

Observation Letters A How-to Guide

Department of English, Fall 2021

With thanks to: Moriah Kirdy, Neepa Majumdar, Ben Miller, Caro Pirri,
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We seek to foster a strong culture of mutual support through peer observation. As our departmental statement on the evaluation of teaching affirms, it is the foundation of how we see one another as teaching professionals. And we'd like to ensure that our departmental culture distributes the work of observation equitably, especially across both tenure- and appointment stream faculty.

We have a new tool in the department to help colleagues locate observers and to ensure that the same colleagues are not performing observations over and over. This spreadsheet lists all colleagues with full-time permanent appointments, and on a rotating basis, indicates those who have recently performed observations and those who are available. Please read below to see how to use it to find an observer, and how to find help locating one. Faculty whose names are greyed out have reached their limit of observations for this year.

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1y5fqqXOLZIp16KL8SJSSoEVAoKDZ2HjtSIEzdE8UCi5Q/edit?usp=sharing>

FAQ

- Am I qualified to observe someone? **Yes.** Any faculty member can observe any other faculty member, regardless of rank or status. Should we always be mindful of hierarchies, identities, and other such factors? Of course. We can trust one another and assess those situations. If you have any questions or concerns, reach out to the chair. But at a minimum, we are all experts in college-level pedagogy and are qualified to observe others teaching college courses, regardless of content.
 - Exceptions: graduate seminars should be observed by graduate faculty, ideally by those who are members of one's tenure subcommittee/promotion committee when relevant. And we should not ask graduate students to observe faculty in any formal or evaluative capacity; they are certainly welcome to observe us as part of mentoring practices.

- What is the difference between an observation and an evaluation? **Important distinction.** Everyone should feel encouraged to observe faculty in all ranks at any time. We learn an immense amount from witnessing each others' teaching. Non-evaluative observations

may involve a descriptive letter, some notes on certain elements of a class session, or merely an informal discussion. If you are preparing for promotion, renewal, or reappointment, however, you will need formal observation letters based on observation of your teaching. It should be clear to both the observer and the observed when the situation is an evaluative one. For job applications and appointments, evaluative observations intended to form the basis of letters of recommendation should be conducted by a faculty member of higher rank who has a permanent appointment (see below).

- NB: Evaluative observations (e.g. not informal observations) are not confidential and, when completed, should be sent both to the colleague observed and to the chair's office, with a copy to the assistant to the chair, to be placed on file for the colleague in question for their next promotion/renewal/application dossier. They will be viewed by the voting faculty at the colleague's next faculty action. Informal observations *can* be sent to recommenders to be incorporated in their letters, at the discretion of the observer.
- When I need a teaching evaluation letter, how do I find someone to observe me? **Good question.** Generally speaking, if you are a Lecturer I or II, talk to your assigned mentor and/or DUGS for your program. Senior Lecturers: talk to your program director or chair and assistant chair. TS professors: talk to your tenure/promotion subcommittee chair. The colleague who is writing the teaching section of your promotion report should definitely observe you. For the additional letters, your subcommittee chair will work with your program chair and department chair to find observers.

For VL/VIs and PTIs, contact your program DUGS and/or adjunct faculty coordinator (new position to be announced, spring 2022), and see below. For graduate students, consult with your program director (rather than DUGS) and/or dissertation/project/thesis committee members; the DGS and Grad Advising committee can also assist. You may have built-in observation structures depending on which courses you are teaching at various stages of your career.

- How often should I aim to be observed? **That varies by your rank and status.** As a formal answer, you'll need to consult the handbook/guide for promotion and/or renewal relevant to your current situation, both at the departmental and DSAS level, to see what is required for your next dossier (e.g. how many observation letters are expected). But as a practical answer, once per year is a good rule of thumb; also, consider if observations are useful when you are teaching a new class, a class in a division you do not cover often (lower/upper/grad); a class that is going very well or not so well (and then, consider whether formal or informal observation might be best). You can also have the Center for Teaching and Learning observe and/or record you as part of their consultation process; visit teaching.pitt.edu.

NB: Depending on your program and what you're teaching, there may be committees or structures in place for observations already--see the departmental Teaching Guide on the [Faculty Resources](#) page. In the Composition program, new part-time faculty are typically observed in their first year of teaching by a designated Lecturer (currently Angie Farkas). The adjunct faculty observer also tries to visit classes of part-time faculty every three or four years. Part-time faculty who want to have a conversation about their teaching can request a visit at any time from the AS faculty observer, the Composition DUGS, or other Composition administrators.

- Is an observation letter a recommendation letter? **No.** The university distinguishes clearly between these two. Observation letters are needed for promotion and renewal (both AS and TS) in varying quantities and types. Most promotions and renewals need at least 2-3 observations. Recommendation letters are needed for job searches/appointments (both internal and external), and cover the candidate's full profile and job qualifications, including teaching but often more. *They cannot come from anyone who is on the selection committee for the appointment in question.**

*This matters greatly for our annual Visiting Lecturer searches: the entire Directors Committee--chair, assistant chair, all four DUGS, all four program directors, and the DGS are unable to write rec letters for VLS. For this reason, we need more faculty involved in writing rec letters for VLS; and because these are teaching-intensive positions, observations often form the basis for those recommendations. Therefore, we need more faculty from beyond the DC observing VLS regularly. Members of the DC are marked with a "DC" in the third column of the spreadsheet linked above.

- Where can I learn more about how to perform a good observation? **Perhaps the most common question.** There are many resources out there, beyond our own shared expertise. Purdue University Northwest has compiled them into one of the neatest and most streamlined websites, which covers basics such as the pre-observation meeting and the review of course materials, which our department values: <https://www.pnw.edu/center-faculty-excellence/programs/peer-observations-of-teaching/> Of course, you may have your own or can locate others; please share them as you see fit.