

# The Observation and Feedback Cycle: Best Practices for Low-inference Notes<sup>1</sup>

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## Observe

The school leader visits the classroom and takes low-inference notes on teacher and student actions.

### Best Practices for Observation

1. **Eliminate effects of bias.** Enter the classroom without judgment and work from evidence.
2. **Take low-inference notes.** Write down only what teacher and students say and do.
3. **Look for learning.** Seek evidence of what students know and are able to do.
4. **Remain, review, reflect.** Pause to organize your evidence before rating.

## Collecting low inference evidence during an observation

Capturing high-quality notes during the observation is the first step in ensuring that ratings are accurate and feedback aligns to teachers' needed areas of improvement. **Low-inference note-taking is a skill**, not knowledge. Knowing how to do a push-up doesn't mean you can do 25 of them in 60 seconds; it comes with practice. When taking low-inference notes, the school leader describes what is taking place without drawing conclusions or making judgments about what he or she observes. When taking notes on instruction, ask:

- What do you see and hear the teacher and students saying and doing?
- What evidence can you gather of student learning?
- What will students know and be able to do at the end of the lesson?

## Common mistakes/pitfalls to avoid

- Distinguish between low-inference statements and opinions. For instance, you can identify key words that give away subjectivity: e.g., *"I think,"* or *"I feel."* Be cognizant of keeping evidence separate from opinions, using this framework:

Evidence	Opinion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Is observable</li><li>• Is not influenced by the observer's perspective</li><li>• Is free of evaluative words</li><li>• Does not draw conclusions</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Makes inferences</li><li>• Depends on observer's perspective</li><li>• Includes evaluative words</li><li>• Draws conclusions</li></ul>

- Replace vague quantifiers by capturing more specific evidence: e.g., *"a lot of students raised their hands"* vs. *"17 of 20 students raised their hands."*
- Swap Edu-Speak for Evidence. For example, rather than saying, *"You differentiated by scaffolding questions during the mini-lesson,"* identify the actual questions that the teacher asked, such as *"What is the name of this shape? How is it different from a square or rectangle? Where in real life have you seen this shape?"*

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see [The Power of Feedback: Supporting Teacher Development](#), pages 32-33.

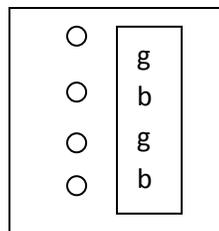
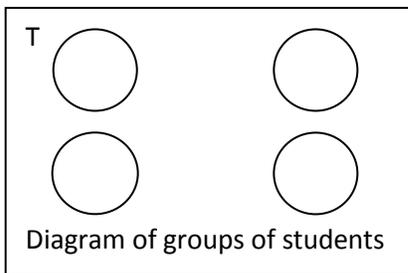
## Tips for low inference note taking

Where to find the data for student outcomes during an observation:

- Sit with a table/group of students. Write down the questions asked and answers given by the students in that group.
- Copy down what each student has written on their paper VERBATIM into your observation notes (e.g., answer to #2 on handout, response to quick-write prompt). The observer can obtain a handout from the teacher, if available, and record the answers directly onto it.
- Write down the time and circulate in the room. Record the item that all students are working on in that moment. Then, go around a second time.
- Select a problem, determine the correct answer, and tally the number of students who have the correct response written on their papers.
- If recording observation notes using an iPad, use the iPad to take pictures of actual student work during the classroom observation.
- Move around the classroom and identify students performing at high, medium, low levels and strategically capture their work
- Monitor observation notes to ensure that the “student side” is not neglected.
- Ask students to tell you what they are learning/doing, why they are learning, and if they have learned anything new today.
- Collect the lesson plan and/or copies of student work prior to leaving the classroom.

How do I capture as much evidence as possible?

- Set up a coding system ( T= teacher, S= student, HU= hands up)
- Time transitions, each section of the lesson, work time, etc.
- Copy objective or aim, or make a note if it is not posted
- Draw circles to represent groups of students or teacher interaction with students



- If you notice a trend, create a tally on the side, so you can capture other evidence that may be occurring while also documenting the trend. For example, Jane is the only one responding to the teacher’s questions. You may capture several instances verbatim, but you can also capture how many times it occurs if you can’t capture everything Jane said.

Use tallies or shorthand in the diagram or a chart:

Jane is called on	<del>    </del>
Times teacher provides feedback to front table	

- Quality over quantity: collect a full interaction.
  - When teacher did \_\_, student \_\_. When student said \_\_, teacher said \_\_.

## Low-Inference Note-Taking Samples: Strong versus Weak

**Strong example of low-inference notes:**

Time	Teacher Actions	Student Actions
1:00	Teacher says to walking students, "You need to be on the rug in 3-2-1."	Twenty-four students on the carpet facing the front of the room. 3 students walking around the classroom. As teacher said "one" students joined classmates.
1:01	Teacher asked "How many days are there in the week?"  Teacher repeated question and then said, "Anyone?"  Teacher asked kids to stand and lead them in "The Days of the Week" song.	5-6 kids spoke to each other when teacher spoke.  She called on Terrence who said "7."  16 of the 27 kids stood up for the song.
1:02	Teacher asked "What day comes after Saturday?"	Steven shouted out, "Monday!" Most students laughed – 2 boys physically rolled around and knocked over 2 girls. Steven walked away from the group, and sat in the opposite corner of the classroom.
1:03	Teacher said, "OK boys and girls if you hear my voice clap once, if you hear my voice clap twice."	After two claps, all but 2 boys were quiet and looking at her.

**Weak example of low-inference notes:**

Time	Teacher Actions	Student Actions
1:00		Students on carpet during mini-lesson. Lots of students walking around the classroom while the teacher tried to get their attention.
1:01	Teacher asked questions about the calendar.	Many students were not listening while the teacher reviewed the days of the week.
1:02		Steven called out over and over again when you asked the question about the days of the week.
1:03		Steven walked away from the group and the class fell apart.
1:04	Mini-lesson is not successful. Little student learning accomplished as teacher has no classroom management skills.	
1:05	Poor classroom management continues through sloppy transitions from carpet to desks.	Several students are talking to one another.
1:06	The teacher seemed to be okay with this.	A few students go to the round table. Some start reading and some don't.