



Showing what you know

Pre-observation panic is normal, says Sally Ashworth, but try not to view them as a source of worry. Follow these tips for before, during and after for a positive experience.

Your palms are sweating, your stomach is churning and you are sure that when you open your mouth, nothing but a stream of gibberish is going to come out. The time has come: you are about to be observed!

Most fully-qualified teachers – even those who have been in the profession for decades – will tell you they still feel very nervous before an observation. A tummy full of butterflies and a burning desire to run for the hills in the minutes before your observer steps through the classroom door is quite normal.

Hayley Butterworth, who is in her first term as a fully qualified teacher at Triangle C of E Primary School in West Yorkshire, explains how she felt during her first observation as an NQT: 'It was extremely nerve-racking because you just don't know exactly what they're looking for and that makes you feel self-conscious. Once you get going though, you do sort of forget there's someone watching, and it does get easier each time. Now, I have a better idea what they want to see, I feel I'm doing a good job and that they see that too, so I'm much more relaxed.'

As an NQT, you will be observed regularly, but there are things you can do to make the experience as positive and helpful as possible. Remember, the person observing you is on your side and wants the lesson to go well as much as you do (or almost

as much!). They want to be able to tell you all the things you are doing right, as well as picking out areas for improvement. So take a deep breath, read these tips for surviving lesson observations, and go into your lesson feeling confident and ready to show off your skills.

Ask questions

- Talk to your observer beforehand and agree a focus. Will they be looking at how you manage behaviour, for example, or how you cater for the needs of a certain pupil? Having a focus does not mean you should neglect other aspects of the lesson, just that you should give special thought to doing your absolute best in that particular area. Feel free to suggest an area of focus; this shows you are being reflective about your teaching and proactive about developing your skills.
- Agree a date and time for the observation. Ask how long the observation is likely to last and which part of the lesson will be observed. If you know what to expect, you will feel more in control.
- Ask what is expected in terms of planning. Are you required to use a certain format? Does your observer want to see your plan? If so, make sure there is a

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- copy available, either before or during your lesson. If your lesson is part of a scheme of work, it might be helpful to show annotated plans for lessons already taught and any plans for future lessons.
- If there is anything else you would like to ask, go ahead. You are an NQT and asking for help and information shows initiative and a desire to learn.

Plan your lesson

- Plan your lesson thoroughly but try not to overdo it. Now is not the time to try out that new experimental drama technique you learned about on a course last week.
- Check through the Teachers' Standards – have you thought about each area? These are what you will be observed against.
- Make sure your plan shows that you have thought carefully about what you want the children to learn (the learning objective), how they will learn it (the teaching and learning activities), and how they will show they have learned it (the outcomes or success criteria).
- Show that you have considered the needs of all pupils in the class; clear differentiation is crucial.
- If there are children with specific educational needs (including any gifted or talented pupils) it is a good idea to name them individually on your plan; how will you address their needs? If you have teaching or support assistants in class, how will you use them to ensure these children make progress and succeed?
- There is no need to write pages and pages with each second accounted for; you are not an actor reading a script. If one side of A4 is all it takes, there is no need to add extra detail just for the sake of it. Less is usually more.
- Get all your resources ready. If there is going to be a lot to hand out, think about when and how you will do this to avoid interrupting the flow of the lesson.
- If there will be other adults in the lesson, try to talk to them beforehand. Explain what their role will be. Using support effectively is a key ingredient in a good or outstanding lesson and you need to make sure they are playing an active part right from the beginning.

Relax and do your best

- The person observing you knows you are nervous – remember, they were in your position once – so do not worry about your hands shaking or your voice trembling a little bit at the start. You will soon settle down.
- Share the learning objective and success criteria with the children; they need to know what they are going to learn and how they will demonstrate they have learned it.
- Avoid talking for too long, particularly at the start of the lesson. It is easy to ramble on a bit,

especially when you feel nervous, but it is good practice to get the children actively involved as soon as possible. You can use mini plenaries during the lesson to address any misconceptions and to move the learning forward. This shows you understand the importance of ongoing assessment.

- Use careful questioning to assess pupils' understanding. Ask open and differentiated questions and use the answers to decide where your lesson needs to go.
- Be flexible. It is fine to change your plan if you do not feel the class or a group of children have fully grasped something; in fact, this is what good teachers do all the time.
- Be aware of what all children are doing, both in terms of learning and behaviour. If you are working with a group, make sure you keep a close eye on the rest of the class. Visit each table to check pupils are on task, and do something about it if not; carry out a mini plenary with the whole class or spend a minute talking to a few children about what they need to do next.
- Deal with challenging behaviour quickly and consistently. Show that you have high expectations and will not tolerate behaviour which affects other children's ability to learn.
- If something goes wrong, do not panic. Nobody is expecting perfection. What they want to see is, that if something is a particular issue in this lesson, you try to address it next time.

Afterwards

- Think about the kind of questions your observer might ask and how you might respond. A typical opening question is *How do you feel the lesson went?* Say what you think went well and not so well. What would you do differently next time?
- Try not to feel too disheartened if the feedback is not as good as you had hoped for. Constructive criticism helps you learn and even the most experienced teachers expect to be given points for development.
- File any written feedback you are given.
- Next time you are observed, show that you really listened to the feedback and have addressed any points for improvement.
- Remember, you are at a very early stage in your career. You will have some great successes and probably some great flops. What matters, just like for the children in your class, is that you are learning and making progress with every lesson you teach.

As Sarah Dawson, lead adviser for NQTs with Entrust, Staffordshire's education service, puts it: 'It must be a useful and constructive experience, not a worry. What's an observation for, after all? It's a celebration of what you know.'