

Writing Student Learning Outcomes

What are student learning outcomes (SLOs)?

Student learning outcomes are statements that identify what students will know, be able to do, or be able to demonstrate when they have completed or participated in a program (including a major or degree program), activity, course, or project. Outcomes are usually expressed as knowledge, skills, attitudes, or values.

What are the characteristics of valid SLOs?

SLOs specify an action by the student that must be **observable, measurable, and capable of being demonstrated**.

How do valid SLOs benefit learning?

Well-written, clear, and precise SLOs:

- Help faculty determine how best to facilitate student learning;
- Provide faculty with focused, informative feedback about the knowledge, skills, and attitudes students are actually acquiring through their educational experiences;
- Enable students to articulate and explain what they know and are able to do as a result of their time at High Point University.

How should SLOs be phrased?

The best SLOs are organized around **active verbs**. These verbs identify behavior that can be observed and measured. Here are sample active verbs:

- Analyze, apply, argue, arrange, assemble, assess, calculate, categorize, choose, classify, compare, compile, compute, create, criticize, critique, defend, define, demonstrate, describe, design, develop, differentiate, discuss, distinguish, estimate, examine, explain, formulate, identify, illustrate, indicate, interpret, label, list, locate, manage, memorize, order, operate, organize, plan, practice, predict, prepare, propose, question, rate, recognize, repeat, report, reproduce, review, revise, schedule, select, solve, state, translate, use, utilize, write.

Certain verbs are unclear and identify internal behavior or states of being that cannot be observed or measured. These verbs should be avoided:

- Appreciate, become familiar with, become aware of, know, learn, understand.

In general, the more specific the SLO, the better, as greater specificity usually leads to more measurable outcomes. Balancing specificity with the flexibility needed to describe a range of learning activities, however, can be tricky. The following

examples show the benefits of greater specificity in formulating measurable student learning outcomes:

Examples of SLOs that are TOO GENERAL and therefore EXTREMELY HARD TO MEASURE:

1. Students will appreciate the benefits of exercise.
2. Students will develop conflict resolution and problem-solving skills.
3. Students will have more confidence in their abilities.

Examples of SLOs that are general and HARD to measure:

1. Students will value exercise as a stress reduction tool.
2. Students will demonstrate the ability to resolve personal conflicts and assist others in resolving conflicts.
3. Students will demonstrate critical thinking skills.

Examples of SLOs that are more specific and therefore relatively easier to measure:

1. Students will explain how exercise affects stress.
2. Students will use effective negotiating tactics to assist roommates in resolving conflicts.
3. Students will analyze and formulate logical responses to arguments about racial discrimination.

How do I fix a poorly-phrased or weak SLO?

Ask these two questions:

- Can the outcome be displayed and measured?
- Is learning being demonstrated?

Some outcomes do demonstrate learning, but not in a way that can be reliably or easily measured:

- Participants will understand the nine reasons for conducting a needs assessment.
 - Learning is demonstrated, but this SLO will be difficult to measure (how do you measure *understanding*?)
- Students will arrive on time daily.
 - This can be measured, but learning is not necessarily being demonstrated.

Both of these outcomes can be rephrased to make the learning measurable and demonstrative of learning:

- Participants will list the nine reasons for conducting a needs assessment.
- Students will explain the benefits of punctuality in a professional setting.

Is there a checklist for writing valid SLOs?

When writing an SLO, begin by completing this sentence:

As a result of students participating in (or completing)

they will be able to _____.

Example: *As a result of students completing* the resident assistant training session for writing incident reports, *they will be able to* write concisely, include factual details in their reports, and use non-judgmental language.

After creating outcomes, ask and answer these questions:

1. Does the outcome support the mission and overall objectives of the program of which it is a part?
2. Does the outcome employ active verbs to describe what the course or program intends students to know (cognitive), believe (affective, attitudinal), or do (behavioral)?
3. Is the outcome important and worthwhile?
4. Is the outcome
 - a. Detailed and specific?
 - b. Measurable/identifiable?
 - c. The result of learning?
5. Does the course or program offer activities through which students will be able to acquire the intended outcome?
6. Can measuring the attainment of the outcome help guide decisions on how to improve the program or course?