

Training Tips and Tricks: Start with Learning Objectives

Not Enough Time for Learning Objectives?



In the rush to move training online, it's easy to overlook the more academic principles of good teaching. Some might argue that we can't fuss over details like these, not now. We need video conferencing and project management software, and we need them now. [Zoom](#), [Slack](#), [WebEx](#), [Trello](#), [Groove](#), [Scoro](#)—names that might have sounded foreign to us just a few weeks ago are now slipping into our everyday conversations. That's good news for trainers. The bad news? If you're already on the Zoom bandwagon (as most of you probably are), you might be starting in the wrong place. That's because an effective training program begins with learning *objectives*, not learning *tools*.

Learning Objectives Matter

In its broadest definition, a **learning objective** describes what learners can *do* after completing a course that *they couldn't do before*. Launching a training course without learning objectives is like travelling the country without a map. Objectives set a clear path, not only for what instructors need to accomplish but also for what learners can expect to gain.

Deciding on learning objectives might seem like a simple task, but articulating those ideas in short, concise sentences takes practice. There's no room for error in this critical stage of development. Your choice of words can mean the difference between an amazingly successful course or training that is a waste of time for everyone.

The Right Word in the Right Place

Consider the following learning objective written by Lucy, an inexperienced instructional designer:

Learn about Iowa's Child Support Recovery Unit's parent location services.

See anything wrong here? First of all, learning objectives are not agendas. It's okay for Lucy to think about topics she'd like to cover in her course, but when writing objectives, she must be more specific about what she expects her learners to *know* or *do* after completing the course. In fact, it would be better for Lucy to start her sentence like this:

At the end of this course, learners will be familiar with Iowa's Child Support Recovery Unit's parent location services.

Better, but it still needs work. Look at the phrase *learners will be familiar with*. This might be the general outcome Lucy is shooting for, but at the end of the course, *how will she know if this is true?* A well-written learning objective defines not only the desired outcome but also how learners will *demonstrate* what they've learned. Lucy revises her sentence to read as follows:

At the end of this course, learners will correctly identify services that Iowa's Child Support Recovery Unit uses to locate parents.

Take special note of the word *identify*, which represents an *action* taken by the learner. Well-written learning objectives always include **action words** like this to help define what a learner *can do* at the end of the course. Other action words Lucy might use are *arrange, define, describe, match, duplicate, and list*.

Of course, Lucy will want to do more than simply test a learner's memory. As she begins to explore more complex pieces of training, she'll need to find ways to *measure* more complex outcomes. For example, Lucy might want learners to do the following:

- **Understand** what they've learned by describing, discussing, or expressing thoughts.
- **Apply** what they've learned by choosing, demonstrating, or illustrating features.
- **Analyze** what they've learned by comparing, contrasting, and calculating data.

As the content of Lucy's training becomes more complex, her learning objectives become more refined.

At the end of this course, learners will be able to discuss the mission and vision of Iowa's Child Support Recovery Unit.

At the end of this course, learners will be able to demonstrate their ability to enter data into Iowa's child support collections system.

At the end of this course, learners will be able to calculate the amount of child support owed.

Notice how these learning objectives describe both the outcome Lucy desires and how learners will demonstrate what they've learned. Conveniently, the objectives also suggest what tools Lucy might use to measure success. For example, if the objective calls for learners to *discuss*, Lucy will need a learning tool that allows participants to write short answers or join a live conversation. If the objective calls for learners to *demonstrate*, she'll need a learning tool that allows participants to choose options, make changes, or find information. If the objective calls for learners to *calculate*, Lucy will need a learning tool that allows participants to enter numbers and categorize data.

Going Forward

Moving online doesn't mean abandoning what you've already created for the classroom. However, now is a good time to revisit the purpose and mission of your training and better define your learning objectives. This will add clarity to your purpose—and save you the sorrow of later overhauling a training program that just doesn't work. As my grandfather used to say, "There's never enough time to do it right, but there's always enough time to do it over."

--David Briggs
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