UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
DIVISION OF STUDENT AFFAIRS
ASSESSMENT TEAM

Writing Learning Outcomes

What are learning outcomes?
Learning outcomes are statements that specify what learners will know or be able to DO as a result of a learning activity. The key word is DO and the need in drafting learning outcomes is to use **active** verbs. Outcomes describe a desired condition such as knowledge, skills, or attitudes that need to be fulfilled.

What are the characteristics of good learning outcomes?

Three characteristics of learning outcomes
1. The specified action by the learners must be observable.
2. The specified action by the learners must be measurable.
3. The specified action must be done by the learners.

An ultimate test when writing a learning outcome is whether or not the action taken by the participants can be assessed. If not, the outcome probably does not meet all three characteristics.
1. who is to perform;
2. what action they are to take;
3. some result that must come from their action.

How do you fix an unclear outcome?

You may notice many program brochures include unclear learning outcomes which represent elements of curriculum rather than action the participants will generate.

If you can ask the simple question ("Can it be measured?"), you will discover that learning outcomes have shortcomings. Some outcomes may not be measurable.

Example #1
- Unclear learning outcome:
  Students will *understand* three main reasons for participating in volunteerism

- Clear learning outcome:
  Students will *list* three reasons for participating in volunteer opportunities.

Example #2
- Unclear learning outcome:
  Students will *develop* an appreciation of cultural diversity in the L.A. area.

- Clear learning outcome:
  Students will *summarize* in writing their feelings about cultural diversity in the L.A. area.

What is the importance of action verbs?

Since the learner's performance should be observable and measurable, the verb chosen for each outcome statement should be an action verb which results on overt behavior that can be observed and measured.

Outcomes can be modified by changing the action verbs. Some action verbs include:

For Knowledge:
- arrange
- order
- define
- recall
- relate

For Comprehension:
- classify
- locate
- report
- indicate
- review

For Application:
- apply
- schedule
- illustrate
- interpret
- employ

For Analysis:
- appraise
- compare
- experiment
- criticize
- contrast

For Synthesis:
- arrange
- formulate
- assemble
- compose
- design

For Evaluation:
- predict
- assess
- select
- evaluate
- estimate

Certain verbs are unclear and are subject to different interpretations in terms of what action they are specifying. Such verbs call for covert behavior which cannot be observed or measured. These types of verbs should be avoided: know, become aware of, appreciate, learn, understand, and become familiar with.

References

American Association of Law Libraries. (2005). http://www.aallnet.org/prodev/outcomes.asp

Bloom, B. (1956). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Book 1 Cognitive Domain.*

Bloom, B. (1964). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Book 2 Affective Domain.*

University of California at Santa Barbara. (1996).
http://www.ncgia.ucsb.edu/education/curricula/giscc/units/format/outcomes.html

Additional Web Links

http://www.ncsu.edu/assessment/presentations/assess_process/process.htm
(Excellent starting place – see topics below)

Topics on the NCSU Website:
- What Exactly is Assessment? What is Your Role in it?
- Survey Research
- Basic Assessment Plan Development
- Qualitative Methods: Interviews and Focus Groups
- Supporting Student Learning: Assessing the Effectiveness of Our Work
- Creating a Culture of Assessment: Making Assessment Meaningful and Manageable
- Creating, Implementing, and Using Rubrics
- How to Best Document My Assessment Work
- An Outline for an Assessment Plan
- Using Portfolios in Assessment
- Conceptual Overview of Assessment
- Use of Assessment Data
- Using Electronic Resources to Manage the Assessment Process
- Assessing assessment at North Carolina State University, U.S.A.: Assessment, Program Development, and Continuous Improvement
- Ownership, Leadership, and Trust: Defining Elements in a Successful Assessment Process
- The Assessment Process: From Philosophy to Implementation
- The Assessment Tool Kit (for Faculty)
- Refining Program Assessment Plans