

Learning Objectives - A Practical Overview

by Amy Acito
Praxis Learning Networks

What are learning objectives and why are they important?

Learning objectives are statements describing what learners will be able to do upon completion of a unit of instruction. (They can also be called instructional objectives, behavioral objectives, performance objectives, or learning outcomes.) Learning objectives are typically created at the beginning of the 'design' phase of the following instructional design model.

Analysis → Design → Development → Implementation → Evaluation

Creating learning objectives is an essential step in designing instruction of any kind. Since they describe exactly what learners will be able to do, the objectives help define the scope of an instructional project, and guide project teams through the development of instructional content. Assessment activities or tests should also be developed directly from learning objectives to ensure that these activities are properly focused on what learners are meant to take away.

Learning objectives also play an important role after the instruction has been designed. They communicate the goals of the instruction to instructors and learners, allowing them to focus their attention and energy accordingly.

Writing Learning Objectives

Learning objectives should only describe what learners should be able to do upon completion of a unit of instruction. They should NOT include any information about the target audience, or what type of instructional strategy will be used. (These are important considerations, but do not belong in the learning objectives.) Objectives should be written in terms of the learner instead of in terms of the instructional unit.

Correct: Upon completion of the course, a learner will be able to...

Incorrect: This course will teach how to...

An expert in the field of Instructional Design, Robert Mager has developed a strategy for developing instructional objectives that has been widely accepted and used. He breaks instructional objectives into three main components: performances, conditions, and criteria.

Performance. This is the meat of the instructional objective that states what learners will be able to do after the instruction. This part of the objective should contain a verb that clearly communicates the skill that the learner will perform. Some examples of verbs that have clear meanings versus those with meanings that are less clear are shown below.

Clear	Less Clear
To define	To understand
To identify	To know
To solve	To appreciate

An example of a performance is:

To be able to list five positive stress management strategies.

Condition. The learning objective should include the specific condition(s) under which the learner should demonstrate a particular skill, if there are any. The condition can specify resource materials needed and help control the complexity of the task. An example of a learning objective with a condition is:

Given a list of ten elements, be able to identify those elements that are metals.

Criteria. Learning objectives should include criteria that defines acceptable performance, when it is appropriate to do so. This is another opportunity to make sure learning objectives are clearly communicating the intent to learners and instructors. An example of a learning objective with a criterion is:

Be able to list the bones in the ear, spelling them correctly.

Blooms Taxonomy and Verb List

Bloom's Taxonomy is a helpful tool in developing instructional objectives. It divides cognitive objectives into several categories of increasing complexity. The categories are: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Below is a chart that contains lists of verbs for each level in Bloom's taxonomy. You can use the verbs to create learning objectives that are appropriate for the desired level of learning.

Knowledge	In this category, a student learns terminology and facts. The student demonstrates this knowledge by recalling information, and does not develop a deep understanding.
	Verbs: describe, tell, show, list, cite, restate, identify, arrange, find, choose, group, label, select, match, locate, name, offer, omit, pick, quote, repeat, say, sort, spell, recognize, memorize, review, remember, relate, write, state, read, recall, catalogue, enumerate, record
Comprehension	This is the lowest level of understanding that goes beyond memorization. Comprehension can be demonstrated by rephrasing or summarizing of information.
	Verbs: explain, interpret, outline, predict, distinguish, translate, restate, figure, describe, clarify, instruct, discern, discuss, change, retell, reword, reorganize, construe, convert, expand, transform, alter, vary, qualify, infer
Application	In this category, the student is able to apply abstract techniques in concrete situations.
	Verbs: solve, illustrate, examine, show, use, calculate, apply, make, translate, record, teach, construct, demonstrate, complete, relate, model, utilize, operate, handle, manipulate, generalize, put into action, experiment, draw
Analysis	The student can identify the hierarchies or relationships and general organizational structures among elements of content they learn.
	Verbs: classify, compare, contrast, separate, differentiate, dissect, distinguish, categorize, identify, explain, reduce, order, investigate, abstract, summarize, break down, uncover, look into, dissect, examine, take apart, test for, search
Synthesis	In this category, the student is able to combine elements of content they learn in a way that produces a new pattern or structure.
	Verbs: create, combine, build, compile, develop, produce, predict, hypothesize, design, invent, improve, blend, construct, generate, formulate, add to, compose, combine, plan, forecast, estimate, imagine, propose

Evaluation	The student can make qualitative and quantitative judgments about value based on criteria. This also involves recognizing and suggesting improvements to a method or process or suggesting alternative methods.
Verbs: judge, decide, rate, appraise, assay, rank, weight, accept/reject, justify, determine, debate, consider, critique, criticize, select, assess, recommend, verify, grade, argue, prioritize, discuss, editorialize	

Tips from Experience

- Try to keep language simple and try to limit learning objectives to one or two sentences
- You may find it helpful to organize objectives into main objectives and sub-objectives
- If you find that you have several learning objectives (more than 6), you may consider dividing your learning solution into smaller “chunks”
- Use the performance, condition, criteria model to be as specific as possible

The Author

Amy Acito is an instructional designer for Praxis Learning Networks. Amy has three years of experience in the design and development of online learning materials in a corporate environment. She has an M.S. in Instructional Systems Technology from Indiana University. Amy can be reached at aacito@praxismi.com

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