

HOW TO DESIGN LEARNING TARGETS

Excerpt from: Learning Targets: Helping Students Aim for Understanding in Today's Lesson
by Connie M. Moss and Susan M. Brookhart (pages 28-31)

Many readers may remember being asked to write instructional objectives on the board for students to see. Supervisors checked to see whether your objective was on the board and evaluated you accordingly. The reasoning went that students would do better if they knew the purpose of the lesson and understood the intended outcome.

The reasoning was great; it was the method that was wanting. Consider an instructional objective in teacher language, maybe something like “Students will be able to explain the importance of the cycle of pollination and fertilization as it relates to seed production.” It is off-putting at best, because it refers to students in the third person. And it is confusing at worst, because the students probably don’t understand what that sentence means. They haven’t studied these concepts yet.

Students *do* need to know the purpose of the lesson and understand the target they’re aiming for. But most students won’t get that from an instructional objective. They *will*, however, get it from a learning target.

MINING THE INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVE: WHAT IS THIS LESSON’S REASON TO LIVE?

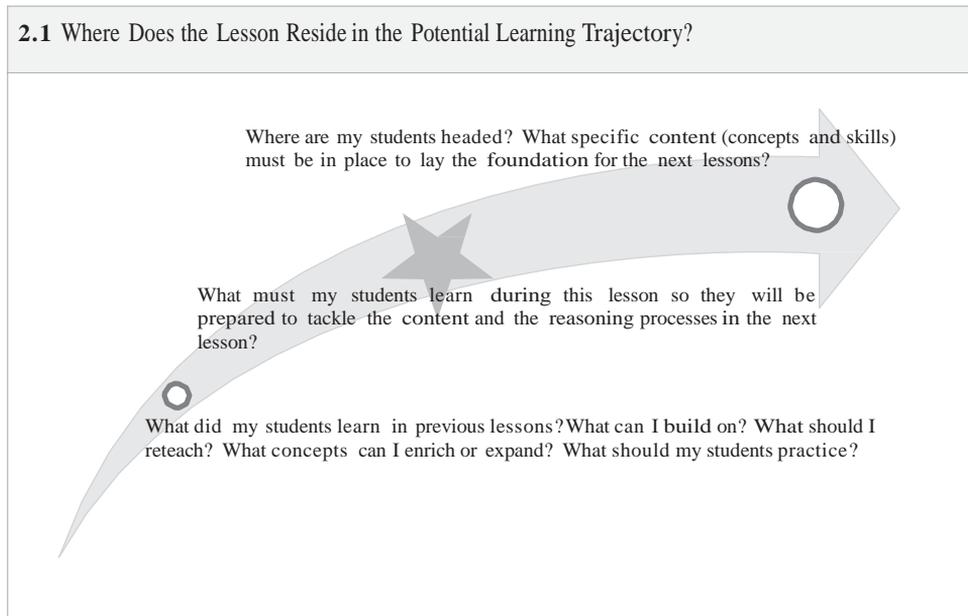
Learning targets use words, pictures, actions, or some combination of the three to express to students, in terms the students understand, the content and performance

they are aiming for. Your learning target should spring from the instructional objectives that guide a set of lessons in this particular unit of study. Of course, your instructional objective for the lesson should be solid, teachable, assessable, and appropriately derived from curricular goals and state standards.

To plan effective instruction, teachers need to know three things about today’s lesson:

- What are the essential knowledge (facts, concepts, and generalizations or principles) and skills (or procedures) for the lesson?
- What is the essential reasoning content for the lesson?
- What is the potential learning trajectory in which the lesson is situated?

If you mine the instructional objective for these three elements, you’ll come up with the raw material you’ll use to design the learning target. It is not overdramatic to call these ingredients the lesson’s “reason to live.” If the essential elements of the lesson are trivial, or if they do not advance learning on a trajectory toward more learning, then it is questionable whether this lesson should be taught at all. The whole concept of standards-based instruction assumes that individual lessons, over time, will amount to achievement of a larger standard. Figure 2.1 illustrates this concept and the thinking associated with it.



A. DEFINE THE ESSENTIAL CONTENT FOR THE LESSON

To define the essential content for the lesson, you need to have a deep understanding of the intended learning. If you find yourself able only to list the facts and concepts that students should know, without placing them into any larger learning picture, you should work on your own understanding before you try to plan instruction.

You also need to have a good idea of what a lesson-sized “chunk” of your instructional objective looks like. What portion or aspect of the instructional objective are you going to work on during today’s lesson? All of it? Part of it? If the latter, which part? You can and should communicate longer-range goals to students, but don’t lose sight of the fact that students need a learning target for today’s lesson.

Once you have a deep understanding of the instructional objective and what aspect or aspects of it you will base your lesson on, ask yourself the following questions:

- What content knowledge does this lesson focus on? Content knowledge should be more than facts; it should also include concepts and generalizations or principles.
- How will this particular lesson add to what students have learned in previous lessons?
- How will this lesson increase students’ understanding of the content? Will students develop a more sophisticated understanding of a concept, or will they tackle a brand-new concept?
- What skills does this lesson focus on? *Skills* is a broad term, encompassing abilities like outlining, summarizing, questioning, graphing, diagramming, balancing equations, solving problems, journaling, giving a speech, and using dictionaries and other reference materials.
- Will students learn a new skill, practice one they have yet to master, or apply a highly developed skill to a new context?

B. DEFINE THE REASONING PROCESSES ESSENTIAL FOR THE LESSON

A taxonomy of thinking skills, like Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) or Webb’s (2002), is helpful here. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What thought-demanding processes will allow my students to build on what they already know and can do?
- What kinds of thinking will promote deep understanding and skill development so that students can analyze, reshape, expand, extrapolate from, apply, and build on what they already know?

C. DESIGN A STRONG PERFORMANCE OF UNDERSTANDING

A performance of understanding simultaneously serves an instructional purpose (developing student understanding and skills) and a formative assessment purpose (providing compelling evidence of student understanding and skills). So it's important to ask yourself, "What performance of understanding will help my students develop their thinking skills and apply their new knowledge?"

Be careful here. The performance of understanding is not the instructional objective, but it embodies and exemplifies the instructional objective, so it influences the language used in framing the learning target for students. This is a subtle but vital point: one of the most common mistakes teachers make in lesson planning is to confuse learning targets with performances of understanding (Clarke, 2001).

Think of it this way. A performance of understanding provides one of a number of possible ways in which students can learn and produce evidence of what they are learning in today's lesson. Imagine a foreign language class whose learning target is for students to be able to carry on an everyday conversation in the foreign language with same-age peers. Today's performance of understanding has students working in groups, holding conversations that they might have at a friend's birthday party. The performance of understanding could have been a conversation at the ice-skating rink, or in the school parking lot, but it wasn't. There is typically a whole set of performances of understanding that would work for any given instructional objective. Your job is to design a performance that matches the chunk of the instructional objective that is the learning target for today's lesson.

The performance of understanding is what keeps students' heads in the game as they work toward a learning target; from their point of view, what you ask them to *do* becomes inextricably bound to what they intend to *learn*. As the facilitator of student learning, the teacher has the "omniscient" point of view. He or she is able to select performances of understanding and other lesson elements from the larger domain, which includes what learning, came before and what will come after. In contrast, students have the "limited" point of view; they are "in" the learning and know only the things they either encounter in the lesson or have prior knowledge of. So for students, doing well on the performance of understanding *is* the goal, at least at that time and in that place. For the teacher, it is only one indicator of learning.



Discuss the connection between standards,
learning objectives and learning targets

D. STATE THE LEARNING TARGET

During this step, you describe the lesson-sized chunk of learning for your class as a statement of what the students will learn and do during the lesson. Make sure that this learning target expresses, from the students' point of view, the knowledge and skills they will be using in their performance of understanding.

So far, we have established that developing a learning target follows a thoughtful process of mining your instructional objective for the lesson. The result should be a coherent set: your instructional objective, your students' learning target, and the performance of understanding.

An effective learning target must speak to students, express the essentials of the lesson, and provide students with a rationale for why what you are asking them to do is in fact a performance of understanding. In effect, an effective learning target helps students hop onto the learning trajectory.

Stating a learning target well is a skill in itself: you must state the target in a manner that students will understand, using student-friendly language and relevant illustrations. In the following two sections, we take up each of these in turn.

Excerpt from: Learning Targets: Helping Students Aim for Understanding in Today's Lesson by Connie M. Moss and Susan M. Brookhart (pages 51-54)

THE FOUR STEP FRAMEWORK

This framework employs a set of “starter prompts” that unpack the learning target, performance of understanding, and success criteria from the student's point of view (see Figure 3.3, p. 52). The successive steps of the framework outline what students will learn during today's lesson, explain what they will do to learn it, describe what they will look for to know they are doing good work, and make the target relevant by connecting it to the potential learning trajectory, future academic learning, or real-world applications.

The four starter prompts of the framework are

- We are learning to . . .
- We will show that we can do this by . . .
- To know how well we are learning this, we will look for . . .
- It is important for us to learn this (or be able to do this) because . . .

We'll use a 3rd grade language arts lesson to illustrate how the four prompts work together to share the learning target with students. The teacher's learning target for the lesson is “Students will learn how to sequence the four main events of a story.”

Step 1. Explain the learning target in student-friendly, developmentally appropriate terms: *We are learning to* put the four most important events of a story we read into the exact order they happened in the story to answer the question “What happened first, second, third, and last?”

Step 2. Describe the performance of understanding: *We will show that we can do this* by placing pictures of the four important events from the story in the exact order we remember them happening.

Step 3. Describe the student look-fors: *To know how well we are learning this, we will look for* the match between the order of our pictures and the sequence of events in the story as we reread it.

Step 4. Make it relevant: *It is important for us to be able to* put what happens in a story in the right order because it helps us understand and remember stories and books we read. It will help us in our next lesson when we learn how to write our own stories. Knowing and remembering the order of important events also helps us learn science, history, math, and other subjects in school. It is a skill we will use for the rest of our lives, no matter what we do when we grow up. Doctors, detectives, teachers, mechanics, musicians, chefs, and many others must know and follow the exact order of things.

3.3 The Four-Step Framework	
The learning target for today’s lesson: _____	
steps	What the Teacher says
step 1: Explain the learning target in student-friendly, developmentally appropriate terms.	We are learning to . . .
step 2: Describe the performance of understanding.	We will show that we can do this by . . .
step 3: Describe the student look-fors.	To know how well we are learning this, we will look for . . .
step 4: Make it relevant.	It is important for us to learn this because . . .

The I-Can Framework

This strategy pairs a description of the learning target with an “I can” statement that describes the performance of understanding for today’s lesson and translates the criteria for success into look-fors that students can understand and use. You can complete the starter prompts of the framework to fit your students’ grade level and the lesson content. The following example uses the framework in the context of a high school lesson on writing a thesis statement for a persuasive speech.

Use the first starter prompt to describe the learning target: We are learning to create an effective thesis statement for a persuasive speech that sums up what we want our audience to do, feel, think, or agree with.

Use the second starter prompt to alert students to the performance of understanding as an “I can” statement. The statement should tell students what they will do to deepen and demonstrate their understanding and provide a short list of student look-fors that explain how well they are expected to do it. You will know you are able to do this when you are able to say “I can” write a thesis statement that

- Is simple, clear, and direct.
- Says what’s important.
- Is easy to remember and understand.
- Announces what the audience should do, feel, think, or agree with.
- Explains a benefit for the audience.

Figure 3.4 (p. 54) provides examples of the I-Can Framework for a middle school and an elementary school lesson.

3.4 The I-Can Framework

Level and Topic	Describe the Learning Target	Use “I-Can” statements to share the performance of understanding and student look-fors
<p>Middle school: Assassination of President John F. Kennedy</p>	<p><i>We are learning to perform a historical investigation that examines a past event to determine what happened, why it happened, and why people still disagree about it to this day.</i></p>	<p><i>You will know you can do this when you are able to say:</i></p> <p><i>I can use the steps of the historical investigation process to answer these questions about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do people already know? • What is it that people cannot know for sure? • What specific disagreements do people have about what happened? • What evidence exists to support the two sides of the disagreement?
<p>Elementary School: Proper nouns</p>	<p><i>We are learning to find proper nouns in a story.</i></p>	<p><i>You will know you can do this when you are able to say:</i></p> <p><i>I can read a story and circle all the proper nouns I find.</i></p>

