



Elijah Academy Homeschool Handbook

Testing and Grading

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Homeschool Testing and Grading

Recent national initiatives for improving the American public school system are giving testing a bad name. Competition for nationalized school funding, based on test scores, has perverted the purpose of teaching. The inevitable result is “teaching to the test” rather than teaching for excellence and wisdom. This is unfortunate for all involved, and there is a lesson for us. That is, to be mindful of the unintended consequences of badly designed testing and grading systems.

An appropriate amount of evaluation and feedback is helpful. Grading an assignment is essential feedback. A person needs to know how their performance compares to the expectations of them. Improvement can be made on the next cycle. If no corrective action is needed, the student and teacher have the satisfaction of seeing the results of their effort on paper. With clear and reasonable expectations set, grading is an easy way to encourage your child, and celebrate their progress as they move forward.

Why Grade?

Grading a course of study is the same concept as grading a set of math problems. Both are feedback loops. But a report card reflects the cumulative effort of the student over a longer period of time. This wider feedback has broader application and greater importance than the grade for a single exercise. Subjects the student worked hard at - or is naturally inclined toward - will stand out. Moreover, report card time is one of those rare opportunities for the homeschool Dad to be involved, to praise a job well done, and encourage the pursuit of excellence. Opportunities of this kind are not to be missed. The completed report card marks a milestone. The process itself holds us accountable to finish the course we started.

A unique disadvantage of homeschooling is that there is no way to gauge the progress of one student against the range of performance among their peers receiving the same instruction. While the “bell curve” is not the right process for assigning grades based on mastery of the material, having a group comparison is additional validation of the system. For this reason, it is a good idea, and fairly simple, to check in yearly with standardized tests in addition to assigning course grades that reflect an objective assessment of achievement against test goals. Standardized testing is an evaluation of the entire system that was in place for the year – the motivation of the learner, quality of the instructional materials, and the effectiveness of the teaching methods. Improvement can be made on the next cycle.

A final thought is on the value of the process itself, regardless of the results. Test taking is an academic skill, and learning to adjust actions based on feedback is a life skill. In skill-based subjects, practice is what makes perfect. Testing and grading in the early years is practice for high school and beyond where course grades and standardized test results have a permanent effect on the student’s future.

The Language of Character

Academic progress is a reflection of character. Does the student balk at doing their math assignments? Their course grade will reflect that fact. Does the student enjoy learning about a subject? Their grades will reflect that also. Our report card form includes a section for translating the student’s progress into the language of character. Character traits such as diligence, honesty, and neatness are subjectively assessed against a W.I.S.E. scale that stands for “Working on it,” “Improving,” “Satisfactory,” or “Excellent.”

The goal of this exercise is to provide the parents with a tool for instructing the heart of their student. What areas does the child need praise, and in what areas improvement? Scripture references are keyed to each trait to help parents convert the evaluation into meaningful feedback – “instruction in righteousness” (2



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Timothy 3:16). Godly character, achieved through the power of the Holy Spirit, is a firm foundation for academic success. Our job is to speak truth diligently to our children.

Requiring Mastery

It should be noted that the homeschool with a mastery approach to learning will have an overall elevating effect on grades. In a classroom environment, laggards are left behind holding a grade that reflects their inability to keep lockstep pace with the group. A key advantage of homeschooling is that the pace and time allocated for each subject can be tailored to the needs of the student. Requiring a certain level of mastery before moving on is a common pre-control.

You won't always re-test until the child has a perfect score, but progress is slowed to accommodate material that is particularly difficult for a child and speeded up for material that comes easy. If a fundamental concept is missed, the student should back up and repeat the lessons. The result is that, if pursued properly, and as time allows, there should be lots of A's. This is entirely appropriate if it truly reflects mastery of the material within the span of the course.

Keeping It Simple

Assigning a course grade could be as simple as creating a midterm and final exam. Each would count at 50% toward the course grade. That would not be the best way to give your child motivation of seeing their incremental progress, but the math works. A better way is to define a method for grading a sampling of the records produced by the student throughout the course.

The process of assigning grades should not be overwhelming for the teacher. Clear course goals should naturally translate into measureable progress. If the method for assigning grades is determined by the curriculum provider, follow that method. If not, the process is as follows:

- 1) Determine what measures you will have available to evaluate the student with. These might be: projects, quizzes, tests, worksheets, exercises, oral reports, papers.
- 2) Determine what percentage each component should contribute to the final grade.
- 3) Grade the material throughout the semester. For grading work such as written paragraphs, you may need a scoring tool that helps you evaluate the content and assign a score. That is called a rubric.
- 4) Calculate final course grades! Keeping the scores in a grade book will help this final step.

Some subjects are nearly impossible to assess, especially in early grades when the student does everything that is asked of them. Good examples are the subjects of Bible and Phonics. These aren't math problems that can be counted right and wrong, and the course may not produce written records. These can simply be graded as Pass/Fail or with letter grades heavily weighted on participation.

For most subjects, grades are weighted with only a very minor portion allowed for "participation." Some curriculums and programs include criteria for weighted grading and programmed courses often do the grading for you (e.g. Teaching Textbooks grades math problems). Our high school program has a standard for calculating the semester grades for each course based on graded materials throughout the semester.

Lastly, don't fret too much. We want to provide our children the benefit of having consistent methods for feedback. But grades don't really matter until high school, and even then, colleges validate the grading scales against scores on standardized college entrance exams. If you start early, you should know the drill by then and your children will have many years of benefit from your feedback!



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Weighted Course Grades

Unless you are using a programmed course or external teacher, you will need to understand how to define and calculate a course grade. The first step in assigning a course grade is to define what content will be produced by the student in a given course, and assign appropriate grade weightings for each category. The grade weighting should always be defined before a course begins. The number and type of components will vary based on the course. Not all courses will have graded projects, for example. We will illustrate with the example case of a science course. The components in this example are: projects, quizzes, and tests. At the suggestion of the curriculum provider, weights of 25%, 30%, and 40% were assigned to these components respectively, with a 5% Participation component. Participation is a nice way to reward effort, especially in lower grades. But it should be kept at a small percentage of the weighted grade.

Next, grades are assigned throughout the duration of the course for assignments in each of the categories. Assignment grades can be calculated as a simple average. For example, a quiz with 20 problems is taken and the child gets 18 correct. That is $18 / 20 = 0.90$ or 90%. Another way to look at that is that each problem is "worth" 100/20, or five percentage points. Two wrong, means a deduction of 10%, and $100\%-10\% = 90\%$. Same answer. This is fairly simple, and we're used to this kind of grading.

Similarly, a simple average is calculated at the end of the course period for each category to be included in the weighting. In this case, there are three: projects, quizzes, and tests. These are calculated as a simple average. For example, if three tests were given with the following grades, {93,85,97} the test component average is the sum divided by the count, as follows:

$$\text{Test Average: } (97 + 82 + 85) / 3 = 88$$

Lastly, the total grade is calculated based on how much each component counts toward the course grade. This methodology is determined in the initial definition of the course. Applying the weighting factors as determined by the course provider, and the calculation of the final grade is as follows:

Table 1: Example Course Grade Calculation

COMPONENT ¹	GRADED SET	SET AVERAGE ²	WEIGHTING FACTOR ³	WEIGHT ⁴
PARTICIPATION	Subjective	95.0	5%	$95.0 * 0.05 = \mathbf{4.75}$
PROJECTS	{94,95,93,100,95,90,98,92,95,95,97,92,85,100,85,99,97,96}	94.3	25%	$94.3 * 0.25 = \mathbf{23.6}$
QUIZZES	{100,95,93,85,95,90,92,88,82,95,97,92,95,85,99,97,86,100}	92.5	30%	$92.5 * 0.30 = \mathbf{27.8}$
TESTS	{97,82,85}	88.0	40%	$88 * 0.40 = \mathbf{35.2}$

COURSE GRADE⁵:

$$4.75 + 23.6 + 27.8 + 35.2 = \mathbf{91.4}$$

NOTES:

1 – The number and type of COMPONENT will vary based on the course being graded

2 – The SET AVERAGE = (Sum of GRADED SET) / (Count of GRADED SET) for each component

3 – WEIGHTING FACTOR is determined by the course definition, it must add up to 100%

4 – WEIGHT is calculated as shown SET AVERAGE * WEIGHTING FACTOR for each component.

5 – COURSE GRADE for the period being graded is the sum of the WEIGHT of each factor, as shown.



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Simple Rubric Example

There's one more thing to know here. Above, we walked through the simple averages for determining tests and quiz components for a weighted grade, but how were the projects graded? Assigning a grade for a project or other exercises such as written papers needs to be done with a scoring tool. This is called a rubric. An example of a simple rubric that could work for this scenario is provided below:

Table 2: Example Rubric for objectively assigning grades on subjective material. This rubric has four categories graded on a scale of 1 to 4.

CATEGORY	Exemplary – 4	Accomplished – 3	Developing – 2	Beginning – 1	STUDENT SCORE	TOTAL POSSIBLE
Research	Answers most questions, includes interesting facts.	Answers some questions and includes a few other interesting facts	Answers Some Questions.	Does not answer the question.	4	4
Organization	Good Organization, logical order, and conclusion.	Organized, somewhat jumpy, sense of beginning and end	Somewhat organized, points jump around, and ending unclear	Poorly organized, not logical progression, conclusions vague.	3	4
Quality of Information	Very Relevant. Details directly support the subject.	Relevant. Some Details are non-supporting.	Somewhat Relevant. Details are somewhat Sketchy	Remotely Relevant. No supporting details.	4	4
Conclusion	Logical explanations, addresses most questions.	Logical explanations, leaves some questions.	Illogical explanation, but addresses some questions	Illogical explanation doesn't address questions.	4	4
TOTALS:					15	16

GRADE (earned divided by possible): 15 / 16 possible = 94%

The total score is simply the percentage calculated by the earned score divided by the total possible score. This example illustrates how the first 94% "Project" grade could have been determined in the graded components shown in Table 1. A rubric with relevant categories and clear definitions for each scale factor is very helpful to the homeschool teacher. It gives provides a written standard so grades can be assigned with some objectivity against the assignment expectations. As with the grading scale, rubrics should be settled on before grading begins.

In creating rubrics, you don't have to reinvent the wheel entirely. Some curriculums come with grading rubrics built in. Many standard rubrics can be found online that fit your topic as well. The more categories and scale factors included in the rubric, the more fine-tuned the grading can be. For written assignments, the "6+1 rubric" developed by Education Northwest in the 1980's is a good model for evaluating the essential traits of



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effective writing, and many examples and helps can be found online.¹ This rubric has six traits: Ideas & Content, Organization, Voice, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency, and Conventions/Presentation. Scoring scales typically range from four to six factors between “Excellent” to “Beginning”. A common six-factor scale is: Beginning, Emerging, Developing, Proficient, Strong, and Exemplary. Good rubrics can be found for any subject of learning.²

Standardized Achievement Testing

When you go to the doctor, you want to know how healthy you are compared to what is normal or average. It isn't helpful at all to have results reported against a subjective scale. So it is with academic health as well. Standardized testing is very important for homeschooled students and parents. One of the unique disadvantages of homeschooling is that there is no feedback on progress relative to other students. Grades are assigned based on mastery of the material presented in your curriculum. Achievement tests are one way to gauge your child's progress in various subjects against their peer group, and evaluate the entire system you have put in place.

An essential question for the home school is whether the curriculum is challenging enough. A child develops so quickly that it is easy for a parent to convince themselves that their child is excelling. Even below average progress seems amazing to a parent! But all children are developing, and how they measure up to the norm is a gauge of progress against their potential, in theory. Homeschool presents a unique opportunity for students to excel academically at their own pace and to their full potential without the limitations or "stop signs" on progress that their classroom-bound peers have. At the very least, with classroom organizational matters out of the way, the home school should be more efficient at teaching than an industrial school, and many homeschool advocates claim academic superiority. Achievement tests can be a valuable exercise for both parents and students by gauging whether the home school is fulfilling the anecdotal expectations of academic quality. Modifications can be made in subsequent years to assure ultimate success.

There are three major achievement tests that are nationally norm-referenced and cover the spectrum of subjects. These are: (1) Stanford Achievement Test, (2) Iowa Achievement Tests, and (3) California Achievement Test (CAT6/Terra-Nova2). CAT and Terra Nova also have “core battery” tests which only cover math and language skills rather than the “full battery” of all subjects. Each of these tests has a window of opportunity for students across the country to get into a standardized testing group. The testing group is not the same as the norming group. The norming group, the sample group of students against which scores are reported, is usually from a prior year listed in the test information. The testing window is typically March-April in the spring, and the month of October in the fall.

There are various testing services that work for homeschoolers. Abeka Testing, BJU Press Testing & Evaluation, and Seton Testing Services are three well known ones. Testing currently runs about \$40 per student (\$30 for Core Battery tests). You can sign up for any of the tests above through these providers. Each test will have different proctoring requirements that come from the test developers, including

<http://www.setontesting.com/>

<http://www.abekatesting.org/>

¹ More information on the 6+1 trait writing and rubric is available on Education Northwest: <http://educationnorthwest.org/traits>

² Two free sites with good rubrics are: www.rubrics4teachers.com and <http://rubistar.4teachers.org/>.



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<https://www.bjupress.com/testing/>

The test materials are closely guarded, and once you sign up, the instructions and/or materials will release very close to the testing date you sign up for. Now it's time for proctoring. The proctoring takes a good portion of an entire week (full battery), and is typically grade-specific. Some core battery tests can be given in 2.5 hours. Proctoring rules are different for the different tests. For example, taking the CAT tests through Seton, there is no requirement that the proctor have a bachelor's degree. The Core Battery CAT test can be given to students in grades 4-12 simultaneously by a single proctor in 2.5 hours. However, the Full Battery CAT tests can only be proctored together for certain adjacent grades. The Stanford Achievement Test can be taken through online proctoring by students in 3rd - 12th grades through Abeka, but students below that level will need an in-person proctor per grade level. Online proctoring requires a dedicated phone line for each student who must remain on the line for the testing duration.

Current public school students in Texas are required to take a state-specific STAAR exam (State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness). Texas has a long history of State-specific testing. The STAAR test replaces the former TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) test which was created to comply with the *No Child Left Behind* act in 2003, testing knowledge from the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) standard. TAKS came on the heels of TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills) from 1990-2002 and TEAMS (Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills) prior to 1990.

The STAAR exam is not required for private or home schools in Texas. In fact, we do not believe it is even available to homeschoolers. The TAKS test is still available from Pearson Testing. If you wish to have a Texas-specific comparison, please verify your options by contacting TEA: <http://tea.texas.gov/contacttea.aspx>. Because Texas schools are below the national average in language and mathematics (based on 2014 SAT scores), the nationally normed tests should give an equivalent or better comparison of your student against their peer group in the tested subjects.