
Student Learning Outcomes

For more detailed information on learning outcomes, including tutorials on how to write outcome statements, see the SDSU Center for Teaching and Learning Web site at <http://go.sdsu.edu/dus/ctl/>

Nearly every accrediting agency in the United States now expects colleges and universities to use student learning outcome statements to clarify the educational purpose of programs and courses and to provide a basis for assessment and improvement. The ability of SDSU faculty and administrators to use learning outcome statements as a basis for planning instruction, measuring results, and devising improvement strategies will be critical to future accreditation success and resource allocations.

As early as 1990, the CSU Board of Trustees endorsed the use of learning outcomes as a cornerstone for academic planning. Later it adopted learning outcome statements to articulate broad, system-wide priorities for CSU graduates. For example:

- Integrate knowledge across discipline boundaries.
- Locate, analyze, and synthesize information.
- Make both qualitative and quantitative assessments.
- Appreciate and value cultures other than one's own.

SDSU policy requires that all course syllabi and course proposals include statements of expected student learning outcomes.

Although policies do not dictate specific numbers of outcome statements, 5-10 outcomes, carefully aligned with the major course purposes and themes, are often enough to communicate essential expectations.

What are Learning Outcome Statements?

Student learning outcome statements succinctly describe student capacities – observable and measurable manifestations of knowledge, skills, and attitudes—attained as a result of some learning process or educational experience. The simplest format for outcome statements consists of an action verb and a noun phrase:

- Classify vertebrate specimens.
- Employ metaphors in rhetorical arguments.
- Explain convective effects.
- Predict returns on invested capital.
- Choose to participate in civic affairs.

Learning outcome statements express intentions for learning and describe how students can demonstrate what they have learned. In this sense, they describe some of the ways learning will empower or enable students. Thus, learning outcomes provide a foundation for communicating (and in some cases negotiating) with students about academic responsibilities.

At a collegial and programmatic level, learning outcome statements can help faculty and administrators understand and plan the structure of the curriculum, estimate student and instructor work loads, communicate with SDSU stakeholders, and market degree and certificate programs.

Learning outcomes seem strange to some faculty, perhaps because traditional approaches to academic learning often emphasize transmission of topical information (“covering the content”) with little regard for explicit student competencies. It is therefore unsurprising that, in their first attempts at writing outcomes, faculty often merely amend conventional topical expressions with very general verbs such as “know,” “understand,” “demonstrate knowledge,” and “appreciate.” These are essentially placeholders for more considered and precise action verbs.

For brief guidance composing student learning outcomes, reference http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~acserv/files/Action_Verbs_Developing_Objectives.pdf

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Place holder verbs	More precise action verbs		
Know the policies.	<i>Identify</i> the policies	<i>Analyze</i> policies	<i>Apply</i> policies to new circumstances.
Understand the margin of error.	<i>Define</i> "margin of error."	<i>Predict</i> the effect on the margin of error.	<i>Compute</i> the margin of error.
Demonstrate knowledge of catalysis.	<i>Describe</i> examples of catalysis.	<i>Explicate</i> catalytic effects.	<i>Predict</i> catalytic effects.
Appreciate mid-century 20th century jazz composition.	<i>Analyze</i> thematic development.	<i>Recognize</i> innovative technique.	<i>Choose</i> to attend jazz performances.

Syllabi often contain seeds of intention that can be developed into more concrete descriptions of expected learning outcomes.

Syllabus Excerpts

Broad Statements of Abstract Intent	Possible Learning Outcome Statements
Students should have a thorough understanding of the statistical margin of error.	You should be able to describe and explain how the margin of error changes when standard deviation, population size, or confidence interval are altered.
We will explore the influence of traditional, modern, and post-modern perspectives on the role of religion in contemporary American spiritual life.	We will learn to compare and contrast the influence of traditional, modern, and post-modern perspectives on the role of religion in contemporary American spiritual life.
Discussion of political issues will encourage open exchanges and tolerance of other views.	During discussions about politics, students will be able to listen to other speakers well enough to: verbally summarize the other speakers' views, seek clarification from the original speaker, incorporate clarifications in a revised summary.

There is no final answer regarding what it means to "know the content" other than clarification through discussion and negotiation. Yet many students benefit from clarity of expectations and find clear outcome statements to be a useful guide to preparation, study, and engagement.