

Washington State University
College of Arts and Sciences
Teaching Observations Information and Guide¹

The purpose of this document is to guide the teacher and the observer through the process of formal teaching observations of faculty by faculty.

Purpose of Observations:

Teaching is central to the mission of Washington State University. The WSU Strategic Plan highlights four key themes, all of which include goals or sub-goals in support of enhancing the quality and relevance of the learning experience. Specifically, Theme 2: Transformative Student Experience articulates goals of providing excellent teaching and learning opportunities centered on student engagement, development and success; preparing graduates to lead and excel; and improving curricular infrastructure. Ongoing assessment in each of these areas is necessary. There are numerous quantitative metrics that have been identified in capturing relevant data for many components. Faculty observations of classes and instruction, however, allow a humanistic and qualitative approach that provides context in the assessment of the learning experience, value in determining needs for more investment in faculty development and in the identification of challenges for changes in course infrastructure, and evidence of innovation and effectiveness in teaching.

Demonstration of effectiveness in teaching is essential for re-appointment and advancement. Systematic collection and assessment of evidence of effective teaching is therefore crucial. Because instruction must align with the mission of the institution and include considerations such as student demographics, resources, curriculum, class size, type of course, and other related elements, effective teaching can vary substantially from course to course.

Formative or developmental feedback is important at all stages of teaching and for faculty in all tracks. Teaching observations and feedback early and often can help faculty improve their courses, refine their teaching style, and broaden their use of effective approaches for each course.

Formative feedback, over time, will also provide a more informed summative review for promotion evaluation. When considered together with student ratings, the teaching portfolio, letters from past students, self-reflection, and supplemental materials, teaching observations from colleagues provide a more comprehensive and reliable review of a faculty member's performance as a teacher and are used to document growth, development, and excellence in teaching.

Goals:

The ultimate goal of faculty teaching observations is to enhance professional development. The Tenure and Promotion Guidelines in the College of Arts and Sciences indicate faculty teaching observations must be included as part of the portfolio submitted for consideration and a multi-year schedule for the formal faculty observation, conducted by senior colleagues who will be involved in the process of reviewing materials for tenure and promotion. Each academic unit is expected to develop a process for conducting teaching observations of all faculty members throughout their career so the process truly

functions as developmental and formative for faculty. Goals include developing unit culture that supports growth and professional development as a teacher; establishing a culture and environment where observing other teachers, being observed by other teachers, and talking about teaching is not only acceptable but embraced; and creating contacts, plans, personal assistance, collaboration and mentorship in the area of teaching.

Procedure:

Each academic unit shall determine how teaching observations are conducted and by whom. Establishing peer teaching groups or circles of faculty who observe each other, identifying faculty who serve as teaching observers each semester/year, or assigning mentoring committees the responsibility to observe teaching are three possible approaches to consider.

The final document of the formal teaching observation is a narrative summary of the observation submitted on letterhead stationary, using this guide to structure and provide details for the observation and for the discussions, presented to the teacher being observed and to the chair/director of the department/school. Teaching observations that document improvement and innovation in a faculty member's teaching will be considered positive.

The process of formal faculty observation of teaching includes four steps:

1. A pre-observation meeting between the teacher and the observer to discuss the context of the course and of the lesson that will be observed, and the goals for the observation
2. The classroom observation
3. A post-observation meeting to discuss the observations made
4. A narrative summary of the observation, using the guide provided below for structure, including the context and post-observation discussion with the teacher

Best Practice Suggestions:

1. In the interest of fairness and clarity of process, some standardization within the unit is best.
2. Observers benefit from training and practice to use the tools for observation with consistency.
3. Opinions can vary as to what constitutes good teaching. Engaging multiple observers on different days and even in different classes is recommended.
4. Multiple observations, extended over a period of time and under a range of conditions, allow for a comprehensive and illustrative view.
5. Observers should be known as competent and effective teachers.
6. Observers should have familiarity with the broad discipline of the course, if not the specific course content.
7. Observers should be flexible, as there is no single correct way to teach.
8. Effective and meaningful observations of teaching work best if done over an extended period of time and range of conditions to allow for the demonstration of change and improvements or, in cases of implementing new teaching methodology or innovations, to allow for student adaptation.

9. A brief meeting between the observer and the teacher prior to the classroom observation is necessary for the teacher to share the syllabus, the context of the class and of the lesson, and the goals for the day. The pre-observation meeting also allows for a meaningful discussion regarding new teaching practices being piloted, and airing of any concerns or questions.
10. If the goal of the department/school is to improve teaching in the unit, then the process must create and support a culture of mutual mentoring and professional development in teaching. This includes supporting innovative teaching approaches that may take time to develop and addressing weaknesses in a longer-term process.
11. It is beneficial to include opportunities for newer faculty to observe the teaching of several experienced faculty in the unit, without any rating or review, as part of the mentoring process for professional development.
12. Untenured faculty should not be asked to rate colleagues in a summative assessment.
13. Narrative observations should include both strengths and potential areas of improvement.
14. Establishing a sustainable process of observing teaching that begins early in a faculty member's career provides the best opportunity for beneficial growth and professional development.

The Teacher:

Pre-observation:

- Once the observer has been identified, determine appropriate dates/times/course for the observation.
- Identify a day, time, and place for a pre-observation meeting between you and your observer. The goals of this meeting are to provide context for the observer who will be visiting one specific day out of the semester, to discuss issues, concerns, and methodology for the class and the course, and to heighten the conversation about teaching. The pre-observation meeting is extremely valuable for the professional development focus of teaching observations.
- For the pre-observation meeting (approximately 15-30 minutes), the teacher should be ready to share with the observer the following information:
 1. The course syllabus, handouts
 2. Contextual information about the course, as well as that day's topic
 3. Description of the students in the class
 4. Objectives for that class period
 5. Teaching methods and activities
 6. Student preparation expected for this class
 7. Any new ideas/methods being piloted during this class
 8. Any specific input from the observer that you wish to have

Classroom observation:

- It is important that you feel as comfortable as possible in this process. It may help to be familiar with the teaching observation guide so you are aware of the general categories and some of the detailed points.
- Depending on the size of your classroom and student enrollment, it may be appropriate to mention to the class that you have a guest faculty member visiting the class but this is something you may wish to discuss with the faculty observer in advance and is your choice whether or not to call this to the attention of the students.
- The goals are to have an opportunity to share your teaching and to allow for feedback and discussion with your colleague.

Post-observation:

- Within a week following the observation, meet again to discuss and debrief.
- Thereafter, the observer completes the written observation and provides a copy to the teacher and a copy to the chair/director that includes the feedback discussed in the post-observation meeting.
- Reflect on the feedback and your own thoughts to identify any next steps.

The Observer:

Pre-observation:

- Determine appropriate dates/times/course for the observation of the faculty member whom you will be observing.
- Familiarize yourself with the observation guide prior to the pre-observation meeting with the teacher. Note that the guide has six overarching sections that should be addressed in the narrative and organized in that way to add structure to the narrative. However, the various “considerations” listed are only suggested points to consider that may or may not be applicable depending upon factors such as content, size, and academic level (e.g., undergraduate class of large size vs. graduate seminar vs. one-on-one studio teaching). These are elements that are to be viewed as flexible based on the environment, needs, and goals of the faculty and within the academic unit. However, they are there to provide guidance for the observation. Therefore, not every consideration under the broader section will likely be addressed during a single observation.
- At the pre-observation meeting (approximately 15-30 minutes), develop an understanding of the syllabus, the context of the course and the lesson within the unit, and any additional materials presented by the teacher. Consider the following questions that you may wish to ask the teacher:
 1. What are your goals for the class I will observe?
 2. What teaching/learning activities will take place?
 3. What advance preparation will the students do for this class?
 4. Is this presentation typical of your teaching style or are you piloting a new idea?
 5. Is there anything you wish for me to focus on during the observation?
 6. Is there anything else that I should be aware of prior to the observation?
 7. Is there a specific place you feel I should sit in the classroom to observe yet be unobtrusive?
- It is important to remember that the teaching observation is one way to support improvement in effective teaching practices and is not meant to penalize innovation in the classroom.

Classroom observation:

- During the observation, try to be as unobtrusive as possible while maintaining a good view of students and teacher. Take notes on the teacher, the students, and course content, referring to the observation guide. Attend to verbal and nonverbal behavior, emphasizing what you see rather than your judgment *per se*.
- Immediately after the class, complete your notes based on the observation guide.

Post-observation:

- At the post-observation meeting (optimally, within 1 week following the observation), which may last approximately 15-30 minutes, give the teacher a copy of the completed observation form or a draft of your incomplete narrative of the observation and meet to discuss items such

as these below. Ask open-ended questions about the teacher's view and discuss strengths of the instruction as well as opportunities for growth.

1. In general, how did you feel the class went?
 2. How did you feel about your teaching/explanations of the material?
 3. To what extent do you feel the students were able to successfully accomplish the learning outcomes for this particular class?
 4. What do you feel worked well in the class? Is this a particular strength for you?
 5. What do you feel didn't work as well? Is that something that you are working on?
 6. What ideas do you have for enhancing those skills?
 7. Discuss strengths of the teaching of this class.
 8. Discuss suggestions and actionable recommendations.
- Complete the written narrative observation on unit letterhead using the guide for organizing your summary, including all overarching sections, and include the feedback discussed in the meeting.
 - The narrative for a **formal observation that will be included in the portfolio for tenure/promotion applications** must include the following:
 1. Introductory paragraph providing context for this course and this particular class; considerations discussed at the pre-observation meeting which might include specific goals of the teacher, innovative teaching ideas used, when this observation took place (such as the day before a test or the first day of a new unit of information); items of note regarding the physical space, sound reinforcement or issues, and technology that may be considerations but may also be out of the teacher's control for that particular day.
 2. The categories on the classroom observation guide as listed below, addressed by summarizing what was observed in the classroom:
 - a. Content Knowledge
 - b. Design of the Course and Learning Experience/Lesson Organization
 - c. Instructional Strategies in the Classroom, Laboratory, Studio, Clinic
 - d. Presentation Skills
 - e. Student Engagement/Learning Activities/Rapport with Students
 3. Brief Overall Summary concludes the narrative, noting areas of strength and any recommendations for improvement.
 4. Sign and Date
 - Teaching observations, outside those indicated for the formal observations included in the tenure/promotion application as delineated here, may occur throughout the career of the faculty member and may focus on select categories within the guide to help facilitate the spirit of sharing, guidance, and feedback.
 - Share copies of the completed narrative summary with the teacher and the chair/director.

¹Information and questions adapted from:

Chism, N.V.N. (2007). *Peer Review of Teaching: A Sourcebook*. Boston, MA: Anker.

Green, Kimberly. *Washington State University Office of Assessment of Teaching and Learning*

Weimer, M. (1990). *Improving college teaching: Strategies for developing instructional effectiveness*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.