

What to look for in a lesson observation



This information is drawn from observations in many classrooms – over a thousand – and many schools – over 400 – and in roles including headteacher, school improvement partner, coach, and lead inspector.

'Lesson' is used below as shorthand for 'observed session'. Lists of questions and notes are not comprehensive.

Time

A lesson observation does not need to exceed twenty minutes. After that, you will gain very little new information. This can be split, particularly where a lesson is not going well, but the plan indicates it will improve once the current problem is addressed. Then you might choose to return for the last five or ten minutes.

A drop-in

There are times when a short visit is appropriate, such as a learning walk, or if you have left your classroom for a few minutes to see how the subject you lead is working in a classroom. On these visits, try to form an impression:

- What is the atmosphere when you walk into the classroom: are pupils all busy and engaged? Is the classroom vibrant and attractive?
- Is the teacher calm and in control? Or are they rushing round trying to help every pupil?
- Is the teacher's subject knowledge good?
- What do the pupils say they are learning?
- Is what is being taught and learned what you might have expected before going into the classroom?
- What evidence is there of past work? In particular, what do pupils say they remember?
- Are you satisfied, in this short visit, that standards are good? And that the subject is being taught well? Does learning also look good, as far as you can tell?

Attitude

Being observed can be a stressful experience. Teachers should always be given advanced notice of an observation, unless there is good reason not to. The best teachers always look for feedback, as they are keen to know that their work was as good as they thought, and are also keen to improve.

A headteacher is allowed to observe a teacher for up to three hours a year for the purposes of appraisal and to establish and make a judgement on the quality of teaching across the school. Most observations do not fall into this category, but are to:

- Help and support the teacher;
- Raise standards for pupils;
- Make it easier for teachers to teach by suggesting changes;
- Through confirming and affirming the teacher's strengths, build their confidence;
- Through feedback and coaching, help to raise the standards of teaching;
- Aligning teaching practice across the school.



Therefore, notes should be taken during, or immediately after the observation, and a feedback meeting should be offered, in a relaxed, private and undisturbed place.

Activities during the observation

- Take a few minutes to understand what is going on
- Look at lesson planning. Is this lesson standalone, or one of a sequence?
- Speak to pupils
- Look at books or work, if available
- Look at what is on the walls
- Get a 'feeling' for the classroom and the lesson
- Listen to what the teacher is saying
- Listen and observe what any other adult in the room is doing and saying
- Watch pupils in different groups work
- Work with a group and help them
- Ask a pupil if you can look at their book (with them if possible)

NB Not all of these activities will be possible. For example, some classrooms will not have books available.

Ask pupils one or more of these questions:

- 'What are you learning today?'
- 'What did you learn in the last lesson?'
- 'What will you learn in the next lesson?'
- 'What do you do when you don't know what to do?'
- 'What lesson do you learn best in, and why?'
- 'What stops you learning?'
- 'Who helps you learn?'
- 'Why are you sitting here for this lesson? Does it help you learn?'

In all of these questions and the activities below, you will need to form an opinion. This may differ from a co-observer, because you might have noticed different things, or had a different focus. This is not a problem, and you can talk about it afterwards.

Entry to the classroom

It always takes two or three minutes to understand what is happening in an active classroom. It helps to have a chair to sit on behind the pupils, so you not disturb them, and lesson planning. You tend to be welcomed in a good classroom, but can be completely ignored in some outstanding classrooms, because the teacher is focused entirely on maximising pupil learning. Beware teachers who leave the class to come to talk to you, if they start to talk about individual pupils, and particularly if they give individual pupils as reasons for standards in the class being low, because of the pupil's absence, behaviour or attitude. This indicates RI or inadequate. You are only interested in groups of five or more, and it is helpful if the teacher gets on with teaching the class.

First impressions are important, because firstly, they rarely change and secondly, you will look for evidence to back up your initial impression.

You would want to walk into a vibrant, lively classroom, where things were happening and pupils were enjoying the challenge of what they had been asked to do. Walking into a silent classroom is always a bit worrying. Why are pupils silent? It can be the sign that they have been seated inappropriately, (e.g. very different prior knowledge), and so have nothing to say to each other.

Questions to ask yourself:

- Is the teacher talking to the whole class about their learning? Or is the teacher talking about behaviour (even reminders to behave well)? How long has the teacher been talking for?
- Is the teacher working with a group? Are other groups working independently, confident in what they are doing?
- Is the classroom neat and tidy, but interesting and attractive?
- Is 'stuff' stored well, so pupils have plenty of room to work?
- Are desks in groups? Is any pupil sitting or seated on their own? Are the groupings of pupils always the same?
- Is what is up on the walls for pupils, or are there also items for adults (e.g. TA timetables)?
- Are displays on the walls aids to learning? (Exemplary work, useful information, inspiring images, etc.)
- Are pupils fully engaged in their activities? Are they talking to each other, and getting on together on their set task?
- Is there a teacher desk? If so, what is on it?
- Is everything working? Is the IWB (Interactive Whiteboard) being used well? Is use being made of the visualiser?
- Are all pupils doing the same thing?
- Do pupils have a high degree of independence, and consequently, are they using their initiative? Are they free to walk across the classroom to get resources?
- Is the classroom calm/ peaceful/ buzzing/ excited/ chaotic/ noisy/ busy?
- What happened when you walked in? Did pupils stop work? Did the teacher greet you, and tell you what was going on?

Early in the observation

Some of the questions in the section above will have left you with questions of 'why?' Look around the classroom for evidence that will give you the reason for some of the things you have seen. You will also start to build 'threads' and hypotheses. For example, you may have a feeling that this is a good classroom. Therefore, what is the evidence for that? Why is it good and not outstanding? Start to collect early evidence, for example:

- Why are pupils grouped and seated as they are?
- How have tasks been varied so that those with low prior knowledge are engaged, and those with high prior knowledge are pushed to learn even more?
- Is what you see in line with school policy?
- Are all pupils working on task? All of the time?
- How is behaviour for learning and metacognition?
- Are pupils all expected to completed one part of the task before they move onto another?
- Do you find you are also interested in what is being taught, and are 'drawn in' to the lesson?

- If you have identified any vulnerable pupils, such as SEND, very low prior attainment, etc., are they able to work independently, or are they (always) in a group with a TA?
- Do any pupils leave the classroom for catch-up or booster sessions, or for another reason, such as a music lesson?
- How do pupils come back into the classroom?
- At what point, and how, do pupils ask the teacher for support?
- How does the teacher move around the classroom? Do they try to respond to all of the hands up, or do they focus on a group, and pupils help each other?

Later in the observation

As the session progresses, you will get a feel for how the lesson is going. You will have found evidence to answer some of the questions you have, but will have other questions you will need to ask the teacher later (and not in the active classroom). The main thing to find out before you end the observation, is how well pupils have learned.

Outstanding – All pupils learn all of the time. Learning is inevitable.

Good - All pupils learn most of the time, or most pupils learn all of the time. Learning is well-planned.

Requires Improvement – Most pupils learn most of the time. Poor learning is excused.

Inadequate – Only some (or none) learn. Poor learning is ignored.

You may like to check on the following:

- Has this lesson followed the requirements of the school's curriculum? (This is usually the national curriculum)
- Has the expectation for each and every pupil been well-matched challenge, based on a prior assessment of their knowledge?
- How did the lowest attaining 20% of pupils get on? The highest 20%?
- Have pupils demonstrated good engagement with strong working practices, established over time?
- What is the response required in the lesson? Is this appropriate? For example, if it is writing in a foundation subject, is this in line with the subject requirements and expectations?
- Have pupils enjoyed the lesson? What has made it enjoyable? What has motivated them?
- How has the teacher dealt with behaviour during the lesson?
- Was behaviour, good or bad, mentioned during the lesson? (NB in outstanding lessons, it tends not to be, not even praise)
- If another adult, such as a TA is present, how did they know what to do?
- How has the lesson been linked to past and future learning? How has the learning within it been given a practical application for pupils?
- How has the teacher managed and led the lesson?
- Were the intentions of the lesson plan achieved?
- Were the lesson objective/s met? Were they too easy or too hard (for some)?
- Did the teacher have good subject knowledge? Was what she said accurate, or were there misconceptions? Were pupil misconceptions corrected?
- Did the teacher use exemplary work to demonstrate key teaching points to pupils?
- Was what the teacher attempted to teach reasonable in the time available? Or was it too challenging? Too simple?

At the end of the observation, the observer should leave the classroom quietly. They should only say 'thank you' to the teacher as they leave, if it does not disturb the lesson in any way.

Taking notes

A blank sheet of paper works well, although you may like a proforma to note down contextual information, such as:

- Teacher name
- Date
- Year group
- Class name
- Subject/s being taught
- Number in class and number present
- Other adults in class, and roles
- Observation focus (often 'Quality of teaching')
- 'Context'. This is usually the lesson objective, but might also be where the lesson fits in a sequence, or why the lesson differs from others.

Notes on the lesson should be evaluative. This means that every sentence should be a judgement about how well an aspect of the lesson went. Notes should not be descriptive, as it avoids making a judgement. You have little time to make notes, and so your writing may be untidy, but can be neaten up later. Always use paper or a notebook. To type onto an electronic device is impersonal, and can create a barrier between observer and observed. Electronic recording should not be used, as firstly, it may breach safeguarding and GDPR rules, but it also loses the context of anything outside the frame which is not recorded.

At the foot of the notes, summarise, in one to five brief bullet points, what went well (there should always be something), and in one to five what could be improved (if nothing, then the one bullet should state this). Ideally, pick out the one defining feature of the lesson.

The feedback meeting

Most observed teachers will be tense and feel you may have surprises for them. It is better to treat the meeting collaboratively. However, avoid starting the meeting with 'How do you think it went?', as this is immediately seen as a trap. Teachers often fail to hear the positives, and will pick out the one thing they feel did not go well. Be honest and open, but reassuring. Make sure you are specific, making your points concisely and accurately, based on evidence – what you saw. Start with the positives, but go back to them later to make sure the teacher has heard what you are saying. You will need to set out plainly where there is a need to improve, so do not obfuscate by adding in overly-positive language, otherwise the teacher will be given the impression that this is not important.

Where a teacher disagrees with your findings, point to other evidence. Where you do not have any, offer to observe again, or to get someone else to observe and give a second opinion. This is meant to be a helpful process, so do not be at loggerheads.

Where a teacher is upset at their performance, offer support and help. Use others in the school to help out, so that the teacher can improve. Where a teacher is both willing, and willing to put the

time in, they will always improve. Where a teacher is not, you will need the help and support of others to make your point.

Some questions you might use in a feedback meeting, where you take a facilitative coaching role, are set out below:

| Lesson Aspect | Possible Initial Question *Open *Broad *Inquisitive |
|--|--|
| Progress <i>Differentiation</i> <i>Challenge</i> <i>Achievement</i> | <i>Whereabouts in the lesson did the pupils make the most progress?</i> |
| Resources <i>Environment</i> <i>Use of IT</i> <i>Pupils responded by?</i> | <i>What resources would you have added if you could? How would it have improved learning?</i> |
| Subject Knowledge <i>Assessment</i> <i>Planning</i> <i>Links to other subjects</i> | <i>What details (of the lesson's subject) challenged pupils the most?</i> |
| Use of TA's and OA's <i>Impact of no TA/ OA</i> | <i>When did your TA have the most impact on the lesson?</i> |
| Time <i>Use of teacher time</i> <i>Learning/ active time</i> | <i>Did the class/ group have time to develop a full understanding (of the learning objective)?</i> |
| Feedback <i>Differentiation</i> <i>Challenge</i> <i>Assessment and marking</i> | <i>What style of feedback would help pupils understand this more deeply?</i> |
| Pupil's Understanding <i>Differentiation</i> <i>Challenge</i> | <i>What do the pupils have to do to improve/ raise their achievement even further in this subject?</i> |
| Teacher's Responsiveness <i>Plenary</i> <i>Assessment and marking</i> | <i>Did you feel the need to intervene and support the pupils' learning at any time? How did you do this?</i> |
| Attitudes <i>BfL</i> <i>Groups</i> <i>Pride in own work</i> | <i>At what point in the lesson did you feel the pupils were most motivated?</i> |

Behaviour*BfL**Systems**Cooperation*

Whereabouts in the lesson did you feel your behaviour systems had the greatest impact on learning?

Assessment*Success criteria**Marking*

Which part of your lesson reflected prior assessment? Where did the pupils meet the assessment criteria?

Fundamental questions

- What is the standard of learning in this classroom?
- What is the standard of teaching over time? (If pupil outcomes are not good, then teaching cannot be good, and vice-versa)
- If standards are good, then why are they not outstanding?
- Did all pupils learn during the lesson?
- How good were behaviour for learning, resilience, independence and metacognition?
- Did you enjoy the lesson? Would you want your own child to be in here?