# Purpose: The Foundation for High-Quality Teaching

*Identifying the purpose of a lesson helps teachers create the lesson and lets students know what is expected of them.*

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### Watch the Video!

See examples of real teachers establishing high-quality purpose statements for their students: www.principals.org/pl1010frey.

Each lesson should have a purpose. Educators have known about the importance of purpose for several decades (Hunter, 1976). A clearly articulated purpose focuses instruction; provides students with an answer to the question, "Why do we have to learn this?" and allows for assessment of outcomes. Simply said, establishing the purpose of the lesson facilitates student achievement (Marzano, 2009). It's a vital component of quality teaching, yet one that is often neglected. In too many classrooms, students are left to intuit the purpose of the lesson.

But what does a good purpose statement look like? It's more than simply stating the standard to students. A quality purpose statement gives students information about what they will learn and how they might demonstrate that understanding. A quality purpose statement also helps the teacher plan the lesson, because the tasks students are asked to complete should align with the expected understanding. This is an important point that is easy to overlook: purpose drives instruction, differentiation, and assessment. It might seem like an insignificant component of high-quality teaching, given that it should only occupy a fraction of teaching time, but we think it's the foundation of quality lesson planning and instructional delivery.

In our work, we use *purpose*, rather than *goal* or *objective*, because it forces us to pay attention to what students think. A teacher writes an objective, but the students must understand the purpose. Although teachers want objectives that are measurable, students want to know what they're expected to learn and why.

Before we delve into the examples of high-quality purposes, it's important to note that the questions that you and other observers ask students influence the type of purpose that is established. When a principal—or any other observer—asks students in a class, "What are you doing?" teachers are encouraged to establish a purpose on the basis of the tasks that students will complete during the class session. Alternatively, when visitors ask students, "What are you learning?" teachers tend to focus the purpose on enduring "understandings" and content.

This is an important aspect of fostering high-quality instruction: the questions we ask students about their learning influence the purpose statements teachers make. Of course, we can also discuss high-quality purpose statements in professional development sessions and give individual teachers feedback about the purposes they establish for their students.

## Components of the Purpose Statement

There are a number of ways to think about components of a purpose statement. To be clear, the purpose statement should not focus on the tasks that students will complete as part of the class session or at home. Rather, the purpose statement should reflect the understandings that students will gain as a result of their engagement in the lesson components. When lessons are planned with the end in mind, purpose statements are easier to develop (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

### CONTENT

Part of the purpose statement comes from the content standards. This is, in part, why a clearly established purpose is essential. Planning an

amazing lesson for ninth graders that is based on seventh-grade standards will not ensure that the students reach high levels of achievement. Having a purpose statement that is based on content standards ensures that instruction is aligned with high expectations. In the coming months, we'll focus on how to design lessons to ensure that students reach those high expectations, but for now we have to ensure that the lessons are based on grade-level expectations.

Suggesting that the purpose should be based on the content standards does not mean that the standard can serve as the purpose. Most content standards take time to master. The purpose statement should focus on the learning for the day. For example, it takes weeks for students to understand the causes and effects of World War II, so several purpose statements will be required that add up to this larger picture. When standards are not analyzed for their component parts and instead are used as the purpose, students stop paying attention to them. The standards might be posted on the wall, but they're like wallpaper to students: a decoration that really doesn't have anything to do with the day's work.
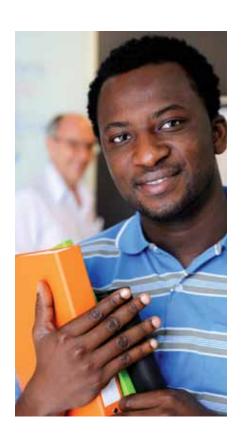
### LANGUAGE

A second component of the purpose statement relates to the ways in which students can demonstrate their understanding of the content. This is often referred to as the "language purpose," because humans demonstrate their understanding by reading, writing, speaking, listening, and showing. Understanding the linguistic demands of the content is essential to this component of the purpose and especially important for English learners who are doing double the work in middle and high school, learning content and language simultaneously (Fisher, Frey, & Rothenberg, 2008).

To develop the language component of the purpose statement, teachers consider vocabulary, language structure, and language function. For some lessons, the important linguistic component might be related to the vocabulary of the discipline. The language purpose indicates *how* students will demonstrate their understanding, and it may be more task-like than the content purpose. For example, in a math class, part of the purpose might be for students "to use logic vocabulary in their proofs." For other lessons, students might focus on grammar, syntax, or signal words. For example, as part of a history class, students learning the art of sourcing ideas might use a sentence frame, "Although _____ believed _____, others disagreed" as part of their conversations with peers. A third way to think about the language component is by determining the function of language that is necessary to understand the content. In other words, do students need to justify, persuade, inform, entertain, debate, hypothesize, and so forth to understand the lesson? For example, in a math class, part of the purpose might be to "justify your answer in writing."

## Communicating the Purpose Statement

Once a teacher constructs a purpose statement, he or she must communicate it to his or her students. The teacher may do this in various ways. Some post the purpose on the board and briefly talk with students at the start of the period about the purpose and its relevance. Others begin with inquiry and then invite students to talk about *why* they are doing what they're

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doing before making the purpose more explicit. And still others discuss the purpose and then invite students to write the purpose in their own words as part of their note-taking tasks.

When Lucas Staker, a teacher at Health Sciences High and Middle College in San Diego, CA, was teaching his art students how to look at paintings, he projected a famous work of art and said, "Today, we're going to consider the role that perspective plays in fine art, and to do that we'll use specific technical vocabulary." When Dina Burow, another teacher at Health Sciences High and Middle College, introduced her algebra students to quadratic questions, she said "Today, we're going to identify the properties of a quadratic equation and explain how we know whether equations are quadratic or not." For additional examples of teachers establishing purpose, see the video that accompanies this article at www .principals.org/pl1010fisher.

## Part of Quality Teaching

Regardless of how the purpose is established, it's important that students know it so that they know what to pay attention to and what will be expected of them. A clearly communicated purpose increases the relevance of the lesson for students and helps the teacher remain focused and not drift too far afield, perhaps wasting valuable instructional time. In fact, the most common thing that teachers who begin establishing purpose tell us is that it

really helped them stay focused. When asked about the impact of staying focused, we regularly hear teachers say, "My students learn more" and "I have more than enough time to cover the standards, and cover them well." **P**L

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