Writing Better Goals and Short-Term Objectives or Benchmarks

**Benjamin Lignugaris/Kraft
Nancy Marchand-Martella
Ronald C. Martella**

How do I write effective IEP goals, objectives, and benchmarks?

This article provides strategies for writing precise goals and short-term objectives or benchmarks. We developed this article from common questions beginning special education teachers frequently ask about writing and sequencing goals and short-term objectives or benchmarks. By following the logical writing and sequencing strategies outlined here, you might find your goals, objectives, and benchmarks more informative and useful for other teachers, students, and parents. Throughout the article, we provide figures that you may use as models.

What Are Goals, Short-Term Objectives, and Benchmarks?

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA Amendments, 1997) mandates that educators develop an individualized education program (IEP) for each student with disabilities (Gibb & Dyches, 2000). The heart of the IEP includes *measurable* annual goals and short-term objectives or benchmarks that describe each student's expected learning outcomes. You use annual goals to estimate what *outcomes* you can expect in an academic year based on the student's present level of performance (Mountain Plains Regional Resource Center, 1995). You should then divide these goals into short-term objectives or benchmarks. Short-term objectives and benchmarks describe meaningful intermediate and measurable outcomes between the student's current performance level and the annual goal. The final short-term objective or benchmark should be the last step before the student accomplishes the annual goal.

How Does a Benchmark Differ from a Short-Term Objective?

According to the IDEA '97 Final Regulations, the IEP team must develop either measurable, intermediate steps (short-term objectives) or major milestones (benchmarks) for each goal (IDEA '97 Final Regulations, 1997-Appendix A at Question 1). IEP teams

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should develop short-term objectives when they can divide annual goals into discrete skill components. Benchmarks, on the other hand, describe the amount of progress the child is expected to make within a specified period.

For instance, you could express comprehension in math and reading as *discrete skills* (e.g., double-digit addition with carrying, literal comprehension, sequential comprehension, inferential comprehension, synthesizing or evaluating information). On the other hand, you might better express other content, such as grade-level reading performance, as *milestones*. In Example 1, each benchmark represents a significant milestone for the student (see Figure 1).

Regardless of whether you write short-term objectives or benchmarks, you must write them so parents, students and educators [can] monitor progress during the year and, if appropriate, revise the IEP consistent with the student's instructional needs (Appendix A at Question 1).

Why Write Clear and Precise Goals and Short-Term Objectives or Benchmarks?

There are at least three educational reasons for writing precise learning goals and objectives (Gronlund, 1995; Wolery, Bailey, & Sugai, 1988).

1. Precise learning goals and objectives or benchmarks provide a clear focus for instruction, which, in turn, promotes positive outcomes for students with disabilities.

2. Precise goals and objectives or benchmarks provide a clear basis for monitoring student progress or lack of progress and making individualized curriculum decisions.

3. Precise goals and objectives or benchmarks communicate expectations to others, such as therapists, teachers, and parents, in terms of

what knowledge and skills a student should acquire.

After students meet identified mastery criteria, well-written goals and objectives or benchmarks clearly communicate important information to new therapists and new teachers. This information includes under *what conditions* and at what *performance level* educators might expect students to demonstrate the identified skills and knowledge.

What Are the Parts of Goals and Short-Term Objectives?

Historically, four essential parts are included in learning objectives (Mager, 1962; Wolery et al., 1988). These parts include the conditions under which the student will perform the behavior; the student's name; clearly defined, observable behaviors; and performance criteria. We can use the same parts to write a measurable goal (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Reading Benchmarks

Goal: Given a fourth grade reading passage, Martin will read the passage at a rate of 125 words per minute with 97% accuracy on 3 consecutive twice weekly passage timings.

Benchmark 1: Given a beginning second grade reading passage, Martin will read the passage at a rate of 125 words per minute with 97% accuracy on 3 consecutive twice weekly passage timings.

Benchmark 2: Given an end of second grade reading passage, Martin will read the passage at a rate of 125 words per minute with 97% accuracy on 3 consecutive twice weekly passage timings.

Benchmark 3: Given a beginning third grade reading passage, Martin will read the passage at a rate of 125 words per minute with 97% accuracy on 3 consecutive twice weekly passage timings.

Benchmark 4: Given an end of third grade reading passage, Martin will read the passage at a rate of 125 words per minute with 97% accuracy on 3 consecutive twice weekly passage timings.

Figure 2. Sample Goal

Condition
Given a random selection of 20 words from a pool of 100 words with a CVC or CVCC pattern,

Student Name
Rick

Clearly Defined Behavior
will write

Performance Criteria
80% of the words correctly on three consecutive weekly spelling tests.

Note: C = consonant;
V = vowel.

Condition

We may analyze the condition further to create a format for constructing and then sequencing a series of objectives for each goal. The condition includes one requisite part and two optional parts. A good condition phrase requires a clear description of the assessment material that will be used to evaluate the learning outcome. For example, the

condition in Figure 2 describes an assessment that includes words with a consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) or consonant-vowel-consonant-consonant (CVCC) pattern: "Given a random selection of 20 words from a pool of 100 words with a CVC or CVCC pattern. . . . ."

We may also address higher-level skills such as synthesizing or evaluating information (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956) by describing the problems and the type of response required of the student. The condition statement, "Given 10 problems that requires a synthesis or evaluation of material," clearly describes the type of response demanded in the assessment.

The two optional parts of a condition include (a) any assistance or accommodation provided during or immediately before the assessment that might affect the student's performance and (b) the evaluation setting.

- **Accommodation.** The accommodation you provide during the assessment may be different for each student. By including accommodations in objectives, you can firmly establish the basis for any necessary accommodations needed when students are participating in statewide testing programs (Elliot, Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & Erickson, 1997). Rick's teacher could expand the condition in Figure 2 to include different types of accommodations, depending on Rick's needs. For example, Rick's teacher might include an accommodating procedure, such as multiple repetitions of each word, prompts to check work, or practice with the randomly selected words immediately before the assessment (see Figure 3).

  You might also use special materials to accommodate physical needs,

You must write objectives and benchmarks so that parents, students, and educators can monitor progress during the year.

such as a pencil with an oversized grip, a typewriter, or paper with large lines. This information is important so other teachers and parents understand the conditions under which the student demonstrated competence.

- **Evaluation Setting.** You should include the second optional part of the condition, the evaluation setting, when you modify the assessment environment to accommodate specif-

ic student needs. For example, the teacher could expand the condition in Figure 2 to include testing in an isolated study carrel if Rick is easily distracted by other activity in the classroom (see Figure 4). In addition, the teacher might include an evaluation setting when targeting curricular areas in which skill generalization is difficult to achieve. For example, it is important to include a setting in social-skill or school-survival goals

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Figure 3. Sample Goal with an Accommodating Procedure

Condition
Given a random selection of 20 words from a pool of 100 words with a CVC or CVCC pattern

Accommodating Procedure
and oral spelling practice prior to testing,

Student Name
Rick

Clearly Defined Behavior
will write

Performance Criteria
80% of the words correctly on three consecutive weekly spelling tests.

Note: C = consonant; V = vowel.

Figure 4. Sample Goal with an Accommodating Procedure and Evaluation Setting

Condition
Given a random selection of 20 words from a pool of 100 words with a CVC or CVCC pattern,

Accommodating Procedure
oral spelling practice prior to testing,

Evaluation Setting
and testing in a separate room,

Student Name
Rick

Clearly Defined Behavior
will write

Performance Criteria
80% of the words correctly on three consecutive weekly spelling tests.

Note: C = consonant; V = vowel.

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and objectives. In contrast, skill generalization is not likely to be an issue with basic decoding or math skills; thus, it may not be important to include a setting when writing goals and objectives in these areas.

Clearly Defined Behavior

Goals and short-term objectives or benchmarks should include clearly defined, observable behaviors. This means that you need to describe the behavior in measurable terms, and you should describe what the student actually will do (Wolery et al., 1988). Wolery et al. provided lists of examples that describe behavior, such as says, writes, prints, types, and reads orally and nonexamples such as understands, knows, recognizes, discovers, and perceives. The latter terms are not directly observable and are only inferred as a function of student performance. Figures 1-4 provide examples of clearly defined behavior.

Performance Criteria

There are three major components of performance criteria: the criterion level, the number of times the student should demonstrate that level, and the evaluation schedule. The criterion level is the functional performance level the student must demonstrate for mastery (125 words per minute with 97% accuracy in Figure 1; 80% of the words correctly in Figures 2-4). This level is usually expressed as a percentage correct or a rate of correct responding.

The next component, the *number of times* the student should demonstrate the criterion level, is often forgotten when writing goals and objectives. This component is important because it tells parents and other teachers how consistently the student needs to perform the skill before it is considered mastered. As

Precise learning goals and objectives or benchmarks provide a clear focus for instruction.

a rule, we suggest that mastery is based on at least *three consecutive performances* at the criterion level (see Figures 1-4). This level might be increased or decreased, depending on the teacher's experience working with a student or experience teaching in a particular curriculum area.

Finally, the *evaluation schedule* addresses how frequently the teacher plans to assess student mastery on the objective (twice weekly passage timings in Figure 1; weekly spelling tests in Figures 2-4). This schedule is important because it provides information to other teachers and parents about the durability of a particular behavior and provides a basis for teachers to evaluate their instructional planning.

Putting It All Together

By combining these parts, we can generate a format for writing better goals and short-term objectives or benchmarks (see Figure 5).

How Long Should Short-Term Objectives and Benchmarks Take to Accomplish?

IDEA '97 provides some help in this regard by mandating that parents of students with disabilities should be informed about their child's progress at least as often as parents of students without disabilities. If we use this as a guideline, then, to the extent possible, teachers should estimate how much the student will accomplish during one reporting period and structure that con-

tent as the short-term objective or benchmark.

How Many Short-Term Objectives or Benchmarks Should Be Written for Each Goal?

There is no single answer to this question. The number of objectives or benchmarks per goal is based on a teacher's experience and judgment. At a minimum, divide the goal into intermediate steps that show meaningful progress for that student. At least two factors are helpful when making this decision. First, consider how long it has taken to teach the targeted skills to previous students. Second, consider how long it has taken to teach other skills to this particular student.

Obviously, if there are new students in the classroom and you have little experience working with them, your decisions will be based on previous experience teaching the skills. If you have never taught the skills and have never worked with these students, then you should estimate what you think you can accomplish in one reporting period. After that time, you should evaluate where your students are and make a note that when teaching this skill in the future, you should increase what should be accomplished during the reporting period, decrease what should be accomplished, or make no change in the objective or benchmark. If you use this approach, you can systematically use

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Figure 5. Elements of Better Goals and Short-Term Objectives or Benchmarks

Condition
Given (description of assessment material and [options] accommodation and/or evaluation setting)

Student Name
(name of student)

Clearly Defined Behavior
will (observable behavior)

Performance Criteria
with (performance level) on each of (number of demonstrations) (evaluation schedule [e.g., daily, weekly, twice weekly, every other week]) (teacher checklist, observation, test, worksheet, exercise).

your teaching experiences to refine your practice.

How Are Short-Term Objectives and Benchmarks Sequenced for Each Goal?

There are two general strategies for writing a series of short-term objectives or benchmarks. One is a hierarchical, or sequential strategy; the other is targeting important skills in the domain.

Strategy 1: Arrange Skills in a Hierarchy (Sequentially)

In this approach, students must accomplish the objectives in sequence. You may modify the sequence by changing one or more variables in the condition. In Figure 6, the math assessment material described in the condition increases in difficulty sequentially. Clearly, the student must accomplish Objective 1 before moving to Objectives 2 or 3, and, finally, the goal. As noted earlier, you may modify the amount of material included in each objective, based on your experience with this student and the curriculum.

For each of these objectives, you write another objective that changes the response mode, rather than the condition, such as the following:

> Objective 1: Given a worksheet with 10 addition problems with sums less than 19 and both addends less than 10, Larry will say correct answers with 90% accuracy on 3 consecutive weekly classroom exercises.

You may write one or more objectives using a *rate* criterion. The sequence holds because the logical analysis across skills still works:

> Objective 1: Given a worksheet with 10 addition problems with sums less than 19 and both addends less than 10, Larry will write correct answers at a *rate of 40 digits per minute* on 3 consecutive weekly classroom exercises.

Finally, you may include accommodations in the objective and then remove them over time (sequentially across objectives):

The addition of these objectives in the sequence will depend on previous experience and the particular student with whom you are working.

Vocabulary and spelling present special problems for writing short-term objectives. In most cases, the purpose of spelling and vocabulary objectives is to enlarge the pool of words that students can spell or use while speaking or writing. The objective sequence needs to show an *increasing* pool of words. Figure 7 shows a spelling example:

There is the potential for overlap across the goals and objectives. A word could be chosen randomly several times as the student marches toward the goal. You might control some of the overlap by developing rules for selecting words for each test. For example, words spelled incorrectly are automatically included on the next test. Another rule might be that 25% of the words in each test are taken from previously mastered objectives, and 75% of the words are randomly selected from words introduced in the present objective. This overlap process ensures long-term mastery (maintenance of spelling skills) and helps integrate the various spelling skills. A vocabulary example could be constructed using a similar approach.

Strategy 2: Target Important Skills in the Domain

The second strategy focuses on pinpointing important component skills in a curriculum domain; these skills do not

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Figure 6. Math Objectives Arranged Sequentially

Goal: Given a worksheet with 20 addition problems up to 3D + 3D + 3D with and without regrouping, Larry will write correct answers with 90% accuracy on 3 consecutive weekly classroom exercises.

> Objective 1: Given a worksheet with 10 addition problems with sums less than 19 and both addends less than 10, Larry will write correct answers with 90% accuracy on 3 consecutive weekly classroom exercises.

> Objective 2: Given a worksheet with 10 addition problems up to 3D + 3D without regrouping, Larry will write correct answers with 90% accuracy on 3 consecutive weekly classroom exercises.

> Objective 3: Given a worksheet with 10 addition problems up to 3D + 3D with and without regrouping, Larry will write correct answers with 90% accuracy on 3 consecutive weekly classroom exercises.

Figure 7. Spelling Objectives Arranged Sequentially

Goal: Given a spelling test with a random selection of 20 words from a pool of 100 words with a CVC or CVCC pattern, Juan will write 80% of the words on three consecutive weekly tests.

> Objective 1: Given a spelling test with a random selection of 20 words from a pool of 30 words with a CVC pattern, Juan will write 80% of the words on three consecutive weekly tests.

> Objective 2: Given a spelling test with a random selection of 20 words from a pool of 50 words with a CVC pattern, Juan will write 80% of the words on three consecutive weekly tests.

> Objective 3: Given a spelling test with a random selection of 20 words from a pool of 75 words with a CVC or CVCC pattern, Juan will write 80% of the words on three consecutive weekly tests.

Note: C = consonant; V = vowel.

have to be accomplished necessarily in sequence. Figures 8 and 9 illustrate social skill goals and objectives that target important skills and do not have to be accomplished in sequence.

You can construct a sequence for objectives that are typically not sequential by adding *accommodations or assistance* (e.g., teacher prompts, self-monitoring) and then removing those in the next objective. You can also build an overlap structure by systematically expanding the *number of settings*. This is applicable to goals and objectives for social skills, school survival skills, study skills, or daily living skills. Figure 10 illustrates this strategy.

Notice that the number of opportunities increased in Objective 3 because the *number of settings* in which the skill is applied is growing, and you need more testing opportunities to obtain a good sample of information. Note also that the sequence created by increasing the number of settings is based on preference (i.e., you could easily change the order in which the skills are introduced in different settings) and not on skill prerequisites, such as Figure 6. In Figure 11 the order of classes in which note-taking skills are applied is based on preference or convenience.

Finally, in Figure 12, we modified Figure 6 and added a most-to-least assistance hierarchy to sequence the objectives. The strategy you use to implement the prompt hierarchy does not need to be included in the objective.

What Other Knowledge and Skills Contribute to Writing Effective Goals, Short-Term Objectives, and Benchmarks?

Understanding the logical structure for goal/objective statements and understanding sequencing strategies will help you write IEPs that effectively guide the instructional process. To use the logic

and sequencing strategies outlined in this article more effectively, you need to understand the skills and knowledge that comprise the targeted curriculum domain. Curriculum knowledge will give you a clear understanding of where a student's needs fit relative to overall understanding of the knowledge and skill in a curriculum domain. You should also determine whether you should sequence skills and knowledge as objectives or benchmarks.

In addition, you need to be skilled at developing assessment strategies to evaluate student performance. In fact, to write a useful and informative condition and performance criteria, you need,

at a minimum, a broad understanding how the goal, objective, or benchmark will be evaluated. You will need skills not only in developing and administering teacher-made tests, but designing classroom observation systems and innovative approaches for integrating evaluation and instruction.

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Figure 11. Note-Taking Objectives Sequenced Across Classes

Goal: Given a lecture in science, social studies and English literature class, Heather will write notes that include 80% of the critical information on 5 consecutive sets of daily classes as measured by a teacher note-taking checklist.

Objective 1: Given a lecture in science class, Heather will write notes that include 80% of the critical information on 3 consecutive daily science classes as measured by a teacher note-taking checklist.

Objective 2: Given a lecture in science and social studies class, Heather will write notes that include 80% of the critical information on 4 consecutive daily science and social studies classes as measured by a teacher note-taking checklist.

Figure 12. Sequential Removal of a Prompt Hierarchy

Objective 1: Given at least 5 opportunities for social interaction during a leisure recreation activity with peers (swim class, lunch, free reading time) and a verbal and physical prompt from the teacher, Winnie will demonstrate appropriate social proximity to peers on 80% of observed intervals on 3 consecutive weekly observations.

Objective 2: Given at least 5 opportunities for social interaction during a leisure recreation activity with peers (swim class, lunch, free reading time) and a verbal prompt from the teacher, Winnie will demonstrate appropriate social proximity to peers on 80% of observed intervals on 3 consecutive weekly observations.

Objective 3: Given at least 5 opportunities for social interaction during a leisure recreation activity with peers (swim class, lunch, free reading time), Winnie will demonstrate appropriate social proximity to peers on 80% of observed intervals on 3 consecutive weekly observations.

Benjamin Lignugaris/Kraft *(CEC Chapter #837), Associate Professor, Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation, Utah State University, Logan.* **Nancy Marchand-Martella**, *(CEC Chapter #97), Professor and* **Ronald C. Martella** *(CEC Chapter #97), Professor, Counseling, Educational, and Developmental Psychology, Eastern Washington University, Cheney.*

Address correspondence to Benjamin Lignugaris/Kraft, Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation, 2865 Old Main Hill, Logan, UT 84322-2865 (e-mail: lig@cc.usu.edu).