Homeschooling for College Credit

LEARNING GUIDE

5 Ways to Accurately Calculate 1 High School Credit

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Introduction

As a homeschooler, you have a lot of freedom to direct your teen's learning, but one of the most common fears parents have is how to calculate a high school credit. What exactly = 1 credit, and how can you be sure your teen is doing "enough" for you to count it?

Sorry, that's untrue.

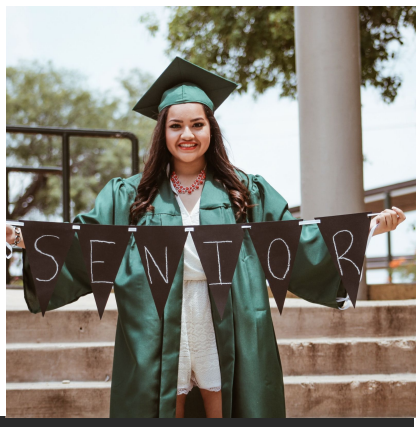
I've read many comments or articles over the years that give homeschooling parents a *hard rule* for calculating 1 high school credit. I don't think they intentionally are sharing incorrect information, rather I think they are just repeating the one method they've heard or used (usually from a public school official) and assuming that everyone else should follow that method too. If there were one right way, then we'd all choose that one right way, but there isn't! In fact, there is no universally "approved" or "correct" way of calculating 1 high school credit. Schools differ in how they do this, and you have the authority to do this for your school too. Unfortunately, sharing misinformation as truth is really harmful, so in this guide, you'll learn 5 different ways to calculate a single high school credit accurately and with confidence.

Disclaimer: Of the 50 states, a few have rules/suggestions/laws that may require tracking a student's hours. As a legal homeschool, you'll want to be sure you follow those rules. If you need help understanding your state's homeschool laws, I recommend a quick visit to Homeschool Legal Defence Associations' State Law Summary Page. If your state does not require tracking hours, you are free to use any method (or methods) you like!

1. Carnegie Units
2. Calendar (year/semester)
3. Competency-Based
4. Finish the Book
5. Dual Enrollment

5 Calculation Methods

01
Carnegie Units



02
Calendar

03
Competency Based

04
Finish the Book

05
Dual Enrollment Golden Ratio

01 Carnegie Units

★ 120 hours

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

Carnegie Units are the most popular method used by group schools and colleges of every type. It's typical that a school will calculate a minimum number of required hours, and this method is called Carnegie Units.

In the Carnegie Unit system, 1 high school credit is equal to 120 hours. The Carnegie Unit was established in 1900 by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Part of the push to use the model was to make sure teachers met a minimum number of hours to receive their retirement pension.

As you can guess, simply ***spending time*** on a subject didn't measure learning, and this method started to receive criticism. By 1993 the Carnegie Foundation denounced their method and urged schools to stop using it, but by then, it was so widely adopted that most schools just stuck with it - and are still sticking with it today.

Why it works: This is the most "popular" default method suggested to homeschoolers because it's what most schools still use. Calculating hours gives anyone an easy metric with a hard and fast guideline for measuring "enough" learning. Carnegie Units make building a schedule easy. A parent simply divides the academic year into minutes or hours and distributes the work evenly. It's neat and tidy. In states that require the calculation of hours, Carnegie Units are typically suggested.

Challenges of the method: 120 hours in a 1-on-1 setting vs a group school that requires classroom management makes for two very different experiences. Parents who use Carnegie Units report that their teens can finish too much school, or work too far ahead. This becomes a secondary concern since the parents want to fill all 120 hours.

In high school, where time is extremely precious, waiting for 120 hours to pass before allowing your teen to move on to the next subject may limit their opportunities to accumulate high school and college credit. If, on the other hand, a student didn't learn a subject well, stopping simply because you've hit 120 hours seems inconsistent with the benefits of homeschooling.

When Carnegie Units Make Sense

Unschooling

Your teen isn't using a specific book, class, or curriculum, rather the learning is more interest-led and self-directed. Keeping track of hours gives you an easy metric .

Laws

Your state has a homeschooling law that dictates that a specific number of hours be spent in a subject or during a school year.

By the Hour

Your student completes an activity "by the hour" such as a musical lesson, volunteer activity, job experience, internship, or other activity that is easily measured hourly.

Specific documents or records are required

If participation in a specific club, program, scholarship, or special program requires documented time on task, using Carnegie Units is the most straightforward way to do that.

Many years, 1 credit

If a subject happens part-time or only occasionally over multiple years, keeping track of the hours may be an easy way to maintain a record. Examples include learning a second language through immersion, writing a book, publishing a monthly newsletter.

02 Calendar

Using a calendar allows you to start and stop your school on predetermined dates.

Though not typical, your state may require homeschooling to happen for a certain number of months (or days) each year. If that's required, using the calendar method is easy for compliance.

Colleges may use semesters or quarters in any given academic year. If you choose to adopt a similar schedule, 1 high school credit follows the completion of 1 year, which is 2 semesters. A college semester lasts 12-16 weeks.

FALL
late August until mid-December

SPRING
early January until late May

SUMMER
(June-July-August)

- count as extra credit

Why it works: Lining up high school subjects to "start" and "stop" with their college classes usually aligns well with textbooks and curriculum. It's not uncommon to see a textbook with 16 chapters (or 32) that are intentionally designed to match a typical semester length. Having a structured schedule helps many students stay organized, and it's easy for a parent to see if their teen is on pace to finish a subject. This system also builds in regular school breaks. This system mirrors the traditional presentation on a high school transcript, making it easy to record credits earned.

Challenges of the method: Using the calendar does provide some structure, but the structure can also drift into unnecessary rigidity for a homeschool. Like the Carnegie Unit method, following a calendar doesn't take into account a student's level of learning or pace of mastery. Many of the same challenges of Carnegie Units apply to this method, especially regarding students who work more quickly or who need more time. Using a calendar, especially a quarter, may require skipping some chapters or lessons for the sake of finishing on time.

One other challenge is that your academic schedule will match that of most other families. This makes it less practical to take a spontaneous vacation in September or plan a break in February.

When the Calendar Makes Sense

Uncertainty

When in doubt, this is a solid default option.

Laws

Your state has a homeschooling law that dictates that a specific number of days or months be spent in a subject or during a school year.

Curriculum

If the curriculum you're using sets a pace as X number of weeks, this will easily work with any calendar system,.

College Credit

If your teen is taking college classes, it makes a lot of sense to align their high school classes to follow along the same schedule.

Short Classes

If you've purchased a curriculum or class that doesn't include enough content to cover a full year, using the calendar system to block out a semester or even half of a semester will help you set up a schedule that covers all topics in small pieces.

03 Competency-Based

Until mastery

Mastery-based
Competency-based
Performance-based
Outcome-based

Competency-based education, also called mastery-based education, puts learning front and center and ignores the clock and calendar entirely. If you've ever heard of teens graduating high school without the basic ability to read or write, you understand the outrage that led to this approach.

Many parents already used competency-based education when their children were very young, but then switched to a different approach later. Think back to teaching your child their alphabet. You'd say it with them over and over, gently helping them through the l,m,n,o,p and celebrating when they got it right. You probably did a similar method while teaching them their address or the times tables. Beyond memorization, competency-based education allows the student to learn "until." High school students generally dive much deeper than simple memorization, but the principles are the same.

Why it works: In this system, your teen studies until they have mastery. This is a logical and highly desired outcome most of the time. Once the student has mastery, credit is awarded, and the student moves on to the next skill. When a student works on a plan for mastery, they are very aware of their own abilities which leads to becoming stronger and more self-directed learners. Allowing competency to pace the learning means fewer gaps and less worry about getting "behind" while the schedule marches on. Competency-based learning is the model used by many software-based curricula. Among those used for college credit in our community include ALEKS math, Sophia, Studycom, Straighterline, and CSM Learn (See-More Labs). Families who use a more traditional curriculum may have their teens demonstrate competency by passing an exam like CLEP, DSST, or Advanced Placement.

Challenges of the method: Guiding a learner toward competency requires a highly individualized level of instruction. This approach works best with a willing participant, so a highly motivated student is key. The student's own desire to keep working until they "get it" is the cornerstone of this approach. An uninterested or unmotivated student will struggle with this approach. Parents may struggle with the appearance of awarding an "A" for every course even when the student has achieved mastery.

When Competency-Based Makes Sense

Hands On

Hands on skills of every kind are best learned and measured through competency-based assessments. Examples may include automotive, welding, cooking, baking, gardening, physical fitness, painting, journalism, and computer programing.

College Credit

If your teen is taking college classes, it makes a lot of sense to align their high school classes to follow along the same schedule.

Motivation

Teens with high levels of motivation to learn a subject independently will thrive in this type of format.

Credential

Classes that tie an exam or credential to them will lend themselves to competency based testing. Examples include many types of Information Technology and Computer Science certifications. In these cases, it makes sense to learn until the student has met the level required.

Fitness

For teens heading into the military, physical fitness challenges will be part of their assessment. Use a competency-based approach for physical fitness until your teen can meet or exceed the entrance qualifications.

CLEP

Preparation for a CLEP exam works well under the competency-based method. A student starts with a traditional curriculum and then transitions into "test prep" until they've accumulated enough knowledge to take the exam.

04 Finish the Book

One and Done

Use the same textbook vendor for the best scope and sequence.

Simply award the credit when your teen finishes the book. An example of where this approach makes the most sense is in the math sequence. A student starts with Prealgebra and when finished, progresses on to Algebra 1. Upon completion of Algebra 1, the student moves on to Algebra 2, etc. Completion of the book, not the hours, calendar, or mastery, determines then the student has earned a high school credit.
Using this method, the student simply keeps learning until the desired subject is finished.

Example of a Math Sequence

1. Arithmetic (grades k-8)
2. Pre Algebra (grades 6-9)
3. Algebra 1 (grades 8-10)
4. Geometry (grades 9-10)
5. Algebra 2 (grades 10-12)
6. Trig/Precalculus (grade 10-college)
7. Calculus 1 (grade 11-college)
8. Calculus 2 (grade 12-college)

Why it works: Using this approach lends itself really well to a homeschool family that likes their curriculum provider and wants to use it for the duration of high school. We've used the math example, but this is also true with other subjects like Language Arts, Foreign Language, History, or Science. Another advantage of this approach is that the guesswork is removed. There is no question about what comes "next" because the curriculum follows a larger scope and sequence.

Challenges of the method: It is very hard to change brands once you're used to a specific vendor. Bouncing from one vendor to the next for subjects with strong scope and sequence (ex. Math) will certainly create gaps and repeats while the student transitions. It may be impossible to know early on whether or not you'll want to stay with a specific vendor for all of high school.

A significant disadvantage of this approach happens when a student learns quickly. In this case, they may grow bored or argue that the book is full of "busy work" when they already have the skills.

Some students may find it difficult to finish an entire book in 1 school year, causing the year to drift over into summer or the following school year.

When Finish the Book Makes Sense

Traditional Curriculum

Using traditional high school curriculum works well with "Finish the Book" and most homeschooling books are written with the understanding that the student will finish all or nearly all of the book.

Low Management

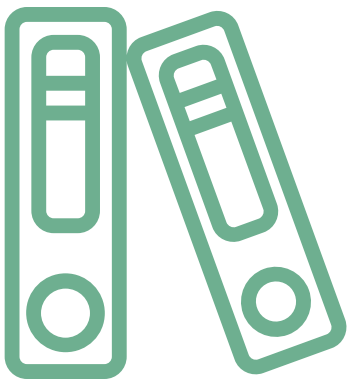
This system requires the lowest amount of learning management in terms of assessment and modification. Books , when used this way, provide the structure for the parent.

Low Motivation

For teens with low motivation or enthusiasm for a subject, finishing the book allows them to accomplish the credit with the least amount of friction.

Sequences

When learning is intended to happen in a structured sequence, as is the case with math, finishing each book helps keep learning gaps to a minimum and makes sure the student is learning the full scope and sequence of the content.



Love the Book

Many parents have a specific brand or vendor or author that they love. If you have a specific company that puts out products you love, your teen is more likely to thrive than if they had to direct their own learning.

05 Dual Enrollment

3:1
Golden Ratio

3 college credits = 1 high school credit

Dual enrollment is the leading choice for Homeschooling for College Credit learners and with good reason! A student who takes a college course has the golden opportunity of getting credit twice (dual) for learning once. In a dual enrollment class, the college awards the student some amount of college credit, and the homeschool parent awards the student some amount of high school credit.

The typical award is 3:1

For each 3-credit college course, the student receives 1 high school credit.

Parents may choose to follow that ratio literally (whereas a 4 credit college class would be worth 1.33 high school credits) or to use what I call "reasonable rounding" and stick with whole or half credits. Employing reasonable rounding means a 4-credit college class could be worth either 1.0 high school credits or 1.5 high school credits. The parent decides.

The math for this determination is based on Carnegie Units and is considered as the standard conversion in the United States.

Typically, a three-semester credit hour course meets for three contact hours (three 50-minute sessions or two 75-minute sessions) per week for a semester. Depending on the course type, the expectation is that for every hour of contact time there are two hours of outside-of-class or non-scheduled preparation work. In total, that three-semester credit hour course totals approximately 126 hours of work. (42 contact hours and 84 preparation hours)

Why it works: Students who take courses for college credit, will accumulate high school credit twice as fast as students taking a high school class. This not only saves time, saves money (because you're usually paying a significantly reduced tuition rate), but also allows a student to fill graduation requirements or college admissions requirements twice as fast.

Challenges of the method: While the payoff for this method is high, the risk is also high. Students who use dual enrollment to accumulate high school credit will have to disclose their attendance to future colleges, which can be a problem if the student doesn't do well or pass the courses.

05 Dual Enrollment

3:1 Golden Ratio

1 college credit class= .33 (literal) or 0.5 (rounded) high school credits
2 college credit class = .66 (literal) or 0.5-1.0 (rounded) high school credits
3 college credit class = 1.0 (literal) or 1.0 (rounded) high school credits
4 college credit class = 1.33 (literal) or 1.0-1.5 (rounded) high school credits
5 college credit class = 1.66 (literal) or 1.5 (rounded) high school credits
6 college credit class = 2.0 (literal) or 2.0 (rounded) high school credits

Is it *really* dual enrollment?

Many forms of college credit are not "dual enrollment" and therefore do not get the benefit of the 3:1 ratio.
Dual enrollment is:

- Taught through a college, not a business.
- Is recorded on a college transcript.
- Results in a letter grade.
- Is calculated in your college GPA.

Recap

01 Carnegie Units

120 hours in the subject (7,200 minutes) = 1 high school credit.

Pro Tip: To make logging easy, plan your schedule before the school year begins. A good rule of thumb is that 1 hour per day x 5 days per week means you'll hit 120 hours in 24 weeks. Those weeks can be spread out over the entire academic year.
If your state requires schooling for a set number of days per year (for example 180 days) you can divide the total minutes (7,200) by the required number of days. 7,200 / 180 = 40 minutes per day

02 Calendar

Start and stop your school on predetermined dates.

1 Semester (8 weeks) = 0.5 high school credits
2 Semesters (16 weeks) = 1 high school credit
1 year = 1 high school credit

Pro Tip: Some colleges use "quarter hours" instead of "semester hours" which will make the conversion of credits more involved. If possible, choose one calendar (either type) and stick with it for all four years of high school.

03 Competency-Based

Work until a predetermined level of mastery is met.

meets expectations = 1 high school credit

Pro Tip: Establish your expectations clearly ahead of time. Consider whether you'll use a pass/fail grading system or letter grades. If you're using letter grades, give careful consideration to how your student will meet or exceed the expectations you've outlined.

Recap

04 Finish the Book

1 high school textbook= 1 high school credit.

Pro Tip: If you can use the same vendor for an entire sequence from 9th grade through 12th grade (example: Math) you can have a high degree of confidence that your student has covered the full scope and sequence of the subject.

05 Dual Enrollment

1 college class = 1 high school credit

Classes taken through a college for dual enrollment credit are each worth a full high school credit. Students accumulate high school credit twice as fast when compared to a similar course taken only for high school credit.

Pro Tip: Improve your teen's chances of having their dual enrollment courses accepted by their future target college by following these 5 tips:

1. Make sure the college you're using for dual enrollment is regionally accredited. You can look up any college through the US Department of Education website. www.ed.gov/accreditation
2. Take the class for a grade instead of pass/fail.
3. Choose a class that is classified as "general education" instead of an elective.
4. If a 2-part sequence exists, take both parts. Example: General Biology 1 with Lab followed by General Biology 2 with Lab.
5. If your dual enrollment college is a 2-year college, they likely have transfer agreements with 4-year colleges. These agreements give you access to transfer advisors and guidance directly from both colleges.

Turn a High School Class into ***High School Honors*** Credit

Students who are college-bound may look for opportunities to take classes that are more challenging or to boost their grade point average.

One way to do this is to convert your regular high school class into an HONORS course.

An honors course does not have a specific set of universal criteria, so the parent can use their judgment to assess their teen individually and determine which class(es) should carry the distinction "Honors" on the high school transcript.
Adding one or more enrichment activities can enhance a course enough that you give it the "Honors" distinction on the transcript.

1. If you're using Carnegie Units, increase the contact hours of a course from 120 to 180.
2. Add CLEP or AP test preparation to any high school course to create an honors option. (You should still award the "honors" even if the CLEP is not passed)
3. Add a significant project that allows depth. Examples include a term paper, video, speech, or other deliverables.
4. Collaborate with other homeschooling parents who have offered the subject. Ask how they added challenges to their curriculum.
5. Add several significant works of literature (fiction or nonfiction) to the course in a way that provides greater depth or understanding.
6. Use a college textbook alongside your high school curriculum. The same subject written for an adult audience will carry more sophistication than a high school text alone.