AO Education Institute

10 tips for writing effective learning objectives

Well-written learning objectives give learners and faculty a shared, clear view of what should be achieved through an educational activity. They help focus content and learning activities, clarify expectations, and provide a basis for assessing whether the intended learning has been achieved.

Effective objectives describe what the learner will be able to do, using observable and assessable actions appropriate to the learning need.

The following 10 tips provide a practical guide for writing learning objectives that are clear, focused, and aligned with learning and assessment.



1. Start with the learner

Write what the learner will be able to do after the activity, not what faculty will teach or cover.

2. Use one observable action

Choose an action you could see, hear, review, or otherwise assess.

Observable actions make it possible to determine whether the intended learning has been achieved.

3. Use one main verb per objective

One action keeps the intended outcome clear.

If an objective contains two distinct performances, consider separating them.

4. Choose the cognitive level deliberately

Use Bloom's revised taxonomy to match the verb to the level of learning participants really need: Remember, Understand, Apply, Analyze, Evaluate, or Create.

Do not aim higher simply for the sake of it.



5. Be specific about the context

Include relevant details, such as the clinical situation or patient characteristics, when they are needed to make the learning objective clear.



6. Keep it concise and unambiguous

An objective should communicate the intended learning quickly.

Remove unnecessary wording and references such as “the above.”



7. Make it achievable

Match the scope and complexity of the objective to the learners, available time, learning format, and opportunities to practice.



8. Align objective, learning activity, and assessment

Learners should practice the type of thinking or performance named in the objective, and the assessment should allow them to demonstrate it.



9. Check that the content supports the objective

Do not promise an outcome that the educational activity does not adequately address.

Revise the objective or redesign the activity.



10. Use a final quality check

Ask:

- Is it learner-centered, observable, specific, achievable, and assessable?
- Does it describe one clear outcome, and is it aligned with the activity and assessment?
- Will achieving this objective make a meaningful difference in clinical practice?

Verb guide

Instead of vague terms	Consider using
Understand	Explain, interpret, apply
Know	Identify, classify, select
Be familiar with	Demonstrate, perform, recommend
Appreciate	Evaluate, justify, compare

Quick example

Instead of

Understand principles of postoperative mobilization.

Try

Recommend an appropriate postoperative mobilization strategy for an older adult based on the patient’s clinical status.

Key sources:

Anderson & Krathwohl (2001); **Biggs** (2014); **CDC Training Development** (2026); American College of Surgeons guidance on effective learning objectives.

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