



Writing Course Objectives and Outcomes

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Background and Purpose

Curriculum design is a meticulous process that requires instructors to make many decisions about the knowledge and skills that will be central to the course. In conceptualizing the course content, instructors are challenged to identify not only discrete information, but to identify the kinds of thinking and procedures that will be targeted for mastery.¹²This means that curriculum designers must be attentive to how students will be assessed and which types of formative and summative assessments are appropriate for the course. It also challenges instructors to envision an appropriate scope and sequence of the course in order to ensure that the knowledge and skills targeted in the course will be delivered and assessed effectively.

The purpose of writing course outcomes is to clarify the specific knowledge and skills students will acquire as a result of their studies in the course. These outcomes are different from the course objectives. While course objectives describe the general purpose of the course, the outcomes identify not only what knowledge and which skills will be addressed, but *how* students will actually demonstrate their learning. In stating course outcomes, the instructor is explicit about the discrete components of the course and provides students with a clear picture of how their learning will be assessed.

Outcomes are characterized by two key elements. First, they contain a verb that describes what students will do with knowledge or skills that clearly demonstrates their proficiency. Outcomes, for example, might state that students will “identify,” “compare and contrast,” “explain,” ‘demonstrate,’ or “compose” something. In this manner, outcomes are the foundation of assessments.³ Second, outcomes embody the level of cognition required to meet the learning objectives. An outcome, for instance, might require students to simply recall information, which is a relatively simple process when compared to the cognitive task of generating and defending an original thesis.

Examples of Course Objectives and Outcomes

HIST 345: The History of the Cold War

Course Objective

The purpose of this course is to acquaint students with the origins, major events, and consequences of the Cold War as to improve students’ understanding of the present, and to improve historiographical and critical thinking skills.

¹ Wiggins, Grant P. and McTighe, Jay. (2005) *Understanding by Design*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision Curriculum and Development

² Richlin, Laurie, (2006). *Blueprint for Learning: Constructing College Courses to Facilitate, Assess and Document Learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

³ Tyler, Ralph. (1949) *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago press.

Course Outcomes

1. Students will trace the chronology of events that led to the Cold War, develop a Cold War chronology, and describe the Cold War's impact on the present in general
2. Students will compare and contrast capitalism and communism and identify the potential merits and detriments of each
3. Students will identify the major events of the space race and arms race during the Cold War and describe the causes, effects, and describe the impact of each on the world at present
4. Students will chronicle the development of Communism in China and describe the evolution of Chinese Communism as expressed in Sino-Soviet relations, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms
5. Students will describe the activities of dissidents, and role, and impact of dissidence as expressed by people behind the Iron curtain, in the West and in developing nations
6. Students will compare and contrast decolonization processes in Algeria, Congo, Mozambique, and Indochina, describe causes and effects, and describe how those processes shaped present conditions in Africa
7. Students will describe the non-alignment movement, compare and contrast how India and Indonesia applied the principles, and evaluate their outcomes
8. Students will identify the liberation movements in Latin America during the Cold War, identify the causes, compare and contrast these movements with other liberation movements prior to and during the Cold War, and identify the philosophical, economic, and legal issues at stake in these movements
9. Students will develop a chronology of events in the Middle East, describe the interests of all who had a stake in these events, and explain how Cold War events contributed to the current state of affairs in the Middle East and what might have been done differently in the past to avoid conflict
10. Students will trace the development of Détente, identify its achievements, and explain its failure
11. Students will develop and compose a thesis addressing the matter of which world leader(s) deserve the most credit for ending of the Cold War
12. Students will compose an essay that illuminates the common interests and patterns of behavior exhibited by the US and the USSR during the Cold War and comment on the significance of findings
13. Students will conduct a content analysis of editorials that appeared in American mainstream printed news media (such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *the Washington Post*) that addressed a major event (such as the Vietnam War, the development of the hydrogen bomb, or the construction of the Berlin Wall) and report what the editorial reveal about American values and political attitudes of the time
14. Students will read and analyze primary sources, such as *The Long Telegram*, *Stalin's Two Camp Speech*, *The Protocol of Proceedings at the Crimea Conference (Yalta Agreements)*, *Afro-Asian Solidarity and the World Mission of the Peoples of Africa and Asia, 1957* (Anwar el Sadat), and the *Vietnamese Declaration of Independence* and identify the document's purpose, accuracy of assertions, perspective, and impact on Cold War events
15. Students will compose an essay describing the differences between the traditional and revisionist perspectives of the Cold War and provide scholarly evidence to support their claims

Special Attention to the Alignment of the Objectives and Outcomes

In the example of *The History of the Cold War*, the alignment between the objectives and the outcomes are manifest in several ways. In the table below, the course objective has been organized into discrete elements and the numbers of the outcomes identified in the example above are placed beside each element.

Table 1: Alignment of the History of the Cold War Course objectives and Outcomes

Elements of Course Objective	Number of Outcome
Acquaint students with origins of the Cold War	1, 2
Identify major events of the Cold War	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Identify the consequences of the Cold War	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Improve understanding of present	1, 3, 6, 9
Improve historiographical skills	11, 12, 13, 14, 15
Improve critical thinking skills	2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15

Special Attention to Discrete Thinking Skills

Notice in Table 1 that there are many outcomes aligned with the course objectives concerning historiographical and critical thinking skills. How does the instructor justify this?

The answer lies in the way the instructor has determined how students will use information and demonstrate their learning. Most of the course objectives assert that students will be identifying things, which itself is not a rigorous exercise of historiography and critical thinking. When located on the Bloom's Taxonomy of learning outcomes, for instance, identifying things is described as "knowing" or "remembering," which does not require the individual to engage in complex cognitive tasks.⁴

As the instructor wants to improve historiographical and critical thinking skills, the instructor must require students to perform certain cognitive tasks that are commensurate with such skills. A historian, for instance, must be adept at determining which sources to use to understand which events, discerning the credibility and reliability of sources, assessing the relevance of assertions or documents, understanding the context in which the assertions or documents emerged, understanding the function, purpose, and significance of the assertions or documents, and understanding the broadest scope of perspectives on a given event.

Since historiography involves critical thinking skills, the instructor integrated cognitive tasks that are found at the upper level of Bloom's Taxonomy, (Table 2). The outcomes that call for students to "identify the causes," for instance, engage students in analysis; the outcome that call for students to determine which leaders had the most impact on the end of the Cold War engages students in evaluation.

⁴ L. W. Anderson, D. R. Krathwohl, Peter W. Airasian, Kathleen A. Cruikshank, Richard E. Mayer, Paul R. Pintrich, James Raths, and Merlin C. Wittrock (eds) (2000) *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* Allyn and Bacon.

Table 2: Bloom's Taxonomy with The History of Cold War Outcomes⁵

Level of Taxonomy	Example of Cold War Course Outcome
One: Knowledge: Concerns recalling facts, identifying categories, organizing events, knowing theory/procedures	#3: Identify the major events of the space race and arms race
Two: Comprehension: Concerns ability to describe, compare and contrast, interpret, translate, and explain	#6: Compare and contrast decolonization processes in Algeria, Congo, Mozambique, and Indochina,
Three: Application: Concerns the ability to use a given process to approach a new problem, use technique to accomplish a task, or use methodologies to conduct a study	#13: Conduct a content analysis of mainstream editorials
Four: Analysis: Concerns identifying causes, detecting relationships, detecting organization or philosophical elements embedded in assertions, discerning relevance and accuracy of claims, detecting implications and inferences	#8: Identify the causes of liberation movements in Latin America
Five: Synthesis: Concerns merging information and merging of procedures to create a new plan, process, product, theory or idea	#9: Explain how Cold War events contributed to current conflict in the Middle East and what might have been done differently in the past to avoid conflict
Six: Evaluation: Concerns assessment and making judgments based on criteria including those representing professional standards, principles, ethical codes, and laws	#11: Students will develop and compose a thesis on the matter of who deserves more credit for ending the Cold War

Some Considerations for Writing Course Objectives

1. What is the overarching purpose of the course?
2. What obligations does the course have relative to its place in the program; for example: is this course required to ensure students understand ideas or have skills that are required by an external agency, such as a state licensure office?
3. Where does the course fit into the curricula of the program and what elements should be reviewed and augmented?

Some Considerations for Writing Course Outcomes

1. What is the level of the course and what kinds of writing, procedural, and thinking skills ought to be integrated into course work?
2. What types of assessments will best target the discrete knowledge and skills in the course and what alternatives might also be appropriate?
3. What forms of content delivery, instruction, and assessment are most likely to engage students and be universally accessible?
4. What is the appropriate scope of content and is the number of course outcomes likely to allow sufficient time for students to reflect on their work, receive formative assessments, revise their work, and address the ways the course content relates to their lives and future professions?
5. Are the outcomes fully aligned with the course objective?

⁵ Ibid.