



Ask Chris

This month Chris Turner answers a question about homework and practice.

My student has no conception of how to study. She only finished the third grade. She doesn't study at home at all. She thinks when she leaves she should know the material. She works hard during her lessons and I know she wants to learn. What can I do to encourage her to do her homework?

Frustrated Tutor

Helping students to practice literacy skills between lessons is one of the most important things we can do as tutors. However, it is also one of the most difficult. If your expectations are too high, your student will not succeed and the cycle of failure will continue. If your expectations are too low, your student will not feel challenged enough to keep striving.

Our goal is to help our students become self-directed learners. To do that, you will need to slowly build your student's study skills. Make sure she understands how important independent practice is. Many students have difficulty with the idea of homework—it brings up all those old bad memories of school and trying to please the teacher.

Often, we tell people to forget about the idea of homework—at least at first. Instead we suggest that tutors and students think of it as practice—a daily Skill Drill. Just as in sports or music, students need to practice everyday in order to get better—or even maintain skills. Try to get your student to make a commitment to ten minutes of practice a day. Everyone can find ten uninterrupted minutes. Then, we recommend that you work together to develop a ten-minute daily routine to build skills.

1. Concentrate on specific skills.

Don't just assign an exercise from the book. This is almost always a bad idea. Most students need to work on those exercises with you during the lesson. This is when you introduce new skills, review old skills or provide guided practice before students work independently. Instead, figure out exactly what skills your student needs to practice. Each student will have different needs. Some students are desperate to learn work-related vocabulary. Others need to improve their spelling or read accurately and fluently at their level. Focused work on what a student identifies as their primary need is very motivating.

2. Take advantage of your student's learning style..

People learn in different ways. Some students, for example, practice reading paragraphs for fluency while walking around the house. Somehow moving makes

learning easier for them. Some students use flash cards with great success. Others hate flash cards. Come talk to the staff at the literacy council if you need ideas.

3. Set a realistic short-term goal.

Don't let your student get overloaded. Often people think if learning five new spelling words is good, learning twenty is better. Unfortunately, when students get too ambitious, they often end up not retaining anything. Slow and steady wins the race. Be specific. For example, your goal might be to accurately spell 50 words at the end of three months. To meet that goal, you would introduce five new words a week. During the student's skill drill, she would study new words and review old ones.

4. Monitor progress and celebrate achievement.

Check on your student's progress regularly and give your student feedback and encouragement. If your student is not making progress, you can adjust your plan. When your student has achieved a short-term goal, make sure to celebrate in some small way.

Although the basic formula is simple—practice makes perfect—there are many obstacles that might hamper your student's ability to practice at home. Some of these include: poor organization skills, poor memory, difficulty concentrating, low motivation due to repeated failure, health problems, busy schedules and poor understanding of how to practice skills.

If your student needs help in these areas, talk to the literacy council staff and plan to attend the training on Good Study Habits on June 19.