# Early Literacy Classroom Observation Tool

DESE Instructional Planning and Observation Tools Collection

## Guiding Question

**To what extent are all students experiencing evidence-based, inclusive, and culturally and linguistically sustaining early literacy instruction that promotes deeper learning?**

## About this Tool

The Early Literacy Classroom Observation Tool articulates essential expectations for effective teaching and learning aligned to the [DESE Educational Vision](https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2023/2023-05/item7.1-educational-vision.pdf) , the [Standards of Effective Practice,](https://www.doe.mass.edu/edeffectiveness/standards/teaching/teaching.pdf) and [evidence-based early literacy practices](https://www.doe.mass.edu/massliteracy/). For details on purpose and use of this observation tool, please review the [Classroom Observation Tools Guidance](https://www.doe.mass.edu/kaleidoscope/planning/protocols/default.html) document.

## Tool Purpose

This tool is designed to be used in observation of:

* **Grades K to 3:** A full core literacy block which should include three main components, with oral language development throughout:
* Foundational skills (as appropriate based on grade-level and student need)
* Engaging with complex text
* Writing

Depending on the specific context, these skills may be demonstrated during whole-group instruction, small-group instruction, play-based instruction/centers and/or co-teaching and may occur across one or more observations.

* **Preschool:** Because literacy development in PreK occurs across a range of instructional formats— interactive, structured and play-based—it is important that observations reflect this variety. Instead of focusing solely on a designated "literacy block," observers should look for opportunities to see literacy instruction embedded in different parts of the day.

To ensure a comprehensive view, observations should be conducted across multiple visits, prioritizing different components of literacy instruction each time. The different parts of the day may include:

* Whole-group activities (e.g., a read-aloud, shared writing, letter-sound instruction)
* Small-group instruction (e.g., explicit phonological awareness lessons, guided writing, interactive literacy tasks)
* Play-based and embedded learning (e.g., literacy-rich centers, dramatic play with writing opportunities, child-led storytelling)
* Language interactions (e.g., snack time, transitions, math/science activities)

## Navigation

Each section of this observation tool focuses on a key part of early literacy instruction and is aligned to the Standards for Effective Practice. Each section includes:

* **Indicators:** These are specific skills or teaching practices that show whether literacy instruction is effective. They help observers understand what to pay attention to in each section.
* **Look-fors:** These are examples of what effective teaching and learning look like in the classroom. They provide concrete details to help observers recognize when an indicator is being met.

## Low Inference Observation Notes

Subject: Click or tap here to enter text. Grade Level: Click or tap here to enter text.

Part of Lesson Observed: Choose an item. Numbers of Students and Teachers: Click or tap here to enter text.

*Describe the assignment or activity. What is the teacher doing? What are students doing (all students, x number of students)? If possible, note known or identifiable student groups represented in the room (multilingual learners, students with disabilities, etc.) and the classroom set-up (student access to materials, seating options, work spaces).*

Click or tap here to enter text.

Grade-level content standards addressed: Click or tap here to enter text.

Language objective addressed, if applicable: Click or tap here to enter text.

High-quality instructional materials (HQIM) used: Click or tap here to enter text.

Range of English proficiency levels, if known: Click or tap here to enter text.

Range of languages spoken in classroom, if known: Click or tap here to enter text.

## Section 1: Instruction (Standard II-A, II-B)

Instructional practices and pedagogy are evidence-based, inclusive, and culturally and linguistically sustaining, so that all students engage in the complex thinking and ideas of the lesson.

| *Observation Look-fors* | *Rating* |
| --- | --- |
| Inclusive Student Experience: Does this lesson recognize, center, and affirm diverse identities, perspectives, and experiences?  * Students engage in learning that is developmentally appropriate and values and leverages their identities, experiences, interests, home languages, and/or cultures. * Lesson targets language development aligned to grade-appropriate WIDA standards, with clear language objectives that highlight key functions and features. * The lesson elements ensure that students have opportunities to practice these language functions and disciplinary language in alignment with content objectives. * The classroom environment maintains classroom displays and resources that are print-rich, provide instructional language models, support access to grade-level content, showcase student work, and promote student interaction. | Yes  Mostly  Partially  Not yet  Not Applicable |
| Assessment and Differentiation: Is there evidence that the teacher is collecting and responding to data and providing feedback to students as they progress towards mastery?  * Teacher collects student data (formal and/or informal). * Teacher responds to data and differentiates and adjusts instruction accordingly to support students. * Students receive asset-based feedback that clarifies progress, maintains cognitive lift, and guides next steps toward learning goals. * Students receive flexible scaffolds and support, when necessary, so that all students, including students with disabilities, English learners, and former English learners, can work towards the same, grade-level objectives as their peers. | Yes  Mostly  Partially  Not yet  Not Applicable |

## Section 2: Foundational Skills (Standard I-A, II-A, II-B)

The core literacy block includes systematic and explicit instruction with active practice in foundational skills every day in grades K–3. Literacy instruction is taught throughout the day in preschool classrooms.

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| *Observation Look-fors* | *Rating* |
| Aligned Content: Is foundational skills instruction appropriate for the grade level and time of year?  * The foundational skill(s) observed in the lesson reflect grade-level standards and are appropriate for the time of year. * The foundational skill(s) observed in the lesson is part of a systematic scope and sequence. | Yes  Mostly  Partially  Not yet  Not Applicable |
| Explicit Teacher-Directed Instruction: Is the foundational skills instruction clear, explicit, and accurate?  * Teacher is delivering instruction in concepts of print, phonological awareness, phonics and decoding, and/or fluency that is clear, explicit, and accurate. * Lesson elements are presented in a child-friendly and engaging manner. * Lesson includes appropriate time for aligned teacher instruction and student practice of targeted skill(s). | Yes  Mostly  Partially  Not yet  Not Applicable |
| Sufficient and Aligned Student Practice: Do students have sufficient opportunities to practice new and previously introduced foundational skills in- and out-of-context?  * Students are practicing concepts of print, phonological awareness, letter-sound correspondence, phonics, decoding and encoding, and/or fluency through differentiated tasks in playing, center-based application, small groups and/or independently aligned to the targeted content and skills. * Students practice skills out of context, with support as needed. * Students practice skills in context with connected text, with support as needed in whole- and small-group instruction, based on student needs, interests, and identities [K-2]. * Teacher is providing time and support for repetitive, engaging, active, and efficient student practice of foundational skills. * Students practice connecting acquisition of foundational skills to making meaning from reading and listening. | Yes  Mostly  Partially  Not yet  Not Applicable |

## Section 3: Engaging with Complex Texts (Standard I-A, II-A, II-B)

The core literacy block includes reading and/or listening to authentic and meaningful texts every day in grades PreK–3.

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| *Observation Look-fors* | *Rating* |
| High-Quality Texts: Is the lesson focused on a high-quality text(s)?  * Students actively listen to, read, write, and/or speak about texts for the majority of the lesson. * Texts are grade-appropriate, complex, culturally relevant, and worthy of student time. They provide meaningful knowledge, diverse perspectives, and rich academic language. Illustrations support comprehension when appropriate. | Yes  Mostly  Partially  Not yet  Not Applicable |
| High-Quality Questions and Tasks: Does this lesson employ questions and tasks, both oral and written, which integrate the standards and build students’ comprehension of the text(s) and its meaning?  * Lesson integrates grade-level reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language standards to support deep understanding of the text(s) and/or topics under consideration. * Teacher demonstrates meaning-making strategies through read-alouds and think-alouds centered on the grade-level text. * Lesson focuses on key words, phrases, and sentences to build vocabulary and deepen understanding while attending to the text’s qualitative features—such as meaning, language, structure, and knowledge demands—to support comprehension. * Lesson requires students to use details from the text to demonstrate understanding and/or support their ideas about the text. * Students have access to grade-level tasks and experiences, with appropriate support to meet high expectations. * Teacher is guiding students through text-based questions that progress from literal to deeper, inferential thinking aligned with grade-level standards centered on the grade-level appropriate text. | Yes  Mostly  Partially  Not yet  Not Applicable |
| Student Ownership: Are all students responsible for doing the thinking in this classroom?  * Students do the majority of the work of the lesson—speaking, listening, reading, and/or writing—through engaging, hands-on activities. This may be in play-based or center-based learning. * Students are examining diverse perspectives and thinking critically about texts and topics with real-world impact within tasks and activities. * Students are asking and responding to text-based questions and each other’s thinking orally and in writing through various group configurations (pairs, small groups, and/or whole class) to clarify or improve their understanding of the grade-level text or topic. * Students reason and make meaning of texts to persevere through difficulty. When teachers provide support, students still own the complex thinking. * Students provide text evidence to support their ideas and use topic or text-specific language in their oral and/or written responses. | Yes  Mostly  Partially  Not yet  Not Applicable |

## Section 4: Writing (Standard I-A, II-A, II-B)

The core literacy block includes systematic writing instruction with active practice every day in grades PreK–3.

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| *Observation Look-fors* | *Rating* |
| Explicit Teacher-Directed Instruction: Are writing skills and strategies clear, explicit, and accurate?  * Teacher provides explicit, standards-aligned instruction in different ranges of writing, conventions of Standard English, craft, and/or writing process using culturally relevant curricular materials. * Teacher facilitates guided practice and application of writing skills using questions and tasks that support students to actively draw upon their backgrounds, make connections, examine their own and others’ perspectives, or help advance student thinking and actions about real-world issues. * Teacher provides models (e.g., exemplar texts, student samples, sharing their own writing). * Students engage in discourse with the teacher and peers to extend their thinking and develop ideas for writing. | Yes  Mostly  Partially  Not yet  Not Applicable |
| Sufficient and Aligned Student Practice: Do students have a wide range of authentic writing applications?  * Students are practicing and applying skills in the context of culturally relevant and meaningful writing tasks. * Students have agency and choice in selecting and developing ideas, topics, or styles of writing. * Students are engaging in writing activities (including fine motor activities, drawing, dictation, shared writing, inventive spelling, scribbling, and writing) for specific and grade-appropriate purposes and audiences (opinion, informative/explanatory, narrative, aligned centers activity). * The majority of writing tasks are connected to texts used during reading instruction. | Yes  Mostly  Partially  Not yet  Not Applicable |
| Student Ownership: Are all students responsible for doing the thinking in this classroom?  * Students do the majority of the work of the lesson—speaking, listening, reading, and/or writing—through engaging, hands-on activities. This may be in play-based or center-based learning. * Students use writing to examine diverse perspectives, think critically about topics, and communicate ideas with real-world impact, incorporating evidence from texts when appropriate. * Students actively engage in the writing process—generating, drafting, revising, and refining their ideas—while persevering through challenges and maintaining ownership of their thinking, even with teacher support. This may include telling their ideas through drawing, dictation, shared writing, inventive spelling, scribbling, and writing depending on the grade level. * Students participate in high-quality discussions about their writing, asking questions, providing feedback, and using topic- or text-specific language to strengthen their work. | Yes  Mostly  Partially  Not yet  Not Applicable |