

Service Learning **RESOURCE GUIDE**

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THE SERVICE LEARNING JOURNAL: WRITING TO LEARN

by Joan Gilson and Nan Ottenritter

The service learning journal is a set of informal, sequenced writing assignments about course work and personal and civic responsibility. It is useful for many different kinds of courses, from the humanities to sciences and technical trades. Students use their journals to respond to experiences in class and at service learning sites, apply course concepts, raise questions, make values decisions, and determine directions for the future. While the journal helps students explore new connections and possibilities, instructors also find the assignments useful as feedback, enabling teachers to monitor student progress and identify areas of confusion about critical course concepts.

Goals for Journaling

The advantages of using journals are many, but one stands out. Students who journal about their course work and experiences also increase their understanding of specific course theories and their applications. Students also become clearer writers and thinkers, more empowered individuals, and better citizens.

Service learning journals are an adaptable teaching strategy because the various details of the timing and content of assignments can be changed to suit individual teaching styles. Many instructors find that regular practice is the most important factor in improving writing and thinking skills. Asking students to submit journals several times throughout the quarter or semester helps them get solid, scheduled practice in the skills of writing and critical thinking.

Evaluating Journals

Service learning journals may be evaluated on the quality of writing, content in relation to course material, and length of entries. One system of grading for a composition course is as follows:

- An "A" journal contains thoughtful, clear, correct prose of at least two, and not more than three, pages for each assignment (i.e., 24-36 pages over 12 weeks).
- A "B" journal will contain clear, mostly correct prose of at least one, and not more than two, pages for each assignment (12-24 pages).
- A "C" journal will contain adequate prose of at least one half, and not more than one, page per assignment (6-12 pages).
- A "D" journal will contain adequate prose of less than half a page per assignment (3-6 pages).
- An "F" journal will contain less than adequate prose of less than three pages in all (0-2 pages).

Another method of evaluation may de-emphasize quantity of writing, focusing instead on the quality of the analysis. This method requires the student to write about observations of an incident at the service site, relate his or her reactions to the incident, and synthesize the observations or reactions with course content.

Sample Weekly Assignments

Following are typical student service learning journal assignments that could be used by faculty in a variety of disciplines.

Form: The service learning journal consists of weekly writing assignments over 12 weeks. The first assignment will be collected, graded, and returned to you so that you are clear about expectations for your journaling. If you have any questions, feel free to consult with the instructor. Journals will be collected at mid-semester and the end of the course.

Purposes: The journal is designed to improve your knowledge, skills, and capacity for reflection and action.

Objectives: The objectives of the journal are to demonstrate improvement in (1) understanding of course content; (2) critical thinking and problem-solving skills; (3) citizenship and leadership development; (4) personal growth; and (5) writing skills.

Student Assignment 1. Describe a time when you did something kind for someone else without any reward. Be specific and provide details of time, place, motivation, results. (*Learning goals: citizenship and leadership development, personal growth, writing*)

Student Assignment 2. Write a page or more defining and explaining the concept of community. Your explanation should provide the reader with the characteristics of a successful community, according to your own experience. (*Learning goals: critical thinking and problem-solving, citizenship and leadership development, personal growth, writing*)

Student Assignment 3. Choose either option A or B, as follows:

Option A. Use your imagination to write a page or more describing the best kind of community you can think of. Be sure to include details about what kinds of laws, religion, festivals, fun, leisure activities, schools, etc., this community would have. Explain how the inhabitants survive, what they believe is right and wrong, what keeps them from breaking their own laws. What are their schools, businesses, religions, child-rearing practices, treatment of the elderly, treatment of criminals and the

disabled like? (*Learning goals: course content, critical thinking and problem-solving, citizenship and leadership development, personal growth, writing*)

Option B. Write at least a page describing an area of confusion you are having about the current unit of study. Conclude your description with three or four summarizing questions. (*Learning goals: course content, critical thinking and problem-solving, personal growth, writing*)

Student Assignment 4. Using class discussions and any relevant assigned reading, write a definition for service learning. Then describe some specific ways that you could use the service learning component of this class to your own benefit: to enhance your learning, explore careers, help others, etc. Please provide detailed information about the potential benefits you believe can be derived from service learning. (*Learning goals: critical thinking and problem-solving, personal growth, writing*)

Student Assignment 5. Find a newspaper or magazine article about volunteer work or a volunteer project. Describe the project here and explain what kind of difference it made, as nearly as you can tell from the article, for the volunteer, the recipients, and the community. Explain why you chose this particular article to write about. (*Learning goals: citizenship and leadership development, personal growth, writing*)

Student Assignment 6. Write about a page describing the service learning project you will do for this class. If you will work for an agency or community organization, explain what the agency does, how it began, its size, goals, and other pertinent details. You may want to interview a veteran volunteer or the agency director for this information. If your service learning project is a brief, less organized experience, discover its scope, purpose, and history. These items are important for you to understand the ultimate impact of the project upon the community it works to serve. (*Learning goals: citizenship and leadership development, writing*)

Student Assignment 7. After your first service experience with this organization, take about 30 minutes and write down everything you remember about it. Note details: sights, sounds, odors, tactile sensations, etc. Note people, furniture, events, everything about the experience. (*Learning goals: critical thinking and problem-solving skills, personal growth, writing*)

Student Assignment 8. Describe one problem or strength you see with this organization. Explain why it is a problem or strength and offer a specific plan for either the solution of that problem or use of that strength. (*Learning goals: critical thinking and problem-solving skills, writing*)

Student Assignment 9. *For Economics:* Explain the concept of commodity clearly and in detail. How do you see this concept at work in your service learning experience?

For Biology: Explain the concept of photosynthesis clearly and in detail. What examples of photosynthesis have you noticed at your service learning site? Describe the significance of the presence or absence of this process for the life/lives you observed there.

For Introduction to Literature: Explain the concept of the scapegoat. What evidence of this concept did you observe at your service learning site?

For Introduction to Sociology: Explain the concept of racism or ageism. Did you observe evidence of the workings of one of these concepts at your service learning site, either as the site presently exists or as part of the history of the clients of this service?

(*Learning goals for all disciplines: course content, writing*)

Student Assignment 10. After a minimum of four or five sessions at your site, describe your impressions, your learning goals, and the difference this project makes in both the immediate community (your local town or county) and the larger community—that is, the nation or the world. (*Learning goals: critical thinking and problem-solving skills, citizenship and leadership development, writing*)

Student Assignment 11. What do you know about this academic discipline (e.g., chemistry, biology, composition, sociology) now that you did not know before your service learning work? Write a letter to a new student at

Sample Journal Entry

This journal entry by a first-year community college student was written in response to Assignment 4. How might a faculty member evaluate this entry?

Service learning is a somewhat new teaching method that community colleges across the country are catching on to. [*Community Colleges and Service Learning*, an AACC publication] states: “The service learning instructional methodology integrates community service with academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility.”

Through service learning all parties involved benefit. Students see for themselves how rough others may have it. They can have tangible evidence that life is not always what it may seem. Some people do not have it as lucky as you do. If a student chooses to do his or her service learning volunteer project on something like dedicating their time picking up trash, they may get something else out of it. They may feel a feeling of worth. They can see their progress. They can see that they have helped. For myself I will choose Special Olympics as my service learning project. My basketball team coaches Special Olympics basketball teams. I could write about the joy in the kids’ faces, the happiness that I have felt by helping out people. I could write about the feelings I had when one of the special kids smiled or laughed during the games. Those kids have more fun playing basketball for the Special Olympics than I ever have. I love playing basketball, but those kids brought a new meaning to having fun on the basketball court.

People gain character by volunteering. Community service is a necessity for the future. Bill Clinton said [in his 1993 inaugural address], “I challenge a new generation . . . to a season of service . . . to act on your idealism by helping troubled children, keeping company with those in need, and reconnecting our torn communities.”

the college explaining the effect of the service learning component on learning course material. (*Learning goals: course content, writing*)

Student Assignment 12. What do you know now about yourself, your abilities, your community, and your future as a result of service learning? (*Learning goals: personal growth, writing*)

Conclusion

Service learning journals can help students learn how to write—how to express their thoughts about course-related service thoughtfully and clearly—and can give faculty a new means for communicating with students. While journaling may not be the best form of reflection for every course or discipline, its value to student growth and understanding of community and civic responsibility can be immeasurable.

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About the Authors

Joan Gilson, M.A., Ph.D., teaches writing and service learning courses at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas. A poet and community activist, she has authored articles on a number of topics, including the teaching of writing, writing assessment, and the development of the college student.

Nan Ottenritter, M.S., M.S.W., coordinates Bridges to Healthy Communities, a project combining service learning and HIV prevention for the American Association of Community Colleges. She writes and speaks on service learning and diversity in college and community settings.



FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

Gail Robinson, Coordinator of Service Learning
 AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES
 One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 410
 Washington, DC 20036-1176
 Phone 202/728-0200 ext. 254
 Fax 202/833-2467
grobenson@aacc.nche.edu
www.aacc.nche.edu/servicelearning

