

Template for Writing Course Learning Goals

Course: _____

This packet is intended to help you draft and revise learning goals.

Picture a student at the conclusion of your course. What should that student know? How would the student demonstrate that knowledge? What should that student be able to do? What activities would best reveal those enhanced skills? What you teach in your course may be new material/concepts or may take something learned in previous course(s) to the next level of complexity. Writing your learning goals means defining what that student should be able to know or do at course completion. Goals are stated in terms of *behaviors*.

A well-written goal will be...

- **Measurable or observable**
Measurement(s) can but doesn't have to be quantitative.
- **Manageable**
Be careful with complexity. Think about what is realistic for you and your students.
- **Meaningful**
If the goal isn't relevant to the instructor or program, then why is it included?

By the end of this course, students should be able to...

Example: *understand Aristotle's basic appeals.*

Example: *identify, analyze, and discuss common rhetorical fallacies.*

Write verb-driven statements of the 5-7 keystone goals of the course. Don't worry much about wording—we'll work through that in the next steps. If you already have a first draft, then start with those, consider their accuracy for the curriculum, and move on to revision. Use a separate sheet if your goals are too long to fit here.

1. _____ .
2. _____ .
3. _____ .
4. _____ .
5. _____ .
6. _____ .
7. _____ .

Next, we'll proceed through several review and revision exercises. *Do these in any order.*

Review & Revise: Goal Complexity

Look at your previous draft and consider the complexity of your goals. *Complexity is related to measurability*—Picture how you will show this goal being achieved. Have you packed too many ideas, requirements, or qualifications into one goal? Here are some options:

- Break one complex goal into two or more simpler goals.
- Focus on the more sophisticated aspect of the goal, especially if the required smaller or supporting skills feed directly into the more advanced skill.
- Disregard skills or knowledge pre-requisite for your course. If students should already bring a reasonable level of mastery to your course, then word the goal in a way that identifies higher-order abilities.

Example from above:

Original: *Identify, analyze, and discuss common rhetorical fallacies.*

Notes: Notice the three verbs—successful analysis requires sub-skills of comprehension (discussion) and memory (identify). Therefore, I can focus only on the higher-order skills.

Revised: *Analyze common rhetorical fallacies.*

Return to your list above and consider each statement. A scratch sheet may be useful in redrafting, as you may need to go through several iterations to get to a narrow goal that uses language you like.

Important Note: You may recognize at this point that a course may actually have many teaching goals. A lower-level undergraduate course may have two dozen. Don't let this overwhelm you. Focus on what you consider **the top five to seven goals** for this course.

Once you have narrowed the scope of each goal, write your revised goals here. **Don't worry about these being "final."** No set of course goals is ever really final, as new theories, technologies, and field developments translate into course content adjustments.

1. _____.
2. _____.
3. _____.
4. _____.
5. _____.
6. _____.
7. _____.

Review & Revise: Skill or Thinking Level

Consider your course's level (freshman? junior? graduate?), the general baseline of students entering your class, and the target for end-of-course abilities. Do you only need to introduce a new concept and work at the lower taxonomy levels? Or should students be demonstrating higher-order skills? Use **Bloom's revised taxonomy** to locate where on the skill spectrum students should land.

Example from above:

Original: *Analyze common rhetorical fallacies.*

Notes: Students in this class are expected to excel in critical thinking. Beyond breaking the fallacy into its pieces, they need to evaluate the effectiveness of the fallacy in terms of the audience and context.

Revised: *Evaluate common rhetorical fallacies.*

You can think and revise in any manner that best fits your methods, but here is one suggested approach:

1. Begin with your most recent goal list.
2. Access—on paper or online—a chart of Bloom's revised taxonomy. Notice that the goals are on a spectrum, from lower order remembering to the highest order of creating.
3. Find the thinking level category—remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, or create—where you originally placed the skill.
4. Consider the course, including the assignments you require and the course's place in one or more program sequences.
5. Verify or adjust the category indicated by your action verb. In the example above, it is adjusted up the skill spectrum, from “analyze” to “evaluate.” If you're moving through this revision process in order, then you may want to use the category verb (remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, or create) for now. (We consider specific verb choice in the next revision phase.)

Here is a space for the next iteration of your draft list.

1. _____ .
2. _____ .
3. _____ .
4. _____ .
5. _____ .
6. _____ .
7. _____ .

Review & Revise: Accurate & Active Verbs

Think about the verbs driving your goals. Many instructors gravitate to the category (domain) titles from Bloom—remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create—but think about the activities related to *how* you are going to observe this knowledge and skill.

Try using the **Planning Framework** sheet for ideas. A table of Bloom's revised categories, action verbs, and common assignment types, this framework can help you identify what sorts of skills and knowledge you are already requiring, or it can help you plan new assignments with a better understanding of where they fit along the learning continuum.

Example from above:

Original: *understand Aristotle's basic appeals.*

Notes: How does the student demonstrate his or her ability to understand? What activity will show me that the student understands these appeals? What verb might pull the statement out of the abstract?

Revised: *Identify Aristotle's basic appeals.*

Original: *Evaluate the use of common rhetorical fallacies.*

Revised: *Judge the success of common rhetorical fallacies.*

Don't worry if your draft at this point still doesn't seem concrete—we move to consider that area of revision under the Measurability section.

Revise your primary learning goals for strong action verbs here:

1. _____ .
2. _____ .
3. _____ .
4. _____ .
5. _____ .
6. _____ .
7. _____ .

Review & Revise: Measurability

Consider what you have written above, and ask yourself these questions:

- How would I recognize whether or not the student achieved this goal?
- How could I measure the *degree* to which the goal was achieved?
- Where in the course will my students demonstrate this competency? A test? A project? A research paper? A performance? A portfolio?

Good instructors know what they teach, what the course “gifts” should be for the student. Good instructors also have a sense of how and when the learning is accomplished. However, the tricky part can be communicating this to others, both internal and external.

Thinking about the reality of when, where, and how you can communicate with others regarding your students’ learning might show you where the challenges are in your course goals, too. Most likely, these challenges simply relate to how the goals are worded, but this revision may also find disconnects between the learning you think is happening and the learning that is actually happening (or emphasized).

You can note the measurement point in the actual learning goal, or you can make a simple side note of where in the course the goal will be achieved. The latter is obviously more useful if you change your assignments frequently.

Original: *Identify Aristotle’s basic appeals.*

Notes: This happens in a number of places because it is a fundamental part of the class. Some students have problems with the complex interaction of ethos, logos, and pathos, so the class addresses that.

Revised: *Identify Aristotle’s basic appeals.*

(No changes...Side note: this goal is introduced in the first assignment and is required—with progressing complexity—through the other assignments as well. It could be included on grading checklists/rubrics.)

Original: *Judge the success of common rhetorical fallacies.*

Revised: *Judge the success of common rhetorical fallacies used in student debates.*

1. _____ .
2. _____ .
3. _____ .
4. _____ .
5. _____ .
6. _____ .
7. _____ .

Something Extra...Assignment-Level Learning Goals

After shaping up or verifying your course-level goals, you may want to consider using assignment- or project-level goals, too. Assignment goals serve these purposes:

- Clarify your expectations and emphasis to students,
- Tie back to the course-level goals,
- Translate directly to a grading rubric/checklist.

Writing Assignment Goals

Assignment-level goals can be an exact repetition of a course goal (easy to map back to syllabus) or they can be reworded to indicate the progression of skill you expect over the semester's duration. If you adjust your wording a lot to show progression, then you can number your course goals and note the connections.

Here is an example list. *After completing this assignment, students should be able to...*

- **Identify differences between scholarly and trade publications. (G5)**
- **Point out concrete clues to an article's audience and purpose. (G1)**
- **Explain how Aristotle's appeals are at work in the article. (G2)**

An instructor may or may not want to have assignment goals that cover foundation skills—in the above example, those would include things like organizing an essay and writing cleanly (mechanics). The G# notes following each of the examples would be course goals, listed on the syllabus. Such “mapping” reinforces the assignment's purpose.

Translating Goals to Grading Rubrics

Assignment goals can save you time and frustration by translating into a grading rubric. Rubrics simply provide an organized and consistent approach to evaluating student writing. They can come in a variety of flavors but all have one thing in common: they should show a clear connection to your course objective, assignment instructions, and course concepts.

Three common rubric approaches include...

A scale range of feedback, not translating directly into a grade:

EX: **Sources are accurately chosen for publication type and credibility. 1—2—3—4—5**
(1= strongly disagree, 3= unsure/neutral, 5= strongly agree)

Open-ended questions with instructor responses (with or without associated points):

EX: **Are the sources accurately chosen for publication type and credibility? (10 pts.)**

Scaled points that feed directly into an overall grade:

EX: **Sources are accurately chosen for publication type, credibility. 0—2—4—6—8—10**

Other benefits of grading rubrics are that they can increase grading consistency, they can streamline grading by cutting down on annotations, and they improve student-teacher communication.