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Aims & Objectives



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Snippets on aims & objectives

Aims are just general statements briefly outlining the content of the training being offered. Well written objectives are much more specific and should clarify the aims in more detail. They should state what the trainee should be able to do. Well written aims and objectives will help to provide a sound basis for identifying the content of a course or training programme. They also will assist you in assessing whether or not the training has been successful.

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The Problem

I'm not really sure what is expected of me at this stage of my training

The objectives I've been set are a bit woolly

The aims and objectives of the training programme are so general it's difficult to really tell how you are doing

Trainees

The Solution

Clear aims and objectives for the training being undertaken!

I know precisely what I should be able to do by the end of this training year

My supervisor and I went though the objectives of the training and clearly identified those areas where I needed more experience

Trainees

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Tackling terminology

Aims and objectives are often used loosely (and sometimes incorrectly) although they are very different. Other words are also used such as goals, purposes (rather like aims) and learning outcomes (similar to objectives). The terminology has become a minefield, but there is no need to get too bogged down in fine differences and drawn into educational theory.

objective [AIM] /ɛəb'dʒek-tɪv, \$-tɪv/ *n* [C] something which you plan to do or achieve • *Her main/prime objective now is simply to stay in power.* • *Is the European sales force achieving/attaining/meeting its financial objectives?* • *The military objectives are simple – to capture and hold the city.* • See also OBJECT [PURPOSE].

objective [FAIR OR REAL] /ɛəb'dʒek-tɪv, \$-tɪv/ *adj* not influenced by personal beliefs or feelings; based on real facts • *How can you make an objective assessment of her? It's your own daughter?* • *It's an admirably objective and impartial report.* • *Science is usually concerned only with objective facts that can be proved or disproved.* • Compare SUBJECTIVE.

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Aim

An aim is a general statement of intent. It describes the direction in which the learner will go in terms of what they might learn or what the teacher/training will do.

Objective

An objective is a more specific statement about what the learner should or will be able to do after the training experience.



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Aims and objectives play an important part in planning:

- a training programme
- a curriculum
- a course
- a short training event for individual trainees.

A clear statement of what you are trying to achieve through training will provide a sound basis for choosing the training methods as well as the assessment instruments. In other words trainees will know precisely in which direction they are travelling and you will know whether or not they are getting there.



Aims & objectives in action

What are they?

Consider for a moment this programme – ‘Developing the Teaching Instinct’. What are its aims & objectives?

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The aims

The objectives

A unit's objective



For more information
click on one of the
options



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The aims



The objectives

A unit's objective

Its aim is to introduce doctors to basic educational techniques in order to better equip them in their day to day teaching or supervisory role.

The aim gives you a general indication of what you might learn and how you might benefit from a course. However, it does not give you any details, or a means of assessing whether your learning has been successful. Objectives are used for this purpose.



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The aims

The objectives

Unit's objective



The objectives tell you what you should be able to do after the course, eg on completion of *this programme* the learner will:

- be able to identify key principles of adult teaching and learning
- be able to apply educational techniques learned to everyday teaching and supervision
- have identified their own strengths and weaknesses in teaching and supervision.

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The aims

The objectives

A unit's objective



Each unit might also have its own objectives, depending on how specific you wish to be. For this programme the unit's objectives are:

The learner will be able to:

- define aims and objectives
- write appropriate objectives for knowledge, skills and attitudes training
- write clear objectives for the training in which they are involved.

If you wish to see another example from the GMC (1997) document, click [HERE](#)

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The GMC (1997) document 'The New Doctor' outlines one of the aims (they call it purpose) of general clinical training for PRHOs as:

- To enable PRHOs to demonstrate that on completing general clinical training, they are ready to accept with confidence the duties and responsibilities of a fully registered doctor and to begin training for specialist medical practice.

This broad statement of intent is later clarified into more specific aspects. These are really broad objectives for the whole training programme, eg:

- Develop competence at diagnosis, decision making and the provision of treatment
- Keep accurate records
- Be aware of their own limitations and ready to seek help when necessary.

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What are the pitfalls?

The most common mistake trainers make is in writing vague objectives which can be interpreted in different ways.

Read the six objectives below. Which would you consider to be vague? Try to improve them. Check to see [our list](#).

The learner will:

- 1 have a knowledge of reproduction
- 2 be able to identify patients that are malnourished
- 3 appreciate patient rights with regard to confidentiality
- 4 understand the physiological basis of factors which interact to...
- 5 be familiar with principles governing the peri-operative care of...
- 6 be able to recognise surgical illness in the newborn.

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Here are our suggestions.

The learner will be able to:

- 1 describe and summarise the key issues relating to reproduction
- 2 (no change) identify patients that are malnourished
- 3 demonstrate recognition of patient rights with regard to confidentiality
- 4 describe the physiological basis of factors which interact to...
- 5 be able to summarise the principles governing the peri-operative care of...
- 6 (no change) recognise surgical illness in the newborn.



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Good objectives use 'doing' words, like:

- list
- identify
- describe
- compare
- interpret
- give examples of
- illustrate

At higher levels of complexity you might use:

- assess
- predict
- analyse
- justify
- devise
- plan



Note...

Avoid words or phrases like “understand, know, be familiar with” – after all how can you tell the trainee knows, understands etc. Such words may suffice for a broad objective for a training year, but will require further clarification through unit objectives.



Examples in practice

Objectives need not form a rigid format. They should just say what you want them to say to clarify the intention of your training and help you to assess the effectiveness of that training. Also you should write only as many as you think are needed for all the important aspects of the training.

Objectives can be classified in many ways. The simplest way is to think of them in terms of the knowledge, skills and attitudes the learner will gain from the training or course. Many objectives may involve a combination of all three.

Knowledge objectives

Skills objectives

Attitudinal objectives



Check if you want to see examples



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Knowledge objectives

Skills objectives

Attitudinal objectives



Objectives in this category can range from simple recall or recognition, eg list, define, recognise, through to application and analysis, eg choose, illustrate, compare etc.

A specific knowledge objective describing the knowledge that learners should have gained from a course could be:

- The learner can describe the clinical features of the four grades of encephalopathy.
- or
- The learner will be able to list the main differences between ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease.

Learners will be able to easily demonstrate achievement of such objectives.

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Knowledge
objectives

Skills objectives



Attitudinal
objectives

Skills involve the application of knowledge, eg solving a problem, making a diagnosis, or performance of a physical skill such as following a procedure, using an instrument correctly. Examples of skills objectives are:

The learner will be able to:

- correctly interpret the findings obtained from the history and the physical examination
- choose appropriate investigations
- carry out the basic clinical procedures of venepuncture, insertion of an intravenous line
- carry out prompt and effective resuscitation
- keep accurate records
- discriminate between normal and abnormal x-rays.

Again achievement of such objectives will be clear.



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Knowledge
objectives

Skills objectives

Attitudinal
objectives



These objectives concern the beliefs, approach or style and attitudes which you would wish the trainee to adopt. Here are some examples.

The learner will be:

- aware of their personal limitations and seek help when necessary
- able to communicate effectively and with respect with patients, relatives and other professionals with whom they come in contact
- able to work effectively as a member of a team
- able to cope with uncertainty
- show a desire to further improve the quality of patient care

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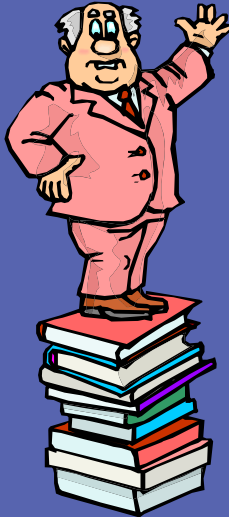
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Over to you!

Can you correctly classify the objectives below in terms of knowledge (K), skills (S) and attitudes (A).

The learner will be able to:

- 1 evaluate the likely causes of groin swelling in a patient
- 2 state the important questions to ask when taking a patient history from a patient with...
- 3 institute appropriate investigations for the condition of...
- 4 include the child in discussions and decisions when taking a history from a child's parent
- 5 apply the principles of management for the common conditions of...
- 6 describe the monitoring required for patients receiving nutritional support
- 7 carry out prompt emergency care
- 8 predict likelihood of outcome.



Click [HERE](#) for answers

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The learner will be able to:

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- 4 include the child in discussions and decisions when taking a history from a child's parent
- 5 apply the principles of management for the common conditions of...
- 6 describe the monitoring required for patients receiving nutritional support
- 7 carry out prompt emergency care
- 8 predict likelihood of outcome.

Answers

K & S

K

K & S

S & A

K

K

K & S

K



P

ractical tips

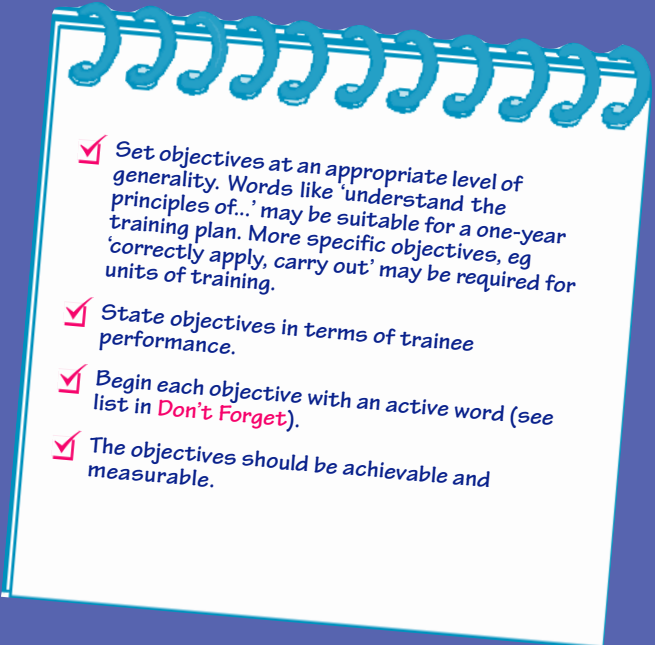
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- ✓ Think of objectives in terms of the outcome or product of your training, ie trainee performance - how do you want the trainee to behave/practice or what do you want them to be able to do?
- ✓ Ensure objectives are representative of what the training is trying to achieve - but don't get bogged down in writing objectives for every single aspect of your course. You can't assess everything. Make sure your objectives reflect the important aspects of your course/training.
- ✓ Objectives should cover the range of aspects of the training i.e. knowledge, skills and attitudes. For example if the training area involves working closely with other professions, make sure there are objectives covering this aspect.

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- 
- ✓ Set objectives at an appropriate level of generality. Words like 'understand the principles of...' may be suitable for a one-year training plan. More specific objectives, eg 'correctly apply, carry out' may be required for units of training.
 - ✓ State objectives in terms of trainee performance.
 - ✓ Begin each objective with an active word (see list in **Don't Forget**).
 - ✓ The objectives should be achievable and measurable.

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Other learning opportunities

There are many books and other resources on aims and objectives.
Here is a short resume of our suggestions.



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button if you wish to
find out more

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Centre for Medical Education (1997) Aims, objectives and competencies. Unit CD:4 in the Diploma in Medical Education, *Dundee, Centre for Medical Education, University of Dundee*

As with some of the other units, you can build on your learning of this topic and gain accreditation towards a postgraduate certificate/diploma/ Masters in Medical Education. The topic is studied further in their unit 'Aims, objectives and competencies'.

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McAvoy B R (1985). How to Choose and Use Educational Objectives. *Medical Teacher* 7(1): 27-35

A useful article giving a slightly different overview from this unit.

Allan J (1996). Learning Outcomes in Higher Education. *Studies in Higher Education* 21(1): 93-106

An informative paper for those who wish to read about the move from objectives to learning outcomes.

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Gronlund N (1985). *Stating objectives for classroom instruction*. Third edition. New York, Macmillan

A not too daunting booklet that gives lots of examples for writing appropriate objectives. Although non-medical, the examples clearly show the points being made and should help you critically evaluate your own objectives.

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The international database TimeLIT (Topics in Medical Education Literature) www.timelit.org gives free access to articles relating to education in medicine, dentistry, nursing, patient health and the professions allied to medicine.

Other useful websites for those interested in Medical Education are that of the Association for the Study of Medical Education www.asme.org.uk and that of the Association for Medical Education in Europe www.amee.org

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The skills of aims and objectives are relevant to many other teaching roles and activities. Here are some other *Developing the Teaching Instinct* units you might wish to look at.

**Learning
Contracts**

Appraisal



Click the appropriate button to take you to a summary of the unit

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Next time you see any aims, goals, objectives, learning outcomes written down, eg for a course you are going on, an official training document from your profession or specialty, critically analyse them in terms of:

- appropriateness for the training offered
- generality versus specificity
- measurability
- usefulness.



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If you are formulating measurable objectives then use 'active' words. Here are a few you might use.

Select, recognise, state, contrast, formulate, explain, criticise, demonstrate, modify, illustrate, categorise, differentiate, resolve, derive, manage, suggest, synthesise, contrast, evaluate, determine.

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