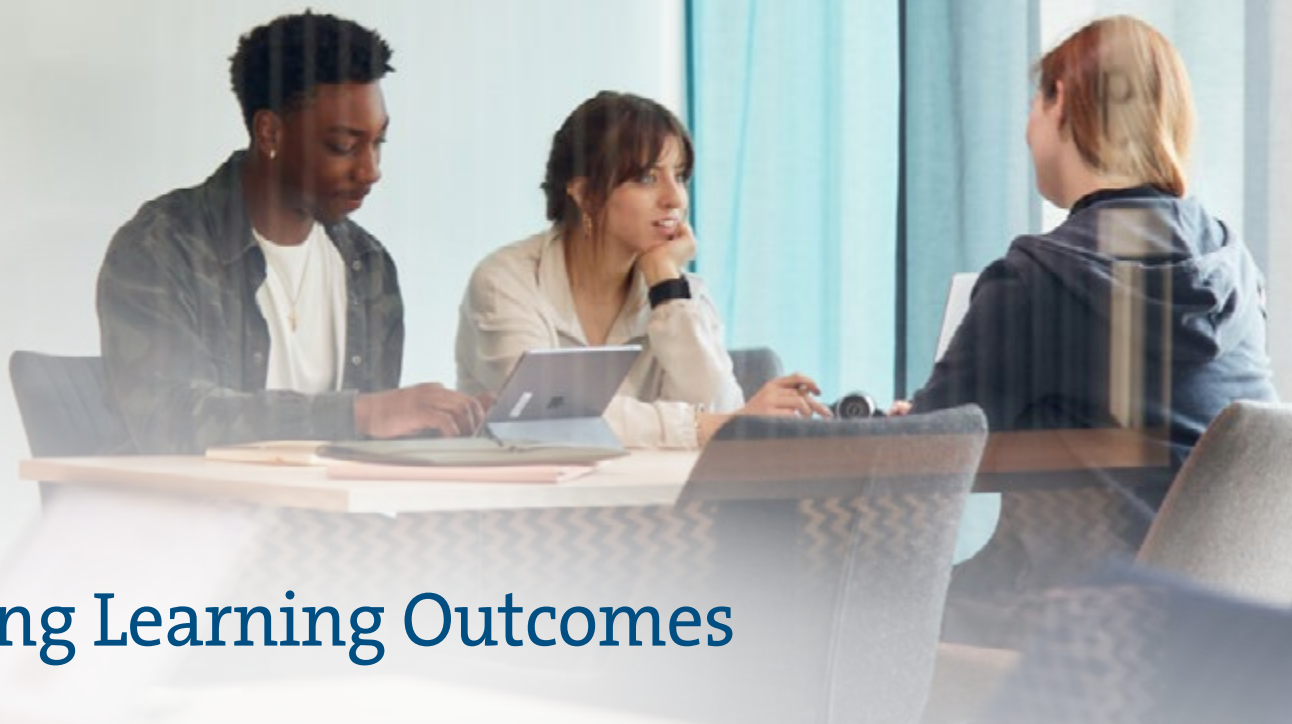




**UNIVERSITY  
OF LONDON**

**CENTRE FOR ONLINE &  
DISTANCE EDUCATION**



# Writing Learning Outcomes

## What are learning outcomes?

Learning outcomes explain, in words which are clear and concise, what students should be able to do when they have completed a programme, unit of study, or topic. They help students to understand the purpose of the programme, unit of study, or topic, and to decide whether to study it. They also help employers to understand what a successful student has learned.

## The Quality Assurance Agency's Subject Benchmark Statements and the Office for Students

Learning outcomes should be informed both by the QAA's Subject Benchmark Statement for your subject (which may be found here: [bit.ly/qaa-subject-benchmark](https://bit.ly/qaa-subject-benchmark)) and by the requirements of the Office for Students (which may be found here: [bit.ly/ofs-quality-standards](https://bit.ly/ofs-quality-standards)).

In some cases, the Subject Benchmark Statement indicates only the threshold standards at level 6 (Bachelor's degree), the minimum standards which a graduate should have achieved. Others may also describe typical and/or excellent standards of attainment at level 6, and/or threshold standards for level 7 (Master's degree).

Although the lists of benchmark standards vary considerably in length between subjects, in most cases the list provided is intended only to provide typical learning outcomes for programmes in that subject area. There is no expectation that a single degree programme should attempt to include all of them.

## How are the learning outcomes at programme, course/module and topic level related?

The programme learning outcomes provide an over-arching description of what a graduate of the programme should be able to do.

Each unit of study should have versions of the programme learning outcomes which relate specifically to that unit of study. Do bear in mind, however, that it is not necessary to cover every programme learning outcome in every unit of study.

The learning outcomes for the unit of study are then broken down into topic learning outcomes. Again, it is not necessary to cover every learning outcome for a unit of study in every topic.

**So, for example, if the learning outcomes for a Divinity programme include the following:**

- Conduct a detailed critical analysis of texts, events, doctrines, theories and arguments;

**Then a version for a unit of study in Philosophy of Religion might look like this:**

- Conduct a detailed critical analysis of key arguments in the Philosophy of Religion;

**And a cosmological argument topic version might be as follows:**

- Conduct a detailed critical analysis of at least two versions of the cosmological argument for the existence of God.

All of the programme learning outcomes should be reflected in the sum of a programme's units of study. If some units of study are optional, a student who completes any permitted version of the programme should still have demonstrated all of the programme learning outcomes. Units of study should not contain learning outcomes which do not fit into the overarching structure provided by the programme learning outcomes.

The same applies at the topic level. At least one of the learning outcomes for a unit of study should apply at the topic level. A student who has studied the minimum possible number of topics of a unit of study should have demonstrated all the learning outcomes for the unit of study. Topics should not include learning outcomes which are not encompassed by the learning outcomes for the unit of study.

## SMART learning outcomes

Each learning outcome should be SMART – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound. This should enable students to demonstrate that they have achieved the learning outcome using available resources and within a given time-period.

For example, achievement of a learning outcome such as 'Explain the relationship between A and B', can be demonstrated if the student is able to give a clear, accurate and insightful account of the relationship between A and B using available resources and by a given deadline. By contrast, achievement of a learning outcome such as 'Appreciate the beauty of X' would be difficult to demonstrate. How could we know whether, or to what extent, the student appreciates the beauty of X? What could they do which would show this?

## Should the acquisition of knowledge be reflected in learning outcomes?

Ideally, learning outcomes should not refer to knowledge which can be acquired by means of a Google search, or AI. In all subjects, although perhaps to varying degrees, students need to attain a knowledge base, but the ability to apply or process the knowledge is more important. For example, although a medical practitioner might be able to acquire some knowledge of diseases of the eye online, this knowledge will be of little use if they are unable to use it to identify a patient's disease and treat it. It is for this reason that learning outcomes are best defined as things which students should be able to do, rather than what they can remember.

The acquisition of knowledge may be assumed in learning outcomes which require the student to, for example:

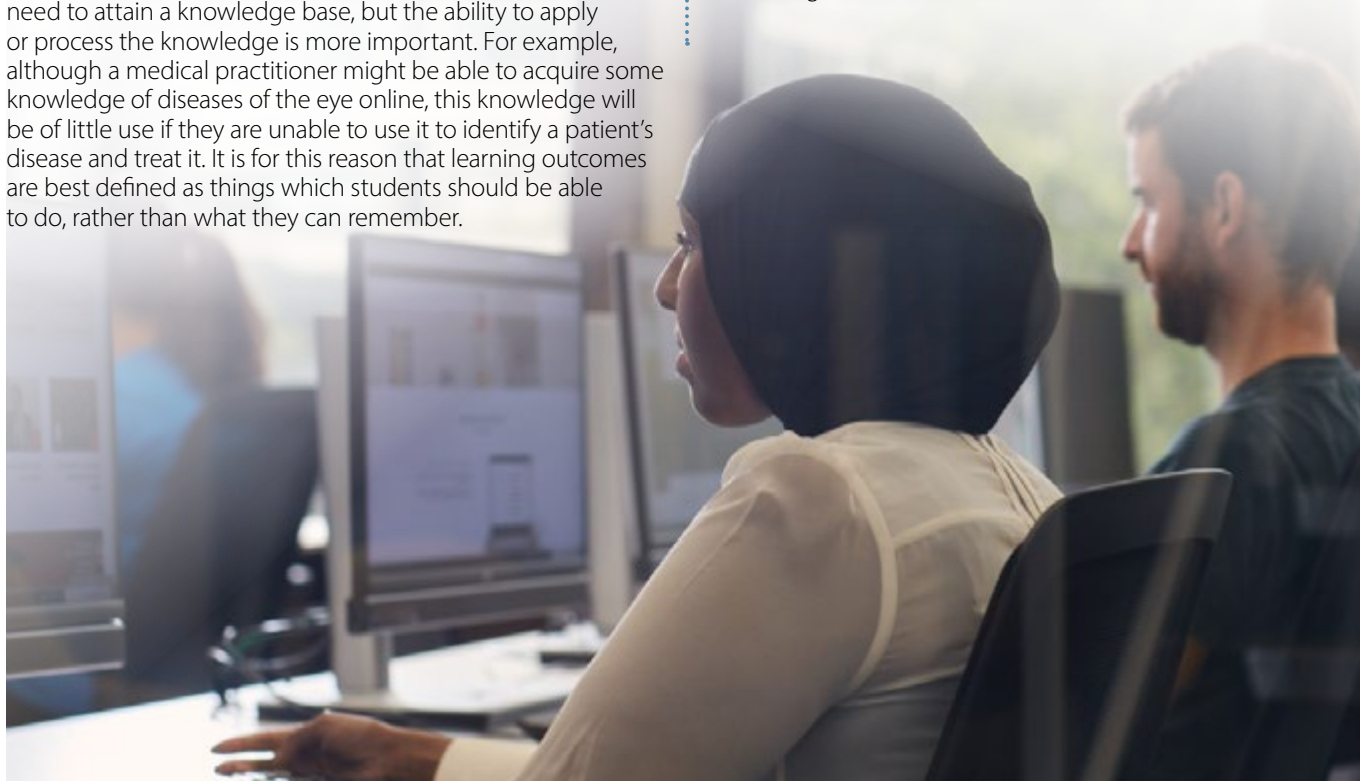
- Compare A with B
- Weigh up the relative merits of X and Y
- Demonstrate the importance of specified knowledge in a practical situation
- Analyse an argument
- Construct a better argument
- Create a new theory and test it
- Find a solution to a problem
- Show why one solution is better than another.

Notice how all of these learning outcomes use active verbs as action words to specify the expected outcome – e.g. 'compare', 'demonstrate', 'construct', 'create'.

## The relationship between learning outcomes and assessment

Every learning outcome at the programme and unit of study level should be summatively assessed. So, every student who has completed the programme should have been summatively assessed in all of the programme learning outcomes, and every student who has completed a unit of study should have been summatively assessed in all of that unit's learning outcomes. Since, in many cases, students do not have to master every topic of a unit of study in order to pass it, however, it is not necessary for them to be summatively assessed in every topic.

There should be a clear link between the learning outcomes and the assessment criteria. For example, if a learning outcome is that a student will be able to explain the relationship between A and B, the related assessment criterion should enable the assessor to describe the quality of the student's explanation in terms which are associated with one of the available grade bands.



# Action words

Use the words in this table to help you write your learning outcomes. They are grouped in columns, each of which is based on a cognitive level from a revised version of Bloom's Taxonomy ([bit.ly/blooms-taxonomy-education](https://bit.ly/blooms-taxonomy-education)). Note that, in some cases, the categorisation might be a matter for debate.

Know	Understand	Apply	Analyse	Evaluate	Create
Articulate	Demonstrate	Adapt	Analyse	Appraise	Anticipate
Cite	Diagram	Administer	Appraise	Argue	Assemble
Define	Explain	Apply	Arrange	Assess	Collaborate
Describe	Give examples	Calculate	Break down	Choose	Collect
Enumerate	Outline	Change	Calculate	Conclude	Combine
Identify	Paraphrase	Chart	Categorise	Consider	Compile
Indicate	Retell (in your own words)	Choose	Classify	Criticise	Compose
Label	Select	Collect	Compare	Critique	Construct
List	Show	Complete	Connect	Debate	Create
Locate	Sketch	Compute	Contrast	Decide	Design
Match	Summarise	Convert	Correlate	Defend	Develop
Name	Trace	Determine	Criticise	Discuss	Develop a hypothesis
Record	Translate	Dramatize	Deduce	Examine	Devise
Relate		Employ	Differentiate	Evaluate	Estimate
Report		Establish	Discriminate	Find errors	Facilitate
Reproduce		Illustrate	Dissect	Grade	Formulate
Research		Interpret	Distinguish	Judge	Invent
Restate		Interview	Divide	Justify	Make
State		Manipulate	Experiment	Persuade	Manage
Survey		Modify	Group	Rate	Modify
Tabulate		Operate	Integrate	Recommend	Negotiate
		Paint	Measure	Review	Organise
		Predict	Order	Score	Plan
		Prepare	Prioritise	Select	Prepare
		Teach	Question	Solve	Produce
		Use	Rank	Support	Propose
			Reframe	Test	Rearrange
			Separate	Weigh	Reorganise
			Subdivide		Rewrite
					Role-play
					Substitute
					Transform
					Write