GRADE SMARTER, NOT HARDER
Building Rubrics from Programmatic Outcomes

September OWI Symposium (owicommunity.org)
Allegra W. Smith, Purdue University • smit2632@purdue.edu • @argella • allegra-w-smith.com

---

❶ GENERATE PROGRAM/COURSE OUTCOMES

You may already have a set of pre-determined learning outcomes for your courses. If not, creating outcomes is an important step to determine what students will be able to do as a result of successfully completing the course, as well as how to assess those students' progress. Even if your department or program has established outcomes, you might want to create a separate set of outcomes for the course(s) you're teaching—to specify the course-level goals for your specific section(s) or approach(es).

Learning outcomes should be measurable, clear, and explicit. Using specific action verbs linked with learning (like those in Bloom's Taxonomy—see resources below) can help communicate these goals. Typically they include a process (verb) + information (books, articles, data, evidence, other inputs) + why ("in order to"). Examples from our 100-level introductory composition course at Purdue include…

- Demonstrate rhetorical awareness of diverse audiences, situations, and contexts
- Compose a variety of text in a range of forms, equaling at least 7500–11,500 words of polished writing
- Critically think about writing and rhetoric through reading, analysis, and reflection
- Provide constructive feedback to others and incorporate feedback into their writing
- Perform research and evaluate sources to support claims
- Engage multiple digital technologies to compose for different purposes

❷ CONVERT PROGRAM OUTCOMES INTO ASSIGNMENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Learning objectives are the smaller pieces that, when put together, form a pathway that will help students achieve a course-level learning outcome. To design objectives, think of parts of or steps to completing a larger outcome. These are a set of course-level learning outcomes for a technical writing class, and assignment-level learning objectives for an assignment in that class that asks students to create an instruction set.

Sample Program Learning Outcome	Sample Assignment Learning Objective
LO1: Use technical writing theories and approaches to analyze and solve problems individually and in teams	**OBJ1**: Respond to colleagues' work by providing specific, targeted feedback on writing and design
LO2: Communicate complex technical information, processes, and procedures via a variety of media, genres, technologies, and presentations to a range of audiences and stakeholders	**OBJ2**: Use desktop publishing software to create a layout that is informed by document design principles
LO3: Adapt written genre conventions and expectations to both technical and non-technical audiences with changing organizational needs	**OBJ3**: Recognize and articulate the features of an instruction set
LO4: Apply primary and secondary research methods and strategies to produce technical documents	**OBJ4**: Practice user-testing techniques to assess documentation and revise writing and design accordingly
LO5: Demonstrate awareness of both the technical and human needs of users, paying special attention to accessibility, cultural diversity, and global sensitivity	**OBJ5**: Apply concepts of user-centered design to create instructions for a specific target population

❸ CREATE RUBRIC CRITERIA FROM OBJECTIVES

Use the objectives that you've created to draft rubric criteria that you'll use to grade assignment submissions. You can create multiple criteria for a single objective, depending on its importance to the assignment and to the course. These criteria can be transformed into analytic or single-point rubrics, depending on how you prefer to grade. Here are two sample analytic rubric criteria for OBJ5 in the previous section:

	Proficient (10–8)	Competent (7–5)	Novice (4–0)
Style	The documentation is written in an engaging style that is appropriate for its audience(s). The tone is well-considered. The author has used plain language to communicate instructions.	The documentation is written in a style that's somewhat appropriate for its audience(s), though the tone could use some finessing. The author has generally used plain language to communicate instructions.	The documentation is not written in an engaging style, or the tone is not appropriate for the audience(s). The author has not used plain language to communicate instructions: there may be too much jargon, or the tone may be too formal or colloquial.
Visual Design Principles & Usability	Documentation is designed with a focus on readability. Textual and graphical clues guide the user's reading experience. The document exhibits attention to various principles of design (CRAP, HATS, etc.). Images are used to illustrate steps and are positioned and labeled appropriately.	Documentation is generally readable, though it may disproportionately privilege one form of information over another. Textual and graphical clues typically guide the user's reading experience. The document exhibits attention to design principles, but may neglect one or two. Images are usually used to illustrate steps and are positioned and labeled appropriately.	Author does not make balanced use of text, graphics, images, and formatting. Principles of readability and design are neglected, and it's unclear how the reader should move through the documentation. Visual and textual clues are not given. Images are either not given to guide the user's work, or are missing labels and/or positioned illogically.

❹ IMPORT RUBRIC INTO LMS AND LINK WITH ASSIGNMENT

Learning Management Systems (LMS) like Blackboard and Canvas have functions that enable you to create/import rubrics and link them with course assignments. I recommend drafting rubrics in Word or Google Docs and then pasting them into your institution's LMS, rather than creating them in the LMS themselves. If you move schools, or if your school changes platforms (as mine did this summer!), you'll have all your rubrics saved already, instead of having to spend time exporting or copying and pasting them from the LMS.

❺ LEARN MORE

Council of Writing Program Administrators (2019). WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (3.0), Approved July 17, 2014.

Frink. J.S. (n.d.). Writing Learning Outcomes: Meeting QM Essential Standards 2.1-2.5.

Introductory Composition at Purdue (ICaP). (2020). Outcomes.

Quality Matters. (2018). Making Your Course Better Through Measurable Objectives.

Shabatura, J. (2013). "Using Bloom's Taxonomy to Write Effective Learning Objectives."