

SAMPLE SENTENCING NARRATIVE: SARAH STEVENS

Section 1: Introduction

Dear Honorable Judge,

My name is Sarah Stevens, and I come before you with humility, shame, and deep regret. I am a 31-year-old mother of two children, Bobby (7) and Cindy (4). I am writing this letter to you not to excuse my actions or diminish the seriousness of my crime, but to accept responsibility for what I did, to reflect on the lessons I have learned, and to pledge to live differently moving forward.

Eighteen months ago, I made the devastating choice to abuse the trust of my employer, ABC Roofing. At a time when I was overwhelmed by financial stress, I began using the company credit card for personal expenses. At first, it was small—groceries and childcare bills. But when no one noticed, I convinced myself that I could get away with more. I created a fictitious company, submitted false invoices, and used the credit card to pay them. Over time, my theft grew to more than \$100,000.

I recognize now that each choice I made compounded the harm. I betrayed the trust of my employer, damaged my own integrity, and set a terrible example for my children. The shame of my conduct consumed me. I began drinking heavily to mask my fear, but no amount of alcohol could silence the voice in my head that told me what I already knew: I had broken the law and violated my values.

Eventually, I could no longer carry the burden of my lies. I admitted everything—to my employer, to the government, and to my family. Since that day, I have fully cooperated with prosecutors, providing records and answering questions honestly. I now work as a waitress, and though my income is modest, I make restitution payments of \$50 to \$100 per month from my tips. These contributions are small compared to the harm I caused, but they are steady and they represent my commitment to repair what I can.

Honorable Judge, I know that punishment is required. My hope in writing this letter is to show you that I am remorseful, that I am committed to rebuilding my life with honesty and accountability, and that I am determined to prove—through my actions—that I can become a law-abiding, contributing member of society.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share my words.

Section 2: Background

I was born in Spokane, Washington, into a working-class family. My father was a mechanic, and my mother worked part-time at a grocery store while raising me and my younger brother. They didn't have advanced education, but they were steady, hardworking people. They believed in earning an honest living and making sacrifices for family. Looking back, I can see that they gave me the foundation to live responsibly. My failure was that I didn't carry those lessons with me into adulthood.

As a child, I was quiet, responsible, and family-oriented. I did well in elementary school, but by high school I began to drift. My grades were average, and I never applied myself. I worked part-time jobs—babysitting, cashiering—but without focus or ambition. When I graduated, I felt unprepared for college and decided not to pursue higher education. Instead, I worked retail jobs and dreamed of one day building a family of my own.

At 21, I married my high school boyfriend. We had Bobby two years later and Cindy three years after that. For a while, life seemed steady. But my husband struggled with employment, and eventually he left us altogether. I suddenly found myself a single mother with two small children, no college education, and little financial support.

That period was the most difficult of my life. Childcare costs were almost as high as my paychecks. Rent, food, utilities, and medical bills stacked up faster than I could manage them. I worked shifts as a waitress, often coming home after midnight only to wake up early to get Bobby to school and Cindy to daycare.

One night stands out vividly. It was the middle of winter, and after my late shift I picked up Bobby and Cindy from a neighbor's apartment. Both were



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asleep, their small heads heavy on my shoulders as I carried them through the snow to our apartment. My feet were numb, and my arms ached, but what cut deepest was the sense of exhaustion and fear: How would I keep providing for them? That night I promised myself I would never give up, no matter how hard things became.

That determination was real, but so was my desperation. When I was offered an administrative job at ABC Roofing, I thought I had finally found stability. The owner trusted me with responsibilities, and for the first time in years, I felt hopeful. Unfortunately, instead of honoring that trust, I abused it.

My background is not an excuse for my crime. Many people face harder circumstances and never break the law. But I share this history to help the Court understand how I reached the point where I allowed financial pressure, pride, and fear to cloud my judgment.

Section 3: Influences that Led to the Crime

When I started at ABC Roofing, my life finally felt steady. But my financial problems did not go away. Old debts, childcare bills, and medical expenses still overwhelmed me. I began to panic whenever another bill arrived.

The turning point came one night at my kitchen table. Bills were piled high, and I stared at the company credit card in my purse. I told myself, “Just this once. I’ll pay it back.” That decision was the first step down a path that would devastate me, my employer, and my family.

At first, I used the card for groceries and utilities. Then for daycare expenses. No one noticed, and that false sense of safety emboldened me. I convinced myself it was temporary, but each month I went back. Soon, I created a fictitious company, generated false invoices, and used the card to pay them. Over 18 months, I stole more than \$100,000.

The stress was crushing. I drank more heavily, telling myself it would numb the guilt. But the voice in my head never stopped reminding me of what I had done.

Looking back, I can see the safeguards I should have put in place:



- » Ask for help: I should have reached out to family, friends, or community programs for financial or childcare support.
- » Be honest with my employer: Instead of hiding, I should have admitted my struggles. My employer might have helped me in ways I never imagined.
- » Seek counseling: Instead of drinking to cope, I should have sought counseling for stress and financial anxiety.
- » Stay true to values: I should have remembered my parents' lessons about honesty and integrity, even when times were hard.

These missed safeguards represent my failure of judgment and character.

Section 4: Lessons Learned

The turning point for me came not in the act of stealing, but in finally admitting the truth. The guilt became unbearable, and I realized that if I wanted to be the mother my children needed, I had to stop lying. I reported my conduct to my employer and to the government. That decision, though terrifying, was the first step toward accountability.

Since then, I have learned several key lessons:

- » Compliance is not optional. The law is the foundation of community trust. By breaking it, I harmed more than just my employer—I harmed everyone who relies on fairness.
- » Ethics require awareness of impact. I once convinced myself that because I was only taking from a business, the harm was less severe. I now know that theft erodes trust, destabilizes livelihoods, and causes ripple effects I cannot fully measure.
- » Accountability is absolute. I cannot shift responsibility to financial stress, abandonment, or hardship. Many people face challenges without breaking the law. The choices were mine alone.

Reading has been part of my transformation. I have studied books on resilience and integrity. One memoir that struck me deeply was about a woman who rebuilt her life after addiction and crime. Her story reminded me that while shame can feel overwhelming, change is always possible when paired with accountability.



These lessons are not abstract. They guide me daily as I raise my children, make restitution, and live with the consequences of my choices.

Section 5: Steps to Reconciliation

Understanding my failures is important, but reconciliation requires action. Since admitting my crimes, I have worked to demonstrate accountability in concrete ways.

First, I have embraced restitution. Though I earn little as a waitress, I contribute between \$50 and \$100 each month from my tips. It will take me years to repay the harm I caused, but I will continue no matter how long it takes.

Second, I have sought help for sobriety. I began attending counseling for alcohol misuse, recognizing that drinking had become a way to escape shame. Staying sober is not only vital for my well-being, but also for my children.

Third, I have focused on being a better mother. I attend parenting classes and support groups, learning healthier ways to cope with stress and to teach my children the values of honesty and accountability. My children did not deserve the instability my choices created, and I am determined to model integrity for them moving forward.

Finally, I am pursuing vocational training in bookkeeping. I want to regain employment in honest work and to rebuild trust by showing that I can use my skills responsibly.

Reconciliation is not a single act but a lifelong path. My plan moving forward rests on three pillars:

1. Education and Personal Growth — Continue studying, reading, and training to improve myself and create honest career opportunities.
2. Sobriety and Discipline — Remain committed to sobriety and support programs.
3. Service and Restitution — Keep paying restitution, serve others when I can, and raise my children with honesty and accountability.



Section 6: Conclusion

I know that I cannot undo the betrayal I caused to my employer and to my community. I also know that I cannot erase the pain my children experienced when they saw their mother in shame. I take full responsibility for these choices, and I accept the consequences.

What I ask is that, in weighing your judgment, you consider the steps I have already taken and the path I am committed to following. I have admitted my wrongdoing, cooperated fully, and begun restitution. I have sought help for sobriety, and I am raising my children with honesty as the central value. I have worked to transform my character, and I will continue to do so throughout my sentence and beyond.

I do not seek to avoid punishment. I seek mercy only in the hope that I may have the opportunity to return sooner to my children, to continue restitution, and to prove—through action—that I can live as a law-abiding, contributing citizen.

Thank you for considering my words and for allowing me the opportunity to demonstrate my commitment to living differently.

Respectfully,

Sarah Stevens

SELF-DIRECTED LESSON: LEARNING FROM SARAH STEVENS'S NARRATIVE

Lesson Overview

This lesson uses the fictionalized narrative of Sarah Stevens, a 31-year-old mother convicted of wire fraud, as a teaching tool. Sarah's story shows how someone can:

- » Admit wrongdoing,
- » Acknowledge the harm caused,
- » Reflect on lessons learned,



- » Take steps toward reconciliation, and
- » Present themselves as a candidate for mercy.

Core Teaching Points

1. Structure Matters
 - ◇ Intro: Humility, accountability, respect for the Court.
 - ◇ Background: Humanize the person without excuses.
 - ◇ Influences: Show how flawed thinking led to crime.
 - ◇ Lessons Learned: Demonstrate maturity and self-awareness.
 - ◇ Steps to Reconciliation: Show concrete, forward-looking efforts.
 - ◇ Conclusion: Gratitude, remorse, and a plea for mercy.
2. Accountability is Key
 - ◇ No shifting blame.
 - ◇ No minimizing harm.
 - ◇ No vague promises.
3. Vulnerability Strengthens Credibility
 - ◇ The “scene” moments (e.g., Sarah carrying her children home in the snow; staring at bills at her kitchen table) make the story real and relatable.

Practical Exercise: Write Your Own Narrative

Step 1: Intro (300—400 words)

- » Write a respectful opening to the judge.
- » State your crime, accept responsibility, and explain why you are writing.



Step 2: Background (1,000—1,300 words)

- » Share your upbringing, family, and early life influences.
- » Include one short, vivid memory that humanizes you.
- » Avoid excuses — show where opportunities existed, even if you missed them.

Step 3: Influences (600—800 words)

- » Explain how you came to commit your crime.
- » Share one moment that shows your poor decision-making.
- » End with 3—4 safeguards you should have implemented.

Step 4: Lessons Learned (400—550 words)

- » Share what you've learned since your crime.
- » Focus on law, ethics, accountability, and character growth.

Step 5: Steps to Reconciliation (650—800 words)

- » Document what you've done since the crime to repair harm.
- » Detail plans for education, sobriety, restitution, employment, and service.

Step 6: Conclusion (200—300 words)

- » Close with gratitude, remorse, and a pledge to live differently.

Reflection Journal Prompts

1. What part of Sarah's background resonated most with you, and why?
2. Where in your own life have you failed to implement safeguards?
3. How could you demonstrate accountability without sounding like you are making excuses?
4. What steps have you already taken to reconcile with society?
5. What is one concrete plan you can commit to in the next year?



Profile-Building Assignment

Students should publish their work on their Prison Professors profile under these sections:

- » Biography: Adapt your “Background” section into your public story.
- » Journals: Write weekly reflections on lessons learned (like Sarah’s turning points).
- » Book Reports: Submit reports on books that have shaped your thinking (as Sarah did with memoirs).
- » Release Plan: Document your education, sobriety, employment, and service goals.
- » Testimonials: Invite mentors, family, or community members to validate your efforts.

Key Takeaways

- » Judges look for sincerity, accountability, and a plan for the future.
- » Stories are powerful when they are vulnerable and specific.
- » Narrative writing is not only about sentencing — it becomes part of your long-term profile and advocacy.

Self-Directed Exercise

Write a **1,000-word “Background” section** of your own narrative.

- » Include one vivid memory from childhood or early adulthood.
- » Share family influences honestly.
- » Show where you missed opportunities, but don’t make excuses.
- » Publish this in your Profile: Biography section.

