WRITE RIGHT

11: Aims and Objectives

If you are setting out on a project that involves original research or design, you'll need a set of aims and objectives. They are the starting point, and the guide for the whole project. Without thinking them through properly, you'll quickly lose your way.

This guide covers:

- ➢ **What aims and objectives are**

- ➢ **How to think through your aims and objectives**

- ➢ **How aims and objectives guide a research project**

What are aims and objectives?

The phrase "aims and objectives" gets horribly misused outside of academia and professional research. You'll often hear people say things like this:

"Our aims and objectives are to increase productivity..."

The phrase is being misused as a synonym for "goal" here, when in fact aims and objectives mean something very specific.

- ➢ **Aim**: **what** you want to achieve [and **why**]

- ➢ **Objectives**: **how** you will achieve it [and **why**]

There is a really important extra element attached to both of those things – the **"why"**. We'll look at the importance of the why below.

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Aims and objectives as part of research design

Stage 1: At the start of the research process, you typically start with a **research topic**, but without defined aims and objectives. The topic can be **very broad, or fairly narrow**. Here are a few realistic examples that you might look at in college:

- Sports participation on campuses…
- Tourism in Athlone…
- Representation of women in Disney films…

Stage 2: Sometimes your lecturer will give you a research topic; sometimes you have to choose it for yourself. But you will always need to **develop a specific aim** within that topic. A research topic like the examples above is far too broad and unfocussed.

The aim you develop is **what exactly you want to do or find out**:

- Do rates of gym use vary across different faculties?
- What are Athlone's main tourism attractions and how could they be better promoted?
- Are there any changing patterns in Disney's representation of women over time, and do they mirror societal changes?

Stage 3: Once you've worked out your aim, you need to create **a set of objectives** – the **things you'll do** to achieve the aim.

It is essential that you can answer the **"why"**:
- What's the **justification** for doing this?
- Would the findings have any **practical or theoretical value?**
- Why **exactly** are you pursuing a particular objective?
- Will it really help you **get to your aim?**

You may not directly discuss the "why" within your stated aims and objectives, but you **must think it through**.

Aims and objectives: an example

The **"why"** isn't openly stated here, but if you asked the researcher, they'd certainly be able to answer.

A single aim

Usually you should have a **single aim** – or at most a couple of interconnected aims. The number of individual objectives depends on the scale of the research project; but **typically three or four** would be appropriate for an undergraduate project.

Topic:
Energy policy and layers of governance

Aim:
To understand the contribution that local governments make to national-level energy policy

Objectives:
- Conduct a survey of local politicians
- Conduct desk-research of local government websites to create a database of local energy policy
- Interview national-level politicians to understand the impact these local policies have had
- Code the data using a code book derived from dominant theories of governance

Checking your aims and objectives

We'll look at a simple, real world scenario and go through the process of building a set of aims and objectives for it to show how checking them against the "why" helps to **keep you on track**.

Research topic: coffee

Aim: To raise the caffeine level in my blood.

If asked, the author needs to be able to say **"why",** and in this case it's easy:

Why: Because I need a boost to get through this work!

Now we need to put together a set of **objectives** that will help us achieve that aim.

You'll probably notice that a couple of these objectives are a bit questionable. This is where **working out the "why" is so important**.

Aim: To raise the caffeine level in my blood

Objectives

1. To go to the coffee dock and buy a large americano

2. To drink the large americano

3. Also, to go to the canteen and buy a scone

4. To take before and after blood tests to measure caffeine levels

5. To travel to Southeast Asia to test coffee beans on individual plantations to identify the best source of raw ingredients

So we still have two questionable objectives now we've answered the why.

Why?

1. Because this is the most readily available source of caffeine

2. Because this is a simple way to get the caffeine into my body

3. Because a scone is always nice with a cup of coffee…

4. Because this will provide quantifiable evidence of success

5. Because beans with a higher caffeine content will more effectively caffeinate my blood

Always check your objectives back against your aim. When we do this we see that objective 3 – the scone – has **no value**. It does nothing to help the researcher caffeinate their blood, so it needs to be deleted.

Objective 5, meanwhile, is directly connected to the aim. But it's **unrealistic**; it would require a huge amount of time and resources. We need to think of a **more achievable alternative**, or scrap it altogether.

➢ **Always check that each objective is actually helping you to achieve your aim**

➢ **Always check that each objective is actually achievable**

Same aim, different objectives

Thinking through the "why" properly for the aim will have a major impact on **how you develop your objectives**.

Here's an example:

The objectives that follow on from that could be quite different **depending on your "why"**. If your "why" was connected to health, for example, you'd take a very different path from another researcher whose "why" was connected to economics, or food technology, or kitchen staff management practices.

This is why it is **so important to go through the process of working out the "why"**.

Topic: Food on campuses

Aim:
To investigate food-buying patterns amongst students in the AIT canteen

Objectives:

? ? ?

Guiding the research process

Well-developed aims and objectives are crucial for success. They should guide the project throughout, giving you a clear purpose and moving you forward at all times. They are what you should refer back to if you feel yourself drifting, to get yourself back on track.

Keep your aims and objectives close!
Keep checking them – have them written out on the first page of your notebook, or pinned above your desk or saved on your phone. And check them repeatedly throughout the project. This is the best way to make sure you're not drifting away from what you set out to do. And when you get to the end you'll need to refer back to them to find out whether you've succeeded – whether you've achieved your aim.

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Summary

➢ Your aim is **what** you want to achieve; your objectives are **how** you will achieve it.

➢ Make sure your aims and objectives are **absolutely clear**, and that you understand them fully.

➢ Ask **"why"** you are doing this at each step.

➢ Ask if your aims and objectives are **achievable**.

➢ Use your aims and objectives as a **point of reference** to **keep you on track** throughout a research project.

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