

Writing Learning Outcomes for Your Programs/Services

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What are learning outcomes?

Learning outcomes are statements that represent what you want your students to learn or take away from your programs and services. These outcomes are related to the growth or change in students' knowledge, skills, or attitudes. Assessment is an important part of **measuring** changes or growth in knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Without assessment, you may see that students have a skill after your program or service; however, you will not know where this skill was learned. Was this demonstrated skill part of your program or was it a skill acquired outside the purview of this program? A thoughtful assessment can assist you in demonstrating that your programs and services are doing what you think and say they are doing!

How do I write learning outcomes?

To begin the process, think about what you want your students to take away from your program or service. Is it knowledge? Is it the ability to comprehend something? Is it the ability to apply knowledge and skills? A helpful tool to use when writing learning outcomes is Bloom's Taxonomy. Originally written about in Benjamin Bloom's (1956) publication *The Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: Cognitive Domain*, a revised taxonomy lays out framework to describe learning. Bloom's Taxonomy provides domains of learning, from the simplest behavior to the most complex. Associated with these domains are action verbs that can be utilized when writing specific outcomes for your programs. They include:

Remembering (knowledge)	arrange, define, duplicate, match, label, outline, list, memorize, name, order, recognize, relate, recall, reproduce, repeat
Understanding (comprehension)	classify, describe, discuss, explain, express, identify, indicate, locate, recognize, estimate, report, restate, review, select, translate, defend
Applying (application)	apply, choose, demonstrate, operate, change, compute, dramatize, employ, illustrate, interpret, show, operate, practice, modify schedule, sketch, solve, use, write
Analyzing (analysis)	analyze, deconstruct, appraise, calculate, categorize, compare, contrast, criticize, differentiate, discriminate, relate, break down, distinguish, examine, experiment, question, test
Evaluating (synthesis)	arrange, generate, assemble, collect, compose, construct, create, design, develop, formulate, relate, manage, organize, plan, prepare, propose, set up, write
Creating (evaluation)	appraise, argue, assess, attach, criticize, critique, choose, compare, defend, estimate, judge, predict, rate, core, select, support, value, evaluate

It is important that your outcomes are observable and measurable, and that your students must be engaged in an action to reach those outcomes. You can also think of them as SMART outcomes. They should be **Specific**, **Measurable**, **Achievable/Ambitious**, **Realistic/Relevant**, and **Time-bound**.

S.M.A.R.T. refers to the acronym that describes the key characteristics of meaningful objectives, which are **Specific** (concrete, detailed, well defined), **Measurable** (numbers, quantity, comparison), **Achievable** (feasible, actionable), **Realistic** (considering resources) and **Time-Bound** (a defined time

line). Let's look at these characteristics in more detail. Although S.M.A.R.T. is most often used when describing the process of setting goals or objectives, it is a great way to think about writing outcomes too!

Specific

Specific means that the outcome is concrete, detailed, focused and well defined. That is, it is straightforward, emphasizes action and the required outcome. Outcomes need to communicate what you would like to see happen.

Measurable

If the outcome is measurable, it means that the measurement source is identified and we are able to track the results of our actions, as we progress towards achieving the outcome. Measurement is the standard used for comparison. For example, what financial independence means to me, may be totally different compared to what it means for you. As is so often quoted, if you can't measure it, you can't manage it! Importantly, measurement helps us to know when we have achieved our outcome.

Achievable

Outcomes need to be achievable, if it is too far in the future, you'll find it difficult to keep motivated and to strive towards its attainment. Whilst being obtainable, outcomes still need to stretch you, but not so far that you become frustrated and lose motivation.

Realistic

Outcomes that are achievable may not be realistic. However, realistic does not mean easy. Realistic means that you have the resources to get it done. The achievement of an outcome requires resources, such as, skills and knowledge, to support the tasks required to achieve the outcome. Most outcomes are achievable but, may require a change in your priorities to make them happen.

Time-Bound

Time-bound means setting deadlines for the achievement of the outcome. Deadlines create the all important sense of urgency. If you don't set a deadline, you will reduce the motivation and urgency required to execute the tasks.

What Does Writing Program or Service Outcomes Look Like in Practice?

Example One

You offer a social justice program developed to increase your students' understanding of their privilege in the world. After an examination of the curriculum, you decide to write the following outcome:

Students will understand their privilege in the world.

A better way to write this outcome:

Students will identify ways in which they have privilege in the world.

An even better way to write this outcome:

Students will identify two ways in which they have privilege in the world.

You need to think about HOW this program provides this understanding. Can it actually do this? You also need to consider how you MEASURE the outcome. The first outcome is very broad. The second outcome is more specific. The third outcome is specific and measurable.

What methods can you use to measure this outcome? You can use a post-test, pre/post test, focus groups, oral question/response, and journals.

Example Two

You want more students to take advantage of your peer counseling/mentoring services. During orientation, you provide students with information on this service through a PowerPoint presentation. This year, you also provide each student with a cool poster that provides this information. You decide to write the following outcome:

Students will want peer counseling/mentoring services

Once you realize that this outcome is not specific or measurable, you recognize that there are actually two things you can measure:

1. You can measure the students' knowledge of the program. One way to write this outcome:

Students can identify the peer counseling/mentoring program as one of the department's services.

What methods can you use to measure this outcome? You can use a post-test, pre/post test, focus groups, oral question/response, and journals.

Another way to write this outcome:

All students who use the peer counseling/mentoring service learned of the program from the orientation program.

What methods can you use to measure this outcome? You can use intake forms or applications for the service.

2. You can also measure the application of the students' knowledge of the program. That is, you can measure how many students use the program after attending your orientation session. One way to write this outcome:

All students utilize the peer counseling/mentoring program after learning about it at orientation.

How methods can you use to measure this outcome? You can collect data who attended the orientation sessions and who participates in the counseling/mentoring program and compare. You can also create a control situation where some students receive the cool poster while others do not. You can then measure the differences in those who do and do not receive it.

What Other Things Should I Consider When Writing Learning Outcomes?

- How difficult will it be to measure the outcome?

- Do the outcomes of your program or service align with your department's mission and strategic plan?
- Do the outcomes of your program and service align with the university's mission and strategic plan?
- How do the outcomes of your program and service relate to the outcomes of other programs and services you department offers?

Are you not sure how to answer these questions? Ask a member of the Campus Life Assessment Committee for help!