



SELF-REFLECTIVE PROMPTS

Cornell Law School

Cornell Center on the Death Penalty Worldwide



Narrative Construction: Self-Reflective Prompts Toolkit

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Dear Survivor,

Below is a list of prompts to help you reflect on different aspects of your story. Give yourself as many breaks as you need in reflecting because this process may bring up difficult experiences and memories. Your story and your voice are unique to you alone. You do not need to use all or any of these questions/prompts. You may be inspired to think of other reflective prompts that better fit your story. These reflective questions are not legal advice and do not cover all things that must be covered for the narrative in your case. We created these prompts to help people recall, remember, and reflect on their own powerful narratives as survivors.

Please remember that nothing is covered by client confidentiality unless it is a secret shared with your lawyer. If you do decide to journal or write your reflections, please be advised that if your cell is searched, it is possible that your notes could be found and read.

Once you write things down, there is always a danger that things you have always kept hidden or private will be revealed to people you may wish didn't know about the abuse you have survived. If you are concerned about the risk of others at the prison accessing your written reflections that you may want to keep private, you could consider writing to your lawyer or a person you trust to hold onto your journal. Sending it as mail to a person you trust means that it will still be read by prison staff in the mailroom, but at least other people in the prison likely will not have access. If you have a lawyer, you should share your reflections with them.

Sincerely,

Cornell Center on the Death Penalty Worldwide



STRENGTHS AND MITIGATION

1. My greatest *qualities* are that I [fill in the blank].
2. My greatest *skills* are that I can [fill in the blank].
3. My greatest *values* are [fill in the blank].
4. I have *faith* in [fill in the blank, this can be God, other people in your life, your religion, spirituality, my community]
5. While in this facility, I have used my *creativity* to [fill in the blank, this can be artwork, poetry, drawings, music, or something else from your story]
6. I have *cared* for people in my world by [fill in the blank].
7. While in this facility, despite serving a sentence, I have [think of all that you have done, maintained relationships with family, taken classes, helped other people in the facility?] Be as specific as possible.
8. One of the ways I have been of service while incarcerated is that I [think of what you do, how you have helped others inside, or even jobs you have had in the prison, and the ways in which you do your work well, whether cooking or some other work].
9. Have prison staff given you additional responsibilities? If so, please reflect on those, as it shows trust in you.
10. During my time in prison, one of the things I have learned about myself, and my own life is [reflect].

SURVIVOR NARRATIVES

11. I am so much more than my trauma, my conviction, and my sentence. As a full human being, I am [fill in the blank].
12. How would I describe my childhood? What are the details that stick out to me the most? What are the scenes that describe my childhood? What are the locations, sights, sounds, smells, tastes in those scenes?



13. Were there things I was forced to do as a child that I didn't want to do?
14. What were my teenage years like? Where were there moments in my teenage years that are unforgettable? Or lifechanging? What did I most enjoy when I was a teenager?
15. How would I describe difficult parts of my childhood? As a child was there something I needed to protect myself against? If so, what? How did I cope? How did I protect myself? How did I survive?
16. How far did I get in school? How did I get to that point in school? What motivated me? What were the challenges I faced in school? What was I dealing with at home while I was in school?
17. How would I describe my hopes and dreams in life? As a child I dreamt of growing up to be [fill in the blank]. What happened to my hopes and dreams in the process of life?
18. What were my romantic relationships in life like? Was I ever touched in ways that I did not like? When did I first encounter any physical, emotional, financial, psychological, or sexual abuse?
19. What are the red flags that came up in relationships that I didn't have the tools to recognize at the time? How would I describe those red flags now? How would I describe those red flags in connection to the abuser/s who were in my life before the crime.
20. How was I coping or surviving the abuse? Was I even coping or surviving? What were specific things I did to try to cope and survive?
21. What are some of the most important aspects of my life, such as experiences of domestic violence or trafficking, that the jury or judge never heard about?
22. What is the untold story in my case? The story that the jurors or judge never heard or knew about?
23. If I had never been subjected to domestic violence or trafficking, what would have happened? What would my life have been like if I had gotten help or if someone had intervened?
24. Despite the severe domestic violence and/or trafficking I survived; it has been a difficult journey for me to think of myself as a victim because... [how would I fill in this blank]?



25. The experience of domestic violence and/or trafficking impacted me deeply, in my core. Here are three ways that it impacted how I feel about myself, and how I share things or communicate with the world around me:
26. They say a picture is worth a thousand words. If there were a few photos of me throughout my life, what photos would exist (either actual photos or photos that could have been taken) that show who I am and what I have survived?
27. If I could tell the story of my life through pictures, what would the picture of each scene be?
28. One of the biggest misconceptions around domestic violence and/or human trafficking is that the survivor/victim is free to leave the situation, but I never felt free to leave. I wasn't free to leave, even if I wanted to, because [fill in the blank]
 - a. Sometimes, survivors are afraid that their abuser will kill or hurt them if they intervene in a crime that the abuser is committing. If this is true for your case, here is a reflective writing prompt:
 - i. I didn't act, intervene, or speak out because I was afraid my abuser would [insert what would have happened if you would have spoken out].
29. If I met someone who has survived all that I have lived through and who was on trial for the same type of case as me, what would be the advice I would give them?

CORROBORATION

30. Who can I reach out to who can write a letter of support on my behalf? Family? Friends? Former neighbors, classmates, teachers, co-workers? Journalists?
 - a. If I don't have their contact info, is there someone who can help me find the people in my community who can write letters of support for my clemency petition?
 - b. Can I contact my lawyer from my case, whether private or the public defender's office, and have them find my family members and phone numbers in the files from my case?
31. Have I ever had to run away from where I was living or where I worked? When? What are the scenes from my life at this point? Why did I run away? Where did I go? Who did I go to? What happened? Are there records about that? Are there people who can write about this for me?



32. Are there any records that exist of my experiences of domestic violence and/or trafficking, or when I tried to get help from counselors, social workers, paramedics, or police?
 - a. For example, are there copies of police reports when I was the victim of abuse? Or medical records that show the injuries I had? Is there an old neighbor who can explain that they heard me screaming or saw me injured or abused?
 - b. Does my attorney (or former lawyer) have any of these records in the file?
 - c. Did I ever stay in a shelter to get away from the abuse, and if so, can someone call the shelter for me? Or can I call the shelter directly? Is there anyone there who might remember me and write a letter of support? What might they have seen?
 - d. Are there any corrections officers, members of the prison staff, or even the warden who know me well and might be open to making a positive statement on my behalf about my journey and progress?
33. What was the first time I had sexual contact? How would I describe it?
34. Was I ever asked to have sex as a child or a teenager? If so, with who? How did this happen?
35. As a child or teenager, did someone give me drugs or alcohol? What were the circumstances? How would I describe the scene to someone reading my story?
36. Did I ever feel that there were people in my life making all my decisions for me? Did I ever feel that my choices in my life were out of my hands? Did I ever feel like other people had control over my life?
37. Was I ever forced to have sex to get food, books for school, water, money, housing, travel documents, immigration papers, protection, safety, or even privileges?
38. Was I ever forced to work to get water, food, books, money, housing, travel documents, immigration papers, protection, safety, or even privileges?
39. How would I describe the places I was forced to work in?



40. Did anyone ever control who I talked to on the phone or how often I was able to visit my family or friends?
41. Did having sex ever feel like there was a blurry line between a romantic relationship and an abusive relationship? How old was I? What happened? Did this change over time?
42. What was the first time I was exposed to drugs or alcohol? Was there ever a time in my life that I was addicted to drugs or alcohol? Was there ever a time in my life that I was given drugs or alcohol in exchange for work or sex?
43. What would I describe as the unhealthy relationships in my life? Why?
44. In terms of freedom, did I ever feel like others had power over me? In terms of freedom, did I ever feel like others had power over me when it came to sexual contact or work?
45. Was I ever afraid that if I refused to have sex with someone, or I said no, someone (either myself or someone else) might be hurt?
46. Was I ever forced to go to places for work or sex? Was I ever taken to places by people who had power over me, for work or sex?
47. Did anyone ever take my passport, ID, or other travel documents away from me? Who took it away? What happened?

WRAP UP

48. What are the ways that my own experiences of trauma have helped me relate to, have empathy, and comfort other people who have experienced similar harm?
49. Despite very difficult circumstances, what are the ways you have done your very best? What are the strengths you have – based on all that you have survived?
50. Looking back on my life, what are all the ways I am strong? What are all the ways I am resilient?
51. If you had a guardian angel who wanted to learn more about your life, and asked you for a list of all the things you have survived, what would you write on that list? What are all the different things you have survived?