

Writing Measurable Learning Outcomes

A Workshop Presented by
the Office of Faculty Development

What Are Student Learning Outcomes?

- ▶ Student Learning Outcomes (SLO's) specify what students should...
 - ▶ know,
 - ▶ be able to do,
 - ▶ or be able to demonstrate,
- ▶ once they've completed a course or program.

Outcomes v. Objectives

- ▶ Sometimes, “Learning Objectives” and “Learning Outcomes” are used interchangeably.
- ▶ Since they express the same goals, they seem to be two ways of saying the same thing.
- ▶ But the difference is that:
 - ▶ Objectives express goals from the perspective of faculty’s performance.
 - ▶ Outcomes express goals from the perspective of student performance.

Mistakes to Avoid

- ▶ Learning outcomes shouldn't be abstract or unspecific.
- ▶ Nor should they be too narrow or confined to a list of topics that must be covered.
- ▶ There shouldn't be too many learning outcomes - a half-dozen or less is preferable.
- ▶ Tip: If all of your assignments satisfy two or more learning outcomes, try combining them into a single learning outcome.

Must Haves

- ▶ Learning outcomes should be specific and measurable.
- ▶ They should be targeted to the level of a course.
- ▶ They should be results-oriented.
- ▶ There should be clear, realistic methods for attaining them.

What Makes an Outcome Measurable?

- ▶ We want students to demonstrate their learning through some sort of observable behavior.
- ▶ When writing your learning outcomes, ask yourself what overt, observable student behavior would be the best indicator of their learning.
- ▶ SLO's are measurable when they specify observable student behavior that is a strong indicator of their learning.

When Isn't an SLO Measurable?

- ▶ An SLO isn't measurable when no overt, observable student behavior is specified.
- ▶ We often write unobservable, internal behavior into our SLO's:
- ▶ “Students will know, learn, appreciate, understand, think critically...”
- ▶ Since we can't observe these internal behaviors, the resulting SLO will be very difficult to measure.

How to Specify Observable Behavior

- ▶ Overt, observable student behavior is best specified using verbs.
- ▶ When choosing a verb, it's best to be as specific as possible.
- ▶ The more general the action verb, the more difficult it will be for you to measure the SLO.

What's Wrong with 'Understand'?

- ▶ We often use “understand” to express what we want students to do.
- ▶ But “understand” is too broad.
- ▶ There are many ways to express understanding (classify, explain, discuss, review, critique, distinguish, contrast, etc.)
- ▶ But we don't expect our students to demonstrate understanding in ALL of those ways.

Sample Verbs

EXPLAIN

CALCULATE

RATE

DESCRIBE

DEVELOP

ILLUSTRATE

DEMONSTRATE

DISTINGUISH

DEFEND

ANALYZE

ESTIMATE

LOCATE

EVALUATE

FORMULATE

COMPUTE

COMPARE

SOLVE

REPORT

MEASURE

TRANSLATE

REVIEW

DESIGN

PREDICT

IDENTIFY

3 Key Components of Strong Learning Outcomes

1. Specific, observable student behavior (expressed by a **verb**).
2. A specific method for evaluating that behavior (expressed by a **task** that students will perform).
3. Specific criteria or **standards** of student performance.

Example SLO

Students will be able to...

Locate, analyze, summarize, paraphrase or synthesize philosophical arguments in primary texts.

We can evaluate this SLO by giving students a passage from a primary text and asking them to summarize the argument contained in the passage (task).

We can then use a rubric as a standard to measure the student's performance.