Course Goals and Outcome-Based Objectives

A **course goal** is a general expectation, often written in broad, overarching, student-achievement terms (Trice 2000). For example, one might identify the following: *The goal of this course is to gain an appreciation of the roots of popular music.*

Goals are measured using **student learning objectives**. An objective (also sometimes referred to as an outcome) is a specific expectation written so as to be clear about an action a student will be able to perform as result of instruction (Tice 2000). An objective should address only one, specific area. Here is an example: *At the end of the course, given a list of musicians, a successful student will correctly identify 9 of the 12 musical icons of the late 1990’s.*

Objectives should be written in such a way that one can assess a student’s success or failure at meeting the objective, using the following criteria (Mager 1997):

1. Performance (what is expected of the student)
2. Conditions (as related to the performance)
3. Criterion (acceptable/successful level of performance)

Examples:

1. Given a compilation CD of popular songs from the 1990’s, correctly identify the song title and writer with at least 80% accuracy.
2. Given two of the songs discussed in the class, write an essay for each describing the social-political references made in each of the songs. Essays must correctly describe at least three of the socio-political references discussed in class and should exhibit proper grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

The following represent common mistakes found in (outcome-based) learning objectives:

- Using performance not stated in measurable terms:
  - **Examples:** “develop an understanding;” “develop an appreciation;” “know” (i.e., “Develop an appreciation for rock music of the 1990’s). See the first example above for a good way to restate these types of objectives.

- Using criteria to describe a task that does not prove one’s mastery of the task:
  - **Write a 5 page essay on the theory of music.** The number of pages is the sole criteria. Is the essay’s length really the key to this objective? See the second example of the objective restated.

- Using instructional objectives rather than learning objectives:
  - **Be able to discuss the main points of chapter 5.** Discussion is the instructional method, but what is the student performance for this objective? **Try restating the objective:** Given the topic of a chapter, correctly identify 80% of the main points.

- Using improvement in learning instead of a performance standard:
  - **“Increase knowledge of” or “Increase skill in”** (i.e., “Increase one’s skill in typing”). **Reword using a performance criterion:** Type 45 words per minute with no more than $X$ errors.
The following table lists some verbs commonly used in creating student learning objectives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Comprehension</th>
<th>Application</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Synthesis</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recall</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
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<td>Translate</td>
<td>Repair</td>
<td>Recognize</td>
<td>Write</td>
<td>Test</td>
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--adapted from Bloom 1956

On a syllabus, one can list student learning objectives as a bulleted list of only the performance components and save the more detailed objective when discussing or describing the individual assignments:

By the end of the semester, the successful student will be able to:

- Identify the writers and titles of popular songs from the 1990’s
- Describe the socio-political references in the songs
- Write an analytical essay that exhibits proper grammar, punctuation, and spelling