

The Six Elements of Strong Teacher Feedback

A practical guide for assistant principals and other leaders who coach teachers

Background and purpose

For assistant principals and other instructional leaders, classroom observations are an important part of supporting teacher development. During an observation, a leader may notice several areas that need attention, including the directions a teacher gives, the questions a teacher asks, or the checks for understanding a teacher uses. The next responsibility is deciding which area to prioritize and preparing feedback that helps the teacher make a specific change in their practice.

However, identifying an area for growth does not always make it easy to explain what the teacher should do next. A comment such as “increase student engagement” may describe the concern, but it does not tell the teacher which part of the lesson to change or how to change it. Without that guidance, the teacher may leave the coaching meeting understanding the concern but still unsure of how to address it.

Growth MindED Consulting created this guide to help leaders prepare feedback that teachers can understand, practice during a coaching meeting, and apply in an upcoming lesson. The guide explains six elements of strong teacher feedback and includes examples of what bite-sized feedback is and is not. A completed feedback message and a planning template show how the elements fit together so that you can prepare feedback for a teacher you currently support.

How to use this guide

- Review the six elements before preparing feedback for a teacher.
- Use the six examples to compare broad comments with specific action steps.
- Read the completed feedback message, then use the planning template to prepare your own.

The Six Elements at a Glance

What makes feedback bite sized

Bite-sized feedback identifies one specific teaching action based on what you observed. The teacher can practice the action with you and use it in the next lesson. When you return, observe whether the teacher is using the action and decide together whether further practice or an adjustment would help.

A short sentence is not necessarily bite-sized feedback. “Improve your questioning” is brief, but it does not tell the teacher what to say or do. The action step should be narrow; the explanation should be complete enough for the teacher to understand and apply it.

The six elements

Focus indicator

Identify the relevant expectation in your school’s teaching rubric.

Scripted evidence

Record the teacher’s or students’ actual words and actions from the observation.

Why this matters

Explain how the proposed change addresses what you observed.

Action step

Name one specific teaching move for the teacher to use.

Practice prompt

Have the teacher rehearse that move during the coaching meeting.

Follow-up look-for

Describe what you will look for when you return.

1 Give complete directions

What the leader observed

The teacher names the assignment, but students ask where to write and what to include.

Feedback that needs more guidance

“Be clearer when you give directions.”

A specific action step

Before releasing students, state what they will do, where they will do it, and what their finished work should include.

Why the revised feedback helps

The revised feedback names one routine the teacher can practice. It does not ask the teacher to guess what “clearer” means.

What the AP could say during practice

“Let’s use tomorrow’s assignment. Give the directions as if I am a student in your class.”

What to look for during the next observation

The teacher gives all three parts of the directions before releasing students.

Sample scenario. Match the feedback to your observation and your school’s expectations.

These comparisons focus on the action step. The completed message later in this guide shows how to include all six elements.

2 Ask students to explain an answer

What the leader observed

The teacher accepts an answer and immediately moves to the next question without asking how the student reached it.

Feedback that needs more guidance

“Ask more rigorous questions.”

A specific action step

After a student answers a key question, ask, “What in the text or model supports your answer?”
Pause for the student to explain before evaluating the response.

Why the revised feedback helps

The revised feedback identifies one follow-up question and when to ask it. “More rigorous” does not specify either.

What the AP could say during practice

“I’ll give you a short answer to tomorrow’s question. Practice your follow-up question and give me time to explain.”

What to look for during the next observation

The teacher asks for supporting information and waits for the student’s explanation before responding.

Sample scenario. Match the feedback to your observation and your school’s expectations.

3 Use checks for understanding that include every student

What the leader observed

During checks for understanding, the teacher calls on the same few students who raise their hands.

Feedback that needs more guidance

“Use cold calling, whiteboards, exit tickets, and partner talk for checks for understanding.”

A specific action step

During the planned check for understanding after your model, ask every student to write a response to the same question. Scan the responses before selecting students to explain their answers.

Why the revised feedback helps

The original gives the teacher a list of strategies to manage. The revision focuses on one check for understanding at a specific point in the lesson.

What the AP could say during practice

“Show me the question you will use. Practice introducing the check for understanding, then show me how you will scan the responses.”

What to look for during the next observation

The teacher collects a response from each student and reviews the responses before calling on individual students.

Sample scenario. Match the feedback to your observation and your school's expectations.

4 Make the expectations visible in a model

What the leader observed

The teacher asks for a complete response, but the example does not show what makes a response complete.

Feedback that needs more guidance

“Students need to produce stronger written responses.”

A specific action step

Before independent writing, show one completed response and point out the two features students need to include in their own responses.

Why the revised feedback helps

The original describes the writing the teacher wants students to produce. The revised feedback explains how the teacher can use a model to make those expectations clear.

What the AP could say during practice

“Show me the completed response you will use tomorrow. Practice explaining the two features students should include in their own writing.”

What to look for during the next observation

The teacher explicitly identifies the two features in the model before students begin writing.

Sample scenario. Match the feedback to your observation and your school's expectations.

5 Hear the student's attempt before helping

What the leader observed

When a student asks for help, the teacher immediately supplies the next step without asking what the student has tried.

Feedback that needs more guidance

"Build student ownership."

A specific action step

When a student asks for help, first ask, "What have you tried so far?" Listen to the student's explanation before choosing your next prompt.

Why the revised feedback helps

Building student ownership can remain the broader coaching goal. This action step gives the teacher one way to begin: hear what the student has tried before offering help.

What the AP could say during practice

"I'll say, 'I don't know what to do.' Practice your first question and listen to my answer before helping."

What to look for during the next observation

The teacher asks about the student's attempt and listens before giving further guidance.

Sample scenario. Match the feedback to your observation and your school's expectations.

6 Help partners respond to each other

What the leader observed

Partners take turns giving answers, but they do not respond to what the other person said.

Feedback that needs more guidance

“Great partner talk today. Keep it up!”

A specific action step

After partners share their answers, ask each student to respond to one specific idea their partner shared. Model the prompt, “I agree or disagree with ____ because ____.”

Why the revised feedback helps

The original offers encouragement but no next step. The revision identifies one addition to the partner discussion routine.

What the AP could say during practice

“I’ll be your partner and share an idea. Show me how you will model a response to that specific idea.”

What to look for during the next observation

The teacher explicitly prompts partners to respond to each other’s ideas, rather than only taking turns.

Sample scenario. Match the feedback to your observation and your school’s expectations.

A Completed Feedback Message

This sample brings the six elements together. The focus is the teacher's directions before independent work. Use your own observation notes and your school's rubric when preparing a real message.

Focus indicator

Clear directions. Match this focus to the corresponding indicator in your school's teaching rubric.

Scripted evidence

At 10:05, you said, "Solve the problem and show your work." Before starting, one student asked, "In our notebooks?" Another asked, "Do we need to write a sentence?"

Why this matters

Your directions named the task, but they did not name where students should complete it or what their finished work should include. Giving those details before the release makes the expectations clear from the start.

Action step

Before releasing students tomorrow, state what they will do, where they will do it, and what their finished work should include.

Practice prompt

Let's practice with tomorrow's problem. Give the directions as if I am a student in your class. Include the task, the location, and the expectations for finished work.

Follow-up look-for

When I visit tomorrow, I will listen for all three parts of your directions before you release students for independent work.

Practice the Feedback During a Coaching Meeting

After discussing the feedback, ask the teacher to rehearse the directions for an upcoming lesson. This gives you an opportunity to hear how the teacher will apply the feedback and provide support before the lesson takes place.

What the teacher could say during practice

“Solve problem three in your math notebook. Show each step of your solution. Then write one sentence explaining how you found your answer.”

What students will do

Solve problem three.

Where they will do it

In their math notebooks.

What finished work should include

Each step of the solution and one sentence explaining how they found the answer.

How the AP could respond after practice

“You named the task and where students should complete it. You also specified what their finished work should include. Let’s try those directions once more so the sequence feels comfortable before tomorrow’s lesson.”

If the teacher leaves out part of the directions, explain what was missing and ask the teacher to try again. Keep the practice focused on the agreed action step so that the teacher has time to become comfortable using it.

Prepare Feedback for Your Next Coaching Meeting

Choose one classroom observation and one teaching move that is worth practicing. Complete the prompts below, then read the message aloud. The teacher should be able to explain what they will do differently in the next lesson.

Focus indicator

Which expectation in your school's rubric does this feedback address?

Scripted evidence

What did the teacher or students say or do? Include a time or lesson moment.

Why this matters

Why is this change useful in the lesson you observed?

Action step

What is the one move the teacher will use, and when will they use it?

Practice prompt

What will you ask the teacher to rehearse with you?

Follow-up look-for

When will you return, and what teacher action will you look for?

Review Your Feedback Before the Coaching Meeting

Check before you share

- Does the feedback address one teaching priority?
- Have you included specific words or actions from the observation?
- Could the teacher explain what to do differently in the next lesson?
- Have you planned an opportunity for the teacher to practice with you?
- Does your plan for the next observation focus on the action you asked the teacher to use?

About Nicole Bryan

Nicole Bryan has spent over a decade developing performance management frameworks, rubrics, and teacher coaching structures for charter organizations. Through Growth MindED Consulting, she helps school leaders use those tools to prepare specific feedback and plan coaching sessions that support changes in teacher practice.

Continue practicing with other school leaders

For guided practice preparing feedback and leading coaching sessions, explore the New Assistant Principal Series at growthmindedconsulting.com/assistant-principal-series.