Learning Outcomes

Background
Clearly defined outcomes form the basis for selecting appropriate content, learning activities, and assessment measures. For the OIPP, outcomes will also support the beginning and end of our e-learning framework, which will encompass not only the outcomes, but also the activities and assessment that you’ll create to ensure that students achieve your goals for them.

What is a learning outcome?
A stated learning outcome answers the question: What is it that your students should be able to do at the end of the course that they could not do before?

A learning outcome makes clear the intended result of the learning rather than what form the instruction will take. A good learning outcome states what a student will know or be able to do at the end of instruction. It focuses on student performance.

Benefits of using learning outcomes
For students:
Learning outcomes focus on the learner. Well-written learning outcomes should give students precise statements of what is expected of them. Students can use the outcomes to measure and guide their own learning, and determine how much support to ask for/pursue.

For instructors:
Learning outcomes also govern other processes that are part of instruction. Outcomes help in the planning instruction: they help break down the syllabus and the teaching process so that instructors select meaningful content/materials and activities to aid the meeting of an outcome; they help facilitate assessment and evaluation; and they (should) align a course with a program and curriculum, i.e., a set of course-level outcomes should nest within program outcomes.

Writing learning outcomes
How do I write an outcome?
First, think about one module or topic in the course you have proposed. What would you like for each student to be able to do when he/she has completed that module? Working from that module or topic, write a specific statement describing what you want your students to have achieved as a result of completing the activities prescribed. That achievement should be observable to you.
You can create learning outcomes and exam questions that activate and assess varying levels of student thinking skills, including:

- Knowledge
- Comprehension
- Application
- Analysis
- Synthesis
- Evaluation
- Creation

What are the characteristics of good learning outcomes?

Key characteristics of learning outcomes include:

1. The intended achievement for the learners must be meaningful.
2. The intended achievement for the learners must be measurable.
3. The outcome should speak to the quality standards established for the OIPP.

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

How many learning outcomes should there be?

There should be as many outcomes as needed to clearly reflect what students will learn from the course. Typically, an undergraduate UC course may have 3-5 overarching, student-centered learning outcomes. Each major course topic may have 1-3 (sub-) learning outcomes.

Tips for writing learning outcomes

- Use action verbs (e.g., demonstrate, perform, write, recite, list, explain, etc.). Visit this page for a list of suggested verbs (http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/assess/Step2/7_BloomsTaxonomy.html)
- Address them directly to the student: “You”
- Keep them short
- Write a clear, lead-in statement (e.g., “In this course, you will apply the concept...”, “By the end of this course, you will have designed....”)

Sample learning outcomes

Example of weaker/stronger outcome

- Weaker learning outcome:
  Students will be happy with their UC experience.
- Stronger learning outcome:
The number of students that report being “very satisfied” with their UC experience will increase.

Learn more

References
Two websites that spell out the importance of learning outcomes and explain how to write them:
- USC’s office of Student Affairs: http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/assess/Step2.html
- University of Texas’ Instructional Assessment Resource:
  http://www.utexas.edu/academic/ctl/assessment/iar/students/plan/steps/