
12-2022

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Recommended Citation

Hansen-Brown, Ashley A. (2022). What's in a Name? The Effect of Calling an Assignment "Homework" vs. "Reading Notes". *Bridgewater Review*, 40(2), 36-38.
Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol40/iss2/12

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What's in a Name? The Effect of Calling an Assignment "Homework" vs. "Reading Notes"

Ashley A. Hansen-Brown

Introduction

Does it matter what you call your course assignments? I've often wondered this. I've always felt a bit of pressure when deciding what to name a new assignment – “*Should I call this a reflection paper or an application paper?*” – especially because I suspect that what I call it might lead students to take it more or less seriously. However, I've never known for sure whether these choices really matter.

As faculty members, we do influence our students' perceptions of our courses based on at least some of the choices we make during course prep. For example, one study showed that students who read syllabi written in a warm and inviting tone (vs. a cold and unfriendly tone) reported being more likely to reach out to the professor for help with class assignments or when asking about campus resources, even though both the warm and cold syllabi included a statement with information on how to reach out for help (R. A. R. Gurung & N. R. Galardi 2021). However, as far as I can tell, there is no research that explicitly tests whether it matters what you name a specific assignment.

I was particularly interested in knowing if it matters whether or not you call an assignment “homework.” There is some research out there about students' perceptions of homework assignments. For example, a previous study found that students perceive web-based vs. paper homework assignments pretty similarly and feel positive about web-based work (N. Demirci 2007). Another group of researchers found that students perform better on homework assignments when



Photo: Tim Llewellyn.

homework is included in the course grade compared to when it is not (D. Koban et al. 2019). However, as far as I can tell, no research has yet focused on students' perceptions based on what instructors call the assignment.

It seemed to me that perhaps students might take a regular weekly assignment more seriously if it's called “homework” vs. another name. I thought they might also view it as more boring given their very long history with completing homework assignments from elementary school through college. I decided to put this research question to the test.

The Study

I collected data from BSU students taking PSYC 100 or other psychology classes during the fall 2021 semester. Students in these classes receive course credit for participating in research studies, gaining experience with what it means to be a research participant and learning more about the vital role of research in the discipline of psychology.

A total of 269 students participated in the survey. Students ranged in age from 18–39, with the average age around 19, and were mostly female (164, 61%) with 91 males (34%), 2 identifying as non-binary (1%), 1 identifying as a transgender man (<1%), and 11 not responding (4%). Most students identified as White/Caucasian (176, 65%), with 32 identifying as African American/Black (12%), 15 identifying as Hispanic/Latino (6%), 10 identifying as Asian/Asian American (4%), 2 identifying as Middle Eastern (1%), 1 identifying as Azorean (1%), 22 identifying as multi-racial (8%), and 11 not responding (4%).

Students were told they would be asked about their opinions on a type of assignment they might have in class. The assignment was described as involving “reading a chapter of the textbook and writing answers to a series of questions about the textbook chapter” and being “graded on completion, meaning that if you do the work, you will get the points for the assignment.” However, students were randomly assigned to see the assignment named either “Homework Assignments” or “Reading Notes Assignments”; thus, although all students read the same assignment description, half saw it being called homework and half saw it being called reading notes. (I had been considering renaming the homework assignments in my research methods class, which match the description given above, to “reading notes,” which is what inspired this particular description and set of names.)

Next, I measured a series of beliefs that I thought might differ based on what the assignment was called. Students were asked to complete a series of ratings on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*) about how challenging, helpful, time-consuming, meaningful, boring, worthwhile, useless, interesting, irrelevant, and easy they thought completing this assignment every week would be. On separate scales from 1-5, they indicated how seriously they would take the assignment, how helpful they thought the assignment would be for their learning in the class, how likely they would be to copy answers word-for-word from the textbook, how likely they would be to consult their responses on the assignment when studying for exams, and how confident they were that they would succeed in the class.

Lastly, students completed a manipulation check to see if they remembered the title of the assignment they had seen earlier. They completed demographic items and read a debriefing statement in which I explained the purpose of the study and what my research question was.

The Results

I first checked how many participants correctly remembered the title of the assignment they had read about. A total of 101 participants failed the manipulation check (i.e., they misremembered the name of the assignment) and 157



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passed the manipulation check (i.e., they remembered correctly). Following best practices in my field, I excluded the data of the 101 participants who failed the manipulation check before running my statistical analyses. This helped to ensure that any students who didn't read the description carefully weren't included, as their data would not accurately reflect the impact of the assignment name if they hadn't actually read what the assignment name was. That left me with 157 viable responses to analyze.

I ran a series of independent-samples *t*-tests checking whether condition ("homework" vs. "reading notes") affected students' perceptions of the assignment. Surprisingly, there were no significant differences for any of the variables. In other words, students thought the described assignment was equally challenging, helpful, meaningful, boring, worthwhile, useless, interesting, irrelevant, and easy (all $ps > .12$), regardless of the name of the assignment. They were also equally likely to say they would take the assignment seriously, to think the assignment would help their learning, to say they would copy answers verbatim from the textbook, to say they would use the assignment to help them study for exams in the class, and to believe they would succeed in the class (all $ps > .13$).

Only one analysis was even close to significant: there was a trend toward students believing the reading notes assignment would be somewhat more time-consuming ($M = 3.26$, $SD = .90$) than the homework assignment ($M = 2.99$, $SD = .99$), $t(155) = 1.82$, $p = .07$, 95% CI $[-.02, .58]$, $d = .29$. Perhaps this indicates that students tend to view "homework" as a requirement to skim the textbook to find the correct answers, whereas "reading notes" sounds more comprehensive and thus more time-consuming. However, since this analysis did not reach the significance cutoff of $p < .05$, this should be interpreted with caution and only as a possible trend; more research is needed to follow up this finding.

Implications

All in all, the results of this study suggest that it doesn't matter whether you name an assignment "homework" or "reading notes" in terms of how students perceive it. I was genuinely surprised that there were no significant differences in any of the variables I measured, but also reassured. Although it's fun to hear students calling an assignment by whatever arbitrary or well-thought-out name you give it, perhaps it doesn't actually affect how seriously they take it or how difficult they think it will be.



Photo: Kindra Clineff.

Another group of researchers found that students perform better on homework assignments when homework is included in the course grade compared to when it is not.

Of course, as with any research study, the results of this study provide a lot of ideas for future research. For example, this study only looked at a low-stakes homework assignment. What happens when you rename a high-stakes exam? If you call it a “quiz” instead, or a “celebration of learning” as someone I knew in graduate school did, does that perhaps lower students’ anxiety, or even lead them to study less? What about daily points that students receive from coming to class – if you call those “participation,” do students plan to speak up in class more than if you call those points “attendance?” Or what if we repeated the study almost identically to its original setup, but instead of saying the assignment was graded on completion it said it was graded on accuracy –

do students’ perceptions change then based on what you call the assignment?

The study also has limitations, of course. For example, all the participants in the study were BSU students taking psychology courses (mostly intro psych), so the results may not generalize to students at other types of colleges (e.g., community colleges, private colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities [HBCUs]) or taking other types of courses (e.g., chemistry courses, English courses, music courses). I also did not have enough respondents to dig into questions of intersectionality – for example, do first-generation college students respond differently than continuing-generation students? Do gender, age, or race/ethnicity impact how students perceive what an assignment is called? Thus,

much future research can continue testing these questions and improving the generalizability of these findings.

Overall, the results of this study left me feeling at least somewhat reassured, and hopefully it reassures you as well, reader. At least with a low-stakes weekly assignment, you can probably call it whatever you want and it won’t affect how students perceive it. Although we as faculty do have a great deal of power over how we design our courses and what the students can gain from them, it looks like at least some of our decisions are pretty inconsequential in the greater scheme of things. Perhaps this is a great opportunity to try renaming your assignments, and maybe you can collect some informal data from your students to see what they think of the new name. If you do, let me know what you find!



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