Benchmark and Instructional Analysis: A Protocol for Learning From Student Work

What is a benchmark?

When you are looking closely at your students' writing, you're trying to figure out what they could do well and where they still need work. To make this possible, you need a benchmark.

A benchmark is a piece of student writing that reflects what you were hoping to get as a proficient piece of writing for a specific instructional sequence, for your grade level. If a piece of writing is "proficient", it will show understanding of the content you were teaching, in a well-organized and well-articulated way that makes that understanding clear to a reader.

 (NOTE: In addition, the student work will also show reasonable control over conventions – spelling, punctuation, sentence structure. These are *language standards.* We will note these when we look at the work, but our emphasis will be on the writing standard itself, not the language standard).

Thinking about "proficient" and what that might reasonably look like means asking ourselves as teachers, " Hmmm……what was I after here? What is a *reasonable expectation* of what my students could write here?" When we are looking for a "proficient" benchmark, we are not looking for the very best piece in the class – rather, we are looking for a piece that demonstrates what *most students should be able to do after having had good instruction.*

Sometimes, it can be hard to find exactly the piece we are looking for. Sometimes, there are lots of pieces that seem like good candidates for "proficient" – sometimes, very few. That's all okay. We'll do the best we can. A benchmark is, after all, a teacher tool – something that will help us make sense of what our students wrote, and to figure out ways to help them take next steps.

What is an Instructional Analysis Checklist?

An Instructional Analysis checklist (sometimes called QDA, for "Qualitative Data Analysis") is a simple tool for recording and learning from student work. Each type of writing (opinion / argument, informative / explanatory, and narrative) has a checklist for each grade level. The descriptors in the checklist reflect both the level of *content understanding* in the piece, and the descriptors named in the *grade level writing standard* for that type of writing.

 In combination with a benchmark, the checklist helps a teacher to see in what areas her students are proficient, and in what areas they still need further instruction.

The steps

1) *read over the Instructional Analysis checklist* for your grade level. This will remind you what the standard says about this writing type at your grade level.

NOTE: It will also remind you to be specific about what type of *content understanding* you are looking for in this writing. Typically, the content understanding is driven by the Focusing Question (prompting question) you posed to the students to drive their thinking and writing.

2) now you're *ready to think* about choosing a benchmark from your students' actual work.

3) *read over the pile of student writing* you have from your class.

4) using your best judgment, *choose 1-3 pieces* that you think are probably going to be good candidates for "proficient". You might want to do this with a colleague, so you can discuss as you work. If it's helpful to look at some pieces of writing from *In Common,* or other proficient student work, feel free to do that.

5) try "annotating in your head", using the checklist. Which of these pieces is *closest to what you were hoping to see in "proficient" writing*?

6) once you've decided on your "proficient" benchmark, go ahead and actually annotate the piece. (It might be helpful to make a copy so you can write directly on it)

Ready to use

Your benchmark is now ready to serve you in looking closely at all your students' work! Here's how:

1) read over the first piece of student writing without stopping, to get a "sense of the whole". It's often helpful to do this aloud.

2) step by step, using the checklist and your benchmark, note where this piece is ***in relation to that benchmark.*** Use the student's initials to show where his/her writing falls for each descriptor.

Look at the model below for a *fourth grade* piece of student work. The student, GT, could do some things well (**compared to the benchmark**) and other things not so well

Not present	Developing	Proficient
		Shows a solid understanding of content GT
		Introduces the topic clearly GT
	GT	Develops the topic with facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples related to the topic
	GT	Groups related information in paragraphs and sections
	GT	Links ideas within categories of information using words and phrases (e.g., *another*, *for example*, *also*, *because*)
		Includes formatting (e.g., headings), illustrations, and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension *Not applicable to this piece*
	GT	Uses precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to inform about or explain the topic
		Provides a concluding statement or section related to the information or explanation presented GT
		Conventions, syntax are grade appropriate GT

NOTE: for a fully filled out sample, see the Kindergarten sample in this folder

3) repeat until you have recorded all of the student work on the checklist

Next steps!

Look at the patterns you see from your students' initials. What are the strengths of your class? What are their needs? Are there groups of students who have particular needs?

What do you need to do, as a teacher, to move them along towards proficiency?