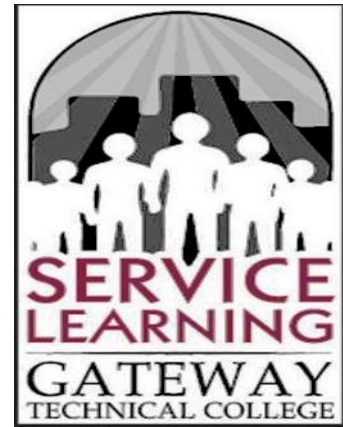


# Service Learning Reflection Toolkit<sup>1</sup>



**Reflection is** a crucial part of community service, which allows volunteers to look back on, think critically about, and learn from their service experience. Reflection may include acknowledging and/or sharing of reactions, feelings, observations, and ideas about anything regarding the activity. Reflection can happen through writing, speaking, listening, reading, drawing, acting, and any other way you can imagine.

## Benefits of Reflection<sup>2</sup>

- Gives meaning to the experience (was goal accomplished, how did we do, how is community served by this, how is this part of a larger effort, etc.)
- Provides an opportunity to establish expectations (individually, team)
- Can help volunteers understand the limitations and opportunities of the service site or community organization
- Relieves tension and provides re-energizing and renewal (especially important when service is emotionally challenging)
- Can create a sense of accomplishment that is crucial, especially where there are limited external rewards
- Can create a habit of appreciating ourselves
- Integration of service into the rest of one's life – developing a “spirit” of service and civic-mindedness
- Improved service – As volunteers examine the effects of their behavior, they discover ways to improve the quality and quantity of their service.
- Can create a sense of closure, especially important after a long service period, project, or emotional experience.
- Personal and Team Development:
  - Fosters life-long learning skills– develops an ability to learn from positive and negative experiences
  - “Reality Check” – guards against reinforcing inaccurate perceptions/biases
  - Gain a broader perspective of other's experience
  - Builds community among the volunteers
  - Personal Problem solving increases personal empowerment, confidence
  - Group problem solving creates shared understandings, open communication, and better teamwork
  - Clarifies values as volunteers confront new situations
  - Provides practice clarifying goals and making choices to accomplish these goals

<sup>1</sup> Info taken from “Service Reflection Toolkit” Northwest Service Academy, Portland, OR ([www.northwestacademy.org](http://www.northwestacademy.org))

<sup>2</sup> Info taken from “Learning Through Service,” Kate McPherson, Project Service Leadership, and “Possible Outcomes of Service Learning,” National Youth Leadership Council.

- Encourages volunteers to do higher level thinking, as they look for root causes of complex issues
- Acknowledges gained skills gained builds confidence

## **What? So What? Now What?**

This is a well-used and successful model to assist you in designing the reflection activities. Although you can derive learning from each question, focusing on all three will provide broader insights and keep participants from getting stuck on only the facts or just the feelings. Whereas the “What?, So What?, Now What?” model focuses on group processing and discussion, ideal reflection activities allow the participants to reflect publicly and privately, utilizing a variety of forms of expression.

**1. What?** (Reporting what happened, objectively). Without judgment or interpretation, participants describe in detail the facts and event(s) of the service experience.

Questions include:

*What happened? What did you observe? What issue is being addressed or population is being served? What were the results of the project? What events or “critical incidents” occurred? What was of particular notice? How did you feel about that? Let’s hear from someone who had a different reaction?*

**2. So What?** (What did you learn? What difference did the event make?) Participants discuss their feelings, ideas, and analysis of the service experience.

Questions can also be focused on the meaning or importance of the activity to:

**The Participant:** *Did you learn a new skill or clarify an interest? Did you hear, smell, feel anything that surprised you? What feelings or thoughts seem most strong today? How is your experience different from what you expected? What struck you about that? How was that significant? What impacts the way you view the situation/experience? (What lens are you viewing from?) What do the critical incidents mean to you? How did you respond to them? What did you like/dislike about the experience?*

**The Recipient:** *Did the “service” empower the recipient to become more self-sufficient? What did you learn about the people/community that we served? What might impact the recipient’s views or experience of the project?*

**The Community:** *What are some of the pressing needs/issues in the community? How does this project address those needs? How, specifically, has the community benefited? What is the least impact you can imagine for the project? With unlimited creativity, what is the most impact on the community that you can imagine?*

**The Group** (for group projects): *In what ways did the group work well together? What does that suggest to you about the group? How might the group have accomplished its task more effectively? In what ways did others help you today? (and vice versa) How were decisions made? Were everybody’s ideas listened to?*

**3. Now What?** (How will they think or act in the future as a result of this experience?)

Participants consider broader implications of the service experience and apply learning. Be aware to strike a balance between realistic, reachable goals and openness to spontaneity and change.

Some questions include:

*What seem to be the root causes of the issue/problem addressed? What kinds of activities are currently taking place in the community related to this project? What contributes to the success of projects like this? What hinders success? What learning occurred for you in this experience? How can you apply this learning? What would you like to learn more about, related to this project or issue? What follow-up is needed to address any challenges or difficulties? What*

*information can you share with your peers or community volunteers? If you were in charge of the project, what would you do to improve it? If you could do the project again, what would you do differently? What would “complete” the service?*

## **Journaling: A Primer**

Journaling is one of the best reflection tools. Ideally, the program or project would allow for a ten to fifteen minute period every day for the volunteers to journal; preferably at the end of the day or during/after a debriefing. It is helpful if staff or the project leader provides substantial structure to insure quality, conscientious journaling, and even more helpful if the person leading the reflection activity is journaling him or herself! Regardless of the time allotted, it is important to encourage participants to write whatever comes to mind, and to not worry about grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. This entails a commitment to confidentiality that nobody will ever share what they have written unless they want to. You also want to be definite and clear about the time allotted, (five to fifteen minutes) and let them know when it is almost finished.

## **Journaling Methods**

*Clusters:* Have people shout out words or phrases that describe the day. Ask each person to take two minutes to write five or six words in random spaces on their journaling page. Give a short speech about the interconnectedness of everything, the web of life, Quantum Physics, or whatever and ask them to do a free write focusing on those five or six items and how they are related.

*The Critical Incident:* Choose an incident that involved the entire team and give them a couple of minutes to think about the incident. Then ask them to write a detailed, factual report of what happened, making sure to answer the four “W” questions, “who, what, where, when.” You can then have participants share their stories to see how they differ from another.

*Dialogue:* A good one for developing observation and communication skills. Ask participants in the morning to pay special attention to conversations they hear throughout the day, including light conversations between staff and volunteers, volunteers and sponsors or stakeholders, etc. Ask them to pay special attention to mannerisms, accents, and the tone of the conversation. Later, have the participants pick a dialogue and duplicate as closely as possible how it went. This should be done in a light-hearted manner on a light-hearted day to avoid a “bashing” session. This is an exercise that gets better with time, as their observation and retention skills improve.

*Different Perspectives:* A great one for developing empathy skills. Ask participants to recall a specific occurrence from the day that involved some degree of conflict. Ask them to assume the viewpoint opposite that which they actually held during this conflict (or the viewpoint they were the least empathetic with) and write a description of the conflict from this perspective. This can include what happened, their role in it, what they want, what they envision as the ideal solution. Good debrief questions are, “How did it feel to do this writing, how were you able to get in their shoes or how was it difficult, what is one thing you realized through this writing.”

*The Fly on the Wall:* Ask participants to take a couple moments to reflect on the day (where they’ve been, what they’ve done, whom they’ve worked with, tools they’ve used). Then ask them to pretend they were a “fly on the wall” observing but not participating in the scene, and write a short descriptive passage based on their observations. You can also use any animal or plant or person that was near the project site.

*Guided Imagery:* Encourage participants to relax, close their eyes, get comfortable, notice their breathing, etc. and read a guided imagery. Then, ask the participants to free-write about what they experienced.

*The Free Write:* The easiest and perhaps most effective journaling method, wherein people that think they “can’t write” or “have nothing to say” realize how much and how well they can write. For a predetermined amount of time participants engage in continuous writing by keeping their pens moving . . . even if only to write, “I don’t know what to write.” It is helpful to trigger the free-write with an open-ended sentence such as “I don’t think I’ll ever forget . . .” or “If I could do one thing differently, I would . . .” or make up your own! Let participants know when they are nearing the end of the writing time, and then ask them how it went.

*The Letter:* Have participants write a letter to themselves, a relative, a historical figure, a political figure, etc. describing the project and what it means to them, or ask for some piece of advice, etc.

### **Good Reflection Writing/Sharing Questions:**

- What is service? What is the difference between service and volunteering?
- Has your definition of service changed? Why? How? Should everyone do service?
- Describe a problem the team has been having. List possible solutions.
- Make a list of the skills used and learned on this project.
- What have been the best and worst parts of this project?
- Describe a person you met on your project. What are their attitudes about the project, where might those attitudes have come from?
- What communities/identity groups are you a member of? How might this be related with your commitment to service?
- Have you ever felt hopelessness, despair, discouragement or burnout related to your service? How have you dealt with this? How can reflection help?
- What are some of the problems facing the world today? (mind map) How does your service connect or address these issues?
- Identify a person, group, or community that you got to know this year, who is significantly “other” for you. What are the needs or challenges facing them that particularly got to you? What is one way in which you’ve allowed yourself to be changed as a result of knowing these folks?
- What community need, work challenge, or public issue have you given the most deliberate, critical, analytical thought to this year? What are some factors and facts you looked at, data you considered? Who or what resources did you consult?
- Over the next two years, what’s one issue or challenge you would like to be a more respected authority on? How will this be a challenge for you?
- Dedicating ourselves to service rather than selfishness or our own comfort can be scary. We risk honestly getting to know others who are different, and come face to face, day after day, with pain, abuse, hatred, violence. What are two fears or inner worries you have, that somehow keep you from being the person of service you hope to become? What is something in your life that brings your courage, that gives you hope?
- What is one way in which you expect the community you are serving to nourish, nurture, or satisfy you? What are two ways you will take responsibility for that community?
- Summarize the most important things you will take with you from the experience.
- Your commitment to service can involve many things, including keeping your word (also being realistic when we say “yes”) and resisting the temptation, at least some of the time, to move on to new causes and needs. Think of something this year that you really didn’t want to continue doing, but you kept doing it the best you could. Was there something you got out of that?