

**Morningside College**  
**The Chinese University of Hong Kong**

**GEMC3001 Service Learning / Civic Engagement**

**Reflective Journal**

**Guidelines**

- I. Purpose
- II. How to structure a journal entry
- III. Special entries
- IV. To do and to avoid
- V. Sample journal entry (service learning trip)
- VI. Sample journal entry (individual project)

**Purpose**

Your journal is your thinking space, a place to connect service-learning experiences with course learning, to grow personally, and to develop as an engaged community member. Quality of reflection matters more than perfect writing.

**How to structure a journal entry (300-450 words/entry<sup>i</sup>)**

1. Date each entry
2. Describe<sup>ii</sup> (100-150 words): Objectively recount what happened during the service-learning experience, without judgment or analysis
3. Examine (100 words): Analyse the experience using academic concepts (e.g. from pre-trip work, project proposal bibliography, class materials), personal perspectives, and questions about causes, consequences, and social issues.
4. Synthesize (100-200 words): Draw new understandings, insights, or questions about the course material, oneself, the community, or societal structures, and consider future actions or changes in thinking.

**Special Entries**

1. First entry: Your service-learning experience is just beginning. Record your expectations, anxieties, goals. What assumptions do you have about the place, people, organization, and/or community?
2. Mid-point: When you are halfway through your service-learning experience, take time to look back. What patterns do you see in your entries? How has your understanding changed from your first entry? What do you need to focus on for the second half of your service-learning experience?
3. Final entry: Quote two or three lines from early entries that now seem naïve, imprecise, or different in some other way. Articulate your biggest transformation in understanding. State one commitment for how this experience is likely to influence your future – this could refer to the way you handle challenges, the way you communicate, the way you approach difference, or how you might serve others in more concrete terms. There is no right or wrong way of crafting this final entry – honest reflection is key.

Entry	Content
<b>First entry</b>	Expectations, anxieties, goals, assumptions
<b>Entry 2</b>	Describe: Facts only, save your analysis for later Examine: Connect to readings/other course material Synthesize: Evaluate your original reactions, what has changed and why
<b>Entry 3</b>	
<b>Entry 4</b>	
<b>Entry 5</b> (...onward, depending on length of service)	
<b>Mid-point entry</b>	
<b>Entry 7</b>	Describe, examine, synthesize
<b>Entry 8</b>	
<b>Entry 9</b>	
<b>Entry 10</b> (onward)	
<b>Final entry</b>	Transformation(s), commitment(s)

DO	AVOID
✓ Write within 24 hours of service experience	✗ Waiting until the night before the journal is due
✓ Use concrete examples as evidence	✗ Vague generalizations (“It was good/bad..., I think they should probably...”)
✓ Make at least one clear course connection per major entry	✗ Keeping the service experience and class content separate

### Sample Journal Entry (*College service-learning trip | 391 words*)

Student: Hyacinth Mok

Course: GEMC3001 Service Learning/Civic Engagement

Site: Mohammad VI Foundation for Environmental Protection, Rabat

Date: Day 8, Entry 8 | 23 May 2025

Hours today: 3 | Total hours: 32

*[Describe]*

Today, we visited the Hassan II International Center for Environmental Training in Salé, run by the Mohammed VI Foundation. Staff member Ms. Amal Haouari greeted us at the impressive building where a youth conference was underway. After listening in briefly, we attended Ms. Haouari's presentation. Several students from the "Young Reporters for the Environment" program—a flagship initiative here—joined us to introduce their projects. Everyone, staff and students, was dressed professionally. I noticed a portrait of Princess Lalla Hasnaa on the wall. Interestingly, we were asked to put our plastic water bottles out of sight before group photos were taken. After the talk, we toured the center's garden and then had coffee and pastries in the foyer. [118 words]

*[Examine]*

The Center's structure reflects the argument from Guaâdaoui et al. (2021)<sup>iii</sup> that Morocco champions sustainability through top-down, royal vision. The Foundation's name, the Center's name, and the portrait all signal this. However, their "Young Reporters" program also addresses a key gap the article hints at: how to build public buy-in for the long term. This connects to our visit with Sara at the Moroccan Association for Family Planning (AMPF). It shows that whether an organization is top-down or grassroots, one core challenge is the same: how to foster genuine public engagement. [91 words]

[Synthesize]

My initial reaction was skeptical. The place felt too polished, and a comment from a Young Reporter about "summering at a beach house" highlighted a level of privilege that made me uncomfortable. How could this be considered an NGO alongside groups like AMPF or Project SOAR that serve more immediate, basic needs? I even questioned why it was on our itinerary.

But forcing myself to write a neutral description and connect it to our readings made me confront my own biases. I've always assumed NGOs must be grassroots and serve the underprivileged, but I'm starting to see I've confused the mission with the organizer. I also realize my own lack of context: I've never lived in a monarchy where royal foundations can operate independently from the government, providing stability beyond political cycles.

Before our visit to AMEPN tomorrow, I need to unpack my assumptions. For my final essay, I'm considering comparing the approaches of this Foundation and a grassroots group like AMEPN. I should prepare questions for AMEPN's founder tomorrow, maybe even asking for his perspective on the Hassan II Center's role. [182 words]

### **Sample Journal Entry** (*individual project / 419 words*)

Student: Hydrangea Lim

Course: GEMC3001 Service Learning/Civic Engagement

Site: Hong Kong Dog Rescue (HKDR) Tai Po Rehoming Centre

Date: Day 1, Entry 1 | 22 September 2025

Hours today: 4 | Total hours: 8 (including mandatory training)

[Describe]

Today was my first shift at the Hong Kong Dog Rescue (HKDR) Tai Po Rehoming Centre, a sprawling facility located in the hills above Tai Po. I noticed cleaners hosing down concrete kennels and disinfecting enclosures—so much water, so many smells, so much ear-deafening noise. After signing in and checking the list of resident dogs, I began taking friendly “green” dogs for walks on a designated paved loop just outside the Centre gates. The contrast was striking between the stressful, echoing kennels and the moments of calm outside, where dogs could stop panting and simply sniff the air. The scale of dedicated, yet repetitive, care was immediately apparent. [109 words]

[Examine]

The daily reality at HKDR directly engages with the constraints highlighted by Ho et al. (2024)<sup>iv</sup>. Their study underscores that the effectiveness of a “Trap, Neuter, Return” (TNR) policy in protecting wildlife hinges on achieving and maintaining high sterilization coverage in a defined area. HKDR’s model, while compassionate, operates primarily through intake from across the territory and adoption. This reveals a systemic gap: Hong Kong lacks a coordinated, territory-wide TNR program targeting specific ecological zones like its country parks. The Centre’s work, though vital, functions as a rescue and rehoming bottleneck, not a population control strategy for sensitive urban-protected area boundaries, such as the adjacent Pat Sin Leng range. [109 words]

[Synthesize]

My initial feeling was one of admiration for the Centre’s order and dedication, but also despair at the endless lines of kennels. I unconsciously framed the work as purely ethical—saving individual lives—and saw the hills, village houses, and the temples surrounding the Centre merely as a peaceful backdrop.

Re-reading Ho et al. (2024) forced a difficult but necessary confrontation. My ethical framework was

missing an ecological dimension. The article's conclusion that "wildlife cannot wait" isn't an argument against rescue, but an urgent call for integrated policy. I realized HKDR's Tai Po location is symbolic: it sits on the edge. It's a buffer between urban sprawl and protected areas, handling the consequences of a missing territory-wide management strategy. My earlier binary of "shelter vs. country park" that I mentioned in my project proposal was wrong; both are impacted by the same root cause of unmanaged free-roaming populations.

This synthesis complicates my view of advocacy. Pushing for adoption is crucial, but insufficient. For my final essay, I must explore why a formal TNR ordinance for Hong Kong's country parks doesn't exist. My role here isn't just to walk dogs, but to understand the complex policy landscape that keeps the kennels full. [201 words]

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<sup>i</sup> View word counts as a framework to develop precision in your writing. Your primary goal is clear, effective communication. Use these guidelines to refine your ideas, ensuring *every word contributes meaningfully to your argument*.

<sup>ii</sup> The "describe, examine, synthesize" framework is most closely associated with the work of Janet Eyler and Dwight E. Giles Jr. in *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning?* (1999, Jossey-Bass).

<sup>iii</sup> The article referred to in this section was one of the pre-trip reading assignments: Guaâdaoui, A., Elyadini, M., Chiat, K., Jdani, T., El Hajjaji, S. (2021). Preserving the Environment and Establishing Sustainable Development: An Overview on the Moroccan Model. *E3S Web of Conferences*, 234, 1-6.

<sup>iv</sup> This refers to an article included in the student's service learning project proposal: Ho, Ying-Yi & Chang, Hsueh-Wen & Chang, Gau-Ming & Yen, Shih-Ching. (2024). Effectiveness of the trap-neuter-return method for free-roaming dog management in an urban protected area: Wildlife cannot wait. *Global Ecology and Conservation*. 53.