

Wording Objectives Successfully

One of the biggest problems with poorly written objectives is the choice of words used to indicate the type of performance expected. In the example above, "will know how to tell time" is not a clear enough statement of what the learners will actually be doing. There are many slippery words that are open to a wide range of interpretation when writing objectives. It is important not to use broad or vague terms when trying to convey a *specific* instructional intent, or you leave yourself open to misinterpretation. The following chart lists some of the most common unclear words used in goals and objectives, as well as more specific, better alternatives.

| Common Ambiguous Words | "Better" Performance Words |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Know• Understand• <i>Really</i> understand• Determine• Appreciate• <i>Fully</i> appreciate• Grasp the significance of• Enjoy• Become familiar with• Become aware of• Believe• Learn• Have faith in• Internalize• Be happy• Value• Acquire• Develop | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Choose (or select)• Solve• Write• Identify• State• List• Recite• Apply• Sort• Assemble• Adjust• Build• Align• Compare• Contrast• Smile• Use• Perform• Execute• Classify• Draw• Construct |

When looking over your objectives, ask yourself if you could observe someone doing the behavior. It's hard to observe someone *knowing* or *understanding*. If any of your objectives contain these vague words, rewrite them to include verbs that actually describe the intended behavior. What you want to do is state how learners are going to *demonstrate* that they know or understand the skills. Try using words from the list on the right.

To help you in writing your own objectives, here is a chart listing the categories of learning (from Lesson 4) along with some of the more common verbs used when writing objectives for that category:

| Category | Common Verbs |
|--|---|
| <i>Verbal Information</i> | State, Recite, Tell, Declare, Name, List, Define |
| <i>Intellectual Skills: Concrete Concepts</i> | Identify, Label |
| <i>Intellectual Skills: Defined Concepts</i> | Classify instances, Sort, Categorize |
| <i>Intellectual Skills: Rules</i> | Solve, Show, Demonstrate, Generate, Develop, Create, Determine, Calculate, Predict |
| <i>Intellectual Skills: Higher-order Rules (Problem Solving)</i> | Solve, Show, Demonstrate, Generate, Develop, Create, Determine, Calculate, Predict, Defend, Support |
| <i>Motor Skills</i> | Execute, Perform, Swim, Walk, Run, Climb, Drill, Saw, Assemble, Build |
| <i>Attitudes</i> | Choose, Decide, Participate |

The following represent some poorly written objectives taken from a number of commercially produced instructional materials:

- The students will demonstrate a knowledge of the principles of magnetism.
- The students will be able to recognize that the practical application of democratic ideals requires time, adjustment, and continuous effort.
- The students will understand the use of commas.
- The students will recognize an autobiography.
- Employees will demonstrate positive habits of the mind.

Another common problem with objectives is the use of superfluous wording that often makes the actual performance fuzzy. For example, using "Students will learn how to..." tends to emphasize the teaching rather than the learning (permanent change in behavior). Another common problem with poorly worded objectives is the description of instruction as part of the condition. These objectives might state, "After viewing a filmstrip..." or "Given a math worksheet..." and then indicate that students will be given some type of instruction. Things like instructional procedures, descriptions of the target audience, or format requirements are not useful and should be left out of objectives. For example, look at the following statement:

- Following two lectures on the Civil War, ...

This statement does not serve a useful purpose, and is limiting. An instructor might be able to accomplish the same thing in one lecture, or some students may not need any lecture to achieve the goal. The objective should only be concerned with student outcomes. Here are some more poor examples, this time with improved versions:

Bad: The student will demonstrate metric measurement of length.

Better: Given a metric ruler, the students will measure the length of common linear objects to the nearest millimeter.

Bad: The students will solve addition problems with 80% accuracy.

Better: The student will correctly solve at least 8 out of 10 addition problems that require borrowing.

Best: Given two numbers not written in equation form, the students will place the numbers in equation form and add them together (some will require borrowing).