

# The Teacher's Guide to Better Assignments for Students with ADHD



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From the ADHD Experts at

**ADDITUDE**

Strategies and Support for ADHD & LD

# ADDITUDE

## Strategies and Support for ADHD & LD

A trusted source of advice and information for families touched by attention-deficit disorder—  
and a voice of inspiration to help people with ADHD find success at home, at school, and on the job.

[ADDitudeMag.com](http://ADDitudeMag.com)

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# The Teacher's Guide to Better Assignments for Students with ADHD

All students learn differently. Students with ADHD and learning disabilities, especially, struggle to decipher and comprehend assignments that don't align with their learning styles. Here are ideas educators can use to adapt homework assignments and project requirements for unique thinkers.

BY ADDITUDE EDITORS,  
CHRIS ZEIGLER DENDY, M.S., AND SANDRA RIEF, M.S.

Your student's homework is rarely complete, when it's submitted at all. "Punishing" him with zero credit won't solve the problem. But addressing the root cause(s) just might. Does he forget to bring home necessary books? Does he copy down the assignment incorrectly? Does he leave completed work at home or in his locker? Digging in to these questions can unlock solutions and learning that persists all year.

This primer is designed to help teachers understand the unique challenges of students with ADHD — why they are disorganized, forgetful, or seemingly scatterbrained — and how to adjust teaching and assignments accordingly to support learning, growth, and a healthy relationship between home and school.

## The Problem: Disorganization

Your student forgets to bring home the reading or supplies she needs to finish assignments, or to bring the completed work back to school. Her desk, locker, backpack, and notebook are in disarray, and she frequently misses deadlines and scheduled activities.

**The Reason:** The neurological process that keeps us organized is called "executive function." It is the ability to organize, prioritize, and

### GUEST BLOG

6 Reasons Why I Love Teaching Children with ADHD

[additu.de/6teach](https://additu.de/6teach)

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analyze information in order to make reasonable decisions and plans. Children with ADHD have impaired executive function skills.

**The Obstacles:** Students with ADHD exhibit inconsistent organization skills. If a child handles one task in an organized way, it is tempting to believe she could be organized always “if she wanted to.” But punishment will not change disorganized behaviors that are related to brain pathology. Nor will calling the child “sloppy” or “lazy.”

### Solutions in the Classroom:

- **Color-code academic materials.** Use green, for example, for all science notebooks, binders, folders, and textbook covers. Keep related classroom books and materials in bins of the same hue.
- **Post steps for routines.** Hang colorful signs at the locations where students should submit homework, lunch boxes, and parent-teacher correspondence. (For pre-readers, use drawings and photos.) Also post step-by-step procedures for special periods, such as library time or computer lab, and hand out copies for students to keep in their binders. An example for dismissal would be: Did you clear off your desk? Did you pack your book bag? Do you have your jacket, lunch box, and homework?
- **Assign each student with ADHD a study buddy** whom he can contact later in the day if he forgets something in his desk or locker at school.
- **Simplify the flow of papers.** Homework, permission slips, and PTA letters are easily lost or crumpled. Provide each student with three clear, pocket-type folders — labeled “Mail,” “Homework to Do,” and “Completed Homework.”
- **Schedule a class clean-up.** Provide time for students to de-clutter their binders, backpacks, and desks. Hold periodic desk and notebook inspections, and award prizes — a homework pass or tokens redeemable at the school store — for tidiness.
- **Post a master calendar.** Visually show all upcoming activities, projects, and deadlines. Allow time for students to transfer the information to their personal planners.
- **Communicate regularly with parents** of students who are falling behind in homework or assignments. Do not wait so long that catching up is impossible.

### SCHOOL ORGANIZATION TIPS

Calendars, Clocks, and Confidence

[additu.de/cc](http://additu.de/cc)

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- **To help students with time management, use an analog clock** and Time Timer. These devices make it easier for students to track the passage of time. Make a game out of predicting how long an activity will take. How long does it take to walk from the classroom to the school office? To write a book report?
- **Provide structure for long-term projects, and give students with ADHD a head start.** Break projects into manageable steps – choosing a topic, submitting an outline, and so on. Post deadlines for each stage and refer to them frequently. Let parents know about these due dates, as well. Encourage students to use *ADDitude*'s step-by-step guide to writing term papers at <http://additu.de/term-paper>.

## The Problem: Poor Memory

Weak working memory — the inability to keep information in mind so it's available for use — is a common complaint among students with ADHD. In some cases, distraction prevents students from taking in information. In others, they can't retrieve memories or reclaim information that has been stored away. This is why instructions given 20 minutes ago are so often forgotten by “Go” time. This may look like laziness or a bad attitude, but it is a classic characteristic of the disability.

**The Reason:** Working memory helps us keep information in short-term memory while performing complex tasks. A young child uses his working memory to execute simple tasks like cleaning up crayons when asked, while a student in middle school uses it to remember the expectations and assignments of multiple teachers. Children with ADHD who struggle with working memory may seem defiant, lazy, or disinterested. They may also struggle while writing to juggle the thoughts they want to get on paper while keeping the big picture in mind, and while doing math to keep track of numbers and operations throughout the steps of a problem.

**The Obstacles:** Working memory is most likely related to the frontal cortex, which is often underdeveloped in children with ADHD — up to three years behind their same-age peers. Of course, kids with ADHD also struggle with attention, which is a prerequisite for memory. Combined with other deficits, like inattention and impulse control, it can put children with ADHD at a serious disadvantage.

Punishment will not grow more white matter, or improve attention. Instead of punishing a child for poor memory, teach compensatory

### SELF-TEST

Could Your Child Have a Working Memory Deficit?  
[additu.de/wmd](http://additu.de/wmd)

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skills for coping with the challenge.

### Solutions in the Classroom:

- **Put homework assignments in writing** on the blackboard in the same spot every day, so that students know where to find them. Don't rely on oral instructions.
- **Ask students with weak working memory to repeat back** assignment instructions and then clarify any parts they may have forgotten. Do this privately to avoid embarrassment.
- **Make time at the end of class for students to write down homework in their assignment books.** If attention or language deficits make copying hard for a student, ask another student to write the assignment and discreetly give it to the child.
- **Get your students' attention.** Clap out a rhythm and have your students clap the rhythm back until the class is quiet. Then give instructions.
- **Keep homework assignments on the school website up-to-date.** Parents of kids with ADHD depend on this information to make sure their kids know what to do if the assignment notebook goes missing.
- **Speak slowly and provide information in small units.** Read a few pages of an article at a time. Teach students how to stop and ask questions about what they've read. Given too much information at once, children with weak working memory quickly lose track. They may still be working through the first few minutes of the lesson after you've moved on.
- **Make lectures interactive.** To improve retention among kids with weak working memory, structure the lecture to include student responses. For instance, when teaching a math lesson, you might encourage students to share what they learned. Repeating a key point will help anchor it in students' memories. Play music or sing a song to keep them focused on the material being taught.
- **Have a routine for handing in homework assignments.** Some teachers collect homework immediately — and then check off their grade books or dig further for the assignment. Another idea: Make handing in homework the “ticket to get out of class” at the end of the day. Stand by the door and collect it as the students leave. As you can imagine, kids will comply when the alternative is staying in school one

*“I make up a daily assignment sheet for my students with ADHD. Parents sign the sheets each night and staple all completed work to the back. This cuts down on ‘lost papers.’”*— Hope Gibson, Tennessee

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minute longer.

- **Talk with students about what to do if they forget something.** Assign another student to act as a body double — permitting the child to ask for information or clarification without getting in trouble.
- **Ask students to design their own “tickler systems”** — a way to remind themselves of things they must remember (permission slips, lunch money, gym clothes). This could lead to a class discussion, to give students a chance to share the strategies that work for them.

## The Problem: Turning in Assignments

Your student consistently neglects to hand in homework or long-term projects, even though he or she may claim to have completed the work.

**The Reason:** Children with ADHD lose track of loose bits of information. They have the same problem with bits of paperwork, often forgetting to bring home the right books, keep track of due dates, and copy down assignments. This problem may stem from an inability to focus on more than one thing at a time.

**The Obstacles:** An assignment, from writing it down to handing it in, actually represents many different tasks. Somewhere along the way, children with ADHD get interrupted and forget where they are in the process. They often want to comply, but as their focus shifts from one task to another or one class to another, they may lose the memory of what just transpired.

Mental disorganization causes children to be inconsistent, often leading adults to believe a lapse is intentional. When teachers respond by giving zeroes or bad grades, it only discourages the child and doesn't solve the problem.

### Solutions in the Classroom:

- **Set aside time each day for students to copy homework assignments in their planners.** Write assignments on the board and read them aloud to reinforce the information. If attention or language deficits make copying hard for some kids, provide typed assignments for everyone to take home. Post assignments to the school's website for backup.
- **Assign homework at the beginning of the period, when possible,** rather than at the end.
- **Sign up with myHomework,** a free app that can track class

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schedules, homework assignments, and upcoming tests — and notify students when something is due. It can also share school announcements, and let parents download documents like permission slips.

- **Appoint “row captains.”** At the beginning of class, these designated “leaders” should collect completed homework. At the end of class, they should check to see that homework assignments have been written down by each student in their row.
- **Provide a labeled folder for bringing in completed homework.** If a student consistently leaves completed assignments at home, have his or her parents sign a homework sheet each evening to confirm that the work is finished and packed up.
- **Send home a list of suggestions for productive homework sessions,** such as the following: 1. Establish a set homework time with input from your child; 2. Find a quiet location with good lighting and a clear workspace with access to paper, pencils, and a computer.
- **Lighten the homework load.** Some students with ADHD work slowly and are easily frustrated. What takes an average child 15 to 20 minutes to complete may take a student with ADHD longer than an hour to finish. The National Education Association and the National Parent Teacher Association recommend 10 minutes of homework per grade per day. In other words, a sixth-grader would spend roughly 60 minutes per evening on homework. Be responsive to parents who report frustration with spending hours on homework with children every night.
- **Make adaptations to homework for individual students.** Ask yourself, “What do I want all students to learn from the assignment?” “Can this student get the concepts without having to do all the writing?” “Can he/she demonstrate understanding in a more motivating format?” One size doesn’t fit all.
- **Allow students to email homework to you,** or place it in a Dropbox folder or share it via Google Docs as soon as it’s complete to avoid lost assignments.
- **Work with your school** to set up supervised study halls, homework labs or clubs, tutorials, and other assistance for students who need it.

#### FREE RESOURCE

8 Useful Homework & Study Apps

[additu.de/hwapps](http://additu.de/hwapps)

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## **ADDitude eBooks Available Now**

[additudemag.com/shop](http://additudemag.com/shop)

### **The ADHD Parent-Teacher Handbook**

**Practical learning solutions to common ADHD symptoms in the classroom and at home.**

Consistency and cooperation between school and home makes such a tremendous difference. Forge a coordinated partnership with parents by sharing these practical learning solutions to common ADHD problems in the classroom and at home. This eBook has specific strategies for both teachers and parents to use when helping children maintain focus, stay organized, make and keep friends, and control impulsive behavior.

>> Learn more about this eBook: <http://additu.de/pth>

### **Your ADHD Homework Survival Guide**

**A plan for getting assignments written down, completed, and handing in on time.**

After working hard to focus and remember all day long, children with ADHD fight nightly homework with a vengeance. And who can blame them? Children with ADHD struggle with executive functions, working memory, and focus — skills that are taxed all day. Parents who are tired of daily battles over vocab lists and multiplication tables agree: There has to be a better way. In this eBook, learn how to break the bad homework cycle and keep children learning.

>> Learn more about this eBook: <http://additu.de/hw-book>

### **Signs & Symptoms of Learning Disabilities**

**Learn to recognize and address the learning and language disorders that most commonly co-exist with ADHD.**

A student has been diagnosed with and treated for ADHD, but is still struggling to keep up with her classmates — though you know she's just as bright. Could there be something else going on? In fact, many children with and without ADHD struggle with undiagnosed learning disabilities that make it difficult for them to read, write, compute, or understand at the same pace as other kids. Use the strategies in this eBook to recognize learning disabilities and devise strategies to help children succeed.

>> Learn more about this eBook: <http://additu.de/signsld>

## **FREE ADDitude Downloads**

### **10 Teaching Strategies that Help Students with ADHD**

These guidelines for establishing a supportive, structured classroom will encourage learning and enforce discipline. The best part? They will benefit your neurotypical students, too.

### **The Laws That Protect Students with ADHD & LD**

A clear, thorough explanation of the federal laws that require schools to provide special-education services to students who need them.

### **Homework Help for Children with ADHD**

Homework doesn't have to be exhaustive to be effective. The strategies in this free download can shorten completion time, and reduce stress at home.

### **10 Solutions for Disorganization at School**

The key to helping kids stay organized is constant communication between teachers and parents — and this guide offers concrete strategies to help you get started.

### **Success at School for Children with ADHD/LD**

To help start the school year off right, *ADDitude* asked teachers, parents, and other professionals: What's your best advice? Find their answers in this guide.

### **40 Accommodations for Children with ADHD/LD**

You can increase the odds that your student will succeed in school by zeroing in on his problems in the classroom and including these proven accommodations in his IEP or 504 Plan.

**Find these and many more free ADHD resources online at:**

<http://additu.de/freedownloads>

## ADHD Webinar Replays from *ADDitude*:

### Teaching Students with ADHD

>> <http://additu.de/teaching>

Teaching kids is hard work; teaching kids with ADHD simply cannot be done without special tools designed to help them implement IEPs, deal with disruptive behaviors, modify homework, and work with parents. *ADDitude* asked teachers to share their top concerns, and, in this webinar, Jerome Schultz, Ph.D., seeks to address them.

### Learning Strategies for ADHD and Dyslexia

>> <http://additu.de/adhdld>

Almost half of people with ADHD also have a learning disability, and the most common among them is dyslexia. Many times dyslexia is not identified because reading challenges are commonly attributed to ADHD. Knowing the genetic, biological, and neuropsychological similarities and differences between these two conditions is essential in ensuring a proper assessment. In this webinar, Roberto Olivardia, Ph.D., discusses strategic treatment interventions and academic accommodations that can turn things around for a child with dyslexia and ADHD.

### Ready, Set, Work: Help Students Fight Procrastination and Get to Work

>> <http://additu.de/rsw>

The first step is the hardest. This is true for many children with ADHD who perpetually struggle to get started on classwork or homework. The trick for many students is feeling ready — emotionally, physically, and mentally — to begin. The problem: This essential preparation feels a lot like work for many kids, who avoid it at all costs. In this webinar, Cindy Goldrich explains how to set the stage for starting assignments.

### Comeback Kids: Building Resilience in Students with ADHD

>> <http://additu.de/resilience>

Students diagnosed with ADHD hear a disproportionate number of negative messages throughout their school days: “Don’t blurt out the answer!” “Stay seated!” “Are you even listening?” All of this correction has an understandable impact on self-esteem, which, in turn, shuts down our kids’ initiative and confidence. But every good teacher knows that real learning requires taking risks, as well as bouncing back from experiences that didn’t end up as we’d hoped. In this webinar, Anna Vagin, Ph.D., explains how to build the resilience that is essential to your student’s success at school.

## FREE ADHD Newsletters from *ADDitude*

Sign up to receive critical news and information about ADHD diagnosis and treatment, success at school, adult ADHD, and parenting strategies: <http://additu.de/newsletter>

### Adult ADHD and LD

Expert advice on managing your household, time, money, career, and relationships.

### Children with ADHD and LD

Strategies and support for parents on behavior and discipline, time management, disorganization, and making friends.

### ADHD and LD at School

How to get classroom accommodations, finish homework, work with teachers, find the right schools, and much more.

### Treating ADHD

Treatment options for attention deficit, including medications, food, supplements, brain training, mindfulness and other alternative therapies.

### For Women with ADHD

Managing ADHD on the job, running a household, dealing with challenging emotions, and much more.