

Copying Homework

Gabriella and Vivian have been friends for a long time and are now juniors in high school with aspirations to attend top-notch universities. They have four classes together this year, three of which are AP classes. As such, they are extremely busy with their schoolwork. Unluckily, two of their AP courses happen to have tests scheduled for the same day. To make matters worse, homework is assigned in their fourth common course the day before they must take the tests. It is just a simple worksheet, but it must be submitted for a grade. Gabriella is annoyed that she has to take time away from studying for the tests, but it only takes her thirty minutes to complete the assignment. Vivian, however, studies diligently all evening and forgets to do the worksheet. It just slips her mind.

The next day, Vivian realizes that she has forgotten to complete the homework. She knows that getting a zero on an assignment will be detrimental to her overall average and the teacher does not accept late homework. She decides to ask Gabriella if she can copy her answers to the worksheet.

Gabriella is sympathetic to Vivian's situation but has a few concerns. First and foremost, she could get in a great deal of trouble for letting Vivian copy her work—after all, it's considered cheating. In the eyes of many people, including the school administrators, cheating is always wrong, no matter how small of an assignment it is. Gabriella is also frustrated because she took the time to complete the worksheet while Vivian did not. It seems unfair that Vivian had the extra time to study but will still receive full credit as Gabriella. It is not only unfair to Gabriella, but to all of the students in the class who did the homework on their own.

At the same time, it just a menial worksheet—what some students might call “busy work.” It doesn't seem the same as plagiarizing an essay, and the benefits Vivian will receive if Gabriella lets her copy the worksheet seem to far outweigh the triviality of the rule being broken. Perhaps more importantly, Gabriella wants to help her friend. She certainly doesn't want to see Vivian's grade damaged over a silly worksheet. If Gabriella says no, she knows that it will really hurt her friendship with Vivian.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Would it be morally permissible for Gabriella to allow Vivian to copy the worksheet? Why or why not?
2. Does the fact that Gabriella and Vivian are good friends influence the ethical analysis of whether or not copying would be morally permissible? Explain.
3. Is it ever morally permissible to break rules in order to help a friend? If so, what must the conditions be?