



## One Size Does Not Fit All For EF Challenges

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All of us use executive function (EF) skills every day in our lives. Students use them the most when they are learning in school and doing academics. For many students with EF challenges, however, the typical ways that we plan, prioritize, organize, remember things, self-monitor, and engage in mental flexibility do not work for them.



In treating students with EF differences over the years, I have discovered that one size does not fit all. For instance, when working on a skill such as planning, one student may feel overwhelmed when using an online calendar because visuo-spatially it is too much for them and there are too many steps in using it. While another student may love it because of the different features it has to offer (e.g., color coding, reminders, syncing across devices, etc.). And then there are students that do not know "how" to use a planner system effectively so they don't use them at all.

### How Do We Help These Students?

One thing I do is to ask guided questions. I do this in a curious way and not in a judgmental tone. This is very important because students with EF challenges know that they have struggles and that they "mess up" sometimes (and in some cases, a lot). When people ask them questions about why they "messed up," they naturally go to their self-defense mechanisms. They either tune out, just go through the motions, or shut down completely. This does not help the student to learn about him or herself. The goal of guided questions is to help the student (and me, the clinician) to understand why something happened (I give them options to choose from), what they can do about it (we work together to problem-solve and think of strategies), and how to help him or herself in the future. I do not expect a student to have all of the answers at the beginning because they struggle with "cause and effect" thinking and developing effective strategies. The end goal is that over time, the student will be able to ask themselves these questions independently and know their answers.

The goal of guided questions is for the student to begin to learn:

How to identify the "why" or "cause" (e.g., why they have missing assignments) behind things

- How they can problem-solve a situation
- What strategies they can use
- What they can do differently next time around

## Guided Questions for Missing Assignments

For example, if a student were struggling with missing assignments, **I would first ask them if they know they have missing assignments?** I want to check in on their self-awareness, because some students do not track things well and often they don't know that they are missing things. On the flip side, there are students who know they have chronic missing assignments but don't necessarily know what to do about it, so they begin to avoid them. This taps into more than EF difficulties and includes self-defense mechanisms (e.g., denial, rationalization, projection, and so on). This takes longer to work on with students and requires guided and targeted reflection (with a clinician) to help shift that pattern of thinking and doing.

Next, **I would ask them if they know which assignments they are missing?** This is checking on how many details they know about their assignments or if they are unclear about them. If their school has an online program for assignments, then we would search for the missing assignments together in the system and I would model for them how to find and analyze the information.

Then **I would ask them if they remember doing the missing assignment or not?** If they do remember doing it, we would try to find it in their binder or online assignment folders. At the same time, **I would ask them why they didn't turn it in?** Immediately I would follow up with possible answers for them to choose from. Did they forget to turn it in? Did they think they turned it in but didn't double check? Did they forget to put it in their binder or submit it online? I provide options of the "why" for students because they tend to have a hard time pinpointing why something happened (or the cause). I also want them to practice using their frontal lobes and guide them through thinking about the causes and effects (or consequences).

If we can't find the assignment, then we figure out how to problem-solve the situation. **I walk them through more questions, such as what can you do about the missing assignment?** Again, provide options and let them choose. When do you think you can get it done? How will you remind yourself to get it done, what strategy can you use? Can you use a post-it note, put it in your google calendar, put it in your planner, or put it on your to-do list in google keep to remember? Is the time frame realistic with everything you have going on right now?

I go through this process of guided questioning many times and over many sessions with a student. Each time, we both learn a new piece of information from the questions, which then helps guide us in problem-solving the situation and in developing strategies that work for her or him. The amount of time it takes for a student to internalize this process and ask themselves guided questions with no prompting depends on different factors including the age of the student, how severe their EF difficulties are, how

long a student has been struggling with a specific area, how cognitively flexible they are, and whether they have multiple diagnoses impacting them.

### Five Ws and One H

One way you can help your child to develop these self-questioning skills is to ask them the Five Ws and One H. These are Who, What, Where, Why, When, and How. It is a powerful framework for information gathering that is typically used for reading comprehension. My colleague, **Dr. Raymond Jones**, who teaches the EF Bootcamp at Morrissey-Compton, instructs students in how to use the Five Ws and One H for calendaring, planning, prioritizing, project planning, studying for tests, and more. This fall, practice asking your children guided questions in a curious manner and reflecting with them on their answers!