I feel like a bad teacher

I feel like a bad teacher. Teachers type it in the car, after a class that went fine and a note that stung. Often the feeling started with one line on an observation, and the line hired your pen. It arrives as a verdict. Most of it is weather.

Tonight, copy the observation note onto paper and underline the one line that is data. Just one.

If the note is mixed, with one fair line and three that sting, underline the fair one and put the rest in a drawer until you have slept. If it is all fog, take it to a person you trust in the building before you rebuild anything.

You sit with the observation PDF open on your phone in the car. You have a class that goes well and you cannot feel it. You can list what went wrong in under a minute. The list of what went right takes a prompt and still comes out qualified. "They were fine, but."

You reread an observation, or an email, or a comment from a walkthrough, looking for the sentence that will settle the case. You find a true sentence and a dozen others, and you give the dozen the same weight as the true one. The true one was enough to work with. The dozen were enough to ruin a week.

You compare your room to the room next door, which is quieter, or louder, or decorated, or not. The comparison always picks the axis you lose on. That is how you know it is not information. Information would sometimes go the other way.

A student likes you, and you treat the liking as a trick, or as proof you are not rigorous. A student does not like you, and you treat that as the real news. The alarm has a preferred headline. The headline is that you are getting away with something, or that you have been found out. It will take either story. It will not take "today was mixed, and the floor held."

You stay late to outrun the feeling. The staying does not retire it. The staying is the feeling, given a task. Shannon's task has been 30 comments a paper since a form used one word. The word was *adequate*. The comments are the appeal she files every night, to a reader who left the building years ago.

You are tired of being this person, and you are also, on Tuesdays, good at the work in ways the form did not measure. Both are in you. The page is about how to stop letting the unmeasured part be cross-examined by the measured one.

If your stomach just clenched, you are in the right room.

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If you have taken one hard word and given it the editing power of a whole career, you are in the right place. The word may have been partly true. The career is larger than the word. The tool is how you tell the part that is data from the part that is weather.

What do you do with one word near the bottom?

The prologue of *Stop Grading Your Sundays* puts Shannon in the faculty lot with 88 essays, 14 done, 74 to go, 37 more hours, and a rate she can do in her head. The rate has a birthday: nine years ago, one sentence near the bottom of an observation called her feedback adequate. The absence of a second sentence did not retire the first. The pen kept the correspondence going.

In the chapter called Sixth Period she finally sorts the observation notes. One line is data. The rest is noise. The book does not say the observation was fake, and it does not say the one line was kind. Data can sting. Data is the part you can do something about on Tuesday. Noise is the part that sounds like a verdict on the kind of teacher you are.

The sort has three piles.

Data. What happened, specific enough that a different adult in the room could have seen it. "Students did not get a chance to revise." "Three students had their heads down for the last 10 minutes." "The comment on the sample paper was a check mark." Data can be used. You can change Tuesday.

Mirror. The part that reflects the writer's fear, taste, or mood more than your room. "Energy was low." "Rigor was not evident." Sometimes a mirror has a splinter of data in it. Pull the splinter out and put it in the data pile, in concrete words. If you cannot make it concrete, it stays a mirror. You do not owe a mirror a new personality.

Noise. The rest. The tone. The adjective that cannot be acted on. The comparison to a teacher who is not you. The word that has been running your pen because it was written there, not because it is still true of this week's class. Noise gets no vote on your worth.

The sort starts with one question: am I regulated enough to hear this right now? Red, close it and run the breath. Yellow, read it once and answer within a day. Green, go ahead. A note does not get to call you a bad teacher in order to smuggle in a useful fact.

If a note is cruel, or if it is part of something heavier than a bad day, you do not decode your way into accepting it. You use the school's own process for that, and a person, not a worksheet.

What could the form not measure?

Shannon already had counter-evidence. A former student, now a public defender, wrote to say the only thing she put on his paper, *I want to hear more*, did what 30 comments never did. The form measured effort. He was reporting attention.

The facilitator does not pat Shannon and call the 30 comments love. Love, in that margin, had been recruited. The four words were the floor. Later she swings past the floor and gives a quiet student too little, and the table says so. The comment that matters is the floor. You can be a careful teacher and

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still be aiming the care at the old sentence. The sort is how you read the note without hiring it for the rest of your career.

Take it seriously. Do not take it personally. The table keeps that line for exactly this kind of note: one true piece, and a cloud around it.

Where do the three circles sit on one form?

Circle 3 is the form itself, the observer's mood, the rubric you did not write, what a student tells their parent, the fact that one sentence landed near the bottom and the rest of the form did not get a parade. You cannot erase it by staying later. You could not control the sentence then. You do not control it now.

Circle 2 is the colleague who will read the note with you and help you say the data in concrete words, the department conversation about what feedback is for, the follow-up you request if your workplace has a follow-up and you want it. Influence. A follow-up is not a second trial you conduct alone at midnight.

Circle 1 is the sort. Data, mirror, noise. The pen that stops answering a word that is no longer in the room. The four-word note you are willing to try on one paper this week, not as a brand, as a test. Worth lives in Circle 1. Nowhere else. Not in being the teacher no sentence can name, which is not a job that exists.

What do three lines from a form look like, sorted?

Say the note said three things. The comments on student work were brief. The room felt flat. You might consider more energy.

Line one can be data if you make it specific. Brief compared to what? If the sample they saw was a check mark where a student needed a sentence, that is data. Tuesday gets a floor comment, the way the four words were a floor. If "brief" is only an adjective and you cannot point at a paper, it is a mirror until you can.

Line two, the room felt flat, is a mirror until it grows a fact. Flat is the observer's weather. Maybe it matches a stretch where three students were asleep. The asleep students are data. The word flat is not a plan. You do not owe the word a new personality, a louder voice, or a show of enthusiasm you will hate by October. You owe the asleep students a change you can name, if the asleep students were real.

Line three, more energy, is noise if it cannot be done on a Tuesday, and it usually cannot. Energy is not a strategy. It is a request that you feel different so the back of the room feels different. Put it in the noise pile. Give it no vote. If you want a real change that sometimes reads as energy from the back, pick one action: you stand where they walk in, you ask one student the question you used to answer yourself, you stop talking for two minutes and let them. Those are Circle 1. "More energy" is a mood the form ordered. Moods do not obey forms.

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Then look at what you almost did, which is rewrite the whole week to satisfy all three lines. That rewrite is Shannon's 37 hours. It answers noise at the rate of a career. The sort leaves you with less to do, and the alarm hates having less to do, because less to do feels like being *adequate* again. Less to do, aimed at the one data line, is the practice. The other lines can sit in the noise pile where they cannot hold the pen.

What do you do with the form, or the email, or the voice?

Copy the note. Mark one line as data. If you cannot find one, the note may be all mirror and noise, and you are allowed to say so and get a person to look before you rebuild your practice around a fog. If you find one, write the Tuesday change in a single sentence. Not a new philosophy. "Revision time, 10 minutes, before they hand it in." Then do that, and do not do the other 14 improvements the noise suggested.

Say the word out loud once, as a word, not as a name. *Adequate.* Or whatever your word is. A word you can hear is smaller than a word that lives in the pen. Shannon's pen has been answering it in the margins ever since. The answer did not retire it. Naming it as one line of data, and refusing the rest, is the retirement the form will never send you.

One paper, four true words, this week. Not a void. A floor. If the student needed more, add the sentence and stop. The page on the long margin is Why grading takes so long. The page on the email that uses the same courtroom is The angry parent email. They are the same alarm in two uniforms. You do not have to solve both tonight.

The opening is on the teachers page.

The book is Shannon in sixth period, one line of the observation kept, the rest set down.

Be first to know when *Stop Grading Your Sundays* is out

If this is keeping you from sleeping or eating, or it is not easing, talk to your EAP or a clinician. If it has gone darker than that, or you are having thoughts of not wanting to be here, call or text 988 in the US, any hour.

More reasons

Teacher Sunday scaries

How to stop taking work home

Why grading takes so long

Teacher guilt

Should I quit teaching?

The angry parent email

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Tonight's move

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When the book is out.

Stop Grading Your Sundays

Come home after the bell

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Be first to know when Stop Grading Your Sundays is out. We write once, when that book is out.

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Send it to a friend

The person still grading at the kitchen table. Send this page. They can read it without an account.

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