What are learning outcomes?

Learning outcomes are statements that specify what learners will know or be able to do as a result of a learning activity. Outcomes are usually expressed as knowledge, skills, or attitudes.

Learning outcomes should flow from a needs assessment. The needs assessment should determine the gap between an existing condition and a desired condition. Learning outcomes are statements which described a desired condition – that is, the knowledge, skills, or attitudes needed to fulfill the need. They represent the solution to the identified need or issue. Learning outcomes provide direction in the planning of a learning activity. They help to:

- Focus on learner's behavior that is to be changed

- Serve as guidelines for content, instruction, and evaluation

- Identify specifically what should be learned

- Convey to learners exactly what is to be accomplished

What are some key questions that I should ask myself before writing learning outcomes?
Before outcome statements are written, the program planner and/or subject matter expert should answer key questions about who is affected by the need (i.e., who is the intended audience). These questions may well be addressed in a needs assessment. Regardless of how they are addressed, these questions are useful in decision making about how a presentation should be tailored to the intended audience. These questions are a useful tool for programmers in helping speakers focus their planning and instruction.

- Does the potential audience's level of awareness need to be raised?
- Do they need to understand better the context in which the problem/issue exists?
- Are there things they need to unlearn?
- What are the most essential things they need to know or be able to do?
- Do they need a strong rationale to buy into the issue?
- What specific skills or strategies do they need?
- How important is their level of confidence with this new learning?
- What are the obstacles they face in the workplace using this new learning?
- What are the most important things they need to be able to do when they finish?

What are the characteristics of good learning outcomes?
Learning outcomes have three distinguishing characteristics.

1. The specified action by the learners must be observable.

2. The specified action by the learners must be measurable.

3. The specified action must be done by the learners.

The ultimate test when writing a learning outcome is whether or not the action taken by the participants can be assessed. If not, the outcome probably does net meet all three of the characteristics.

1. who is to perform;

2. what action they are to take;

3. some result that must come from their action.

How do you fix an unclear outcome?
Many program brochures include learning outcomes which are unclear or represent elements of curriculum rather than some action the participants will demonstrate. Note the following examples:
Participants will understand the nine reasons for conducting a needs assessment.
Participants will develop an appreciation of cultural diversity in the workplace.

If you ask a simple question ("Can it be measured?"), you see readily that these learning outcomes have shortcomings. They are not measurable. The same outcomes can be modified by changing the action verbs.
Participants will list nine reasons for conducting a needs assessment.
Participants will summarize in writing their feelings about cultural diversity in the workplace.
Learners now have a much better idea of what is expected of them.

*What is the importance of action verbs?
Since the learner's performance should be observable and measurable, the verb chosen for each outcome statement should be an action verb which results in overt behavior that can be observed and measured. Sample action verbs are:
> compile, create, plan, revise, analyze, design, select, utilize, apply, demonstrate, prepare, use, compute, discuss, explain, predict, compare, rate, critique

Certain verbs are unclear and subject to different interpretations in terms of what action they are specifying. Such verbs call for covert behavior which cannot be observed or measured. These types of verbs should be avoided:
> know, become aware of, appreciate, learn, understand, and become familiar with

[1] Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall[1] Phillips, Louis. The Continuing Education Guide: the CEU and Other Professional Development Criteria. /Hunt Publishing Co., 1994.