback when it is still possible to influence the process, and are at the heart of teaching” (Airasian, 1994, p. 136). Teachers must emphasize this to students and to parents to develop a new understanding of what counts. Guskey and Bailey (2001) suggest that “most students need to be shown the explicit benefits of putting forth appropriate effort on formative assessment” (p. 31). However, they also acknowledge that “many teachers have found when students understand the purposes of formative assessments and see the direct payoff they derive from the feedback offered by such assessments, motivation is no longer a problem” (p. 50).

Anecdotal evidence of this is provided by the experience of the modern language department at Rutherford High School in Panama City, Florida. Led by department head Sandy Wilson, all teachers in this department have made a clear distinction between formative and summative assessment. They have found (and I have heard students attest) that students here discovered that this approach is very beneficial to their understanding of language and that they approach summative assessments with great confidence. Students have said things like, “The test is less stressful because we have practiced the material till we know it and we know we know it before the test,” “We have more fun in class because there is no

grade attached to formative exercises. We are expected to make mistakes to help us learn,” and “It is obvious that the teacher wants us to learn” (personal communications, June 2003). It is essential that teachers know which students are doing well and which are not. This knowledge allows all concerned to build on the strengths and correct the weaknesses of individual students.

Taking into account all of the above, it seems clear that teachers need to keep records of formative assessment, sometimes just “done” and “not done” or sometimes “done well,” “done OK,” and “done poorly” and that the most constructive approach is *no mark, comment only* formative assessment. Paul Black and his research colleagues note that when this became the teachers’ practice, “classroom culture began to change—students saw effort as worthwhile because learning was improving” (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003, p. 48).

## The Role of Summative Assessment

*Summative assessment should be designed to provide information for specific purposes and carried out only when progress needs to be summarized and evaluated. At other times teachers should focus on the formative use of assessment.*

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### ***Performance: Data Source for Grades***

What does count for grades is the performances that students give to demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and behaviors they have acquired as the result of instruction and practice. These demonstrations usually occur at or toward the end (however arbitrarily *the end* is defined) of a unit, a course, or a grading period. “Teachers[, however,] should present the summative performance assessments tasks to students at the beginning of a new unit or course” (McTighe & O’Connor, 2005, p. 12). McTighe and O’Connor suggest that

this practice has three virtues. First, the summative assessments clarify the targeted standards and benchmarks for teachers and learners. . . . Second, the performance tasks yield evidence that reveals understanding. . . . Third, presenting the authentic performance tasks at the beginning of a new unit or course provides a meaningful learning goal for students. (p. 12)

### ***Variety of Summative Assessments***

This guideline does not emphasize just exams and unit tests. There are many possible summative assessments, especially if teachers use performance assessment (see Figure 4.2). For most subjects, teachers should use a combination of assessment types:

- Paper-and-pencil tests—Primarily for knowledge
- Performance assessment—Primarily for application of knowledge and to recognize skills and behaviors
- Personal communication—To evaluate aspects of all types of learning goals

Good examples of varied summative assessments are those that drivers complete before they can obtain a driver’s license. First, the driver must usually take a written test on the rules of the road and common driving situations. This is often followed by an eye test, and finally, a performance assessment of the critical skill—driving. Student drivers must pass all three tests to obtain a license. This model can be applied in the classroom when we want students to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and behaviors.

Also note that most people take lessons and practice for a long time before they try the driving test. While they are doing this, the instructor provides them with feedback. Instructors do not give each lesson a mark to be factored in with the score on the driving test that determines if the license will be issued!

It must be emphasized again that Guideline 4 supports learning and encourages student success by giving students opportunities to practice before undertaking assessments that count directly in grades. In this regard, there are two critical points. First, not only must students have opportunities to practice their knowledge, skills, and behaviors, but they also must have opportunities to

Give students opportunities to practice before undertaking assessments that count directly in grades.

practice the type of assessment that is to be used summatively before a summative assessment is made. Second, educators must use more than one assessment method. This ensures comprehensive and consistent indications of student performance (Rogers & Graham, 1997). Travis (1996) supports this viewpoint and suggests that it “is especially true when the educator wants to take varying learning styles and strategies into consideration” (p. 309).

This principle is being applied in school districts that are using the “bodies of evidence” concept. The school district of Aurora, Colorado, for example, requires that validation of competency on each of its district standards must involve several assessments, at least one of which must be a performance assessment. Harlen and James (1997) offer a superb analysis of formative and summative assessment and their roles in learning. Below, from McColskey and McMunn (2000), is a valuable set of questions that teachers should think about:

- If students’ work is graded on a daily basis, can they relax and really think and learn, or do they have to constantly worry about getting a bad grade?
- Of what value to students is the feedback they receive from practice tests?
- Does an overemphasis on grading increase or decrease the motivation of those most likely to be struggling with the topic or skill?
- When students are just beginning to learn a new skill or topic, do grades on homework or assignments designed to help them explore a topic make some of them fearful and anxious?
- How important is it to help students learn how to assess and improve their work? (p. 118)

Teachers need to plan carefully the summative assessments that will provide sufficient evidence for evaluating student achievement of a group of learning goals, say in a unit, and plan equally carefully the formative assessments that will help the students to be successful on the summative assessments. This planning should also include who is the assessor. For an example, see Figure 4.6.

**Figure 4.6** A Unit Assessment Plan

<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Assessment Task</i>	<i>Assessor</i>
<b>Summative</b>	Map	Teacher
	Supported opinion short essay	Teacher
	Test	Teacher
<b>Formative</b>	Map draft 1	Self
	Map near final	Peer
	Supported opinion draft	Peer/Self
	Quiz(es)	Teacher/Self

It should now be clear that formative and summative assessment both have important roles to play in the teaching/learning process; although they overlap somewhat, the purpose of each is fundamentally different. This is highlighted by Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, and Chappuis (2004): “We can think of all assessment uses falling into one of two general categories—assessment *FOR* learning [formative and diagnostic] and assessment *OF* learning [summative]. Both categories have their place in education and in the classroom” (p. 29). (A detailed comparison of assessment of and for learning can be found in Stiggins et al., p. 33.)

### Think About This . . .

“I have challenged my staff to grade student achievement, not student work.”

—Joseph Brown, Principal, Monroe Middle School, Tampa, Florida  
(personal communication, February 4, 2005)

### WHAT'S THE BOTTOM LINE?

What should be included in grades? Scores from summative assessments should be included. What should not be included in grades? Scores from formative assessments should not be included.

What is the practical implication of Guideline 4? Teachers should either have a page in their grade books for reporting purposes—the formative page—and a page for grading—the summative page—or they should clearly identify formative and summative assessments in their grade books.