



Teaching Support Services

Learning Objectives: A Basic Guide



Learning Objectives: A Basic Guide

Think for a moment about a course or training session with which you are currently involved. Identify one skill that you think would be essential to know or do by the end of this learning period. If you were able to do this, then you are beginning to construct a learning objective.

Learning objectives are statements that describe significant and essential learning that learners have achieved, and can reliably demonstrate at the end of a course or program. In other words, learning objectives identify what the learner will know and be able to do by the end of a course or program.

Spady, (1994), an educational researcher who spearheaded the development of objectives-based education, suggests that the ability to *demonstrate* learning is the key point. This demonstration of learning involves a performance of some kind in order to show *significant* learning, or learning that matters. He claims that significant content is essential, but that content alone is insufficient as an objective. Rather, knowledge of content must be manifested through a demonstration process of some kind.

Learning objectives refer to observable and measurable

- knowledge
- skills
- attitudes

Characteristics of Learning Objectives Statements

Learning objectives should:

- reflect broad conceptual knowledge and adaptive vocational and generic skills
- reflect essential knowledge, skills or attitudes;
- focus on *results* of the learning experiences;
- reflect the desired end of the learning experience, not the means or the process;
- represent the *minimum* performances that must be achieved to successfully complete a course or program;
- answer the question, "Why should a student take this course anyway?"

Learning objectives statements may be considered to be exit behaviors.

Guidelines for Writing Course Learning Objectives

Learning objectives written at the *course* level should:

- state clear expectations - learners know what they have to do to demonstrate that they have achieved the learning objectives;
- represent culminating performances of learning and achievement; (meaning the highest stage of development, or exit, end performance)
- describe performances that are *significant*, *essential*, and *verifiable*;
(meaning that performances can be verified or observed in some way and that they represent more than one small aspect of behaviour; this also means that the performance is considered to be essential for success in the course)
- preferably state only ONE performance per objective;
- refer to learning that is *transferable*;
(meaning that the learning can readily be transferred from a class to a work place environment, or from one workplace environment to another, etc.)
- not dictate curriculum content;
(meaning that there could be a number of different ways to achieve the objective.)
- reflect the overriding principles of equity and fairness and accommodate the needs of diverse learners.
- represent the minimal acceptable level of performance that a student needs to demonstrate in order to be considered successful.

Anatomy of Learning Objectives

Learning Objective statements may be broken down into three main components:

1. an *action word* that identifies the performance to be demonstrated;
2. a *learning statement* that specifies what learning will be demonstrated in the performance;
3. a broad statement of the *criterion* or minimum standard for acceptable performance.

By the end of this session, the learners will be able to:

Action Word -> Learning -> Criteria

Are They Effective Objectives?

1) Once you have written your objectives, ask yourself: “**How will I evaluate the achievement of this learning objective?**” and “**How well do attendees have to do to demonstrate achievement (mastery) of the objective?** (standard)”

2) Remember the acronym, **SMART**, when writing learning objectives:

S – Specific
M – Measurable
A – Achievable
R – Relevant
T – Timely

Verbs to avoid when writing learning objectives include:

Understand	Enjoy
Know	Realize
Be aware of	Perceive

Instead try SMART verbs:

Demonstrate	Develop	Analyze	Express	Evaluate
Organize	Create	Write	Plan	Apply
Produce	Implement	Compile	Incorporate	Construct

Learning Objective SMARTification

Learning Objective as Originally Stated	Learning Objective after “SMARTification”	<i>Justification for the “SMARTification”</i>
This course has the following objective: ➤ To introduce you to some elementary concepts and questions in the philosophy of social science	By the end of this course, you will be able to: ➤ Describe foundation concepts and questions in the philosophy of social science (final exam)	- <i>Learner-centred vs. topic-centred</i> - <i>Active versus passive</i> - <i>Explicitly linked to assessment</i>
This course has the following objective: ➤ To develop your capacity to compute, analyze and interpret basic descriptive and inferential statistics	By the end of this course, you will be able to: ➤ Compute basic descriptive and inferential statistics (individual exercises/final exam) ➤ Analyze basic descriptive and inferential statistics computations (individual exercises/final exam) ➤ Interpret basic descriptive and inferential statistics analyses (individual exercises/final exam)	- <i>Different knowledge units and levels, so better dealt with as distinct (use one action-verb per objective, at the minimum acceptable level.)</i> - <i>Explicitly linked to assessment</i> - <i>Active versus passive</i>