

# Learning objectives FAQ

## WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

A list of common questions from instructors regarding learning objectives and best-practice answers from the [Center for Excellence in Teaching](http://cet.usc.edu/).

## HOW DO I USE IT?

When working on course learning objectives, find answers to your questions by reviewing the document. For assistance, [contact CET](http://cet.usc.edu/).

### How many learning objectives should I have?

A university course typically has 3-8 learning objectives. However, there is no set number of learning objectives required per unit or considered better or worse. The number of course learning objectives will vary greatly depending on what is being taught and assessed. Sometimes a course needs several learning objectives because many lower-level skills are taught and assessed, such as with introductory courses and freshmen courses. Other times, a course needs very few, yet much more challenging, learning objectives because students, such as graduate students, may be taught and assessed on higher-level skills.

### Should learning objectives all be at the same skill level?

Typically, a course will include a range of learning objectives reflecting different skill levels. This is because it’s natural for students to be taught and assessed on both lower-level and higher-level skills. In an introductory, freshmen, undergraduate, or prerequisite course, learning objectives should reflect more lower-level skills because novices may not be ready for higher-level ones. Similarly, in upper undergraduate and graduate courses, learning objectives should reflect more higher-level skills because students are no longer novices. However, even advanced courses may still include a few lower-level skills.

### Are learning objectives for advanced skills “better”?

There is no such thing as “better” in this case. Learning objectives for higher-level skills are not better or worse than learning objectives for lower-level skills. Learning objectives are best when they accurately reflect what students will be able to do by the end of the course, what they are actually taught and assessed on. It would go against best practice to include learning objectives for any skills, no matter the level, that are not taught and assessed.

### Why do I need learning objectives if students don’t even look at the syllabus?

A course cannot be properly designed without learning objectives. They are the necessary blueprint of a course. Learning objectives are not trivial statements merely included for the goal of hoping students will read them, or to comply with paperwork for course approval.

Ideally, students use the syllabus because the syllabus is useful. A properly designed syllabus is a course resource constantly referenced and utilized throughout the semester, not just summarized on the first day of class. Everything in the course and mentioned in the syllabus--all the assignments, assessments, grading rubrics, content--are aligned with the course learning objectives and refer to them. Students should be able to copy and paste the course learning objectives into their resumes, post them on LinkedIn, or state them in a job interview as skills acquired by the end of the course. For assistance on making your course syllabus more useful, contact CET (cet.usc.edu).

### Why should I revise learning objectives if they already got through the Curriculum Office? My course already has learning objectives, so why do I need to revise them?

The USC Curriculum Office provides a syllabus template outlining required sections and language, especially for certain policies, for all USC syllabi. When the Curriculum Office reviews a new or revised course for approval, they look for the presence of course learning objectives but not whether they follow best practices for format or whether they are aligned with the assessments as a true reflection of what is taught and assessed. In fact, many approved courses lack true course learning objectives.

### I reviewed my course learning objectives and was surprised to discover they do not follow best practices! Should I change them and redistribute my syllabus to students?

Finding learning objectives in need of revision is extremely common. While these learning objectives do need to be revised in order to adhere to best practices and achieve course alignment, this should not be done mid-semester. Major changes to a course should be made at the end of the semester, before the course is offered again.

### Should all sections of a course have the same course learning objectives? Should online sections of a course have the same course learning objectives as on ground sections?

Yes. To ensure consistency, quality, rigor, and fairness, all sections of the same course need to have the same course learning objectives and aligned assessments. The same is true for programs that offer a course both online and on ground, or both on campus and at a remote campus. Ideally, faculty and TAs of all the sections would communicate throughout the semester and/or a main course coordinator would ensure coordination and consistency among all the sections.

### Can I turn aspirations into learning objectives?

Sometimes. Not all aspirational statements can be, or should be, turned into learning objectives. Remember that aspirational statements on their own are valid and valuable and can be placed in the course description. Otherwise, a good way to analyze whether an aspiration can be turned into a learning objective is to list all the visible, tangible ways a student could demonstrate their mastery of it. Then, ask yourself whether or not you teach and assess those specific skills. For example, if the aspiration is that students will “embrace new technology”, the corresponding learning objective would have to focus on the specific type of technology (hardware, software, program, etc.) taught and used in the course, and what students will be able to do with that specific technology by the end of the course (generate a model, calculate or graph something, etc.). A possible learning objective could be “students will be able to analyze a given dataset using Excel.”

### Are objectives different from our program’s goals or competencies?

Yes. Program goals are created internally whereas competencies are typically adopted from external standards. Some programs have guiding statements at a higher, broader level than course learning objectives. These are often called program goals. Some programs even require instructors to align, or match, their course learning objectives to the broader program goals. Other schools, typically professional schools where there are industry standards or licensing bodies, may have competencies as well as program goals and course learning objectives. In this case, instructors are also asked to indicate which course learning objectives support which professional competencies.

### Can anyone help me revise my course learning objectives?

Yes! You are not alone. CET always work with faculty on course learning objectives. In fact, the overwhelming majority of CET course consults begin by revising course learning objectives. For support with course learning objectives and other aspects of course design and teaching, please [contact CET](http://cet.usc.edu/) to request a consult. There is also supporting documentation on learning objectives available on the [CET website](http://cet.usc.edu/).