

How to Write Effective Course Competencies

A Brief History – During the August 18, 2011 faculty in-service, faculty members asked Academic Affairs and Standards Council (AASC) to offer guidance on writing course competencies. While AASC does not have an approved list of verbs for your use as you write course competencies, we can offer some generally agreed upon suggestions as you craft your course outlines for submission into Curriculum Approval and Review Process (CARP).

We understand some anxiety may exist about AASC's close attention to competencies. The topic of course competencies is not without controversy among other scholars. There is no one right way to develop or present competencies. We do not want the writing of your course competencies to simply be a task that must be done. On the contrary, AASC wants you to think critically about your course competencies so they can serve as a useful road map to guide your "instructional priorities" (Diamond, 1998). From the student's perspective, competencies should provide them with a clear picture of what you will expect them to gain as a learner by the time they complete your course.

In sum, there is no exact formula for writing course competencies that will guarantee your gaining approval from any curriculum committee. Still, if you keep some of tips in mind, we think it will be helpful.

Purpose– Course competencies

- Provide students with a clear picture of what you will expect of them.
- Guide your instructional selection of appropriate course materials, course assignments and activities.
- Provide other institutions and external constituents with a means of examining course content for transfer potential and/or alignment with business and industry standards.
- Identify the skills on which students will be assessed.

What to Consider When Writing Course Competencies

- ✓ Write course competencies that are clear and **measurable**.
- ✓ Use **active verbs** that articulate your "expected student outcome." (Mandernach, 2003)
- ✓ Determine if your competencies **align** at various levels.
 - program outcomes
 - Minnesota Transfer Curriculum Goal (MnTC) area outcomes (where appropriate)
 - other institutional curricular goals
- ✓ Ask yourself if the competencies **align** with your choice of instructional materials, assignments/activities, and assessments.
- ✓ Judge the **face validity** of the course competency. Does it make sense? Is it understandable? Could someone outside of your discipline develop a solid sense of what you might expect them to do in your course?

- ✓ Write course competencies that accurately **reflect the level of learning** you are expecting from students.
- ✓ Check to make sure the competency describes what will be **assessed**.

Examples of Well Written Competencies

Describe basic lockout/tagout procedures. (Joe Mrazek)

Inspect used boats for operability. (Mike Ullmer)

Use accurate art vocabulary when discussing works of art. (Kris Gyolai)

Relate the impact and influence of social and historical events to the work of specific artists. (Kris Gyolai)

What to Avoid When Writing Course Competencies

1. **Avoid the use of competencies that may be vague, difficult to measure or don't really describe what you want students to accomplish.** Words should be specific. In general this would mean avoiding statements like the following:

Students will:

- a. Know how to....
- b. Learn.....
- c. Demonstrate an understanding of....
- d. Practice...

Rather be specific and write statement with action verbs such as

Students will

- a. Explain the steps in
- b. Install....
- c. Contrast.....
- d. Evaluate.....

The following verbs are difficult to assess thus should be used with caution:

Know----Comprehend---- Understand----Appreciate----Familiarize----Study----Be aware----

Become acquainted with---- Gain Knowledge of---- Cover----Learn---- Realize (Mandernach, 2003)

2. **Avoid writing competencies that are so broad they may seem unrealistic.**

Example: Examine world views about violence.

3. **Avoid writing competencies that appear to be formulaic.**

Example: Every competency in your course starts out with “Explain... While you may have good rationale for this, it may appear to others that you did not think critically about your course competencies. AASC may ask for a rationale.

4. Avoid writing competencies that do not tie course descriptions to program outcomes, and/or MnTC goal area outcomes (where appropriate).

5. Avoid writing competencies that are inconsistent with the course designation of a lecture or a lab. If a course includes both be sure have competencies related to both.

Lecture courses may ask students to diagram or describe how to install something.

Lab courses would say install.

Suggestions for Writer’s Block– If you do not seem to be finding the right action verb for a course competency, the attached lists may be of use to you. These are meant to be samples/suggestions. You may want to ask your colleagues, a dean or two, and/or business and industry representatives in your field for feedback if you are not satisfied with the competencies you have written.

References

Diamond, R.M.(1998) 2nd Edition. *Designing & assessing courses & curricula: A practical guide*. Jossey Bass: San Francisco.

Mandernach, B.J. (2003). *Faculty resources quick tips*. Retrieved September 25, 2011 from Park University Quick Tips.

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