Designing Homework
By Sandy Chapman

College students are often told that they should expect to devote two to three hours of outside study for each hour of class. That translates into students (however unrealistically) spending about two-thirds of their time on homework assignments: outside projects, reading assignments, problem sets, and papers.

That being the case, here are some general tips on designing homework assignments so that students will get the most out of the course:

- Impress upon students the value of actually doing the homework for the course. Explain that it is not just "busy work" but, instead, is part of the learning experience and will contribute to success in the course.
- Be clear about when homework assignments will be assigned, what they will be, and when they will be due. Some instructors like to assign all outside class assignments ahead of time, listing them on the class syllabus along with the due dates. Decide what your rules are for late homework and enforce them.
- Coordinate homework, especially problem sets, with lecture topics. When designing homework, make sure that your assignments only require knowledge of material already covered in class. Concepts should build from one to the next. Avoid tricky problems that require material not yet covered.
- Pace your assignments and divide them equally throughout the term, so that students are not overwhelmed with a large quantity of work all at once.
- Give homework and quizzes frequently and regularly. This will allow you to assess what the students have mastered, what they are having difficulty with, and in what area you need to provide assistance. Regular homework also serves to get students used to working outside of class and setting aside time in which to do it.
- Assign different types of homework. One assignment may be to solve a problem, others might be to research a topic, keep a journal, or summarize key concepts. Summarizing helps students synthesize the course content. Even open-book assignments require students to review important concepts.
- Vary the types of homework questions and include a balance of questions—some requiring specific, literal answers, others requiring students to infer the answer from course material, and others requiring individual creative application of the information.
- Allow students to work on homework collaboratively from time to time. Collaboration encourages discussion and peer learning. You might also choose to divide problems into ones students hand in and others they do for practice and which may appear later on exams.
- Do some problems or assignments yourself, whenever possible. When reviewing homework problems in class, ask students to give step-by-step explanations of how they solved them. Then, discuss the thinking process. Such "thinking aloud" will help students not only understand the answers to problems, but also the cognitive process involved in solving them.
- Grade the process as well as the solution—a wrong answer does not necessarily mean that the student approached the problem incorrectly. Give partial credit for student work that employs correct methods.
- Grade fairly and return homework promptly: students will better connect it to what they have mastered and to what areas they need further study.

Source: