

## Large Class FAQ: Assignments

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### 1. How can I evaluate homework?

- Judy Ozment Payne (Chemistry) offers the following suggestion for making grading more manageable: "I teach a class where one problem is not enough practice for them, but a dozen problems is just too much to grade when the class size is large. I used to assign 12-15 homework problems and then grade only one or two of them, by randomly selected from the 12. This was seen as being biased by students who felt that I actually went through and picked hard ones or ones they didn't complete. So, I brought a 12-sided die to class, put a numbered list of the problems on the overhead projector, and rolled the die (or had a student roll the die) and circled the two numbered questions that came up on the die rolls. This accomplished two things. (1) It made a firm deadline for papers being turned in (since papers had to be in before the die was rolled) and (2) it proved without a doubt that the selection process was truly random. Some students still wish that I would grade all the work they do, but I no longer get any other complaints. I do still grade  $N \times 2$  problems for each homework set I collect, where  $N$  has been as high as 220, but I grade  $N \times 4$  problems for each of the four exams I give, too. The homework gives them low stakes practice, and they learn the importance of thoughtful problem solving prior to the high stakes exams."
- John Lowe (Chemistry) assigns a Daily Problem: "It's a fairly simple problem that's not in the textbook. I put it on the overhead one day, and they have to turn the answer in the next. So each day they come to class they turn in a problem. These are graded on an 0-1-2 basis: 0 if it's not there, 1 if it's there but it's not correct, and 2 if it's okay."
- Another question raised at one of the luncheons was how to evaluate homework and whether or not to allow for collaboration on homework exercises. People shared intricate methods they had used for trying to prevent dishonesty, but many agreed that only the most egregious kinds of dishonesty (such as students copying solutions just before turning the homework in) could be effectively discouraged (for example, by requiring that homework be typed). Many felt that genuine student collaboration on more difficult problems should be encouraged as this connects the homework to learning objectives.

### 2. How can I encourage students to read the assignment before class?

- At the end of each class session, Peter Maserick (Mathematics) assigns his students five homework problems, three of which are based on that day's topic and two of which are on the topic assigned for the next session.
- Do not assume that students know how to read for comprehension. Schedule time early in the semester to talk about how you expect students to read assigned materials. Give them tips for making connections that will enhance understanding as well as memory recall. Offer note taking suggestions. Follow up on and reinforce these tips in your periodic checks of students' preparation and understanding of the material.

- Use the textbook in class. Get them accustomed to referring to it.
- Demonstrate how to use the text. Students who need specific information to solve problems, for example, could greatly increase their reading efficiency by learning how to use an index.
- Give an estimate of time required to complete the reading. This can help students take responsibility for their out-of-class preparation.
- Convince students that they may need to read the assignment more than once.
- Provide a set of questions to guide students in their reading. The kinds of questions you ask can show students the difference between reading to locate specific information, skimming for main ideas, and doing a close reading for the purpose of textual analysis.
- One popular method of encouraging students to read is to give quizzes on the assigned reading material. Variations on this old favorite include having students take quizzes in the computer lab as a means of helping students prepare readings and other homework, assess their own understanding of key concepts, and practice for hard-copy exams. Another alternative is to give small group quizzes.
- Linda Morrow (Nutrition) uses Quiz Wizard to administer open-book, out-of-class quizzes that target the things she wants her students to get out of the assigned reading. She makes these available on-line for a given time prior to class and takes them down just before class begins. With this software, you can limit students to one try or let them take the quiz several times, counting only the last score.
- Assign and collect homework (one reading-based problem will do) from all or a random selection of your students. Require that it be typed, so that students can't copy from each other in the hall just before class begins.
- Give a reading-based "minute paper" at the **beginning** of class, rather than a lecture-based one at the end: 1) most important thing you got out of the reading, and 2) most important question the reading failed to answer.
- Require students to submit a question based on the reading prior to or at the beginning of class, and give them credit for doing so.
- Use the lecture to fill in the missing pieces from the reading, clarify confusing material, correct wrong or outdated information, propose alternative theories or approaches, and / or provide meaningful contexts.
- Give participation points to students who answer correctly (or adequately) questions posed to the class. As appropriate, ask students to provide support for their answers.
- Arthur Anderson (Architecture) gives "take-home" quizzes which require students to answer questions about the design of various structures within walking distance of campus. Ideally, the student would need to both visit the sites and draw from reading and lecture materials to successfully answer these questions.

- Many faculty require students keep reading logs and collect these several times during the semester. To make the process of giving credit manageable in a large class, some use a simple check/plus/minus technique, while others divide the effort by giving written feedback only to a different subset of students each time.
- Glenn Johnson (Education Technology Services) offers this variation on the journal idea: "Have students keep a notebook where they write a paragraph reaction/annotation to a reading assignment. As class begins, have students swap notebooks with a neighbor. The neighbor then writes a comment based on his or her own reading of the assignment that also responds to what the student has written. The notebooks are returned, and the student writes a final response to the neighbor's reaction. In this way students are going over, thinking about, and responding to the reading a few times before classroom discussion begins."
- Reinhard Graetzer (Physics) suggests collecting lecture homework from randomly selected recitation sections each lecture period. Grade these primarily for effort. This homework should relate to material for the upcoming lecture, so that the instructor not only encourages students to work ahead but also gets early feedback on what students are having difficulty understanding.
- Ask students to submit, as homework, exam questions based on that day's reading. Promise to use a certain number or percentage of these questions on large exams. Students could get credit for submitting any reasonable question (and answer). If you use the question on the exam, the student who submitted it will get credit again, assuming he or she remembers the answer!
- Bob Mitchell (Biology) suggests getting to class early and introducing yourself to one or two people at the back of the room. That way, when you call on them by name, the class thinks virtually anyone could be put on the spot, and they start looking at the materials before they come to the lecture.
- If no one is volunteering to answer your questions and you are having trouble remembering students' names, use a simple game to get students involved and check their understanding of the day's assigned reading. Some possibilities are listed below. Do you have others?
  - "Hat Trick." Select 8-10 student names at random from your class list and ask those present to work as a team to come up with questions for the class (or the instructor) based on the day's assigned reading. They write each question on a slip of paper and put the slips into a hat. The team gets points for every question related to the assigned reading that students and/or the instructor cannot answer.
  - "Eraser Game." Ask students to pass an eraser continuously, so that when they hear a cue (and you can decide what the cue will be), whoever has the eraser in his or her possession must attempt to answer the question.
  - "Hot Seat." Select one student or a panel of students to be in the hot seat. Anyone can ask them questions about the assignment, and they get points for every question they can answer.

- "Planting the Audience." At the beginning of the semester, take individual students aside as they are leaving the classroom and say, "Next class I'm going to call on you and ask you this question." The student then prepares a thorough response to that question. When the rest of the students hear the quality of this response, they infer that everyone else is coming to class as well-prepared and begin to do the same in order to keep up. According to the teacher who offered this idea, the tactic establishes a high standard for both homework and class participation. As the semester progresses, he no longer finds it necessary to use these student "plants."
- Utilize the Web to increase student involvement and participation. For example, Web Crossing software promotes student interaction with the material and you.
- Encourage students who are having difficulty to take advantage of the services offered by the University Learning Resource Center.

### **3. How can I prevent students from getting too much help from others on writing assignments?**

- One respondent, who may be speaking for a silent majority, does not think writing assignments should be given at all in large classes, since instructors have so little time to provide feedback that will help students improve their writing skills. This person also argues that when students get help from other readers, they are doing nothing unethical since professional writers often receive such help from colleagues and editors.
- Many faculty agree that the most important thing instructors can do to prevent plagiarism is to make sure students know precisely what your expectations are. Give them in writing a description of plagiarism with examples, and allow some class time to talk about what you consider to be unethical and to answer students' questions.
- Nancy Lowe (English) writes: "Part of the plagiarism handout which all PSU freshmen receive through their English 4, 15, 30, or 202 classes says that 'an innocent way to plagiarize is to allow your fellow students and friends to give you too much rhetorical help or do too much editing and proofreading of your paper. If you think you have received substantial help in any way from people whose names will not appear as authors of the paper, acknowledge that help in a short sentence at the end of the paper or in your list of Works Cited. If you are not sure how much help is too much help, talk with your instructor, so the two of you together can decide what kind of outside help (and how much) is proper, and how to give credit where credit is due.' Perhaps teachers of large classes could reiterate this policy and remind students that it applies to all their written work in the University. Then of course instructors need to make clear how much help is too much."
- Kathy Hood (Human Development, Women's Studies) writes: "An elaborate statement that specifies what plagiarism is and the penalties, which [students] must sign when they hand in the assignment, assures at least that they know what they are doing or have done. Some may not know that it's wrong, incredible as that seems."

- Frederick Brown (Health Psychology) goes even further: "I have no hesitation in asking students to write a pledge at the top of their product--be it a makeup exam, project, paper, or whatever. Although the wording can be tailored to the product, I require that they write, 'On my honor as a person, I have neither given nor received information about this test,' or 'On my honor as a person, this is my own work within the guidelines established for its production.' And then I ask them to sign their name. That's all! Whether the student has a conscience or not to take personal responsibility for their pledging is beyond my ability to enforce. But I know pledging their work does give most of them pause to reflect."
- Another faculty member avoids the problem by assigning only in-class writing.
- Terry Engelder (Geosciences) writes: "Although I have not done this in my large GEN ED class, it is a model that might have merits in that setting. During the first class at the 400 level, I have all students provide a writing sample. This gives me some indication of the student's baseline proficiencies. I let the students know that I plan on measuring later assignments against the 'in class' sample. If later assignments seem wildly out of whack with the 'in class' sample, I will ask the student for an explanation. An unsatisfactory explanation will result in a 'no grade' for the assignment."
- Dorothy Blair (Nutrition) offers a similar idea: "You could require each student to respond spontaneously in class on the last page of their previously written assignment to a question posed in class. This brief sample of their writing ability should be enough to compare to their assignment's style to gauge whether or not they did their own work. You might be able to eliminate cheating in advance by announcing that you will collect such a sample of their spontaneous work."
- Several people see the enforcement of deadlines for component parts in the writing process as the best way to discourage students from plagiarizing.
- Ron Kensinger (Animal Nutrition) suggests: "I think if an instructor breaks down the assignments into pieces, students (most of whom procrastinate) are more likely to do the work. For example, could the instructor have a first deadline to submit the topic, a second deadline to turn in references, a third deadline to turn in an outline, and then a final deadline for the paper? Students may be more likely to keep up under this scenario. However, I realize that cheating may still occur, if a student is determined to do so."
- Charlotte Wulf (English) has tried such a system and found it an effective deterrent: "The way I like to handle this is first to request a proposal from the student, sometimes with a short preliminary bibliography attached (preferably annotated), to make sure they have a feasible topic and know where to find information on it. [Then I] request that they turn in notes and rough drafts with their final draft. It is, I am sure, more trouble than it is worth to fake an entire package of materials, so I believe this cuts down considerably on cheating. The downside to this is that it is more work for the teacher! If they tell you that they do all of their revising directly on the computer, ask them to stop and print out a draft from time to time so that they will have it to turn in. I tell them it is a good idea to print out and look at the whole thing periodically anyway, because one tends to get too wrapped up in micro-revising if one doesn't do so."