



What is a Course Learning Objective (LO)?

Learning objectives (sometimes referred to as intended learning outcomes or course-specific goals) are clear statements that describe the competences that students should possess upon completion of a course (Simon and Taylor, 2009; Anderson et al., 2001; Harder, 2002; Kennedy et al., 2006). Effective learning objectives state what students should know and be able to demonstrate, as well as the depth of learning that is expected. Clearly defined and intentionally integrated course learning objectives can: 1) help to organize, structure and enhance student learning; 2) improve communication with students and other instructors regarding the important concepts and skills covered in a course; and, 3) improve assessment practices (Simon and Taylor, 2009). Learning objectives are often presented separately in the cognitive, psychomotor and affective domains (Table 1), but may also reflect a range of interacting knowledge, skills and attitudes (Harder, 2002; Soulsby, 2009). Based on various situational factors and contexts, courses typically contain 5-8 broadly stated learning objectives that represent a graduate's integrated and essential learning within the course.

Table 1: Domains of learning, with example levels of sophistication and common verb associations^a

Domain of Learning	Levels of Sophistication	Common Verb Associations
Cognitive (Knowledge) <i>What will students know?</i>	remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating, creating	define, identify, describe, differentiate, explain, apply, analyse, resolve, justify, recommend, judge, create, design
Psychomotor (Skills) <i>What will students be able to do?</i>	imitation, manipulation, precision, articulation, naturalization	adapt, arrange, build, calibrate, construct, design, deliver, demonstrate, display, dissect, fix, mimic, operate, sketch, use, perform
Affective (Attitudes, Values or Habits of Mind) <i>What will students value or care about?</i>	receive, respond, value, organize, characterize	ask, challenge, demonstrate, discuss, dispute, follow, justify, integrate, practice, judge, question, resolve, synthesise

^a see Marzano and Kendall (2007); Kennedy et al. (2006); Anderson et al. (2001); Bloom et. al. (1956; 1964) for further details and examples related to the domains of learning

How do you write a learning objective?

The LO should (Kennedy et al., 2006; Soulsby, 2009):

- Start with an action verb, followed by a statement specifying the depth of learning to be demonstrated, and finally a statement to give it context and to identify a standard for acceptable performance.
- Be specific and unambiguous. Terms such as know, understand, learn, appreciate, and to be aware of should be avoided, and the specific level of achievement should be clearly identified.
- Focus on observable student performance, and be capable of being assessed. It is often helpful to add the preposition “by” or “through” followed by a statement which clearly states how the LO will be assessed.
- Be balanced. Broad LO are difficult to assess, while an extensive list of learning objectives will limit flexibility and adaptability in the curriculum, and make it difficult for students and the instructor to communicate an integrated understanding of the subject matter.
- Be concise and clearly stated.



- Be achievable given the time and resources available to both learners and instructors.

Table 2: Before and after examples of course learning objectives

Before – broad and ambiguous	After – direct, measurable and achievable <i>By the end of the semester, successful students will be able to:</i>
<i>Students will become familiar with plant and animal species in Southern Ontario</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level of achievement/sophistication expected unclear 	<i>Identify and describe 15 common plant and animal species found in the Carolinian Forest Region through field study and the development of an identification guide</i>
<i>Students will critique works of art</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional detail required 	<i>Critique contemporary works of art based on an appropriate set of criteria through studio critiques and an independent essay</i>
<i>Students will be taught various decision-making models</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher-centred, level of sophistication expected unclear 	<i>Apply appropriate decision-making models in business and marketing through participation in a collaborative group project</i>
<i>Students will appreciate the ethical responsibilities of social scientists</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too broad, unclear how this can be measured 	<i>Assess the ethical implications of research in the social sciences through in-class discussion and an independent written report</i>
<i>Students will learn about research proposals</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ambiguous, level of sophistication expected unclear 	<i>Develop and present a research proposal (including appropriate research methods and a review of literature) on a relevant topic in primary or secondary education, through an independent presentation and written report</i>

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