

Explain learning objectives

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A learning objective is a short statement about the goal of a lesson, series of lessons or learning task, and what students are expected to learn by engaging in it.¹ Learning objectives, also known as learning intentions, are most effectively used together with success criteria. Success criteria break down each step towards achieving the learning objective, helping students determine if they're on track towards reaching each learning objective.²

Learning objectives and success criteria form key parts of explicit instruction approaches and formative assessment practices, as they help teachers and students establish a clear and shared understanding of learning goals.³ By using learning objectives and success criteria, teachers prompt students to think about the knowledge, skills and understanding they have that relate to the task at hand. Activating students' prior knowledge can help them connect and retain their new learning, while building confidence in their capacity to extend and apply their growing knowledge, skills and talents.

This practice guide will help you reflect and take action to develop your practice with a greater understanding of:

- the learning benefits when students understand the objectives of a lesson and how to be successful
- specific techniques and strategies you can adopt to understand students' prior knowledge, create well-informed learning objectives and criteria and use them effectively.

Communicate learning objectives and activate prior knowledge (*Explain learning objectives*) is one of 18 interconnected practices in our [Teaching for How Students Learn](#) model of learning and teaching. This practice sits in the **Instruction** phase, which focuses on managing students' cognitive load as they process and acquire new learning. This practice is interconnected with:

- **Enabling**, which focuses on positive, respectful relationships in a culturally safe, learning-focused environment
- **Planning**, which focuses on developing and using a sequenced and structured plan for the knowledge and skills students will acquire
- **Gradual release**, which focuses on maximising students' opportunities to retain, consolidate, and apply their learning.

Enabling

Planning

Instruction

Gradual release

Understanding this practice

These examples demonstrate what communicating learning objectives and activating prior knowledge might look like in the classroom, and potential misapplications in practice.



What it is

- Providing specific and measurable learning objectives and success criteria, written in student-friendly language. All unfamiliar terms are unpacked and defined. The learning objective explains what students need to achieve, and the success criteria break down how students can work towards that, as well as what they need to demonstrate.
- Developing learning objectives based on what students already know and can do, exploring and activating previous learning and explaining to students how current learning builds on this.
- Addressing differing gaps in prerequisite prior knowledge with temporary, flexible groupings for additional instruction as part of whole-class teaching.
- Referring to learning objectives and success criteria throughout the lesson, including checking that students have met the success criteria by the end of a lesson or by the end of a sequence of learning.
- Planning and setting tasks that allow students to demonstrate their achievement of the learning objective and success criteria in a variety of ways.



What it isn't

- Communicating a vague learning objective that includes unfamiliar terminology. For example, replicating descriptions, standards or capabilities from the Australian Curriculum without breaking them down and explaining.
- Explaining learning objectives without making explicit connections to previous learning, students' prior knowledge and the wider area of learning.
- Developing a different learning objective for each individual student, or for fixed groupings of students in the class.

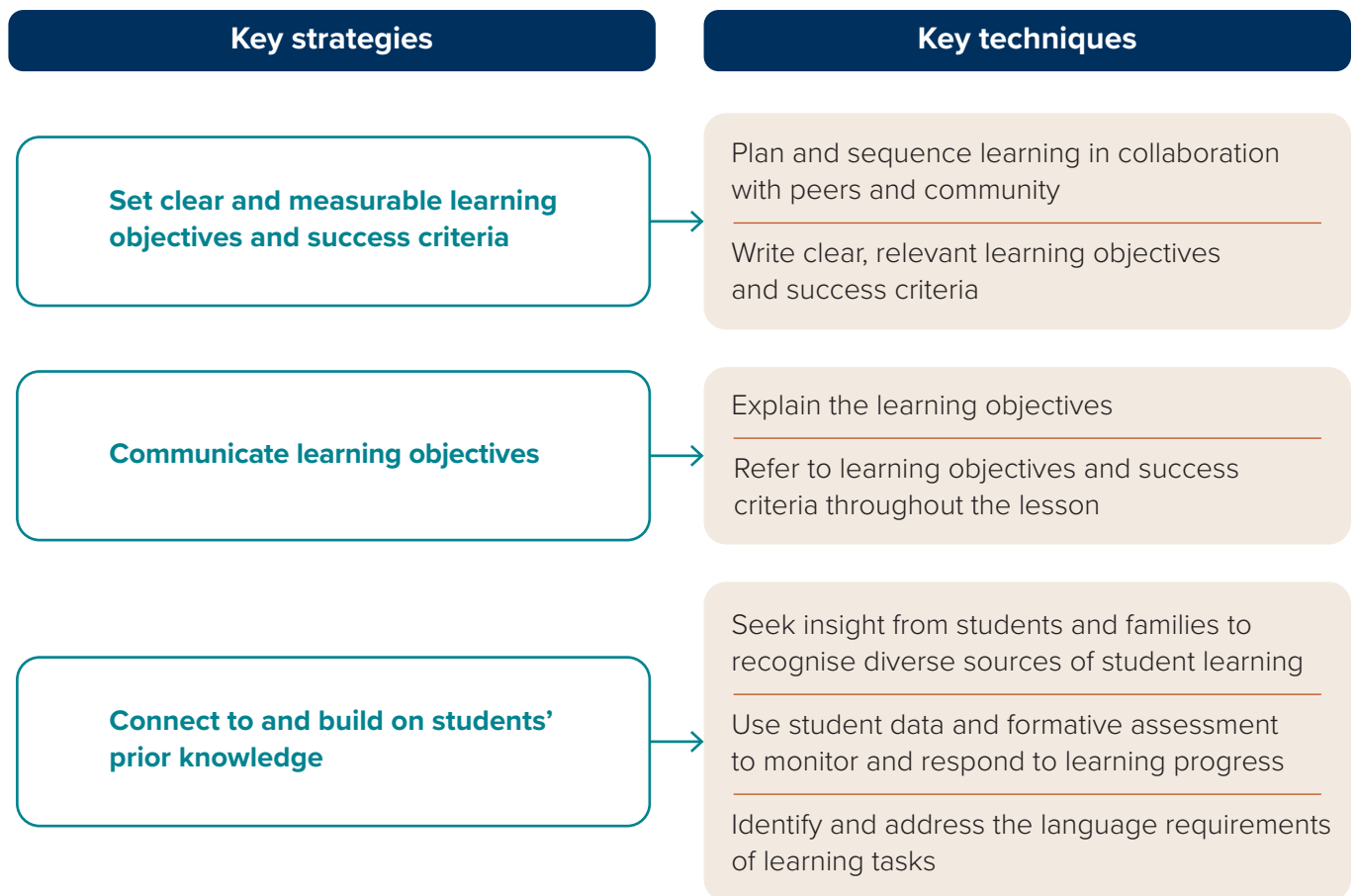
The importance of explaining learning objectives and activating prior knowledge for effective teaching and learning

Key points from the research

- Brief, clear and measurable learning objectives are most useful for student learning.⁴ When communicated clearly, learning objectives help students focus on the key information or main idea to be learnt.⁵
- Communicating the connection between how learning objectives relate to what students already know provides students with a greater likelihood of achieving the intended learning goal, retaining new information and consolidating their knowledge.⁶
- When students share their prior knowledge, it helps the teacher recognise strengths, gaps, misconceptions and differing perspectives that will need to be considered during the next stage of teaching and learning. When new information builds on what has previously been learnt and subskills are practised and incorporated, students can develop an accurate and nuanced understanding of what they're learning.⁷
- Across Australia, around 25% of primary and secondary school students learn English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D). In some schools, this figure can be as high as 90%.⁸ Students may have different levels of language proficiency across the modes of listening, speaking, reading and writing, and their particular strengths can be reflected in learning objectives and success criteria, while still maintaining the integrity of curriculum area content.

Key strategies and techniques

The best way to communicate learning objectives and success criteria will depend on the age, stage and learning needs of students. This section describes key strategies and techniques (see summary in [Figure 1](#)) that can support you to communicate effective learning objectives and success criteria, and to activate and respond to students' prior knowledge.

Figure 1: Key strategies and techniques to explain learning objectives

Set clear and measurable learning objectives and success criteria

Plan and sequence learning in collaboration with peers and community

Collaboratively plan across and within year levels to manage the work of developing rich and detailed teaching and learning plans that ensure students experience an effective sequence of learning year to year. Ideally, this would involve meeting with teachers from other year levels or learning areas to plan and sequence teaching.

Engage with students, families and communities as part of whole-school and individual planning. Seek out and participate in opportunities to learn about community events, cultures and environments and build relationships. Apply what you learn to contextualise curriculum content when planning for the students at your school and their communities.

Write clear, relevant learning objectives and success criteria

During planning, break down relevant content descriptors from the curriculum into parts. Each learning objective should focus on the specific knowledge or skills that students will need to learn. Write using language that students can understand and find ways to clearly explain unfamiliar terminology, such as by creating a glossary and revisiting students' developing vocabulary regularly. For each learning objective, write success criteria that break down each of the small steps towards achieving it. Use active and measurable verbs in the learning objectives and success criteria so that students can interpret what they need to do, know and be able to demonstrate.

Communicate learning objectives

Explain the learning objectives

Students should know what they'll be learning, how each lesson or task links to prior learning and why they need to learn it. Explain learning objectives and success criteria fully, break down their components, unpack any new terminology and connect the intended purpose and relevance of all tasks for each learning objective with examples that are relevant to students. This may also include asking students to explain the learning objective in their own words, or using other ways to [check their understanding](#) of the task.

Refer to learning objectives and success criteria throughout the lesson

Communicate learning objectives and success criteria to students at the beginning of the lesson, then refer to them frequently and briefly throughout, including:

- during checks for understanding, reminding students what they're aiming to achieve, modelling how they can check their own work against the intended outcomes and encouraging them to seek guidance about specific aspects of the work they're unclear about.
- as a basis for providing feedback to students so the feedback is clear, actionable, and relevant. Students can also use success criteria to self-monitor – for example, when they seek assistance, help them identify the criteria they're having trouble with until they can do this more independently.
- during transitions, especially prior to removing scaffolds, before independent practice, and at the end of the lesson to reinforce students' focus and help them organise their thinking.

Connect to and build on students' prior knowledge

Seek insight from students and families to recognise diverse sources of student learning

Students' knowledge may come from previous learning at school or from their learning experiences beyond schooling, including from family and community. Engage with students and their families to learn about their strengths, goals and aspirations for their learning in school. [Communicate regularly with parents and carers](#) so they're informed about the focus of current learning, and can support their children's growing understanding where relevant.

Use student data and formative assessment to monitor and respond to learning progress

When planning, use class and individual-level student data to identify where students are, relative to their expected learning attainment. You don't need to write individualised learning objectives in response to this data, but it may highlight students with gaps that could interfere with the next step in their learning without additional intervention or support, either at the whole-class level or through tiered intervention. Referral to [small group or individual intervention](#) can support these students in developing the prerequisite knowledge and skills for what is taught in class.

Use multiple methods of formative assessment when teaching to find out what students know and can do, and remember that students are likely to share more about themselves as positive interactions and relationships with their teacher develop. Checking for understanding can begin before and when you communicate learning objectives. For example, you can use an informal pre-quiz to gain insight into existing student knowledge or misconceptions.

Identify and address the language requirements of learning tasks

Students with English as an additional language or dialect may have language needs that can be developed with specific support to help them access teaching and learning in class. Success criteria should identify and address the language requirements of tasks to support all students in engaging actively in learning. Provide culturally safe learning environments and [foster positive relationships](#) so you're aware of students' language abilities, and can support them in expressing their prior knowledge. Set tasks in ways that allow students to draw on their differing strengths to achieve intended learning goals.

Developing your practice

Consider what's informing your current practices, expectations and beliefs. Use these questions to reflect, make a plan to develop your practice and seek feedback to monitor the impact for your students.

- » What strategies for developing and communicating learning objectives do you currently use and why? How do you ensure all students understand learning objectives and success criteria and can use them to guide their learning?
- » How do you determine whether you've communicated learning objectives and success criteria clearly? Do you seek feedback from students, and check their understanding to gauge the clarity of your explanations? How do you respond?
- » How might you strengthen your current practice in the use of learning objectives. For example, how might you:
 - learn about, recognise and prepare yourself to connect with the prior knowledge students bring to a new area of their learning?
 - identify, break up and sequence content to create learning objectives and success criteria that students can understand and follow?
 - use success criteria throughout your lessons to guide you in checking for understanding, and guide your students in evaluating their own learning progress and needs?
- » Consider the strategies and techniques for communicating learning objectives and activating prior knowledge discussed in this guide. What area might be an important focus for your next professional learning goal? How could you monitor this change and any impacts for your students? What information could you identify and what feedback could you invite to better understand the impact of your approach on your students' learning progress?

Further reading

Mager, R. F. (1997). *Preparing instructional objectives: A critical tool in the development of effective instruction*. Center for Effective Performance.

This is an updated version of a seminal text that outlines why learning objectives are the cornerstone of effective teaching. It provides a guide to write effective learning objectives, including specifying the features of well-defined learning objectives.

Clarke, S. (2021). *Unlocking learning intentions and success criteria: Shifting from product to process across the disciplines*. SAGE Publications.

This practical guide illustrates different types of learning intentions and success criteria, including how to write effective learning objectives in different disciplines, how to communicate them to students, and how to ensure there is a fit between learning intentions and success criteria.

Endnotes

- 1 Mager, R. F. (1997). *Preparing instructional objectives: A critical tool in the development of effective instruction*. Center for Effective Performance.
- 2 Hattie, J. (2023). *Visible learning: The sequel: A synthesis of over 2,100 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Routledge.
- 3 Education Endowment Foundation. (2021). *Teacher feedback to improve pupil learning*. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/feedback>
- 4 Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 5(1), 7–74.
- 5 Perry, T., Lea, R., Jørgensen, C. R., Cordingley, P., Shapiro, K., Youdell, D., Harrington, J., Fancourt, A., Crisp, P., Gamble, N., & Pomareda, C. (2021). *Cognitive science in the classroom: Evidence and practice review*. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/evidence-reviews/cognitive-science-approaches-in-the-classroom>
- 6 Mager, R. F. (1997). *Preparing instructional objectives: A critical tool in the development of effective instruction*. Center for Effective Performance.
- 7 Hughes, C. A., Morris, J. R., Therrien, W. J., & Benson, S. K. (2017). Explicit instruction: Historical and contemporary contexts. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 32(3), 140–148. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ldrp.12142>
- 8 Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2023). *Meeting the needs of students for whom English is an additional language or dialect*. <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/resources/student-diversity/meeting-the-needs-of-students-for-whom-english-is-an-additional-language-or-dialect/>