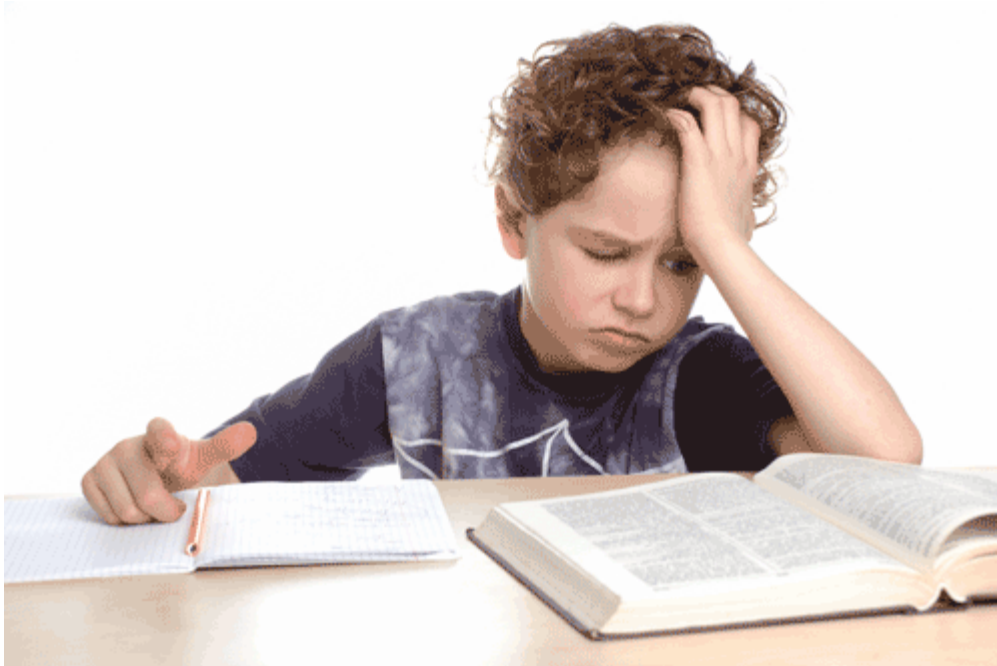


National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

The Practical Teacher



This Week's Topic:

Classwork & Homework: Troubleshooting Student Problems From Start to Finish

There are a thousand small ways that students can drift into academic trouble by regularly showing up late for class, for example, or not writing down their homework assignments accurately. Teachers know, however, that such small problems can rapidly snowball into more serious academic difficulties, resulting in reduced test scores, lower course grades, and more disciplinary office referrals.

This Practical Teacher lists common stumbling blocks that can prevent students from fully understanding material taught to them or from completing work assignments. Practical solutions are offered to overcome each potential stumbling block. Educators can adapt the majority of these intervention ideas to include in Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and 504 Accommodation Plans.

1. The student does not get to class on time

- Provide an incentive for arriving promptly (e.g., points toward earning a reward or privilege).
- Set up fun, short 'bellringer' activities before class to motivate students to show up on time.
- Establish a classwide reward system in which students 'clock in' (record their arrival time) as they enter the classroom. The teacher sets a cumulative time goal (e.g. 6 hours). Students who arrive early contribute the number of minutes between their arrival and the beginning of instruction to the growing class total. Students arriving late have the number of minutes that they were late subtracted from the class total. Once the class total matches the teacher's pre-set time goal, the entire class takes part in a desirable activity (such as watching a movie or having a pizza party).
- Require tardy students to 'make up' missed class time (e.g., being required to stay after school or complete extra assignments) if they lack a valid excuse for being late.
- Start a school-home note system to communicate with parents about student's arrival time, classroom attendance, and overall performance.

Make sure that other teachers are releasing their classes on time to allow students adequate time to get to your classroom.

2. The student does not consistently bring necessary work materials to class

- Remind students at the end of class about the books or other work materials that they should bring to the next class session.
- Keep a collection of pens, pencils, and writing paper in the room that students can use if they forget their own.
- Send parents a list of the essential materials that students should always bring to your class. Encourage parents to check with their child before school to ensure that he or she has all necessary work items.
- Teach the class a general system for organizing work and storing materials. Students should have an organizer with a section for every subject. Each section should include a calendar to record assignments, and space to store work in progress. The organizer should also be stocked with pens, pencils, and writing paper.
- Pair each student with a 'peer buddy'. Direct students to share with, or borrow from, their peer buddy if they forget a book, pencil, or other item. Also, have student pairs check with each other at the end of class to ensure that each has written down all assignments correctly and has the necessary study materials needed for homework.
- Have the student use a simple self-monitoring system. At the end of class each day, the student answers one question: "Did I have all necessary materials in class to do the work expected of me?" Offer the student an incentive (e.g., privilege, extra-credit points toward a grade, etc.) if he or she is able to answer 'YES' to the self-monitoring question a certain number of times per week. (For students with very poor organizational skills, you may start with an easy-to-achieve goal-say 2 YES ratings pre week. As the student shows improvement, raise the bar to 3, then 4, and eventually 5 YES ratings per week. Also, spot-check the student's rating periodically to make sure that the student is being honest in his or her ratings.)

Ask to have one staff member at your school manage a caseload of students who are organizationally challenged. At the start of each day, that staff member 'checks in' with these students before they go to class. This person can quickly check students' schedules for the day and make sure that they have all necessary work materials. If a student is missing an important item, the check-in person should help that student to secure the missing item before class.

3. The student appears unmotivated to complete in-class work.

- Survey the student's academic skills to make sure that the student does not have skill deficits that he or she is hiding behind a mask of poor motivation.
- Offer the student the opportunity to earn points or tokens toward rewards or incentives by completing a certain amount of schoolwork. Review possible rewards with the student and allow him or her to choose those that he or she would find most motivating.
- Use cooperative learning activities to teach course content. Cooperative learning allows students to learn while also getting motivating social reinforcement through interaction with their peers.
- Weave high-interest topics into lessons to capture and hold student attention. To learn what topics most interest your students, just ask them (whether through class discussions, written surveys, or individual student-teacher conversations).
- Offer the student choices in how he or she structures his or her learning experience in the classroom. For example, consider allowing students to select where they sit, who they sit with, what books they use for an assignment, or the type of product that they agree to produce (e.g., offering the option to students in a writing course of composing an opinion essay, a newspaper article, or letter to the editor).
- Give students a voice in structuring the lesson. For example, you might have the class vote on whether they wish to spend a class period working in student pairs at the computer center reviewing course content posted on an Internet site or remaining in the classroom working in larger student groups to pull out key course concepts from the textbook.

4. The student appears unable to complete in-class work

- Survey the student's academic skills to determine where his or her skill deficits lie.
- Adjust the student's classroom instruction to match his or her skill level. For example, a student who struggles in a higher reading group might be placed in a lower group.
- Give the student review sheets with completed models that demonstrate all steps of the learning strategy that he or she must use to do the assignment. Take care to write the review sheets so that the student is able to grasp the essential elements of the strategy when reviewing it independently.
- Link the student with a classmate, an older student, or an adult volunteer who can tutor the student in the area(s) of academic weakness. (Be sure that the student and tutor spend the majority of tutoring time actively working on the targeted skills rather than engaging in social conversation!)
- Provide the student with materials at his or her ability level on which the student can practice, practice, practice key skills being taught in the course. If the student is working independently on practice materials, provide the student with answer keys so that the student can rapidly check his or her work.
- Provide the student with study aids and reference materials designed to increase his or her comprehension of course material, such as guided notes and glossaries containing key course terms and their definitions.

5. The student completes classwork quickly without attention to quality

- Select assignments that have high-interest 'real world' application for students to encourage their best effort. For example, have students write an autobiographical essay that can later be submitted as part of their application for a summer job.
- Create a 'quality rubric that lists the key dimensions of quality that you expect from the student's work. Require that the student rate all classwork using the rubric. Do not allow the student to hand in work until the student is able honestly to assign him- or herself the highest ratings possible. (NOTE: You can use this technique with one student or the entire class.)
- Divide students into pairs and have them exchange their completed assignments. Instruct students to rate the quality of their peer's work and to share their written evaluations with each other. Before collecting work, encourage students to make changes to their own assignments in response to peer editorial feedback.
- To avoid having students rush through an assignment so that they can have free time, give additional classwork to anyone done early.
- Occasionally surprise students by inviting 'guest reviewers' from outside the classroom (e.g., another teacher, principal, visitor from outside the school) to look at important student assignments and provide face-to-face feedback about the quality of the work.

6. The student does not participate in large-group discussions

- Make sure that students are not permitted to tease or mock their peers for giving an incorrect answer in your classroom. Students should feel safe to make mistakes-even in public--as they strive to master difficult course material and concepts.
- Let students know that a certain percentage of their course grade will be determined by their preparation for class discussion and willingness to participate in class.
- Write all student names onto index cards or slips of paper and place those names into a container. During class discussion, pose a question and give students a short period of 'think time'. At the end of that time, draw a name from the container and call on that student to attempt an answer. Then replace the student's name in the container and pose another question. (If you have students who are very shy about participating, you may allow them to pass if they do not know the answer when called on.)
- Meet with the student privately and give him or her a passage from the course text (or other relevant material). Provide the student with discussion questions that you plan to ask him or her in the next class session and let the student know that the answers to those questions are to be found in the passage. (If the student requires additional support, underline the portions of the passages where answers to the discussion questions are to be found.)
- Permit students who do not know the answer when called on to select a 'lifeline', a peer who they believe will know the correct answer. If a student uses a lifeline, however, do not accept the answer until the student using the lifeline states whether he or she judges the lifeline's answer to be correct.
- Allow students to consult their notes and the course text when responding to a discussion question.
- Have the student use a simple self-monitoring system. With the student, set a reasonable daily goal for responding to discussion questions (e.g., "In each class, I will raise my hand to answer at least 3 questions.") At the end of class, the student marks on a sheet how many times the student actually participated in discussion. If the student meets or exceeds the daily

goal, the student is awarded a point or token that can be redeemed later for an incentive. Of course, the teacher should spot-check the student's rating periodically to make sure that the student is being honest in his or her ratings.

7. The student takes poor or incomplete notes on lecture content

- Base part of the course grade on the quality of the student's notes. Periodically collect student notes to grade and provide written feedback, doing so more frequently near the start of the school year. (NOTE: If you decide to grade student notes, be sure first to provide students who have disabilities that impact note-taking with appropriate accommodations, such as those discussed below.)
- Provide sets of 'guided notes' to students (notes which contain main headings and some key information but leave blanks where the student is to write in additional information).
- Keep a master set of teacher course notes available for students to borrow to check against their own notes. Or get the permission of a student in the class with good note-taking skills to photocopy his or her notes and make them available (e.g., with weekly updates) for other students to review.
- When covering important material in a course lecture, explicitly prompt students to write it down.
- Allow students to audiotape lectures. Or get into the routine of recording your own lectures and allow students to sign out those audiotapes for review.
- Encourage students to join study groups (e.g., in study halls, after school) to prepare for quizzes and tests. In these groups, students can compare notes, increasing the likelihood that students with poor note-taking abilities will fill in gaps in their own notes while reviewing essential course content.
- Work with the class to create a rubric for judging the quality of course notes. Periodically have students exchange notebooks and give structured feedback to each other about the quality of their note-taking. Require that students write up their feedback and share a copy with you. Use that feedback to flag students who are regularly rated as poor note-takers; spend time with them reviewing effective note-taking strategies.

8. The student is unfocused and inattentive in class

- Seat the student near you in your teaching 'action zone', the section of the room that you tend to face most often when addressing the class.
- When giving individual instructions to--or making a request of--the student, first make eye contact, call the student's name, and be sure that he or she is clearly attending to you.
- Post a daily agenda on the board describing the main activities planned for the class. Include the approximate amount of time that each activity will require. Preview this agenda with the class before beginning instruction. Keep the agenda on the board through the entire class period.
- Break longer assignments down into smaller 'chunks' or sections. Allow the student the option of taking a short break after successfully completing each section.
- Before the student begins an independent assignment, have the student describe his or her work plan out loud for you. Tell the student that you plan to check in with him or her at the end of class to see what progress the student has made toward accomplishing his or her work goals.

- Teach at a brisk pace that is more likely to hold students' attention.
- Provide a quiet, less-distracting corner study space (e.g. study carrel) in a less-frequented section of the classroom where the student can go when he or she needs to concentrate on independent work.
- Seat the student next to an accepting classmate with good work habits. Teach the student how quietly to ask the classmate for help whenever the student becomes confused or unsure about a class activity.

9. The student refuses to comply with teacher requests to do work

- Survey the student's academic skills to make sure that the student does not have skill deficits that he or she is hiding behind a mask of non-compliance or defiance.
- Use strategies to boost student motivation to learn (see ideas listed in section 3).
- When giving individual instructions to--or making a request of--the student, first make eye contact, call the student's name, and be sure that he or she is clearly attending to you.
- When interacting with the student, keep it positive. Attempt to have at least 3 positive interactions with the student (e.g., greeting the student, praising his or her behavior, acknowledging a correct answer) for each negative interaction (e.g., reprimand).
- Create a reward program that allows the student to earn points or tokens toward incentives or privileges for complying with adult requests. First, set a percentage goal for student compliance. (For example, if the student typically complies with only 50% of your requests, you might set an initial goal for improvement of 70% compliance.) Meet with the student before starting the program to teach the student your definition of compliance (e.g., 'The student carried out the teacher request within 20 seconds without complaining'). Inform the student that, for those periods during the day when a behavior program is in effect, the student can earn a point or token if he or she complies with teacher requests at or above the pre-set goal. The points or tokens can be redeemed periodically for rewards or privileges.
- Create a list of fair and appropriate consequences to be imposed whenever students refuse to comply with teacher requests. Explain to the class in advance what these consequences are and take care to be consistent in imposing them whenever a student fails to comply. (If possible, develop a series of consequences for misbehavior that can be delivered in the classroom, rather than simply sending the student to the principal's office at the first sign of defiance.) Teachers should note that providing only negative consequences when a chronically defiant student misbehaves is unlikely to work very well. Chances for success increase when negative consequences for misbehavior are paired with a reward system for positive student behavior.

10. The student seeks help from others even when he or she can do the work

- When the student asks for assistance unnecessarily, direct the student to attempt the problem or work on his or her own. Keep the interaction brief and business-like.
- Reinforce the student for working independently: Approach the student at random intervals whenever he or she is engaged in work and give the student encouragement (for example, by briefly praising the student for effort).
- Meet with the student to generate a list of strategies that the student can use independently when he or she has problems with seatwork. Strategies might include referring to a model

that demonstrates how to solve the problem type, referring to notes or the course text, or consulting reference resources such as dictionaries, glossaries, or maps to find an answer. Whenever the student approaches you for assistance, have the student first describe independent strategies he or she has already tried before giving the student assistance.

- Create a 'memory-friendly' classroom by publicly posting essential information (on the board or as posters) that students are likely to need for reference (e.g., the daily class schedule or agenda, in-class assignments, step-by-step breakdown of strategies for completing academic problems). When a student asks for assistance, point to the appropriate information resource and direct the student to find the answer on his or her own.

11. The student does not ask for peer or teacher assistance, even when he/she clearly needs help

- Give the student a private signal to indicate the need for teacher assistance. For example, provide the student with a red folder ('help folder') containing practice worksheets. Meet privately with the student and tell the student that, whenever he or she is stuck and needs assistance on independent assignments, the student should pull out the folder and begin working on practice worksheets until the teacher can provide assistance. Monitor the room during seatwork; whenever you note the student working out of the red 'help folder' approach the student in a low-key manner to offer assistance.
- Give the student review sheets with completed models that demonstrate all steps of the learning strategy that he or she must use to do the assignment. Format the review sheets so that the student is able to grasp the content while working independently. Direct the student to attempt to resolve problems with seatwork by first referring to the completed models.
- Create a 'memory-friendly' classroom by publicly posting essential information (on the board or as posters) that students are likely to need for reference (e.g., the daily class schedule or agenda, in-class assignments, step-by-step breakdown of strategies for completing academic problems). Coach the student to consult the appropriate memory aid (e.g., posted academic strategies) whenever he or she needs assistance.
- Allow students to complete seatwork assignments in pairs or small groups. Encourage them to ask each other for assistance as needed.
Approach the student privately during seatwork. In a supportive manner, encourage the student to demonstrate ('think aloud') the strategy that he or she is using to complete the assignment. Correct the student if he or she is using the strategy in a faulty manner. Be sure to praise the student for effort.
- Meet with the student privately and together brainstorm a list of strategies that the student would be willing to use to get assistance during independent work. For example, the student may agree to first refer to his or her notes, then ask a peer, and as a last resort approach the teacher for help. Write up the student's 'help steps' as a checklist and remind the student to use these steps whenever seatwork is assigned.

12. The student does not write down homework assignments correctly or completely

- Type up all class assignments for the week or month and pass out to the class.
- Set up a 'homework hotline' that students (and parents!) can call with a pre-recorded message listing current class assignments. Or create and regularly update a web page that students can visit to browse a listing of pending assignments and their due dates.

- Pair off students. At the end of each class, instruct students briefly to check each other's organizers or notebooks to ensure that each has accurately and completely recorded assignments from the board.
- Instruct the student to approach you at the end of each class period with his or her organizer or notebook. Read over the student's listing of assigned work. If the student's recording of the assignment is incomplete or incorrect, prompt him or her to write it correctly. Then initial the assignment page.
- Select a staff member (e.g., vice principal, reading teacher, counselor) who can serve as a 'check out' person at the end of the school day. Assign that staff member a caseload of students who have chronic difficulties accurately recording homework assignments. As each student stops by, the 'check-out' person reviews the student's recording of assignments to ensure that he or she has written them down completely.

13. The student fails to take work materials home that are required for his/her homework assignment

- When writing assignments on the board, include a list of required work materials as a reminder to students.
- At the close of class, remind students what materials they will need for homework.
- Have the student keep one set of textbooks at home and one at school.
- Post worksheets to be done as homework on the Internet where students can download and print off as needed.
- Explicitly teach students how to prepare at the end of each school day for that night's homework. Instruct students to review each instructor's homework assignment and verify that they have put the necessary work materials to do that assignment into their backpack or book bag. For students who need additional practice, walk them to their lockers at the end of the day and coach them as they pull together their homework materials.

14. The student does not have a regular routine (fixed time, location, etc.) for studying and completing homework

- Have the student complete a homework schedule each week with adequate time set aside daily for homework. Verify with the student's parent(s) that the student is abiding by the schedule.
- Meet with the student to identify both a place at home where the student can do homework without distractions and a set time for doing homework. Check in with the student occasionally to monitor his or her homework habits.
- If the home environment is not conducive for completing homework, encourage the student to find another location (e.g., local branch of the public library, community center) suitable for homework.
- Encourage the student to use study halls or other in-school time to get a head start on homework.
- Team up with other teachers to sponsor a 'homework club' where students can stay after school to complete homework with adult support and supervision. Consider having different teachers 'host' the club on different nights of the week.

15. The student lacks an efficient strategy for completing homework assignments

- Train students in the specific steps needed to build a work plan for doing homework. Show them how to preview their afterschool assignments, order those assignments so that they do the most difficult first (when their energy level is highest), break larger assignments into smaller sub-tasks, and estimate how much time each assignment is likely to require. Assign students to create their own homework plans for a week and to turn them in to you. Follow up by asking students to reflect on how their use of these plans may have improved their homework completion.
- If you are giving students an especially challenging homework assignment, provide them with strategies (e.g., time-saving tips, techniques to check for mistakes, etc.) for doing that homework efficiently.
- Suggest to students that they take short breaks between homework assignments (e.g., spending 10 minutes watching television) to refresh and reenergize.
- Recommend to students (and perhaps to their parents) that they remove unnecessary 'time-wasters' from the homework setting (e.g., Internet messaging, television, radio, cell phones).
- Enlist the student's parent to serve as a 'homework coach', meeting with the student each night to look over assignments, set up a plan for completing the homework, monitoring the student's actual time spent doing homework, and reviewing finished work to verify its completeness and quality.

16. The student completes homework but fails to turn it in at school

- Meet with the student's parents and suggest that they check each morning to be sure that the student has all completed homework assignments in his or her backpack before leaving for school.
- Set up a homework chart for the student. Award the student a point for each day that he or she turns in homework. Allow the student to redeem collected points for rewards or privileges.
- Build a sense of personal accountability by requiring that students put their homework directly in your hand as they walk in the door at the beginning of class. Note which students fail to turn in homework and approach them before the class period is over to have them pledge when they will turn it in.
- Send 'overdue homework' notices home every several weeks to parents of your students. The notices should include enough information about the missing assignments so that the parents have all the information that they need to prod their child to get the work done and turn it in.
- Designate a staff member to be a 'homework check-in' person for selected students. At the beginning of the day, students go to the staff member in the school's main office and surrender their completed homework assignments. The staff member immediately puts students' homework in the appropriate teachers' mailboxes.
- Encourage students to complete their homework in study halls or in an afterschool 'homework club'. Appoint a staff member to collect students' completed homework before they leave for the day and to put finished homework into the appropriate teachers' mailboxes.

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