

CHAPTER 4: BUILD YOUR PROFILE FROM THE START

People going through the criminal justice system may feel like puppets. Other people pull strings that have an enormous influence on their life—and the lives of the people they love. Prosecutors write indictments, probation officers write presentence reports, lawyers make arguments without knowing much about the individual, reporters may write articles, and government agencies issue press releases. Those records shape how judges, case managers, employers, and even neighbors see a person. Once those documents begin circulating, a person can feel as if his identity has been reduced to the worst decision of his life.

I know that feeling.

After my arrest, the government had its version of my story. Judicial records reflected facts about the crime I committed, the prosecution's, and the sentence I received.

Granted, I was guilty of participating in a scheme to sell drugs. Yet those reports or stories did not capture all that I had learned during that first year of solitary confinement. They could not reveal what was in my heart, or what I had learned from reading the Bible or from books on personal leadership.

Reading can change a person's life, but no one knows about those changes unless a person does something about it. Leaders taught me to think differently or how I would prepare for the life I hoped to build after prison. I wanted a different future, but the responsibility would be mine to build it.

That realization influenced the way I lived through 9,500 days in prison. I came to understand that the record I built through reading, writing, planning, and disciplined effort would shape opportunities long before anyone offered me a second chance. I could not erase the bad decisions that led to my conviction. I could, however, begin documenting the decisions I was making afterward.

That is the purpose behind the Profiles platform at Prison Professors. We built it to give people a practical structure for memorializing their journey from the beginning. Rather than thinking of a profile as a public-relations exercise, think of it

as a disciplined record that shows how a person is preparing for better outcomes through self-directed effort.

It's our hope that through our Playbook, participants will come to the same conclusion:

People strengthen their prospects for success when they document progress by developing a comprehensive profile.

WRITE THE NEXT CHAPTER

One of the lessons I learned from reading Frederick Douglass was that a person gains strength by taking ownership of his own narrative. Douglass did not allow other people to define him entirely through the degrading system he had endured. He invested time to learn how to read, write, and communicate. Then he used his personal story to build a persuasive case that helped others see his life, his message, and his argument with greater clarity. He wrote. He explained. He gave people a fuller understanding of who he was, what he had learned, and what he intended to contribute. By developing his personal story, Frederick Douglass changed the way people thought.

The same principle applies to people going through the criminal justice system. We can all learn from reading about people who overcame obstacles larger than the ones we face and then emulate their commitment to personal leadership.

- » If you do not write your biography, other people will rely on court records, including your Presentence Investigation Report.
- » If you do not explain how you are using time, others may assume you are waiting passively or that you are not self-directed and intrinsically motivated.
- » If you do not document your progress, you leave no visible evidence of growth.

Stakeholders may not recognize or acknowledge your efforts at first. Building a record takes time. But the more you write, the easier it becomes for you to persuade others that you're worthy of consideration. Perhaps you can build pathways that will lead to a higher level of liberty sooner, a job that may await you upon release, or business opportunities that you cannot even imagine today.

By strengthening my body of written work, more opportunities have opened than I can remember. In *Earning Freedom: Conquering a 45-Year Prison Term*, I reveal many of those opportunities. In other books, I show how those decisions and actions in prison led to prosperity upon release, and then wealth. They allowed me to focus on being the change that I want to see in the world—and to give all resources away without charge to members of our community. These micro steps are essential to bringing changes that may expand President Trump’s First Step Act so that all people in prison can benefit from those incentives, regardless of what country they’re from, or what offense they have.

We want to incentivize excellence for all. To succeed, however, we need to collect data, showing how people in our community are working hard to prepare for law-abiding, contributing lives upon release.

A profile helps you begin building that record in an organized way. It gives you a place to show who you are, what you are learning, how you are changing, and what you are doing to prepare for success. Think about your profile as a living record of growth. It should evolve as you evolve. Step by step.

WHAT A PROFILE IS REALLY FOR

Some people may hear the word profile and think of social media, self-promotion, or image management. That is not what I mean. As CZ writes in *Freedom of Money*, a leader must remain mission aligned.

A Prison Professors profile is a structured tool for self-directed learning and written accountability. It gives a person a practical place to store evidence of preparation. It turns private effort into visible effort. It creates an organized archive of growth that can later support release planning, mitigation strategy, reentry preparation, and self-advocacy. If you adhere to the lessons in our courses, you will see how a strong profile can influence prospects for employment or even a higher level of liberty sooner.

The well developed profile becomes an asset for self-advocacy. A person may say:

» I am trying to improve.

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That statement may be sincere, but it remains vague until the person shows what improvement looks like in practice and builds that record over time. A profile provides that record of growth. It also becomes time-stamped, allowing stakeholders to see a pattern of personal commitment. That pattern can show intrinsic motivation, which becomes a powerful force in preparing for success.

The major sections are straightforward, and I will write about them throughout this workbook. A person cannot think of a profile as a magic pill. It should become a record of personal growth that grows over time. No one plants a seed for an apple tree in the morning and expects to eat an apple in the afternoon. You've got to nurture that seed over time, and allow it to mature into a tree that provides fruit for a lifetime.

These are the lessons we offer at Prison Professors. Always remember that no one is coming to rescue you from the prison system. Expect obstacles, but work to succeed anyway.

Biography

This is where you take ownership of your story. You explain who you are, what led to your current circumstances, what you have learned, and how you are preparing for a better future. The biography is not a place to make excuses. It is a place to show self-awareness, accountability, and direction.

Think of the biography as your effort to write a fuller and more accurate account of your life. If you do not take the time to write it, other people may rely entirely on government records and press coverage to define you.

Journal

A journal documents your effort over time. It becomes evidence of consistency. Instead of making broad claims about who you want to become, the journal shows how you are using your days and weeks. The Straight-A Guide reinforces that growth becomes more credible when it is written down, tracked, and revisited over time.

It is easy to complain about what the prison system is not doing. Yet complaining does not move the needle in your effort to prepare for success. Use your journal to show how you are using time today to prepare for success

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tomorrow. Your journal can show self-directed learning, including the way you are developing vocabulary, writing ability, math skills, critical thinking, or a record of contributing to the lives of others.

Book Reports

Book reports show how you are using reading to build your thinking. They help prove that you are not only passing time. You are learning, reflecting, and applying ideas. When a person writes book reports, he creates a visible record of self-directed education.

The book report can be simple. Each time you read a book, include the following:

- » Name of the book
- » Author of the book
- » Why you chose to read the book
- » What you learned from reading the book
- » How the lessons you learned may contribute to your success, as you define success

This strategy of writing book reports shows that you are self-directed, that you know how to learn, and that you are becoming more intentional. Those qualities can help you build credibility and support.

Release Plan

A release plan shows that you are thinking ahead. It explains how you intend to live, work, contribute, and overcome the collateral consequences that often follow a criminal charge or prison term. A release plan demonstrates intention. It shows that success is not something you hope will happen by chance. You are engineering it.

You should update your release plan regularly. Show that you understand your strengths, your weaknesses, your opportunities, and your threats. By showing that you have thought through those complications, you demonstrate critical thinking. I recommend updating your release plan quarterly so the record reflects the way you are reverse engineering a pathway toward success.



Testimonials

Testimonials add outside credibility. They show that other people have observed your discipline, your character, your effort, or your growth. A personal narrative becomes stronger when others can confirm that the work is real.

Your profile offers a section where others can leave a testimonial for you. Think about the people you have helped, influenced, or encouraged. How much stronger would your record become if those people wrote about the work they have seen you do? What if you had a prospective employer willing to say that a job would be waiting for you upon release? A testimonial like that could strengthen your record. Ask people to write testimonials for you. The harder you work on building your profile, the more likely you are to build a meaningful collection of support.

Taken together, these sections create something much more useful than scattered notes. They create a body of work that may last a lifetime.

START EARLY, EVEN IF THE PROFILE IS IMPERFECT

People often delay useful work because they think they are not ready. They may tell themselves that they need more clarity, more time, more support, or better writing skills before they begin. I understand that instinct, but it leads too many people to wait.

Do not wait. Live with a sense of urgency, knowing that the harder you work on yourself today, the more opportunities may open for you tomorrow. Even though I had a 45-year sentence, I always felt a sense of urgency. I believed that if I achieved goals early, more opportunities would open. By documenting my story, I used the record to build trust and credibility. You can do the same.

If you are facing charges, begin now. If you are preparing to surrender, begin now. If you are already in prison and years have passed, begin now. If your family is the one that must enter the material for you, begin now.

The point is not to produce a perfect profile on the first day. The point is to begin building the record and to show consistency. That effort restores confidence. You may write a rough biography today and revise it later. Better still, you may write a new version later that shows how your thinking evolved. A short journal entry can lead to a stronger one later. A basic release plan can become more sophis-

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ticated over time. A person who begins imperfectly is still ahead of the person who continues waiting.

Prison Professors also uses a point system to measure written progress. If a person writes between 100 and 300 words, the system assigns one point. If a person writes more than 300 words, the system assigns two points. I encourage participants to write regularly and to aim for approximately 350 to 400 words per entry. A person may write more or less, but that range often proves long enough to develop a useful thought and short enough to sustain consistency. The more a person commits to writing words and sentences, the more skillful that person becomes at building a persuasive written record.

This Playbook is intended to show best practices. The chapters will include open-ended questions. There is no right answer or wrong answer. There is only your answer. Use those questions as prompts for self-directed learning. They can help you develop your profile. In that sense, this entire book can serve as a prompt for building the profile, one chapter at a time.

If you work through the exercises and build your profile, our team will send additional books when resources allow. We provide these books as lessons, and we want each one to lead to more writing, more reflection, and a stronger body of work.

THE PROFILE AS A TOOL FOR CRITICAL THINKING

Do not use the profile as a place to post polished statements that mean very little. Develop the profile to show a commitment to personal growth. You cannot wait for the government, or anyone else, to change your life. Consider the following questions to build a record that shows you are the CEO of your life:

- » Who am I, apart from the charge or conviction?
- » What decisions led me here?
- » What have I learned from those decisions?
- » What am I doing today to prepare for a better future?
- » If a stakeholder reviewed my record six months from now, what would it show?

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Those kinds of questions do more than produce writing. They develop judgment. They help a person move from passive reaction to deliberate planning.

That is why this chapter belongs so early in the book. It shows you how to build a profile over time. Start with one entry, and then write another. If you are sending entries by email, use the subject line to tell us whether you are submitting material for your biography, your journal, your book report, or your release plan. In the subject line, write one of the following:

- » biography
- » journal
- » book report
- » release plan

Over time, this strategy can help build a profile that supports self-advocacy and also helps us identify people who are working hard to prepare for better outcomes.

WHAT YOU CAN BEGIN WRITING RIGHT NOW

If you want to begin immediately, start with these five moves.

1. Draft a short biography

Write a first version of who you are, what brought you to this point, what you have learned, and what kind of future you want to build. If you do not want to write about your crime in detail, that is your choice. But write what you would want a judge, a probation officer, a case manager, or another stakeholder to understand about who you are becoming.

2. Write one journal entry

Describe how you are using time right now. Be honest. Explain what you are doing, what you are struggling with, and what you are trying to improve.

3. Write one book report

Choose a book you have read and explain why you read it, what you learned, and how it may help you prepare for success.



4. Draft the beginning of a release plan

Even if you do not have every answer, begin outlining how you intend to live, work, and contribute after release. Show that you are thinking about your strengths, your weaknesses, your opportunities, and your threats.

5. Identify one person who can help

If you have access to the internet, you can begin your profile by visiting PrisonProfessors.org. If you are in prison, or preparing to go to prison, it may be helpful to identify someone who can help you build and maintain your profile. That person can become a profile partner and receive a user ID and password. A spouse, parent, sibling, child, friend, or supporter can all help in that role. Prison Professors built the system with the goal of helping as many people as possible at no cost to the community we serve.

BUILD THE RECORD BEFORE YOU NEED IT

I have always appreciated Ted Gray's phrase, "If you wait for the opportunity to present itself, it is too late to prepare." Do not wait. The worst time to begin documenting growth is when a person suddenly realizes he needs proof. It is like starting to floss the night before going to the dentist. If a hearing is approaching, if release planning is underway, or if a stakeholder asks what a person has been doing, it is far better to have an established record than to begin scrambling.

When developing a profile, think of it as a long-term asset. If you build it consistently, it may later help others see:

- » that you accepted responsibility,
- » that you used time productively,
- » that you developed discipline,
- » that you invested in self-directed learning,
- » that you are intrinsically motivated,
- » and that you prepared intentionally for the opportunities you hope to earn.

Obviously, I cannot guarantee results. Results will depend on the work you do to develop your profile and advance yourself as a candidate for a better outcome. A person does not control every decision-maker. A person does control whether the record exists. A person controls how hard he prepares and works. As Bobby Knight used to say, "Everyone has the will to win. Not everyone has the will to prepare to win."

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SELF-DIRECTED QUESTIONS

1. If someone reviewed the official records in my case, what parts of my life would remain invisible unless I wrote them myself?
2. What would I want a biography to show about how I understand my past and how I am preparing for the future?
3. If I began journaling today, what would my first entry reveal about the way I am using time right now?
4. What book have I read, or could I begin reading, that would help me write the first serious book report for my profile?
5. What should a credible release plan say about the life I intend to build after this chapter of my journey ends?
6. Who in my family or support network could help me build or maintain my profile if I cannot do it alone?
7. If a judge, probation officer, case manager, employer, or family member reviewed my profile six months from now, what evidence would I want them to find?

A profile will not build itself. It begins when a person decides to stop waiting, start writing, and create a record that shows where he has been, what he has learned, and how he is preparing for the best possible outcome.

