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“Now I Get It!”

Homework Help Strategies for Volunteers

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Introduction

■ “I don’t like homework. It’s annoying. I get stressed out at school and need to do something that isn’t working when I get home, but then I have to do homework. It eats up my free time, but I know it’s supposed to help me.” (Camden, eighth grade)

■ “I like homework. If kids didn’t get homework and they were in school for just the normal six hours, they wouldn’t get smart enough to go to college—even though I like to do other things.” (Jonathan, second grade)

■ “I don’t like it because it’s boring. Like sometimes I don’t know what to write. Then I sit and stare at the paper. My head is blank. And I feel bored.” (Elizabeth, third grade)

homework help may feel somewhat daunting. Who among us, after all, thinks she can recall ancient history or algebra with enough detail to assist struggling students? This issue of *the Tutor* identifies the key issues and strategies that can help you be more effective and feel more confident providing homework help to your students. We will examine the following:

- Purposes of homework and the role of the homework help provider
- Effective homework help environments
- Helping students get organized
- Helpful strategies for common homework assignments
- What to do when your student isn’t getting it
- Recordkeeping and assessment

In cafeterias and gymnasiums, schools and community centers across the country, volunteers provide homework help to students of all ages. Among students, homework elicits a wide range of emotions, from anxiety, to grudging acceptance, to genuine enjoyment. For national service volunteers, providing

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- Locate resources
- Connect with peers
- Brainstorm solutions
- Design and deliver training

The Purposes of Homework

What is homework and why do teachers assign it? Ideally, homework reflects what happens in the classroom and helps students reinforce and internalize what they learn during the school day and practice new skills (O'Connor & McGuire, 1998). Occasionally, teachers assign new material for homework, which can confuse and frustrate students. In general, the goal of homework is to teach students to work independently, plan effectively, get organized, and think on their own (Cooper, 2001). Your job, as a volunteer providing homework help, is to help students in this endeavor.

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The Role of the Homework Help Provider

When you meet with a student to provide homework help, it can be difficult to know where to begin. Start by considering the age and developmental level of the student and what you know about her academic strengths and weaknesses. Children struggle with increasing amounts of homework (O'Connor & McGuire, 1998), and it's likely that your time together is short. This can make homework feel like a race against the clock, often pressuring well-meaning adults to step in and do the work for the child. This may meet the student's immediate needs, but won't develop enduring skills. So, what is your role?

You can be most effective by helping the child think about his own learning and gain the necessary skills to complete homework independently. Model skills such as:

- Organizing and prioritizing the work
- Using appropriate strategies for different assignments

- Identifying potential stumbling blocks and how to overcome them
- Checking the work to make sure the student understands not only what he has done, but how he has done it

Effective Homework Help Environments

As a homework helper, you are likely working with children who struggle to keep up in school. They may cope by finding ways to avoid the work—clowning around; distracting themselves; ignoring instructions; or putting little effort into a task. By building a trusting relationship and creating an environment conducive to learning, you can help these youth build the necessary skills to complete homework successfully.

Useful supplies. Have a bag or box of supplies on hand. Inexpensive plastic containers with various compartments, large card-file boxes and heavy-duty shoeboxes all work well. If you choose to use a bag, maintain order by grouping similar supplies together in separate zip-loc bags. Keep the following on hand: Extra pencils, colored pencils, pens and markers; an eraser; a ruler; a calculator; small scissors; glue sticks or scotch tape; sticky notes; a small stapler and a staple remover; index cards (various colors); an inexpensive timer; stickers; paper—lined, graph, and plain; and any supplies specific to the students and content areas you work with (O'Connor & McGuire, 1998).

Build trusting relationships. When you meet a student for the first time, get him talking and show interest in what he has to say. The more open-ended a question is, the easier it will be to continue the conversation. Some openers include:

- *I bet your teacher reads books to your class. One of my favorites is My Side of the Mountain. What are some of yours?*
- *I love animals. My favorite is the cheetah because it runs really fast. Which animals do you like?*
- *I got stuck in traffic getting here today. How do you usually get to school?*
- *I know lots of kids watch television. Tell me about some TV shows that you like to watch.*

Remember that a conversation is an exchange. Offer your ideas but focus most on what the child says. The goal is to put him at ease and encourage him to speak. A good way to do this is to say, *That's interesting, tell me more.*

When you work together, be open-minded rather than judgmental. Struggling students often feel inadequate or anxious under the scrutiny of teachers and parents. Make it clear that you are there to help and that you respect the child's efforts. For example, imagine a child working on multiplication tables, who correctly solves 7×2 , 7×3 , and 7×4 , but makes a mistake on 7×5 . Instead of focusing on the error, you might say, *You did very well on those. It's clear you know your multiplication. You got three out of four correct. Why don't you try and find your mistake and fix it?*

Provide praise that is specific and reinforces accomplishments and new skills. For example: *You did a great job summarizing that chapter. I can tell you really understood the main points.* Or, *You used to get so frustrated when you didn't understand the assignment. Now you understand how to figure out what you need to do and how you will accomplish it.*

Establish routines. An established routine sets expectations, helps create a focused atmosphere, and models time organization. Start your homework routine by taking a few minutes to talk about the child's day or chat over a snack. This is an important part of getting homework done. Remember, the child has been in school for six or more hours before sitting down to do homework. A moment to decompress, collect thoughts, and relax the body and mind will result in a more successful session.

Create a physical environment conducive to learning.

Volunteers typically provide homework help in after-school settings, although some meet with students during lunch, on weekends, or before school. You will not always control all aspects of your physical environment. In many out-of-school time programs, homework help takes place in a large cafeteria, gym, or other shared room where multiple activities take place, sometimes simultaneously. To the extent possible, find a space that is quiet, well lighted, and provides minimal distractions for your student. Use furniture such as bookcases as a screen, or arrange your desks or chairs so that distractions are somewhat blocked out. If your student is very easily distracted in your current setting, ask your supervisor if there are alternative spaces you can use (O'Connor & McGuire, 1998).

Make the most of your situation. Ideally you will be able to work one-on-one with the same student over time. Sometimes, however, due to inconsistent attendance or program structure, you may provide homework help to different children at each session or provide homework help to small groups of students who may or may not be working on the same assignment.

If you provide homework help to different students each time you volunteer, you may not enjoy the benefit of an established relationship or familiarity with the student's typical assignments, strengths, and weaknesses. Nevertheless, you can still provide valuable assistance. To use your time effectively:

- Find out what the student needs to accomplish
- Determine together what is realistic in the time you have
- Affirm effective strategies you observe the child using and offer additional strategies as necessary
- Create a list at the end of the session of what the student still needs to do to complete the assignment on his own

**"I get angry sometimes when I have to do homework—mostly because I'm tired at the end of the day."
(Elizabeth, third grade)**

Providing homework help to groups of students, especially if they are working on different tasks, can be challenging. With groups, try these strategies:

- Create a study hall environment in which you circulate and answer questions as necessary.
- Cluster students into mini-groups by assignment (i.e., if at least some students are working on the same assignment), content area (e.g., language arts, math, social studies), or grade level. This way, students are well positioned to help each other when you are busy working with another child.
- Encourage students to clarify assignments and share ideas with each other.

Helping Students Get Organized

Whatever the specifics of your setting, you will soon realize that many students struggle with organizational issues. Perhaps they are not sure what the assignment is, or maybe they have forgotten a key text or handout. For your homework help to be successful, the student needs to:

- Know what the homework is
- Have the necessary materials at hand
- Understand the assignment(s)
- Organize the work
- Develop the motivation to begin

You can help him get these elements in place. One helpful tool is a homework planner in which the students can keep track of assignments, due dates, and required materials. Many children receive a homework planner or notebook from their schools, or are required to get one. Find out if your student has one. If so, take a few moments to discuss its relevance and how to use a planner effectively.

If your student does not have one, help her create a system to keep track of papers and assignments. You might suggest a folder for all homework-related papers, a separate small notebook for writing down assignments, or even a specific place in an existing notebook (denoted by colorful sticky notes) where the student can write down everything that is due.

“I’m really bad at organizing. When I have a big project, she [homework helper] helps me map it out on a day-by-day basis. She takes the entire assignment and breaks it into small pieces and puts it on a calendar so it’s manageable, and I still get in some free time.”

(Christopher, eighth grade)

MT. SCOTT AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM Daily Schedule

2:50-3:00	STUDENT CHECK IN
3:00-3:15	SNACK TIME
3:15-4:00	HOMEWORK HELP
4:00-4:30	OUTDOOR PLAY
4:30-5:15	ACTIVITY (MONDAY: READING CIRCLES, TUESDAY: COOKING CLUB, WEDNESDAY: COMPUTER LAB, THURSDAY: SCIENCE EXPLORATIONS, FRIDAY: SURPRISE ACTIVITY)
5:15-5:30	CLEAN UP/PARENT PICK-UP/BUS LOADING

Date of Assignment	Assignment	Materials Needed	Date due	Completed
1/24	Read chapters 2 and 3 in social studies book and answer questions 3–10 in social studies notebook.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social studies textbook • Social studies notebook 	1/25	
1/24	Problem set 17 in math	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem set paper • Calculator • Math notebook 	1/27	

If a child is particularly disorganized, make a planner together and encourage her to incorporate specific strategies. For example, if she often forgets a book or notebook needed for an assignment, include a column for materials. When the student completes an assignment, she can place a star, sticker, or checkmark in the final column. Create a system together that is fun for the student and contributes to a sense of accomplishment. See the example above.

Seeing assignments organized this way can help a child who feels overwhelmed set priorities more effectively. Use the planner to suggest strategies for managing homework. For example, this child has three days to do all the problems in math problem set 17; suggest she do a few problems each night instead of trying to plow through them all at once. Over time, the child will begin to internalize the strategies you model and homework will begin to feel more manageable.

Whatever system you and your student agree upon, consistency is key. If the child is still not following through, take some time to find out why. Perhaps the system is too cumbersome or developmentally inappropriate. Be flexible in creating a system that suits the unique needs of the student.

Once the student is organized, make sure he understands the assignment. Ask him to articulate the assignment, including not only what he needs to do, but how he will know that he's done it successfully. For example, a student might say, *I need to read the next chapter in my history book. I'll know I've done it successfully when I can give a summary of the chapter out loud.*

Helpful Strategies for Common Homework Assignments

Regardless of the grade level(s) you work with, you will see a range of homework tasks. Though it's impossible to predict specific assignments, here are some typical ones

- Read a chapter and answer a set of questions
- Research and/or write an essay, speech, or report on a chosen topic
- Write a book report
- Solve math word problems
- Practice specific skills (e.g., multiplication or spelling)
- Study for spelling or language tests
- Work on projects, such as posters, for content areas

To complete assignments successfully, students need help with study skills. Five skills are described below, along with concrete examples for the homework helper. Always consider your students' age and developmental levels when tailoring your homework help to their unique needs. The skills are:

- Answering inferential rather than factual questions
- Reading nonfiction
- Solving word problems
- Preparing for a quiz or test
- Summarizing source material

Answering inferential rather than factual questions. Most homework assignments require students to think abstractly. In the context of reading, students need to draw inferences and synthesize information to answer questions or analyze text. In the context of math, they need to understand the concepts behind the math problems they are solving. This can challenge children of any age. The following examples and strategies can help you support children as they move from concrete to abstract thinking.

To make inferences, students need to combine prior knowledge and clues from the text to make certain logical assumptions. To help your student infer, select a very short passage—a couple of sentences is adequate—from a text, or create one yourself. Use an example that's easier than the text you are working on. For example:

Anna and Janice meet on the playground. They hear the bell of the ice cream truck and one of them decides to run home and ask her mom for some money.

“Sometimes it helps to just have someone there at your side to work with. That keeps me going when I really want to stop.”

(Lynne, ninth grade)

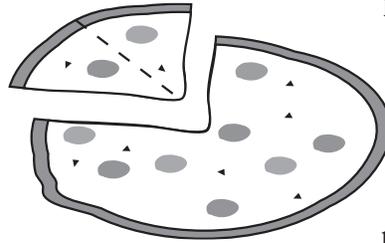
See if your student can answer the following inferential questions based on the passage:

- *How old do you think the girls might be?*
- *What time of year do you think it is?*
- *What is the money for?*

The more the student can combine her prior knowledge with the ideas implicit in the text, the more she can understand. Exercises like this and the conversation that ensues can help students learn to “read between the lines.”

In mathematics, students need to use abstract thinking to understand complicated math concepts. For example, when a child learns multiplication, he learns that the product will generally be larger than the numbers multiplied. However, when multiplying fractions, the product is smaller. He may wonder how this is possible. Use visual representations and familiar objects to clarify confusing concepts. In this example you might try the following:

- Draw a pizza or cut one out of heavy paper
- Take one-fourth of the pizza and ask the child if one-half of the piece ($\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{1}{4}$) would be bigger or smaller
- Invite the student to cut the piece in half to illustrate the result

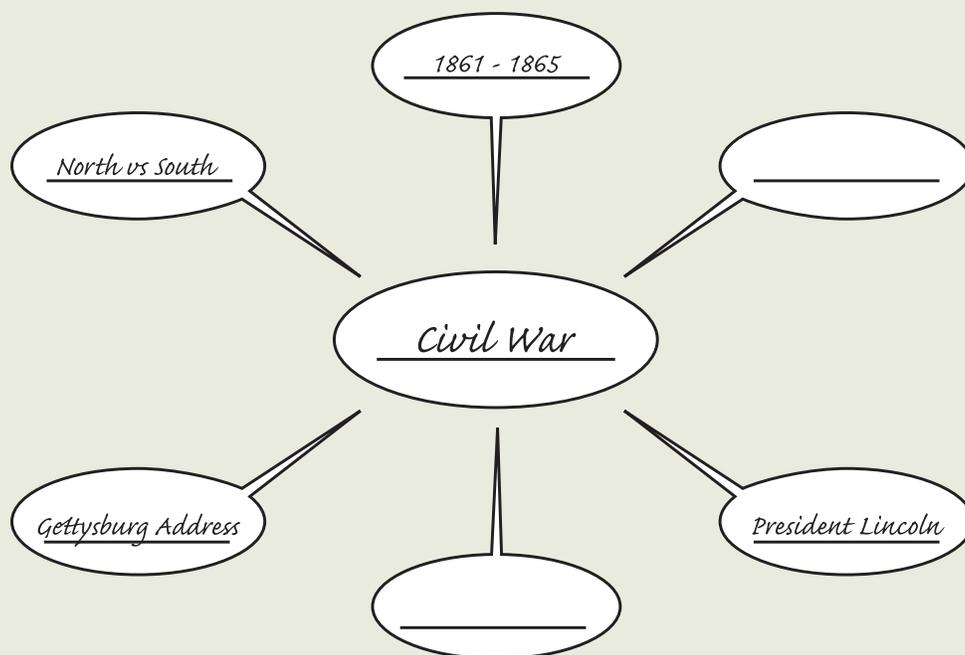


Translating abstract concepts into concrete visuals can help to explain even the most advanced mathematical concept. Use what you have on hand (pennies, pencils, sketches, blocks, etc.) to make the theory become reality.

It's Okay If You're Not an Expert

No one is an expert on everything. It's okay for children to know that you don't have all the answers. A lack of expertise can also provide an ideal opportunity for you to model ways to access unknown information. When you are stuck, the two of you might reread a text, check a reference or trade book, or search the Internet. These are all important strategies for students to learn. For example, if the student is unsure how to figure something out, you might say, *Hmmm, I'm not sure myself. Let's think of how to find out.*

As a homework helper, it's less your job to teach or reteach than it is to activate the knowledge the child already has. Do this through direct questioning. For example, if the child needs to write an essay on the Civil War, you might ask: *When was the last time you talked about the Civil War in class? What did you talk about? What did you think?* Using a graphic organizer (see example below) can help the student access and organize what she knows about the subject. As the child begins to respond, probe for deeper understanding. Note what the child knows and thinks and consider how it can help her complete the assignment.



Showing the entire process is helpful. Support the student in developing the ability to:

- Organize and prioritize the work
- Articulate the task and what he doesn't understand about it
- Identify what he already knows
- Seek the information he needs
- Complete the task in a timely fashion

Reading nonfiction. Though children are being exposed to nonfiction earlier than ever, most children learn to read using story books and other fiction texts. Fiction has many features that aid comprehension, such as story structure (i.e., beginning, middle, and end) and illustrations that help tell the story. Because nonfiction texts and textbooks have different features, many children struggle with these texts when they reach upper elementary and middle school.

Students need to know that, unlike fiction, nonfiction texts do not have to be read from beginning to end; indeed, students can benefit from previewing the text, including the first and last chapters, before reading. In addition, nonfiction texts have a unique structure, with specific features such as a table of contents, glossary, index, illustrations, graphs, diagrams, maps, photographs, captions, sidebars, bold or italicized words and phrases, headings, and subheadings—all of which, when used properly, can greatly enhance comprehension of the material.

Guide your student through the following process to better understand nonfiction texts. When the student has trouble, model the steps yourself.

- Read the title of the chapter and predict what it might be about.
- Read all the headings in the assigned reading to preview upcoming information.
- Go back to the beginning of the chapter and examine any graphics and their captions.
- Before reading, ask the child to summarize what he already knows and predict what he will learn based on the headings and graphics. (This step achieves two things: It activates the student's prior knowledge and creates a mental outline for organizing the information to be learned.)
- If the assignment requires answering questions after reading, preview the questions.

- Begin reading together. As new features arise (e.g., bold or italicized words, sidebars, etc.), pause and ask the student if he understands their function in the text; if not, explain. As you read, revisit the features you previewed in steps 1–3. Though the student might tell you that he has already read them, explain that revisiting these features enhances comprehension.
- Identify new or technical vocabulary and clarify using the context, dictionary, or other appropriate reference material.
- Encourage the student to take notes or highlight text (if appropriate) as he reads.

Solving word problems. Word problems in mathematics are often difficult. Rather than asking for a specific piece of knowledge, they require students to apply that knowledge to a real-world situation. A student may have proficient knowledge of mathematics operations, but be unsure which ones to use to solve the problem posed.

Guide your student through the following process for solving word problems. When the student has trouble, model the steps yourself.

- Read the entire problem and clarify vocabulary and concepts: *What is this problem about (i.e., purchasing something, traveling somewhere, etc.)?*
- Reread the problem and write down (or highlight) key information: *What information do you need to solve the problem successfully?*
- Articulate what the problem is asking for (e.g., find out how much money you have left after a purchase; find out how long it will take to travel a specific distance, perform a task, etc.): *What information is the problem asking you to find?*
- Eliminate any information that is not relevant to the problem (sometimes included for the child to discern what is and isn't important). *Is there information included here that you don't need to solve the problem? What is it?*

- Based on what is known and what needs to be determined, decide on a strategy and try it out.
- Check the answer to see that it makes sense and satisfies the problem. (Sometimes the answer calls for an extra step—perhaps you found out how much money something costs, but the problem asks how much money you have left.)

Preparing for a quiz or test. Students face a range of tests and quizzes each week. To relieve the anxiety that may come with studying for a quiz or test, you can help your student organize, prepare, and review.

Guide your student through the following process:

- Go over the big picture. What is the content? What will be covered and what won't?
- Organize the materials you need to prepare, such as lists of spelling or vocabulary words, notes taken in class, or relevant textbooks.
- Review key concepts. Ask the student to articulate these concepts to you. In general, the better a student can explain the content to someone else, the more thoroughly she knows it.
- Practice specifics, such as vocabulary, spelling words, or mathematical formulas. A practice quiz format or flash cards can be helpful for this type of review.
- Review trouble spots. If the student fared poorly on the last exam and has a copy, review it together and determine what was most challenging. If she still has questions, help her find the answers in her notes or the appropriate text.
- Practice reading directions and understanding what they are asking for. Again, old tests and quizzes can provide useful examples.
- Emphasize the importance of a good night's sleep and a healthy breakfast prior to the test.

Summarizing source material. When preparing book reports, speeches, or research papers, students are often required to summarize and restate material written by others in their own words. Students need to understand the meaning of plagiarism and the difference between copying and using their own words. You can help students to better understand this difference and to use source and reference material in meaningful ways.

The Internet. The Internet is a powerful tool for homework help. Hard-found references can be just a mouse-click away. However, students need to learn how to distinguish reliable from unreliable sources. If you access the Internet during homework help time, help the student think carefully about what information she is looking for; how to find it and determine its usefulness; and what to do with the information (e.g., reference, rewrite in her own words, use as background knowledge). Keep your time focused on using the Internet as a supplemental research tool, rather than simply surfing the Web. Additionally, many schools require parent permission for students to use the Internet. Check with school or project staff to ensure that your student has this permission.

Guide your student through the following strategies:

- Discuss the importance of distinguishing between the student's own words and those of others. Clarify the difference between a direct quote and a summary.
- Ask the student to reread the source material to you. This allows you to help with difficult vocabulary and concepts. The student needs to understand the passage before she can summarize it in her own words.
- Practice summarizing and restating key information from the source in the student's own words. Encourage students to do this orally before writing.

- Study examples to see how quotes and references are cited in texts. Look at a simple bibliography and discuss its features.

What Do You Do When Your Student Isn't Getting It?

Despite all these strategies, there will still be times when you hear the words, *I just don't get it*. There are many reasons a student may not “get” the homework. Sometimes, students think they don't understand an assignment because they feel overwhelmed and anxious. In these cases, asking the student to read the assignment or problem aloud and clarifying expectations can be enough to put him at ease. When there is a true breakdown in understanding, however, your job as a homework helper is to try to identify it. Ask questions such as: *What part are you having trouble with? Where are stuck? Which parts do you understand?* Encourage the student to be as specific as possible about areas of difficulty so you can help accordingly.

For example, imagine a child who is working on a division worksheet, and says he doesn't understand. By asking a series of questions, you learn that he understands the concept of division, but not the idea of a remainder. Now you can focus your time on the concept of remainders, rather than starting at the beginning with division.

Or envision a child trying to read a textbook chapter on the water cycle. After a page she says she doesn't understand. After careful questioning, you realize that the lack of comprehension is due to her inability to decode certain words specific to the topic, such as *precipitation* and *evaporation*. Now you can target strategies for dealing with new vocabulary in context.

“When I need help with something, it's usually because I don't understand what the teacher taught. It helps me when someone can explain it again but in a different way.”
(Pat, seventh grade)

Creating a mini-lesson. After you have determined the difficulty, provide support with a mini-lesson. A mini-lesson is exactly that—a very brief lesson focused on a specific concept or strategy. Mini-lessons can help make abstract concepts more concrete and provide practice on an isolated strategy. The new learning can then be applied directly to the homework.

Use the following strategies to develop a mini-lesson for a struggling student (an example follows below):

- Determine the child's difficulty and isolate the necessary concept or strategy.
- Start with a simpler example not connected to the homework assignment. Check for success.
- Ask the student how he figured it out. What did he do to accomplish the task? Note or chart his responses.
- Invite the student to apply what he has learned to the homework assignment and provide support as needed.

To return to the example of the student struggling with remainders in division, the mini-lesson might look like this:

- Ask questions to determine what the breakdown is (in this case, understanding exactly what a remainder is).
- Provide an alternate, simpler example: Ask the child what he would do if there were a plate of four cookies on the table to share with his two friends. More than likely, he will respond that each of them would get one cookie and split the last cookie three ways (no remainder). Then ask him to imagine a group of five friends on the playground who want to divide into two equal teams. What happens? The child may respond that you can have two equal teams with one person left over—the remainder.

- In explaining, the child might say that if the friends were cookies, you could split the extra friend in half; but, in this case you can't cut a person in half, so you have a remainder.
- Transfer the understanding to the actual math division problem, using the cookie versus the person as a concrete example.

What to do when there is no homework.

Occasionally you will be scheduled to help a student who doesn't have any homework. Don't miss this opportunity to engage in enjoyable learning. Vocabulary, poetry, math facts, read-alouds, spelling games, cognitive activities (e.g., puzzles, mazes), art, reading and writing newspaper articles, book talks, book games, trivial pursuit, and story retelling are just a few of the possibilities (O'Connor & McGuire, 1998). For more ideas, visit: www.nwrel.org/learns. If you suspect that your student really does have homework, you or your project coordinator can work with teachers to get assignments ahead of time.

Recordkeeping and Assessment

As with any other tutoring relationship, you'll need to observe the child(ren) you work with and assess progress over time. Because the content you cover may be wide-ranging, focus your assessment on behaviors and skills related to homework success. These include preparation, ability to articulate assignments and problems, and completion. For an example of a homework assessment rubric, visit: www.nwrel.org/learns/resources/ost/homework_assessment.pdf

More Homework Help Tips

The United States Department of Education Web site (www.nochildleftbehind.gov) has additional homework help resources you can access. Most materials are available in English and Spanish and include a downloadable booklet for parents, *Helping Your Child with Homework* (www.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/homework), and a PowerPoint presentation, *Homework Tips for Parents*.

These approaches provide a starting point for addressing the range of issues that you might face as a homework helper. You can never anticipate every assignment or challenge your student will bring to you, but you can adapt the strategies and models presented here to fit your situation and the unique needs of your student.

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