

## 1. INVEST IN YOURSELF

### INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF THE LESSON

I created this lesson to reach people who are sitting where I once sat, trying to make sense of a system that often feels indifferent, confusing, or stacked against them. When I first entered federal prison, I did not understand how long the journey would be, how little control I would have over outcomes, or how important my own decisions would become once I accepted that no one was coming to rescue me. What I did not realize at the time was that preparation for a better future does not begin when opportunity appears. It begins long before, often in moments when opportunity feels impossible.

This lesson is about that truth.

During my years inside prison, and later through my work visiting facilities across the country, I learned that many people delay preparing for their future because they believe the law does not apply to them, their sentence is too long, or their circumstances are too limiting. I understand that mindset because I lived it. I entered prison facing what felt like the end of my life as I knew it. Yet over time, I saw examples of people who prepared anyway. They invested in themselves before the law changed, before anyone promised them relief, and before success seemed realistic. When opportunities finally appeared, those individuals were ready.

This lesson introduces the idea of living as the CEO of your own life. That does not mean pretending prison is fair or ignoring the hardships of confinement. It means accepting responsibility for the decisions you can control, even when the system controls everything else. It means choosing to prepare, learn, and document your effort even when no one is watching and no reward is guaranteed.

The stories you will encounter in this lesson are not shared to inspire false hope or offer shortcuts. They are shared to show how preparation works in real life, over long periods of time, under difficult conditions. You will learn how individuals serving long sentences used education, discipline, communication, and contribution to influence outcomes they could not initially see.

This lesson is self-directed by design. No one will grade you. No one will force you to complete it. The value of this work depends entirely on what you choose to take from it. If you are willing to think critically about your future and take respon-

sibility for how you use your time today, this lesson can help you begin building a pathway toward better opportunities tomorrow.

## **INVESTING IN YOURSELF BEFORE OPPORTUNITY APPEARS**

### Readiness Comes Before Reform

When I walk into a prison and ask people whether they believe the First Step Act applies to them, I already know what the response will be. Many hands go up. People explain that their sentence is too long, their charge disqualifies them, or their recidivism score puts them outside any meaningful benefit. Those responses are understandable. I entered prison at a time when there was no First Step Act, no meaningful compassionate release pathway, and no conversation about earning freedom through merit.

Many people believed the system had already decided their fate.

What separated those who stagnated from those who prepared was not optimism or luck. It was belief in personal efficacy. Those who believed in themselves understood something fundamental: laws do not create readiness. Readiness creates opportunity. Reform follows preparation, not the other way around.

That belief guided me from the beginning of my journey.

## **BELIEF IN AGENCY UNDER CONDITIONS OF UNCERTAINTY**

From the start, I understood that no one inside the system was responsible for my future but me. I did not know how the law would evolve. I did not know whether judges would ever have discretion to revisit sentences like mine. But I knew that if opportunity ever emerged, it would favor those who had prepared themselves intellectually, emotionally, and practically.

Preparation is not an emotional response. It is a rational strategy. It requires discipline without guarantees. It demands effort when results are invisible. It is grounded in foresight rather than prediction.

I believed that my capacity to influence outcomes depended entirely on what I did with my time, regardless of what the system offered in return.



## **HALEEM FLOWERS AND THE DISCIPLINE OF PREPARATION**

That belief is exemplified by the story of Haleem Flowers. Haleem entered prison at sixteen years old with a double life sentence for a crime of violence. Under any statutory framework, he would have been dismissed as someone beyond the reach of reform. Yet Haleem did not wait for permission to change his life.

He invested in himself anyway.

Haleem learned to read critically, to write intentionally, and to express himself creatively through painting. None of those efforts were tied to sentence reductions. None guaranteed release. They were acts of disciplined preparation. Haleem behaved as though his future would matter, even when the present suggested otherwise.

Years later, when the law changed and judges were granted discretion they had never previously possessed, Haleem was ready. Lawyers believed in him. Advocates stood beside him. A judge concluded that continued incarceration no longer served justice. Haleem's preparation did not cause the law to change. It allowed him to benefit when change arrived.

That sequence of his adjustment opened opportunities.

## **PREPARATION WITHOUT CERTAINTY IS A MARK OF LEADERSHIP**

Many people delay preparing because they want certainty first. That is a mistake. Preparation is not contingent on assurance. It is an act of foresight. Haleem did not know he would one day sell paintings, influence cultural institutions, or speak before audiences far removed from prison walls. He only knew that failing to prepare would guarantee irrelevance if opportunity appeared.

I saw the same pattern in others serving extreme sentences. Adam Clausen. Tommy Walker. Men with no immediate reason to believe release was possible. Each invested in education, communication, and contribution. They built records of seriousness. When opportunity emerged, they did not scramble to explain who they were. They had already documented it.

That is leadership under constraint.

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## **MY OWN STRATEGY FROM THE BEGINNING**

My own journey followed the same logic. From the moment I entered prison, I understood that preparation was my responsibility. I did not wait for permission to think strategically. I studied people who had influenced change under extreme conditions. I examined what law-abiding, tax-paying citizens would expect of someone seeking their support.

The answer was consistent across contexts: education, contribution, accountability, and communication.

Those expectations became the framework for my decisions. They allowed me to replace emotional reactions with intentional action. They reinforced my belief that I could influence outcomes over time, even if I could not control them immediately.

## **LEARNING FROM FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND THE NATURE OF INFLUENCE**

One of the most important lessons I learned came from Frederick Douglass. Born into slavery, Douglass lived without liberty for the first twenty years of his life. Yet when he escaped, he did not focus solely on personal freedom. He focused on learning how to influence those who held power.

Douglass became literate. He became articulate. He became persuasive. Through those skills, he altered the moral calculus of a nation.

The lesson was unmistakable: influence is earned through preparation, not demanded through complaint. Credibility comes from competence. Change is driven by those who understand how to communicate effectively under hostile conditions. That lesson shaped how I viewed prison. Confinement did not negate my responsibility to prepare. It intensified it.

## **OFFICER WILSON AND THE REINFORCEMENT OF DISCIPLINE**

Officer Wilson reinforced this mindset. He did not offer false reassurance. He offered tools. Books. Questions. Exposure to ideas larger than immediate circumstances. His actions affirmed what I already believed: preparation is an internal decision, not an institutional gift.

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Through study and reflection, I refined my thinking. I replaced complacency with inquiry. I used confinement as an environment for disciplined growth rather than passive endurance.

That choice was not accidental. It was intentional.

### **RESILIENCE AS A STRATEGIC ASSET**

Preparation inside prison requires resilience. The environment often rewards short-term survival rather than long-term growth. Effort may invite skepticism or resistance. Progress may feel invisible. But resilience under adversity builds credibility that comfort never can.

Investment made when conditions are favorable proves little. Investment made when conditions are hostile demonstrates seriousness.

That seriousness compounds over time.

### **BEING READY WHEN OPPORTUNITY APPEARS**

Opportunity rarely announces itself in advance. When it appears, it favors those who are prepared. You may encounter a case manager, probation officer, employer, or advocate whose perception influences your future. That encounter will be brief. You will not be judged on intentions. You will be judged on preparation.

Confidence in those moments does not come from luck. It comes from years of disciplined effort.

### **DOCUMENTATION TURNS EFFORT INTO EVIDENCE**

Preparation becomes influence only when it is documented. Reading, writing, learning, and contributing may feel insignificant in isolation. Over time, those actions accumulate into a record. That record becomes evidence. Evidence shapes decisions.

Without documentation, others define your narrative. With documentation, you define it yourself.

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## THE STANDARD: PREPARE WITHOUT GUARANTEES

Throughout my journey, I never waited for certainty. I prepared because preparation was rational. Haleem Flowers prepared without knowing the law would change. Frederick Douglass prepared without knowing history would listen. I prepared without knowing whether I would ever leave prison.

That is the standard I encourage others to follow.

- » Not hope without effort.
- » Not effort dependent on assurance.
- » But disciplined preparation rooted in belief in one's own efficacy.

When opportunity finally appears, it does not ask how long you suffered. It asks whether you are ready.

## VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

One of the most reliable ways to strengthen your ability to influence outcomes is to strengthen your ability to think, read, and communicate clearly. Words matter. They shape how you understand your circumstances and how others understand you. Throughout history, people who lived under extreme constraints learned that developing language skills was one of the few tools no system could permanently take away.

In the previous section, I intentionally used several higher-level words that appear frequently in academic, legal, and professional settings. These words help people communicate complex ideas with precision. You do not need a dictionary to learn them. They are defined below, used in context, and provided as tools you can practice using in your own writing and thinking.

As a self-directed exercise, I encourage you to study these words, write them in your own handwriting, and practice using each one in a sentence that reflects your own experience or goals.

### 1. Efficacy

- » **Definition:** The ability to produce a desired result or effect.
- » **Example Sentence:** I believed in my own efficacy, even when the system offered no immediate opportunity for release.

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## 2. Foresight

- » **Definition:** The ability to anticipate future needs or consequences and plan accordingly.
- » **Example Sentence:** Preparing for the future requires foresight, not certainty.

## 3. Discipline

- » **Definition:** The practice of training oneself to follow rules, structure, or consistent effort over time.
- » **Example Sentence:** Discipline allowed me to keep preparing even when results were not visible.

## 4. Credibility

- » **Definition:** The quality of being trusted or believed because of demonstrated reliability or competence.
- » **Example Sentence:** Years of consistent effort helped me build credibility with people who later influenced my future.

## 5. Resilience

- » **Definition:** The ability to recover, adapt, or continue despite difficulty or hardship.
- » **Example Sentence:** Resilience is required to keep working toward long-term goals inside a prison environment.

## 6. Intentional

- » **Definition:** Done with purpose, planning, and conscious decision-making.
- » **Example Sentence:** Every step I took toward education was intentional, not accidental.

## 7. Complacency

- » **Definition:** A state of satisfaction that prevents awareness of danger or the need for improvement.
- » **Example Sentence:** I refused to allow complacency to replace responsibility during my sentence.

## 8. Accountability

- » **Definition:** The obligation to accept responsibility for one's actions and decisions.



- » **Example Sentence:** Accountability begins when you stop waiting for others to change your situation.

## 9. Influence

- » **Definition:** The capacity to affect the decisions, opinions, or actions of others.
- » **Example Sentence:** Influence is built through preparation, not complaints.

## 10. Documentation

- » **Definition:** Written records that provide evidence of actions, progress, or decisions over time.
- » **Example Sentence:** Documentation turns effort into proof that others can evaluate.

### SELF-DIRECTED VOCABULARY EXERCISE

- » Write each word by hand.
- » Write your own sentence using each word, based on your current situation or future goals.
- » Revisit these words when you write journals, letters, or reflections.

Strong communication skills strengthen self-advocacy. The more precisely you can express your thoughts, the more effectively you can influence how others understand your efforts.

### SELF-DIRECTED APPLICATION QUESTIONS

The purpose of this section is to help you apply the ideas from this lesson to your own adjustment inside prison. These questions are not tests. There are no right or wrong answers. They are prompts designed to help you think more clearly about how you are using your time and how your daily decisions connect to your long-term goals.

You may answer these questions in writing, think through them quietly, or revisit them over time as your circumstances change.



## **1. Readiness and Belief in Yourself**

In this lesson, I explained that readiness comes before reform and that belief in personal efficacy matters even when the law does not appear to apply.

- » In what ways do you currently believe in your ability to influence your future?
- » Are there any assumptions you have made about your sentence or circumstances that may be limiting how you prepare today?

## **2. Preparing Without Guarantees**

Preparation requires discipline even when there is no certainty about outcomes.

- » What is one area of your life where you could begin preparing more intentionally, even if there is no immediate reward?
- » What would disciplined preparation look like for you over the next 30 days?

## **3. Education, Skills, and Contribution**

The lesson emphasized education, communication, and contribution as foundations for credibility.

- » What skills or areas of knowledge could you begin developing while incarcerated?
- » How might those skills contribute to your success or usefulness to others in the future?

## **4. Resilience and Daily Decision-Making**

Effort inside prison often meets resistance, discouragement, or indifference.

- » What situations inside prison make it hardest for you to stay focused on long-term preparation?
- » How can you respond to those situations in a way that reflects discipline rather than frustration?

## **5. Readiness for Opportunity**

Opportunities often arrive unexpectedly and briefly.

- » If you were given a short opportunity to explain who you are and what you have been doing, what would you want that person to understand about you?
- » What evidence could you begin building now to support that explanation?

Revisit these questions over time. As you work through our personal development courses, your answers may change. That is a sign of progress. Thoughtful reflec-



tion, followed by consistent action, is one of the strongest tools you have for navigating prison successfully and preparing for better opportunities ahead.

## **DOCUMENTING YOUR WORK AND BUILDING A PROFILE**

Preparation has little impact if it exists only in your head. Over time, I learned that when we document our self-directed efforts, we build influence. Documentation turns private discipline into visible evidence. It allows others to understand who you are, how you think, and what you have been doing with your time.

Inside prison, many people work hard in silence. They read books, avoid trouble, help others, and try to improve themselves. Yet when opportunities arise, decision-makers rarely see that work. In the absence of records, people are judged by paperwork created by others: charging documents, sentencing memoranda, or disciplinary summaries. When you do not document your own growth, someone else defines your story for you.

That is why documentation matters.

Throughout this lesson, I referenced people like Haleem Flowers, Adam Clausen, and Tommy Walker. What they shared was not luck or timing. Each of them created a record of seriousness. They could point to education completed, skills developed, contributions made, and work sustained over long periods of time. When advocates, lawyers, or judges looked at them, they did not see promises. They saw evidence.

The same principle applied in my own journey. I documented my education. I documented my writing. I documented my goals and the steps I took to pursue them. Those records allowed others to understand my mindset and intentions without relying on my word alone. Documentation made my preparation visible.

Building a profile on Prison Professors is one way to organize and preserve that documentation. A profile is not about self-promotion. It is about creating a clear record of accountability, effort, and growth. Through a profile, you can memorialize your biography, reflect through journals, demonstrate learning through book reports, and explain your plans through a release strategy. Over time, those entries form a body of work.

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There are several ways to begin a profile, depending on your circumstances. Some people ask a family member or trusted person outside prison to enroll them on their behalf through the Prison Professors website. Others begin by sending an email with their name, registration number, and facility to the Prison Professors team. If you do not have email access, you can write a letter with the same information. The important point is not the method. It is the decision to begin.

Once your profile is started, documentation becomes a habit. You write about who you are. You record what you are learning. You reflect on how you are using your time. You explain your goals and the steps you are taking to pursue them. Over time, this work creates clarity for you and credibility for others.

That body of work serves multiple purposes. It helps you think more clearly about your own progress. It gives structure to your self-directed efforts. And it creates a record that others can evaluate when opportunities arise. Whether the opportunity involves a program, a recommendation, a job, or a legal consideration, documentation strengthens your position.

Importantly, documentation is not about predicting outcomes. It is about preparing for them. Haleem Flowers did not know when or how the law would change. He documented his growth anyway. Frederick Douglass did not know his writings would influence history. He documented his ideas anyway. I did not know how my journey would end. I documented my work anyway.

That is the discipline I encourage you to adopt.

You do not need to document everything at once. Start where you are. Write honestly. Write consistently. Focus on effort rather than perfection. Over time, your documentation will reflect who you are becoming, not just where you came from. Later, you will be able to use your profile as a self-advocacy tool. It may help you work toward higher levels of liberty. It may help you build credibility with employers, educators, or partners on the other side of the journey. The strategy worked for me, and I am confident it can work for you.

When opportunity appears, documentation allows you to meet it with confidence. It shows that you did not wait passively. You prepared deliberately.



## REINFORCING THE LESSON BY TEACHING OTHERS

One of the most effective ways to strengthen your own understanding is to explain what you have learned to someone else. Teaching does not require authority, a title, or a formal setting. It requires clarity of thought and the willingness to articulate ideas in a way others can understand.

Throughout my journey, I learned that explaining concepts to others sharpened my own thinking. When I shared lessons about preparation, discipline, and long-term planning, I was forced to organize my ideas, identify gaps in my understanding, and refine how I communicated. Teaching became a tool for accountability. It also helped me build credibility and influence in environments where formal power was limited.

You can use this lesson in the same way.

Consider explaining the central idea of this lesson—that readiness comes before opportunity—to a cellmate, a study partner, or a small group. You might do this through conversation, by writing a short explanation, or by helping someone else think through how preparation applies to their own situation. The goal is not to persuade or instruct others to follow you. The goal is to reinforce your own understanding by articulating it clearly.

Teaching also strengthens leadership skills. People who can explain ideas calmly and thoughtfully tend to be seen as stable, credible, and grounded. Those qualities matter inside prison. They matter even more when opportunities arise outside it. Learning how to communicate without exaggeration, complaint, or defensiveness is part of preparing for success.

If you prefer a private approach, try writing a short summary of this lesson as if you were explaining it to someone who has just entered prison. Focus on the principle of preparation without guarantees. Use your own words. Avoid copying language directly. The act of translating ideas into your own voice deepens understanding.

Teaching does not mean you have all the answers. It means you are willing to engage seriously with ideas and share what you have learned. Over time, this practice strengthens confidence, reinforces discipline, and builds influence in quiet but meaningful ways.



Preparation is not only about what you do alone. It is also about how you learn to communicate, contribute, and lead. Teaching this lesson to others is one way to continue investing in yourself—long before opportunity appears.

**TO BUILD A PROFILE:**

1. If you have access to the internet, or your family will access it for you, visit [PrisonProfessors.org](http://PrisonProfessors.org). Follow links to build a profile.
2. If you have access to email, send an email to [Interns@PrisonProfessors.org](mailto:Interns@PrisonProfessors.org) requesting to build a profile.
3. Send a letter requesting to build a profile to our mailing address:
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