
Get Wise to Word Problems



by Kate Smith

Is your middle schooler stumped by word problems in math class? Here's an at-home activity that will help your child take a step back and see the big picture.

One type of assignment asks students to distinguish relevant from irrelevant information, or, in essence, figure out which parts of the problem they need in order to solve it, and which parts they don't. Here's where you can use a term most kids are familiar with: TMI (too much information). Explain to your child that she's looking for the TMI in the problem. For example:

“Terri and Sara are selling Girl Scout cookies this weekend. Each box of cookies costs \$3.00. Terri sells 12 boxes on Saturday and 20 boxes on Sunday. Terri sold 50 boxes last year. Sara sells 9 boxes on Saturday and 21 boxes on Sunday. How much money total did the girls make this weekend?”

Help your child break down the problem and identify what she's looking for. Have her circle or highlight sentences that contain information she needs. She needs to find out what the girls made this weekend, so she has to know what each girl sold on Saturday and Sunday. After she goes through and highlights all the sentences, the one left over should be “Terri sold 50 boxes last year.” TMI!

Another type of assignment will ask students to identify missing information: what do they still need to know in order to solve the problem? In this case, tell her to think about how annoying it is when a friend only gives her part of the story. Take a look at the previous example, only this time, take out a key details. For instance:

“Terri and Sara are selling Girl Scout cookies this weekend. Terri sells 12 boxes on Saturday and 20 boxes on Sunday. Terri sold 50 boxes last year. Sara sells 9 boxes on Saturday and 21 boxes on Sunday. How much money total did the girls make this weekend?”

Have your child identify what important detail is missing. She should come to the realization that she can't say how much money they made, because she doesn't know how much the cookies cost!

Extension Activity:

Although word problems can be confusing, they're actually much more relatable to the real world than linear equations. That means that whenever you're at the supermarket, watching a ballgame, cooking dinner, or making change, there's a word problem waiting to happen! Make it a habit to quiz your child using real world word problems. Not only will it give her practice, it will also help to connect classroom math with real life.

Kate Smith has been a teacher since 1997. She has taught in New York and California, with experience in all subjects and grades from 1 to 12, but the heart of her expertise lies in middle school, primarily English and Journalism. She has a B.A. in English and a Master of Science in Teaching from Fordham University.

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