

Guide for Writing Learning Objectives

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Stating intended learning outcomes provides direction for teaching, sets the necessary foundation for assessment of learning, conveys instructional intent to others, and serves as an implicit contract between teacher and student. Learning objectives, found on course syllabi, describe the knowledge and skills that a student is expected to demonstrate upon completion of the course. Ideally, each of these objectives relates, in some discernable way, to the learning objectives for the overall program of study. ²

All learning objectives should be specific, measurable and written in behavioral terms. All learning objectives have two parts – an action verb and a content area. In selecting action verbs, avoid terms like “appreciate,” “realize,” or “understand” since these terms refer to an internal state that cannot be observed by an outside evaluator. Learning objectives are not statements of topics to be covered, not statements of learning activities, and not statements about the teaching methods. Instead, learning objectives describe what the student will do when they have reached a specific level of competency with a skill or subject. ³

Learning objectives should be framed in terms of types of learning outcomes and should reflect progressively higher-level functioning. A set of learning objectives that relies primarily on terms such as “list,” “define,” “identify,” and “describe” reflects a fairly elementary level of attainment. Public health professionals need to be proficient in critical thinking and problem-solving and this level of functioning should be reflected in the learning objectives. Terms more likely to capture higher-level functioning include, for example, “analyze,” “evaluate,” and “design.” ⁴ The table below contains examples of illustrative verbs that are useful in stating specific learning outcomes.

Knowledge ⁵	define, describe, diagram, draw, identify, label, list, match, name, outline, recall, record, reproduce, select, state
Comprehension	convert, discuss, defend, distinguish, estimate, explain, extend, generalize, give examples, infer, paraphrase, predict, report, review, rewrite, summarize
Application	apply, change, compute, demonstrate, discover, dramatize, employ illustrate, interpret, make inferences, manipulate, modify, operate, predict, prepare, produce, recognize new instances, relate, show, solve, teach, translate, use
Analysis	analyze, break down, compare, contrast, examine, diagram, differentiate, distinguish, identify, illustrate, infer, outline, point out, predict, relate, select, separate, sub-divide
Synthesis	arrange, assemble, categorize, combine, compile, compose, construct, create, devise, design, formulate, generate, modify, organize, plan, rearrange, reconstruct, relate, reorganize, setup
Evaluation	appraise, assess, conclude, critique, estimate, justify, interpret, measure, rate, revise

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^{2, 4} This text has been abridged from “Writing Clear and Measurable Learning Objectives” with permission from the Council on Education for Public Health

³ Wolfe, RM. 1990, Educational Objectives chapter in: Evaluation and Education: foundations of competency assessment and program review. 3rd edition. Praeger, 1990.

⁵ This table is based on “Bloom’s Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain” originally conceived in Bloom, B., Englehart, M. Furst, E., Hill, W., & Krathwohl, D. 1956. Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals. Handbook I: Cognitive domain. New York: Longmans, Green.

