Writing learning outcomes

What are learning outcomes?
Learning outcomes are statements that describe what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to demonstrate by the end of a unit or course of study. Well-designed learning outcomes are the foundation of good learning design and are central to the ‘constructive alignment’ approach.

Constructive alignment involves a focus on ensuring all of your content, learning activities and assessment tasks directly support your students to achieve the learning outcomes. This improves the coherence of curriculum and generates clarity of expectations for student performance.

The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) makes explicit the need to demonstrate the link between learning outcomes and assessment methods. In the AQF, learning outcomes are expressed in terms of the dimensions of:

- **Knowledge** (what a graduate needs to know)
- **Skills** (what a graduate needs to be able to do)
- **Application of knowledge and skills**

UWA’s Assessment Policy also emphasises that each unit must clearly explain how assessment items relate to the learning outcomes.

Writing learning outcomes
Unit learning outcomes must align with those at the course level. As such, an important first step in developing good learning outcomes for your unit is to think about where your unit fits into the overall course.

Learning outcomes should be written in the future tense and use clear, unambiguous language. They should be:

- **Specific** (the student will know exactly what kind of knowledge and skills are involved)
- **Achievable** (the student will know how this learning is to be demonstrated)

When writing learning outcomes, you must precisely indicate the main skills, abilities and knowledge that students will acquire upon successful completion of the unit. It is useful to start with a clear statement: ‘On completion of this unit students will be able to …’. This expression is then followed by:

- a single, active verb to identify what the student should be able to do
- a clear object for the verb to specify the context

Using Bloom’s taxonomy
Learning taxonomies, such as Bloom’s, can help you to consider the level of learning required of your students and identify appropriate verbs to use in writing your learning outcomes. The diagram below is based on Bloom’s revised taxonomy:

### Diagram:

- **Remembering** requires learners to recognise or recall knowledge from memory such as definitions, facts, lists or previously learned information. For example, students will be able to **recognise** the defining features of digital communication.

- **Understanding** requires learners to construct meaning or comprehend topic areas or processes by interpreting, explaining or summarising. For example, students will be able to **describe** a range of engineering roles, their value, and capabilities important for those roles.
Applying requires learners to use learned material in a given or new situation by executing, interpreting or implementing. For example, students will be able to use aerial photographs and other images, topographic maps and GPS proficiently in the field.

Analysing requires learners to break down or distinguish material into its parts and understand how the parts relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose. For example, students will be able to critically analyse the role of government and non-government organisations in the creation and implementation of regulation.

Evaluating requires learners to make judgements based on criteria/standards and may involve synthesis, critiquing and checking or making recommendations. For example, students will be able to critically analyse the role of government and non-government organisations in the creation and implementation of regulation.

Creating requires learners to reorganise elements into a new pattern or structure by generating, planning or creating an original product. For example, students will be able to develop a convincing, coherent and consistent argument applying anthropological/sociological perspectives that engage with a recognisable body of theory.

It is important to ensure that learning outcomes become increasingly sophisticated and to scaffold your students’ learning as they progress through their course of study. For example, learning outcomes for an introductory unit would be more likely to focus on building a broad understanding, while a unit undertaken by a student in the final year of their course would have a more in-depth analysis focus.

Points to keep in mind

- Assessment tasks should closely link to the learning outcomes. A learning outcome should not be included if it is impossible to assess it.
- All learning outcomes have to be observable and measurable. Avoid vague terms such as ‘know’, ‘understand’, ‘become familiar with’ and ‘appreciate’ as these cover a broad range of meanings and general behaviours that cannot be objectively measured.
- Avoid double-barrelled outcomes by using only one, clear action verb for each learning outcome.
- Very broad learning outcomes are difficult to assess effectively and make it hard for students to determine what is required. Alternatively, narrow outcomes are overly restrictive and can leave you with very little flexibility in the assessment.
- Ensure the learning outcomes can be reasonably accomplished within the timescale of the unit and the resources available.
- There is no absolute rule on the appropriate number of learning outcomes. Some units may have many outcomes that are relatively straightforward to achieve and assess, while others may have fewer, more complex outcomes that are more demanding to acquire. As a rough guide, a unit typically has four to six learning outcomes.
- Explicitly link unit-level learning outcomes to course-level outcomes. Ensure that the learning outcomes developed within related units can collectively lead to the achievement of the course-level outcomes.

Contact your Faculty EEU team

If you have any questions please contact your Faculty’s EEU Team for assistance:

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References


