

2. LEARNING FROM OTHERS

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF THE LESSON

I created this lesson to show how people throughout history endured confinement, injustice, and isolation by developing their minds and learning how to influence others. When I entered prison, I understood that my circumstances were not unique in human history. What was unique was the choice I still had about how I would respond to them. This lesson builds on that understanding.

Many people believe their situation is unprecedented, that no one before them has faced similar limitations or pressures. History tells a different story. Long before modern prisons existed, people were confined by law, by force, or by social structure. Some of those individuals were silenced permanently. Others found ways to develop knowledge, sharpen their thinking, and influence outcomes far beyond their immediate circumstances.

This lesson focuses on learning from those who came before you, not as distant historical figures, but as practical examples of how disciplined thinking and communication can create influence under constraint. You will learn how literacy, inquiry, and deliberate self-education became tools for people who had no formal power, no legal protection, and no guarantee that their efforts would ever be recognized.

The purpose of this lesson is not to glorify suffering or suggest that hardship automatically leads to growth. Hardship alone teaches nothing. What matters is how people respond to hardship. The individuals you will encounter in this lesson made intentional choices to learn, to think critically, and to communicate effectively despite confinement.

As I worked through my own sentence, I learned that studying history was not an academic exercise. It was a strategic one. By understanding how others developed influence under extreme limitations, I gained clarity about what I needed to do with my own time. This lesson explains why developing your mind may be the most durable form of preparation available to you while incarcerated.

Like the previous lesson, this one is self-directed. No one will monitor your progress. No one will evaluate your answers. The value comes from your willingness to engage seriously with the ideas and apply them to your own adjustment. If you

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choose to do that, the lessons of history can become tools for your future rather than stories about the past.

LEARNING FROM THOSE WHO CAME BEFORE YOU

History as a Strategic Teacher

When I began serving my sentence, I understood very quickly that prison has a way of making people feel as though their suffering is unique. Isolation, restriction, and uncertainty can convince a person that no one has ever faced similar circumstances. That belief is dangerous. It leads to despair, passivity, and resignation.

One of the most important lessons I learned early on is that history offers guidance precisely because human struggle is not new.

People have endured confinement, injustice, and loss of freedom long before modern prisons existed. Some were enslaved by law. Some were imprisoned for their beliefs. Some were silenced because their ideas threatened those in power. What separates those who disappeared from history from those who shaped it was not strength or luck. It was how they used their minds under constraint.

Studying history helped me reframe prison. I stopped seeing my confinement as an interruption to life and began seeing it as a testing ground. History showed me that people without formal power could still develop influence. That realization shaped every decision I made moving forward.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND THE POWER OF LITERACY

Frederick Douglass was born into slavery. For the first twenty years of his life, he lived without legal identity, autonomy, or protection. His body belonged to others. His labor belonged to others. Even his thoughts were meant to be controlled. Yet Douglass recognized something that his oppressors feared: literacy creates independence of mind.

Douglass learned to read when reading was forbidden. He learned to write when writing was dangerous. He understood that language was not simply a skill. It was leverage. Literacy allowed him to understand the system that oppressed him. Writ-

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ing allowed him to challenge it. Communication allowed him to persuade people who had never experienced slavery to care about its injustice.

When Douglass escaped slavery, he did not retreat into private life. He used the skills he had developed to influence others. He wrote. He spoke. He argued. He persuaded. Through disciplined learning and communication, he became one of the most influential abolitionists in history.

The lesson was unmistakable to me: knowledge is portable. It cannot be confiscated once internalized. No matter how limited your physical freedom may be, your capacity to think, learn, and communicate remains a source of power.

WHY LITERACY STILL MATTERS INSIDE PRISON

Inside prison, many people underestimate the power of reading and writing. They see education as something that matters only after release. That is a mistake. Literacy is not preparation for freedom alone. It is preparation for influence.

When you can read critically, you can understand rules, policies, and systems rather than reacting emotionally to them. When you can write clearly, you can explain your actions, your growth, and your goals in ways others can evaluate. When you can communicate effectively, you stop being invisible.

I learned early that if I wanted law-abiding citizens to see me as more than my conviction, I needed to speak their language. That meant learning how to read, write, and think at a level that demonstrated seriousness. Frederick Douglass showed me that literacy was not optional. It was foundational.

SOCRATES AND THE DISCIPLINE OF INQUIRY

Another historical figure who shaped my thinking was Socrates. Socrates lived in a society that restricted who could teach, who could learn, and who could question authority. His crime was not violence or corruption. His crime was asking questions that made people uncomfortable.

Socrates believed that wisdom begins with recognizing what you do not know. He asked questions relentlessly. He challenged assumptions. He forced people to defend their beliefs. That commitment to inquiry ultimately cost him his life. Yet

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even when given the opportunity to escape imprisonment, Socrates chose to remain and accept the consequences of his principles.

From Socrates, I learned that disciplined thinking requires courage. Inquiry is not passive. It demands effort and honesty. Socrates did not seek comfort. He sought truth. His example taught me that prison could become a place of intellectual development rather than mental stagnation.

APPLYING INQUIRY TO PRISON LIFE

Inside prison, it is easy to accept narratives without questioning them.

- » “Nothing you do matters.”
- » “The system is rigged.”
- » “Just do your time and keep your head down.”
- » “You’ve Got Nothing Coming.”

Those messages circulate constantly. Socratic thinking demands a different approach.

Instead of accepting those narratives, I learned to ask questions.

- » What outcomes do I want in the future?
- » What behaviors today increase or decrease the likelihood of those outcomes?
- » What evidence would others need to see to take me seriously?

Those questions changed how I used my time. They helped me move from reaction to strategy. Inquiry allowed me to replace emotion with analysis. That shift alone altered the trajectory of my sentence.

LEARNING AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE

Frederick Douglass and Socrates both demonstrated that learning itself can be an act of resistance. Not resistance through defiance or confrontation, but resistance through self-development. When systems restrict opportunity, developing your mind becomes a way to preserve dignity and agency.

I saw this repeatedly in prison. People who committed themselves to learning stood out over time. They thought differently. They communicated differently. They were

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perceived differently. Education did not erase their past, but it reshaped how others interpreted their future.

That insight reinforced my belief that prison does not eliminate the possibility of growth. It amplifies the consequences of choosing not to grow.

WHY HISTORY IS PRACTICAL, NOT ABSTRACT

Some people dismiss history as irrelevant to modern life. I came to see it as practical instruction. History reveals patterns of behavior, response, and consequence. It shows what works under pressure and what fails.

By studying people who endured confinement, oppression, and punishment, I learned how to adapt without surrendering agency. I learned that influence is built through clarity of thought, consistency of effort, and disciplined communication. Those principles are timeless.

BECOMING A STUDENT OF ENDURANCE AND INFLUENCE

Throughout my sentence, I considered myself a student of endurance. I studied people who survived long periods of confinement without losing purpose. I studied people who influenced outcomes without holding power. Frederick Douglass and Socrates were not symbols to admire. They were models to learn from.

Their examples reinforced my belief that preparation is not limited by circumstance. It is shaped by choice. Learning how others navigated extreme limitations gave me a roadmap for navigating my own.

THE CORE LESSON OF HISTORY

History does not promise fairness. It does not guarantee outcomes. What it offers is guidance. Those who endured and influenced did so by investing in their minds, sharpening their thinking, and learning how to communicate effectively under constraint.

That is the lesson I want you to take from this section. You are not the first person to face limitation. You will not be the last. What matters is whether you choose to learn from those who came before you and apply their lessons to your own life.

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Learning is not something you postpone until freedom. It is something you use to prepare for it.

VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

One of the most durable ways to prepare for influence is to strengthen your ability to think and communicate clearly. Words are tools. They allow you to understand complex ideas, explain your intentions, and persuade others to take you seriously.

Throughout history, people who lived under severe constraints relied on language as a means of asserting dignity, clarity, and purpose.

In the previous section, I used several higher-level words that appear frequently in academic, legal, and professional settings. These words are not meant to impress anyone. They are meant to help you express ideas with precision. Each word is defined below and used in a sentence connected to prison life or long-term preparation.

As a self-directed exercise, study these words, write them by hand, and practice using them in your own sentences.

1. Literacy

- » **Definition:** The ability to read, write, and understand written language.
- » **Example Sentence:** Literacy gave Frederick Douglass the ability to understand the system that oppressed him and eventually challenge it.

2. Inquiry

- » **Definition:** The act of seeking information through questioning and investigation.
- » **Example Sentence:** Inquiry helped me replace emotional reactions with thoughtful decision-making while incarcerated.

3. Autonomy

- » **Definition:** The ability to make decisions for oneself; independence of thought or action.
- » **Example Sentence:** Even inside prison, I preserved a sense of autonomy by deciding how I would use my time.

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4. Constraint

- » **Definition:** A limitation or restriction placed on freedom or action.
- » **Example Sentence:** Learning how to think clearly under constraint is a skill that strengthens long-term preparation.

5. Persuasion

- » **Definition:** The act of influencing others through reason, explanation, or communication.
- » **Example Sentence:** Persuasion requires clear communication, not force or complaint.

6. Credibility

- » **Definition:** The quality of being trusted or believed because of demonstrated reliability or competence.
- » **Example Sentence:** Consistent learning and thoughtful writing helped me build credibility over time.

7. Analysis

- » **Definition:** The process of examining information carefully to understand it or draw conclusions.
- » **Example Sentence:** Analysis allowed me to evaluate my choices rather than reacting impulsively to prison conditions.

8. Endurance

- » **Definition:** The ability to withstand hardship or difficulty over a long period of time.
- » **Example Sentence:** Endurance is strengthened when you commit to learning and growth despite uncertainty.

9. Articulate

- » **Definition:** Able to express ideas clearly and effectively in speech or writing.
- » **Example Sentence:** Becoming more articulate helped me explain my goals and progress to others.

10. Leverage

- » **Definition:** The ability to use something to gain an advantage or influence outcomes.



- » **Example Sentence:** Education became a form of leverage that allowed me to influence how others perceived my future.

SELF-DIRECTED VOCABULARY EXERCISE

- » Write each word by hand.
- » Write one sentence using each word, based on your own experience or goals.
- » Revisit these words when writing 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 mind, your time, and your opportunities for growth.

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

1. Learning From History

This lesson explained how people like Frederick Douglass and Socrates developed influence under severe limitations.

- » What similarities do you see between their circumstances and your own?
- » What lessons from their approach to learning and thinking could apply to your life right now?

2. Literacy and Daily Thinking

Literacy was presented as a foundation for influence and clarity.

- » How often do you read or write with the intention of learning, not just passing time?
- » What changes could you make to use reading and writing more deliberately?

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3. Questioning Assumptions

Socratic inquiry emphasizes questioning commonly accepted beliefs.

- » What messages about prison life or your future have you accepted without questioning?
- » How might asking better questions change how you approach your daily decisions?

4. Learning Under Constraint

This lesson emphasized that learning itself can be an act of resistance.

- » What limitations inside prison make it harder for you to focus on learning?
- » How can you adapt your approach to learning despite those constraints?

5. Preparing for Influence

Influence comes from clarity, credibility, and communication.

- » If someone were to evaluate how you use your time, what would your current habits communicate?
- » What evidence could you begin building now to show that you take learning and preparation seriously?

Revisit these questions over time. As your understanding deepens, your answers may change. That change reflects growth. Thoughtful reflection, paired with consistent learning, strengthens your ability to navigate prison successfully and prepare for future opportunities.

DOCUMENTING YOUR WORK AND BUILDING A PROFILE

Learning has the greatest impact when it is recorded. Ideas that remain only in your thoughts are easy to forget and difficult for others to evaluate. When you document what you are reading, writing, and thinking about, you transform learning into evidence. That evidence helps others understand how you are using your time and how you are developing your mind.

Inside prison, many people read constantly but leave no record of what they have learned. Over time, that effort disappears. When opportunities arise, decision-makers do not see how many books you read or how deeply you thought about them.

They see only what is written. Documentation bridges that gap.

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Throughout this lesson, I referenced historical figures like Frederick Douglass and Socrates. What made their learning influential was not only what they read or thought, but how they communicated it. Douglass documented his ideas through writing and speeches. Socrates documented his thinking through dialogue and questioning. Their influence endured because their learning left a record.

The same principle applies today.

In my own journey, I documented what I was learning as I studied history, philosophy, and social systems. I wrote about how those lessons applied to my circumstances. That documentation helped me clarify my thinking and made my preparation visible to others. Over time, it allowed people outside prison to understand that I was serious about growth and accountability.

Building a profile on Prison Professors is one way to organize that documentation. A profile allows you to preserve your learning in a structured way. Through it, you can write a biography that explains who you are beyond your conviction. You can reflect through journals on what you are learning and how you are thinking. You can write book reports that show how reading is shaping your perspective. You can explain your goals and how you are preparing for the future.

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 method matters less than the decision to begin.

Once your profile is established, documentation becomes part of your routine. You are no longer reading just to pass time. You are reading to learn and recording what you learn. You are no longer thinking in isolation. You are capturing your ideas so they can be revisited, refined, and evaluated.

That body of work serves multiple purposes. It sharpens your thinking. It builds credibility. And it creates a record that others can review when opportunities arise. Whether the opportunity involves a program, a recommendation, education, or employment, documented learning strengthens your position.



Importantly, documentation is not about predicting outcomes. It is about preparing for them. Frederick Douglass did not know his writing would change history. Socrates did not know his questions would influence philosophy for centuries. I did not know how my journey would unfold. Each of us documented our thinking anyway. That is the discipline I encourage you to adopt.

Start where you are. Write honestly. Write consistently. Focus on learning rather than perfection. Over time, your documentation will reflect how your thinking has evolved and how seriously you take preparation.

When opportunity appears, your documented work will speak for you. It will show that you did not allow confinement to limit your mind. You invested in learning and used history as a guide for your future.

REINFORCING THE LESSON BY TEACHING OTHERS

One of the strongest ways to deepen your own learning is to teach what you are learning to someone else. Teaching forces clarity. It requires you to organize your thoughts, choose your words carefully, and explain ideas in a way that others can understand. Over time, this practice strengthens confidence, credibility, and leadership.

As I worked through my own sentence, I learned that teaching was not something I waited to do after release. I began teaching while incarcerated. I shared lessons about preparation, discipline, literacy, and long-term thinking with people around me. Each time I explained an idea to someone else, I refined my own understanding. Teaching became part of my preparation.

You can do the same.

After completing this lesson, consider explaining its core ideas to a cellmate, a study partner, or a small group. You might talk about how Frederick Douglass used literacy as leverage, or how Socratic questioning helped replace emotional reactions with thoughtful inquiry. You might explain why preparation matters even when opportunity is uncertain. The goal is not to persuade others to follow you. The goal is to reinforce your own understanding by articulating it clearly.

Teaching also provides something worth documenting.

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When you record how you are learning and how you are helping others learn, you are building a record of contribution. That record shows leadership, accountability, and engagement. It demonstrates that you are not only focused on yourself, but are using your time to elevate others. Over time, those documented contributions become evidence of maturity and readiness.

This is where building a profile becomes especially important.

A profile allows you to document not only what you are learning, but how you are applying that learning. You can write about the books you are reading, the questions you are asking, and the lessons you are sharing. You can describe how you are teaching others informally, mentoring peers, or leading discussions. That documentation shows growth that cannot be captured by disciplinary records or program certificates.

There are several ways to get started with a profile, depending on your circumstances:

1. If you or your family have internet access, visit PrisonProfessors.org and follow the links to build a profile. Family members can enroll on your behalf.
2. If you have email access, send an email with your name, registration number, and facility to Interns@PrisonProfessors.org requesting to start a profile.
3. If you do not have email or internet access, you can write a letter requesting to build a profile and send it to:
 - » Prison Professors Charitable
 - » PO Box 50996
 - » Irvine, CA 92619

The method you use does not matter. What matters is the decision to begin documenting your journey.

Start where you are. Write honestly. Document what you are learning and how you are sharing it with others. Over time, your profile will reflect not only your personal growth, but your willingness to contribute, teach, and lead.

Preparation is not something you do alone. It is also reflected in how you communicate, how you help others, and how you leave a record of your efforts. By build-



ing a profile and documenting both your learning and your teaching, you strengthen your position for future opportunities—long before opportunity appears.

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