Good Practice Guide: Writing Effective Learning Outcomes

(Support resource to the Higher Education Assessment (Inclusive FedTASKs) Procedure AG1254)

- Support Resource as part of "Higher Education Assessment Procedure"
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This guide aims to simplify the process of constructing, revising or refining Course Level Outcomes (CLOs) and Unit Level Outcomes (ULOs). It contains several examples and resources as well as an activity for brainstorming ideas with a teaching team or learning designers.

Why are learning outcomes important?

Learning outcomes help guide student expectations and serve as a key element in curriculum design. According to the Higher Education Standards Framework, learning outcomes must be clearly communicated to students and must align with the expectations of the **Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF**). It is good practice to periodically review course and unit outcomes to ensure they accurately reflect requirements and expectations for high-quality course and unit delivery and the student experience.

What is constructive alignment?

Prominent scholar John Biggs coined the term 'constructive alignment' as a mechanism to ensure that students will have the optimum learning experience. Therefore, learning outcomes are written from the point of view of the learner. Learning outcomes serve as the backbone of curriculum design, ensuring they align with assessment, learning activities, and the appropriate selection of resources, including educational technologies (see Figure 1).

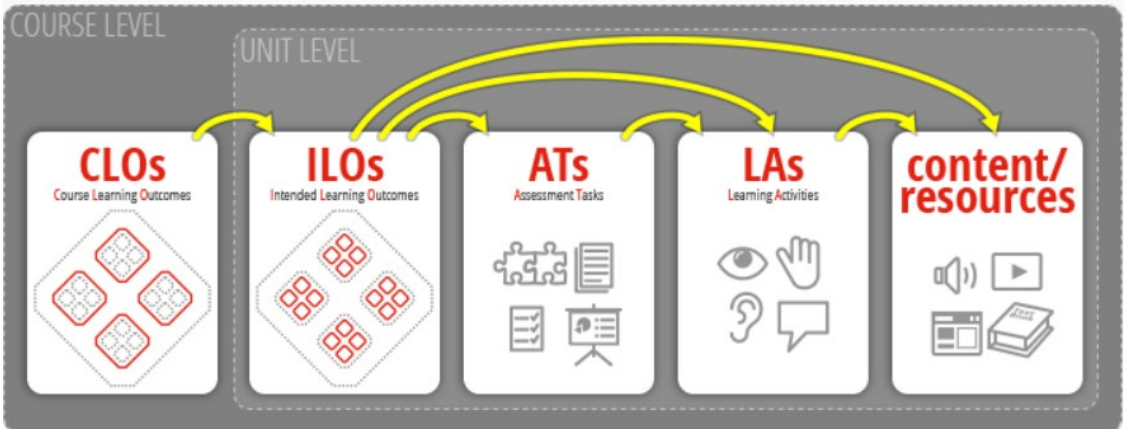

Figure 1: Constructive alignment diagram, Beale Gurney & Nell Rundle, CC BY-SA

Leading with Course Level Outcomes (CLOs)

Course Learning Outcomes (CLO) guide the broader expectations of the course outlining key knowledge, skills that students are expected to demonstrate at the completion of their degree. These are written at a broader level than ULOs.

Guiding Questions for Developing CLOs:

- ☐ Do they convey the purpose and what is important or unique about the course?
- ☐ Do they outline the professional and graduate competencies, skills and knowledge that students are expected to learn by the end of the course?
- ☐ What do you value about the course? What is special or innovative about it? Is this captured in the CLOs?
- ☐ Are there approximately 6-8 concisely written outcomes?

Writing or reviewing Unit-Level Learning Outcomes (ULOs)

Unit Learning Outcomes are more specific than CLOs. Also known as Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs), they are statements of intentions that outline what learners must know and be able to perform by the end of the unit. Unit-level outcomes should:

- stem from course-level learning outcomes
- guide writing assessments, designing activities and selecting resources
- be clearly stated using precise, student-friendly language
- specify observable and measurable achievements using meaningful action verbs that students should demonstrate after completing the unit

Guiding questions for developing ULOs:

- ☐ What will students be expected to demonstrate knowledge skills and application upon completion of the unit?
- ☐ How would you finish the sentence: 'At the end of this unit, students will be able to….'
- ☐ Which action verbs apply to the level of cognition (e.g Critique, Devise, Explain)
- ☐ How will the learning outcome be assessed? (Essay, presentation, performance, quiz)
- ☐ What learning activities would help support students to achieve the learning outcomes?
- ☐ Do the learning outcomes, assessment and activities align? ('Constructive alignment')

Constructing or deconstructing ULOs

The following example demonstrates the structure of a learning outcome. Select the appropriate verb that indicates what students need to do, followed by the content/ topic and more detail in the context.

Action Verb +	Content/topic +	Context +	= Demonstrable Outcome
Construct	a reference list	using an appropriate disciplinary style	Construct a reference list using an appropriate disciplinary style, e.g. APA 7th.
Justify	wellbeing solutions	to health care providers	Outline and explain reasons that justify particular hospital case study solutions to health care providers.
Apply	principles of good learning and teaching	in higher education	Outline your approach to teaching, drawing on your own reflection, student and peer feedback, as well as educational literature.
Synthesise	elements of a claim or defence	according to law	Prepare court documents that synthesise case law for a claim or defense scenario in accordance with the relevant court rules.

Table 1: Structuring ULOs (Source: University of Newcastle)

Examples of Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs)

The examples from the UNSW below shows how CLOs are written more broadly than ULOs, are structured using demonstrable verbs, and are categorised according to Knowledge, Skills and Application of Knowledge and Skills (**Examples of Learning Outcomes | UNSW Staff Teaching Gateway**).

Note: Learning outcomes are not always specified under headings of Knowledge, Skills and Application, these examples are illustrative only, and cover different disciplinary contexts. There is a shift from using these labels.

On successful completion of this course, graduates will be able to:

(Knowledge)

- describe the fundamental concepts, principles, theories and terminology used in the main branches of science.
- assess the health care needs of different groups in society.
- apply the principles and practices of their discipline to new or complex environments.

(Skills)

- collaborate effectively as part of professional teams and in interdisciplinary contexts.
- apply effective oral, written and visual communication skills to present a coherent and sustained argument to the public in a specialist area.

(Application of knowledge and skills)

- contribute to contemporary artistic and cultural discourses by incorporating ethically aware and globally diverse perspectives in their writing and presentations.
- demonstrate adherence to professional and ethical frameworks in healthcare services and delivery.
- engage responsibly and sensitively with cultural, historical and interdisciplinary global contexts in the synthesis of ethical and sustainable design solutions.

Examples of Unit Learning Outcomes (ULOs)

On successful completion of this unit, students will be able to:

(Knowledge)

- outline significant curriculum and assessment theories, models and research in the higher-education sector.
- critically analyse disparate sources of information about WWII.
- evaluate concepts of race, culture, identity and diversity with regards to indigenous education.

(Skills)

- plan and develop an independent research project that uses research methodologies that are appropriate to the discipline.
- communicate through oral presentations using visual, verbal and written information.
- apply technical skills in creating and formatting digital media content, including 2D animation.

(Application of knowledge and skills)

- analyse electrical engineering problems in industrial settings.
- demonstrate critical reflection on their professional knowledge and skills, incorporating broad subject knowledge and perspectives.
- communicate architectural and built-environment ideas through the medium of film.

Poor, better, best: Improving CLOs and ULOs

The following examples (adapted from UNSW) demonstrate how to improve the writing of learning outcomes.

Course Level Outcome example

Poor: *Students will understand different theories relevant to criminology and law.*

This is poor because it does not specify to what extent students should understand these theories. Should students be able to recognise the theories, recite central ideas or criticise the assumptions?

Better: *Students will demonstrate critical understanding of different theoretical positions or arguments relevant to criminology and law using both primary and secondary sources.*

This is better because it signals that students should draw from primary and secondary sources to develop their understanding of theoretical positions, and that a level of criticality is expected. The extent to which they should understand this is still unclear.

Best: *Students will be able to synthesise, compare and evaluate different theoretical positions or arguments relevant to criminology and law using both primary and secondary sources.*

This is the clearest and most specific statement of the three examples. It clarifies how students are expected to **demonstrate** that they 'understand'. It explains a specific target students are expected to evidence. It also provides academics with a reasonable guide for appraising student performance.

Unit Level Outcome example

Poor: *Students will understand the historically important systems of psychology*

This is poor because it does not specify to what extent students should understand these systems, nor what information about each system students should know.

Better: *Students will understand the psychoanalytic, Gestalt, behaviourist, humanistic and cognitive approaches to psychology*

This is better because it signals what theories the students should understand but it still lacks sufficient detail about what they should know or understand.

Best: *Students will be able to recognise and articulate the foundational assumptions, central ideas, and dominant criticisms of the psychoanalytic, Gestalt, behaviorist, humanistic and cognitive approaches to psychology.*

This is the clearest and most specific statement of the three examples. It clarifies how students are expected to **demonstrate** that they 'understand' with specific targets as shown in the verbs "recognise and articulate". It also provides academics with a reasonable guide for appraising student performance.

Common pitfalls when writing learning outcomes

For good practice, it is recommended to **avoid** the following:

- Using vague terms such as *"know"* or *"understand"*, which do not clearly specify the skills or knowledge students must demonstrate
- Focusing on teaching objectives rather than student learning outcomes (i.e., what the teacher will do vs. what the student will achieve)
- Listing content topics instead of articulating what students will learn or be able to do
- Overcomplicating outcomes by using multiple verbs or failing to relate them to a specific context
- Writing outcomes that are not assessable or not clearly linked to assessment tasks
- Including too many outcomes (these can be onerous for the learner and make mapping a harder administrative task)
- Using nested outcomes (e.g., dot points within dot points), which can reduce clarity and make alignment more difficult

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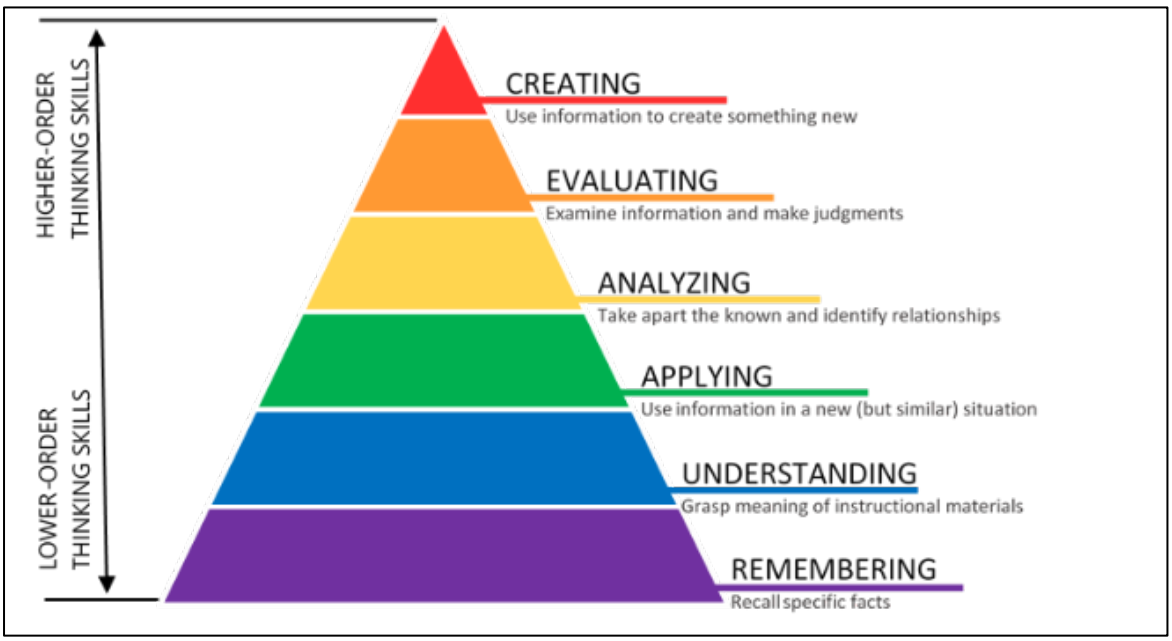
How to find the right verbs

Several taxonomies of learning are available to help classify the types of knowledge and skills expected of students to achieve their learning outcomes. Blooms taxonomy (as Krathwohl revised, 2001) is commonly used for the cognitive domain. Other taxonomies include Marzano (2007) and Biggs (2014).

Bloom's Revised Taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2001) below illustrates typologies from lower-order thinking skills to higher-order skills. Higher-order skills reflect the expectations of graduate capabilities at AQF 7 and above. See the following page for examples of verbs in each typology.



Adapted from Blooms revised taxonomy: Anderson and Krathwohl (2001)

ACTION VERBS APPROPRIATE FOR EACH LEVEL OF BLOOM'S/ANDERSON & KRATHWOHL'S TAXONOMY
(Cognitive Domain)

Remember	Understand	Apply	Analyze	Evaluate	Create
Define	Choose	Apply	Analyze	Appraise	Arrange
Identify	Cite examples of	Demonstrate	Appraise	Assess	Assemble
List	Demonstrate use of	Dramatize	Calculate	Choose	Collect
Name	Describe	Employ	Categorize	Compare	Compose
Recall	Determine	Generalize	Compare	Critique	Construct
Recognize	Differentiate between	Illustrate	Conclude	Estimate	Create
Record	Discriminate	Interpret	Contrast	Evaluate	Design
Relate	Discuss	Operate	Correlate	Judge	Develop
Repeat	Explain	Operationalize	Criticize	Measure	Formulate
Underline	Express	Practice	Deduce	Rate	Manage
	Give in own words	Relate	Debate	Revise	Modify
	Identify	Schedule	Detect	Score	Organize
	Interpret	Shop	Determine	Select	Plan
	Locate	Use	Develop	Validate	Prepare
	Pick	Utilize	Diagram	Value	Produce
	Report	Initiate	Differentiate	Test	Propose
	Restate		Distinguish		Predict
	Review		Draw conclusions		Reconstruct
	Recognize		Estimate		Set-up
	Select		Evaluate		Synthesize
	Tell		Examine		Systematize
	Translate		Experiment		Devise
	Respond		Identify		
	Practice		Infer		
	Simulates		Inspect		
			Inventory		
			Predict		
			Question		
			Relate		
			Solve		
			Test		
			Diagnose		

Figure 2:Blooms revised taxonomy: Anderson and Krathwohl (2001)

Activity: Drafting or revising your learning outcomes

Draft or revise your CLOs and ULOs with peers and/or learning designers being mindful that the drafting process may require several iterations to ensure alignment or refinement. Methods such as Brainstorming, Backwards Design or Design Thinking may assist in the process

Resources: You may find sticky notes or butchers' paper useful, or apps like Miro (FedUni supported) can be used to create and save 'virtual' sticky notes. AI tools such as MS Copilot (FedUni supported) can also assist with drafting. (Note: Ensure that you observe university guidelines for using applications). Provide as much context as you can in your prompt such as year level, discipline, unit topic and include any existing learning outcomes. Continue to refine your prompts further if necessary and review any results for accuracy and quality.

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Action verb +	Content/ topic +	Context +	Full learning outcome

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Action verb +	Content/ topic +	Context +	Full learning outcome

Resources and references

Anderson, L. & Krathwohl, D. et al. (Eds.) (2001). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives.* Longman Australian Higher Education Standards Framework. **https://www.depauw.edu/files/resources/krathwohl.pdf**

Australian Qualifications Framework **AQF levels | AQF**

Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 | Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency

Supplementary Guidelines (Learning Outcomes and Assessment): A support resource for staff constructing unit outline documents. Policy Central **Federation University Australia - Forms(s)**

Good practice guide - Developing learning outcomes - Flinders University Staff

Examples of Learning Outcomes | UNSW Staff Teaching Gateway | Learning Outcomes | UNSW Staff Teaching Gateway

Creating Learning Outcomes / Resources / LDTI Teaching Resources / Learning Design and Teaching Innovation / Teaching resources / Teaching and research / Current staff / The University of Newcastle, Australia

TEQSA | Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency

Anderson, L. & Krathwohl, D. et al. (Eds.) (2001). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives.* Longman

Biggs, J. (2014). Constructive alignment in university teaching. HERDSA Review of Higher Education, 1, 5-22

Marzano, R.J. and J.S. Kendall, eds. The New Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. 2nd ed. 2007, Corwin Press: Thousand Oaks, California. Accessed from: http://thekglawyerblog.com/ptblog/articles/from-bloom-to-marzano-a-new-taxonomy-of-educational-objectives-for-plt/

Krathwohl, D.R. (2002) A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy: An Overview. Theory into Practice, 41, 212-218. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0164-1212(98)10055-9

Wiggins, G. & McTighe, J. Understanding by Design. Expanded 2nd Edition. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2005.
McTighe & Associates – Resources

Note:

- Shared with Learning and Teaching Community of Practice (CoP)
- Attached as a support resource to the HE Assessment Procedure

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