LESSON 8

Learn From a Sample Commutation Application

When I applied for commutation during the Clinton and Obama administrations, I drew on work I had done long before I filled out either petition. Neither President granted my request. The education, writing, and relationships I developed while serving my sentence still helped me build a life after prison. As you study this sample, look for work you can begin now that would serve you even if your circumstances stay the same.

In Lesson 7, you identified what the commutation form asks. Here, you'll follow Daniel Rowan's fictional application and see how he connects his answers to dated records, a release plan, and letters from people who know his work. The packet is an unsigned teaching example. Use the examples on these pages to work through the lesson on paper.

Start with two questions.

- What would I want a reader to understand from the first page of my request?
- Which part of my account would a record or another person's observations help explain?

State the request and give the reader a way to follow it

Daniel asks to shorten his prison term, with the reduction taking effect 180 days after a grant so he has time to prepare for the transition. His request leaves his five years of supervised release in place. The cover letter states both points up front. Daniel then explains his role in the offense, including that he recruited two couriers, and acknowledges a disciplinary finding for possessing an unauthorized cellphone in 2016.

Read Daniel's complete sample commutation petition

Appendix A starts on page 42. Use the guide there to find the form, release plan, and support letters.

The petition answers the government's questions. The supporting pages give the reader places to look for more detail. As you read the guide below, consider which material would help a reader understand each part of the request.

Part of Daniel's packet	What it shows	What to look for
Cover letter and petition	The change Daniel requests and his account of the offense and his conduct since.	Does the request stay consistent across both documents?
Dated progress record and writing	When events happened and how Daniel responded, including a disciplinary setback.	Which details come from Daniel's own account? What records could confirm them?
Release plan and budget	His proposed housing, work, and expenses, with a plan for delays.	Which arrangements have conditions? What would he do if work starts late?
Support letters	What a mentor, a family member, and a prospective employer observed or offered.	How does each writer know Daniel? What does each person say they can do?
Supporting-document list	Which records the sample illustrates and which a real applicant would need to obtain.	Can you trace an important detail to the person or record that supplies it?

Adapted from Prison Professors, "Sample Commutation Application," November 2026, packet pp. 2–23.

Pause and write.

- What part of your request would you state first? Which detail would you explain more fully in an answer or attachment?

Follow one experience through the record

On April 14, 2026, Daniel writes that he entered a supply count before checking the last shelf. He tells his supervisor, recounts the supplies, and corrects the entry as directed. He decides to check each storage area before signing the count and to review at the end of the week whether he followed that procedure. His journal gives a reader the sequence of decisions and a way to see what he planned to change.

His mentor, Thomas Avery, writes about reading the first draft and asking Daniel to describe the choice he had controlled. Thomas can describe the change he saw in Daniel's writing. Daniel's journal gives Daniel's account of what happened at work. If a reader needed independent confirmation of the incident itself, a supervisor who saw the correction or a dated work record could provide it, if available.

Daniel's book report shows another way to connect learning to action. After reading Earning Freedom, he revises his employment plan around an entry-level job. He identifies what the job would require, how he would get there, and what he could budget from wages. A later reader could compare the two plans and see which questions Daniel still needed to answer.

Pause and write.

- Think of a mistake you corrected or feedback you used. What could your own account explain? Who or what could provide a second view of the same event?

Check the release plan against the letters

Daniel's release plan identifies a place to live with his sister, Elena, subject to approval. Her letter offers him a room for up to 12 months if the residence is approved and explains what she can offer if he has to wait for his first paycheck. A prospective employer, Morgan Vale, describes the shop-assistant position, the conditions on the offer, and the need to confirm a start date. Thomas offers to meet weekly for the first 90 days if Daniel returns to the proposed community and receives any needed approvals.

Read Daniel's budget alongside those letters. His monthly budget assumes a paycheck once work begins. His sister's letter describes help she can offer during a delay, including groceries and time before he has to contribute to household expenses. If work starts later than he expects, Daniel plans to review the money he has left each week and look for other work. The plan tells readers what he could do during a gap between release and a first paycheck.

Pause and write.

- Which promise or assumption in your plan would you want to confirm with someone else? What could you do if that arrangement takes longer than you expect?

Choose what to develop next

Daniel's sample includes a list that identifies the source and purpose of each supporting item. It shows where a person preparing an actual petition would need genuine records, including the judgment and the institutional progress report. You can make a short list in your notebook. For each item, name the answer it would support, who created the record, and what you still need to confirm. Start with one answer you can improve this week.

Pause and write.

- Which part of your account depends on something you still need to verify? What step could help you resolve it?

Write your journal entry

Date your entry. Describe a responsibility you want to take on and one action that would prepare you for it. Give yourself a date to review what happened and decide whether to adjust your plan.

- What would I want a reader to understand about a decision I've made since my conviction?
- Which document, dated entry, or firsthand observation could help explain that decision?
- What will I do in the next seven days, and what will I look for when I review my progress?

In Lesson 9, you'll study how a fictional pardon applicant uses records and letters to explain his life after prison.