



## USING REFLECTIVE WRITING IN SERVICE LEARNING

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Service learning courses allow students to connect their academic and civic lives. Writing—because it can be a structured, reflective process—helps students make that connection and begin to understand important social issues that face us today. At the same time, thoughtful writing offers students an opportunity to reflect on and integrate their placement experiences into their academic lives. The writing tasks should reinforce your specific teaching goals for the course. These tasks can range from a simple low-stakes assignment, such as a guided journal, to a high-stakes, formal assignment, such as an analysis of the placement. Additionally—working individually or in groups—students can develop progress reports, organizational documents, oral presentations, or brochures for their agency, thus creating professional samples for their portfolios.

Finally, and just as importantly, as you read their writing or listen to their presentations, you can monitor your students' experiences and provide essential feedback.

### FAQ: LOW-STAKES, EXPLORATORY WRITING

**What are low-stakes, exploratory assignments?** These assignments are short and require little or no grading. Often written in journal format, they are designed to get students thinking more deeply about their service learning experiences by exploring various aspects of an issue or considering several sides of a topic. They can be used to stimulate class discussions, get started on more formal assignments, or determine what the students have learned in a specific lecture.

Exploratory writing is messy in terms of grammar, organization, and spelling because thinking itself is a messy process. John Bean of Seattle University compares exploratory writing to “a musician’s early practice sessions on a complex new piece. . .” (101). Here, the goal is to develop good ideas, not polished writing.

**What is the student payoff?** Students get involved in both your course and their placement. They can safely explore various points of view, refine insights, try out new ideas, and test their own thinking skills, all without worrying about being graded on the quality of the writing. As an added benefit, low stakes assignments can form the kernel of longer, more formal assignments you may wish to make.

**How should I grade such assignments?** Because most students need an incentive, the writing should count. You can use something as simple as a check or limited points to recognize a completed assignment. In your syllabus, you announce how much each assignment counts toward the final grade.

- The points can be based on the amount of writing or the quality of content or both. *Inadequate effort does not have to earn points.*
- Many students seem satisfied with a check-plus for outstanding work, a check for a satisfactory entry, or a check-minus for an inadequate entry or one not turned in. Thus, credit generally reflects the extent to which the writing meets or exceeds your expectations.
- The good news is that you needn't spend time on issues like grammar, transitions, or style, *unless* you spot serious issues. Then you might make a general comment or indicate that the student should seek Writing Center support for a specific class of error. While the grading can be simple, you do need to comment on at least a few of the entries. When students know you read their journals, they put more effort into them.

**Should exploratory writing be done in or out of class?** It can be done either place. One advantage of in-class writing is that you can model good responses for your students. This type of modeling done early in the semester shows students the value of such writing.



**How frequently should students do exploratory writing?** Once a week is the absolute minimum, but two or three times a week is more likely to produce content that will deepen critical thinking.

**How much time should students spend on this writing?** Some faculty require a certain number of words per assignment (for example, 250 words or one double-spaced, typed page); others require that a certain amount of time (15 or 20 minutes) be allotted to each entry.

**How will I manage carrying all that paper?** Students can turn in their writing on loose-leaf paper (or in folders), notebooks (if your class isn't too large), or they can email the assignments as attachments.

**How will I handle reading all that writing?** You can collect 1/3 of the journals each week, or you can ask students to mark the three or four pieces they want you to read, or you can read a certain number of randomly selected entries from each student. As an added benefit, exploratory writing helps you monitor individual students and see what issues might be common. For the most part, a quick reading is all that is required.

**How much commenting/responding should I do?** While you don't want to wear out your hand, thoughtful comments or questions help students understand how the placement connects to your course and the readings. Remember, your comments may help the student work through a problem or look at an issue differently.

When you see common issues or problems—instead of responding to each student individually—you can address the class. Or if it is appropriate, you can ask students to address the problem in another exploratory writing assignment.

## LOW-STAKES EXPLORATORY ASSIGNMENTS

### JOURNALS

- **Guided journal**—students respond to specific prompts, such as a question or problem that you pose or a reading that you have assigned. (This ensures that students have done the reading.) Often these are assigned two or three times a week. In addition, you might ask students to consider various issues dealing with services, people, organizational structure, resources, etc.
- **Team journal**—students assigned to the same service learning placement take turns recording shared and individual experiences, and they can respond to one another's entries. Such journals can promote interaction within the team and expose students to several viewpoints. They can also interact using Track Changes on Microsoft Word, or they can use an electronic platform such as WebCT. To prevent coasting, make sure each author gets credit for his or her entries.
- **Critical incidents journal**—students describe and react to a critical incident each week. This journal allows students to write about specific issues and problems that they face in their placement. Critical incidents are defined at [www.compact.org/disciplines/reflection/fact/activities.html](http://www.compact.org/disciplines/reflection/fact/activities.html)
- **Double-entry journal**—using two sheets of paper side by side or a single sheet of paper with a vertical line in the middle, students write about the course material or their service placement, and later they reflect on their initial writing. Students write their initial comments, questions, confusion, or insights on the left. Then, several days later they reread their entries and make comments on what they wrote. Such reflective journals show students how their thinking and attitudes are evolving. In addition, double-entry journals can help students distinguish between facts and analysis/interpretation. By looking at the amount written on each side (lots of writing left side, little writing on the right, or the reverse), students see where they need to do more problem-solving or fact-finding.
- **Contemporary issues journal**—students read articles in current newspapers and respond to them, showing how their course and service learning relates to the articles and life outside college.



## OTHER LOW-STAKES ASSIGNMENTS

- **Electronic discussions**—students respond to prompts provided by the instructor and then respond to other students' responses. This works well on WebCT or on student blogs (xanga.com is a good site).
- **Thought letters**—somewhat longer than a journal entry, these are addressed to a friendly audience (such as parents) and encourage students to discuss problematic issues. Such assignments help students see the importance of choosing specific information for a specific audience.
- **Focused freewrites**—at the beginning or end of class, students spend 5 minutes freewriting (no stopping, analyzing, or editing) on a specific question (chosen by you) dealing with their placement.
- **Study questions for short answer or essay exams**—students develop potential questions for an exam. As an incentive, you pick one or two to appear on the exam.
- **Speculation memos**—students write this at the very beginning of the term, speculating about their placement. At the end of the semester, they reread this memo and respond to it.

## HIGH-STAKES FORMAL WRITING AND PRESENTATIONS

Low-stakes reflective writing can be an important end to itself. However, you can scaffold longer formal assignments upon earlier exploratory writing. As you would expect, formal assignments are graded on everything from content and style to format and grammar. Below are some nontraditional formal assignments—written individually or groups—that work well with service learning courses.

- Formal progress reports about the placement
- A history of the agency
- Internal or external documents that conduct the business of the agency
- Letter to director of the agency describing what the student learned
- Letter to a student who will be placed in this agency in the following semester
- A supported recommendation to future students undertaking the same project
- An article for the agency newsletter
- Press release
- Brochure, poster, or report to the funding agency

In addition, students can make individual or group oral presentations to the class about the agency or to the agency about their work, a public service announcement, or a PowerPoint presentation for a campus event.

## USEFUL SOURCES

Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Very useful in the compilation of this tipsheet:

<http://www.compact.org/disciplines/reflection>

