

# Math Computation: Increase Accuracy by Intermixing Easy and Challenging Computation Problems

Teachers can improve accuracy and positively influence the attitude of students when completing math-fact worksheets by intermixing 'easy' problems among the 'challenging' problems. Research shows that students are more motivated to complete computation worksheets when they contain some very easy problems interspersed among the more challenging items.

**Grades: K-12**

## Materials

- Math computation worksheets & answer keys with a mixture of difficult and easy problems

## Steps to Implementing This Intervention

1. The teacher first identifies one or more 'challenging' problem-types that are matched to the student's current math-computation abilities (e.g., multiplying a 2-digit number by a 2-digit number with regrouping).
  2. The teacher next identifies an 'easy' problem-type that the students can complete very quickly (e.g., adding or subtracting two 1-digit numbers).
  3. The teacher then creates a series of student math computation worksheets with 'easy' computation problems interspersed at a fixed rate among the 'challenging' problems. (NOTE: Instructions are included below for creating interspersal worksheets using a free online application from [www.interventioncentral.org](http://www.interventioncentral.org) [2].)
- If the student is expected to complete the worksheet independently as seat work or homework, 'challenging' and 'easy' problems should be interspersed at a 1:1 ratio (that is, every 'challenging' problem in the worksheet is followed by an 'easy' problem).
  - If the student is to have the problems read aloud and then asked to solve the problems mentally and write down only the answer, the items should appear on the worksheet at a ratio of 3:1 (that is, every third 'challenging' problem is followed by an 'easy' one).

## Directions for On-Line Creation of Worksheets with a Mix of Easy and Challenging Computation Problems ('Interspersal Worksheets')

By following the directions below, teachers can use a free on-line Math Worksheet Generator to create computation worksheets with easy problems interspersed among more challenging ones:

- The teacher goes to the following URL for the [Math Worksheet Generator](http://www.interventioncentral.org/tools/math-worksheet-generator) [3]: <http://www.interventioncentral.org/tools/math-worksheet-generator> [3]
- Displayed on that Math Worksheet Generator web page is a series of math computation goals for addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. Teachers can select up to five different problem types to appear on a student worksheet. Each problem type is selected by clicking on the checkbox next to it.
- The tutor then repeats the sequence--taking yet another problem from the 'known facts' deck to add to the expanding collection of math facts being reviewed ('review deck'). Each time, the tutor prompts the student to read off and answer the whole series of math facts in the review deck, beginning with the unknown fact and then moving through the growing series of known facts that follow it.
- It is simple to create a worksheet with a 1:1 ratio of challenging and easy problems (that is, with an easy problem following every challenging problem). First, the teacher clicks the checkbox next to an 'easy' problem type that the student can compute very quickly (e.g., adding or subtracting two 1-digit numbers). Next the teacher selects a 'challenging' problem type that is instructionally appropriate for the student (e.g., multiplying a 2-digit number by a 2-digit number with regrouping). Then the teacher clicks the 'Multiple Skill Computation Probe' button. The computer program will then automatically create a student computation worksheet and teacher answer key with alternating easy and challenging problems.
- It is also convenient to create a worksheet with a higher (e.g., 2:1, 3:1, or 4:1) ratio of challenging problems to easy problems. The teacher first clicks the checkbox next to an 'easy' problem type that the student can compute very quickly (e.g., adding or subtracting two 1-digit numbers). The teacher then selects up to four different challenging problem types that are instructionally appropriate to the student. Depending on the number of challenging problem types selected, when the teacher clicks the 'Multiple Skill Computation Probe' button, the computer program will create a student computation worksheet and teacher answer key that contain 2 (or 3 or 4) challenging problems for every easy problem.

Because the computer program generates new worksheets each time it is used, the teacher can enter the desired settings and -in one sitting-- create and print off enough worksheets and answer keys to support a six- or eight-week intervention.

## References

- Hawkins, J., Skinner, C. H., & Oliver, R. (2005). The effects of task demands and additive interspersal ratios on fifth-grade students' mathematics accuracy. *School Psychology Review*, 34, 543-555.