

All About Homework

This handout describes some general thoughts and techniques for doing homework, as well as what is required, how to submit it, how late homework is handled, and other administrative matters.

Turning In Homework

All homework is due at 11:55PM on the due date, unless noted otherwise on the assignment. These will be graded and comments returned to you as quickly as possible; we'll try for three class periods, but can't guarantee it.

For written homework, you must turn in an ASCII, a PostScript, or a PDF version of your answers (you can use any text processor you like to generate these). Please do not submit Microsoft Word files; since the readers may grade these on UNIX-based and Linux systems, they will not be able to read those files. If you submit PostScript, please be sure the file will print on our department printers (use *ghostscript*(1) or *gs*(1) to check this; if it displays the file properly, the file should print correctly). If your file is a PostScript file, please choose a name that ends in ".ps". If it is an ASCII file, please choose a name that ends in ".txt". If your file is a PDF file, please choose a name that ends in ".pdf".

Please turn in your work electronically through Smartsite. Do not use the *handin* program! If you need to turn in something on paper (for example, a diagram that you can't draw using your text processing program), please hand it to the professor or TA before the assignment is due, and put a note in what you submit electronically that you have done this. (That way, the grader will know to look for something written, rather than mark you off for that problem.)

Doing Written Exercises

When you are asked to analyze something, or explain something, please be complete, and show your work (including any commands you give, and their output, to show how you did the problem). Otherwise, even if you get the right answer, you will get **ZERO** (that's *0*, *zip*, *nada*, *rien*, *nothing*) points. Think your answer through and do a rough draft. Students (and professionals, actually) often overlook this, but it is vital. Write clearly and cogently. If the question asks for an opinion, state your opinion clearly, justify it, and don't ramble. Answers that start, "My opinion is yes ..." and conclude with "... on the other hand it could equally well be no" won't get much credit.

Asking for Help

We do not mind being asked for help; indeed, we welcome it because it helps us know what students are finding difficult or confusing, and sometimes a few words about the problem in class will clarify the assignment immensely. Your questions may also point out ambiguities that we didn't think of, so the more questions you ask, the better for everyone!

We do mind being asked for help before you have tried to think the problem through. The classic objectionable question (this really happened) occurred on a homework assignment in which the class was given a buggy program. The assignment said the program did not work, and the homework was to debug it and make it work. That particular class period discussed how to deal with bugs, and gave tips and techniques on how to debug programs. Within 10 minutes of the end of the class during which the assignment was given out, the instructor got this request for help: "The program doesn't run. What do I do now?"

So, before asking for help, please be sure that you have:

- spent a significant amount of time thinking about how to solve the problem;
- read all relevant handouts, announcements, and Wiki entries (because your question may be answered there); and
- tried everything you could think of to solve the problem.

When you come to us, or send us a note, asking for help, please show us whatever you have done to solve the problem, because the first question we will ask you is "What have you tried?" This isn't because we think you're wasting our time. It's because understanding how you have tried to solve the problem will help us figure out exactly what your difficulty is and what we can do to help you. Remember, we will do everything we can to avoid solving the problem for you. When we give you help, our goal is to help you solve the problem yourself.

Don't Delay!

We must emphasize the importance of taking time to think through, outline, and draft your answer, thoroughly. More points are lost through unclear organization, or superficial answers, than anything else. So do think both your answer and your expression of the answer through, and—as always—try to find the simplest way to solve the problem (within the limits given in the assignment, of course)!

Do not leave assignments for the last minute. The assignments are non-trivial and will require significant time before you write your answers for submission. When we decide on the due dates, we assume you will spend significant amounts of time solving (at least some) of the problems. If you choose not to do this, you will have difficulty finishing the assignments on time.

Late Homework

You can turn in your homework up to one class period late (unless the assignment says otherwise). If you turn it in late, we will grade it normally, and then deduct 20% as a late penalty. Requests for exceptions will be handled on a case-by-case basis; please do feel free to ask!

Grade Appeals

If you feel that there is an error in grading, please come see the professor or the TA and we'll look over it (and possibly talk with you about it). However, don't dally; any such request must be made within one week of when the grades were made available. After that, we won't change your grade.