

What's this noise about homework?

By Mary Lou Aguirre / The Fresno Bee

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Mrs. Marilyn Metcalf was my high school English composition teacher. She made a lasting impression with her chic outfits and dramatic classroom readings of "Lord of the Flies."

It turns out she also had psychic powers. She once wrote on my term paper: "I could almost hear the whooshing sound of the typewriter as you pulled this paper out." She could tell I had written it at the last minute.

In addition to procrastinating, I would watch TV in the living room when I did my homework.

Today, our daughter does the same thing. But, instead of watching "Maude," she's watching "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation."

It's a homework habit that drives my husband nuts.

"Didn't you watch TV or have the radio on when you were a teenager?" I ask.

"No. I did it quietly in my room," he says in a smug tone.

"Well, she's a good student. It works for her," I say.

Stella Moosios of Madera says her sons, Christopher and Jeffrey, didn't study in silence, either.

"Both boys studied with the TV and the music going on," Moosios says. "I think they had stock in PG&E."

A new book, "Umm ... Studying? What's That?" (AimHiEducational, \$15) by Susan Gingras Fitzell and Shivahn Marie Fitzell, a mother-daughter team, covers memorization techniques, writing strategies and reading comprehension tips.

Shivahn, now 20, graduated in 2005 from Manchester Memorial High School in Manchester, N.H.

Today, she's a mechanical engineering major at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts. She preferred a calm atmosphere when doing homework.

"I had to go someplace very quiet or have classical music playing," she said in a recent phone interview. "It had to be music that didn't have words, or else I would start singing along."

Breaks between subjects were important, she says.

"I would have a break for 10 or 20 minutes," she says. "If it were longer, I'd get distracted and lose focus. But if a break is less than 10 minutes, it doesn't loosen you up enough."

Fitzell says teens should tell their parents about class assignments.

"In my case, I needed someone to listen to me when I needed to vent about how much homework I had," she says. "There's not much a parent can do, but they can be supportive."

Make sure to have dictionaries and other study tools handy, she says.

"Teens should have everything they need within reaching distance," Fitzell says.

"The reason I studied in the kitchen was because there was no clutter. The desk in my room was covered with stuff like postcards. There were a lot of visual distractions."

Study areas are covered in an article, "Making the Grade," in Organize magazine. The September/October issue (\$4.99) provides tips on making sure students have a good place to concentrate.

Writer Maria Eckersley suggests thwarting the TV-on-while-doing-homework scenario by using a timer designed for lamps and Christmas lights.

"A more advanced model allows you to predetermine how many minutes or hours your TV can be on each day," she writes. "When the time allowance is up, the device shuts off the power."

Manual override switches are available beneath the tamper-proof lock."

Allison Grant of Visalia is a freshman biology major at California State University, Fresno.

"Allison has to have 'noise' when she studies," mother Terri Grant writes in an e-mail.

"She usually has the television on, or at least the radio. If we turn it off, she says she can't think! But it must work because she always does well on her homework and studying.

"Our motto: Use what works!"

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