

A Clear Guide to Writing Learning Objectives

❖ WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

A concise how-to process for developing specific and measurable course learning objectives. Intended as an introduction for new instructors or a reminder for experienced instructors.

❖ HOW DO I USE IT?

Specific and measurable learning objectives are an important early step in the design of coherent and aligned courses. When composing new learning objectives or re-evaluating existing ones, use this resource to ensure that valid learning objectives are being formed. For assistance, please contact [CET instructional designers](#).

A well-written learning objective provides a clear picture of the outcome or performance you expect of the student by the end of the course.

Every learning objective should be:

- Taught in the course
- Assessed in the course
- Specific and measurable

Aspirations, which do not satisfy the criteria above, are valuable but distinct from learning objectives. Examples of aspirations include “Appreciate ethics” and “Become lifelong learners.” Aspirations can be included in the course description and help the student to understand the instructor’s broader goals for the course.

Format

The format of a learning objective is:

action verb + noun (+ condition + timescale)

Condition and/or timescale are not always included. For example, the following are well-composed learning objectives.

- Analyze a given data set in Excel
- Label the bones shown in an x-ray image
- Describe post-treatment care to a patient during an office visit

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES

- Given four works of short fiction of contrasting genres, students will be able to match each work with its correct genre.
- Using data from census.gov, students will be able to make a histogram displaying demographic distributions of the U.S. population for a given year.
- Given a case description, students will be able to identify legal and ethical issues and suggest plans of action.

[Verb lists](#) organized according to Bloom's Taxonomy can be useful when writing learning objectives.

WHEN WRITING LEARNING OBJECTIVES, ASK YOURSELF THESE QUESTIONS:

- Does the objective focus on student performance?
- Is this skill taught and assessed in your course?
- What criteria will I use to establish that the objective has been reached?

Common Pitfalls

Errors made when composing learning objectives can be avoided by watching out for these common mistakes.

- Listing desired mental states, indicated by the words *know, understand, learn, appreciate, value*, etc.
- Making a mental state sound like a learning objective by using "camouflage verbs" such as *demonstrate* and *show*. For example, "Demonstrate an understanding of interviewing techniques."
- Listing steps that are actually included in another learning objective, making them redundant. This is referred to as *scaffolding*. For example, these five learning objectives
 - Identify research priorities
 - Use effective online search strategies
 - Identify gaps in the research literature
 - Formulate a good research question
 - Produce a research proposal

Can be replaced by just the one final learning objective

- Produce a research proposal
because the first four statements are steps required for the production of a research proposal; the first four are redundant.
- Listing course activities rather than skills obtained through the course. For example,

- Attend a professional presentation
- Complete an online survey
- Observe a professional practitioner
- Work collaboratively