Let's start with what a learning outcome (objective) is:

A learning objective is a quantified, measurable statement of what a student will be able to do when a particular module of instruction is completed.

Not just what they will know – but what they will know and be able to demonstrate.

Designers make a big deal over the learning objectives because they represent the output of the subject matter expert’s thought process regarding what should and shouldn’t be included in the course based on what they know about the topic and the learners. Clear learning objectives directly lead to defining relevant learning activities and assessments that translate into knowledge and skills applicable in the real world.

Can’t I just use the learning objectives from the course’s textbook?

Maybe, but I would give the text’s objectives a litmus test first. Picture the student in a setting where they are applying what has been learned in the module. Then read the text’s objectives. Does the description match the image of your student applying their knowledge? Does the text’s objectives use measurable, action-oriented verbs such as analyze, list, compare and contrast, or explain?

Do students actually read learning outcomes?

This would be a good question to pose in a mid-course survey. I see this as a chicken-and-egg problem. Not many learning objectives are described in terms of what students will be able to do in the real-world after instruction is complete. If the objective doesn’t connect learning to a relevant application, its utility for students is minimal. If its relevance or utility to students is minimal, they won’t bother to read it.

What do students get out of reading the Learning Outcomes?

- It serves as a focus for student learning – instead of going through the materials blindly, what they are to focus their effort on is clear.

- It is an inexpensive form of pre-training; it introduces a tiny amount of content so that when the student reads about it or hears about it in lecture they already have a connection to map it to.

- It can be a student’s first opportunity to connect prior knowledge with the learning in the module.

- It serves as a quick post-instruction self-assessment: “OK, here’s what I am supposed to be able to do now that I have finished Module 5. Can I?”

To measure if you are on the right track with learning outcomes, try reading each one preceded with this phrase:

“At the end of this module, the students will be able to ________________”

If it doesn’t sound right, it probably needs a little more work.