

# Writing Learning Objectives Made Easy

Review of accreditation applications reveals that many sponsors do not write learner objectives in behavioral terms. The following information should prove helpful:

## ***Types of Objectives***

*Learner objectives* state what the learner should know or be able to do at the end of a learning activity. This type of objective emphasizes learning outcomes.

*Instructional (teaching) objectives* state what the instructor intends to accomplish during a learning activity. This type of objective describes a process, not an outcome.

*Behavioral objectives* state what the learner might be able to do differently (behavioral change) as a result of what has been learned.

## ***What Type of Objectives should I Be Writing?***

CME sponsors should write *behavioral and/or learner objectives* for use on program promotional materials and evaluations. This type of objective gives potential participants clear information on what they can expect to take away from the session, communicates to the speaker what (s) he is expected to convey to the learners, and provides a measurable basis for evaluation of whether the objectives have been met.

## ***How Should Behavioral Learning Objectives Be Written?***

This is the easy part! All you have to do is start with the phrase: "At the conclusion of this activity, participants should be able to: " and then state the things participants will be able to do. Be sure to use specific action verbs (behavioral terms) in these statements -- verbs such as "identify," "cite," "describe," or "assess." **You will find a list of these verbs on the next page.** If you follow this simple format and keep the list of verbs by your side, it is almost impossible to write a bad set of objectives!

## ***Common Mistakes***

Verbs such as "know" and "understand" are vague. Avoid these words and use action verbs from the next page instead. "Understanding" can have a myriad of meanings and it can be difficult to evaluate whether a learner "understands" a concept. However, a learning objective that states that a physician "will be able to cite the risk factors for breast cancer" can be evaluated consistently by both the CME Committee and the participants as to whether it has been achieved.

Often program announcements list teaching objectives rather than learning objectives. Examples: "To acquaint the clinician with the key clinical features necessary for the diagnosis of common rheumatic diseases." "To update, reinforce, and provide new information regarding the etiology, pathogenesis, diagnosis, treatment, and prognosis of herniated thoracic disc." These objectives focus on what the instructor plans to do, rather than what the learner outcome will be.

Announcements sometimes give objectives which are just a list of topics. Examples: "1. Principles of laser mechanics; 2. Laser uses in the cardiovascular system; 3. Efficacy of lasers in cardiovascular disease." This focuses on what the instructor will do rather on what the learner will achieve.