

# Homework and the Gradual Release of Responsibility: Making “Responsibility” Possible

*Fisher and Frey describe instructional methods for designing homework that enables student learning by ensuring that students are thoroughly prepared for and responsible for the tasks assigned.*

**F**or several decades, teachers and researchers have argued the value of homework. There have been research reviews suggesting that homework is beneficial, such as the meta-analyses done by Harris Cooper, Jorgianne C. Robinson, and Erika A. Patall. Their analysis concluded, “With only rare exceptions, the relationship between the amount of homework students do and their achievement outcomes was found to be positive and statistically significant” (48). Harris Cooper also notes that homework is more powerful as students get older. In his 1989 meta-analysis, Cooper reported the following effect sizes according to different age groups (71):

- Grades 4–6: ES = .15 (Percentile gain = 6)
- Grades 7–9: ES = .31 (Percentile gain = 12)
- Grades 10–12: ES = .64 (Percentile gain = 24)

This pattern suggests that homework is increasingly beneficial as students get older. However, critics of homework argue that it is not effective and interrupts family interactions and fosters a competitive environment that values work over social interactions (e.g., Kralovec and Buell). Alfie Kohn even suggests that researchers inflate the value of homework. For example, Kohn suggested that Cooper was determined “to massage the numbers until they yield something—anything—on which to construct a defense of homework for younger children” (84).

Homework appears to be deeply embedded in the beliefs about schooling. A survey sponsored by MetLife revealed that homework is viewed as

“important” or “very important” by teachers (83%), parents (81%), and students (77%). However, the purposes for homework were more complex. The majority of teachers reported that they used homework to “improve skills in the classroom and for improving life skills beyond high school” (30), especially in establishing effective work habits about assuming responsibility. Notwithstanding, 26% of secondary teachers confessed that they “very often or often” assigned homework because they ran out of time in class (32). We find this worrisome because it suggests that middle school and high school students regularly face homework assignments for which they have received inadequate preparation.

The debate rages on about homework (e.g., Marzano and Pickering) as schools and teachers attempt to meet adequate yearly progress targets with their students. But what if we are asking the wrong question about homework? Or what if we changed the question from a dichotomous one—either a yes or no to homework—and focused on the role that homework plays in building competence? In particular, we’d like to talk about instructional routines and procedures that support learning through homework. Our work with high school students has allowed us to clarify our understanding of how classroom instruction and homework can complement one another to result in deeper understanding and improved skills. We will describe our process for planning instruction and developing homework assignments that allow students to assume responsibility because they are thoroughly prepared for the task.

## Before Homework, Consider Instruction

Before thinking about what we want students to do at home, we plan a series of experiences in class. We do so using the gradual release of responsibility model. The gradual release of responsibility model stipulates that the teacher moves from assuming “all the responsibility for performing a task . . . to a situation in which the students assume all of the responsibility” (Duke and Pearson 211). Our operationalization of this model consists of four major components: focus, guided, collaborative, and independent (e.g., Fisher and Frey).

### Focus Lesson

Before students can be expected to produce independently, they need to understand the purpose and experience an example. The focus lesson does exactly that. During the focus lesson, the teacher establishes the purpose and models his or her own thinking. Purpose is established in using both content and language objectives (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short). For example, during a recent class meeting our purpose included a content goal (Synthesize and retell information gained from reading multiple sources) and a language goal (Use signal words to guide the reader in understanding).

Once students understand the purpose of the lesson, they need an example of the thinking required to complete the task. As such, teachers model their understanding using think-alouds and demonstrations. The emphasis during the modeling phase of instruction is on explaining one’s thinking for learners. Behaviors frequently modeled include comprehension strategies, word solving, using text structure, or gaining information from text features. For example, thinking aloud about the information presented in a graph of the world’s population demonstrates for students how text features work. Similarly, demonstrating the use of predicting, visualizing, or summarizing while reading provides students with examples that they can use in their reading. And finally, solving unknown words using context clues, word parts, or resources such as other people and dictionaries helps readers understand that there are ways of figuring out “tricky words.”

During the first class session in which students were reading multiple sources of informational text,

we modeled our comprehension of a newspaper article written about the Chicago stockyards around the time that Upton Sinclair was working on *The Jungle*. We also thought aloud about a photograph from the time that portrayed the harsh work conditions of meatpackers, explaining what we saw. We drew their attention to the blood and animal body parts on the floor and the men using push brooms to unsuccessfully clear away the mess. We were careful to include academic vocabulary identified for the unit in our modeling, including *meatpacking plant*, *sanitary*, *slaughter*, *muckraker*, and *contamination*.

### Guided Instruction

With a purpose and examples, students are ready to assume more of the responsibility for the task at hand. In this phase of instruction, the teacher strategically uses prompts, cues, and questions to get the students to do more of the work. Guided instruction can be done with the whole class, but our experience suggests that teachers can be much more precise when they guide the learning of small groups of students. For example, Nancy met with four students who were struggling to understand a political cartoon related to the publication of Upton Sinclair’s book. The cartoon featured President Teddy Roosevelt holding his nose with one hand while using a large rake labeled “investigations” in a stinking pool of detritus labeled “meat scandal.”<sup>1</sup> Rather than tell them what it meant, Nancy used a series of questions to get students to do the thinking. She first asked, “What is the biggest image on the page and why might it have been made so large?” The students in the group talked about this for a few minutes, agreeing that both the rake and the pool were dominant. She then reminded them of the term *muckraker* and prompted, “How might this relate to the photograph we examined earlier?” They were able to connect the visual commonalities—the push brooms and rake—as well as the animal body parts. An outcome of their discussion was a deeper understanding of the impact of photographs and political cartoons in creating the public outcry that resulted from the publication of the book. The goal of guided instruction—for students to assume increased responsibility for their learning while also receiving scaffolds and supports when they experience difficulty—was realized in this exchange.

## Collaborative Learning

While the teacher meets with groups of students for guided instruction, other students in the class

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work collaboratively. The key to this phase of instruction lies in the task. Students need to be held individually accountable for their performance while working together. Collaborative tasks have to be structured such that students work together and each contribute to the product. For example, as part of the class session on reading multiple sources of informational text, students not working with Nancy created collaborative

posters. The task that was posted on the board read as follows:

Create a poster that includes:

- An image that portrays the main idea of the reading
- A quote that captures the feeling of this reading
- A statement that summarizes the meaning of this reading

Remember, each group member uses a different color pen and each color pen must appear on the poster.

Working together, students read an assigned newspaper editorial or article and composed a visual and textual summary on poster paper with each student contributing to the poster.

## Independent Tasks

The final phase provides students an opportunity to apply what they have learned to a new situation or experience. Ideally, the independent task should align with the other phases of instruction and not be something only tangentially related to the lesson’s focus. Unfortunately, this is often not the case and students do not understand the purpose of the homework assignment and thus do not do well on it. This is not to say that students can’t propose independent learning tasks or be provided a number of choices in what to complete.

In addition, some homework assignments are given prematurely in the instructional cycle. As a

result, students complete tasks independently for which they are not yet ready and often learn things incorrectly as a result. And we all know how long it takes to “unteach” misconceptions and misunderstandings. Learning something incorrectly may be one of the most significant reasons for the lack of consensus in the research on homework’s impact on student achievement.

Given that students in our classes were just being introduced to intertextual analysis, we didn’t assign homework related to the lesson on this day. Instead, we asked students to continue reading the books they had chosen and to work on their weekly literacy letters, which we had taught them to write at the beginning of the year. Over time, they would be ready to take home a collection of reading materials on a topic and complete an analysis on their own.

## The Role That Homework Can and Should Play

In our experience, there are a number of ways that homework can be useful. We use the four systems described below, but we don’t use all of them all of the time. Instead, we vary the ways in which students apply what they are learning and invite students to propose ways that they can demonstrate their application of the content. Figure 1 contains a list of questions to consider for each of these four areas of homework.

### Fluency Building

One of the things that homework does for students, in the gradual release of responsibility model, is build fluency. Current neurosciences research suggests that readers must develop fluency, or automaticity, with decoding, sight words, word recognition, comprehension strategies, and the like so that they can free up working memory for making meaning (e.g., Wolf).

We know what reading does for the mind in terms of vocabulary and background knowledge (Cunningham and Stanovich). As such, we need to provide students with opportunities to read widely on a daily basis. Therefore, one standing homework assignment we advocate is reading. Understanding the importance of choice and motivation, our reading homework is completed from books students

**FIGURE 1.** Checklist for Developing Effective Homework Assignments

PURPOSE OF HOMEWORK	CHARACTERISTICS	REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS TO ASK
<i>Fluency Building</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multiple opportunities for practice</li> <li>• Focuses on one or two skills</li> <li>• Serves as an access point for other skills or knowledge</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Do students fully understand how the skill is performed?</li> <li>2. Is the difficulty level low enough so that they can focus on speed/rate/fluency, instead of how it is performed?</li> </ol>
<i>Application</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allows a skill to be used to solve a problem, or apply a rule or principle</li> <li>• Uses previously learned skill for a new situation</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What rule or principle will the students use to solve the problem?</li> <li>2. Do the students possess the background knowledge and prior experiences necessary to understand the new or novel situation?</li> </ol>
<i>Spiral Review</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student utilizes previously learned skills or knowledge</li> <li>• Allows students to confirm their understanding and assess their learning</li> <li>• Related conceptually to current learning</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What previously taught skills or knowledge is important for future learning and assessment?</li> <li>2. In what ways will this strengthen students' metacognitive awareness of how well they use skills and knowledge?</li> <li>3. What previously taught skills or knowledge serve as a basis for current classroom instruction?</li> </ol>
<i>Extension</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potential for development of new understandings</li> <li>• Results in a new product or innovation</li> <li>• Requires the use of a variety of skills or knowledge</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Does the assignment lead to a new knowledge base or set of concepts?</li> <li>2. Will the students create a new product or innovation that they have not done before?</li> <li>3. What skills or knowledge will students require to complete the assignment?</li> </ol>

have chosen to read. This provides students a great deal of control in how they complete this homework task.

Similarly, we understand the importance of writing fluency. Of course, we know that simply asking students to write at home, in the absence of instruction, will not make them better writers. We assign reading responses several times a week using the genres that have been taught in class. For example, the summary writing in the above lesson came after many lessons involving the characteristics of effective summaries. Students used strategies such as Anne E. Cunningham's GIST (Generating Interaction between Schemata and Text) to make decisions about key information contained in longer texts. This strategy has been particularly helpful for English language learners (Frey, Fisher, and Hernandez). Therefore, when students write a summary of a book or article they are reading independently,

they are using approaches that have been thoroughly taught in the classroom.

### Application

Once students have experienced quality instruction and have been apprenticed into the thinking and vocabulary required of a task, they can and should be asked to apply this knowledge on their own. Again, the key is to ensure that this application is not requested prematurely in the instructional cycle. Learners deserve to understand the purpose of the task, have access to models of the thinking required, practice with peers, and receive scaffolded support before being asked to perform independently. Our weekly literacy letters are an example of this type of application.

In our classes, students choose books that they want to read and they read from these books nightly. We have regular, brief conferences with readers,

usually a few times each week. These conferences allow us to monitor student reading and engagement as well as get to know students as individuals and guide their understanding of, and reactions to, the things they’ve chosen to read. In addition, students write a weekly literacy letter for homework. We teach this format in the beginning of the year and expect a weekly letter from every student in our classes. The format is a friendly letter in which the first paragraph updates us on the events in the book and the student’s reaction to the book. The second paragraph provides students an opportunity to apply something we’ve focused on in class to their writing. For example, after analyzing characters for several weeks, the second paragraph prompt provides students an opportunity to use what they had learned and apply it to the book they were reading. Similarly, after some time spent on setting and how authors use setting, the second paragraph prompt provides students an opportunity to apply this independently. Figure 2 contains a sample literacy letter based on the prompt related to setting.

### Spiral Review

A third feature of effective homework is to provide a spiral review of past learning. We find this to be an especially important function for students who will be taking major end-of-course and standardized tests in the spring. Students can be challenged to draw on topics that were taught months ago, and homework assignments that require students to apply knowledge from past units of instruction can keep it fresh. Learners can sometimes have difficulty with understanding how the lessons they were taught in the fall of the year can relate to their current lessons. The National Research Council examined the research on effective teaching of secondary history, science, and mathematics and reported that the move from novice to expert is dependent on one’s ability to organize factual knowledge into larger core concepts. In English, an example of students’ ability to organize factual knowledge into larger core concepts would be students utilizing their knowledge of metaphors and similes from an earlier poetry unit in their persuasive essays later in the year. Assignment of homework that is strategically chosen to refer back to previous learning strengthens students’ ability to access background knowledge and build larger “enduring understandings” (Wiggins and McTighe 17).

**FIGURE 2.** Sample Literacy Letter Based on Setting

Dear Reader,

The book that I have been reading for the last week is called *Tyrell* by Coe Booth. In the book the main character, Tyrell, is living in a shelter with his mother and little brother. While living in the shelter, Tyrell meets a girl name Jasmine who he thought was very attractive. Tyrell does something that he regrets because he has a girlfriend already. Tyrell is also having problems with his mom because she is pressuring him to go sell drugs to get them out of the shelter. But Tyrell has another plan. He decides to throw a party that he can charge people money to come too.

One day Tyrell spends the night at his girlfriend’s house because of the snowstorm. But the other girl, Jasmine, calls him and tells him that his brother is home alone crying. When Tyrell goes back to the shelter he finds out that his mom left his brother to go shopping with a man name Dante. Dante is Tyrell father’s friend (they were in prison together) and Tyrell doesn’t trust him at all. That’s as far as I got in the book this week.

In *Tyrell*, the setting of the book is in Bronx. The author of the book, Coe Booth, has been working with families and teenagers in the Bronx who are poor and has lived in a shelter before, so she really understands the setting. She was a writing consultant for the New York City Housing Department and received a MFA in creative writing from The New School and that’s where she finished *Tyrell*. Because of all of this, the setting really works and helps move the story along. I can picture the places she writes about and I wouldn’t change the setting. I don’t think that this story, at least what I’ve read so far, would work in the suburbs or in a smaller city. So far, the setting hasn’t provided any symbolic details and is just a backdrop for the story. But I’m on the lookout for details that might be symbolic. I do think that the social class of the characters is important for the setting. There are some people who couldn’t survive the life the Tyrell has. I think the time period is modern because of the crises that the family experiences. And finally, for mood, I think that the setting helps me understand the overall mood of the first few chapters, which is worrisome, or ominous as you might say.

Sincerely,

Destini

PS: I rate this book 10/10.


### Extension

A final type of homework invites students to extend their learning across topics and disciplines. We have found that this is particularly useful for students who are struggling with perceiving the relevance of a topic beyond the unit of instruction. For example, after several national reports were issued about the dangers of working in meatpacking plants, and

several recalls of meat were issued, we linked students' learning about food inspection, the Progressive Era, persuasive essays, and letter writing as a homework assignment to write their representatives in Congress about their concerns regarding working conditions and food safety. Students were able to marshal their knowledge of Upton Sinclair and the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 within an accepted business-letter format. They wrote persuasively about human rights and the role of the federal government in protecting its citizens. They utilized argumentation in their writing, balancing the *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* arguments to make their points.

## Homework Design and Homework Completion

As we have continued to refine our practice of a gradual release of responsibility model of instruction, we have come to understand that homework can be a meaningful part of the independent phase of learning. However, past experience has taught us that we are often too quick to assign homework before students have had an opportunity to learn the skills and strategies needed to successfully complete it. Instead, we have begun to use homework for four purposes: to build fluency, foster application, provide a spiral review, and offer opportunities for extension. We have noted in our practice that homework completion has risen over the course of the school year. While we would not attribute this increase solely to homework design, we do believe it plays an important role.

Many teachers talk about the importance of students assuming responsibility for their learning and assert that homework builds that habit. We believe that "responsibility" is a two-way street, and more attention to the role of homework as part of our overall instructional design makes it possible for more learners to assume that responsibility. 

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## Note

1. This cartoon is available at <http://www.vw.vccs.edu/vwhansd/his122/Teddy/Images/TRtoonMuck.jpg>.

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### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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Use the resources in "Analyzing the Stylistic Choices of Political Cartoonists" to provide guided instruction on how political cartoons work. The lesson includes an interactive example cartoon as well as definition sheets and analysis materials. After this guided instruction, students move to collaborative work as they discuss several cartoons as a full class and then they shift to independent work as they analyze the techniques that the same cartoonist uses in five or more cartoons. [http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson\\_view.asp?id=923](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=923)