



## Learning Outcomes

A learning outcome is our expectation about what a student **will be able to do** as a result of successfully completing the instructional experience we designed.

You are expected to assess each learning outcome you write, so...

- Only state what you can reasonably expect for all students. If this is learning that you hope might happen for some students, but can't expect it for all, call it a "goal" instead of a "learning outcome."
- Only expect learning on the things you intentionally teach.
- Write learning outcomes in a measurable (evidence-based) way.
- Focus on the most important, highest level learning you expect.
- Focus on what the student will do, not what the teacher will do to help the student learn.

## How to Write Measurable Learning Outcomes

The ABCD method explicitly states the audience, behavior, condition, and degree of the expected learning. Explicitly stating these components can make the learning outcomes easier to assess. At minimum, a learning outcome must describe a learner behavior. Adding a condition and degree for course learning outcomes can suggest appropriate assessments and encourage consistent learning across multiple course sections.

- **Audience** Who are you assessing? This may be implied as "student" or "learner" or "participant."
- **Behavior** What action do you expect from the participant? All measurable learning outcomes must articulate a learner behavior.
- **Conditions** Under what circumstances will the individual perform the behavior?
- **Degree** How well must the individual perform the behavior?

## ABCD Method Example

- **Cognitive:** Given a blank page [Condition], the learner [Audience] will be able to write a measurable learning outcome statement [Behavior] with at least 75% accuracy [Degree].
- **Psychomotor:** Given a novel piece of sheet music and a musical instrument [Condition], the student [Audience] plays the piece [Behavior] with no errors that disrupt enjoyment of the music [Degree].
- **Affective:** Given various options to experience art [Condition], students [Audience] choose to engage in art-related activities [Behavior] at least once per month [Degree].

## Tips for Writing Learning Outcomes

- **Use one behavior verb at a time.** The verb indicates the action that you will be assessing. Different verbs may need different kinds of evidence, especially ones signifying different types of skill, knowledge, or attitudes. Using separate learning outcome statements for each kind of learning you want to assess aids clarity.
- **Use the word “and” sparingly.** The word “and” often signals more than one idea within a learning outcome, which may require more than one kind of assessment to generate the necessary evidence. If “and” is present, consider whether the statement would be better broken into separate outcomes.
- **Avoid the terms “know,” “understand,” and “knowledge of.”** We cannot physically sense “understand” and “know” as these exist within the learner’s mind. To gather evidence of learning, the learning outcomes need to describe what you will see, hear, taste, smell, or feel to know how much the student has learned.
- **Choose verbs that accurately signal the task complexity.** Some verbs, like “identify” or “recall” signal cognitive tasks related to recognition and memory. Other verbs such as “analyze” or “create” signal higher-order thinking skills that might require synthesizing information or applying knowledge to a new situation.
- **Choose a limited number of outcomes you will “guarantee.”** You will be assessing each of your learning outcomes. Only write learning outcomes for the knowledge, skills, and attitudes you will intentionally teach and will expect all successful students to exhibit.



- **Align learning outcomes with assessments and instructional methods.** Learning outcomes cannot be separated from the instructional methods that will generate the learning and the assessments that will generate evidence about learning. Without alignment, the instructional methods are teaching an unspoken learning outcome and the assessments are providing evidence for an unspoken outcome.

## Examples of Effective Wording for Learning Outcomes

Could be improved	Better	Rationale
List the steps in the assessment process <b>and choose</b> the best way to assess success of the project.	Rationalize the best approach to assessing success on the project.	We can combine the two verbs into one outcome encompassing both.
<b>Construct an understanding of</b> spirituality, religion, and health.	Construct a model of the relationship between spirituality, religion, and health.	We need a way to observe the learner demonstrate “an understanding of” the topic.
In a reflective journal, <b>define</b> social injustice as it relates to the socioeconomically disadvantaged	In a reflective journal, explain how socioeconomically disadvantaged people experience social injustice.	We match the verb to the task complexity. “Define” implies a recall task, but we want a deeper analysis of the content.
<b>Demonstrates ability to conduct and manage</b> collaborative plans for a long-term project with community partners.	Manages a collaborative plan for a long-term project with a community partner.	Wordiness can obscure meaning. Concisely describe the behavior we will assess.
<i>Learning outcome:</i> Distinguish theory X from theory Y.	<i>Learning outcome:</i> Distinguish theory X from theory Y.	A misalignment between assessment and learning outcome. The assessment was evaluating students’ ability to recall rather than provide evidence about their ability to distinguish the theories.



# Grinnell College

Center for Teaching, Learning,  
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<p>Students will gain knowledge and practice in methods and research.</p>	<p>Students will use common methods in our field to conduct publishable-quality research on a topic of interest.</p>	<p>The outcome should describe what a student will do to demonstrate they met the desired level of knowledge and skills.</p>
<p>The department will retain staffing appropriate to our curricular needs OR Students will attend graduate school</p>	<p>[Not applicable]</p>	<p>The original does not describe something a student can do to demonstrate learning within the classroom context. The first is a department-focused academic goal instead of student focused learning outcome. The second is something that an instructor cannot control and cannot measure before a student graduates; perhaps call this one a “goal” instead of a learning outcome.</p>
<p>The department will instill an appreciation for scientific approaches to knowledge formation.</p>	<p>Given options for information sources, students will opt for scientific sources of data before using anecdotal evidence.</p>	<p>The updated version describes something a student can do to demonstrate learning.</p>