



Writing Goals, Objectives, and Learning Outcomes Tip Sheet

Defining Goals, Objectives, and Learning Outcomes in Adult Education

Goal-setting in adult education can be complex.

- **Students** come to adult education with their own goals, often long-term goals like earning a secondary credential or getting a better job. They may also pursue learning for personal fulfillment, to assist or provide an example for family members, or to participate more fully in their communities.
- **Programs** have goals to meet as conditions of their funding such as assisting students to make gains on NRS-approved standardized assessments, earn credentials, enter postsecondary programs, and gain or maintain employment.
- **Teachers** have course goals related to the subject matter, content, and skills covered in their particular courses. These are often drawn from [state-adopted standards](#) and also include “soft” and [workforce-readiness skills](#). Because adult learners have especially varied backgrounds and skill profiles, teachers also design their instruction around information gained from student placement tests and other learner interest and needs assessments.

Ideally, all online course goals, objectives, and outcomes are to be identified and shared with students before beginning a course. Unfortunately, variable course enrollment policies or a lack of student assessment data during course planning may make this less feasible. Therefore, broad course goals that clearly relate to both program goals and anticipated student goals should at the very least be communicated to students at the point of intake or at the start of the course.

Learning objectives and outcomes that relate to specific units, lessons, or activities may be added as a course progresses. It is important that this information be shared with students as early as possible and always in advance of the course assignments to which they relate. Teachers (or other program staff such as career counselors) may incorporate activities to help students see the connection between personal and course goals, set achievable short-term goals, and reflect on their progress toward their goals.

Understanding how course goals relate to their own personal goals and being able to see clear progress toward their goals boosts students' motivation and persistence, so it is important to communicate goals and outcomes clearly.

The following definitions may be useful:

- **Learning Goals:** A goal is a broad statement about what students should learn by the end of the course.
- **Learning Objectives:** Objectives are typically more defined statements about intended knowledge gained; often specific to a unit, lesson, or activity.
- **Learning Outcomes:** Outcomes are measurable statements about what students should know.

Tips for Writing Goals, Objectives, and Learning Outcomes

Backward Design:

Backward design can be an effective method for course design. It consists of the following three steps:

1. **Identify the Expected Results.** This step involves developing learning outcomes or specifying what students should be expected to be able to do at the end of the period of learning.
2. **Determine Acceptable Evidence.** This step involves determining how learning will be measured by deciding on appropriate formative and summative assessments for the learning outcomes.
3. **Plan Instruction and Learning Activities.** This step refers to developing and/or selecting the materials and tasks that will allow students to build their knowledge and skills and to provide evidence of having achieved the learning outcomes.

Backward design begins with the desired learning outcomes and develops the rest of the course based on those intended outcomes. For more information on backward design, explore the following resources:

[Course Planning with Backward Design](#), an excerpt from a self-paced course on teaching online developed by UC Davis. It explains how to use the concept of backward design to plan, develop, and teach an online course.

[Backward Design for PBL](#): During this presentation, the speaker presents the steps for designing a project using backward design. The same steps can be applied to course design as well. In addition, [this is the article](#) that the presenter references.

Learning Goals:

Goals are the broad, overarching learning outcomes for the course as a whole rather than a specific week, lesson, or activity. Goals can be shared with learners at the beginning of a course to create a roadmap for the instruction and learning that will take place. Goals should:

- Reflect what you want students to know and understand.
- Be broad.

- Reflect [essential questions](#) for your course and/or program.

Learning Outcomes & Objectives:

The terms learning outcomes and learning objectives are often used interchangeably; however, objectives often refers to lesson or activity goals written from an instructor's perspective while learning outcomes are written from the student perspective. When identifying objectives or learning outcomes:

- Write in language that is understandable for students. (Learning outcomes often begin with "I can ..." or "Students will be able to ..." statements.)
- Emphasize higher-order thinking.
- Specify skills and knowledge that students must demonstrate to prove their mastery.
- Ensure outcomes/objectives are aligned to program outcomes and standards.
- Ensure outcomes/objectives are attainable for learners within the timeframe of the course.
- Ensure outcomes/objectives are flexible enough to accommodate various forms of assessment. See the [UDL Tip Sheet](#) for more information.

Resources for Goals, Objectives, and Learning Outcomes

[Course Objectives & Learning Outcomes](#): This section of a course design teacher guide from DePaul University defines and explains the differences between learning outcomes, objectives, and goals. It gives examples of common learning outcome problems and solutions as well as key verbs corresponding to different Bloom's Taxonomy levels.

[What is the Difference Between Course Objectives & Learning Outcomes?](#): This resource clarifies the potential confusion between learning outcomes, objectives, and goals and provides examples of each. While the examples provided are designed for the postsecondary context, they provide helpful model language with a focus on making outcomes clear, measurable, and observable.

[Course Goals vs. Learning Objectives](#): This module from Emmanuel College's "Blended Learning Essentials" course outlines tips for writing course goals and learning objectives. It also provides examples of each and how they connect to each other. This resource is presented from a postsecondary perspective but also includes valuable examples of civics and critical thinking goals that are applicable to adult education.