



Creating Measurable Learning Outcomes

by Thomas Dullien

One of the challenges in writing meaningful learning outcomes is to effectively communicate the expectations of the training to the learners. Most of the training in the casino resort environment happens through “hands-on training.” Should there be written learning outcomes for those as well? Absolutely! Those who have implemented written learning outcomes realize how easy it makes measuring the accomplishment of the training goals. Making measuring the results less complicated benefits the trainees as well as the managers or supervisors in their daily interaction while making the training efforts more transparent.

What are Learning Outcomes?

Learning outcomes provide direction in the planning of a learning activity:

- They focus on the learner's behavior that is to be changed.
- They serve as guidelines for content, instruction, and evaluation.
- They identify specific behaviors or actions that should be learned.
- They communicate exactly what results need to be accomplished.

How to Write Learning Outcomes

Many trainers start with a list of questions for the learner that the training will answer. Others consider the skills and abilities that learners would need to develop to be successful in their field. An often overlooked, but important part of learning is the attitude changes that are needed for training to take hold. Many trainers want their learners to view the world or their situation differently after taking a course. To begin the process of writing learning outcomes, trainers should complete the following statements:

(Knowledge) By the end of the course, learners will be able to recall...

(Skills) By the end of the course, learners will be able to do...

(Attitudes) By the end of the course, learners will choose to...

There are a number of formats for writing clear objectives. The ABC method is one of them:

A stands for Antecedent (situation of the learner after training, but before testing)

B stands for Behavior

C stands for Criterion (standard or principle)

Choosing the most appropriate action verb is essential to identifying the knowledge, concept, rule or skill learners are expected to acquire.

Example:

(A) After our training on recommending menu items to the guests, the learner will be able to (B) summarize verbally (or in writing) at least eight special food preparations in an appetizing communication, listing examples from the menu (C) with at least 95% accuracy.

The *antecedent* (*forerunner*) then is the learning activity, the *behavior* is the skill or knowledge being demonstrated, and the *criterion* is the degree of acceptable performance.

Make the outcome specific – check for action verbs and observable conduct. Frequently the outcomes use broad, nebulous verbs such as “understand,” “learn,” and “know.” An example might be: “Learners will win a significant understanding of how to handle difficult situations with upset guests.”

There are two problems with this statement. First, the term understanding is too vague to be meaningful as a performance guide for the learners or as an assessment measure for the trainer. A more specific, action-oriented verb serves as a focus guide for learners: “Learners will be able to recall at least five questions that allow them to classify the reason why the guest is upset, and choose the two most appropriate behaviors (or actions) to soothe the guest.”

This clarifies the ambiguity for the learner who may ask: “Am I being asked to memorize this information or will I need to use this to apply it in any new situation?” Likewise, from the trainer's perspective, action-oriented verbs give direction on how the learning item will be assessed as well as taught.

Second, the statement implies that the responsibility for learning falls on the trainer while learners participate only passively. Action verbs that focus on learner performance communicate the expectation that the responsibility for learning is with the learner. Learners must be actively involved with the material to demonstrate successful completion of the outcome.

Key Questions to Ask Before Writing Learning Outcomes

Before outcome statements are written, the program planner or subject matter expert should answer key questions about who is affected, i.e., who the intended audience is. These questions can be addressed in a needs assessment. Regardless of how they are addressed, these questions are useful in the decision making about how a presentation should be tailored to the intended audience. They are a useful tool in helping trainers to stay focused on their planning and instruction.

- How much does the potential awareness level of the audience need to be raised?
- Do they need to better understand the context in which the problem/issue exists?
- What are the behaviors or habits they need to unlearn?
- What are the most essential things they need to know or be able to do?
- How strong must the justification be to allow ‘buy-in’ into the issue?
- Which specific skills or strategies do they need?
- How vital is their level of confidence with this new learning?
- What are the obstacles they face in the workplace using this new learning?
- What are the most important things they need to be able to do when they finish?

- What specific action is to be taken or behavior to be displayed?
- Which result(s) must come from their action or behavior?

The table below may help to match the desired learning outcome with an action verb. It is not an exhaustive list of verbs, but sufficient to get started in writing meaningful outcomes.

How to Fix an Unclear Outcome

Many program texts include learning outcomes, which are unclear or represent elements of a curriculum rather than some action the participants will demonstrate. Here are some examples:

Participants will understand the seven reasons for exceptional guest service.

Participants will develop an appreciation of cultural diversity in the workplace.

When asking a simple question: "Can it be measured?" it becomes clear that these learning outcomes have shortcomings. They are not assessable. The same outcomes can be modified by changing the action verbs.

Participants will list nine reasons for exceptional guest service.

Participants will summarize in writing their feelings about cultural diversity in the workplace.

Learners now have a much better idea of what is expected of them.

What is the Importance of Action Verbs?

Since the learner's performance should be observable and measurable, the verb chosen for each outcome statement

What are the Characteristics of Good Learning Outcomes?

Learning outcomes have three distinguishing characteristics.

- 1) The specified action by the learners must be observable.
- 2) The specified action by the learners must be measurable.
- 3) The specified action must be done by the learners.

The ultimate test when writing a learning outcome is whether the action taken by the participants can be assessed. If not, the outcome probably does not meet all three of the characteristics.

- Who needs to perform the desired action or behavior?

Types of Learning Outcomes	Action Terms Note that ‘understand’ and ‘discuss’ are not offered	What Learners Can Do Be careful not to test a learning outcome type that is different than the level the learners learned and practiced at
Information (= Knowledge)	STATE, define, list, name, identify, show, recall	Recall information and have them repeat it in their own words
Concepts (= Comprehension)	CLASSIFY, explain, describe, summarize, interpret, predict	Place ideas into a category of things; restate in their own words
Rules (= Application)	DEMONSTRATE, relate, determine, apply, calculate, examine, modify, discover	Engage a rule, procedure of things; move abstract ideas to practical solutions
Problem Solving (= Analysis, Synthesis, Evaluate)	GENERATE, analyze, explain, arrange, rearrange, evaluate, integrate, modify, decide, compare	Generate a solution to a problem; make decisions and support views; determine and arrange components
Cognitive Strategies (= Learning Strategies)	ADOPT, originate, create, design, plan	Adopt new ways of learning; perform a new or unique service

should be an action verb, which results in evident behavior that is observable and quantifiable.

Sample action verbs are: Compile, create, plan, revise, analyze, design, select, utilize, apply, demonstrate, prepare, use, compute, discuss, explain, predict, assess, compare, rate, critique.

Certain verbs are unclear and subject to different interpretations in terms of what action they are specifying. Such verbs call for covert behavior, which cannot be observed or measured. These types of verbs should be avoided: *know, become aware of, appreciate, learn, understand, familiarize.*

Why Spend Time Writing Specific Learning Outcomes?

Well written learning outcomes help trainers and facilitators to encourage learners to get as much as possible from the training by focusing on learning. They also help the implementation by organizing the training around specific areas of achievements. Additionally they improve the assessment of learner performance by aligning testing with what learners actually get from the training and optimize training time by focusing on the most important concepts and reducing the chances to get off track.

Well Written Learning Outcomes Help Trainers and Learners Alike

Learners take a training course for a number of different reasons: it's required, it looked interesting, it fit their schedule, it was the only one left. Specific learning outcomes make all learners aware of the expectations for learning regardless of their prior experience with the subject, the trainer or facilitator, because it clarifies what is important. This supports a continuous self-assessment of the learners, i.e. how they are doing and what they need to do to be successful in the course. When the outcomes are aligned with assessments, learners know how to study, practice, and apply concepts and spend less time guessing how to please the trainer and rise to the highest level of expectations. The best trainers have high expectations for their learners. One of the best ways

to communicate your expectations is to state them up front through your outcomes. ♣

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