

What are Performance Objectives?

By Thom Quine

Human beings are active organisms with many needs, pushed and pulled about by all sorts of internal and external motivations that lead us to set objectives for ourselves and for others. All human activity is directed, whether consciously or unconsciously, towards the achievement of short-term or long-term goals and objectives.

Achieving goals or objectives requires us to actually *do* something – that is, it requires the performance of some action, some sequence of steps, some behaviour, some procedure or process, some task, duty, or job. That's why we *do* stuff – because what gets accomplished in the doing helps us reach our objectives.

Knowing what has to be done to achieve a given result is a powerful thing. It means, for instance, that you can tell someone else how to achieve that result. So as well as setting objectives, we also try to define what we need to do in order to achieve them.

Human performance specialists, such as trainers, coaches, instructional designers, psychologists and educators, technical writers, information designers and the like, spend a lot of time trying to define exactly what people must do to achieve a given outcome. That's the world we live in.

Two kinds of objectives

Now if you've followed closely so far, you'll have noticed that there are two kinds of objectives at work here. Firstly, there's an objective for the outcome of a process or a task or set of tasks, an objective for the kind of results you want to see after someone has done something. Secondly, there's an objective to see done the things that should be done to achieve desired results. The first is an objective for the results; the second is an objective for the performance that leads to the results – i.e., a “performance objective.”

How are Performance Objectives Written?

Performance objectives typically consist of an action verb (a word describing an action) and a direct object (the person or thing affected by the action expressed by the verb). For instance, in a course or tutorial teaching people how to tune up a car, the performance objectives might include the following:

- Change Spark Plugs
- Change Oil
- Replace Fuel Filter
- Replace Brake Fluid
- etc.

Terminal Performance Objectives and Enabling Performance Objectives

“Enabling performance objectives” are objectives that form a part of, lead up to, or otherwise “enable” the achievement of a terminal performance objective.

For instance, in order to achieve the terminal performance objective “Tune up a car”, you would have to achieve most of the following enabling objectives:

- Change Spark Plugs
- Change Oil
- Replace Fuel Filter
- Replace Fluids
- Replace Ignition Wires
- Adjust Timing
- Replace Distributor Cap
- Replace Rotor
- etc.

These are enabling performance objectives; the terminal performance objective is “Tune up a car;” the objective is to have a car that’s tuned up!

Standards and Conditions

It can often be useful to add standards and conditions to performance objectives.

Conditions are external factors, prerequisites, or other requirements for completing the action described in a performance objective. The conditions clause of a performance objective typically starts with the word “Given”, as in the examples below:

- Given a chainsaw and appropriate safety gear, fell a tree...
- Given a shovel and temperature above freezing, dig a hole...

or

- Given a 3/4” torque wrench, tighten a spark plug...

Standards typically refer to time or quality. Let’s add a standards clause to our last example:

- Given a 3/4” torque wrench, tighten a spark plug until the crush gasket makes contact with the head or the plug is tightened to the manufacturer’s recommended torque value.

If we were building an information product to serve the performance objective above, we might have to spin off a few enabling performance objectives, such as:

- Explain the Function of the Spark Plug in an Engine
- Identify the Crush Gasket on a Spark Plug
- Identify a Manufacturer’s Recommended Torque Value
- Use a Torque Wrench

Just as most performance objectives are themselves enabling objectives to an even higher performance objective, so most enabling objectives have an almost endless series of enabling objectives of their own. How many objectives you choose to identify is determined by what assumptions you are prepared to make about your audience.

Is your audience formed of skilled mechanics? If so, you may not have to present an illustrated discussion of the nature of the tool called a torque wrench, in the same way you might need to for an audience of teen-aged apprentices. You may not need to go back and explain the meaning of words peculiar to the field of auto mechanics. And so on.

Verbs in Performance Objectives

The verb in a performance objective should be what's called a "verifiable" verb – that is, a verb whose action can be proven to have occurred. This is very important when it comes to evaluating (verifying) whether the information or instruction has succeeded.

It's easy to verify whether someone has changed the spark plugs, or cut down a tree. It's much harder to verify whether someone has "understood" how to cut down a tree, or "knows" how to change a spark plug. What constitutes understanding? How can we verify that anyone really "understands"?

"Understanding" is a mental process, and mental processes are hard to verify. "Digging" a ditch or "changing" a spark plug is a physical process, easy to verify, and watching someone change a spark plug probably is the best and easiest way to determine whether or not someone "understands" how to change spark plugs.

So, when writing performance objectives, stick with verifiable action verbs!

Make performance objectives SMART

Performance objectives should be SMART: that is, Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time Bound.

- Specific** Performance objectives must be very clear and detailed enough so as to leave no room for ambiguity or misinterpretation.
- Measurable** Always use a verifiable verb and describe an action that can be seen and measured.
- Achievable** Performance objectives should always be achievable.
- Relevant** Performance objectives should be relevant to the performer – they should relate to the objectives that matter to that person.
- Time bound** Performance objectives are more effective if they are to be achieved within a defined time frame.

Factors that impact performance

There are many factors that impact performance positively or negatively, and considerable research has gone into identifying these factors.

One of the important performance factors is the availability of the right tools for the job. For instance, one cannot effectively tighten a spark plug with fingers alone. You can learn more about the factors that impact performance at the following link:

http://www.documen.com/Documen_Factors_table.htm.

Access to the right information is one of the important factors that impact performance. What we call information is just a tool we use to help us achieve our objectives. Just as a logger needs a chainsaw to fell a tree, or a ditch digger needs a shovel to dig a hole, so would anyone who wants to do anything at all need the right kind of information to do it with.

Performance objectives are a short statement of what someone should be able to do after receiving a piece of information that they might not have been able to do before.

The design of all types of information, including training, user manuals, quick reference guides, posters, signage, speeches, reports, Web sites, illustrations, email, marketing materials, software interfaces, even the buttons on a cell phone, should be driven by clearly identified performance objectives. The effectiveness of all information design should be measured by how well it helps its audience achieve intended performance objectives.

Performance Objectives are the Golden Key!

Performance objectives are the key to unlocking any communications or performance improvement initiative. Before you communicate information of any sort, ask yourself: “What do I want my audience to be able to do after this communication that they might not have been able to do before?”

The answer is the foundation and the structure for your work on the project: the performance objective!