



## 5 Quick Tips for Writing Faculty Teaching Observation Comments

by Michael Berman

Observing my ESL colleagues in action in the classroom is one of the professional responsibilities I most value. It is an important growth opportunity for both the observer and the observed, often allowing both parties to learn and reflect on what works well and what needs tweaking in their approaches to teaching. To achieve these important outcomes, however, the process must feel safe to all involved – teacher, observer and students – and must promote trust, honesty and risk taking, the same elements necessary in effective teaching. Meanwhile, in some cases there is an element of quality control involved with the observation, which can add stress to the process. And some faculty, you might say, would rather teach a class in the tar pits than with someone in a pantsuit taking notes in the corner. With this in mind, given the importance of conducting observations as well as the discomfort that sometimes accompanies them, I have found that the following five approaches to writing observation comments have usually helped the process move forward smoothly and beneficially for all.

1. **Communicate well beforehand with the faculty member to be observed in order to cultivate trust and an informed process.** Avoid surprises. Make sure you, as the observer, and the classroom teacher are on the same page about the protocol, documentation, date and length of observation (e.g., whether you plan to leave before the class ends), etc. Ask open-endedly if there is anything you should know prior to the observation or if there are any questions, doubts or requests of the teacher. Often a pre-observation conference is standard, but if it isn't, ask if your colleague would like one. Finally, reflect on what you need as an observer and ask for it prior to the session. This due diligence helps pave the way for a successful observation and for an easier, less stressful time writing your comments.
2. **Praise awesomeness!** Did you just observe a masterful, dynamic lesson that hit multiple learning styles? Don't hesitate to say so in glowing prose. Teaching well requires serious work and passion, and great lessons are just the tip of an iceberg of considerable forethought and preparation. When the teaching is outstanding, try not to get weighed down too much in the constructive minutia that sometimes creeps into our professorial heads. Rewarding excellence clearly and boldly helps keep motivation high for a teacher who is obviously working hard.
3. **Be specific.** Be careful with well-intentioned but generalized statements such as "I enjoyed the class" or "It was a great session." What about it did you enjoy? The instructor's lively, humorous demeanor? Her participative and well planned session? The relevant way she incorporated current events into her treatment of the present perfect tense? Specificity will help the observed teacher better understand and benefit from your comments.
4. **In your notes, be descriptive of student behavior and interaction.** Since we as teachers cannot always confidently determine the level of engagement (or distraction) of our students, this type of feedback is extremely valuable. Also, by focusing on the students, it is sometimes easier to keep

your observations clear and your tone less overtly prescriptive when providing constructive commentary (e.g., “Many students in the back row were on their phones texting for much of the session.” vs. “The instructor needed to engage all the students better.”)

5. **Be courageous when necessary.** Sometimes you may observe a class where the teaching is simply intolerably poor. While this is stressful for all involved, you owe it to the students and to your colleagues to be honest and document the session accurately. Sometimes the poor performance was an anomaly or may have been due to first-time jitters or a miscommunication of some sort. In those cases, after a debriefing with the faculty member, it may be appropriate to arrange a re-do observation at a later date or even arrange for another colleague to conduct the follow-up observation. After all, when we observe someone else’s class, our assessments are necessarily subjective and we are apt to favor approaches and teaching values that are closest to our own. (This is why multiple evaluations from different parties are often required in perennial summative evaluations.) If you’re unsure of how to proceed, reach out to a chair, dean or senior colleague for advice.

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