GUIDE TO WRITING LEARNING OBJECTIVES FOR WORKPLACE TRAINING & PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT

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WHAT IS A LEARNING OBJECTIVE?

So what's a learning objective, you ask?

To put it as simply as possible, a learning objective is something you want employees who are attending a job training session or completing a job training activity to be able to perform when the training is over so that they can then move on and perform that same task on the job.

Beyond that, it's the reason you're designing, developing, and delivering training, or at least one of two reasons. All training should support or be aligned with some larger organizational goal—introduce a new product, increase revenue, decrease costs, remain complaint, and so on. And to help the organization reach those goals, employees will have to perform specific tasks on the job. Job training is intended to teach employees to perform those tasks, and learning objectives identify those necessary performances so that training can be developed accordingly. So learning objectives are directly mapped to helping employees learn to develop skills and perform tasks on the job to help the organization reach goals.

Finally, learning objectives act as the foundation or blueprint of your training. Once you've identified your learning objectives, you go on to create learning assessments (tests) that map directly to the learning objectives. Then you go on to design and create learning content and learning activities to help workers learn to perform those tasks successfully. Then you can use your learning objectives to determine how you evaluate the success of your training efforts.

Petty much, it's that simple. Learning objectives are good for training.

Learning Objectives

1. What employees must do on job

2. What employees must be able to do after training

3. Why you're developing training

4. Your training blueprint

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WHY SHOULD YOU WRITE LEARNING OBJECTIVES?

Why write learning objectives? We probably pretty much answered this question in the previous section. But we'll go into a few more specifics here.

To start by answering the question indirectly, if you don't write learning objectives, your training is unlikely to be effective. You won't know what you're trying to help employees learn to do. You won't know how to create appropriate post-training assessments. You won't know what training content and what learning activities to create. And you won't know how to later evaluate the training, see if it was effective, and see if you need to scrap or revise it.

To answer the question directly, if you write learning objectives, you will:

- Learn what the goal of your training is
- Determine how to design and create your learning assessments
- Determine how to design and create your learning content and activities

- Be able to correctly notify employees what the purpose of training is at the beginning of the training session or activity
- Give employees the ability to more accurately self-assess their level of understanding throughout the training (metacognition)
- Later be able to more accurately evaluate the effectiveness of your training

Sounds like a strong enough set of reasons for writing learning objectives, no?

LEARNING
OBJECTIVES
↑
Lots of good reasons
to use them!

CRITERION-BASED LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Learning objectives can be criterion-based or norm-based.

A criterion-based learning objective determines if the employee can satisfy the learning objective or not. A norm-based learning objective ranks employees from high-to-low in terms of how well they performed on the assessment.

In most cases for job training, you'll be using criterion-based learning objectives. Because your goal is to make sure people can perform a task during or immediately after training before you have them try to do it for real on the job.

Criterion-Based Learning Objective	Norm-Based Learning Objective
More common for workplace training	Less common for workplace training
Worker either "did it" or didn't do it	Ranks employees on a range or spectrum
Tells if worker can perform learning objective	Doesn't directly tell if worker can perform learning objective
Should tell if worker can perform task on the job	Won't directly tell if worker can perform task on the job

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES OR PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVES?

Let's start this section by saying the phrase learning objectives is very well known, is used by many in the field, and has a lot of momentum behind it. This is what people typically say when they're talking about these kind of things and it's unlikely to change.

But it's still worth thinking about, especially in the workforce learning and development/job training arena.

At work, we seldom or probably never provide training to workers just so they will learn. And we don't really provide training so employees will get to know new things.

Instead, we provide training so that people will become able to do things. So they'll develop skills. So they're be able to perform tasks on the job.

So while the name is likely to always stay learning objective, you might want to think of these as performance objectives. Because as a developer of job training, what you're trying

to do is create learning activities that will help employees perform on the job.

This focus on performance in learning objectives is often associated with learning theorist Robert Mager. Check out some of his books if you get a chance.

> **In work training, we LEARN
> in order to PERFORM on the job**
>
> LEARN ⟶ PERFORM
>
> (on the job)

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS; ENABLING AND TERMINAL LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The previous section, about learning v. performance objectives, brings the issue of knowledge v. skills in job training to mind.

Yes, it's true. There are times you have to teach employees to know things—meaning, help them acquire knew knowledge—as part of job training.

BUT, in almost all cases, you're helping employees acquire knowledge so they can then use that knowledge to apply it on the job while performing a task.

So ultimately, your goal is still to help workers develop skills and perform tasks on the job.

Given this, the concepts of enabling learning objectives and terminal learning objectives comes in pretty handy. A terminal learning objective is that skill or task you want employees to be able to perform at the end of training.

It's the "big picture" goal. By contrast, an enabling learning objective is something employees have to pick up during training that will enable them to perform that terminal learning objective. An enabling learning objective is a stop along the road, but not the end of the road.

Generally, you can think of prerequisite knowledge that learners need to know in order to perform a task as an enabling objective.

Knowledge	Skill
What the employee knows	What the employee can do
May help employee perform job tasks	The job tasks employee performs
May be included in enabling objectives	Included in terminal objectives
Not the end goal of job training	The end goal of job training

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WHAT ABOUT BENJAMIN BLOOM, THE DOMAINS & THE TAXONOMIES?

One of the first things that people tend to learn about learning objectives is Benjamin Bloom, his set of three "domains" of learning objectives (cognitive, meaning mental skills; psychomotor, meaning physical skills; and affective, meaning attitudes), and the six different taxonomies each domain is divided into.

You may be wondering why we haven't mentioned Bloom until now.

Yep, we know about him. And yep, we know about his learning objective domains and taxonomies. And yes, we think he was an important and influential thinker in these fields.

But we don't believe Bloom intended for his work to be used as a golden rule for learning objectives in general and we don't believe he meant them to be used this way for job training in particular.

Plus, we think the system is way too complicated and arbitrary to use effectively when writing learning instructions for job training and performance improvement.

So we'll leave it at that for now. We encourage you to use the much simpler "know" and "do" method we're suggesting in this guide and read up more on learning objectives and Benjamin Bloom on your own if you feel so inclined.

ABC AND/OR ABCD LEARNING OBJECTIVES

To write a good learning objective, consider creating one with four parts. Each of those parts is represented by a letter in the ABCD learning objective method. The letters ABCD stand for:

- Actor—who has to complete the performance that matches the learning objective
- Behavior—what the performance is
- Conditions—the circumstances, context, or environment in which the behavior must be performed
- Degree—how well the actor must perform the behavior

So, you could think of the ABCD parts of a learning objective this way:

- A-Actor-Who
- B-Behavior-What
- C-Conditions-How
- D-Degree-How well

Let's consider each of these a little more closely.

Actor—the actor is the employee who is completing the training and who will later be expected to perform the job task on the job.

Always write your learning objective knowing that it's the employee who must learn to satisfy the learning objective. One thing to keep in mind is that your learning objectives should be specific to particular employees and/or to employees in particular job roles. Although there may be some cases where you're making training that applies for all employees, it's better to create training that's more directly aligned to what different employees do on the job.

One common error to look out for is thinking the actor is the trainer (you). This error often creeps in when the person writing the learning objective starts to write about what the training will "cover" instead of what employees must learn to perform. And as a result, they may unconsciously think that they—the training designer/developer—is the actor.

Behavior—this is what the employee must be able to do when the training is complete in order to satisfy the learning objective.

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The most important thing to remember is the behavior should match something the worker will really have to do on the job.

The behavior doesn't have to be something physical, but it does have to be a skill or performance and it must be something that can be observed. So it can be a cognitive skill, such as addressing the concerns of an angry customer in a customer support scenario, or it can be a physical skill, such as operating a forklift.

In addition to being observable, the behavior should be specific and measurable (we'll return to this again). It should be specific so that all parties involved understand exactly what it means and what it would mean to perform the behavior, and it must be measurable in the sense that people can agree when it's been completed.

One common mistake to avoid is writing learning objectives that include vague, fuzzy terms like "know' and "understand" that you can't actually observe.

Another common mistake is to create a behavior that's too far from the real job performance. For example, if you want to teach someone to operate Machine X, a learning objective that asks workers to "list in order the steps of operating Machine X" won't cut it—at least not for a terminal learning

objective. Because when those employees return back to work, they're not going to be expected to list the steps of operation, they're going to be expected to operate the machine.

Condition—this is the environment, context, or set of circumstances in which the employee must perform the behavior in the learning objective. It might be something like "Given a set of tools," or "under normal operating conditions," for example.

Degree—this is how well the employee must perform the behavior. It might be something like "in sixty seconds," "nine out of time times," or "in every case," for example.
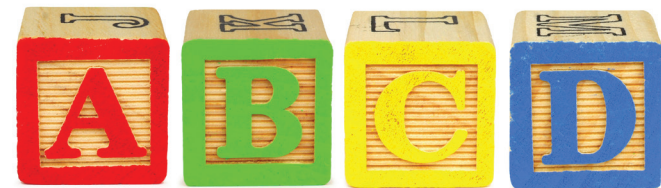
There may be times when you can leave the actor in your learning objectives unstated, at least when you later present them to the employees. You should always identify a behavior. And there may be times when you can go without a condition or a degree. But you should always consider each of these four items and always strive for clarity, precision, and a lack of confusion and ambiguity.

SMART LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The SMART learning objectives test is a way to self-assess the learning objective to make sure it matches a set of generally desired criteria. Each letter in SMART stands for one of those characteristics:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Relevant
- Timely

You'll notice we've already touched on specific and measurable. Let's look at each criteria a little more closely.

Specific—write your learning objective as clearly and precisely as possible. Your goal is to make it so that anyone who reads the learning objective will know exactly what employees need to do to satisfy or complete the objective.

Measurable—this means it should be clear and easy for all involved to observe the performance and agree that it's

been completed. Remember, this is the guideline that makes learning objectives based around behaviors like "know," "understand," and "appreciate" off limits.

Achievable—you shouldn't be providing job training to employees if they have no chance of actually performing the task you're teaching. Remember, the purpose of job training is to help workers learn to perform job tasks. So your learning objective has to be something the employees in the training truly have a chance of performing.

Relevant—again, your goal in job training is to teach people to perform skills they need for their job and that they will perform as part of their jobs. That's what relevant means in this circumstance. Don't create learning objectives that aren't task-based instructions for performing skills on the job at the employee's current job (or perhaps the next one).

Timely—the sad truth is, people forget things from training if they don't get to repeatedly use them. So don't provide training today for something workers won't use until six months from now. Instead, try to aim for as close to "just in time" as possible—a day before, a week before, etc.

AFTER WRITING LEARNING OBJECTIVES, WHAT'S NEXT?

Once you've written your learning objectives:

- Write your learning assessments
- Design and create your learning content and learning activities
- Beta test your training, if possible
- Deliver the training
- Evaluate the training

Let's consider each of the following a little more closely, and watch for additional resources from Vector Solutions, such as blog articles and guides, that go into these other issues much more deeply.

Write your learning assessments-sit down with a list of your learning objectives and these should pretty much write themselves. To the best of your abilities, look at the performance required by the learning objective and make that performance the central part of the learning assessment.

So, for example, if the learning objective is something like "learn to operate a forklift," your learning assessment should require employees to demonstrate that they can operate a forklift.

Design and create your learning content and learning activities-next, figure out the training content you need to teach people how to perform the learning objective and the training activities, and in particular practice, that will help employees develop competence and confidence in performing the job task.

When it comes to training content and training activities, keep the content as little as possible and focus on activities. Too much training content is a major and common training problem. In learning, less is more.

Beta test your training, if possible-let's be honest, you're not

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always going to get a chance to roll out a limited beta test of your training to a group of employees similar to those who will take the training, but if you can do it, then do it.

Otherwise, review the training as best you can and see if you can get others to review it as well, including peers, subject matter experts, and novice employees.

Deliver the training-let employees complete the training (be it instructor-led, eLearning, etc.).

Evaluate the training-once the employees have completed the training, evaluate the training to see if it was effective. There are several different models for evaluating training effectiveness, including Kirkpatrick, Kaufman, Brinkerhoff, Philips, and Will Thalheimer's LTEM model, as well as others. Find the model or models that you think works best for your organization.

MAPPING YOUR

LEARNING ASSESSMENTS TO YOUR LEARNING OBJECTIVES

We touched on this earlier, but the "golden standard" for your learning assessments (tests) is to have them directly map to your learning objectives.

The best way to do that is to simply have the employee demonstrate that they can complete the behavior (performance) described in the learning objective.

However, it is often not quite so easy to do that for a variety of reasons. As a result, there are other types of assessment options available, including:

- Virtual reality scenarios
- eLearning scenarios
- Verbal discussions, Q&A, etc.
- Short-answer/short-essay
- Multiple-choice questions
- Matching exercises

No matter which type of assessment you choose, try to

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make the assessment as close to the real job task as possible. So for example, if you're creating a multiple-choice question, don't simply ask the employees to restate something from the training. Instead, ask them to make a decision that demonstrates they can apply what they learned during the training in a way that's very similar to what they'd do on the job (like make a decision, for example).

When you create assessments, keep the following four criteria in mind:

- Fidelity—how closely does the assessment match the real job performance? Your goal is to get it as close as possible.

- Validity—the assessment measures what it claims to measure.

- Reliability—the assessment provides consistent results.

- Feasibility—how possible is it to create an assessment that has high fidelity, high validity, and high reliability? We're all working in an imperfect world with limited resources and sometimes have to make trade-offs. Try to make fewer trade-offs due to feasibility when stakes and consequences of assessment and high and more when stakes and consequences are low.

Learning Objectives ➡ **Learning Assessments**

MAPPING YOUR LEARNING CONTENT AND ACTIVITIES TO YOUR LEARNING OBJECTIVES

We've already mentioned that you should try to include as little training content as possible—just enough to help employees develop the skills and no more.

In addition, you should definitely focus on engaging learning activities that facilitate real knowledge acquisition and skill development—demonstrations, practice, feedback, discussions, Q&A, case studies, role-playing, and more.

We won't go into great detail about this topic here, as it's beyond the scope of this guide, but remember to:

- Select learning activities that will help employees attain the desired learning outcomes
- Use evidence-based training methods

Learning Objectives → **Learning Assessments**

Learning Content & Activities

DISPLAYING LEARNING OBJECTIVES TO EMPLOYEES

This last part is pretty interesting and may be somewhat surprising.

Traditionally, when instructional designers create a list of learning objectives in the way we've described in this guide, they intended for the learning objectives to be presented to the learners as a list at the beginning of training.

You're probably familiar with these lists. And you'd have to admit—they're pretty boring. So boring, in fact, many employees tune out during this and don't pay attention. Which is pretty bad. And it's even worse if that initial tuning out that happens when the learning objectives are displayed winds up with you completely losing the employee's attention for the entire training session or activity.

By End of Training, employees will:

So, even though you've crafted a solid, beautiful set of learning objectives, and those learning objectives have served you will as you designed your learning assessments, content, and activities, consider rewriting them into language that's less tedious, dry, and predictable and that's instead more attention-grabbing and fun and that states in normal, conversational language how completing the training will help employees with a problem they care about on the job. It doesn't have to be a list of bullet points representing ABCD learning objectives.

We're not going to go into this in depth, but give it some thought, check out this article New Taxonomy for Learning Objectives by learning researcher Dr. Will Thalheimer, and do some additional research on your own for tips from other learning researchers and instructional designers about how to present your learning objectives to employees in a way they'll appreciate more.

CONCLUSION

We hope you've enjoyed and benefitted from this short introduction to writing learning objectives for job training and workplace performance improvement. Good luck with your training projects and let us know if you have any additional questions. Check out the Vector Solutions website(s) for additional helpful guides, checklists, infographics, and more.

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