



Guide for Creating Well-formed Learning Outcomes

Please Note: This guide is written in terms of creating learning outcomes for a course. However, it can be easily adapted to other purposes, such as developing learning outcomes for a degree or other program. Simply substitute your context for "course", and consider when and where you should engage in group brainstorming along the way.

STEP 1: IDENTIFY THE PURPOSE OF THE COURSE

- Write a one or two sentence description of the purpose of the course. When you think about the students you are educating and the value of the course, how would you describe the point of it all?

STEP 2: PUT OTHER STUFF AWAY

- You might be tempted to start with an existing set of learning objectives or outcomes statements, perhaps from an existing syllabus or other documentation. This won't serve you well. Instead, put those aside and pretend they don't exist. The goal is to start fresh to really focus in on what's important or needed for a course like this.

STEP 3: REFRESH YOUR MEMORY (OPTIONAL)

- If it's been awhile since you reviewed guidelines for writing well-formed learning outcomes, take a few minutes to watch this [Learning Outcomes 101](#) video. It's only 3:22 at regular speed, so it might just be worth it!

STEP 4: GET YOUR THOUGHTS ONTO THE PAGE (OR SCREEN)

- **First, draft a list of learning outcomes for your course without worrying** about whether they meet all the criteria for well-formed statements. On your page, write (or type) "By the end of this course students should be able to...", then make a list of things you want students to be able to do by the end of the module. Aim for 3-5 bullet points, but don't fixate on that. Just get your thoughts on the page.
- **Second, take a look at the list of action verbs** associated with Bloom's Taxonomy. Make note of, circle, or otherwise latch onto the verbs that resonate with you as the types of knowledge or understanding you are hoping your students to gain through this module. Bloom's list is non-comprehensive, so don't feel too constrained by it. Instead, use it as a tool to guide your thinking, as you consider what sorts of things might serve as markers of student learning or success in this module.



STEP 5: TRANSFORM YOUR LIST INTO WELL-FORMED LEARNING OUTCOMES

- **First, add or revise specific action words** in your initial bulleted list. Replace words like "understand" and "know" that you may have used at first. This will increase the measurability, clarity, and overall usefulness of your learning outcomes.

Pro-Tip: If you've used the verb "demonstrate", take another look to make sure you're using it in a specific and measurable way. "Demonstrate an understanding of", for example, has all the same problems as "understand", "know", and "gain an appreciation for". Ask yourself: what will my students be able to *do differently* when they've gained the understanding I'm hoping they'll gain? That should give you a clue as to the type of verb you are after.

- **Second, see if you can get your list down (or up) to 3-5 statements.**
If you have more than 5, you are probably providing something more like a laundry list of every single thing you'll talk about in the course: this is a fine list to have on hand, but you want something a little less fine grained, to serve as a big-picture summary of the things students will be able to do at the end of the course. See if there are ways you can combine items into single points (without simply adding "and" between them!).
If you have fewer than three on your list, see if you can be a little more specific about the different components of what students will be able to do.
- **Third, make sure each of your learning outcomes has both an object and an associated scoping condition.** By the end of your course your students should be able to *do something* (action word) *to something* (object) *in a certain way* (scoping condition). For example, in this exercise you are practicing/applying/demonstrating your ability to *articulate* (action word) *well-formed student learning outcomes* (object) *for any course* (scoping condition).

Pro-Tip: If you've used the verb "discuss", take another look to make sure you've scoped the outcome appropriately. Being able to "discuss events in medieval Europe" is very broad, and does not really explain the target. What kind of things do you anticipate students will be able to discuss, specifically? You might scope it further with something like "discuss the impact of events in medieval Europe", but even that is probably far too broad. What type of events? Implications of what sort? Like the impact on the development of technology in the modern era? Or maybe the way we think about gender roles in 2022? Or...you get the idea. "Discuss" is a tricky verb to scope appropriately, so take another look to tighten things up!



STEP 6: REVIEW AND REVISE

- Take a step back (and maybe a quick mental break before proceeding) and read through your set of learning outcomes. Do they collectively capture the full scope of your course? Do they effectively describe the nature of where a successful student will be, by the end of your course? If not, what's missing? Revise your list to fill in the gaps.

Pro-Tip: Try to avoid learning outcomes that are just statements of how students will be assessed. For example, consider the statement that students should be able to "write papers that reflect your ability to interpret and critically analyze a variety of religious claims, and the philosophical arguments behind them." It might be the case that you are going to teach students to write these kinds of papers, and that one of your learning outcomes is indeed for them to be able to do this type of writing. More likely, what you really want students to be able to do is to "interpret and critically analyze...". Writing papers *may* be what you have them do, but it need not be! Similarly, you might have a learning outcome about solving certain types of problems, and that might be your intended outcome — but take a minute to reflect and make sure.

STEP 7: ONE FINAL CHECK

Use this checklist to identify ways in which your SLOs for a course might need revision:

- Number:** There are 3-5 SLOs defined for the application (without using excessive conjunctions!).
- Action-Oriented:** Each SLO is action oriented – most likely through use of an action verb at the beginning of each SLO.
- Measurable:** Each SLO is directly measurable/assessable and avoids use of less measurable terms like "understand", "know" and "gain an appreciation for".
- Time Bound:** SLOs are articulated within a time-bound context (e.g., "By the end of this course...", "Upon successful completion of this degree...").
- Learner-Centered:** SLOs focus on what students will know or be able to do by the end of the lesson/course/degree.
- Jargon-Free:** SLOs are free of discipline-specific terms and abbreviations that students in the course or major are not likely to understand (or those terms are provided with further explanation or definition).
- Provides Scope:** Each SLO is articulated in a way that specifies the limits (or "scope") of expected application of the skill.
- Alignment with Level:** Verbs used in SLOs trend toward lower-level cognitive skills (e.g., *remember* and *understand* categories of Bloom's taxonomy) for courses that are introductory in nature, and trend toward higher-level cognitive skills for more advanced courses.