Common Problems with Learning Outcomes

This document is designed to be used in conjunction with the Learning Outcomes Primer. It explains the common problems associated with learning outcomes and offers examples and solutions.

Adapted by Valerie Lopes from Dublin City University, Learning Innovation Unit “Guide to Writing Module Learning Outcomes at DCU,” written by Margaret Keane, April 2009.
Common Problems

The common problems associated with learning outcomes are

• Too vague
• Too specific
• Ambiguous words and phrases are used
• Too many learning outcomes
• Too many verbs in one learning outcome
• Same verb is repeated
• Progression is used as a measurement tool
• Not realistic
• Learning outcomes that describe the subject content
• Not able to be assessed
• Incomplete
Too vague outcomes use language that is broad and more suitable for the program level.

Example:
Analyze the interrelationships of our body’s homeostasis

How to fix it:
• Use the assessment and what it is measuring as a prompt.

Suggested Alternative:
Relate each organ system to its role in maintaining homeostasis
Too specific outcomes use language that is too prescriptive and describes actions that may be achievable at the end of a particular lecture.

**Example:**
Adjust the page layout settings in a spreadsheet

**How to fix it:**
- Use the assessment and what it is measuring as a prompt.

**Suggested Alternative:**
Format spreadsheets to look professional in both hard and soft copy
Ambiguous words and phrases are used

Ambiguous words include “understand,” “demonstrate,” “knowledge of,” etc. These are not action verbs. They are vague terms because they are not universally understood, and may be interpreted differently.

**Example:**
*Understand* the basic principles necessary to comprehend the nature of project risks

**Suggested Alternative:**
*Discuss* the general principles used to guide environmental risk management projects

How to fix it:
- Focus on what the student will actually be able to demonstrate.
- Look at the verbs used in the relating elements to the assessment as a guide.
- Visit Bloom’s Taxonomy in the Resources section for alternative verbs.
Too many learning outcomes

Typically, a subject would have between 5 and 8 outcomes.

Example:
Upon successful completion of this subject the student will be able to:
1. Use various charts, approach plates, and other publications associated with IFR Flight
2. Explain pitot-static and gyroscopic flight instruments, particularly their design, errors and usage by the instrument rated pilot
3. Explain the operation and usage of the VOR and DME as aids to enroute and terminal IFR flight procedures
4. Explain the operation and usage of the ADF and RMI equipment as aids to enroute and terminal IFR flight procedures
5. Use LOC, ILS and back course procedures and explain ILS advantages and limitations as a primary instrument approach aid
6. Use the Global Positioning System (GPS) as a navigation aid for enroute and terminal IFR operations
7. Explain and use radar systems in use in the IFR environment, including PAR, terminal area, and enroute radar.
8. Explain Canadian domestic airspace and VFR procedures in preparation for detailed discussion on applied instrument flight procedures
9. Prepare for safe and effective flight in an IFR environment, including departure, enroute, holding, separation and instrument arrival procedures
10. Integrate all previous knowledge and correctly complete IFR flight plans/flight logs for a number of simulated IFR cross-country flights
11. Explain the constraints to aircraft operations that are imposed by geographic and aircraft limitations during the design of airways and instrument approach procedures
12. Interpret various weather systems and demonstrate knowledge of the effects of the weather during IFR flight
13. Explain the conditions of issue, validity and renewal of the instrument rating

How to fix this common problem?
Too many learning outcomes

How to fix it:

• If there are too many outcomes, consider whether some can be combined.
• Use the assessment and what it is measuring as a prompt.

Suggested Alternative:
Upon successful completion of this subject, the student will be able to:

1. Interpret various charts, approach plates, and other publications associated with IFR flight to plan IFR approaches
2. Explain the operation and usage of all navigation aids as they pertain to enroute and terminal IFR flight procedures
3. Prepare for safe and effective flight in an IFR environment by analyzing departure, enroute, holding, and approach procedures
4. Integrate all previous knowledge including weather, aircraft performance, and instrumentation to correctly create IFR flight plans and flight logs
5. Explain the conditions of issue, validity and renewal of the instrument rating in preparation for the Transport Canada INRAT exam
Too many verbs in one learning outcome

Too many action verbs in one learning outcome can be confusing – which action is the most important for the student to be required to demonstrate?

Example:
Identify, evaluate and discuss the economic contribution of the non-profit sector

In the above example, is the focus for this outcome on whether student can identify the economic contribution, evaluate the economic contribution or discuss the economic contribution?
Which is assessed, the identification, the evaluation, or the discussion? And how?

How to fix it:
• Use the assessment and what it is measuring as a prompt.

Suggested Alternative:
Evaluate the economic contributions of the non-profit sector in Ontario
Same verb is repeated

To avoid ambiguous language, there can be a tendency to find one non-ambiguous verb and use it for all learning outcomes.

Example:
Upon successful completion of this subject, the student will be able to:

1. **Demonstrate** an understanding of Canadian immigration law and policy.
2. **Demonstrate** knowledge of the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act*, and its accompanying regulations.
3. Apply the knowledge of immigration law and policy to different fact situations.
4. **Demonstrate** a thorough knowledge of the procedures in completing the relevant applications for the various immigration procedures.
5. Analyze the various immigration programs.
6. **Demonstrate** knowledge of the various governmental departments, boards and non-governmental organizations in the immigration field.
7. **Demonstrate** knowledge of the *Canadian Citizenship Act* and its procedures.
8. **Demonstrate** an attitude of professionalism, as evidenced by an ability to meet deadlines, complete assignments and perform tests and in-class assignments as scheduled.

How to fix this common problem?
Same verb is repeated

How to fix it:

• Ask what the learning outcome requires the student to demonstrate to ensure that what is required of the student determines the chosen verb.
• Use the Bloom’s Taxonomy verbs list in the Resources section for alternative verbs.
• When replacing a verb, reconsider the domain of learning it implies to ensure the level of learning or alignment to the assessment is not altered.

Suggested Alternative:
Upon successful completion of this subject, the student will be able to:
1. Explain Canadian immigration law and policy in the context of the Canadian Citizenship Act
2. Apply the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* and its accompanying regulations to a variety of situations
3. Explain the procedures in order to complete the relevant applications for the various immigration procedures
4. Analyze the various immigration programs in Ontario.
5. Differentiate between knowledge of the various governmental departments, boards and non-governmental organizations in the immigration field
6. Summarize knowledge of the *Canadian Citizenship Act* and its procedures

Note: “Demonstrate an attitude of professionalism, as evidenced by an ability to meet deadlines, complete assignments and perform tests and in-class assignments as scheduled” should be an outcome of every program and related to the EES.
Progression is used as a measurement tool

This is where a learning outcome refers to improvement in learning or other phrases that imply progression. Progression is difficult to measure as the student would need to demonstrate levels of learning at varying points of time.

**Example:**
Increase mastery with the most common formulas and spreadsheet applications used in business calculations and presentations

How to fix it:

• Remove the reference to progression.

**Suggested Alternative:**
Create spreadsheet applications that use formulas to solve business calculations
Not realistic

This occurs when learning outcomes are not realizable due to constraints of time and/or resources.
For example, a learning outcome might demand an assessment load too great for the students or for the professor.

Example:
Develop a passionate concern that results in a lifelong desire to abolish slavery

How to fix it:
• Consider the workload and resources of both the professor and the students in relation to each learning outcome and the subject learning outcomes as a set.

Suggested Alternative:
Discuss ways to advocate for the abolishment of human trafficking in Canada
Learning outcomes that describe the subject content

This occurs when the learning outcome addresses the delivery of content only (i.e., what the professor intends to deliver).

**Example:**
Identify transport and travel surveys

How to fix it:

- Rewrite the learning outcome so that it is learner-centric.

**Example:**
Define transport and travel survey questions to collect data for transportation planning
Not able to be assessed

This occurs when the learning outcome describes a goal that cannot be measured with an assessment tool.

Example:
Understand and appreciate the critical dynamics impacting change success, failure and opportunity pertaining to "Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow" exemplified by globalization, politics, business and corporatism.

How to fix it:

• Ensure that the learning outcomes is measurable

Example:
Evaluate the critical dynamics impacting change success, failure and opportunity pertaining to "Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow" exemplified by globalization, politics, business and corporatism

• Check that each learning outcome is addressed in some way by the assessment.
• Check that all elements of the assessment have been included in the set of learning outcomes.
Incomplete

Most learning outcomes are missing the criterion or standard for acceptable performance.

Example:
Identify the components of active listening

How to fix it:
• Include the purpose.

Suggested Alternative:
Discuss the role of active listening in the interviewing process