REFINING LEARNING OUTCOMES STATEMENTS

PURPOSE
This tool addresses the writing and refining of a statement of learning outcomes. Careful articulation of the outcomes statement helps instructors focus not only on what will be taught, but on how it will be presented, what the student experience will be, and how students will be assessed on their learning.

DESCRIPTION
• Step 1: List the target student abilities or characteristics.

At its most basic level, an effective outcome statement contains just two words, a verb and the object of the verb that describes what you want the student to be able to do, i.e. “write poem,” or “reason analytically,” or “solve equation,” or “become disciple,” etc. More often, the initial draft of an outcome statement takes the form:

The student will be able to: verb+ __________.

The choice of the verb is important as it will affect later decisions about how to instruct and measure accomplishment of the outcome. What good verbs have in common is that they are observable, whereas verbs like understand and know describe no observable action on the part of the students. Common verbs used include the following:

Analyze, dissect, detect, test, deconstruct, discriminate, distinguish, examine, focus, survey, compare, contrast, classify, investigate, outline, separate, structure, categorize, solve, diagram, determine evidence and conclusions, judge, calculate, criticize, debate, experiment, identify, illustrate, infer, inspect, inventory, question, relate, select, coordinate, decide, rate debate, evaluate, justify, recommend, verify, monitor, test, measure, appraise, assess, conclude, plan, estimate, explain, interpret, relate, revise, score, summarize, support, value, create, hypothesize, organize, modify, improve, suppose, produce, set up, propose, formulate, arrange, assemble, collect, combine, devise, explain, generate, manage, perform, prepare, rearrange, reconstruct, argue for, relate, reorganize.

As you begin to write down the list of abilities and characteristics you hope your students will have developed by the end of the lesson, course or program, you may be tempted to add more detail than just the verb and object, but that part will come later. Remember, this is not a course content outline. A subtractive approach may work well for you in creating this initial list. List every ability or characteristic you hope your students will gain, and then pare it down to those they can realistically gain within the timeframe and scope of the lesson, course or program.

• Step 2: Organize your list (an outline form works well). You may have found while creating the list in step 1 that not all outcome statements have equal weight. Some are large and complex, while others are small and basic. For this reason, one outcome is often really a component of another. For example, the list may have contained “write essay,” “craft thesis,” and “find evidence.” Crafting a thesis and finding evidence are subsets of the larger outcome to write an essay. Make sure that all of the outcomes are at the same level. Disregard outcomes that are pre-requisites or subordinate to others. Break up statements that contain more than one goal.

• Step 3: Add necessary detail to the outcome statements. Two-word outcomes statements make for a good beginning step because they provide focus. You probably found in step 1 that two words were not quite sufficient to truly define outcomes. Adding a few descriptive words to the statements adds necessary detail and clarity. For example, “solve quadratic equation” is a more useful outcome statement than “solve equation.” You may choose to add additional detail such as the setting, conditions, level of achievement or mastery, or audience information. While the following example contains all of these elements, not all are required in every outcome statement.

Course Outcomes

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The following example is built on the two-word phrase “make circuit.”

*Given a battery, light bulb and pieces of wire, the student will demonstrate making an electric circuit by appropriately connecting the pieces so as to light the bulb.*

Adjust the detail to capture the appropriate skill level or context for the outcome statement.

**Step 4: Revise for Measurability.** Ask yourself what evidence will indicate that students have accomplished the objective and how you will measure that evidence. Note the resulting details in the outcomes statement or to the side. For example, *Students will be able to judge the use of rhetorical fallacies* might become *Students will be able to judge the use of rhetorical fallacies in televised political debates.* The degree of detail required here will depend largely upon the level of the outcome statement. Higher level outcome statements (institutional and program) will rely more on indirect measurements whereas course and class outcome statements will be able to use more direct measures.

**Step 5: Fill in learning gaps.** As you review your completed list of lesson, course or program outcomes, observe any patterns you find. Do your outcomes statements include student abilities of various types, or they tend to focus on only one level or kind of learning? There are various ways of categorizing learning and types of knowledge.

Some common types and taxonomies are discussed in the tool titled:

Learning Outcomes Taxonomies

Try to insure that your outcomes cover a spectrum of different kinds and levels of learning.

**TIPS**

- **Know the context.** Drafting lesson outcomes is easier when kept within the context of course outcomes. Drafting course outcomes is easier when kept within the context of program outcomes. (see Choosing the Scope of Outcomes)
- **Know where to start.** Most BYU-Idaho courses have a list of course goals or objectives filed with the Academic Office.
- **Remember the student.** As you write outcomes, keep in mind the potential within your students.
- **Work with your peers.** Coordinate your outcomes with other instructors teaching the same subject.

**PITFALLS**

- **Too much.** Don’t overdo the drafting stage and try to fit too many outcomes into a course or lesson.
- **Non-student focus.** When drafting, one may be tempted to simply create a content outline rather than a list of outcomes.

**CAMPUS PRACTITIONERS**

Richard Pieper, Kathy Cook, Mark Orchard

**OTHER NAMES**

Authentic Assessment, Evaluation, Testing, Paper Assessment, Performance Assessment, Essays

**KEY ARTICLES**


**OTHER RESOURCES**

- Bloom’s Taxonomy Chart

http://www.byui.edu/learningandteaching/