

Open Professionals Education Network (OPEN) Resource Document
Writing Learning Objectives: Overview

Background

Learning objectives, sometimes called *performance* or *behavioral* objectives, are statements of the intended outcomes of instruction. They must be student centered and focused on a singular concept, describing in specific and measurable terms what student are expected to be able to do after completing a lesson or instructional unit. The ABCD method of writing objectives specifies four key characteristics that contribute to effective learning objectives: audience, behavior, condition, and degree (Georgia State University, 1999). The *audience* is the learner who will demonstrate the *behavior* under specific *conditions* and to an acceptable *degree*. The behavior—what the learner is expected to be able to do—must be observable and measurable. The condition, if any, describes the circumstances under which the learner will exhibit the behavior.

Check Your Understanding

Which of the following is the best example of a well-written learning objective?

- A. Students will be able to describe the psychosocial crises at each stage of Erikson's Psychosocial Stages of Development.
- B. Students will be able to understand Erikson's theory of development in order to be able to name the 8 stages of development.
- C. Students will be able to name the 8 stages of Erikson's Psychosocial Stages of Development in order and explain the psychosocial crises at each stage.
- D. Students will gain an appreciation for Erikson's theory of development.

Feedback

If you selected option A, you are correct! This learning objective is clear, specific about what the students should be able to do in measurable terms (i.e., *describe*), and focused on a singular concept (crises at each stage). Option B focuses on a singular concept, but the term "understand" is vague and not measurable or observable. Option C is clear and specific but incorporates two different concepts (naming the stages and explaining crises at each stage). Option D is not measurable (appreciation) and not specific about what students should know or be able to do.

Examples

Students will be able to summarize the five primary approaches to conflict resolution.

Students will be able to explain the different types of motion associated with each of the three main types of geologic faults.

Students will be able to appropriately introduce themselves in Spanish with different levels of formality according to the situation.

Given a diagram of the eye, students will be able to label the 9 extraocular muscles without error.

Students will be able to calculate force given different mass and gravitational acceleration parameters.

Summary & Additional Resources

There are several reasons why learning objectives are critical to the learning and teaching process:

- They communicate the instructor's intentions clearly to students.
- They guide in decisions about assessment and evaluation methods.
- They provide a framework for selecting appropriate teaching and learning activities.
- They provide a framework for selecting and organizing course content.
- They give students information for directing their learning efforts and monitoring their own progress.

If learning objectives are clearly and specifically defined, the instructor will have an effective means of evaluating what the students learned. Learning objectives should guide both instructional and assessment practices and are the foundation for selecting appropriate content, learning activities, and assessment measures.

References:

Georgia State University. 1999. Mager's Tips on Instructional Objectives. Adapted from Mager, R. F. 1984. *Preparing Instructional Objectives* (2nd ed.). Belmont, CA: David S. Lake.
<http://www2.gsu.edu/~mstmbs/CrsTools/Magerobj.html#Qualities>

Additional Resources:

Davidson, C. I. & Ambrose, S. A. (1994). *The new professor's handbook: A guide to teaching and research in engineering and sciences*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company Inc.

Marzano, R. J. (2009). *Designing and teaching learning goals and objectives: Classroom strategies that work*. Bloomington, IN: Marzano Research Laboratory.



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