Making the Most of Your Courses:

A Transferable Skills Resource for Psychology Students

*Instructor Guide*

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Contents

[Evidence-Based Teaching Strategies in this Resource 3](#_Toc75858326)

[Background and Initial Design 3](#_Toc75858327)

[Student Perceptions and Feedback 3](#_Toc75858328)

[Final Version of the Resource 6](#_Toc75858329)

[Learning Outcomes 9](#_Toc75858330)

[Suggested Strategies for Using this Resource 10](#_Toc75858331)

[Make it collaborative 10](#_Toc75858332)

[Make it required 10](#_Toc75858333)

[Make it real 11](#_Toc75858334)

[Make it visible 11](#_Toc75858335)

[References 12](#_Toc75858336)

#

# Evidence-Based Teaching Strategies in this Resource

## Background and Initial Design

University students often have trouble identifying and articulating the professional skills they have learned in their courses - and psychology students are no exception (e.g., Edge et al., 2018). In particular, psychology students do not believe that transferable skills are emphasized in their courses, and they fail to understand the competencies that underlie these skills (Martini, Judges, & Belicki, 2015). This is unfortunate, as the understanding of skills-based learning outcomes can help students connect their course-based learning experiences to the skills that employers (as well as graduate and professional school programs) are looking for (Martini, Rail, & Norton, 2015). Recently, a working group commissioned by the American Psychological Association’s Committee on Associate and Baccalaureate Education (CABE) developed a resource titled *The Skillful Psychology Student* (Naufel et al., 2019) that identified five basic skill domains that are central to most undergraduate psychology programs and pivotal to career preparation: Cognitive, communication, personal, social, and technological (Appleby et al., 2019). Using *The Skillful Psychology Student* document as a starting point, I created a guided resource that would enable students to identify, articulate, and keep a record of the transferable skills they learned in their psychology courses.

## Student Perceptions and Feedback

To examine the perceived utility of the resource among students, 40 psychology students completed an online version of the initial resource and provided feedback on it[[1]](#footnote-1). The students were asked to think of a recent psychology course that they had taken (or were about to finish) and to keep this course in mind as they were guided through the steps outlined in the resource: (1) review the course syllabus and make a list of the behaviors they engaged in during the course; (2) organize the behaviors into the five categories outlined in Naufel et al. (2019); (3) review the behaviors listed in the second step, and match these behaviors with specific skills; and (4) incorporate the skills and behaviors (evidence) into statements that can be used in future activities (e.g., cover letters).

After completing the steps, participants were asked to rate the resource on a range of characteristics (see Table 1) using the prompt “I found the steps outlined in the resource *Making the Most of Your Courses: Documenting Your Skills and Behaviors*” For each characteristic participants rated their response on the following scale: not at all (1), a little bit (2), somewhat (3), very (4). As can be seen in Table 1, participant ratings were consistently higher for the positive characteristics (e.g., helpful, easy to follow) than the negative characteristics (e.g., a waste of time).

**Table 1**

*Student feedback on the resource (N = 40)*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| “I found the steps outlined in the resource *Making the Most of Your Courses: Documenting Your Skills and Behaviours:*” | Median (Mode)(1-4 scale) |
| Helpful | 3 (3) |
| Easy to follow | 4 (4) |
| A waste of time | 1 (1) |
| Motivating | 3 (3) |
| Encouraging | 3 (3) |
| Confusing | 1 (1) |
| Practical | 3 (3) |
| Useful | 3 (3) |

*Note. Response scale =* Not at all (1), A little bit (2), Somewhat (3), Very (4).

Students were then asked to indicate how likely they were (on a scale from 1-*extremely unlikely*, to 5-*extremely likely*) to engage in a series of behaviors related to the resource. On average, the students were not very likely to share the resource with other students (*M* = 2.71, *SD* = 1.10) or to complete the resource on their own (for additional or future courses) (*M* = 2.6, *SD* = 1.09); they were more likely to use the resource when applying to graduate schools or professional programs (*M* = 3.23, *SD* = 1.25). However, it should also be noted that there was a lot of variability in these responses, and the modal response to the questions about completing the resource independently and using the resource when applying to graduate schools was 4 (i.e., quite likely).

We also asked participants whether they believed the resource would be helpful when asking professors for letters of recommendation and to what extent they saw the resource as relevant to their future career (both answered on a scale from 1-*not at all* to 5-*very much*). As can be seen in Figure 1, on average, participants believed that the resource would be useful when asking for letters of recommendation (median = 4, mode = 4). Participants were split on whether they believed the resource was relevant to their future career (median = 3, mode = 4).

**Figure 1.**

*Student feedback on the relevance of the resource (N = 40)*

Finally, we included two optional open-ended questions where we asked participants what they liked best about the resource, and what they did not like about the resource or how it could be improved. All of the responses we received to these items are reported in Table 2. As can be seen in these responses, many of the participants found the exercise valuable and easy to follow. In terms of what they did not like, some of these responses reflect the technical aspects of how the study was set-up; participants who wanted to save a completed copy of their resource were required to copy and paste responses from the study program (Qualtrics) to the fillable PDF version of the resource that was also provided. If the students had been able to fill out the PDF as intended, without the awkwardness of also having to enter their responses into Qualtrics, we suspect this would eliminate these complaints.

## Final Version of the Resource

However, we also received several comments that provided useful insight into how we could improve the resource. Specifically, based on the student feedback we expanded and improved the final section of the resource where we explain to students how they might use the resource. We also agreed that it would be useful for students to see more examples, which is why we have made a sample of a completed resource available for download. The final version of the resource also includes a dedicated space for reflection, as many students commented on the value of the reflective nature of the exercise, and we wanted to maximise the benefits of reflection (see also Vespia, 2020). Finally, we created two distinct versions of the resource: The original version, which is designed for use in a specific course, and a multiple course version which approaches the task from the perspective of an entire semester (or year) of psychology courses.

To summarize, the final version of the resource *Making the Most of Your Courses: A Transferable Skills Resource for Psychology Students* includes:

* Instructor Guide
* Fillable PDF for a Single Course
* Fillable PDF for Multiple Courses
* Sample of a Completed Resource

**Table 2**

*Open-ended feedback on the resource*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| What did you **like best** about the resource? (n = 19) | What did you **not like** about this resource, or how could it be **improved**? (n = 13) |
| I like how it required me to consider all the skills that I’ve learned in my psych classes, and how to write them in a resume style (which I’m usually really bad at).I liked that it was easy to use and follow.The way it categorizes different skills, and emphasizes the skills valued by employersGreat thought exercise, although so many specific in-course achievements might not be mentioned when applying to certain grad schoolsSelf reflection at the end of a course is always a positive. I liked analyzing what I was able to achieve (sic) this semester. These are skills that I use often but I never think to recognize them as skills.I could just reflect on my actions and etc. That is convenient.I liked how easy it was to follow and how clearly it laid out everything for you.The idea of jotting down the skills learnt or to be learnt from the course appeared appealing, useful and quite pragmatic. Made me think critically about the course and look back upon what I learned I like how it provides a comprehensive record of relevant statistical skills.It made me think about everyday things as skillsIllustrates skills that employers valueexperienceIt highlighted some positive skills I picked up during this course. It was easy to follow.It allowed me to break down every component of my course and apply it to useful skills in the workforce.It provides specific skills to list on my CV Laid out so that it is very easy to read and follow | I don’t think it’s super applicable to asking for letters of recommendation. Perhaps for writing them, but not super transferable for the requesting of them. The behavior inventory is really difficult to do on the spot; it's difficult to break down complex activities into behaviors, especially if you aren't sure which behaviors there are to 'choose' from. Maybe more examples or a more methodic process of doing the inventory would help.The separate pdf is a little clunky. I had to navigate between pages in order to see what I had written in my original list. I feel like page 2 should display the original list for you to sort into the skill categories. Instead of a separate pdf that you fill out and then copy and paste into the answer boxes a summarized and downloadable version of your responses in the text boxes should be presented at the end of the process. Also these text boxes should be bigger so that I can review what I have written.I think it was more the work that went into typing all this out for the actual survey here, that seemed the most like a "waste of time". For this resource, I would likely think about my strengths/behaviours, but I may not write them all down. Moreover, since this resource needed me to have the course syllabus or etc on hand, I imagine this could lead some to feel inconvenienced, thus less likely to do it.The idea of repeating the writing of all skills again and again. It is a bit time consuming, however this con is outweighed by the benefits provided by completing this resource.I liked it.Very repetitive; reduce amount of stepstoo much open-ended questionsI think it took a little bit too long and was a tad repetitive. I don't understand how this could be used to help get a job. Is this to be used in a resume? If so, where? Is this the kind of content that should go in a cover letter? I think including information about how to use this would be useful. Maybe an example of a real resume (with names removed) that uses this template would be helpfulThe font was quite small and some instructions were initially difficult to understand.I think applying it directly to a single psychology course limited the scope of the conclusions that I could draw.  |

# Learning Outcomes

The use of the resource *Making the Most of Your Courses: Documenting Your Skills and Behaviors* reinforces the following learning outcomes from the *APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major* (American Psychological Association [APA], 2013):

**4.1 Demonstrate effective writing for different purposes**

* E.g., Students must craft clear and concise sentences to address specific audiences (e.g., potential employers); provide evidence for the skills they claim to have developed; use standard English, including generally accepted grammar.

**5.1 Apply psychological content and skills to career goals**

* E.g., Students must recognize and describe the application of cognitive, communication, personal, social, and technological skills obtained in the psychology major; apply relevant psychology content to business, health care, educational, and/or other workplace settings.

**5.5 Develop meaningful profession direction for life after graduation**

* E.g., Students must identify the types of academic experiences and advanced course choices that will best shape career readiness; articulate the skills sets desired by employers who hire or select people with psychology backgrounds; develop evidence of attaining skill sets desired by psychology-related employers.

# Suggested Strategies for Using this Resource

Ultimately, the goal of this resource is to help psychology students identify and articulate the skills they have developed in their courses. But of course, this doesn’t happen without you, their instructor! As others have pointed out (e.g., Martini et al., 2015) students often struggle to make the connection between course assignments and career skills; what may be obvious to us as instructors is not always obvious to our students. So, the first thing we can do as instructors to help students make these connections is to *be explicit.* Dedicate part of your syllabus, assignment instructions, and/or class time to highlight the specific transferable skills that are reinforced by various course activities and assignments (Halonen & Dunn, 2018; Vespia, 2020). This resource is designed to make it easy for student to record their behaviors and connect these to skills, but they will still need your help to get the most out of this resource. At minimum, instructors should take the time to review the steps outlined in the resource and walk through a few concrete examples (e.g., choose one course assignment to complete together). Ideally, this would be done early in the semester, encouraging students to then track their behaviors and skills throughout the course, rather than doing it all at the end of the term. Additional suggestions of how instructors might effectively utilize this resource are outlined below.

## Make it collaborative

*Why? It lessens the individual workload and allows the students to learn from each other.*

At the end of the course, or after each major assignment, you could complete step 1 of the resource as a class activity; you could even break the class into groups and have a competition over who is able to identify the most behaviors. This transforms a potentially daunting or difficult task into an engaging collaborative exercise (see Laal & Ghodsi, 2012). Other components of the resource can also be completed collaboratively; however, it is recommended that students practice writing their statements (step 4) on their own.

## Make it required

*Why? It ensures that the students are spending at least some time thinking about the skills they are developing in your course.*

While it is easy to simply provide students with a copy of the resource and encourage them to use it, this is unlikely to be the most effective strategy. Students are far more likely to complete the resource if it is somehow integrated into the course – either as a collaborative classroom activity, a low-stakes course wrap-up assignment, or having students complete the steps in the resource as the final component of each course assignment. While I do not believe it is necessary to assign a grade to the activity, I do encourage instructors to find some way of holding students accountable for it; as reported earlier, many of the students who piloted the resource indicated that they would be unlikely to complete the resource on their own.

## Make it real

*Why? Rather than being an abstract or future-oriented exercise, students may find additional value in the activity if it is tied to a real-world opportunity.*

Ask your students to find a job/volunteer/internship/award opportunity that they are considering applying to (or you could provide examples). Then have them complete the skills resource with this specific opportunity in mind: what skills are identified in the job/scholarship description? Which of these skills have they developed in your course and how could they express this in their application? Students will be more engaged and motivated to complete the resource if they realize it has immediate “real world” applicability.

## Make it visible

*Why? This extends the impact of the activity to the broader student community.*

Once students have completed the activity, you could take a few excellent examples and (with permission of the authors) integrate them into your future syllabi, course webpage, or even showcase them on a department webpage. This last idea is of particular value if the resource is adopted across multiple courses. Showcasing specific examples of transferable skills that are developed in psychology courses is one way of making explicit the value of a psychology education – something which we could all benefit from (see Vespia, 2020).

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1. The students were volunteers who responded to an ad for a study examining psychology students’ perceptions of the skills learned in their courses. They were randomly assigned into one of three study conditions (resource, reflection, and control); the data reported here involve only the 40 participants who were assigned to the resource condition and only include the measures that were unique to this condition (i.e., feedback on the resource). This study was conducted in collaboration with an undergraduate student, Hanqi Chen, and approved by the Psychology Department Ethics Committee. At the end of the study, participants had the opportunity of being entered in a gift card draw. For more information, please feel free to email me at a.waggoner@utoronto.ca. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)