

## **CHAPTER 3: MEMORIALIZE YOUR JOURNEY**

When people first come into the criminal justice system, they usually focus on the most immediate problem in front of them. They worry about charges, sentencing, surrender, prison time, release dates, and the collateral consequences that may follow a conviction. All of those concerns are valid. Yet many people overlook something that may influence how others perceive them long after the formal process begins.

They overlook the value that can come from a new record a person has an opportunity to build.

From the moment a person is investigated, charged, or sentenced, a record begins to grow. That record likely grows with affidavits, indictments, plea agreements, trial transcripts, presentence reports, disciplinary history, news coverage, and other official documents. Those materials shape how stakeholders understand the person's past conduct. They may be detailed, damaging, and accessible for years.

What they usually do not show is how the person responds to such records. That is why I encourage members of our community to memorialize the journey. If you're working through our courses, develop a new record. Memorialize the steps you're taking to prepare for success by building a profile that you update regularly.

If you do not create a written record of what you are learning, how you are changing, and what steps you are taking to prepare for a better future, then the official record may have an influence on what opportunities open, or do not open for you.

Any person who hopes to rebuild credibility, strengthen self-advocacy, and prepare for better outcomes should anticipate the damage and collateral consequences that accompany a criminal record. Such an understanding should lead to better plans.

### **THE RECORD WILL EXIST EITHER WAY**

After my conviction, I learned to accept that the government's record of my life would always exist. The indictment, judgment, sentence, and prison number existed. None of those records reflected the way I intended to live through the years

ahead. I had to own what would come with that record. It led me to accept that I would likely be unemployable for the rest of my life.

That acceptance led to clarity, which helped me develop the plans that would carry me through the journey.

I could not change the judicial record, or go backward and erase the bad decisions that brought me into the system. I could, however, begin building another record. I could read, write, keep journals, and document goals. I could develop release plans, and create a body of work that showed I was preparing deliberately rather than simply waiting for calendar pages to turn so that I could complete the sentence. The record I built gave people another basis on which to evaluate me, showing that my criminal conviction did not tell the full story of my life. I started to build a new record that, I hoped, would influence how others perceived me. Rather than considering only the crime, conviction, and sentence, I wanted them to see how I responded and how I worked to make amends.

In this chapter, I hope readers will understand the opportunities that can open for those who work hard to show self-directed preparation.

## **WRITING IS MORE THAN REFLECTION**

Some people write to sort out feelings, reduce stress, or make sense of difficult circumstances. Writing can help a person think more clearly, process adversity, and measure progress over time. In the context of the criminal justice journey, writing can also create a body of work that becomes an asset for self-advocacy. A person who writes regularly about:

- » what he is learning,
- » how he is using time,
- » what books he is reading,
- » what goals he is pursuing,
- » what weaknesses he is trying to overcome,
- » and how he is preparing for release

is doing more than keeping busy. He is creating an accessible record that helps other people understand that he is not waiting passively for circumstances to change.

He is taking responsibility for the future he hopes to build. That intrinsic motivation can lead to new opportunities.

Through Prison Professors, I place a heavy emphasis on memorializing the journey. Documentation gives form to growth. Without documentation, effort can remain invisible. With documentation, a person begins building a body of work that shows intentionality, discipline, and preparation.

### **INFLUENCE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS**

Frederick Douglass influenced the way I thought about the importance of writing and building a new record. To work toward abolishing slavery, he trained himself how to communicate, think critically, and write in ways that made his humanity, intelligence, and value self-evident. By writing, he could share his story and build credibility. He leveraged that credibility to influence change. Douglass took ownership of his narrative by documenting his experience. By writing his life story, he persuaded others to see the injustice of slavery, and the power of human potential. His story and actions made him a revered figure throughout the world.

That lesson inspired me. Like Frederick Douglass, I wanted to use my personal story and the lessons I learned in prison to influence change. I hoped to open more opportunities for people to earn freedom through merit. This lesson has practical relevance for anyone going through the criminal justice system.

I am not suggesting that every person will become a public writer or a historical figure. For those in our community, I am suggesting that the act of documenting your experience changes the way you understand yourself and may also change the way others understand you. A written record creates a fuller picture than court documents alone. It creates a place where accountability, reflection, and preparation can become visible.

Douglass understood that communication could influence perception. The same principle applies here. A person who learns to write clearly about his life, his growth, and his plans increases the likelihood that others will see more than the charge.

### **PRISON PROFESSORS CHARITABLE CORPORATION**

Prison Professors Charitable Corporation / PO Box 50996 / Irvine CA 92619

IRS 501c3 #85-2603315 / [www.PrisonProfessors.org](http://www.PrisonProfessors.org)

Email: [Playbook@PrisonProfessors.org](mailto:Playbook@PrisonProfessors.org)



## **MEMORIALIZING THE JOURNEY IS PREPARING**

Too many people treat preparation as something abstract. They may say they are trying to improve, or to do better. Such statements may be sincere, but sincerity becomes more powerful if it shows the preparations you make.

- » If a person writes a biography, that document shows how he understands his own story.
- » If he keeps a journal, that record shows whether his daily conduct aligns with the future he says he wants.
- » If he writes book reports, he shows that reading is helping him build judgment rather than simply pass time.
- » If he develops a release plan, he shows that he is thinking ahead about work, housing, support, discipline, and the collateral consequences that may follow release.

In every case, writing strengthens thinking and effectiveness.

Many people believe they should begin documenting growth only when someone asks for proof. That is backward. The written record becomes valuable precisely because it has been built over time. The person who waits until sentencing, release review, or a crisis point is already behind the person who began earlier. A record built slowly through repeated effort carries more weight than something assembled in a rush.

## **THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INTENTION AND EVIDENCE**

The criminal justice system is full of people who intend to change. Some will. Many will not. Decision-makers do not always know which person is serious. That uncertainty is one reason documentation becomes so important.

- » A person may intend to become more disciplined. A journal can show whether the person is truly disciplined and self-directed.
- » A person may intend to become better educated. Book reports can show what he is reading, what he is learning, and how he is applying those lessons.
- » A person may intend to succeed after release. A release plan can show whether that intention is supported by thought, structure, and realistic preparation.

## **PRISON PROFESSORS CHARITABLE CORPORATION**

Prison Professors Charitable Corporation / PO Box 50996 / Irvine CA 92619

IRS 501c3 #85-2603315 / [www.PrisonProfessors.org](http://www.PrisonProfessors.org)

Email: [Playbook@PrisonProfessors.org](mailto:Playbook@PrisonProfessors.org)



- » A person may intend to rebuild trust. Testimonials and sustained written effort can help others see whether trust is being earned.

Anyone can claim good intentions. By memorializing the journey, a person builds evidence that shows results. Results are more persuasive than intentions.

## **WHAT YOU SHOULD MEMORIALIZE**

A person should write consistently, showing that he is intentionally committed to building a record of growth. We encourage members of our community to memorialize the journey through the following categories.

### **Biography**

- » A biography explains who you are, what shaped your life, what you have learned, and how you are preparing for the future. It helps you take ownership of the narrative.

### **Journal**

- » A journal documents effort over time. It shows how you are using your days, what you are learning, what obstacles you are facing, and how you are responding.

### **Book Reports**

- » Book reports turn reading into visible evidence of self-directed learning. They show that books are influencing thought and conduct.

### **Release Plan**

- » A release plan shows that you are preparing intentionally for life after prison. It reflects critical thinking and realism.

### **Other Written Artifacts**

- » Letters, educational reflections, program notes, lesson responses, and testimonials may also become part of a larger body of work. You can include them in your journals or other areas of the profile you develop on Prison Professors. Preserve a pattern that shows who you are becoming.

## **PRISON PROFESSORS CHARITABLE CORPORATION**

Prison Professors Charitable Corporation / PO Box 50996 / Irvine CA 92619

IRS 501c3 #85-2603315 / [www.PrisonProfessors.org](http://www.PrisonProfessors.org)

Email: [Playbook@PrisonProfessors.org](mailto:Playbook@PrisonProfessors.org)



## **YOU ARE WRITING FOR MORE THAN ONE AUDIENCE**

When people begin documenting their progress, they sometimes think only of themselves. That is understandable. The work often begins as a private effort. Over time, however, the writing may serve more than one audience.

You may be writing for:

- » yourself,
- » a future judge,
- » a probation officer,
- » a case manager,
- » a family member,
- » an employer,
- » a supporter,
- » or another stakeholder who wants to know whether your conduct reflects genuine preparation.

Rather than writing to impress people, create a record that shows you are serious about preparing for success. The body of work you build may later influence how others evaluate your discipline, credibility, and readiness for opportunity. This is why I encourage people to memorialize their journey from the beginning. The record becomes stronger when it shows consistency and reflects intrinsic motivation.

## **MEMORIALIZING THE JOURNEY BUILDS JUDGMENT**

Writing shows commitment to progress and helps the writer develop confidence.

When you sit down to explain what you are doing, what you are learning, what went wrong, what you want to improve, and how you intend to move forward, you are forced to think more clearly. Vague hopes become weaker. Excuses become more obvious. Contradictions become harder to ignore. Writing can expose self-deception, but it can also sharpen direction.

That is one reason I do not view writing as a side activity. I view it as part of the preparation process itself.

A person who writes regularly will often become more thoughtful, more deliberate, and more capable of explaining decisions. Those gains have practical value. They

## **PRISON PROFESSORS CHARITABLE CORPORATION**

Prison Professors Charitable Corporation / PO Box 50996 / Irvine CA 92619

IRS 501c3 #85-2603315 / [www.PrisonProfessors.org](http://www.PrisonProfessors.org)

Email: [Playbook@PrisonProfessors.org](mailto:Playbook@PrisonProfessors.org)



improve self-understanding. They improve communication. They improve planning. They also create a visible trail of effort.

I want to emphasize the value of developing the record over a sustained length of time. The worst moment to begin building proof is when you suddenly realize you need it. If sentencing is approaching, if release planning is underway, if a recommendation is being considered, or if someone asks what you have done to prepare, it is far better to have a record already in place than to begin scrambling for language.

The perfect moment will not arrive. The useful moment is the one in front of you. When people delay this work, they often imagine they will start later. In reality, if you begin today, you will have a better chance of advancing your prospects for success than if you wait.

Build a record that shows what you are doing with your time, what you are learning, what you are building, and how you are preparing for better outcomes.

## **SELF-DIRECTED QUESTIONS**

1. If someone reviewed the official record in my case, what would they still not know about me unless I wrote it down myself?
2. What have I done in the past month that reflects growth, discipline, or preparation, but remains undocumented?
3. How would writing a biography help me take greater ownership of my narrative?
4. What could my journals reveal about the way I am using time right now?
5. How would book reports, release planning, or other written work help create evidence of self-directed effort?
6. If I continue through the next six months without documenting my progress, what opportunities might I lose?
7. What can I begin writing this week that would help me start building a stronger record?

Memorializing your journey is not separate from preparation. It is one of the ways you prepare. When you write, preserve, and organize the work you are doing, you create something more durable than intention. You create evidence.

## **PRISON PROFESSORS CHARITABLE CORPORATION**

Prison Professors Charitable Corporation / PO Box 50996 / Irvine CA 92619

IRS 501c3 #85-2603315 / [www.PrisonProfessors.org](http://www.PrisonProfessors.org)

Email: [Playbook@PrisonProfessors.org](mailto:Playbook@PrisonProfessors.org)

