



The Aardvark Who Invented Homework



In long ago school times, a big-eared, tube-snouted, bristly-haired aardvark was angry. That morning when the homely mammal walked from his burrow to the termite mound, children taunted him.

“Hey, donkey ears,” a boy yelled.

“Ugly puss!” a girl shouted.

The aardvark’s stubby legs kept moving. “Aaar!” he said through his crooked, yellow teeth. “Those taunts make me mad. Very, very mad.”

In the afternoon, when the aardvark walked from the termite mound back to his burrow, the same thing happened.

“Here comes *lardvark*,” a girl yelled.

“It’s a pig?” a boy called. “No, it’s too ugly to be a pig.”

The aardvark crawled into his dark hole angrier than ever. “Aaar, how I hate being taunted. Don’t children have anything better to do than to taunt a poor aardvark?”

The weekend was worse. On those days, the children followed the aardvark from his burrow to the termite mound and from the termite mound to his burrow. There was no escaping the taunts.

“Funny-looking!”

“Hello, *Hose-nose!*”

“Ugly! Ugly! Ugly!”

“Aaar, this is bad. Very, very bad,” the aardvark said. “How can I keep those children from taunting me?”

Sunday afternoon, the aardvark stood at the termite mound licking up lunch with his long sticky tongue. When he spied a boy and girl approaching, he hid behind a log. The children sat on the log, close enough for the aardvark’s outsized ears to catch every word they said.

“Aren’t weekends wonderful?” said the boy. “We have no schoolwork, because we have no school.”

“Schoolwork is the worst,” said the girl. “Especially learning spelling lists, writing book reports, and figuring division problems.”

“At least during the week we have mornings and evening without schoolwork,” said the boy.

“That gives us time to taunt the aardvark,” said the girl. “Let’s go find him now. I thought up a new taunt to shout.”

After the children left, the aardvark returned to his termite feast. “Interesting. Very, very interesting,” he said. “Those children dislike schoolwork. They dislike it very, very much. This gives me an idea. A very, very tit-for-tat idea.”

On Monday morning, instead of heading straight to the termite mound, the aardvark walked to the local school, a one-room schoolhouse on a hill. At this early hour, only the teacher was present. The aardvark placed his spoon-shaped claws on a windowsill and poked his tubular snout into the classroom. The teacher, a young woman, sat at her desk grading spelling tests.

“Good morning, teacher,” the aardvark called out. “How are lessons going?”

The young teacher sighed. “Hello, aardvark,” she said. “My student’s schoolwork is poor. They miss too many spelling words. Their book reports are badly written, and their division is a disaster. But that’s the way the world works.”

The aardvark licked his snout with his lengthy tongue. “Too bad students don’t have more time to study,” he said.

“Perhaps, aardvark. But the school day is busy as it is.”

“Evenings are long,” the aardvark hinted. “Very, very long. Too bad students couldn’t learn spelling words, write reports, and figure division problems in the long evening.”

“Perhaps, perhaps,” said the teacher. “But schoolwork is schoolwork, and that’s the way the world works.”

“Weekends are much longer,” the aardvark went on. “It’s easy to forget spelling words and math facts after being away from school for two days.”

The young teacher nodded. “Friday does seem a long time ago. But if the children aren’t in school on Saturday and Sunday how can they do schoolwork?”

The aardvark leaned farther into the room. Now was his chance. Now he could say the word, the scheme, the payback idea that was bubbling in his brain all night.

“*Homework*,” he whispered. “Why can’t students read, write, and figure at home?”

The teacher raised her eyebrows. “Homework? Schoolwork at home? The world doesn’t work that way?”

The aardvark licked up an ant crawling across the windowsill. In a low voice he said, “Right before the afternoon bell rings, you might give an assignment. Let’s

say a spelling list to learn, a book report to write, or a sheet of division problems to figure.”

“Perhaps, perhaps. What then?”

“Then, instead of taunting poor aardvarks after school, the students would complete their homework in their homes.”

“Homework!” said the teacher. “Perhaps you’re on to something. What a smart aardvark you are.”

“But beware of excuses,” the aardvark said. “Children think up amazing excuses to get out of work, so I imagine they’ll come up with extra clever excuses for not doing homework.”

“I’ll give the first homework assignment this afternoon,” said the teacher.

The aardvark spotted the first student coming up the hill. “And maybe it’s best if you don’t mention that homework was my idea,” he said upon leaving.

That afternoon the aardvark left the termite mound satisfied the taunts had ended. Hardly had he started walking, however, before a boy called out, “Here comes termite breath!”

The aardvark lowered his snout to the ground. “Aaar,” he went. “The teacher didn’t assign enough homework.”

Early the next morning, the aardvark revisited the one-room schoolhouse. With his claws upon the classroom windowsill, he hailed the young teacher.

“What was yesterday’s homework assignment?” he asked.

“Ten division problems,” the teacher answered. “My students complained, but that’s the way the world works.”

“The extra math will help,” said the aardvark. “But an evening is long. Very, very long. Maybe they can do a report or two.”

“Perhaps, perhaps,” said the teacher.

“And don’t forget what I said about homework excuses,” said the aardvark. “Children are very, very good at excuses.” That afternoon, the aardvark again departed the termite mound, convinced his taunting worries were over. But before he was halfway home, he heard, “Ewww! *Bombardvark!*” and a clump of mud splattered against his side.

The aardvark slunk past two girls. “More homework is needed. Much, much more.”

It took two more visits to the schoolhouse before the aardvark walked all the way home without hearing a taunt.

“The children are home doing homework,” he said with a snicker. “But I need to return to the school one

more time. Tomorrow is Friday, and I must remind the teacher to assign lots of homework for the weekend.”

The young teacher was waiting at the classroom window when the aardvark arrived. She bent over, and kissed him on his long muzzle.

“Thanks to you, aardvark, this has been my best week of teaching,” she said. “Since assigning homework, my students’ schoolwork has improved.”

The aardvark raised his snout, hoping for another kiss. “Remember, the weekend is two days long,” he said.

“Yes, and I’ve prepared extra homework assignments. If my students complain, I’ll just tell them that’s the way the world works.”

“That’s good,” said the aardvark, as he set off for the termite mound. “The students will be busy. Very, very busy.”

The aardvark lived long enough to see his homework idea spread from school to school across the country. To this day, no teacher has given away his secret.

Teachers did, however, give the aardvark a special honor. When they wanted to assign vocabulary words for homework, teachers wrote the first dictionary. They included thousands of words for their students to look up. But the word they put at the very beginning was the name

of the homely creature that came up with the homework idea in the first place. That word was *aardvark*.