

Developing Your Internship Learning Agreement

If you don't know what you want, chances are very low that you'll get it.

—Tony Robbins

In typical courses, your professor has determined what you will be expected to learn in the course, and told you what those learning objectives are. (Usually they're listed near the top of the syllabus.) In this internship course, determining what you intend to learn is up to you.

Your first task in this course is to develop your Internship Learning Agreement. The goal of the agreement is to articulate in detail what you will be learning from your internship and how you will go about learning it.

Spelling out these objectives and strategies is essential for making sure that you learn as much as possible from your internship experience. Beyond deferring to the job description, this agreement clarifies your role and responsibilities in the organization, and minimizes the chance of misunderstandings with your supervisor. Fundamentally, being clear on the goals you intend to achieve gives you a strong sense of purpose and ensures that the internship is a meaningful experience for you. The job description for your internship outlines what you are expected to *do*; your Learning Agreement spells out what you expect to *learn*.

Once you've created a draft of your learning objectives and strategies, you'll want to get some feedback on them from the internship course instructor. Make sure you leave time for this step.

Your internship supervisor obviously plays an important role in your ability to achieve these goals. After you've articulated them for yourself, the next step is to discuss your learning objectives with your supervisor, and together generate ideas for how you will achieve them. Of course, you have a job to do for your employer, and you want to be sure that you meet their needs and expectations. Talking through your planned activities and projects with your supervisor will allow both of you to clarify your shared intentions and expectations for the internship. Make sure you schedule this conversation before the turn-in deadline.

The Learning Agreement will be included and signed as part of your Internship Contract. The contract is the main document that structures the relationship between you, your internship supervisor, and the MURP program. In addition to the Learning Agreement, the Internship Contract includes the internship job description, identifies the participants in the internship relationship and their contact information, and documents important details about the internship such as start/end dates, hours, salary, etc.

Writing Your Learning Objectives and Strategies

There is substantial research that indicates that developing specific and challenging goals improves your performance and focuses your efforts; further, writing down your goals makes you more committed to achieving them.

Step 1. Self-Reflection and Brainstorming

Make a list of what you hope to get out of your internship. Begin with the perspective that this internship has the potential to take you one step closer toward achieving your vision of a successful career. What do you need to learn more about or get better at to achieve that vision? What knowledge, competencies, behaviors, attitudes, and skills do you wish to develop? Think about growth in several areas, including specific skills and competencies as well as “soft” skills such as negotiation, leadership, self-confidence, or learning to accept feedback or criticism.

Here are some prompts to get you thinking:

- What do I most want to explore, understand or learn during my internship?
- How would I like to change or be different by the end of my internship?
- What obstacles might block my career success, and how can I work to remove them?
- What will make me more marketable to a future employer?
- If I could make it happen, what goal would I like to achieve by the time I complete my internship?
- In what ways would I like this experience to advance my understanding of concepts I’ve learned about in class?

Step 2. Refine Your List (see writing tips and examples below)

Narrow down your ideas into a concrete, specific list of what you intend to learn through your internship. Limit the number of objectives by including only those that have the most meaning to you. To get the most out of your internship, include at least one learning objective in each of the following categories:

- a) skill development: effectively demonstrating the behaviors of the profession
examples: learn to write a planning memo, develop oral presentation skills for community meetings, gain proficiency in a particular research method or computer application
- b) application of academic knowledge: learning and understanding factual information, terminology, principles, concepts, theories and the ideas of the profession

examples: understand the development process, understand how principles of sustainability are applied (or not) in practice, learn how community-based organizations advocate for their constituents

- c) professional development: learning the values, attitudes and ways of the profession; figuring out “what you want to be when you grow up”

examples: learn the pros/cons of the field, learn what it takes to be a consultant, learn how interdisciplinary professional teams operate, learn about job opportunities available in the field

- d) personal development: learning more about yourself as an emerging professional and identifying ways in which you want to grow and change as a person

examples: become comfortable speaking in front of groups, develop more confidence working directly with clients, develop leadership qualities, learn to accept feedback from supervisors and coworkers, improve time management skills

Notes:

- For each category, consider including an *application objective* (something you already know about and want to improve/ practice) and an *acquisition objective* (something new you want to learn about).
- Remember that these objectives are outcomes, not particular activities you will undertake. (You will write about activities in Step 3.)
- Consider using verbs such as the following in your learning objectives: acquire, analyze, appreciate, become, become familiar with, comprehend, develop, discover, explore, know, learn, perceive, synthesize, understand, value

Step 3. Identify the Strategies (Activities) You Will Use to Achieve Each Learning Objective (see writing tips and examples below)

The goal of this step is to describe how you will go about achieving each of your learning objectives. What work activities, duties and assignments will give you the experiences you need to help you achieve your objectives? Use the internship job description, as well as what you already know about the type of work the organization does, to start generating ideas for this section. Consider including multiple strategies for achieving each learning objective. It is very likely you'll need to discuss your planned activities with your supervisor to complete this section with any accuracy.

Here are some prompts to get you thinking:

- What training will you undergo that will develop your skills in a particular area?
- What “off the job” activities such as reading, writing, research or field trips might you do to contribute toward achieving your objectives?
- What deliverables will you have the opportunity to create that you can include in your professional portfolio?
- What resources outside of the work site might help you reach your objectives?
- What specific projects will you be completing that address an aspect of your learning objectives?
- Can you ask your supervisor or a faculty member to recommend relevant materials to bolster your knowledge?
- What opportunities will you have to attend staff meetings, seminars, conferences or professional meetings?
- What presentations will you have the opportunity to make? To what audiences?
- What opportunities will there be for your co-workers or your supervisor to observe you at work and provide you with feedback and suggestions?
- What opportunities will you be given to take on additional responsibility?
- Consider using verbs such as the following to articulate your strategies: answer, arrange, circulate, classify, collect, compare, compile, conduct, count, decide, define, demonstrate, direct, discuss, explain, give examples, list, locate, obtain, participate in, revise, schedule, select, summarize, supervise, verify, write

Note that in addition to your job-specific activities, your course assignments will also help you achieve learning objectives in each of the four categories.

Step 4. Combine Your Objectives and Strategies into a Learning Agreement

Once completed, your Learning Agreement will be included as part of your Internship Contract. The contract must be signed by you, your internship supervisor, and the internship faculty advisor/course instructor.

Writing Tips- Learning Objectives

Write objectives beginning with the word “To” followed by an action verb. Imagine that the phrase “I want” precedes each statement.

Be specific! Here are examples of vague vs. specific objectives:

Vague objective: To gain experience in transportation planning.

Specific objectives:

- To determine if working in transportation planning is the appropriate career goal for me.
- To learn to apply the principles of sustainability to transportation planning.
- To learn how social equity considerations are included in transportation planners' decision-making processes.

Vague objective: To use planning to help community residents.

Specific objectives:

- To become a skilled public meeting facilitator
- To learn to create planning documents that community residents can easily understand

Writing Tips- Strategies/Activities

Write strategies beginning with the phrase "I will" followed by an action verb. Choose the verb that most effectively describes what you will do.

Include quantifiable items when possible (e.g., "I will interview at least four people" vs. "I will talk to people")

Example Learning Objectives + Strategies/Activities

Please write your Learning Agreement using a format similar to the following:

Learning Objective 1: To learn how professionals evaluate conflicts and move toward resolution

Strategies:

- I will attend and participate in inter-organization meetings with decision-makers
- I will interview at least two professionals about their conflict resolution strategies
- I will read at least five articles on conflict resolution

Learning Objective 2: To network and establish professional contacts in the field of _____ planning

Strategies:

- I will attend at least two client meetings
- I will attend at least three local professional events
- I will conduct at least two informational interviews with professionals whose work interests me

Learning Objective 3: To improve my time management skills

Strategies:

- I will interview five colleagues about their work planning techniques
- I will read at least five articles on time management techniques
- I will test out at least three time management strategies during my internship

Learning Objective 4: To become a skilled community meeting facilitator

Strategies:

- I will receive training in conducting asset mapping with community residents
- I will co-facilitate at least two community meetings
- I will ask for and receive feedback on my facilitation strengths and weaknesses from my internship supervisor and at least two community members
- I will read at least three articles on best practices for meeting facilitation