

Late Work

A major problem, especially in middle and high schools, is the issue of not submitting required assessment evidence (“work”) on time. The following late homework policy for one college course was found on the Internet, and similar policies are often been found in high schools:

Homework turned in for grading in class on the date due will incur no penalty. Otherwise the following grade reductions are in effect:

- up to one day—a 5 percent reduction;
- two days late—a 10 percent reduction;
- three days late—a 20 percent reduction;
- four days late—a 40 percent reduction; and
- five days late—an 80 percent reduction.

Homework extensions are only granted *before* homework is due. Do not attempt to obtain an extension on or after the due date.

At the high school level in my former school district, penalties for handing work in late were as high as 10 percent per day to a maximum of 50 percent (including weekend days!).

There are three problems with these approaches. First, the penalty that students receive distorts their achievement, thus contributing to a mark and, ultimately, to a grade that does not have clear meaning. Second, the punitive nature of the penalty provides a powerful disincentive for students to complete any work after it is more than one or two days late. In both examples, no intelligent student would bother completing the work after three days. Third, the penalties rarely change subsequent student behavior.

As Reeves (2007) notes, there is “nearly a century of evidence that grading as punishment does not work” (p. 230). The student who hands work in late in

The intent is that tardiness be dealt with appropriately, so grades have meaning and communicate clear, easily interpretable information about achievement, and second, that the procedures used are likely to assist students to eliminate the problem.

Week 2 frequently exhibits the same behavior in Week 8 and Week 15. Such policies are obviously opposed to a learning/success orientation—that the work is done and that learning occurs holds more importance than when the work is done and when learning occurs. This does not mean that handing work in on time is not important—timeliness is very important—but as I once heard Joel Barker say, “It is best to do it right and on time, but it is better to do it right and late than the reverse.”

In the school or college situation, there are several important considerations about due dates for student work. One is that required work is sometimes part of an instructional sequence and needs to be submitted before marked work is returned. A second consideration is that teachers need to have a reasonable workload—they cannot be expected to mark huge amounts of work on the last day or two of a grading period.

In both situations, the concept of an absolute deadline after which no work will be accepted for inclusion in grades—in that grading period—may be appropriate and/or necessary. This does not mean that students automatically receive zeroes or severe penalties. In the case of work in an instructional sequence, this type of work usually has a formative purpose and so should not be included in grades anyway (see Chapter 4); all the teacher needs to do is record that the work was not done or was handed in late. If there is a behavioral section on the report card, this information will be reported there. In the case of a lack of time for the teacher to grade, the most appropriate approach would be to record an incomplete and include the mark in the student’s grade in the next grading period, when the teacher has had a reasonable amount of time to assess the student’s work.

Think About This . . .

“In the past I have been an absolute stickler for handing in work on-time with exceptions on a case-by-case basis. I had in my mind that I was promoting excellence by doing that. . . . Over time I realized I was sending the message that timeliness was more important than learning. There are many deadlines that I miss for paperwork and the like simply because I am too busy or something came up that needs to be attended to first. That is real life. While I push my students to hand work in on time, I’d rather have the work than not because the work I assign is designed to teach and practice important concepts we’re working on. I (now) post [lists of] student missing work outside their homeroom doors, and they have done a far better job of turning it in—and getting current work handed in on time.”

—Ellen Berg, secondary teacher, quoted in Wormeli, 2006, p. 104

A third consideration for due dates is that these are frequently quite arbitrary, especially for major performance assessments, such as term papers. In these—and, in fact, in all—situations, teachers should encourage and support students to submit work on time, but if they do not, teachers should not use

penalties. I recognize that this will not be acceptable to some teachers, so if penalties are used (hopefully only in transition to true standards-based grading), they should be kept small. Cooper (2007) suggests that if penalties are used they should be fixed, not escalating; that “returned work must indicate both achieved and reduced marks”; and that “late penalties must not change a passing grade to a failing grade” (p. 249). Think of your favorite author—let us call her Margaret. Imagine that when Margaret was in high school, she was a brilliant writer but always handed work in late. Using the punitive procedures described earlier, although receiving A’s or 90 percent or more on each piece of writing, Margaret would probably have received relatively low grades, because her marks would have been reduced one or two letter grades, or 20–30 percent. The final grade would give no idea of her high quality of work or of her tardiness problem. Far better that Margaret get the 90 percent or better that she deserved as marks and that the report card state A or 4 or 95 percent *and* “Margaret is a brilliant writer, but she always hands her work in late.” Now we have real information. If she is going to be a novelist or a playwright, it is not much of a problem—publishers have deadlines, but for novels and plays, the deadlines are often flexible. If, however, she aspires to be a journalist or an advertising copywriter, she will probably not be hired because in those occupations, the deadlines are as important as the quality of the writing.

It must be emphasized again that the intent here is not to encourage students to hand work in late. The first intent is that tardiness be dealt with appropriately, so grades have meaning and communicate clear, easily interpretable information about achievement. The second intent is that the procedures used are likely to assist students to eliminate the problem. Many years of teachers using penalties show that they do not work and that they basically give students excuses not to do the work.

A far more positive approach is one that has been developed in the York Region School District in Ontario. This approach, developed by Cathy Costello with assistance from Barry McKillop, is titled “Creating a Culture of Responsibility.” Just the name itself indicates the orientation of this approach. An adapted version is provided as Figure 3.3. Further details can be found in Costello and McKillop’s (2000) excellent article in the classroom assessment issue of *Orbit*, published by Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. What is most important here is the support orientation: Schools need to develop procedures for situations where students are not completing essential assessment evidence in a timely manner. Cooper (2007) suggests this may include completion contracts and a supervised learning center.

This orientation is stated most strongly in the work of Rick DuFour and his colleagues. Based on the success of the approach he developed at Adlai Stevenson High School in Illinois, DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2004) say that the critical question is “How will we respond when students experience initial difficulty so that we can improve on current levels of learning” (p. 3). They suggest that what is needed is “a school-wide system of interventions that provides all students with additional time and support when they experience initial difficulty in learning” (p. 7). This recommendation obviously refers broadly to “difficulty in learning,” but submitting required work late is clearly a “difficulty in learning,” so this process is applicable. Dufour et al.

Figure 3.3 Getting Work In on Time

1. Set clear and reasonable timelines with some student input.
2. Ensure that the expectations for the task/assignment are clearly established and understood.
3. Support the students who will predictably struggle with the task without intervention.
4. Find out why other students' work is late and assist them.
5. Establish the consequences for late work, such as
 - afterschool follow-up;
 - makeup responsibility within a supervised setting;
 - parent contact;
 - notation in the mark book for each assignment that is late;
 - "grades" on a learning skills/work habits section of the report card; and
 - comments on the report card that reflect chronic lateness.
6. Provide the opportunity for students to extend timelines:
 - Student must communicate with the teacher in advance of the due date.
 - Student must choose situations carefully as this extension may be limited to a fixed number of uses.

SOURCE: Adapted from "Creating a Culture of Responsibility" with permission from the York Region School District Board, Ontario, Canada.

believe that interventions must be systematic and timely; they recommend a "Pyramid of Interventions" (pp. 60-62, 210) that starts with opportunities that are somewhat voluntary and become increasingly directive and required so that "kids learn quickly that if they do not perform well they will be answering to a coordinated team of staff members who will insist that they put in the effort to succeed" (pp. 43-44).

Another author who illuminates this topic with clear logic and support for students is Forest Gathercoal in his wonderful book *Judicious Discipline* (2004), a must-read, at least for all school administrators with responsibility for discipline. He notes that "lowering achievement grades for misbehavior does not always teach responsibility, but it always does pass on misinformation" (p. 154). He also says that

teachers who accept late work tell me that students are more likely to complete their assignments if they know it will not be graded down. It also communicates to students that all class assignments have a legitimate educational purpose that must be fulfilled. (p. 154)

An interesting source for teachers' ideas on the subject of late work is the "Teacher Talk" section of the January 2000 edition of *Classroom Notes Plus* (National Council of Teachers of English). This section contains ideas from an online discussion, "How Do You Handle Late Work?" Views range from open submission to advocating severe penalties and everything in-between.

An excellent vignette with discussion questions about the issues involved with late work can be found in *Smerging Data: Grading . . . More Than Just Number Crunching*, published by the Alberta Assessment Consortium (2001, pp. 22–23).