Gathering Information about Environments and Tasks

Effective, appropriate decisions about assistive technology can only be made when teams are well informed about the unique characteristics of the environments in which the student spends time and the tasks that are being done in those environments (Zabala, 1994). The Wisconsin Assistive Technology Initiative strongly encourages observing the student in several environments with a specific focus on describing the environment and the activities/tasks in which the target student and other students are engaged. The Environmental Observation Guide is a tool for that purpose.

Consider all customary environments, including the classroom and other school environments, such as the lunchroom, playground, assemblies, etc., the home, and any relevant community sites such as shopping malls, restaurants, church, scouts or other groups. Information to be gathered can be guided by specific questions such as these:

- What equipment and materials, including technology supports, are available in each environment?
- Who are the primary people interacting with the student?
- How is instruction or direction delivered?
- What modifications are typically made in various environments?
- What is the student's position and location in room?
- Where are the things the student needs to see, such as chalkboard, overhead, etc.?
- What is the lighting and sound like in the setting?
- How are transitions accomplished? Are there concerns?

Teams may modify or add to these questions, they are provided only as a starting place.

There are many different types of Environmental or Classroom Observation Guides. This manual includes two versions. Remember that you can adapt either of or both these to fit your needs.

Using the Environmental Observation Guide

The Environmental Observation Guide instructions was developed by the National Assistive Technology Research Institute (2001), modified and used with permission.

The Environmental Observation Guide forms draw the observer's attention to what is going on in the activity and setting. Teams may modify or add to these questions. They are provided only as a starting place.

Prior to the observation:

Clarify the purpose of the observation:
- Record successful assistive technology use in educational environments
- Observe a student using assistive technology in educational environments
- Record characteristics of the educational environments

Select a time and place:
- Review the student's IEP for specifics about the student's AT use.
- First preference – Schedule the observation for the place and time indicated in the IEP as to when AT is supposed to be used during the day.

- Second preference – If it is not specified in the IEP, talk to a teacher to schedule a time and place when the student uses AT the most during the day.

- Third preference – If the student uses the AT across the entire day, observe in the setting where he spends the most amount of his instructional day

Meet with the teacher(s), therapists, and assistants to determine:

- What will happen in the class that day; Is it a typical day?
- What the student using assistive technology will be doing that day.
- Inform them what you will be doing during the observation.

During the observation:

Record observations:

- Complete the environmental assessment checklist.
- Record direct student observation field notes.
- Record impressions and comments.
- Record time markers in the observation notes to determine length of activities.
- Participate in the class only if invited to do so.

After the observation:

Thank the teacher for allowing you to observe.

If time allows in the teacher's schedule:

- Probe for additional information directly related to your observations for clarity.
- Share a brief summary of what you saw.

Provide the teacher with a copy of the observation summary when completed.

Conduct the teacher interview at a mutually agreed upon time.

The observer's role is to capture what is occurring, not to make decisions or even formal recommendations; that comes later in the decision-making part of the assessment process. During the observation(s), the observers are simply gathering information.

Environmental Observation Guide

Student's name:_____

School:_____

Observer:_____

Date of Observation: _____

Type of class: _____

Directions: Complete this Environmental Assessment Checklist before beginning

Describe the environment: Record short responses in the space provided.

Special or general education classroom?	
Specialty classroom (Specify: e.g., P.E., computer lab)	
Therapy room? (Specify)	
Number of teachers in class?	
Number of aides in class?	
Number of volunteers in class?	
Number of students in the class?	
How many days per week is the program?	
How many hours/day?	
Is the atmosphere busy or quiet?	
Are there large open areas or small divided sections?	
How are the desks arranged?	
Is the furniture sized for students?	
Are materials accessible, appropriate, varied, interesting?	
Is special equipment available (i.e., chairs with arm supports)?	
Where is the classroom located in relationship to the cafeteria, therapy, outdoor play areas, etc.?	
Are bathrooms located in or outside the classroom?	

Sensory Stimulation: Judge the level of sensory stimulation and record it with a check in the corresponding box. Enter comments or notes that clarify your responses if needed.

	Excessive	Balanced	Reduced	N/A	Comments
Auditory					
Hallway					
Street					
Other classrooms					
Other students					
Instructional media					
Teacher aides/volunteers					
Other (specify):					

Sensory Stimulation: continued

	Excessive	Balanced	Reduced	Comments
Visual				
Color				
Clutter/busy				
Art/decorations				
Visual information				
Lighting				
Other (specify):				

Persons Present During Observation: For each person on the list, put a check in the appropriate column indicating their level of participation.

Persons	Participating	Observing	Not Present
Student			
Special Educator			
General Educator			
Peer Tutors (How many? _____)			
Instructional Assistant #1			
Instructional Assistant #2			
Instructional Assistant #3			
Personal Attendant			
Speech-Language Pathologist			
Occupational Therapist			
Physical Therapist			
School Psychologist			
Parent			
Volunteer			
Administrator			
AT Specialist			
Other (specify):			

Notes:

Access to Assistive Technology: Record the presence or absence of **EACH TYPE** of assistive technology by placing a check in the corresponding box. Record the AT found in the classroom as a whole, not just the AT used by the target student.

Types	Present-Not Used	Present-Used	Not Present
Communication cards/boards			
Digitally recorded communication devices			
Electronic communication devices			
AT for activities of daily living			
Adjustable seating (not a wheelchair)			
Positioning equipment			
Amplification			
Visual signaling devices			
Brailler/brailled materials			
Magnifiers			
Notetaking devices/keyboards			
Speech output devices/computers			
Handwriting aids			
Alternate/adapted keyboards			
Alternate/adapted mouse			
Computer switch interface			
Touch window			
Talking word processor			
Word prediction			
Text or screen reader			
Portable word processor			
Transfer aids - Hoists/lifts			
Mobility aids (not wheelchairs)			
Adapted environment (e.g., doors, fixtures, furniture)			
Electronic equipment for instruction (calculator, e-books)			
Adapted instructional materials			
Instructional software			
Computer stations			
Adapted art/craft materials			
Adapted sports/recreation equipment			
Adapted toys			
Wheelchair – Manual or Power			
Other (specify):			

WATI Classroom Observation Guide

Classroom(s) _____ **Teacher** _____

Student _____ **Date** _____ **Time** _____ **Observer** _____

Task: Ex: Writing a report, working on SMART Board, aligning mat problems, researching topic in media center. **Directions:** Given Visually or verbally **Time:** to complete task	**General students' response:** How does the rest of the class respond to the directions? How do they complete their work?	**Target Student Response:** Do you notice any difference in how the target student handles the directions? How do they begin, maintain, and end the task? Was the time for the activity sufficient?	**Barrier to task completion:** What do you notice about the environment that might affect the target student's work? Ex: How the directions were delivered, time to complete the task, different learning style.	**Potential Adaptations:** What pops into your head as a solution that you might bring to the brain storm session during the ASNAT meeting?	**Questions:** What information do you need? What questions do you have for the teacher/student/parent?
Task: **Directions:** **Time:**					
Task: **Directions:** **Time:**					
Task: **Directions:** **Time:**					

WATI Development Team. (2017). Assistive Technology Consideration and Assessment forms.

Environmental Observation Summary

Activity/Task(s) observed:
Ways that typical students participated:
Ways the target student participated:
Barriers to target student's participation:

Adapted from:

Wirkus-Pallaske, M., Reed, P., & Stokes, S. (2000). *Wisconsin Assistive Technology Initiative*. Oshkosh, WI: Wisconsin Assistive Technology Initiative.

Center for Instructional Development and Research. (1998). Classroom observation. *CIDR Teaching and Learning Bulletin, 1*(4), Available online: http://depts.washington.edu/ObsTools.htm

Pearson, L. (no date). *Apraxia guide: Classroom observation checklist.* Available online: http://hometown.aol.com/lynetteprs/myhomepage/profile.html