

Course-Level Learning Outcomes

Course-level learning outcomes are statements that describe knowledge, skills, or attitudes that a student should be able to demonstrate by the end of a course. While instructors cannot completely predict what students will (and will not) learn, course learning outcomes articulate what instructors intend for students to learn.

Traditionally, course syllabi have explained course goals or objectives in terms of the subject matter and topics that the instructor will address (e.g. “this course will cover the following topics,” “you will be introduced to the theoretical concepts of the field,” “we will explore the current controversies”). Student learning outcomes are slightly different than course goals and objectives. Written in detailed, student-centered language, a course learning outcome describes the learning that “comes out of” a course and can be both observed and assessed (i.e. “students will be able to apply the theoretical concepts to current controversies”).

Establishing course-level learning outcomes is important to the educational process for several reasons:

- Students learn more effectively when they understand course learning outcomes. They not only know what the topics covered will be, but what they should know and be able to do as a result of the class. This helps students achieve a deeper level of learning: if students do not know what is most important to focus on, they skim readings and cram for exams and do not delve as deeply into the material.
- When students better understand what they can hope to learn in a particular course, they gain a better understanding of an entire program’s curriculum and how courses fit together.
- Course-level learning outcomes can aid instructors in designing a course by helping them plan course content, appropriate assessments, and instructional strategies.
- Course-level learning outcomes help students understand their own learning and build metacognitive skills. Students can also better articulate what they’ve learned (to parents, employers, etc.).

Course-Level Learning Outcomes and Program-Level Learning Outcomes

Nearly all degree-granting programs at The New School have articulated student learning outcomes for the program. Program learning outcomes summarize what students have learned over an entire curriculum, at the time of graduation. Course-level learning outcomes are more specific, describing learning that takes place in an individual course.

Program learning outcomes and course learning outcomes are, of course, related, since students cannot achieve program learning outcomes unless they learn and practice them in their coursework. For example, a learning goal for the Parsons BFA in Fine Arts states that students will be able to use the appropriate visual and conceptual vocabulary necessary to articulate their work, as well as the work of others. A

sculpture course within the program might support students' learning of this goal, and have a specific course-level goal that "Students will be able to explain their work and critique classmates' work using the visual and conceptual vocabulary of sculpture." In a well-designed, coherent curriculum, each course will have a particular role in introducing, reinforcing, or aiding students in mastering a program goal. Some of the learning outcomes of a course will connect to program-level outcomes, but many courses will also have learning outcomes specific to the course as well.

Writing Course-Level Learning Outcomes

Course-level learning outcomes on a syllabus represent the most important aspects of learning in the course, and should be limited in number (approximately 5-10). Smaller, more discrete learning outcomes are still important and may remain a goal for a particular unit or assignment.

Consider the following question: **"At the end of this course, students will be able to..."** Brainstorm a list of answers to this question, keeping the following suggestions in mind:

- Focus on what you want students to learn and be able to do, rather than the content or coverage of what you will teach
- Think long-term: What do you want students to be able to do a year or two after the course?
- Consider the course's function within the curriculum: Is the course required? Do students need to learn particular knowledge and skills to advance to the next level? What program-level outcomes are addressed in the course?
- Do other faculty in your division teach same course? If so, most of the learning outcomes for the course should be the same. If these course-level learning outcomes have not been developed by the program, faculty members may need to meet with each other to create them.
- Choose an appropriate level of "staged" learning: Generally, introductory courses introduce concepts; in mid-level courses, students develop increased facility and engage in more complex, higher-level learning; and in senior capstones, students demonstrate mastery.
- Consider including learning from different areas: In addition to specific disciplinary content/skills, what else is being taught in the course? Many courses strengthen student learning in a variety of areas, such as oral communication, critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, teamwork, and more.

Once you have an initial list, your task will be to prioritize and narrow to no more than 5-10 learning outcomes. You may find that some outcomes can be grouped together. When you have drafted a final list, the next step will be to write these as learning outcomes.

- Learning outcomes should be observable, since you'll want to judge whether or not your students have accomplished this learning.
- To ensure that outcomes are observable, precise language is necessary. In the context of a learning outcome, verbs such as "appreciate," "know," or "understand" are vague and difficult to observe.
 - To avoid vague terms, think of how students would demonstrate their knowledge, appreciation, or understanding more specifically – for example, students might explain concepts on an exam or in a paper. Identifying behaviors, activities, or student work that provides evidence may help you find more specific language.
 - Outcomes are most commonly written with "action verbs." Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive thought is a useful aid for finding appropriate verbs, and can be found here: <http://www.newschool.edu/leadership/provost/learning-assessment/program-assessment/tips-writing/>
- Write outcomes in language a student will understand.

Here are some examples of course-level learning. **At the end of this course, students will be able to:**
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- Critically review the methodology of a research study published in a professional psychology journal.
- Produce a marketing plan for a small fashion firm.
- Demonstrate familiarity with American literary traditions from 1492 to 1865, including prominent authors, literary movements and styles, and the historical and cultural contexts important to those traditions.

A final note: Many faculty find beginning the course planning process by creating student learning outcomes to be effective. Once you have determined what students should learn, you can think about how they will apply and demonstrate this learning, as well as the instructional strategies that will aid students in meeting the learning outcomes. Since the ultimate goal of the course is for students to learn what you have identified as being most important, activities and assignments should be related to course learning outcomes. For more information on how to plan a course beginning with learning outcomes, see www.newschool.edu/teachingresources