



STOWELL
Learning Center

10 Homework Tips That Can Help You and Your Struggling Student Right Now



Strategies for Helping Students with Homework

One of the most difficult and frustrating conflicts between parents and students happens at homework time. Whether you “go to war” over getting started, or not knowing what to do, or not being clear about when homework is finished, the following 11 strategies will help.

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Getting Homework Started

Have you ever told your son or daughter to start doing their homework, only to find them 30 minutes later just wasting time, doing other things, or staring at the pile of homework but not doing it?

This tip is all about getting started. It used to baffle me why kids wouldn't sit down and just get their work done.

Now, I understand...what's obvious to me is not obvious to them!

This is one of those tips that apply whether your child struggles in school or not.

If your bright child struggles in school, this won't make the actual work easier, but it will get them organized and moving forward.

HOMWORK PROBLEM: "WHAT DO I DO FIRST?"

This may sound very simple. In fact, the answer should be obvious to everyone.

Except we know that the set of skills known as the executive function skills don't actually finish developing until about the age of 25. Which means what's obvious to adults isn't so obvious to students.

Even bright older children (yes, especially those in high school) put off getting homework started just because they aren't sure what to do first. And often they don't really understand why they are procrastinating!

HOMWORK SOLUTION: GETTING THE HOMEWORK STARTED, A QUICK 4 STEP PLAN

Use these 4 steps to get started and keep homework organized all the way through the process.

1. Help your child look at all of the homework he has.
Together decide about how much time is needed for each assignment.
2. Prioritize the assignments in order from hardest to easiest
3. As assignments are completed, teach your child to check them off. Seeing one's own progress (checking off the assignment) is very motivating.
4. Help your child develop a habit of putting their completed assignments in an appropriate place in their folder and backpack. Habits don't develop without practice, so lots of monitoring and praise is needed here.

While this is pretty obvious organizational "stuff," it actually involves a lot of skills that kids won't develop until later on in life. **Getting started now will give them a procedure they can use for the rest of their lives.**



More Ways of Getting Homework Started

Have you ever had this dialogue with your student?

"I don't know what to do on this assignment!"

"What did your teacher say to do?"

"I don't remember."

"What part don't you understand?"

"All of it!"

"GRRRRRRRR!"

There has to be a **starting place, an anchor, a comfortable and familiar beginning point** that students can rely on to get them started. Below you'll find that place.

HOMWORK PROBLEM: **HOW DO I GET STARTED WITH EACH ASSIGNMENT?**

Some students struggle to get started because they are unsure about what to do.

They often fail to read or understand instructions. Some really need to be shown as well as reading or hearing the instructions. We want students to be as independent as possible on homework, but getting them started and reassuring them that they are on the right track can alleviate a lot of wasted time.

HOMWORK SOLUTION: **USE THE “GETTING STARTED QUESTIONS”**

Here are 5 questions to ask your child to answer at the beginning of each assignment:

1. What should I do first? (*Put my name on the paper*)
2. What do the directions say?
3. Is there an example I can look at?
4. In this assignment, are there questions I will need to answer after reading something? If so, where are those questions? Read the questions before reading the section (paragraph, chapter, etc.).
5. Do I need to ask for help?

Are there other questions that should be asked at the beginning of every assignment?

- Write all the questions on a card that your child will use every time he does homework.
- Now “walk your child through” each question. Direct your child through using the questions on several assignments.
- Finally, have him try to use them independently. Once you have gotten your child in **the habit of using the card at the start of each and every assignment, homework becomes much faster** to get into and to finish...which means more time for fun!



COPS

I hope you find these tips helpful. Remember, these are not intended to solve learning problems. Rather, they are meant to give parents strategies for dealing with issues that come up during homework time.

Often, some of the symptoms we mention may indicate a more serious problem. All learning, vision, auditory, motor, and emotional issues should be referred to a professional who can make sure the right actions are taken to best deal with the issue.

In the meantime, I hope these tips help you in your daily homework journey.

HATE BEING THE PUNCTUATION POLICE? HERE'S HELP FOR THE WRITING BLUES.

Does it drive you crazy that you constantly have to remind your child to use capital letters and punctuation when they write?

Is your child feeling angry and picked on because you have to be the punctuation and capitalization "police?"

Here's a simple technique to help writers of any age become more independent in proofreading their written work.

Have your child write "COPS" on a 3x5 card or at the top of his / her paper.

Explain what each letter in the acronym stands for and walk through the process together with everything your child writes - even single sentences.

Very quickly, most students will begin to apply COPS all on their own.

Even though they may continue to need some help locating or correcting their errors, you are no longer the bad guy. It's just COPS - a process we do every time we write.

HERE'S WHAT COPS STANDS FOR:

C - Capitalization

O - Overall Appearance (Spacing; clean, clear, well-formed letters; mistakes erased completely)

P - Punctuation

S - Spelling (Have the student check spelling by starting with the last word in the sentence or paragraph. This takes the words out of context. The student should check to see if the word "sounds right" and "looks right.")

Have your child go through each sentences checking for **C**apitalization. When done, they get to check off the **C**.

Then check for **O**verall Appearance, checking it off when done.

Go on to **P**unctuation followed by **S**pelling.

Now, it should be all ready to turn in...and no one went to "punctuation jail!"



Impress Spelling

Is there any more common homework activity than studying for a spelling test?

For most elementary school students, spelling tests happen every week. Often this is a very discouraging “exercise in frustration.” Why? Because many times spelling is the clue that there are auditory processing issues.

Auditory processing skills can be trained through special programs that are far more than just “drilling” spelling words. Until those issues can be eliminated, below you’ll find a technique that will help any student who has to study spelling words. It won’t fix auditory processing difficulties, but it will help get through this week’s spelling test.

HOMWORK PROBLEM:

STUDYING SPELLING WORDS

There are several strategies for studying spelling words. Many students have difficulty remembering spelling words. Here is one easy, practical approach to studying for spelling.

HOMWORK SOLUTION:

IMPRESS SPELLING

Impress Spelling Techniques:

1. Write each of your child's spelling words on an index card in large print.
2. Have your child *trace* each word using a *thick crayon*, pressing firmly as she writes each letter.
3. Have her put down the crayon and trace over the letters with her finger as you say them together.
4. Have her "take a picture" in her mind of the card so that she can look up and still see the letters.
5. Have your child trace over the visualized word, saying each letter as she traces it.
6. Play with the word – ask: What color are the letters? What is the first letter? What is the last?
7. Have her spell the word from her visualized image, pointing to each letter as she says it.
8. Move the visualized image back to the paper and write the word exactly as she remembered it.

This technique uses **the visual, auditory, and kinesthetic channels to anchor the word** and it's spelling. This technique sometimes seems to parents that it will take longer. Getting prepped may be a bit longer, but this system is very effective at getting those words "down cold" in about the same amount of time most students spend studying.

Give it a try!



Share the Writing

Filling out worksheets is a breeze for some kids, but for those who find writing or spelling slow and laborious, ***a simple homework worksheet can take aaaaalllllll afternoon.***

Students with graphomotor challenges (difficulty printing or writing in cursive) often find the lines on worksheets too short or too narrow for their uncoordinated and ballooning letters. If they are going to write legibly on the lines provided, they have to write each letter very intentionally and carefully, so even if they know the content, it will take them far longer than their friends to complete the work.

Often, kids with these kinds of challenges get overwhelmed and exhausted. For students with dyslexic challenges, awkward letter formation, letter reversals, and spelling (which may have to be erased and corrected over and over) can make a simple worksheet seem to take forever, and ***the real learning in the assignment, the content, may become completely lost.***

If your child fits one of these scenarios and your dining room table is the scene of nightly meltdowns over worksheets, you may want to get your child's teacher on board with the suggestion below.

TACKLING WORKSHEETS WHEN WRITING OR SPELLING IS SLOW AND LABORIOUS

***Make sure you arrange with your child's teacher to use the following procedure.

Agree to have your student be responsible for writing the answers to a **portion** of the questions (for example, 2 out of 5), and then you (the parent) writes the other questions **as your student dictates**.

This allows your child to take her time and write carefully and neatly on the items she writes, developing good habits.

It's important that students be responsible for **part** of the writing so that she knows that she is capable.

She should know that the amount of writing she has to do is being reduced **so that she can focus on neatness and spelling**.

Her best is expected!

Sharing the actual writing reduces the stress on students and allows her to **focus more on the content**. By having less actual writing to do, she can create better habits because she will not feel penalized by the amount of time it takes.

She will feel better about her work product because her own writing looks neater, and she might just have a little time left at the end of the day.



Can a Hamburger Help Your Child Write Better?

Writing assignments...UGH!!!!

Sometimes trying to get a long paper written can feel like a forever process.

Writing can be VERY disjointed for some students.

They know they have to write a page so they just start writing whatever pops into their mind. Ideas end up being repeated over and over or become a series of random thoughts.

Let's make this really concrete for students. Below you'll find an easy way for kids (and, actually, adults too) to look at a writing assignment and make it "real" in such a way that they are clear about how they will write.

This is really a "tasty" way to go about writing!

Taking something familiar from real life, can often help students to understand the big picture of what they are supposed to do. There's a commercial on TV for a popular fast-food restaurant that shows someone eating a huge, juicy hamburger with all kinds of stuff - cheese, lettuce, tomatoes, sauce, pickles - spilling out as he bites down.

And the point is that this ISN'T any old boring hamburger, but this one is really juicy and special (a.k.a. messy). We sometimes use the analogy of a loaded hamburger to help students understand how a multi-paragraph paper is organized. The whole hamburger represents the overall topic or focus of the paper - what it's all about.

The top and bottom bun represent the introduction and the conclusion. These are the first and last paragraphs in the paper, and while they don't look exactly the same, they are basically made of the same stuff.

The top bun, or the **introductory paragraph** introduces the reader to the topic and gives just enough information to get the reader interested in reading on.

The **concluding paragraph** is like the bottom bun. It is the last paragraph and has basically the same content as the introduction. It restates and wraps up the topic.

Everything in between the introduction and conclusion - the meat and all the condiments - make up the body of the paper, each being a different key point. Each one gets its own paragraph (or paragraphs) to describe or explain its overall contribution to the whole topic.

Try getting a large picture of a hamburger. Draw a line next to the top and bottom bun on the left hand side. Here, the student can put his ideas for the introduction and conclusion. On the right hand side, draw lines out from the meat, cheese, tomatoes, etc.

The student can jot down the key points of the paper on these lines in the order he wants to present them. Using the hamburger as a guide, now he has a structure with which to write a paragraph or a simple multi-paragraph paper that will have an introduction, body/details, and conclusion.

Give it a try...and then maybe eat a hamburger for dinner!



Textbook Chapters

If asked, most students will tell you that they don't enjoy reading a chapter in their textbook, pretty much regardless of the subject. But for struggling readers, what is a minor annoyance for some, is a truly agonizing exercise in frustration for them.

Since homework is supposed to be something kids can do independently, parents of struggling learners constantly face the question of how much help they should give.

Do we just read the whole chapter to our child? Do we make our child "gut-it-out" and do it themselves? As parents, we don't want to foster dependency, but at the same time, we don't want to torture our kids.

Here's a suggestion that will **allow any student to feel capable and responsible for homework**, while giving him an "out" before getting overwhelmed.

ALL READERS ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL! HELPING SLOW OR STRUGGLING READERS GET THROUGH A TEXTBOOK CHAPTER

Textbook chapters are typically divided into fairly short sections designated with a sub-heading. The student's job will be to start reading at the beginning of **each section**.

As soon as he gets tired, he is allowed to stop and the parent takes over until the end of the section. Even if the student only reads one sentence, the expectation will be that he can read the text and will start reading again after each subheading. Knowing that he can stop when he's tired reduces the pressure.

Over time, as his reading or confidence improves, he will gradually tackle more reading on his own. As your child does begin to read more of the section on his own, be sure to validate him for putting out the extra effort and the reading stamina he is building.

If he doesn't, on his own, begin increasing the amount he is reading, but you really believe that he can handle more, you might start gradually increasing the expectation.

For example, you might change the rule so that the student begins reading at each subheading and has to read at least 2 full sentences (or one sentence more than he is typically doing) before he can say he's ready for the parent take over.

AN ADDED TIP FOR COMPREHENSION.

After reading each section, stop and talk about it a little bit to solidify the key ideas. Together try to imagine what you would draw if you were drawing a picture of the important information.

This will help with retention of the material for the test that's sure to be coming up.



“Fear of Word Problems”

Do and your child **dread** math word problems? Many parents report that even if their child can do the rest of the math homework, the word problems often pose a huge “hurdle” that neither parent nor student want to “leap over.”

There are two main causes for this fear:

1. The child has a reading problem and word problems require reading,

OR

2. The child (and parent) is trying to solve the problem by picking out the numbers or key words without really understanding what the problem is about.

Word problems are the **application** of math; the part that makes math something real and relevant.

They used to be called *story problems* and that’s how we have to think of them – as a story. You don’t just pick out the pieces you want from a story.

If you do that, the story won’t make sense. The best way to really understand a story is to visualize it, turning it into a movie in your head.

Have fun with the strategy below!

Word Problem Strategy

- Read and visualize the story. (Do one sentence at a time if necessary).
- Have your child talk about what he/she pictured. Who was in it? What were they doing? What were they trying to find out?
- Use the chart below to think through the information. Have your child say what he’s thinking as he goes. *This helps him reason through the information and develop the language that he eventually internalizes and uses on his own whenever doing word problems.*

WHAT? (What do I know?)	? (What do I need to know?)	How? (Solve the problem)
<i>Here, write the relevant information in a few words as possible.</i>	<i>Write the question you have to solve for.</i>	<i>Do the math. Be sure to label the answer.</i>

Here is a simple problem as an example, but this strategy works with word problems of almost any level and helps students understand what they doing.

Problem: *Sara and Kaitlyn were on the same swim team. On Friday morning, Sara swam 19 laps and Kaitlyn swam 23 laps. How many more laps did Kaitlin swim than Sara?*

Visualize and verbalize (make a mental movie of) the story:

"I picture two girls in a swimming pool swimming laps. They both swam a lot of laps, but Sara got out after 19 laps and Kaitlin kept going until she completed 23 laps. I have to figure out how many laps Kaitlin did after Sara got out of the pool."

To solve this, you might have to guide your child in recognizing that until Sara got out of the pool, the two girls swam the same number of laps.

The difference is the number of laps Kaitlin swam once Sara got out. Whenever you are finding the difference, you will subtract the smaller number from the larger number.

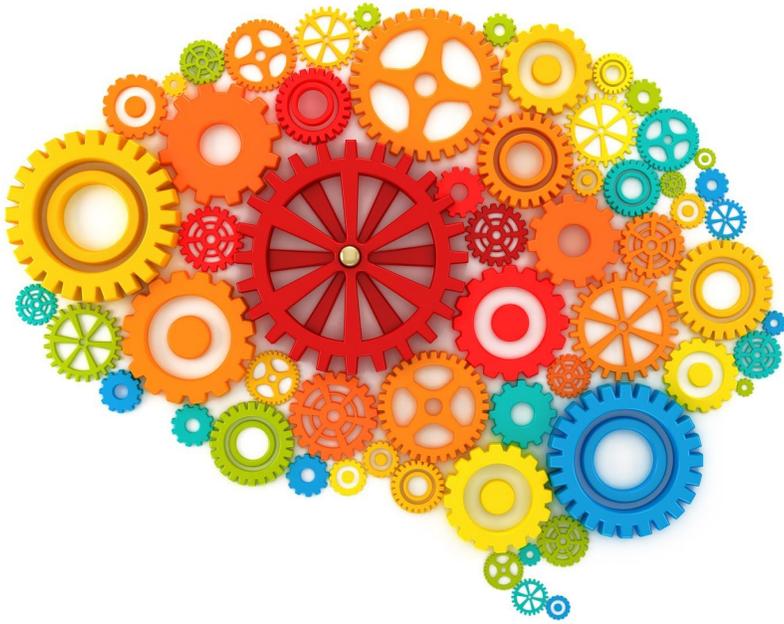
WHAT do I Know?	What Do I NEED To Know?	Now Solve The Problem?
S: 19 laps K: 23 laps	<i>How many more laps did Kaitlin swim than Sara?</i>	23 -19 4 laps

Have your child verbalize or write the full answer to the problem:

"Kaitlin swam 4 more laps than Sara."

NOTE.

As with many of our tips, this takes some time at first, but the more you do it, **the more independent and confident your child will get** with word problems.



Develop a Better Visual Memory

Is helping your child study for spelling tests one of your most UN-Favorite tasks each week? Wouldn't it be great if we were all born with a built-in spell checking system?

Fortunately, we're born with some natural skills that help with spelling. One of the key ones is call **Visual Memory**.

For some, however, that skill doesn't fully develop in the memory system, and so a little help is needed to be able to 'see it.'

The exercise below will help anyone improve memorizing spelling words, and it will also begin to aid in developing a better visual memory.

HOMWORK PROBLEM: **STRUGGLES WITH SPELLING WORDS**

Sometimes students struggle to spell words. Other times it seems as if they can spell them at home but then somehow "lose" the spelling when it comes time to take the test.

When a student has weak visual memory, remembering math facts, the exact spelling of words, which homework was assigned, or even what was just read, can lead to daily frustrations and poor grades.

Being able to spell properly affects reading and writing, so here is one method to begin training the visual memory system to see and remember what words look like.

HOMWORK SOLUTION: LEARNING TO SEE THE WORDS

DON'T worry about how many steps there are to this technique. It's actually not as overwhelming as it first looks!

For this activity, you'll need lined paper, pencils, a black or dark blue dry-erase marker, and **either** a hand-held white board or a piece of plain white paper in a page protector.

1. Begin by folding a sheet of the lined paper in half lengthwise. This will create four separate panels, two on the back and two on the front. Now you have room to write your words four separate times, but don't write them yet.
2. You (the parent) write their first spelling word on the white board or on the sheet protector using the dry erase marker.
3. Show your child the word you've written and talk about it using questions.
 - a. How many letters does it have?
 - b. What sounds are in the word?
 - c. What sound does it start with?
 - d. What sound does it end with?
 - e. What letters make those sounds?
 - f. How many vowels do you see?
 - g. Are there any capital letters?



“Is Your Homework Done?”

Do you ever get into arguments about whether homework has been completed?

This seems like an easy question...“Is your homework done?”

In reality, there are lots of ways this question can be misunderstood, mis-answered, or otherwise misinterpreted.

It’s terrible when a teacher contacts parents and lets them know that homework hasn’t been done for several days or weeks.

It’s especially frustrating when parents have made sure to ask if homework is done.

There are only two ways this can happen:

1. The homework wasn’t actually completed
2. The homework was completed but never found its way to the teacher.

This week we’ll deal with the first one of these. And it brings up an important question:

When is homework done?

Below is a strategy that will help you better define “finished” so that both you and your child have the same understanding.

WHAT DOES "FINISHED" MEAN?

It happens everyday. Your child gets an assignment, does that assignment only to find that what the student thought was "finished," wasn't.

Students may start assignments and then "drift into the ozone" because they do not have a clear picture of what "**finished**" looks like. They are busy working, but they aren't too clear as to what they are supposed to accomplish.

You can help your child to understand "what finished looks like" by looking at each assignment, explaining, "You will know you are finished when..." and listing the criteria.

For example: **You will know you are finished when...**

- You have completed all 10 math problems and checked them.
- Your name, date and period are at the top of your page.

When your child is not working, point to the list of criteria you jotted down and simply ask, "I wonder if you have completed this assignment based on this criteria."

I heard about a teacher who used this technique to help students know what a clean desk should look like.

She took a photograph of a clean desk and posted it with a caption that said, "You will know your desk is clean if it looks like this."

Help your child understand what "finished" really means, jot it down on a paper or 3x5 card, and then make sure they meet all the criteria for "finished." In the long run it will save you lots of frustration.



BONUS HOMEWORK TIP

Three Strategies to Try When You Don't "Get It"

You've got your son (or daughter) sitting down doing homework. All the distractions have been removed. He's had a snack, gone to the bathroom, and is focused on the task at hand.

BUT, he just doesn't "get it." You explain. He really tries. But he still isn't able to break through to real understanding. It doesn't matter if the assignment is reading a chapter and answering questions, memorizing spelling words, or filling in a worksheet.

When you don't get it...you just don't get it!

Below you'll find a 3-step sequence to try when, after getting organized and focused, he still doesn't "get it."

STRATEGY 1: **LET THEM TEACH YOU**

Let him teach you (or someone else) everything he knows about this assignment. Sometimes teaching it reveals clarity and answers.

1. Explain it to a younger sibling.
2. Teach the family dog.
3. Explain it to a friend.
4. Just get him thinking from the teacher's view.

This shift in perspective may give him the answer he needs.

STRATEGY 2: **WHAT THEY DO KNOW**

Explain everything he DOES know about it.

OK, so he doesn't know the answer to question number two.

But how much of the answer does he know?

1. He can't spell a word...how much of it CAN he spell?
2. Can he get the first letter, the first two letters? How far can he get?
3. At this point, focus on what he does know, NOT what he doesn't know.
4. Finding out what he does know may give you some real insight in get him to what he doesn't know.

STRATEGY 3: WHAT THEY DON'T KNOW

List what he DOESN'T know. This is sometimes very revealing.

Have him tell you, SPECIFICALLY, what he doesn't know or understand.

Students, in frustration, often say they don't get "any of it."

But that is seldom true. It's time to get specific.

1. Is he unclear about what the question is asking?
2. Or is he unclear as to what the answer is?
3. What part of the answer is missing?
4. Does he not know that first letter of the word?
5. What letters is he "missing" from the spelling words?
6. Can he get the math facts for the 7's but not the 8's?
Is it all the 8's or just a specific group?

Make a list of what isn't known. Sometimes, the question isn't understood and this exercise will help bring that out much better than asking, "Do you understand the question?"

This will help "zero in" on what pieces are missing.

Use any of the strategies *whenever* you find yourself at a "homework roadblock."