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OPA EVALUATION TA

Observation Tip Sheet

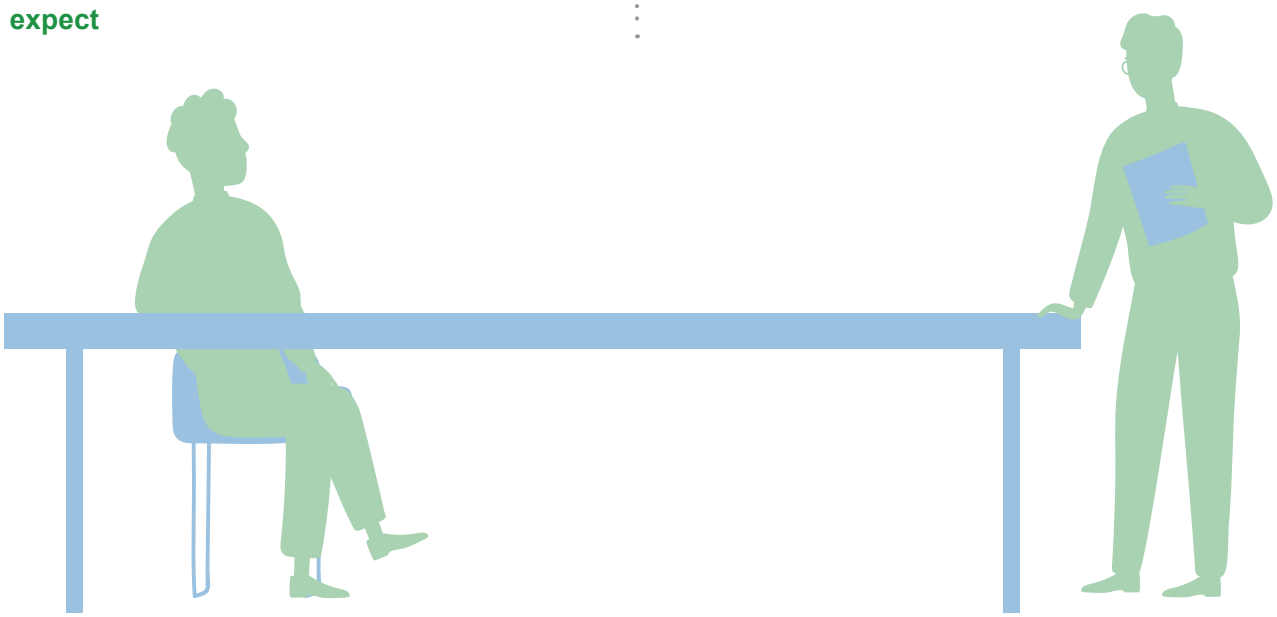
What is an observation?

An observation is a way of using your senses—most often vision and hearing—to collect data. Researchers document their observations of activities, events, and interactions. Observations can occur in person or by reviewing audio or video recordings. This tip sheet focuses more on observations used for program improvement or continuous quality improvement than program evaluation, but many of the points are applicable to observations for program evaluation, too.

Observations can provide information on fidelity, quality, engagement, and other topics.

When *should* I conduct an observation?

- When you're looking to document information **about your program's implementation**
- When you want to understand **why a program, or specific part of a program, isn't working as you expect**
- When you're trying to capture the **level of active engagement from people** involved in an activity
- When you're **looking to document just a sample of sessions**—not what happened in every program session



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FAQs

What should my research team look like? For observations, your research team would typically include at least two observers, although they might not always observe the same activity or event. Observers can be program staff if the observations are focused on program improvement. If observing for an evaluation, observers should not be people involved with providing the program.

How often should I observe? It depends on what you want to learn. If your purpose is assessing a program's fidelity (that is, how faithfully implemented it is), you might want observations at set intervals, such as three times a year for each facilitator, or a certain number of observations per team member. If you want to describe program implementation very broadly, you might need a representative sample of sessions, such as 15 percent of all sessions offered in a cohort. If you are focused on continuous quality improvement, you can focus your observations on new content or facilitators or sessions that aren't working as intended. Note: The guidance provided here is intended to refer to observations broadly in the context of evaluation and continuous quality improvement. This guidance does not supersede the Funding Opportunity Announcement minimum programmatic requirements for fidelity observations, that is, 10 percent of programming for fidelity and quality, generally.

What do data from an observation look like? Data typically come in the form of notes or a checklist, which researchers complete while observing or when reviewing a recording (audio or video). Consider why you need the data so you can determine what format the data should be in. Checklists are useful for putting together numeric data consistently across many observations. Detailed notes are more useful for providing thorough feedback to facilitators. In the end, you might have data from a single observer or from two observers that you have to reconcile.

How do I *prepare* for an observation?

STEP 1 **Identify your objectives for the observation.** Are you assessing fidelity, engagement, or quality? Or do you just want to understand what the program looks like in action? An observation will likely have multiple elements to observe for any single objective, so be sure you're observing enough elements for each objective to get a good measure. For example, assess participant engagement at multiple points during the lesson and during different teaching methods. If you have multiple objectives and multiple observers, you might have each observer focus on some similar and some different elements. In that case, you might have two people observing one session, each focuses on quality, one focuses on fidelity using a fidelity-focused tool and the other focuses on understanding how a new activity works, capturing a description of the activity, the issues, and the reactions of participants.

STEP 2 **Determine the structure of the observation.** You might use a structured observation, with a checklist or other tool, if there are specific things to document in the observation. If scores will be calculated from checklists, ensure the directions are clear to observers about how to calculate scores. Determine if you'll use thresholds or benchmarks. Thresholds are minimum levels that must be met—for example, a threshold can be that 80 percent of activities in a lesson must be done to consider that lesson "delivered." An unstructured observation, which might include only notes, is a good choice if there are no specific elements to document or quantify; you should, however, still develop a structure for the notes and prompts for things to look for so the notes are useful. If observers are looking for potential issues with an activity, they could structure their notes to indicate what step in the activity they're on, what they observed, and why it seemed to be a problem.

STEP 3 **If required, obtain institutional review board approval to conduct your observations, including for recordings or tools such as checklists.** For example, IRB approval may be required if your observations are considered research, which is the systematic collection of information that will contribute to generalizable knowledge. Institutional review boards oversee research to ensure people's rights are protected. Often, research funded by outside entities, such as the federal government, or

research conducted with the goals of publishing findings must be reviewed by an institutional review board before going forward. See the OPA tip sheet for more information about IRB requirements. You should also check to see what other permissions or approvals you need. Would you please change this to "Some school districts require fingerprinting and basic criminal background checks.

STEP 4 **Ensure key site staff know about the planned observation.** Ideally, observers will talk with the staff leading the activity or event they're observing to explain the purpose for the observation and how data will be collected (recording, notes, checklist). This discussion should include when observers can enter and exit the activity, whether to identify and introduce observers to participants, the degree of interaction observers and participants should have, and whether to (and who will) collect consent forms from participants.

How do I *conduct* an observation?

STEP 1 **Introduce yourself to the staff, thank them for allowing you to observe, and confirm necessary consents were collected, if applicable**. Position yourself for the best view of the activities or people you are observing while remaining unobtrusive. Ensure the observers and staff agree on whether and how observers will be introduced to or interact with participants, if at all. Be as unobtrusive as possible while still being able to observe—the goal is to see what happens if there were no observer.

STEP 2 **Prepare yourself to observe and document, as needed.** Ensure you have more than one pen, if you are using pen and paper, or enough battery if using electronic equipment. Make sure you are comfortable, as moving around could distract participants or staff.

STEP 3 **Document observations as directed in training.** Consider making quick notes to yourself, even on a checklist, to help support any ratings or scores. Do not leave any observation materials, complete or incomplete, unattended or in a place where others could see tools, documentation, or notes.

Additional tips for conducting observations

Good observers will…

- ☐ **Be familiar with the observation tools.** They should know what they are looking for during the observation, and they should also know how frequently to focus on an element or staff person.
- ☐ **Be trained and demonstrate reliability.** Before observing, observers should receive training on the tools, what to look for, and how and when to capture what they observe. They might require training on the program or intervention if what they are observing requires that level of knowledge. Once trained, observers should demonstrate reliability against a trained observer (that is, they see and document the same thing as the trained observer). You can use inter-rater reliability statistics to assess reliability.
- ☐ **Use checklists as intended.** This includes selecting from among the options presented, not creating a new one, and adding notes to support ratings.
- ☐ **Document observations in the requested format.** If the documentation should be notes rather than a checklist, observers should ensure they format their notes as requested. This might include writing key elements with supporting bullet points under them or a running record.
- ☐ **Be as unobtrusive as possible.** If observers are not staying for the full activity or event, they should only leave at a natural break in the observed session. Also, they should only interact with participants and staff as agreed when arranging the observation.

Other considerations

- ☐ **Consider feedback loops.** If you're observing staff to determine fidelity to the model or engagement with youth, how and when will staff receive feedback on what went well and how to improve?
- ☐ **Ensure enough data are collected.** Observers should ideally conduct multiple observations of activities, events, or interactions involving different people. The goal is to be confident that findings are not unique to specific observations or people being observed, so consider using a matrix to plan observations and observers to have breadth and depth in what and who you observe and which observers do it.
- ☐ **Always have a backup mode of documentation.** If observing a live event, ensure low-technology options (paper and pencil) for documenting the observation are available.

How do I *analyze and use* observation data?

STEP 1 **As soon as possible, save your data in a secure location.** Review your notes to ensure they are clear and the checklists are complete.

STEP 2 **Use analytical tools, such as NVivo or Excel, to systematically organize your data.** One approach to organizing your data is to transfer data from your notes or checklist into a spreadsheet arranged by observation element. Score checklists as previously stipulated in guidelines.

STEP 3 **If you're using observation tools with thresholds, calculate any scores or thresholds and examine whether benchmarks were met.** If appropriate, give an overall rating to the observation, such as "implemented with fidelity."

For observations without checklists or thresholds, including open-ended notes, ask yourself what patterns or common themes emerge from the intended elements. Look for possible issues or best practices to highlight.

As you analyze your data, determine whether you have to adjust your observation forms, thresholds, or scoring criteria for the future.

STEP 4 **Synthesize your findings.** Use the data to answer the research questions that prompted your observations.

STEP 5 **Use and share your findings in a way that suits your audience.** You can use graphics, tables, or text to communicate your findings and conclusions.

Additional resources

ETR Associates. (2014). *Conducting observations for continuous quality improvement (CQI).* http://surveygizmolibrary.s3.amazonaws.com/library/189682/CQIObservationTool_Stepby_Step_Final_rev061114.pdf

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