

Interuniversity Style Guide for Writing Course Plans in English

UOC

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This guide was produced by the Xarxa Vives d'Universitats, specifically by:

- Mhairi Bain, Department of Applied Linguistics, Universitat Internacional de Catalunya
- Jennifer Drinkwater, Department of Applied Linguistics, Universitat Internacional de Catalunya
- John Bates, Servei Lingüístic, Universitat Rovira i Virgili
- Thomas Bell, Servei Lingüístic, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya
- Barnaby Noone, Serveis Lingüístics, Universitat de Barcelona
- David Owen, Servei de Llengües, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
- Peter Redmond, Servei de Llengües Modernes, Universitat de Girona
- Richard Samson, Serveis Lingüístics, Universitat de Vic – Universitat Central de Catalunya
- Luci Vázquez, Servei de Llengües i Terminologia, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya

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This copy is a modified version of the original (*Interuniversity Style Guide for Writing Course Guides in English*), adapted to the UOC's preferences of the terms *competencies*, *course plan* and *course* over *competences*, *course guide* and *subject*, respectively.



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Introduction

A course plan describes a course taught on a degree programme. Depending on the university, or even the faculty or programme, it may provide a general overview of the course or take an in-depth look at the ground to be covered by the students. It generally includes information such as the course code, prerequisites, learning objectives, learning outcomes, methodology, types of classes, the assessment system and practical information such as office hours for lecturers, reading lists and the study load/ECTS credits. It also focuses on the competencies to be acquired by students, which are crucial to help guide them and direct their learning and study, and it covers every aspect of the learning students must acquire and the assessment activities they must complete in order to pass the course.

The present style guide is designed principally for lecturers tasked with preparing course plans in English. However, it may also be useful for course coordinators, language services, freelance translators and mobility students. It provides definitions of competencies, learning objectives and learning outcomes, as well as practical advice on how to write and present them. It also provides guidance on how to write and present course content and examines certain aspects of language use.

Course plans are written by lecturers in their capacity as teachers of the courses in question. As experts in their field who have teaching experience, they establish which competencies their students need to develop in order to complete the assessment activities, how they will structure their classes over the semester or academic year, and what knowledge they expect their students to acquire. The English version of a course plan is generally translated directly from the original document and should therefore reflect it in terms of content and phrasing.

Despite our attempts to give advice that is applicable to all Catalan universities, course plans are not standardised so they may have different structures, formats and lengths. Moreover, different universities use different terms for certain central concepts. First and foremost, the *guia docent* (or *pla docent*) may be called a *course guide*, a *course plan* or a *teaching plan*. The term *competències* might be translated as either *competences* or *competencies*. The *continguts* of a course may be referred to as *content*, *contents* or *topics* and, in English, the words *subject* and *course* are used interchangeably. On the other hand, the translations for *objectius d'aprenentatge* and *resultats d'aprenentatge* are fairly standard: for the first, *learning objectives*; and for the second, *learning outcomes*.

This guide recognises all of these terms as valid options, but for this particular edition, for teaching staff at the UOC, we have chosen to use the terms in use at this university: *course plan*, *competencies* and *contents*.

Competencies, learning objectives and learning outcomes: context and definitions

One of the key parts of any course plan is the breakdown of what students will learn – or learn to do – into *competencies*, *learning objectives* and *learning outcomes*. However, although the Bologna Process and its framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area called for “generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competences”¹ and higher education systems across Europe have become more comparable, there are still discrepancies in the way different institutions and countries interpret and use terms such as *competencies*, *learning objectives* and *learning outcomes*. Hence, course plans of different universities may organise these concepts into one, two or even more sections.

Below, we provide a short definition of the main terms that should be used consistently within the same programme of study.

Definition of terms

Competencies

The concept of competencies has become a focus within higher education since the initiation of the Bologna Process and the idea that education should lead to employability. In 2005, AQU Catalunya published an overview of competencies in the context of course plans and the European Higher Education Area (see Annex 1 of the document [Eines per a l'adaptació dels ensenyaments a l'EEES](#)), highlighting the requirement for two types: *competències genèriques* and *competències específiques*. Since then, competencies have become an established part of course plans, in which we often see categories such as those in the table below.

Catalan	Recommended English translation
competències bàsiques	basic competencies
competències generals competències genèriques	general competencies generic competencies
competències transversals	interdisciplinary competencies

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http://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/WG_Frameworks_qualification/85/2/Framework_qualificationsforEHEA-May2005_587852.pdf

Catalan	Recommended English translation
	cross-disciplinary competencies cross-curricular competencies
competències específiques	specific competencies

Basic, general and interdisciplinary competencies are expected across all programmes of the same level, and students must acquire them to graduate. However, it is quite likely that students will have developed these competencies to some extent even before the beginning of the course. These types of competencies describe wide-ranging abilities that are needed in a variety of situations. Some course plans provide definitions in the form of noun phrases.

Independent learning

The ability to choose the best approach to extending one's knowledge and to learn new methods and technologies.

Teamwork

The ability to work in a team, whether as a member or as a leader, with the aim of contributing to projects pragmatically and responsibly and making commitments in view of the resources available.

Foreign language

Knowledge of a foreign language at an oral and written level that is consistent with graduates' future needs.

Reasoning

The ability to think critically, logically and mathematically. A capacity for abstraction, analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

In contrast, specific competencies have a narrower scope, and are usually the direct result of taking a particular course, so students will probably not have developed them beforehand.

To finish this section, note that the adjective *competent* has two related nouns: *competence* and *competency* (in the plural *competences* and *competencies*). Although they can be used with slightly different meanings, for the purposes of this guide, we consider *competences* and *competencies* to be synonyms, and we use *competencies* for the sake of consistency.

Learning objectives and learning outcomes

Learning objectives and *learning outcomes* are often used interchangeably because they both relate to teaching and learning in the classroom. Learning objectives state the learning that students should acquire. Learning outcomes state what a learner can do after

completing a course of study. Because of the considerable overlap between the learning students should acquire and what they can do by the end of the course, course plans often only have one section on either objectives or outcomes, not both.

Writing competencies, learning objectives and learning outcomes

The most appropriate way to present competencies, learning objectives and learning outcomes is in the form of lists. When writing lists, bear in mind the following points:

- Write a clear heading and/or a short introductory phrase.
- Ensure that every item on the list is grammatically connected to the heading or the introductory phrase.
- Give every item on the list the same grammatical structure (parallelism). Different lists may have different grammatical structures.
- Be consistent with punctuation. If the phrase introducing the list is a complete sentence, close it with a colon and then give each item on the list sentence-style punctuation (initial capital letter and final full stop). If the phrase introducing the list is a sentence fragment, do not close it with a colon, lowercase the first letter of each item and finish each item with a comma or semicolon (except the last, which you should finish with a full stop).

For examples of these features of lists, see the list above and the lists below.

Competences

Lists of competencies can be expressed in several ways. The example below is a list of general competencies expressed as noun phrases.

- Teamwork
- Complex problem solving
- Critical, logical and creative thought
- Public speaking
- Learning to learn
- Report writing

Note that the gerund form (-ing) functions as a noun and therefore can be used in a list of nouns without breaking the parallelism.

And the example below is a list of specific competencies expressed as infinitive phrases.

Students must

- be able to explain how the economy works,
- know how to use the basic tools for explaining business reality,
- understand how the public sector operates.

Students must be able to

- explain how the economy works,
- use the basic tools for explaining business reality,
- describe how the public sector operates.

In the examples above, note that the introductory phrase conditions the verbs you wish to use. The verb *can* or *to be able* refers to an ability to do something and, therefore, can only be used with dynamic verbs like *explain* or *describe* (verbs that express actions), not stative verbs like *understand* or *know* (verbs that express states).

Learning objectives

Learning objectives are short statements that specify the learning that students should acquire during a particular course. Because the focus is on the students, the statements should be phrased from their point of view. Generally speaking, you should express learning objectives in one of two ways: the heading Learning objectives followed by a bulleted list of infinitive phrases (with *to*); or the heading Learning objectives and an introductory phrase (in the future tense) followed by a bulleted list of verb phrases.

Learning objectives

- To describe how living beings are organised into cells and organisms.
- To classify living beings into five kingdoms.
- To explain the functions of biomolecules.

Learning objectives

By the end of the course, students will be able to

- describe how living beings are organised into cells and organisms,
- classify living beings into five kingdoms,
- explain the functions of biomolecules.

Note that both lists are parallel: every item has the same grammatical structure. In the first case full infinitives link back to the heading; in the second case, bare infinitives link back to the introductory phrase. Note also that the introductory phrase makes the second list more explicitly student-centred.

Finally, when writing lists of learning objectives and learning outcomes (see below), it is important to use the infinitives of dynamic verbs (*explain, define, identify, analyse, recognise, etc.*), which specify what students can do, rather than stative verbs (*know, be, have, etc.*), which describe states. Note that the latter cannot be used with *can* or *be able to*, and are not readily measurable.

Learning outcomes

Learning outcomes describe what students must be able to do after they have completed a course of study. As with learning objectives, lists of learning outcomes can be organised in more than one way. The lists below are both parallel. The first uses full sentences while the second begins each item in the list with a bare infinitive that connects back to a short introductory phrase.

Learning outcomes

- Students are able to explain the main theories of biological and cognitive development.
- Students can analyse the behaviour of adolescents in terms of the theories studied.
- Students can create a positive learning environment suited to the needs of adolescents.

Learning outcomes

Students can

- explain the main theories of biological and cognitive development,
- analyse the behaviour of adolescents in terms of the theories studied,
- create a positive learning environment suited to the needs of adolescents.

Note also that outcomes are expressed in the present tense because they focus on an observable result.

For an extensive list of verbs that describe learning outcomes, see the Appendix.

Writing course contents

This section offers practical advice about how to write or translate the part of the course plan that is typically referred to as the *content*, *contents* or *topics* section. It is the part that organises the course into topics (*temes* or *blocs temàtics*, in Catalan) and subdivides each topic into a list of sub-topics. Specifically, it offers advice about making this part as cohesive, concise and clear as possible.

First, be cohesive by maintaining the hierarchy between the title or heading of the topic (known as the topic head) and the list. In other words, any information relevant to all the items in the list should be included in the head; do not allow any item to take precedence over the head in this respect. The following text shows what happens when you fail to do this: item (2) relies on (1) to explain its meaning (what ADR stands for), “Harvard’s” in (3) can only be fully understood by reading (2), and “the first and the last steps” in (5) depends on the information in (4).

Out-of-court settlements

1. Introduction to alternative dispute resolution (ADR)
2. ADR using Harvard Law School methods
3. Harvard’s collaborative negotiation techniques
4. The seven steps in the negotiation process
5. The importance of the first and last steps

Because all five items refer to ADR, the list would be more cohesively written by putting “ADR” in the head and by making the language in each item independent from the language in all the others.

Out-of-court settlements and alternative dispute resolution (ADR)

1. Introduction to ADR
2. ADR using Harvard Law School methods
3. Harvard Law School’s collaborative negotiation techniques
4. The seven steps in the negotiation process
5. The importance of the first and last steps in negotiation

Second, be more concise by not repeating information contained in the head. For example, the list below contains several unnecessary words.

Neuropsychological evaluation

1. Introduction to evaluation
2. Attention disorders
3. Memory disorders
4. Child neuropsychological evaluation

5. Adult neuropsychological evaluation
6. Neuropsychological rehabilitation

By exploiting the information in the head, you can make the text more concise.

Neuropsychological evaluation

1. Introduction
2. Attention disorders
3. Memory disorders
4. Children
5. Adults
6. Rehabilitation

Being concise is also important when lists contain complex terminology that your text needs to frame as clearly as possible. The list below contains unnecessary words in (1) and (1.1), as well as clumsy and confusing elements like the long phrases in (1.1) and (1.2) and the abbreviation “2D” placed right after the number in (2). Also, (2.1) (2.2) and (2.3) omit the names of the types of equation being exemplified, making these difficult to identify for readers unfamiliar with the subject.

Heat transfer to nozzle and combustor walls

- 1 General considerations of heat transfer to nozzle and combustor walls
 - 1.1 Effects of heat transfer to nozzle and combustor walls: reducing performance and obstructing the design of hot-side structures required to withstand heat fluxes in the 107–108 w/m² range
 - 1.2 Contrasting the principal modes of heat transfer to nozzle and combustor walls: convection and radiation
- 2 2D boundary layer equations to calculate wall heat transfer in convection
 - 2.1 $\frac{\partial(\rho u)}{\partial x} + \frac{\partial(\rho v)}{\partial y} = 0$
 - 2.2 $\rho u \frac{\partial u}{\partial x} + \rho v \frac{\partial u}{\partial y} + \frac{\partial p}{\partial x} = \frac{\partial \tau_{xy}}{\partial y} = \frac{\partial}{\partial y} (\mu \frac{\partial u}{\partial y})$
 - 2.3 $\frac{\partial p}{\partial y} = 0$

All these problems could be solved by clearer writing at a general rather than a technical level and by not repeating information included in the head.

Heat transfer to nozzle and combustor walls

- 1 General considerations
 - 1.1 Negative effects on performance and the design of hot-sides for heat fluxes in the 107–108 w/m² range
 - 1.2 Convection versus radiation
- 2 Two-dimensional boundary layer equations to calculate convective heat transfer
 - 2.1 Continuity equations

2.2 X-momentum equations

2.3 Y-momentum equations

Finally, cohesion, concision and clarity can also be gained by joining phrases. When you translate compound titles that contain a very long first phrase, for example, consider reducing the structure to a single phrase. For instance, titles such as

Psicologia del treball i de les organitzacions: marc teòric

Els drets i deures de la persona treballadora: aspectes generals

Sistemes de planificació i gestió dels recursos humans: una perspectiva psicològica

might be effectively rendered as

A theoretical framework for industrial and organisational psychology

General aspects of employees' rights and responsibilities

A psychological approach to human resource planning and management systems

This can also be appropriate for titles with two phrases of a similar length.

La jurisdicció social: principis bàsics del procés social

Basic principles of labour court procedure

Useful language

Types of assessment

Make clear and specific reference to the type(s) of assessment students receive for the course. Below is a list of terms that are useful when discussing assessment.

Catalan	Recommended English translation
avaluació contínua	continuous assessment
avaluació en línia	online assessment
avaluació final	final assessment
avaluació formativa	formative assessment
avaluació sumatòria	summative assessment
examen escrit	written exam
examen oral	oral exam
examen parcial	mid-term exam mid-semester exam
prova d'opció múltiple	multiple-choice test

Grading system

In universities in the Xarxa Vives d'Universitats, Catalan academic grades are translated in the following way.

Catalan	Recommended English translation
aprovat	pass
apte	pass (pass/fail grading system)
excel·lent	excellent
matrícula d'honor	distinction
no apte	fail (pass/fail grading system)

Catalan	Recommended English translation
no presentat	absent
notable	good
suspens	fail
pendent	pending

Mark and grade

The terms *mark* and *grade* are often used interchangeably but note the following differences between them.

Mark

- UK English
- Numerical
- Individual assessment task

Grade

- US English
- Alphabetical
- Overall assessment of a course

Because of the third difference above, use *grading system* for the *sistema de qualificació* section of a course plan.

Percentages

In course plans, indicate percentages numerically, with the per cent sign closed up to the value (75% not 75 %).

Types of class

The following terms may be useful when discussing types of class.

Catalan	Recommended English translation
classe magistral classe teòrica	lecture
pràctica de laboratori	laboratory practical

Catalan	Recommended English translation
pràctica en empresa	work placement internship
tutoria	tutorial
seminari	seminar
classe presencial	face-to-face class on-campus class on-site class
classe virtual classe en línia	virtual class online class
classe híbrida	hybrid class
classe semipresencial	blended class

ECTS credits

The acronym *ECTS* means European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System. So, when indicating the number of credits awarded to a particular course, be sure to use the word *credits* after the phrase ECTS. Therefore, not

Victorian Literature (10 ECTS)

but

Victorian Literature (10 ECTS credits)

Use of the present tense

In any section where you describe the content of the course or of one of its topics in more general detail, use the present simple.

In this course, students write a placement report using the templates and guidelines provided by the Faculty.

In this part of the course, students use the software package SPSS Statistics for Windows to perform interactive or batched statistical analysis. Specifically, they learn to use the SPSS 'Transform' command to compute new variables from existing ones.

The student or students

Generally speaking, use the plural *students*.

Students should buy all the books on the reading list by the second week of classes.

In the second semester, students will be required to submit a ten-page report.

However, when you want to emphasise the individual nature of the learning, such as in course plans that describe the end-of-degree project, use the singular.

Each student will be asked to prepare an outline of the second assignment, which must be presented to the rest of the class.

In this case, if you need to use pronouns, use *they*, *them* and *their*. This is more concise and inclusive than using expressions such as *he or she*, *him or her* or *his or her*.

Therefore, not

The student will present his or her assignment to the rest of the class. When he or she has finished, the rest of the class will have twenty minutes to ask him or her questions about anything that seemed unclear.

but

The student will present their assignment to the rest of the class. When they have finished, the rest of the class will have twenty minutes to ask them questions about anything that seemed unclear.

Stative and dynamic verbs

When you describe the learning objectives and learning outcomes of your course use dynamic verbs rather than stative verbs: in other words, use verbs that describe the objective in question as a specific, observable and therefore measurable action, like *explain*, *classify*, *define*, *analyse* or *discuss*, rather than as a general state or condition that cannot be easily evaluated, like *know*, *understand*, *have experience of* or *be familiar with*.

Consider the following list.

Objectius d'aprenentatge

Comprendre el sistema que regula la seguretat pública.

Familiaritzar-se amb les bones pràctiques de màrqueting.

Conèixer la història de l'anàlisi biològica.

The literal translation of the above list would be

Learning objectives

To understand the system regulating public safety.

To be familiar with good practices in marketing.

To know the history of biological analysis.

However, these verbs are neither measurable nor dynamic, so a more appropriate and grammatically correct translation would be

Learning objectives

To explain the system regulating public safety.

To identify good practices in marketing.

To discuss the history of biological analysis.

The above is particularly true of the Catalan verb *conèixer*, often used in lists of learning objectives. To translate this verb, do not use the stative verb *know*, which is neither measurable nor dynamic and cannot combine grammatically with the verbs *can* or *be able to*. Instead, use a dynamic verb. The table below offers some common-sense options.

Catalan	Recommended English translation
Conèixer el procediment legislatiu així com la resta d'instruments normatius...	Identify the legislative procedures and legal instruments...
Conèixer la importància de l'organització administrativa...	Explain the importance of administrative organisation...
Conèixer la importància del rol del govern multinivell de la UE...	Discuss the role played by the European Union's system of multi-level government...
Conèixer el rol de l'Administració i del poder judicial com a actors...	Describe how the government and legal authorities enact the law...
Conèixer els factors de l'estructura d'oportunitat política...	List the factors in political opportunity structure...

For an extensive list of such verbs, see the Appendix.

Appendix

The list below is taken from the University of Worcester's [Principles for course design: Guide to writing learning outcomes and developing assessment criteria](#). Keep it to hand when you are writing learning objectives and outcomes in English and when you need to be precise about exactly what skills will be assessed in exams and coursework.

i) Verbs giving evidence of knowing

Define, describe, identify, label, list, name, outline, reproduce, recall, select, state, present, extract, organise, recount, write, measure, relate, match, record.

ii) Verbs giving evidence of comprehension

Interpret, translate, estimate, justify, clarify, defend, distinguish, explain, generalise, exemplify, infer, predict, rewrite, summarise, discuss, perform, report, present, indicate, find, represent, formulate, contrast, classify, express, compare, recognise.

iii) Verbs giving evidence of application of knowledge or understanding

Apply, solve, demonstrate, change, compute, manipulate, use, employ, modify, operate, predict, produce, relate, show, select, choose, assess, operate, illustrate, verify, explicate, prove.

iv) Verbs giving evidence of analysis

Recognise, distinguish between, evaluate, analyse, break down, differentiate, identify, illustrate how, infer, outline, point out, relate, select, separate, divide, compare, contrast, justify, resolve, examine, conclude, criticise, question, diagnose, categorise, elucidate.

v) Verbs giving evidence of synthesis

Arrange, assemble, organise, plan, prepare, design, formulate, construct, propose, present, explain, modify, reconstruct, relate, re-organise, revise, write, summarise, account for, report, alter, argue, order, select, manage, generalise, derive, synthesise, enlarge, suggest.

vi) Verbs giving evidence of creativity

Plan, imagine, begin, design, invent, initiate, state, create, pattern, elaborate, develop, devise, generate, engender, make, produce.

vii) Verbs giving evidence of evaluation

Judge, appraise, evaluate, assess, discriminate, conclude, compare, contrast, criticise, justify, defend, rate, determine, choose, value, question, rationalise.