TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Curriculum & Academic Programs

Learning Outcomes vs. Objectives:
A Primer for Curriculum Review and Course Revision

PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This primer is designed to help faculty distinguish between learning outcomes and course objectives as you revise your courses. Understanding this distinction is essential for creating clear, measurable, and effective course documentation that demonstrates student learning

Course Objectives

Course objectives describe what the instructor intends to teach or cover in the course. They are **instructor-centered** and typically describe the content, topics, or activities that will be presented.
Examples of an objective:

- "This course will cover the major theories of organizational behavior."
- "Students will be introduced to statistical analysis techniques."

Characteristics:

- Focus on teaching and content coverage
- Often begin with phrases like "This course will..." or "Students will be introduced to..."
- Describe the instructor's plans or curriculum content
- May be difficult to measure directly

Learning Outcomes

Learning outcomes describe what students will be able to do after completing the course.
They are **student-centered** and focus on demonstrable knowledge, skills, or abilities that students will acquire.
Example of a learning outcome:

- "At the end of this course, students should be able to analyze major theories of organizational behavior and evaluate their applications in workplace settings."
- "At the end of this course, students should be able to apply statistical analysis techniques to interpret research data."

Characteristics:

- Focus on student performance and achievement

- Begin with "At the end of this course, students should be able to..." followed by an action
- verb
- Describe observable, measurable behaviors
- Can be directly assessed

WHY LEARNING OUTCOMES MATTER

Learning outcomes provide several benefits:

- Clarity for Students: Students understand what they are expected to learn and be able to do
- Assessment Alignment: Outcomes directly connect to assessments and grading criteria
- Curriculum Coherence: Outcomes show how courses build upon each other within a program
- Accreditation: Many accrediting bodies require measurable learning outcomes
- Continuous Improvement: Outcomes enable meaningful assessment of student learning and course effectiveness

USING BLOOM'S TAXONOMY

Bloom's Taxonomy provides a framework of action verbs organized by cognitive complexity. Using these verbs helps ensure your learning outcomes are specific, measurable, and appropriately challenging.

Bloom's Taxonomy Levels (Revised)

1. Remember (recall facts and basic concepts)
    - Define, identify, list, memorize, name, recall, recognize, state
2. Understand (explain ideas or concepts)
    - Classify, describe, discuss, explain, identify, locate, paraphrase, report, summarize
3. Apply (use information in new situations)
    - Apply, calculate, demonstrate, execute, implement, operate, solve, use
4. Analyze (draw connections among ideas)
    - Analyze, compare, contrast, differentiate, distinguish, examine, investigate, organize
5. Evaluate (justify a decision or course of action)

- Appraise, assess, critique, defend, evaluate, judge, justify, recommend, support

6. Create (produce new or original work)
   - Assemble, construct, create, design, develop, formulate, generate, produce

Selecting the Right Level

Consider the level of your course and your students' prior knowledge:

- Introductory courses typically focus on the Remember, Understand, and Apply levels
- Intermediate courses emphasize the Apply, Analyze, and Evaluate levels
- Advanced courses target the Analyze, Evaluate, and Create levels
- Most courses should include outcomes at multiple levels, progressing from foundational to more complex thinking.

WRITING EFFECTIVE LEARNING OUTCOMES

The Formula

At the end of this course, students should be able to + [Action Verb from Bloom's] + [Content/Concept] + [Context/Criteria]

Examples by Discipline

Biology:

- Objective: "This course covers cellular respiration."
- Outcome: "At the end of this course, students should be able to explain the process of cellular respiration and analyze how disruptions in this process affect cellular function."

History:

- Objective: "Students will learn about the Civil Rights Movement."
- Outcome: "At the end of this course, students should be able to evaluate the strategies used by Civil Rights leaders."

Business:

- Objective: "The course will introduce financial statements."
- Outcome: "At the end of this course, students should be able to analyze financial statements to assess a company's financial health and make evidence-based investment

recommendations."

English/Writing:

- Objective: "Students will study argumentative writing."
- Outcome: "At the end of this course, students should be able to construct argumentative essays that articulate a clear thesis and support claims with credible evidence."

COMMON PITFALLS TO AVOID

Using Non-Measurable Verbs

- "Students will understand..." "Students will appreciate..." "Students will be familiar with..."
- Why it's problematic: These verbs describe internal states that cannot be directly observed or measured.
- Better approach: Use action verbs that describe observable behaviors (explain, demonstrate, analyze).

Confusing Activities with Outcomes

- "Students will participate in group discussions." "Students will complete a research paper."
- Why it's problematic: These describe what students will do during class, not what they will learn.
- Better approach: Focus on what students will be able to demonstrate as a result of those activities.

Writing Too Many Outcomes

- Most courses should have 4-6 primary learning outcomes. Too many outcomes become difficult to assess meaningfully and may dilute your course focus.

Being Too Vague or Too Specific

- Too vague: "Students will understand course material."
- Too specific: "Students will identify the exact date of the Battle of Hastings."
- Better approach: Find the appropriate level of specificity that captures meaningful learning.

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THE DEVELOPMENT/REVISION PROCESS

Step 1: Review Your Current Course Description

- Identify any existing objectives or outcome statements.

Step 2: Ask Key Questions

- What should students be able to do after completing this course?
- How will I know if students have learned what I intended?
- What assessments will demonstrate student achievement?

Step 3: Draft 4-6 Learning Outcomes

- Use Bloom's Taxonomy to select appropriate action verbs for your course level.
- Remember that each learning outcome should be assessed in the course, so select the number and language carefully.

Step 4: Align Assessments

- Ensure that each learning outcome connects to specific assignments or assessments in your course.

Step 5: Review for Clarity

- Ask a colleague to read your outcomes. Can they understand what students will be able to do?

EXAMPLES: BEFORE AND AFTER

Example 1: Psychology Course

Before (Objectives):

- This course will cover major psychological theories
- Students will learn about research methods in psychology
- The course will introduce students to abnormal psychology

After (Learning Outcomes):

- At the end of this course, students should be able to compare and contrast major

psychological theories and apply them to explain human behavior

- At the end of this course, students should be able to design a research study using appropriate psychological research methods
- At the end of this course, students should be able to analyze case studies using diagnostic criteria to identify psychological disorders

Example 2: Engineering Course

Before (Objectives):

- This course will teach students about circuit analysis
- Students will be introduced to electrical components
- The course will cover Ohm's Law and Kirchhoff's Laws

After (Learning Outcomes):

- At the end of this course, students should be able to analyze complex circuits using Ohm's Law and Kirchhoff's Laws to calculate voltage, current, and resistance
- At the end of this course, students should be able to design circuits that meet specified performance requirements
- At the end of this course, students should be able to evaluate circuit designs and troubleshoot common electrical problems

QUESTIONS?

If you have questions about writing learning outcomes for your specific course, please contact the Curriculum and Academic Programs. We're here to support you through this revision process