

Learning Objectives



What are they?

Learning objectives are statements that communicate the intent of an educational activity. They tell the attendee what he/she will gain by participating in this educational experience. Every CME activity, whether it is a lecture, workshop or panel discussion must have one or more learning objective(s). The number of objectives is reflective of the amount and diversity of information obtained from the needs assessment.

Developing learning objectives is a cooperative effort that should include the planning committee, faculty and CME practitioner. The planning committee works to interpret the needs assessment, determine the exact learning need and anticipated outcome, and convey that to the faculty. We as CME practitioners help this process by working with the faculty and planning committee to document learning objectives that support the needs assessment.

The most common types of objectives are:

- Learner (what the student will know as a result of the activity)
- Instructional (what the instructor will teach or convey), and
- Behavioral (what the learner is expected to do differently as a result of the activity)

Objectives should not be confused with goals, which are more general or global. Objectives are the action statements that operationalize a goal. For example, a goal for a CME activity may be “to help physicians provide the very best possible care to patients through improved communications.”

Objectives might include:

- Develop new leadership skills and apply them to managing difficult patients
- Identify common causes underlying patient relationship failures that limit the performance of the physician and hamper quality results.

Essential Three (3) states that sponsors shall “highlight the instructional content and/or expected learning outcomes in terms of knowledge skills and/or attitudes.” This essential doesn’t differentiate amongst the various types of objectives, only that they must be stated. CME providers might consider the development and use of behavioral objectives because:

- They improve promotion by clearly telling potential participants what they will be able to “do.”
- They encourage an “outcomes” approach to the learning process.
- They enhance the potential of the evaluation (measurement) process

Objectives are developed to:

- Assist us in planning, designing and implementing CME activities
- Assist us in evaluating the activity
- Help prospective participants judge whether this activity meets their needs or interest
- Enable us to evaluate the activity and determine the extent to which it impacted the audience

 **Pearl:** *While it is not required that you publish an objective for each and every presentation, you might consider incorporating individual learning objectives into your promotional piece. This prompts faculty accountability, sets clear directions for the activity planning, and provides prospective participants with all the information they need to select your activity over another.*

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Applications

Learning objectives must relate to the needs identified by the planning committee. These needs may include the development of either knowledge (correct technique for splinting fractures) or attitudes (addressing the needs of the terminally ill patient). Learning objectives are developed after the need and audience are determined, but before the teaching method and evaluation technique. (Rosof, *CME Primer*)

Before writing objectives, it may be helpful to ask a few questions of the players involved. This process will focus everyone and clearly define the objectives.

- CME committee

What course of action or outcome or change is indicated by the needs assessment?

- Intended audience:

What would you like to take away from this presentation?

What do you need that will enhance your practice?

- Proposed faculty/expert

What information can you share to enhance the intended audience's understanding and competency?"

or, answer

What can you offer that will convince the intended audience to come to this presentation; or what is in it for me?

These responses would help you answer "what is the intended result of the educational activity, in terms of the learner?"

Once you, the CME committee, and/or faculty have this information follow these three steps:

1. Select an action verb that specifies what the learner will be able to do (a specific behavior or activity desired.) The following table reflects the action verbs typically associated with the development of learning objectives (Rosof, *CME Primer*)

To formulate educational objectives -

- A. That communicate knowledge in the following areas (bulleted descriptors):

•INFORMATION count define identify list recognize relate select tabulate	•APPLICATION apply complete develop examine interpret order predict restate treat	•SYNTHESIS arrange assemble detect formulate generalize integrate specify validate
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•COMPREHENSION classify compare describe estimate explain locate restate	•ANALYSIS appraise contrast criticize debate differentiate question separate summarize	•EVALUATION assess critique estimate judge rank rate recommend
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B. That impart skills

Demonstrate
Diagram
Hold

Measure
Palpate
Write

C. That convey attitudes

Consider
Exemplify
Reflect

2. Specify conditions or requirements for completion:

Most learning objectives are introduced by stating: "Upon completion of this (lecture, workshop, session, etc.) participants will be able to....:" For example:

List four causes of aplastic anemia

Give an example of the effect of a strong alkali reacting with human tissue

Calculate the amount of IV fluid necessary to replenish a dehydrated patient

And/or

3. If the objectives lend themselves to quantification then specify criteria for acceptable performance (how well). For example:

Calculate the amount of IV fluid necessary, within 100 milliliters, to replenish each dehydrated patient in the case study

Correctly perform CPR during each simulation

 **Pearl: Commendable Learning Objectives:**

- *Printed objectives are available for each lecture*
- *There is documentation of the development of objectives between the planning committee and presenter.*
- *Objectives are measurable*

Use your discretion when developing and using educational objectives. While too few may not provide enough information about the learning opportunity, too many may be confusing and overwhelm potential participants.

A direct link should exist between the needs assessment (what's the gap?), the stated learning objectives (what will the participants gain?), and the educational design (how will we accomplish it?). Clearly defined learning objectives will ensure the need is met, provide specific direction for educational design and enhance the evaluation process.