

Homework: Ugh!

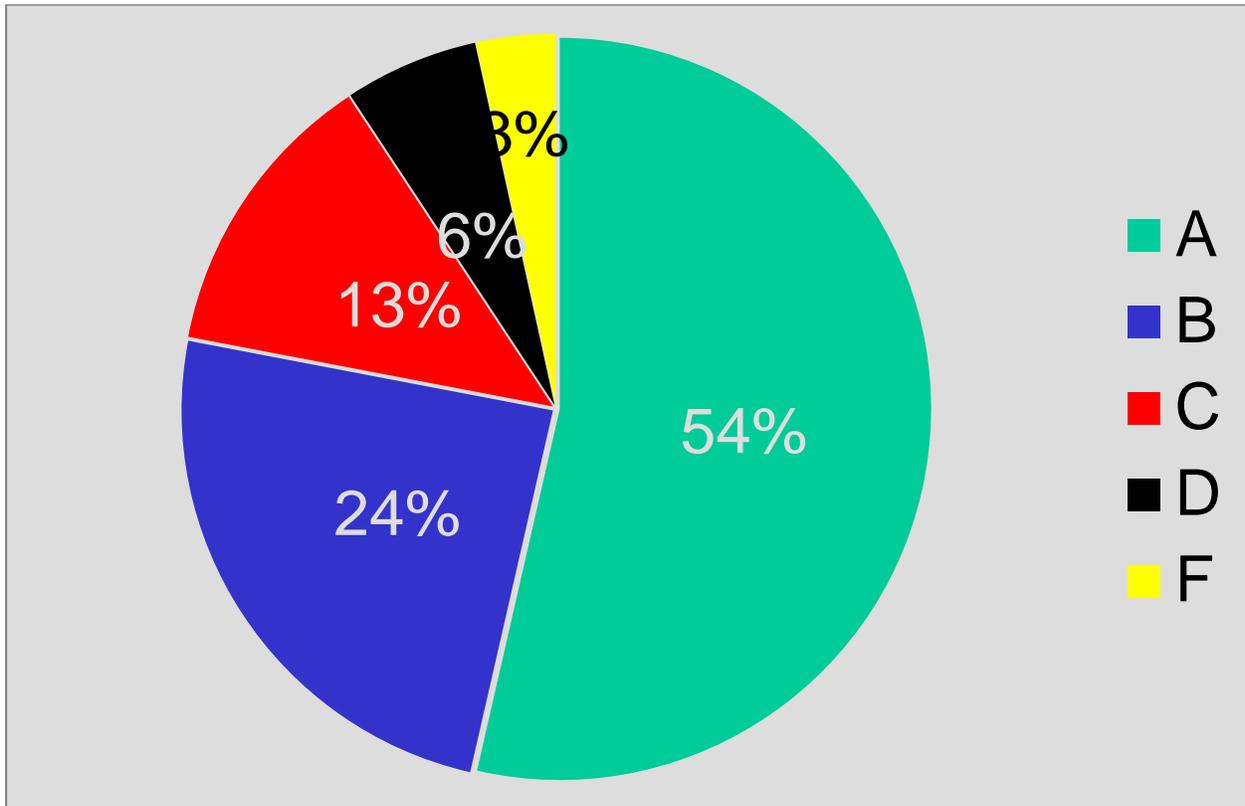
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“If a student earns an ‘A’ on every exam and earns an ‘A’ on every project, but hands in no daily homework, what is the highest report card grade the student can earn in your classroom?” In my seminars I have collected the answers from 2000 teachers in the United States and Canada; the answers are in the graph below.



It seems there is no agreement in the United States or Canada whether homework is a subject or a method. If it is a subject, then teachers should request that homework be placed on the report

card alongside other subjects. If it is a method, how can teachers justify grading students on teaching methods?

Somewhere between these two extremes of not grading homework (it is a method) and adding a new subject (homework) is an alternative taught to me by John McDonald of Rochester, Minnesota. His process is to assign homework but not collect it or grade it. Instead, the day after each biology homework assignment two questions from the homework are asked verbatim, and the two questions are graded. He is not grading compliance (that is, did you do what I told you to do?) but is grading knowledge in the students' heads. His process is seen by the students as efficient and fair.

Under this system, homework is no longer about writing something down to be graded; instead, it is about learning. Studying for the homework can be accomplished through writing, talking on the phone with a friend, texting, discussion with parents, or merely making sure you have in your head the answers to the questions. All that matters the next day is the knowledge in students' heads.

McDonald's methods solve several homework issues that have plagued educators for decades:

1. *Students are no longer punished for being smart.* They no longer lament, "It's not fair that I have to study something I already know." If they have listened in class, used study time wisely, or have prior background knowledge, then they have no homework and will receive credit for what they know. We will not have stories such as the one told to me by an Ohio principal. He related that the student with the very highest score on one of the AP science exams flunked science because he never turned in his daily homework.

2. *Students are not given credit for copied homework.* Educators in both public and private high schools estimate that 70% to 95% of all homework is copied. No longer are students rewarded for copying; the focus is on learning.
3. *Students are not given credit for parents doing the homework.* Certainly, parents can be the ones helping students learn the content, but credit is not given for papers completed by parents.
4. *A sexism problem is solved.* No girls are able to pass the course on participation and copied homework points, and no boys who actually know the content are punished for not using the preferred learning method of homework. (I know there are girls who refuse to play the copied homework game and boys who will gladly copy homework for grades. However, there is a higher percentage of girls willing to play the game than boys.)
5. *The teacher has time to prepare for the next day instead of spending so much time grading homework.* For far too many teachers, by the time they finish grading the daily homework there is no energy left to even think about how to be a more creative, effective teacher.

I have shared McDonald's homework process in several hundred seminars over a five-year period. The stories reported back to me are very intriguing.

An Arizona middle school math teacher lets the first student in the door roll dice to determine the two homework problems that will be used for the homework quiz. Students rush to be the first to his classroom merely to roll the dice. He reports going from 27% D's and F's to 9% with this change in procedure. In other words, 18 % of his students who actually knew the math were receiving poor grades.

An Arizona mom told me her son is a good math student and all of his friends know it. When her son's math teacher adopted this system, her son's evenings changed. He is now a math tutor because all of his friends know he can solve the problems. They text, e-mail, and phone him throughout the evening to help with their math because they don't know which two problems will be on the quiz the next day. No longer is it about compliance; instead, the students must be able to solve the problems.

An Oklahoma high school science teacher related how happy she is to not pass girls who don't know the science and not to fail boys if they actually do know the science. Obviously, as a female teacher she detested a system that let girls slide by, but didn't have a solution to the problem until adopting this process.

An Oklahoma history teacher was most evenings grading homework that consisted of fifteen questions from over 100 students. His wife was not happy. He implemented this process, still assigning fifteen questions, but only five were selected for the homework quiz. Students were given five minutes to answer the questions, and he taught the rest of the period. When the second period students arrived they were given a different set of five questions. While they were taking the quiz, he graded the first period quizzes. This process continued throughout the day until school was over and he took five minutes to grade the last period of the day's quizzes. His wife is now happy to have a husband back in the evenings, rescued from homework hell.

It is important to mention again that this article is about daily homework and not about long-term projects such as essays, speeches, map creation, research reports, art projects, novels to read, and so on. Ideally, grades will match learning, and learning is generally measured through exams and projects. With McDonald's process, perhaps 5% to 10% of the grade will be the homework quiz.