



# PAPER 1 – HOMEWORK

The following two passages focus on homework.

In the first passage Richard Morrison, writing in *The Times* newspaper, questions the value of homework, after a leading school announced it was going to reduce the amount of homework its pupils had to do.

## Passage 1

Some poems strike a chord. Others ring a bell. But Philip Larkin's 'Toads' bongs like Big Ben inside my head. In the poem he says work is a like a toad and asks 'Why should I let the toad work squat on my life?'

5 The toad work has certainly squatted on my life. It has controlled, constrained and coloured (or discoloured) it. There aren't many waking hours when I'm not thinking about it. And of the 12,000-odd days that I've notched up as a theoretically free-willed adult, far too few have passed without me bowing to it. Unlike Larkin, however, I don't think that it is fear – of losing my pension, upsetting the boss, or whatever – that keeps me in this work-addicted state. It's guilt. And I know exactly where and when that guilt originated. At  
10 school, 40 years ago.

The school was, and is, a fine institution. But as with most aspirational schools, competing fiercely for status and places at 'top' universities, it tended to instil a feeling that nothing could be achieved in life without hard slog – hours and hours of it, after school, every evening. At 14 I was doing two hours of homework a night; by 17 it was more like five.  
15 Consequently my exam results were sparkling. But my social life was the opposite. Even at parties, the memory of quadratic equations still to be solved and irregular French verbs left unconjugated hung over me like a cloud. As for any interest in the world outside, how could I develop that? There weren't enough hours in the day.

20 What's worse, the nagging sense of guilt if I wasn't working persisted through university and into my adult life. It lingers even now, this feeling that time not spent doing the job is time wasted.

Homework has a lot to answer for. It doesn't mess up every child. But the mental oppression of leaving school for the day, and then facing hours of slog, alienates many. And there's another sizeable minority in whom it triggers a cosmic conscientiousness, out of all  
25 proportion to the task at hand, that will blight the rest of their lives, impinging not just on social activities but on their responsibilities as parents too. This is tragic, because those are the very people whose work ethic and intellectual capability could be so vital for society, if properly balanced by a healthy attitude to recreation and family life.





30 In the 40 years since I last wore a blazer, the culture of excessive homework, especially in  
'high-flying' schools, has become far worse. There is one obvious reason for that. Education  
is now controlled by a generation of politicians who, on the whole, have no cultural  
hinterlands themselves – no interests outside politics. So they find it almost impossible  
to understand the value of giving children the time and opportunities to discover the  
infinite richness and possibilities of life. The narrowing of the educational curriculum in  
35 this country over the past 30 years – pushing art, music, sport and drama to the margins  
or beyond – has been shocking.

At the same time the fetish with league tables has forced teachers to turn schools into  
fact-cramming, rote-learning factories in which narrowly focused lessons are reinforced  
by stacks of homework. Our education system is now as blinkered, as grindingly utilitarian,  
40 as in the era mocked by Dickens in *Hard Times*. Is it any wonder that so many school-leavers  
have no pastimes except shopping, watching telly and binge-drinking?

So the news that a leading state school has announced a huge reduction in its homework  
requirements, releasing five or more hours each week for a broader exploration of the world,  
brought joy to my heart. Especially as the initiative seems to be part of a wider move among  
free-thinking schools to recognise – or rather, to recognise again, after decades of denial –  
45 the importance of non-curricular activities in the nurturing of a rounded individual.

The question is whether this trend can be turned into a sea-change. Don't underestimate  
the difficulties of doing that. Thousands of playing fields have been sold. There are far  
fewer after-school groups, such as Scouts or youth clubs, around. Lots of parents are only  
too grateful if their kids get sacks of homework, because then they don't feel any obligation  
50 to devise activities themselves to stimulate their offspring's minds. And teachers have  
become so conditioned to following a narrow curriculum to the letter that many would  
feel terrified if asked to run 'enrichment activities'.

But change the system we must. Piling mountains of homework on children is the surest  
55 way to turn education into drudgery. And once that happens, curiosity dies and a soulless,  
sullen, mechanistic compliance takes over. The lucky ones escape the system as soon as  
they can and start exploring the world properly. The unlucky ones never escape. Larkin's  
toad has got them in his clutches for life.

I know. I'm still there.

In the second passage, Eleanor Mills, writing in *The Sunday Times* newspaper in October 2012,  
comments on an announcement by the President of France that he planned to abolish homework  
in France.

## Passage 2

It is every working parent's nightmare. You stagger through the door, knackered, longing  
for a drink – or just a chance to stare at the wall for a few minutes – and instead find  
yourself supervising what seems an unremitting flow of homework. While I loathe it, I  
also believe the whole rigmarole is essential. Last week the President of France announced  
5 that he wanted to abolish homework, his argument being that homework increases social  
inequality because wealthier children are more likely than their poorer peers to have  
parents who will help them do it. In this, as in so much else, he is wrong.



10 I am in favour of homework because I believe it consolidates in a child's mind what they have been taught at school and, more importantly, reinforces that holy grail of character development: delayed gratification.

15 The value of homework is in the transaction around it, the age-old bargain of: do your homework and then you can watch television/go out and kick a football/play on the computer. My grandmother had a maxim that was drummed into me: business before pleasure. Accepting deferred gratification is one of the life skills parents must teach their children, and homework plays a key role in nurturing the ability to delay instant pleasure in return for a bigger long-term reward. Setting up a culture in the home that effort will be rewarded has huge long-term benefits. If you make your offspring do their homework and then reward them, you are setting them up with a valuable blueprint for life.

20 Homework, of course, is not just about developing character; it also works on an academic level – homework, particularly in secondary schools, has been shown by numerous research projects to improve educational attainment, particularly when it is done with a motivated and engaged adult. That is not shorthand for 'middle class': many immigrant groups who do well educationally (Chinese, Indians and Nigerians in particular) have below-average incomes but motivated and engaged parents who set great store by learning. When such  
25 a parent helps a child with their homework, they transmit those values. For children from chaotic families, school homework clubs can serve a similar role: pupils stay behind after school to complete their homework with help from teachers. This helps them overcome the lack of support at home.

30 Being pro-homework is not a popular stance, however. The President's plans have been greeted with gleeful joy by all manner of pontificators, some of whom have been waging an anti-homework crusade for years, and in the past few days the media have been awash with lazy parents falling over themselves to agree with the French President.

35 Of course, I don't endorse the phenomenon of hyper-parenting or the kind of tiger mothering on display in a recent television documentary that showed pre-school children being forced to do hours of homework every night, their heads drooping on to their books with exhaustion. Such relentless drilling of little ones risks putting them off learning for life.

40 From the age of seven or so, however, when children have to start learning their tables and mastering spelling, half an hour of homework to reinforce that day's lesson or practising for a test, or reading aloud, has to be beneficial.

45 Many parents complain that homework has become a battleground, souring the precious time in the evenings they have as a family. But being a parent isn't about being your child's best mate; it's about making sure they have the tools to succeed in life. Learning to buckle down and get on with it, even if it's the last thing you feel like, is the cornerstone of success.