



HOW TO WRITE PAROLE PACKETS

Jorge Antonio Renaud

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INTRODUCTION

Why this guide? Why me?

Those two questions may be churning around in your head right now. You are in prison and you are eligible for parole. Either this is your first time up and you want to do everything possible to convince the Board of Pardons and Paroles (BPP) to grant you your freedom, or you've received set-offs and don't think you did enough the last time and want to do more. You want to put together a parole packet, and you're not sure how to go about it, or you're not satisfied with the one you've put together before and submitted to the Board.

A parole packet is not necessary for you to make parole. The Board doesn't require one. (*More about requirements in the next section.*) In fact, the Board doesn't require that you do anything, other than serve a certain length of time and be in a certain good-time earning category, before it considers you for parole. You don't have to submit anything – no support letters, no certificates, no introductory letters to the Board, and no explanations of your history or employment or education.

The Board can and will make its decision with or without your input. However, the Board is comprised of citizens of Texas, and those citizens would sure like for you to take an active part in the process. After all, they are considering whether or not they should let you go out into society and be their neighbors. Out there, people take an active hand in day-to-day decisions that affect their lives and futures. So if you truly want to do everything you can to give the Board a reason to let you go, then you should prepare a parole packet.

The average inmate probably doesn't understand what should go into a parole packet, and his family sure doesn't know. Many inmates think that they should flood the Board with letters and have their family call every day to show their support. Neither of these things is true or even desirable. Many inmates think they should ask their families to hire a parole lawyer, for various reasons, the primary one being the inmate's reluctance when confronted with this type of project. What goes through your mind is, "You mean I actually have to write letters and compile copies of my certificates and write down my educational and employment and criminal histories, and maybe borrow a typewriter and work on this until it looks good and then spend stamps to mail it to the Board? Why can't I just have my family pay an attorney to do it?"

You can, and many families do just that. But I argue against that for a number of reasons. First, I cannot help but believe that the Board members look more favorably on a packet that is obviously prepared by an inmate. They expect initiative from you. They expect concern for your family's finances and a willingness to take part in your own life. And if they receive a slick packet that is signed by an attorney's secretary and has the return address and phone number of an attorney, it is obvious that YOU, the inmate they are deciding to keep in prison or release onto the streets, had little to do with the compilation of the information; that YOU didn't take the time to put this together; that YOU preferred to have your family pay for an attorney rather than do this yourself, the person asking to be released from prison.

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Second, attorneys cost money. I don't know about you, but my family couldn't send me \$30 a month when I was in, much less afford the minimum of \$1,500 the average parole attorney charges to prepare a packet and TRY to get in to see a Board member before their votes are cast.

Third, the attorney only knows what you tell him. No one knows your history and accomplishments and goals and remorse like you. Just like you are capable of writing a letter to the attorney and briefing him about your history, you are capable of writing these things down and creating your own parole packet, with the help of your family.

Fourth, there is no actual evidence that hiring an attorney in any way increases your chances of making parole. Attorneys choose their clients, and they only choose those inmates who they think already have a chance of making parole. But if your loved ones DO hire an attorney, there are a couple of things to consider:

- The Board is NOT required to actually give an interview to anyone other than the victim(s) of the crime you were convicted of. That means they don't have to give you an interview, nor your family, nor any attorney. Many Board members have established relationship with certain attorneys and will either accept telephone calls or schedule visits with them. But they aren't required to, so be wary of an attorney who guarantees he or she will speak to the members of the Board. There is no such guarantee.
- Some attorneys say they will present your case to the "Board panel." There is no Board panel. The way they work is that the lead voter looks at your packet/prison and legal history and votes, then sends it to the second voter. If both agree on an outcome, that is the end of the process. If they disagree, it goes to the third voter. But the members do NOT meet to discuss your or anyone's case; thus, there is no "panel" for anyone to appear before. Be wary of an attorney who says he or she will present to a "panel."

The only inmates I think should hire parole attorneys are those inmates who have found there are severe factual errors in their prison jackets. By this, I mean that they have been accused of being gang members when they aren't; there is a charge or conviction on their jacket that was not put there by the court and is there in error; or they have found that there is something factually wrong somewhere in their prison jacket that may in fact sway the Board members to vote against their release. In these types of instances, an attorney can investigate and explain to the Board, if he is allowed to see them, that these errors are just that.

So now you've decided to compile a parole packet. Why should you read this guide, or any other book about parole, and listen to what I have to say?

Well, in contrast to most people who offer advice on how to write parole packets or offer to actually construct one for inmates – usually attorneys – I am living proof that I'm know what I'm talking about in this area. I was in prison three times, each time for robbery. I discharged a five-year sentence, returned and made parole on a 28-year sentence, and then I returned and made parole on a 60-year sentence for

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aggravated robbery after serving 17 years. An independent observer, looking at my history, would have been correct in thinking that I would have done quite a bit more time than I actually did, maybe 25 years on the 60, before making parole. I was required to serve 15 years flat. I did, and I took quite a bit of time preparing my packet before my first eligibility date. The Board gave me a one-year set-off. My second time eligible I was released. I am not under special restrictions other than reporting to my officer once a month and attending AA meetings weekly. So I must know something about packets.

You may think I had somebody special talk to the Board and that is why I was released. You may think that I had an “in,” and that I am somehow special, to have been in three times for robbery and make parole so quickly. I don’t think that is true. Yes, I received a BS in Psychology while I was there. I completed one vocational course. But, on the negative side of the ledger, I received my share of disciplinary cases, spent time in Line Class III, and I worked for eight years in the fields. I was a hard head for a good many years, always angry at the officers, always looking for reasons to blame someone other than myself for my situation. I was a typical convict.

I finally took a long, hard look at myself and realized something: I wanted to have my family, my friends, and mostly myself, see me as an honorable man. I changed the way I lived, not to make parole, but because that was the way I wanted to live, whether in prison or out in the free world. I took responsibility for my actions, and I took control of the few things I could in fact control. And one of them was to prepare a parole packet, highlighting what was good, admitting what was bad, and I was careful to place everything in it in the perspective that I felt the Board needed in order to see me the way I was NOW, not the way I was THEN.

I am a writer by trade. While in prison, I wrote a book titled “*Behind the Walls: A Guide for the Families and Friends of Texas Prison Inmates.*” I wrote articles and essays and poetry. I was editor of The Echo from 1999 to 2001. I have been a journalist in the free world. So I know something about how to present myself and my situation in the best light. I took advantage of what was positive in my life.

And so can you. I can help you take your history and your situation and show you how to put those things in the best positive light, one that will make the BPP see you as you are now. You can make parole. But even if you don’t, you can know in your heart that you did everything in your power to be free, and if that does nothing else, it makes you a better person, one your family will see in a different light, and it will let you live your life in a more dignified, responsible fashion.

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WHO IS ELIGIBLE FOR PAROLE?

There are only two actual requirements the Parole Board deems necessary of any inmate before he is considered for release on parole.

First, you must have reached your eligibility date. Your eligibility is set by the elements of your conviction and whatever legislative statutes govern your conviction. In other words, you have done whatever time is necessary to be considered eligible by the Texas Legislature. The amount of time an inmate must do varies enormously. If you are doing time for an aggravated offense, or a 3G offense, you must be in prison a certain amount of time before you are eligible for parole and reviewed for release. This amount will be set, and you will know it when you are convicted. That length of time can be a flat percentage of your sentence – a third, fourth, or a half – or a certain amount of years, in some cases up to 40 years. There is nothing you can do to alter that date. You cannot accumulate good time and bring it closer, and if you lose good time your eligibility date is not affected.

If you are not serving time for an aggravated offense, then parole eligibility will be calculated by the Board, and your eligibility will depend on how much good time you draw. Inmates in this category can in fact bring their review date closer or move it farther away, if you lose good time and lower your good-time earning status.

If you are reading this and preparing for parole, then you have either done the time necessary or are close enough to begin preparing to see the parole representative.

The second requirement the Board demands is that you be in AT LEAST the good-time earning category you were in when you first came to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). Depending on when you were convicted, this means you must be either State Approved Trusty IV or Line Class I.

That's all. Do enough time and be either SAT IV or Line Class I and the Board will consider you for release. You don't have to notify the Board or write a petition or have your family call. But now that you are eligible for parole, what should you do in order to have the best chance?

Quit receiving major disciplinary cases. Of all the things you can do, even including writing and submitting a parole packet, that is number one. I realize that the system and its officers will look for reasons to write you up. But I also believe that the great majority of cases are written on inmates who simply won't shut up when some annoyed officer tells them to, or when an inmate decides to get loud because his home boys are watching and he wants them to think he's a hard case, or simply because an inmate is having a hard day and doesn't want to be bothered by an officer with a chip on his or her shoulder.

That's understandable. But the fact is that the officer goes home, and the inmate has to see the counsel substitute, then the lieutenant or captain, and then go before the Disciplinary Committee, and you know how that ends. This is not the place to go off on the Committee. The simple truth is that inmates too often put themselves before that particular steamroller by their actions. So don't. Think about your freedom and your family and your dignity before you open your mouth or decide to sell cigarettes or decide to fall onto that other block to see your homeboy. It isn't worth it.

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Getting ready for parole should start much earlier than your first eligibility date. I believe that readying yourself to be free and becoming free and staying free entail a certain point of view, a way of looking at life that perhaps you haven't considered. My philosophy will run through everything I say in this guide, and that philosophy is that you must change in prison, and you must change NOT because you want to make parole and NOT because you've seen what being in prison does to your family, but because it is the right thing to do. If you change for that reason, that change will permeate your life. That change will be obvious to everyone, especially to the Board. It will make the Board much more willing to let you go home. And it will make you much more likely to stay out and become one of the formerly incarcerated individuals who doesn't return to prison.

I'm going to write about the following areas. I recommend your parole packet address each one of these areas.

1. Introductory letter to the Parole Board asking for parole.
2. Parole plan
3. Criminal history.
4. Disciplinary history.
5. Educational history.
6. Employment history.
7. Substance Abuse history.
8. Spiritual development.
9. Goal statements.
10. Penance statement.
11. Support letters.
12. Awards and Certificates
13. Presentation

(If you are unsure, the BPP has on its website a publication called, "Parole in Texas." It is available at http://tdcj.state.tx.us/bpp/publications/PIT_eng.pdf. It has a chart that will clearly state when each incarcerated individual can expect to reach his or her first eligibility date depending on the date of conviction and crime.)

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INTRODUCTORY LETTER TO THE PAROLE BOARD ASKING FOR PAROLE

Your parole packet should introduce you to the Board. Although they know OF you, they don't KNOW you. The Board has your history, and much of that is negative. It consists of your criminal and in-prison history, along with various certificates and educational achievements that are included in your jacket.

What their history doesn't include is anything about your living situation when you committed your crime, the fact that you were keeping up payments on your car and apartment before you got into that fight. It doesn't include anything about the fact that you were raised by your grandmother, or that you were an honor student in high school; that you began running around with a gang when your older brother died and you lost direction and became angry at the world and used poor judgment. You need to tell the Board who you are, how you got to where you are now, and why you should be freed.

And I mean specifically why you should be freed. Your letter needs to say that. "I am asking the Board to grant me parole and to allow me to return to my family." Of course, if your family is scattered and broken; if your family is dysfunctional and alcoholic and drug-ridden, then this is the place to say that. If that is the case, you should say that even though you love your family, you don't think that their home or apartment is the place for you to be, not until you are independent and ready to be around them. Again, this is the place to say that.

None of this is to say you should make excuses for your situation. In all instances, you need to say:

"I accept full responsibility for my actions. I realize that society places certain pressures on people, but I also realize that we have the ability to make choices. I made poor choices, again and again. But just as I made poor choices then, since I've been incarcerated I've made better, more positive choices, as my parole packet will show."

You need to address your crime of conviction. If you are there for a series of crimes, you need to explain your state of mind. This doesn't need to be wordy. But you should say something along the lines of:

"I realize that selling drugs is illegal and that drugs destroy lives and families. But at the time I was in love with material things and I did not have the patience to get a low-paying job, to save money to buy the things I wanted. Not only that; I believed that new clothes and a fancy car made me a different person than I was, somehow more attractive. Now I realize that if I needed things to impress people, I didn't need those people around me. Good friends won't care if I buy clothes at Goodwill or if I take the bus to work, but I didn't truly believe that then. Once I began selling drugs [or burglarizing or robbing] I began not to see my victims as people. And I am ashamed of that."

You need to say that last sentence, in some fashion or another: You must express remorse. Neither I nor the Board knows if you truly feel remorse. I would hope that if you have truly examined your life and actions, you in fact feel remorse for your victims, for your family, and for everyone who was in your life

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and hurt by your actions. **Saying** you are sorry and that you regret your actions is one thing and likely necessary for the Board to seriously consider releasing you, but actually **feeling** remorse is crucial to your development as a person, and it is crucial to your staying out of prison.

The introductory letter should not be longer than a page and a half. You begin by introducing yourself. Say who you are, what you're there for, and ask for parole. Then include a few paragraphs describing your state of mind when you committed your crime(s) and why, if in the same situation, you won't do those same things. Describe what the prison experience has done to you, how it has made you more patient, more willing to let go of things you can't control. Allude a little to your education while in prison. Write a sentence or two about how you've learned patience.

If you have children, talk about what this has done to them. Don't be too sentimental, but be honest. If your daughter or son has cried while visiting, say that. If your mother or father has died, say that, and tell the Board how that has left you in tears and how ashamed you were at not being able to go to their funerals.

You should include the name, telephone number, and address of two people to whom you plan on paroling. You will include more detailed information about this in the next section, but here you want to say:

"I plan on paroling to my mother. She lives at 884 North Main in Dallas, Texas. Her number is 555 555-5555. My brother has also indicated that he wishes I live with him, so if the Board would rather I parole to him, he lives at 976 Gurney Avenue in Ft. Worth, Texas. His number is 555 555-5555."

If you don't have a place to parole to, then you should say that here and ask that the Board try to find you a halfway house. However, you should already be trying to do that on your own, and you should say in this letter that you have written to halfway houses and are trying to secure a place to stay.

The introductory letter is your one chance to really speak to the Board. Don't be afraid to be real, to be honest, and to be a little emotional.

What if you're innocent? What if you're not guilty of what you've been convicted of? What should you say? Should you express remorse for something you have claimed from Day One that you didn't do?

That's a hard question. The Board members will assume that you are guilty. That's just a fact. If you've claimed innocence, then it is likely your record will show that. You will have filed appeals, which still may be pending. You may have become involved with one of the various Innocence Projects, and they may be in the process of trying to get you a new trial.

I think that if you are innocent and have claimed so from the beginning, you should continue to do so. But there are two types of innocent people in prison. The first is one who was totally innocent of the crime he was convicted, and whose record shows that he or she pled not guilty and has claimed innocence throughout their sentence. The second is one who has been involved in criminal activity but did not commit the particular crime he was convicted of. They require different approaches.

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If you belong in the first category, respectfully say that you are innocent. Say that you understand that people make mistakes; that victims are often so distraught and traumatized that they don't remember events well, and that you understand how you came to be in prison. But insist that you are innocent; that you have always maintained your innocence; and that you will continue to pursue every avenue to prove your innocence. Tell the Board that while you are deeply sorry for whatever befell the victim, you had nothing to do with that crime, and that you hope the Board will understand how you cannot express remorse for something you did not do.

If you belong in the second category, what you say will be a little different. Again, maintain that your conviction is wrong; that you have always claimed innocence and that you will pursue all avenues to prove that. But in this instance, you must say that you understand that you put yourself in this position by making wrong choices. If someone with you shot or hurt or killed someone while you were with them at a party or during a robbery, you need to say that you understand and accept that your bad choices put you in the position of being blamed for the crime of someone else. Admit that you made terrible choices, but that you should not be punished for making bad choices, especially when you did not commit the crime. You should express regret for your choices and for the victim's pain and trauma. But again, explain that you can't express remorse for something that you did not do.



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PAROLE PLAN

In this section, you should list the people you are planning to parole to along with the people who are offering you employment. Provide their names, addresses, and telephone numbers. I recommend writing a little more than just that information. Also include a sentence describing the situation. For example:

“I plan on paroling to my mother, Mrs. Angelina Brown, who lives at 876 Richland Drive in Dallas, Texas, 87878. Her home telephone number is 555 555-5555. She works at Richland Nursing Home as a registered nurse and her work number is 555 555-5555. My mother owns her own three-bedroom home, and it is in a quiet residential neighborhood in North Dallas. My sister, Jennette, who is 25 and a college student, also lives with my mother.”

You should detail this information about everyone on this list. You should try to have at least two people to parole to. If you are going to a halfway house, try to provide similar information: the type of residence, what the rules will be, how long you plan on staying, and how you plan on getting around.

If you have offers of employment, then you should provide the names of those people also and give some details:

“I will be working for Joe Bond Construction. The firm is located at 980 Main Street in Rutherford, Texas, 88765. Mr. Bond can be reached at 555 555-5555. His firm has provided construction services for Rutherford and the surrounding area for over 20 years. I will be a journeyman carpenter, and I begin work the first Monday after I am paroled.”

Try to have as much information for the Board, because if you provide it for them it shows that you are serious about your parole; that you have already secured a place to stay and employment, and that these people are willing to be contacted by the Board.



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CRIMINAL HISTORY

This is pretty straightforward. The Board has a record of your criminal history, at the very least a record of your convictions. You need to address them: What you did, if anyone was hurt, your state of mind, and the outcome of the case. I don't recommend going too deep into particulars. But you need to say, "On January 12, 1999, I was convicted of armed robbery. I was on drugs and not working. I used a pellet gun because I could not get a real gun. I was arrested on December 9 of 1998, pled guilty and received a 10-year sentence."

If you are convicted of a violent crime where someone was hurt, you need to say something about the crime more than what I've just described. You need to express remorse for your actions. The same goes for a conviction of a sexual offense. If you are receiving treatment, stress that, and say that you will continue to seek treatment after you are released.

How much or how little you say is up to you. You expressed remorse for your actions in the introductory letter. You should repeat that here, to a lesser extent, but in a more particular way, tailored to each conviction. That can sound dumb and repetitious. But you should at least say a sentence or two about each crime and say you are sorry to each particular victim.

There are two gray areas here: Juvenile records and non-convictions. The records of juveniles are sealed. However, there is a good possibility that the Board has records of any conviction, whether or not you were a juvenile. I would address all convictions.

Now, let's say you committed a series of crimes but only were convicted of one or two. For example, you were arrested, and in a plea bargain agreement, you confessed to nine burglaries but were only convicted of one or two. Do you say in the letter, "I committed nine burglaries" or do you just address the robbery you were convicted for?

This is a difficult topic, but I don't think you should mention every crime you committed, only the convictions. If you are interviewed and asked about the other crimes you confessed to, tell the truth: That you believed you were only to address the convictions. But the odds are that the Board doesn't have copies of what a local police department would: every confession and cleared case. The Board certainly has copies of all your convictions. Speak about those.

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DISCIPLINARY HISTORY

This is similar to the above section. The Board has a record of your disciplinary history. The voting members who read your jacket will want to know why you have five major cases for contraband, or why you have two Code 20s for exposing yourself to the officers, or why you have a couple of fighting with or without a weapon.

What can you say about these? That you were dumb and weren't thinking? That's pretty well the truth, and I tend to believe that the truth is always the best way to go. But the packet is the place you put a positive spin on everything, so is there a way of putting a positive spin on this type of disciplinary history?

Not really, but the way you address this type of history is by admitting to it and expressing thoughtful remorse. So, you may say, "When I received these cases, I was not thinking about what my actions would have on others. I was being selfish and wanted physical relief," if the cases are Code 20s. If they're contraband, you can say, "I have had a difficult time quitting smoking, and I understand that smoking is against the rules and that now is the opportunity I've been given to stop." If the cases are for fighting, you can say, "I was frightened, and I believed that I had to defend myself. I only did what was absolutely necessary in the situation."

You should also say, regardless of the situation, that you accepted the punishment, whatever it was, as just; that you did your time in solitary or on recreation and commissary restriction without complaining. And if you have any significant time without cases, stress that:

"Since those cases, I've given a lot of thought to my situation and to the way my actions might have a negative impact on my life. I have stopped [fill in the blank] and I have stayed away from people and situations that may place myself and my future in jeopardy."

Don't worry about the minor cases. Just address the major ones. And if you don't have any, or if you haven't had any in a long time, stress that. I think if there's five or so years since you've had a case, all you should say is "I received [X number of cases] before I realized that acting that way would only have negative consequences. I have had [X number of years] without a case, and I think that demonstrates my determination to obey the rules of prison, and to obey the laws of society when I'm released."

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EDUCATIONAL HISTORY

This is one place you can shine. No matter what your educational attainment, whether or not you've received a GED, a bachelor's degree or a master's degree while in prison, there are things you can say here that will show the Board that you understand the importance of education.

The TDCJ offers many educational opportunities. Most of them are geared toward awarding you with a certificate or a degree. You should spotlight anything you've done in prison for which you were recognized.

You should begin by referring to your free-world educational history. If you finished high school or went to college before coming to prison, say that. Relate dates and places. Say what it was about high school history or geography that fascinated you. Did you win spelling bees? Say so. Did you write an award-winning essay that was published in the newspaper? Say so.

Then refer to your in-prison education. Write a few lines about every degree or certificate you received. If you finished a vocational course, say what it was in, when you received it, and give a few details. For example:

"I received a Certificate in Horticulture in May of 1999. This required that I complete 1,500 hours of classroom training, including 500 hours of actual laboratory. During the course, I was expected to read nine books, and I learned about cultivation, seasonal growth patterns, irrigation, crop rotation, and many other topics that will prepare me for a job or a career in landscaping or horticulture."

You should do this for every vocational course you took, even if you didn't finish.

Many inmates complete religious study courses. You will mention this in the Spiritual Growth section, but you should mention and describe the actual courses here, giving details of what they required. If finishing the required courses meant you had to read a Biblical chapter each week and write an essay on it and answer questions, say that, and give a reference to what you learned:

"I learned from Job how patience and faith are important parts of a God-fearing life, and reading about the tribulations of Job and then writing an essay on him made me realize that everything I go through will benefit me, if I learn something from it."

This way, not only are you demonstrating to the Board that you're taking Bible courses; you're also showing off your writing skills.

If you received a college degree, you should play that up. Refer to how much those courses meant to you; how they increased your awareness of your place in life and of your particular culture; and how the exchange of ideas made you realize what you are missing as a result of your conviction and incarceration.

What if you haven't finished any courses? You can still talk about the books you've read and about the television shows you've watched (or wanted to watch) and about how you never missed the news.

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You can say:

"While in prison, I have been unable to take college courses. However, I made a practice of going to the library and checking out different non-fiction books each week. I finished at least one book every week, and I learned many things, from the effect the shrinking ozone layer has on the atmosphere, to the history of the Iraqi people and why it was important that Sadaam Hussein be removed as president. I plan on continuing my education when I am released."

This entire packet is designed to put you in the best possible light. You should take every opportunity to do that. If you had a fight with someone because you wanted to watch "Nature" and he wanted to watch "The Jerry Springer Show", I think you should say that:

"I received a disciplinary case for fighting because I wanted to watch an educational program and other inmates didn't. I realize that was a dumb thing to do, but I felt at the time that I was being deprived of an opportunity to learn. We have so few opportunities that I just felt I needed to say or do something."

This way, you not only deal with a disciplinary case, but you put it in the best possible light.



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EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

This category can be troublesome for many incarcerated individuals because a lot of them haven't worked much, at least not consistently. However, there are ways you can put a positive spin on this, especially by highlighting what you've done in prison, even if it's just been working in the fields.

You should begin by detailing the jobs you had in the free world, especially those in which you were asked to assume responsibility. Let's say you worked at Church's Fried Chicken and you eventually worked your way up to Crew Chief. Say when you worked there and detail your responsibilities:

"I worked at Church's Fried Chicken in Tyler, Texas, from March 1996 to April 1999. I began as a cook, and I worked the second shift, which usually had the heaviest flow of customers. I unloaded trucks, unpackaged chicken, cut the chicken into eighths, mixed batter, and dropped the chicken into the cooking vats, being careful to check temperatures and cooking times. I eventually worked my way to the cashier's slot. I became Crew Chief, and my duties included assigning jobs to my coworkers, counting the daily receipts, and interacting with customers. I learned what it takes to work in a team atmosphere and how to communicate effectively with my coworkers and supervisors."

With small changes, this is what you should say about any job you had. Even if all you did was cut the grass for your neighbors, you can find a way to write about the details and responsibilities of whatever job you had.

"I was unable to find steady employment, so I went door-to-door, offering to do yard work, and eventually I had about a dozen steady customers in my neighborhood. Each customer had a different way of giving instructions, and I learned to listen carefully and to ask questions to make sure I understood what they wanted. I learned the basics of pruning flowers, how to till a garden, how to operate basic machinery, and other aspects of landscaping and gardening. While I may not make a career of this, I think the discipline it took to keep asking people if they wanted a yardman even after being turned down again and again will help me in the future."

Obviously, your packet should emphasize jobs you had in the free world, especially those that were supervisory in nature. But if you've been in prison a long time; if you've had pretty good jobs in prison; or if you didn't work at all when you were out, then you should emphasize prison employment.

Your descriptions of prison jobs should be similar to the descriptions I listed above. Many incarcerated individuals discount the importance of prison employment and don't include that in their parole packets, but the demands of prison jobs are similar to free-world jobs, and incarcerated individuals often work under restrictions and with stipulations that most free-world employees can't imagine. You can go on lockdown and you fall behind on your duties and have to work that much harder to catch up. You don't get paid; you don't get sick leave or vacation time, so you have to find some way of focusing your discipline and motivating yourself. The Board knows this and expects to know what you've done while you've been in prison.

HOW TO WRITE PAROLE PACKETS

Look for ways to highlight what your job(s) required. If you've been an SSI, point out how that position means you were reviewed by the Unit Classification Committee and approved by the State Classification Committee, and how that means you've been granted a level of trust not given to all inmates. If you worked in Food Service and were a cook, talk about the demands of cooking for thousands of people, and how you've learned the basics of planning, preparing, and presenting food. If you worked in maintenance, describe your duties. Regardless of your job, no matter how unimportant you may think it was and how little prestige it carried in prison, it demanded that you show up, that you please your supervisor, that you work with coworkers who were often undisciplined, and it gave you the opportunity to grow as an individual.

What if you haven't had prison employment and spent all your time in the fields? You can put a positive spin on that, too:

"I've always preferred to work outside. I feel that it is unhealthy to always be inside. While the work in the fields is often hard and dirty, that doesn't bother me. I enjoy rising early and being outside. It took a lot of discipline to work in the fields for years, but I've come to enjoy it and learn from it. I've learned about crop rotation, irrigation, planting and harvesting. I'm not a farmer, but I'm qualified now to work for a landscaping firm, and I think I would enjoy that when I'm released."

Will the Board truly believe this, even though your disciplinary record shows that you had major cases that likely kept you in the fields, and that if you'd had the opportunity to work as an Officers' Baker, you would have jumped at it? Probably not, but they will also realize that it took a bit of creativity for you to prepare this packet, and they will appreciate the fact that you at least tried to present what is essentially a negative in a positive light. They realize that you had to think about these things and that thinking about them is a first step toward you thinking about the other negative aspects of your life and addressing them.

Look at your prison employment. Decide how you can present everything in a positive fashion, and you'll see that every job you've been assigned to had aspects you can honestly claim made you a better person. Keep that in mind.



HOW TO WRITE PAROLE PACKETS

SUBSTANCE ABUSE HISTORY

This doesn't have to be too long and involved, but if you are convicted of drug possession or sales, or if you admitted to using drugs when you committed your crime, then you need to address those things here.

Why did you use drugs? Because all your friends were using them? Then say so, and say why you understand that was and is wrong:

"I began smoking marijuana when I was 12 because my friends were smoking. I understand how I just wanted to belong, how I wanted certain people to be my friends. But I remember how most of the kids didn't smoke, how the kids I made fun of – the nerds, the ones who carried books home every day – are the ones living honest lives and taking care of their children. Using drugs was wrong, and just as wrong was my desire to do dumb, illegal things just so other people would like me."

Why did you sell drugs? Because it was easy money. Admit to that, and say why you realize that was and is wrong:

"I started selling drugs because the money was easy. I didn't pay attention to the effect drugs had on people, how they stole money from their families to give to me. I just ignored that, and I'm ashamed of it. I could have looked for a job, one that didn't pay much but that was legal and offered me a way to work my way up and live an honorable life, but I took the easy way out."

Did you steal in order to buy drugs because you were strung out? Admit to that, and say what you could have differently:

"I became addicted to [crack or cocaine or heroin]. There are places a person can go to for help but I was ashamed of asking for help. I kept telling myself that this would be my last hit, my last pipe, but of course by myself I didn't have the strength to quit. I have learned more about the effects of drugs on a person's brain, and I know now that I needed help. I also understand that the drugs made me temporarily insane, how using drugs changed my values and allowed me to believe that robbery or burglary was not something that I chose to do but was pushed into doing by drug use. I allowed my addiction to push me into terrible choices, and I'm ashamed of that."

The benefit in saying these things is that they are true, and thinking like this will force you to confront the choices you made. Just the act of writing about these things will change the way you think and the way you act in the future.

You should be attending AA/NA in prison, and you should say that. Talk a bit about the concepts you've learned by going to meetings. Explain to the Board that you plan to continue attending meetings in the free world, and that you now understand that addiction is a disease, one that you will always have, and one that you will always need help to face and to overcome.

HOW TO WRITE PAROLE PACKETS

SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Incarcerated individuals are all too familiar with men and women who use the Bible or another holy book as a shield, as a way to keep the predators at bay in prison. Many incarcerated individuals turn to religion on a temporary basis, as a way to show their family and friends, and eventually the Board, that they have changed. I would hope that is not the case with you, and that you have truly sought some manner of finding spirituality while in prison. If incarcerated individuals had been more spiritual while in the free world, chances are good that they would not have committed the crimes they did. But that's another story. This section is about what you should say to the Board if you have become involved in religious studies, or if you've just simply become aware that a good person needs to understand that he is part of a planet of human beings who deserve respect, and he has looked within himself for the best way to become a respectful person.

Those concepts may seem trivial and too simple when compared to the grandeur that is organized religion, but many incarcerated individuals just don't become religious and don't attend services in prison. I don't think becoming involved in organized religion is necessary for one to be a better person, or to make parole. There are individual Board members who may desire that every incarcerated individuals attend church on a regular basis. But what if you don't? I don't think you should lie and say you do. There are things you can say to let the Board know that you realize there are ways people should act with each other that show they understand that cruelty and wastefulness means one is being selfish and acting in an unspiritual fashion.



Photo by Rex Features

HOW TO WRITE PAROLE PACKETS

If you have been attending church and are in fact a religious person, you should by all means share that with the Board:

“I attend church whenever possible. I am a [Catholic, Baptist, Muslim] and I read the [Bible, Koran] daily. I have tried to incorporate the concepts taught in the [Bible, Koran] into my life whenever possible. I realize that my life before I came to prison was without a moral foundation and that is why I was able to commit the crimes I did. Religion has allowed me to find peace. I turn to the [Bible, Koran] whenever I become depressed or angry, and there are always passages or scriptures there that help me understand my place in the world. I pray daily, giving thanks to the Lord for my life and my health. If anything good has come out of this experience, it is that I have become a practicing [Christian, Muslim] and I have accepted beliefs and adopted a lifestyle that will prevent me from turning to crime again.”

If you have become a practicing member in a religion that does not have regular services, or that is not a mainstream Christian denomination, you should say something similar to the above. If you are a Buddhist, Jehovah’s Witness, Wiccan, or a member of a Native American church, say so. Tell the Board how being part of that group has made you a better person, and how that has made you realize how deeply you’ve hurt others. Explain that you aren’t the person you were when you committed your crime, and how the moral foundation you now possess will prevent you from turning to crime when you are released.

What if you aren’t religious? Explain that you accept that there are moral foundations that all people possess, and that you have become a more spiritual person by realizing that people have turned to religion because they cannot explain the profound nature of existence. Say that you totally respect people who are religious, but that you are still struggling to accept organized religion and this does not mean you don’t believe in a superior being, or in the continuing nature of the world and the everlasting nature of our life force. Try to find a way to say that you believe that living one’s life in a spiritual fashion means always being respectful of others’ beliefs and lifestyles; that it means realizing that the world’s resources are not endless and that a person should not live a wasteful life; that it means accepting what you can do and doing that every day, all of your life.

This may sound kind of New Age, and it is. But I think the Board will better accept you saying something of this nature, especially if you’ve thought about it and mean it, than you telling them something you don’t believe in.

HOW TO WRITE PAROLE PACKETS

GOAL STATEMENTS

This is an area that not many incarcerated individuals write about, but I think it is crucial, not only for the Board, but for the incarcerated individuals. Writing down your goals makes you better able to envision actually achieving them. Writing them down makes them real. You'll have to think about the resources you'll need, plan ways to get those resources, and how to best use them. Thinking about and writing down your goals is one of the best things you can do to make them come true.

You should write different sets of goals for the Board:

“Upon release, I have set the following goals for myself.

Immediate goals: Meet my parole officer; have supper with my family; check in to my halfway house.

Three-day goals: Go to my first AA meeting; go to Workforce and register as a job seeker; begin my job search; have found a church I can attend.

One month goals: Have a job; have a bus pass; make inquiries at the college about part-time courses; have had at least one weekend with my children; get my driver's license.

Three-month goals: Begin to make child payments to my wife; visit with the teachers of my children; apply to college.

Six-month goals: Move into apartment, even if I have to share one; begin classes at community college; have a bicycle I can ride to school and work if I possible; look for a better job.

One-year goals: Have met someone I can trust to build a relationship with; have at least partial custody of my children; have my own vehicle, even if it's old and I'm making payments; start volunteering at church functions or at community organizations.”

This is the type of list you should be working on. Whatever your particular life is like: whether you are married or have kids or have a job waiting or a place to stay; all of those things should be on this list. When do you plan on going to work? When do you plan on taking your driver's license test? When can you start paying the child support you owe? How soon can you afford to get a car? When can you afford to pay rent? How about getting insurance?

All of these things will need to be part of your life soon. But you need to be realistic about them. You may not be able to begin payments to your former spouse, or buy a car and pay for insurance, not for a while. Be realistic about the time frame. Write down your goals and then fashion them into a Goals Statement that you can include in your Parole Packet. You should also say that as things progress, you may change some of the dates, but that these are the minimum dates you've set for yourself. You should also say that you realize unexpected expenses or problems may arise, and that you understand these may not be possible to achieve but that you will not be put off by that; you'll adjust and rewrite new Goals.

HOW TO WRITE PAROLE PACKETS

PENANCE STATEMENT

This is something that I believe every inmate should not only include in his parole packet but should also internalize as necessary for his development as a person and as a member of a community. It's something that I began to think about when I was incarcerated, and it is built around an idea I've had, one which I've since realized is part of a larger psychological and sociological belief: Every convicted criminal, if he decides to truly rehabilitate himself, comes to understand that he must give something back to the community that he damaged.

All of us belonged to various communities, some larger than others. I'm not talking about cities, although that can be one definition of a community. I mean the group of people who nurtured us, who cared for us, who worried about us when we began that downward spiral into drug and alcohol abuse and into criminal behavior. They, and we, were in turn part of larger communities; neighborhoods, rural areas, towns and cities. Our families are our primary community. Our friends are our second community. Our neighborhood is our third. The members of our churches and our schools are others.

In some way or another, we hurt each of those communities when we committed crimes, either by abusing their trust, by selling drugs in their neighborhoods, by burglarizing their homes, or by robbing their stores and perhaps assaulting or killing another community member. Our communities may be ready to welcome us back, but we owe them something. Not necessarily money in the form of restitution, but our time and some sort of effort that will, in a tangible way say, "I'm sorry. I truly apologize for the things I did. I would like to assist my community in some way and to make penance to myself and to you."

Most incarcerated individuals understand this, and it is why you hear them say, "I would like to work with kids." A lot of inmates make generalized statements like that, and it is because they realize the harm they've caused, and they don't want to see others go down the same road. But most incarcerated individuals don't have the skills or education to speak to troubled youth. Every inmate, however, does have something he can give back to his community as a way of making penance, if only he will be truthful about himself and his skills.

Have you taken a vocational course in prison that taught you how to work with cars? Have you worked in a furniture factory and learned how to repair old, tattered sofas? Have you worked in a garment factory and learned how to sew? Can you hand out food? Cut grass? Pick up trash?

All of those things are needed, in some way or another, in every community. You should decide what it is you can do, decide the best way to volunteer your services, and then write that down as a plan and present it as part of this packet.

Let's say you have some mechanical skills. What if you and a couple of friends were to approach a man who owned a garage in the neighborhood and offered to fix the cars of low-income families once a month, free of charge? Maybe he'd be willing to donate the garage and the use of his tools for one day. You could advertise in the neighborhood and ask the car owners to buy whatever parts they needed to repair their cars. You and your friends would then work on and fix the cars for free, donating your time and labor and expertise.

HOW TO WRITE PAROLE PACKETS

That is what you can say to the Board in your penance statement:

“I would like to volunteer my time and services and skills at least one weekend a month to repair the cars of low-income families in my neighborhood. I feel that is one way I can give something back to the members of my community.”

You can then outline the plan I’ve described above. And it doesn’t have to be fixing cars. It could be offering to roof someone’s house, or cutting the grass of an older neighbor, or of fixing the lawnmowers of poor neighbors so they can cut their own grass. Any skill you have can be put to use in volunteer setting so that the community can see that you are willing to give something, not just take as you used to. Any plan you can realistically accomplish needs to be detailed and set down in this section as something you will do to make penance to your community.

If this demands too much of your time, you can always volunteer for a local organization or charity in your community. Many of them won’t accept formerly incarcerated individuals, but don’t let that deter you because many will, especially the ones run and staffed by neighborhood churches. You can say in your Penance Statement:

“I plan to ask my neighborhood pastor if I can participate in monthly volunteer efforts that our church uses to beautify the community, whether that means repairing old houses, picking up trash in abandoned lots, or something else. But I believe that I owe something to my community and that is one way of giving back.”

The act of staying out and staying away from criminal behavior, called desistance, is an ongoing event that is usually accompanied by a genuine effort to become part of a community by giving something to that community. Think about what you can do to make penance to your community, and write that down as part of your Penance Statement and include it in your parole packet.



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SUPPORT LETTERS

This is the one section of a parole packet that every incarcerated individual worries about, and the one which he usually gets too much of. When it comes to support letters, quality means more than quantity. The two most important types of letters you can include in your parole packet are, first, those from people who are offering you a place to stay, and second, from someone offering you a job. I know incarcerated individuals who have asked their family to solicit letters from the entire congregation of their church. I don't know how many letters they actually got that way, but one truly heartfelt letter from a pastor who knew you before you went to prison and could attest to your spiritual and personal growth would mean more than a bunch of pre-written letters from people who haven't seen you in a long time.

If you have become involved in a ministry or in some sort of network that called for you to write and meet many people, then it could be that you will in fact have a lot of people willing to write **meaningful** support letters for you. I don't mean to discourage you from having your friends and family write. I just don't think you should be frantic about it. I don't think you should be asking your family to pester their friends, who may be uncomfortable asking the Board to let you go, especially if you've done some crazy things in their neighborhood and they aren't sure if you've changed. This can be tricky, but if you've truly made an effort to change your attitude and behavior, that will show and you will have people willing to write the Board and say something truly heartfelt.

Support letters should generally come from three groups of people: your family, your friends and former employers, and potential employers. You must allow each person to express what level he or she is comfortable with. Your family members will be the most vehement. They will likely say:

"I have seen the changes in my brother. I know that he was under the influence of drugs when he robbed that store. He has been clean now for six years. He has taken college courses, finished a vocational course, and he goes to church every week. I pray to you: please let my brother come home to his family, who loves him and needs him very much."

Your friends won't give that kind of recommendation. In fact, they may not even ask for your release. What they will express, however, is invaluable – a view of who you were then and who you are now:

"I have known this inmate for most of his life. I remember being saddened and tremendously hurt by his actions, and I remember how his going to prison devastated his family. But I have written him dozens of times since he's been in prison. I truly believe that he has changed and that given the opportunity he can be a good member of society. I ask that the Board give his application for parole a serious review."

See the difference? Your friend doesn't ask the Board to let you go; they ask that you be given "serious review." Many people are uncomfortable asking that you be released, but are more than willing to ask the Board to seriously consider you. And if these people are the ones who have been in your life a long time, the Board will listen more to them than to a person who is writing because she goes to church with your mom but doesn't really know you.

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An employer's letter will be different. He will rarely ask that you be granted parole, unless he's employed you before or is a family friend. Even if you've worked with him before, he may not be likely to ask that you be released, and that's not what you want from him. You want him to write the Board and say:

"I am willing to give this inmate an opportunity to work for me if the Board grants his parole. I propose to pay him \$10 an hour, with a raise after six months, if he performs his duties in a responsible fashion and agrees to the stipulations I ask of all my employees, which aren't difficult to follow."

What I've outlined above is what you should ask of your family and friends. The support letter itself shouldn't be more than a page. It should be in the following format:

	Mrs. Maria Hernandez 200 Riverside Drive Austin, TX 78741 May 2, 2009
Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles XXXXXX Anytown, TX 78711-3401	
	In re: TDCJ# 555555
Dear Board Members:	
I hope this finds you well. I am writing you today to ask that you vote to release my son, Jose Hernandez, TDCJ# 555555, on parole and allow him to return to his family.	
I understand that what Jose did was not only illegal but shameful in many ways. But more important, Jose understands that. I have seen him grow in so many ways that I hardly recognize him now. But that's good, because the boy he was before he went to prison was someone I didn't recognize either. He's become a man, a good man, one who goes to church and has taken Bible classes. Jose has received his AA degree and is working toward his BS in Sociology. While I don't think he will become a social worker, the discipline it takes for him to work in the furniture factory and go to church and still make good grades in college will do him good when he comes home.	
I am opening my home to Jose, just as I do to all my family. I know he will want to move out soon and get his own place, and I will help him if I can. I will allow him to use an old truck I have for work, and I have bought him a six-month pass so he can use the bus to find work and go to school.	
I will do whatever I can to ensure that Jose has all the support and love he needs in this difficult time. The pastor at my church is also writing a letter of support. He has known our family for over thirty years, and he will tell you how much Jose has changed.	
If there is anything I can do to help you make this difficult decision, please don't hesitate to call me at 555 555-5555. May God guide you in this. Thank you for your time and patience.	

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All familial support letters should have this format, be of similar length and this specific. They should spell out to the Board (1) what they are offering, (2) what they are willing to do, and (3) how they've seen the inmate change throughout his incarceration.

Although the letters you will include should attest to the changes your friends and family have seen in you, support letters are most important when they offer exactly that: **support**. One letter from a friend offering not only the use of a car but also a place to stay is worth ten letters attesting to how "he goes to church and has changed his attitude about life." The first letter offers tangible support – transportation and a place to stay. That type of assistance is what the Board is looking for, rather than a bunch friend talking about how you've "changed."

So ask your friends and family to be specific. Have them introduce themselves in the letters. If they are providing some type of support – even if it's something as seemingly simple as a place to eat now and then, along with some emotional and spiritual support, have them detail that:

"Joe is welcome in my house anytime, especially if he just wants to talk about some of the challenges he is facing. I can't offer Joe a place to stay, but he is welcome to come by and eat with my family, to join our prayer group, and to go to an AA meeting with me. I will offer him all the emotional and spiritual support I can; all he needs to do is ask."

That is the type of support many friends are willing to offer. If they do, ask them to say so, in plain language. Ask them to provide their name, address, telephone number, and perhaps what they do for a living. The Board may contact them; they may not. But that type of real support is what the Board looks for in support letters. If you can provide the Board with half a dozen letters from family members who open up their homes to you, and a few friends who offer emotional and spiritual support, and if you can get just one potential employer to send in a letter, anything else is unneeded.

You don't need family support to be granted parole, so don't despair if you and your family have not yet arrived at that point. I did not have one family member write a support letter for me before I was granted parole on my 60-year sentence. I had about eight good letters from friends, two of whom offered a place to stay. I had two offers of employment.

But family support is important after you're released. Most studies agree that the single biggest factor dictating whether or not a given incarcerated individual will succeed once released is whether or not he has family support. Now that I'm out, I've been blessed to have that.

So remember: quality over quantity. Support letters should include offers of some type of support, not just empty words talking about change.

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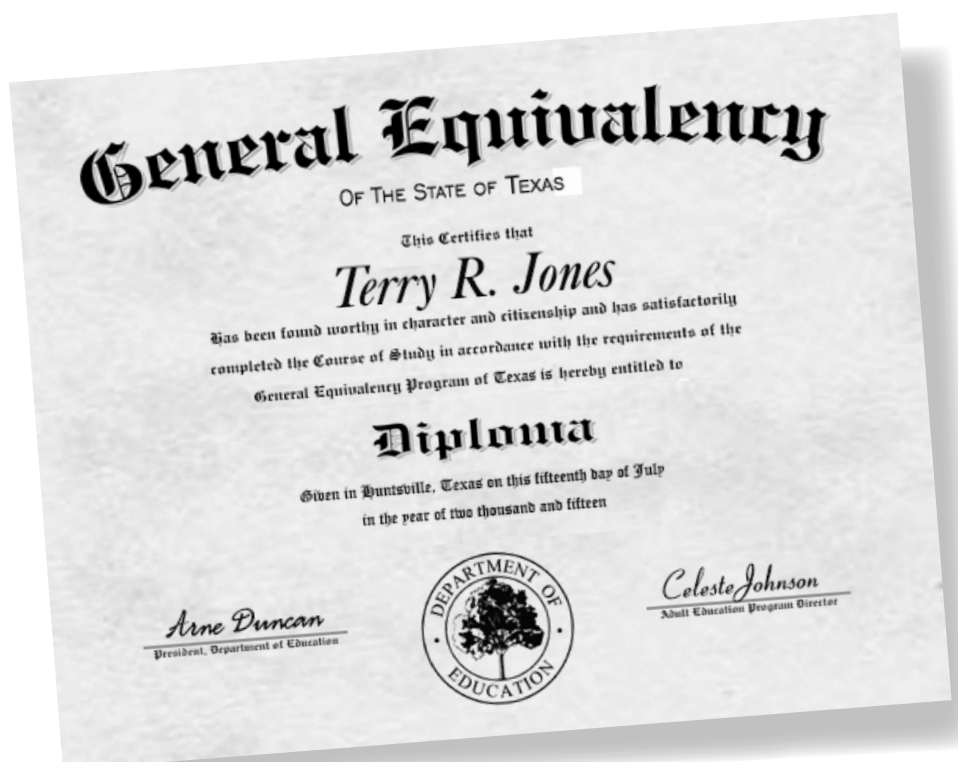
CERTIFICATES AND AWARDS

Most TDCJ educational, vocational, and rehabilitation programs give inmates certificates of recognition upon completion. You should include these, or preferably copies of these, in your packet. The school at your unit will usually be happy to make a few copies for you, especially if you tell them you're using them in your parole packet. If not, don't argue about it: just include the originals. They won't do you any good sitting in your locker.

If your family is compiling your parole packet, then send the certificates home and ask them to make copies and save the original.

In either case, include these in your packet. You should refer to what you had to do to actually earn them in the section on Educational History or Spirituality, especially if you've taken religious studies courses and have been awarded certificates of completion or of recognition.

Include any award you've been given while incarcerated. I don't care if it's for writing an essay for school; for perfect attendance; for completing the hours necessary for OJT qualification; or if it's a master's degree. Any certificate is evidence that you've applied your discipline and that you've accomplished something somebody thought was worthy of recognition.



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PRESENTATION

What should your package look like? Well, since I've strongly urged you to do the packet yourself and it is very likely that you don't have access to a typewriter, much less a computer, I can't very well insist it be typed. That would be nice, but it's not always possible. So, above all, your package should be neat. If you have to write it by hand, write it once, have a friend edit it and check for spelling and grammatical errors, then write it again, in ink. If you have a family member who has access to a computer or typewriter, have them type it or print it out, double-spaced, in an easy-to-read font like Times New Roman. Don't ask them to use a cursive font, because those are really hard to read.

You should have a cover page, with your name and TDCJ number on it. Nothing fancy, just that. The next page should be a Table of Contents, indicating what page each section begins on. You don't have to begin every section on a new page, especially since some of the sections will be short, maybe less than half a page. It doesn't really matter what order your sections are in, although I recommend always beginning with the Introductory Letter, then going to the Parole Plan. After that, go with the sections that you believe put you in the best light. If you have a really good educational and employment history, then start with those.

Number the pages of each of the sections you write. You don't need to number Support Letters or your Certificates and Awards. Put them after the written sections, and in your Table of Contents, after you give the page numbers of the written sections, write Support Letters, Certificates and Awards.

If you can, try to get some sort of binder in which to place the packet. Most have a method for you to attach the pages, either by punching holes in the paper and sliding some type of ring through the hole, or something similar. You can usually borrow a hole-puncher from an officer at a hallway desk or in the law library or at the school. If your family is doing this packet for you, then they should do this. It doesn't have to be expensive or overly fancy. Something simple and functional will do fine. They don't give parole for looks but for content.

You should have at least three copies of the packet. One is for your records. One you will take with you to the parole interview. And one you or your family will mail to the Board of Pardons and Paroles at the following address:

Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles
P.O. Box 13401
Austin, TX 78711-3401

You don't need to mail a copy to the regional parole office. The copy you give to the person who interviews you will be included in the jacket that goes to the board members and commissioner who vote on your case. The Board still does this the old-fashioned way: They look at your jacket, which is in a folder, and your parole packet will be included in that folder.

And that's it. Good luck.

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If you get a set-off, you don't have to submit a new parole packet. Just write the Board a new letter of introduction, stating what the Board's decision was the previous time and what you have done to address any negatives they remarked upon. If you've completed any more college or vocational courses since the set-off, list them and include any documentation such as certificates and degrees. You can have your family and friends write another letter to the Board then also, merely repeating what they said before, asking the Board to please reconsider you for parole. But once you mail in one packet, it is not necessary for you to submit an entire new one every time you come up for parole. Just send in letters updating your situation.

Remember: Parole is never a right. That's just not the way it works. Release on parole is never certain, no matter how good you've been in prison, how long you've been there, what degrees you've been awarded, or how strong your network of family and friends is. I repeat – the best thing you can do to make parole is to look into your heart, admit to yourself what you've done wrong, and make the changes necessary to become an honorable and dignified person and live an honorable and dignified life. If you do those things, parole will follow, and you'll leave prison, never to return.





How to Write Parole Packets by Jorge Antonio Renaud
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Texas Criminal Justice Coalition

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