



**Ten Steps to Prepare for Success
from Jail or Prison:**

Straight-A Guide Introductory Course



**Module 1:
Values**

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Module 1: Values

**Your beliefs become your thoughts,
Your thoughts become your words,
Your words become your actions,
Your actions become your habits,
Your habits become your values,
Your values become your destiny.
Mahatma Gandhi**

How do law-enforcement officials define you? How do you define yourself? If you would like to influence the way that other people perceive you, then this lesson on values will help.

Through this course, you will learn the value of asking questions. That strategy helped me immensely. By asking good questions, we strengthen ourselves. We learn how to think in ways that improve the outcomes of our lives. Questions help us define our values, or what we consider to be central to our lives. When we identify values, we can begin to make more deliberate choices that lead to success—as we define success.

In the opening lesson, I wrote about starting my term in prison. To teach this course, I need to share what I learned. And I need to show how I learned.

My name is Michael Santos:

As I sat in my jail cell in 1987, I knew that I wanted to change. My crimes exposed me to a possible life term, and I would not be eligible for parole. I knew that I would serve at least a decade, and probably longer.

Since this was my first time in jail, I didn't know what to expect. Other people in jail offered me advice on how to get through the time. Yet they'd been to jail many times before, so I didn't consider them as reliable sources for what I wanted to achieve.

Regardless of my sentence length, I wanted to leave prison differently from when I came in. I wanted to influence the way others thought about me—in a positive way. A jury convicted me, and a judge would sentence me. I wouldn't be able to reverse that reality.

Still, if I could influence my future, I believed that I could bring meaning and relevance to my life.

When I found a *Treasury of Philosophy* in the jail's book cart, it was a pivotal moment in my life. The stories I read taught me how to think differently. Lessons in that book taught me how to build strength out of weakness. When I found the story of Socrates, I identified with him. His imprisonment made me feel connected. But Socrates thought differently from me. He wrote about having responsibility as a citizen, and I never thought about such concepts.



Socrates' thought process influenced my perceptions. Prior to reading his story, I didn't think about my responsibilities as a citizen.

I came across that philosophy book when I was about a year into my sentence. I was still a pre-trial detainee. Authorities arrested me on August 11, 1987. As I wrote previously, I only cared about getting out. My attorney described a big difference between an indictment and a conviction. I wanted to believe the lawyer. But I didn't know what I would do if authorities released me. I didn't care. I simply wanted out of my jail cell.

Reading about Socrates changed my thinking. While lying on that concrete rack in the Pierce County Jail, I stared at the ceiling of my cell. Outside, I could hear the television blaring. Other prisoners slammed cards or dominoes on the tables in the jail's day room. Passing time with card games and television didn't interest me. I needed to prepare, to make sure each day was productive.

In my search for answers, some kind of roadmap to success, I read deeper into that philosophy book.

I needed a dictionary while I read. Before prison, I didn't study. I pursued a fast lifestyle, not books. School never held my attention. Reading through that philosophy book made me realize how poorly prepared I was for any type of challenge. As a prisoner, I knew that I couldn't completely avoid confrontations. Yet, I questioned whether I could make choices to minimize my exposure to problems.

The wisdom of philosophy suggested that I should introspect. But I didn't even know the meaning of "introspect."

Introspection:

When I looked up the definition of "introspection" in the dictionary, I developed a better understanding of the word and its meaning. Philosophers said that wise men con-



sidered the motives that drove them. They took deliberate action in pursuit of success—as they defined success.

That advice made sense to me. If a person knew how to define success, it would seem that he would have a better chance of succeeding.

The more I reflected and the further back I examined my life, the more I realized I had to change. Before prison, I didn't think about how my decisions would influence the rest of my life. The friends I chose were like me, living for the moment. I never thought about success.

Introspection from my jail cell brought clarity. By looking back, I could see how decisions early in my life influenced the choices I made. Ever since I could remember, I looked for the easy way. I reflected on my years in school—I didn't pay attention in classes. I wasn't a disciplined athlete. Whenever I saw opportunities, I acted impulsively, without thinking about what consequences would follow. I didn't hesitate to lie or cheat if I felt that lying or cheating would advance my interests.

The more I reflected on my past decisions, the more disgusted I became. Those thoughts and decisions led me to become a shallow, undisciplined young man who was in trouble.

In contrast, I thought about people I admired. They behaved differently from me. Instead of being driven by greed or a fast life, other people aspired to develop good character. They didn't act in ways that would harm their reputation.

My reputation was shot. The more I thought about my life in the past, the more I realized the impact it would have on my future. I would have to serve many, many years in prison. Then, when I returned to society, people would always judge me. They would see me as a convicted felon, or a man who served a lengthy term in prison.

I wanted to influence how others perceived me. I wanted to be positive.

Advice from Confinement

By introspecting, I began to question whether I could do anything to change the course of my future. I considered past decisions and I projected to what I wanted to become. In the jail environment, I heard two messages from staff members:



» *You've got nothing comin'.*

» *Don't do the crime if you can't do the time.*

From the other people in jail, I heard a variety of messages:

» *The best way to serve time is to forget about the outside world.*

» *Focus on your reputation inside.*

» *The only thing it takes to survive in prison is a ball of hate in your stomach and a knife.*

That advice didn't bring much hope. I needed hope. I needed to believe I could accomplish something during my imprisonment. Accomplishments could redeem the bad decisions from my early 20s.

Reading Socrates taught me that I should ask questions. While locked in the jail cell, I didn't have anyone to ask. That didn't stop me from thinking about seeds I could sow to influence others—people I didn't yet know, and people that didn't know me.

Could I take steps to influence people to see me as something different from my criminal behavior?

That was a yes or no question.

Either I held the power to transform my life or I didn't. The more I thought about the question, the more hope I developed. My answer was yes, and I understood that decisions I made while serving time could influence the life that I would lead upon release. Still, I wanted more clarity. During those early stages of my journey, I didn't have any way of knowing the direction my path would take me.

» *I didn't know what sentence my judge would impose.*

» *I didn't know where I would serve my time.*

» *I didn't know the people I would meet in jail or prison.*

» *I didn't know anything about the culture of confinement.*



» *I didn't know how I would support myself.*

» *And I didn't know what else I didn't know.*

There were a lot of unknowns. But I knew that I wanted to come back to society unscathed from prison.

» *How could someone in jail, or someone serving decades in prison, prepare for a successful return to society?*

That question led me to further thoughts. I stared at the concrete block wall. The questions I wrestled with over and over in my mind brought clarity. From that internal quest for answers, I learned how introspection could empower me.

We all have that power.

Masterminds define insanity as doing the same thing over and over but expecting a different result. As I lay in my cell, I knew that I wanted a different life. If I continued to associate with people that broke the law, I would always have problems with the law. I began to think of what I could do to change the course of my life to one that reflected my new purpose.

Restoring Strength:

Thinking about my past helped. First, I thought about all the decisions that led to my troubles with the law. Then I thought about what I could do to create more meaning. I learned to think about the future that I wanted to create.

I thought about people I would meet. I didn't know whom I would meet. But I knew that other people would influence my ability to lead a full life after prison.

A probation officer would supervise me after release.

» *Could I take steps now to influence that future probation officer?*

I didn't have much in the way of work experience before prison. Yet I would have to persuade an employer to hire me.

» *Could I influence the ways that future employers would judge me?*

I didn't have any money and I would need people or companies to extend credit.

- » *Could I take steps while in prison to make it easier to obtain credit when I got out?*
- » *How could I use the time inside to solve problems I would face after release?*



Avatars:

My questions turned to the people I would meet in the future. Eventually, I gave a name to those people. I called them my “avatars.” I considered an avatar as the ideal type of person I would want to support me. I’ll describe more about avatars in future lessons.

- » *Could my adjustment in prison influence my avatars?*

That was another yes or no question. It led to a new question:

- » *What would law-abiding citizens expect from me?*

As you can see, each question I asked opened more questions. I had to think about my responses. And I had to assess whether my responses, decisions, and actions would bring me closer to success upon release.

If people were going to open opportunities for me in the future, they would expect me to show that I’m different. They would want me to do more than serve time. Serving time didn’t present any particular challenge. Calendar pages would turn without any influence on my part.

You may have heard an old saying. A judge sentenced a man to serve 20 years.

The defendant felt weak. “But judge, I can’t do all that time.”

“Well, do what you can,” the judge responded.

I knew my judge would sentence me to a lengthy prison term. My conviction carried a mandatory-minimum sentence of 10 years. But the law allowed for my judge to sentence me to life without parole.



I didn't know anything I could do to influence my sentence length. But I could make choices to influence my prospects for success. My adjustment in prison could put me in the pathway of opportunities. Or my adjustment could threaten progress.

Crafting a Plan:

The judge would impose a sentence, but there would be more to the process. I could wait for my sentence to end. Yet waiting for calendar pages to turn wouldn't prepare me to overcome challenges. I would face many challenges in prison. I would face more challenges after release. As mentioned above, I thought about:

My future probation officer and how I could persuade him to grant me a higher degree of liberty.

My future employer and how I could persuade him to look beyond my criminal record and allow me to work toward a career.

Future lenders and what they would expect me to achieve for them to do business with me.

Those questions led me to think more about the people I'd meet in the future. They led me to flesh out my avatars.

- » *Who were they?*
- » *What kinds of friends did they have?*
- » *What perceptions would they have about someone who served a lengthy term in prison?*
- » *How could I persuade those people to see me differently from what my criminal convictions suggested?*

Thinking about the future brought more clarity.

Successful people taught that thinking about problems led to solutions. Then they created plans that would lead to a successful outcome. By learning from successful people, anyone could create a plan. People in prison could create adjustment strategies. That new

“philosophy” helped me believe that I could do more than serve time. I could take measurable steps to improve the outcome of my prison experience.

Anyone could do the same.

If I wanted a second chance at life, I would need to do my part. If I didn’t work hard to build a credible record, people would always judge me. I wanted to show how I matured into more than the 20-year old kid who sold cocaine. I couldn’t keep blaming others for the problems I created. To build a better future, I had to solve problems.



» *What problems would I face in the future?*

I knew that I’d leave prison without any clothes.

I knew that I’d leave prison without any money.

I knew that I’d leave prison without a vehicle.

I knew that I’d leave prison without any credit.

I knew that I’d leave prison without any work history.

I knew that I’d leave prison without much in the way of resources that other people took for granted.

» *How could a person in jail or prison prepare in ways to overcome those hurdles?*

If I didn’t take steps to solve those problems, my return to society would present many, many challenges. Those challenges, I realized, could complicate my future. They may have been more challenging than serving the lengthy term I was certain to receive.

This type of questioning, introspection, and self-examination led to the values that would define my life. In time, I came away with an answer.

If I were going to emerge from prison with my dignity intact, unscathed by the prison experience, I needed to live a values-based, principled life. My values would reflect my commitment to success. As Gandhi said, habits become values and values become destiny.

Even though I was in prison, I could define value categories. I could pledge to live by those value categories. Those value categories could influence every decision I made going forward.



Prior to learning about values, I didn't have any direction. I hated being in prison and I wanted out. But I didn't know how to create a path that would lead me out. I felt like a puppet. The prosecutor, my judge, and the prison system pulled the strings of my life.

From masterminds, I learned that I could seize control of my thoughts and behaviors. I could define values. Then I could make decisions and take steps to show others that I was worthy of a second chance. I wanted to influence the way others perceived me. I didn't try to fit in with the prison culture or with the expectations of others. Instead, I set my values in accordance with the people—my avatars—that I expected to influence in the future.

I didn't know my avatars by name. But I had some ideas of what they would expect from me. Those ideas influenced the value categories by which I would live.

Once I made a commitment to live a values-based life, I took the first step toward a deliberate course of action. I knew that I was locked in prison. And I knew that I wanted to return to society strong. To accomplish that goal, I charted out the course that would put me in the best possible position upon release.

I committed to live in accordance with the same value categories that governed the lives of law-abiding citizens, my avatars.

What would law-abiding citizens expect from me?

Masterminds taught me to introspect. Doing the work of introspection convinced me that I could influence a better future. By living a values-based life, people would be more inclined to work with me. Instead of "giving" me a second chance, they would see that I earned a second chance.

Those thoughts led me to identify three value categories. They would be consistent with the values of my avatars. They included commitments to:

- » *Pursue an education,*
- » *Contribute to society,*
- » *Build a support network.*

The Straight-A Guide course should generate and reinforce hope for participants. A person living in struggle can introspect and examine past decisions. Looking at past de-

cisions can lead the individual to ask Socratic questions in the search for a better life.



- » *What past influences led to your thoughts about all that you value in life?*
- » *How did those thoughts influence the way you communicated?*
- » *In what ways did your communications lead to your actions?*
- » *How did your decisions and actions become your habits?*
- » *Would others define you by your habits?*
- » *In what ways did those habits influence your values, or where you are now?*

Regardless of where you are now, you can make decisions to influence a better future. If you want a better future, start now by defining your values. To the extent that you align those values with the future you want to create, you live like a mastermind.

Basic Questions:

1. *What are Socratic questions?*
2. *What does it mean to introspect?*
 - » *To rest.*
 - » *To think about past decisions.*
 - » *To plan for a better future.*
3. *What steps can you take to influence positively the ways that others perceive you?*
 - » *People will always think the worst and there's nothing I can do about it.*



- » *I can wait until I get out of prison because nothing matters in here.*
- » *I can build a record of accomplishments.*
- 4. *When is the best time to prepare for challenges you will face upon release?*
 - » *I can start preparing for release right now.*
 - » *I will enroll in pre-release classes when the prison lets me.*
 - » *I'm just going to focus on doing time now and I'll focus on release when I get out.*
- 5. *What steps can you take to influence others so they see you positively, even though you may be in a challenge right now?*
 - » *I can't do anything about the way others see me.*
 - » *I can build a record that will influence the way that others perceive me.*
- 6. *Which of the following decisions be more likely to influence a prospective employer to hire you in your future?*
 - » *I could make sure he knew I was a shot caller.*
 - » *I could show that I was great at playing cards.*
 - » *I could describe steps I took to prepare for success upon release.*

Personal Development Exercises:

- » *Pursue these personal-development exercises independently, or in a group breakoout session. Respond to the questions and discuss with your group.*



- 1. How do you think law-enforcement officials define people who have been in custody?*
- 2. How do you define yourself?*
- 3. What steps could someone in custody take to influence people in the future so that they would not only consider the criminal charge?*
- 4. How could someone serving decades in prison prepare for a successful return to society?*
- 5. What steps could someone in custody take to influence a future probation officer?*
- 6. What steps could someone in custody influence perceptions of future employers?*
- 7. What steps could someone in custody take to open credit lines upon release?*
- 8. What steps could a person in custody take to prepare for challenges after release?*
- 9. How could behavior while in custody influence a person's avatars?*
- 10. Who are your avatars?*
- 11. What kinds of friends do your avatars have?*
- 12. What perceptions would your avatars have about someone who served a lengthy term in prison?*
- 13. How could you persuade your avatars to see you differently from what your criminal convictions suggest?*
- 14. What problems do you anticipate facing in the future?*
- 15. How could a person in custody overcome those hurdles?*
- 16. What influences led to your current station in life?*



17. *How did those thoughts influence the way you communicated?*
18. *In what ways did your communications lead to your actions?*
19. *How did your decisions and actions become your habits?*

20. *Would others define you by your habits?*

21. *In what ways did those habits influence your values, or where you are now?*

Module Activities

- » *Vocabulary Exercise: In each chapter, write down 10 words you did not know. Use a dictionary to look up each word and write the definition next to the word. Practice saying each word out loud, correctly.*

Critical Thinking Exercise

Return to the module and read the sentences and paragraph sections where you looked up words. Think about what you learned by looking up the words.

- » *Does understanding what the words mean bring you a new understanding of the meaning in what you're reading?*
- » *As your understand of vocabulary increases, are you relating to the course content differently?*
- » *Next to each word, write down what you learned from reading deliberately.*