

Teaching and learning at St George’s with a blended learning approach:

Crafting learning outcomes FOR INDIVIDUAL SESSIONS AND SHORTER ‘CHUNKS’ OF LEARNING WITHIN A MODULE OR UNIT OF STUDY

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**OVERVIEW & AIMS**

Learning outcomes (LOs) are statements of the knowledge, skills and/or abilities that a learner should be able to demonstrate by the end of a course, module or particular teaching and learning session. LOs are a key component of a learner-centred approach to education because the main focus is on what students will be able to do by the end of a block of study, and all learning activity and assessment are designed with these LOs in mind.

All curriculum design within the UK Higher Education sector follows an outcomes-based approach so that every programme and module within that programme is planned and expressed with reference to a system of interrelated LOs that span different levels of learning (QAA, 2014). It is also considered good practice to craft and communicate LOs for individual sessions or ‘chunks’ of learning. These session LOs are especially useful when teaching online because they convey the focus of learning clearly and concisely. They should align with programme or module LOs so that students can contextualise the activity within their course.

This guide outlines the basic principles underpinning the design and development of LOs. with a focus on designing individual ‘chunks’ of learning or sessions. In addition to providing clarity to students, well-written LOs provide a useful tool for planning your teaching along with any linked formative or summative assessment.

**THE BASICS**

**Context**

1. Make sure that the LOs for your teaching session align with the LOs for the module of study, which in turn should reflect the level of learning, e.g. first year undergraduate (level 4) or post-graduate (level 7). They should be linked to the course content.
2. Ensure that your LOs are achievable within the time allocated to the activity you are planning. There is no optimal number of LOs per session. Your choice will most likely depend on the difficulty of the desired learning: you might identify a larger number of LOs if they are easy to achieve and assess, and fewer for more complex learning.
3. Remember that LOs provide a framework for designing learning activity and any linked assessment. So, for example, if you have four learning outcomes, you might divide learning activity into four sections, each addressing a single LO, and devise exercises that enable students to progress through each outcome and complete formative assessment activities to test their learning as they go along. The series of LOs might move from simple to more complex, or require students to build their learning step-by-step. Avoid including a LO if its achievement can’t be demonstrated.
4. Make sure that the LOs are available to students at the beginning of each block of study so that they have a clear understanding of what is expected of them e.g. writing the LOs on your session page in Canvas as highlighted in the [Canvas session template](https://canvas.sgul.ac.uk/courses/36/pages/canvas-session-page#Session%20page%20example%201) or at the beginning of your presentation slides. You might also refer students back to the LOs at the end of the session so they can assess or consolidate their own learning, perhaps through paired discussion or a quiz.

**WRITING LEARNING OUTCOMES**

1. LOs should be prefaced with a statement in the future tense that introduces the threshold of learning that students should achieve by the end of the period of study, for example: ‘*On successful completion of this session you should be able to…’*
2. A well-written LO contains the following three elements:

* An active verb that indicates specifically what you want your students to know or do (for example, identify, define, classify, apply, or analyse).
* Information about the object of learning
* Information about the context for the demonstration of learning

*Example 1: List the key principles of informed consent for treatment of both adults and children.*

*Example 2: Explain how microbial metabolism is important to bioremediation.*

1. The instruction to select an active verb ensures that student learning can be demonstrated. Verbs such as ‘list’, ‘apply’ or ‘contrast’ convey learning behaviours that can be observed and measured. Make sure you avoid verbs or verb phrases that can’t be measured, such as ‘understand’ or ‘be familiar with’.

1. The active verb/s you choose for your LO also indicates the level of complexity of the task. For example, requiring students to ‘name’ or ‘list’ something most likely involves simple recall, whereas requiring students to ‘summarise’ or ‘evaluate’ something demands a higher order of learning. There are numerous guides available on-line that list verbs by learning level based on Bloom’s taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). This [PDF from UTICA college](https://www.utica.edu/academic/Assessment/new/Blooms%20Taxonomy%20-%20Best.pdf) website includes some useful recommendations on types of questions and assessment that might be linked to particular active verbs.
2. You can test the effectiveness of your LOs and their usefulness for learning by addressing the following questions:
   * + Are my LOs observable and measurable? That is, will I and/or my students be able to discern when each of the LOs has been achieved?
     + Have I expressed each LO as clearly and simply as possible? Remember that LOs should be written for students to understand so you should keep their perspective in mind. Aim for concise sentences and strip out any superfluous content or terminology using the rubric above. Generally, aim to use just one active verb, or maybe two if you want your students to complete two tasks relating to the same object and context, such as ‘Identify and test…’ If your LO is too complicated, consider splitting it up into two LOs or more.
     + Will the related task/s and formative or summative assessments enable students to achieve and demonstrate the LOs? Make sure your LOs are aligned to activity and assessment.
3. You may not get LOs right the first time. Be prepared to evaluate them and re-craft them as well as the session learning activities to optimise desired student learning.

**BEYOND THE SESSION LEVEL**

When designing course or module LOs, make sure you use the national and institutional reference points so that the LOs correspond with the appropriate learning level. LOs should be informed by the framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ), national subject benchmarks, professional accreditation requirements and the QAA code of practice as well as the discipline-specific frameworks. Another useful reference is the [Credit Level Descriptors for Higher Education (2021)](https://seec.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/SEEC-Credit-Level-Descriptors-2021.pdf). LOs should also reflect and support the current strategic priorities of the university, including enhancing student engagement; widening participation; and supporting students with different learning needs.

Well-designed LOs help to explicitly and directly address expectations for student learning and set clear standards by which the success of the course/module can be evaluated. Monitoring, moderation and evaluation of LOs through assessment processes provide the assurance that internal quality processes are rigorous.

**REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES**

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