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2019-8

Writing Prompts for Parole Applicants

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Recommended Citation

"Writing Prompts for Parole Applicants" (2019). *Parole Preparation*. 4.
<https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/pp/4>

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Writing Prompts for Parole Applicants

Risks of Writing Prompts

For people in prison, putting anything in writing has risks. Privacy inside is nearly non-existent as correctional staff are entitled to search and seize everything in a person's cell or dorm. Further, anything put in writing about a person's crime or even other aspects of their life could potentially be used against them in the Parole Board interview, especially if the material is inconsistent with formal legal records. As such, it's crucial for volunteers and applicants to take precautions to keep any written information safe and from falling into the hands of someone who may use it against the applicant. It's also our responsibility to consider what it would mean to write something so personal and private and not be able to hold onto it.

Any written responses that applicants write to these prompts, as well as any prompts volunteers send inside, **must** be sent using legal mail, so that it cannot be read by anyone other than the recipient. Volunteers should also talk with applicants about whether they even want to have written responses to these prompts in their possession. While applicants ultimately know best how to keep their property safe, perhaps applicants may decide to send volunteers everything they write to prevent things from being confiscated. Thank you for your care and diligence.

Purpose of Prompts

Many people with direct experience with the parole process have expressed that one of the most crucial elements of obtaining release is one's ability to express remorse and accept responsibility for their crime of conviction. As a Project, we do not believe that assistance in the preparation process should be contingent on a person's ability to express remorse (and even further, we do not believe that parole should be based on such criteria). However, given the reality of parole, and what we know about Parole Board commissioners, we as advocates can encourage and support applicants to dig deeper into the emotions and feelings that surround the events of their crime--not only to help the person better prepare for their parole interview, but to open up space for a process of healing and transformation.

Due to past trauma and/or abuse, histories of addiction, mental illness, race and class dynamics, and the ways in which those who are socialized as men are discouraged from experiencing/expressing their feelings, many people involved in the criminal legal system struggle to access their own feelings and emotions. Prison is also an environment that forces stoicism on people, since vulnerability and emotional openness is often perceived as a sign of weakness. Further, people in prison have very few, if any, opportunities to explore their feelings in a structured setting--mental health counseling and group therapy sessions are scarce. People turn to each other for care and support in order to develop a sense of comfort and community.

As a result of these factors, many of the applicants we work with have not been encouraged to access the emotions tied to their crimes, or have purposely ignored it as a tool for survival. Additionally, for some applicants, the last time they discussed their crime in detail was with their defense attorney during the original trial or plea negotiation process. Understandably, they were likely encouraged to deny, minimize, and compartmentalize the crime, and the facts surrounding the case. People often come to prison with a version of the story that is far from what may have actually happened. This is difficult because people may spend decades without ever talking about their experience again, and suddenly when they become eligible for parole, they're asked to talk in detail about the crime, likely in a way that's counter to how they were told to talk about it by their original defense attorney.

So not only is it difficult for many individuals to tune in to the feelings associated with their actions and life events leading up to the crime, but sometimes the language to accurately describe what they felt and currently feel was never encouraged and therefore isn't accessible.

Writing can be a way to reflect on various aspects of one's experience. It may not result in the production of a perfect personal statement and it may not even be the first time many of our applicants have been asked to answer these prompts, but the process of writing and then sharing it with the volunteer partner has the chance to spur a conversation that goes deeper and could potentially be transformative. As we know, the parole board wants to see emotional insight into the crime and a sense of accountability and remorse. Many of these prompts can aid in the process of getting there.

Writing Prompts for Parole Applicants

Organized chronologically and increasing in depth.

- Describe your childhood/adolescence/young adulthood
 - How would you describe yourself?
 - What were you passionate about; what did you like to do?
 - Who did you spend a lot of time with?
 - What was challenging for you?
 - What did you envision for your future; what were your goals?
 - What toys did you play with?
 - Who did you play with?
- Describe your family life
 - Who raised you?
 - Who did you live with and where did you live?
 - What was your room like?
 - Did you grow up with siblings and/or cousins?
 - Were you close with any members of your family or extended family?
 - What were some of the qualities you admired about these people?
 - How did these people influence you?
 - Did you have any difficult relationships with people in your family?
 - How did these relationships influence you?
- Describe your life leading up to your incarceration
 - Explain any major life changes you might have been going through
 - Describe what you often thought about; describe how you felt on a day-to-day basis
 - Were there any changes in your plans for the future or your goals?
 - Describe how you felt about yourself. Were you proud of yourself, upset with yourself, happy with who you were, frustrated by perceived mistakes or flaws?
- Describe the crime and your role
 - What happened on the day of the crime?
 - What were the events leading up to the crime?
 - What actually happened? Describe in detail.
 - What was your role?
 - What memories do you have of the event? What pieces are missing?
 - What thoughts were going through your mind?
 - What did you feel in your body? (Anger, sadness, fear, numbness, power, etc.)
- Describe your feelings right after the crime
 - How did you feel afterwards?
 - What did you do with those feelings?
 - Did you tell anyone what had happened?
 - Did you look for support?
 - Did you hide?
 - If you could re-live the experience what would you do differently?
 - What would be your new course of action?

- If you did not commit the crime, explain your feelings after being accused
 - What did you do?
 - Did you look for support?
- Describe your feelings during your trial/plea process
 - How was your experience with the criminal legal system?
 - Did your attorney explain the process?
 - Did you feel prepared for the process?
 - What were your expectations?
 - How did you feel throughout the process?
 - Did you have a system of support throughout the experience? Explain what it felt like to have (or not have) support.
 - How would you go about this process differently if you knew what you know now?
- Write about your accomplishments/positive experiences on the inside
 - What have you achieved while being incarcerated?
 - Have you received degrees and certifications?
 - Have you been recognized for your accomplishments?
 - What are you most proud of?
 - Describe some of the friends you have made and the impact they have had on you
 - What is the best piece of advice you have received?
 - What is the best piece of advice you have given?
 - What goals have you set for yourself?
 - What would you still like to accomplish?
 - What are your aspirations if you were to be released?
- Write about the victim's experience and the experiences of their family members
 - What do you think the victim(s) felt before and during the crime?
 - What do you think they felt afterwards, if they didn't die?
 - What do you think the victim's family felt when they found out about their loved one's death? How do you think they found out?
 - How do you think the victim's death changed their family? What became different in their lives? What impact did it have on them?
 - Think about financial, economic, emotional, social, romantic and interpersonal consequences.
 - What do you think their family felt one week after their loved one died? One month? One year? Ten years?
 - If the victim hadn't died, what do you imagine their life would have been like? What do you think they would have accomplished? What job would they have pursued?
- Write a letter to your victim(s)
 - What would you say to them?
 - What do you want them to know?
 - What were you thinking about at the time?
 - What were you feeling at the time?
 - What have you thought about since the incident?
 - How have your thoughts and feelings changed? What has shifted for you? How did that shift happen?
 - What was the reason for your transformation, if you feel you had one?

- What do you feel now?
- What must be done to repair the harm/make things right? What, if any, efforts have you made?
- What would you say to them today?
- Write a letter to each of your loved ones affected by your crime
 - What would you say to them?
 - What do you want them to know?
 - What were you thinking about at the time of the offense?
 - What were you feeling at the time?
 - What have you thought about since the incident?
 - What do you feel now?
 - How do you think they have been affected by your incarceration?
 - What would you say to them today?
- If the Board grants your parole, what will be your next steps?
 - What will you do the first days you are out?
 - What are you worried about?
 - What are you confident about?
 - What do you have questions about?
 - What do you feel most prepared and unprepared for?
- If the Board does not grant your parole, what will be your next steps?
 - Who will you seek support from?
 - How do you imagine you'll feel?
 - What will you do to take care of yourself?
 - What will you do to prepare for next time?
 - Who will you reach out to?
- Other Prompts
 - Write about your favorite animals or your favorite song
 - When do you feel the most fulfilled?
 - What are your favorite foods?
 - Write about the last dream you had.
 - What is your favorite book?
 - What is your favorite movie?
 - If you could travel anywhere in the world where would you go?
 - What is your favorite holiday?
 - Do you have any traditions for that holiday?
 - If you could have a superpower what would it be and why?