

TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE PROJECT | DOCUMENT 8

The Personal Narrative

A Guided Writing Journey for TJP Residents

Vision. TJP reframes the narrative of harm, healing, and prevention.

Mission. To implement the principles and practices of Transformative Justice across all sectors of South Carolina.

Governed by: SCDC Division of Programs, Reentry, and Rehabilitative Services (oversight) | Board of Volunteers (direction) | Interdepartmental Committee (supervision)

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SUMMARY

What this is: A six-week guided writing journey, completed during orientation, in which every TJP resident writes The Personal Narrative: the honest story of where they came from, the harm they caused, who it touched, what they owe, and who they are becoming.

The arc: HEALING. Harbor (safety first), Early Roots, Account (the harm, told plainly), Lives Touched (the ripple), I Owe (the reckoning), New Evidence (the becoming), Gift Without Strings (the offering).

Two versions: Every writer produces a **Private Working Draft** (never shared, can be destroyed at any time) and, only if they choose, an **Offering Version** (rewritten for a harmed reader, reviewed by staff and ideally a licensed clinician using the Offering Review Checklist).

Who it is for: The writing is for the writer's growth. The Offering is for the reader's healing. When those two pull in different directions, the reader wins.

How it reaches people: Only through proper channels. A specific victim receives an Offering only if they ask for it through SCDC victim services and their clinician agrees. Other survivors receive Offerings only through a victim service provider who approves. Educational audiences receive anonymized excerpts only with the writer's consent.

Safety spine: Choice of depth on every prompt, a written stop plan before any writing, limits of confidentiality explained in writing before the first word, legal caution for anyone with a pending case or hearing, no graphic detail, no identifying details of any victim, staff-led sessions for the hardest stages, and a referral path when distress rises. Peer facilitators are educators, never therapists.

What is inside: Design principles, the HEALING prompts in three depth tiers, a facilitator guide with 12 session plans, a guide for receiving therapists and advocates, dorm signage, and 11 worksheets ready to photocopy.

1. Why the Personal Narrative Matters

Louis put it plainly: the narrative must be as powerful for the reader as the writing is for the writer. That sentence holds the whole design. Most prison writing programs stop at the writer. TJP goes one step further and asks a harder question: could this page, someday, in the right hands, help a harmed person breathe a little easier?

That question changes everything about how the narrative is written. A story written only for the writer can wander, justify, and circle back to the writer's pain. A story that might reach a harmed person must be clean, true, and careful. It must never ask them for anything. It must never make them carry the writer's feelings. It must never put them back inside the worst day of their life.

So the journey has two jobs, done in order:

1. **Tell the truth to yourself** (the Private Working Draft). This is where the raw material lives.
2. **Shape the truth into a gift** (the Offering Version). This is where the raw material is cut, cleaned, and set down gently.

ANALOGY

Think of a kitchen before the dinner rush. The prep station is messy: peelings, bones, spills, knives everywhere. That is the Private Working Draft, and it should be messy. But nobody carries the cutting board to the table. What reaches the guest is a plate that was prepared with care, portioned right, and served without a speech. The Offering is the plate. The guest never has to see the mess, and never has to pay for the meal.

WHY TJP MUST EXIST

Our justice system is very good at counting harm and very poor at answering it. A sentence tells a harmed person that the state has acted. It rarely tells them the thing many of them say they want most: the truth, from the person who did it, with no excuses and no demands. Howard Zehr, whose work shapes Course 2, names what harmed people often need: information, truth-telling, empowerment, and restitution or vindication. A prison term by itself delivers almost none of that. Meanwhile, the person who caused the harm sits for years without ever being asked to look at it squarely. Both sides are left frozen. TJP reframes the narrative of harm, healing, and prevention by building the missing bridge: residents who can tell the truth plainly, and a careful, consent-based path by which that truth can reach people who want it. Nobody else in the building is set up to do this work at this depth. That is why TJP must exist, and why it must spread "across all sectors of South Carolina": victim services, mental health, faith communities, and schools all need people who can tell the truth about harm without making it worse.

BOTTOM LINE

The Personal Narrative is not a confession, not a parole letter, and not a plea for forgiveness. It is an honest account that the writer owns, and, only if everyone agrees, a gift that asks for nothing.

2. Design Principles: What This Journey Is Built On

Every choice in this journey rests on real practice. Here is what we borrowed, from whom, and why.

Principle	Where it comes from	What it means on the page
Safety before story	Judith Herman, <i>Trauma and Recovery</i> (safety first, then remembrance, then reconnection)	Stage H (Harbor) comes before any hard writing. No one writes about harm until they have a stop plan.
Stay inside the window	Dan Siegel's "window of tolerance" (Course 1)	Writers work where they can think and feel at the same time. Too flat or too flooded means stop and ground.
Small doses	Peter Levine's titration and pendulation (Course 5)	Touch the hard thing briefly, return to a resource, then touch again. Three depth tiers let writers choose the dose.
Short, structured writing windows	James Pennebaker's expressive writing research	Writing blocks are 15 to 20 minutes. Writers choose their topic and can stop at any time.
Meaning, not just venting	Pennebaker's later work on language and insight	Prompts push toward "because," "I realize," and "I understand now," not only toward reliving.
Center the harmed person	Howard Zehr (Course 2); victim services apology programs	The Offering meets the reader's needs: truth, information, no demands.
Accountability is a verb	Danielle Sered, <i>Until We Reckon</i>	Five steps: acknowledge what you did, acknowledge its impact, express genuine remorse, make things as right as possible, become someone who will never do it again.
A change story, told with care	Shadd Maruna, <i>Making Good</i> (redemption script)	Writers may describe real change, but only with evidence, and never as a reason the harm "was worth it."
Choice at every step	Trauma-informed care	Every prompt is optional. Every tier is optional. The Offering is optional. Saying no carries no penalty.

A closer look at the research

Expressive writing (Pennebaker). In a 1986 study, James Pennebaker and Sandra Beall asked college students to write about deeply upsetting experiences for about 15 minutes on four consecutive days. Those who wrote about their deepest thoughts and feelings made fewer visits to the campus health center in the months that followed than those who wrote about neutral topics. Hundreds of studies have followed, with mixed but generally modest positive effects. Two findings matter most for TJP. First, the immediate effect of this kind of writing is often a short-term rise in sadness or distress, which usually fades. Writers should be told this in advance so they do not think something is wrong. Second, a review by Baikie and Wilhelm (2005) notes that expressive writing is not a replacement for treatment, that writers should be able to stop at any time and have someone to contact, and that some studies found it unhelpful for certain trauma survivors. That is why this journey is paced, tiered, and staff-supported, and why the stop plan comes first.

Window of tolerance (Siegel) and titration (Levine). Picture a thermostat. Too hot (racing heart, rage, panic, tears that will not stop) and the thinking brain goes offline. Too cold (numb, blank, "I don't care") and the feeling brain goes offline. Good writing happens in the comfortable middle. Titration means taking the hard material in small doses, like adding hot water to cold a little at a time instead of all at once.

Victim-centered practice (Zehr and victim services). Several state corrections departments run "apology banks" where letters are held until a victim asks for them. Pennsylvania's Office of Victim Advocate reviews letters and forwards them only with the victim's consent. Kentucky's Department of Corrections rejects letters that ask for forgiveness or make excuses. Oklahoma's rejects letters that blame the victim, lack accountability, ask for forgiveness, or rehash details of the crime. Colorado's rejects letters with re-victimizing or disrespectful content. These rules were written by people who work with harmed people every day. TJP's Offering Review Checklist follows them.

The redemption script (Maruna) and its risk. Maruna found that people who successfully stopped offending often told their life story as a "redemption script": a good core self, a hard past, and a new purpose, often helping others. This story helps people change. But to a harmed reader, a redemption story can sound like the writer's happy ending was built on their suffering. "Prison was the best thing that happened to me" may be true for the writer and unbearable for the victim. So TJP keeps the redemption script in the Private Working Draft and teaches writers to carry only its evidence, not its triumph, into the Offering.

BOTTOM LINE

Safety first, small doses, short writing windows, the reader's needs at the center, change shown by evidence. Each rule is here because someone learned the hard way what happens without it.

3. Safeguards: Read Before Anyone Writes

CAUTION

This section is not optional and not fine print. Every item here must be explained to each resident, in writing and out loud, **before** the first writing session. Residents sign the Consent and Sharing Form (Worksheet 10) only after this has happened. The wording of confidentiality limits and legal cautions must be supplied or approved by SCDC legal counsel. Nothing in this document is legal advice.

3.1 Content boundaries (in every draft, private or not)

Never write	Instead write
Graphic detail of violence (wounds, blood, blow-by-blow action)	A plain statement: "I hurt him badly." "I took her life."
Any victim's name, initials, address, workplace, school, or any detail that could identify them	"The man I robbed." "A woman who trusted me." "A child in my care."
Detail of any sexual offense beyond plain acknowledgment	"I sexually abused a child. That is the truth, and it is mine." Nothing more.
Anything that re-exposes a victim (photos, descriptions of their body, what they said or did during the harm)	What you did and what it cost them, stated from your side.
Names of co-defendants, witnesses, or others involved	"Others were involved. I am speaking only for myself."
Detail about how to commit a crime	The choice, not the method.

Why: A written page can travel. Even a private draft can be lost, found in a search, or read by someone it was not meant for. The rule is simple: **write about the harm, not the evidence.**

3.2 Limits of confidentiality (stated in writing before writing begins)

Residents must hear, and receive in writing, that:

- **Nothing written in TJP is legally confidential.** A narrative is not like a conversation with a lawyer. Written documents can, in some circumstances, be requested by courts, investigators, or the institution.
- **Staff must report certain things.** SCDC policy and South Carolina law require staff to report some information. This usually includes threats to harm self or others, abuse or neglect of a child or vulnerable adult, and threats to the safety and security of the institution. The exact list must be provided by SCDC legal and posted in the room (verify locally).
- **Do not write about offenses you were never charged with.** Unreported or uncharged harms belong in a conversation with a chaplain, clinician, or attorney, not on paper. You can acknowledge in general terms that "I hurt more people than the ones in my file" without details.
- **Peers are not bound to silence the way professionals are.** Anything shared aloud in a group can be repeated.

3.3 Legal exposure: the "Impact Version" option

Residents with a **pending appeal, post-conviction relief action, new charges, civil case, or upcoming parole hearing** are strongly encouraged to speak with their attorney before writing anything about the facts of their offense. Any resident, for any reason, may choose to write the **Impact Version** of Stage A: a version that describes the choices, the harm, and the impact without describing the facts of the offense.

There is no penalty for choosing the Impact Version. No loss of standing, no lower score, no comment from staff or peers. Facilitators treat it as a full and honorable way to complete the journey.

3.4 Review, storage, and withdrawal

Safeguard	Rule
Staff review	No narrative, or any part of one, leaves the TJP unit without review by designated staff using the Offering Review Checklist. A licensed clinician should also review any Offering intended for a harmed person.
Private Working Draft	Belongs to the writer. Never collected, never read without permission, never shared. The writer may shred it at any time. Stored in a locked, labeled envelope in a locked cabinet controlled by the Programs Supervisor, or kept by the writer (the writer's choice, with the risk explained).
Offering Version	Stored in a locked cabinet, separate from the Private Working Drafts, under a resident number rather than a name where policy allows. Digital copies, if any, only on the LAN in a folder restricted to designated staff.
Handwriting first	Drafts are handwritten. Only reviewed Offering Versions are typed, and only by the writer or designated staff.
Right to withdraw	A writer may withdraw consent to share an Offering at any time before it is delivered, in writing, with no penalty. Once an Offering has been delivered to a reader, it cannot be taken back from that reader; writers are told this before they consent.
Approvals	The Interdepartmental Committee supervises this process. Any new sharing channel (a new partner agency, a new educational use) is approved by the Committee, consistent with direction from the Board of Volunteers and oversight from the SCDC Division of Programs, Reentry, and Rehabilitative Services.

3.5 The Stop Rule and the referral path

The Stop Rule: Any writer may stop at any time, for any reason, without explaining. A facilitator must pause a writer who shows signs of flooding (see Section 12) and offer grounding. If distress does not settle within about 10 minutes of grounding, or if the writer says anything suggesting risk of harm to self or others, the facilitator follows the referral path.

Level	What you see	What happens
Green	Tears, quiet, heaviness that settles with grounding	Ground, offer water, offer a break. Writer chooses whether to continue.
Yellow	Distress that does not settle, shutdown, agitation, "I can't do this"	Stop writing. Staff facilitator sits with the writer. Same-day check-in with mental health staff is offered.

Level	What you see	What happens
Red	Any talk of self-harm, harming others, or loss of contact with the present	Follow SCDC crisis procedures immediately. Mental health staff notified. Writer is not left alone.

Peer facilitators never act as therapists. They may lead grounding practices, hand out materials, and hold the room, but they do not probe trauma, interpret someone's story, or manage a crisis. Stages A, L, and I (Account, Lives Touched, I Owe) are always staff-facilitated, with mental health staff informed of the schedule.

SIGN FOR THE DORM

YOU MAY STOP AT ANY TIME.

Stopping is not quitting. It is steering.

BOTTOM LINE

Explain the limits before the first word. Write about the harm, not the evidence. Anyone can stop. Nothing leaves the unit without review. The writer can say no at every door.

4. How the Journey Works

4.1 Two versions

	Private Working Draft	Offering Version
Who it is for	The writer	A harmed reader
Who reads it	The writer only (a clinician, only if the writer chooses)	Staff reviewer, clinician, then only an approved reader
Tone	Raw, honest, messy	Clear, plain, careful
May include	The writer's own pain, anger, confusion, self-talk, the full redemption story	Acknowledgment, impact, remorse, repair, evidence of change
Must never include	Graphic detail, identifying details, unreported offenses	Any of those, plus requests, excuses, self-pity, forgiveness-seeking, contact expectations
Length	Any	About 1 to 3 handwritten pages (roughly 400 to 900 words)
Required?	Yes, in some form (the Impact Version counts)	No. Entirely voluntary.

4.2 The three depth tiers

Every stage offers prompts at three depths. Writers choose. Facilitators never assign a tier.

Tier	Feels like	Use it when
Step In	Wading at the shore	You are new to this, tired today, or the topic is close to your own trauma
Go Deeper	Walking out to your waist	You feel steady and want to push
Hardest Question	Swimming out past where your feet touch	You are grounded, have your stop plan ready, and want the truth at full weight

A writer who does only Step In prompts for the whole journey has completed the journey. Depth is not a grade.

4.3 Every writing block has the same shape

1. **Ground in** (3 minutes): a practice from Courses 3, 5, or 7.
2. **Choose** (2 minutes): pick one prompt, at one tier.
3. **Write** (15 to 20 minutes): keep the pen moving. Spelling does not matter.
4. **Ground out** (3 minutes): return to the room.
5. **Rate** (1 minute): mark your window on the Reflection After Writing sheet.

ANALOGY

A football huddle happens before every play, not just before the game. The Ground In is the huddle. It takes seconds, it keeps everyone on the same page, and nobody runs a play without it.

4.4 The grounding toolbox

Practice	From	How
Orienting	Course 3, The Science of Safety	Slowly turn your head and let your eyes land on five things in the room. Name them silently. Notice the exit. Notice you are here, now.
Long exhale	Course 3	Breathe in for a count of four, out for a count of six or eight. Three to five rounds.
Resource	Course 5, The Unfinished Response	Bring to mind one person, place, or memory that feels steady. Notice where you feel it in your body. Stay there for five breaths.
Pendulation	Course 5	After writing something hard, shift attention to a part of the body that feels neutral or okay (hands, feet on the floor). Go back and forth gently.
Feet and seat	Course 7, The Attention You Own	Feel the floor under your feet and the chair under you. Press down gently. Say silently: "I am here. It is today."
Breath anchor	Course 7	Rest attention on the breath at the belly for ten breaths. When the mind wanders, return without judgment.

BOTTOM LINE

Two versions, three tiers, one shape for every block. The structure carries the weight so the writer does not have to.

5. Stage H: Harbor (Ground)

Purpose: Build safety and resources before any story is told. Nothing hard is written in this stage.

Ground in: Orienting (Course 3). **Ground out:** Resource (Course 5).

Code	Tier	Prompt
H1	Step In	Name three things that help you settle when you are upset. How do you know they work?
H2	Step In	Who, living or gone, believes you can become better than your worst day? What would they say to you right now?
H3	Step In	Describe a place, real or imagined, where you feel steady. Use your senses: what do you see, hear, smell?
H4	Go Deeper	What are your warning signs that you are getting overwhelmed? Your body, your thoughts, your behavior.
H5	Go Deeper	Why are you choosing to write this? What do you hope it does for you? What are you afraid it will do?
H6	Hardest Question	What is the story you have told about your crime until now, to others and to yourself? What part of that story are you ready to put down?

WHY THIS IS HERE

Herman's first stage of recovery is safety. A writer without a harbor has nowhere to return when the water gets rough. H4 feeds directly into the stop plan. H6 is a gentle first look at the old story, which is often a defense built over years. Naming it early makes it easier to set aside later.

Weak vs strong (H4):

- Weaker: "I don't get overwhelmed. I'm good."
- Stronger: "My jaw gets tight. I start thinking 'this is stupid.' I get sarcastic. When that happens, I need to put the pen down and look at the window."

The stronger answer is not braver. It is more useful. It gives the writer and facilitator a signal to watch for.

6. Stage E: Early Roots (Where I Came From, Told Without Excuse)

Purpose: Understand the soil the writer grew in, without using it as an alibi.

Ground in: Long exhale (Course 3). **Ground out:** Feet and seat (Course 7).

CAUTION

Many residents carry serious childhood harm. This stage does not require anyone to describe what was done to them. A writer may name it in one line ("I was hurt as a child and did not get help") or skip it entirely. If memories of personal abuse arise, the writer uses the stop plan and may request a clinician. Staff facilitate this stage.

Code	Tier	Prompt
E1	Step In	Describe the house or neighborhood you grew up in, using only what you could see, hear, and smell.
E2	Step In	Who taught you what it meant to be strong? What did they teach you?
E3	Step In	What did you need as a child that you did not get? One sentence is enough.
E4	Go Deeper	What were the unwritten rules where you grew up? (For example: "Never show weakness." "Handle it yourself.") Which ones did you carry into your adult life?
E5	Go Deeper	When did you first feel shame? How did you learn to cover it? (Links to Course 6, The Engine of Violence.)
E6	Go Deeper	Name a moment when someone could have stepped in and did not, or did and you would not listen.
E7	Hardest Question	Finish this sentence three times: "My past explains _____, but it does not excuse _____."

WHY THIS IS HERE

Harm grows from conditions. TJP's mission is to change those conditions, and residents are expert witnesses to them. But a reader who was harmed does not need a childhood biography that sounds like a defense. E7 is the key prompt of this stage: it teaches the difference between explanation and excuse, which the writer will need for every stage that follows.

Weak vs strong (E7):

- Weaker: "I grew up with nothing and nobody cared, so what did people expect?"
- Stronger: "My past explains why I learned to hit first. It does not excuse the fact that, as a grown man, I chose to hit a person who was no threat to me."

ANALOGY

A seed does not choose its soil. But a tree that falls on a house is still the tree that fell. Early Roots studies the soil so the next seed gets better ground. It does not blame the soil for the house.

7. Stage A: Account (The Turn: The Choices and the Harm, Told Plainly)

Purpose: State what the writer did, in plain words, owning each choice.

Ground in: Resource (Course 5). **Ground out:** Pendulation, then orienting. **Staff facilitated.** Impact Version available (see 3.3).

Code	Tier	Prompt
A1	Step In	In one sentence, with no "but," what did you do?
A2	Step In	List the choices you made on the way to the harm. Start each line with "I chose."
A3	Go Deeper	Where were the exits? Name at least two moments when you could have turned around. What did you tell yourself to keep going?
A4	Go Deeper	What did you want in that moment (respect, money, relief, control, escape)? How did you decide that someone else should pay for it?
A5	Go Deeper	Which words have you used to make it sound smaller ("just," "only," "it got out of hand," "wrong place, wrong time")? Rewrite your A1 sentence without them.
A6	Hardest Question	What is the part of this you have never said out loud? You may write it here and keep it only in your Private Working Draft. (Do not write about uncharged offenses; see 3.2.)

Impact Version prompts (for anyone who chooses it): A1-IV "Without describing the event, what kind of harm did your choices cause?" A2-IV "What were you thinking and feeling in the weeks before? What did you refuse to see?"

WHY THIS IS HERE

Sered's first step of accountability is to acknowledge what you did. Harmed people often say they want the truth without the cushioning. A2 ("I chose") moves the story from passive to active voice, which is where responsibility lives. A5 is borrowed from victim services practice: minimizing words are one of the most common reasons apology letters are rejected.

Weak vs strong (A1):

- Weaker: "A situation happened where things went bad and somebody ended up getting hurt."
- Stronger: "I robbed a store while carrying a weapon, and I terrified a person who was just doing their job."

Notice what the stronger sentence does not include: no weapon detail, no blow-by-blow, no name. Plain is not the same as graphic.

ANALOGY

A car's dashboard has a warning light for a reason. Taping over it does not fix the engine. The minimizing words in A5 are tape. This stage peels it off.

8. Stage L: Lives Touched (The Ripple)

Purpose: See everyone the harm reached, and practice empathy without claiming to know another person's pain.

Ground in: Breath anchor (Course 7). **Ground out:** Resource (Course 5). **Staff facilitated.** Use Worksheet 3, the Ripple Map.

CAUTION: YOU DO NOT SPEAK FOR THEM

Perspective-taking means imagining another person's experience in order to understand it better. It never means telling them what they felt. In the Offering, writers never write "I know how you feel" or "You must have felt." They write "I have tried to understand" and "I can only imagine." The harmed person is the only authority on their own pain.

Code	Tier	Prompt
L1	Step In	Fill in your Ripple Map. Who was in the center? Who stood in the next circle (family, coworkers, neighbors)? Who was further out?
L2	Step In	What ordinary things might the person you harmed have lost? (Sleep, trust in strangers, a sense of safety at home, a job, money, time.) Write "may have" in front of each.
L3	Go Deeper	Pick one person in the second circle (for example, a parent or child of the person harmed). What might their next morning have looked like? Write it as "I imagine," and stop if it becomes too much.
L4	Go Deeper	Who in your own family was harmed by your choices? What did they lose? Do not use this to shift attention from the person you harmed; list them as part of the ripple, not the center.
L5	Go Deeper	How did your harm change the community: a street, a store, a school, a church? Who now walks a different way home?
L6	Go Deeper	Recall a time you were harmed and someone explained it away. What did that do to you? What does that teach you about what not to write?
L7	Hardest Question	If the person you harmed could say one thing to you, what are you most afraid it would be? Why does that frighten you? What would it take to hear it without defending yourself?

WHY THIS IS HERE

Course 10, Redemptive Compassion, teaches that empathy has more than one part. The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983), which TJP uses as a measure, separates **perspective taking** (thinking your way into another's view), **empathic concern** (caring about their wellbeing), and **personal distress** (feeling overwhelmed yourself). The goal of this stage is to build the first two without drowning in the third. When the writer's own distress takes over, the focus shifts back to the writer, and that is exactly what the harmed reader should not have to manage. L6 uses the writer's own experience of being harmed as a bridge, then points it back toward the reader.

Weak vs strong (L2):

- Weaker: "I know exactly how they feel because I've been robbed too."
- Stronger: "They may have stopped feeling safe at work. They may have looked at every customer differently. I cannot know what it was like for them. I can only say I have tried to understand, and every time I try, it gets bigger."

9. Stage I: I Owe (The Reckoning)

Purpose: Name what the writer owes, what they have done about it, and what they are still doing.

Ground in: Feet and seat (Course 7). **Ground out:** Orienting (Course 3). **Staff facilitated.**

Code	Tier	Prompt
I1	Step In	What do you owe? List at least three debts that no court ordered (honesty, safety, time, your children's trust).
I2	Step In	What have you actually done so far to repair any of it? Be specific and honest, even if the list is short or empty.
I3	Go Deeper	Sered says accountability includes making things "as right as possible," ideally directed by those harmed. What might repair look like if the harmed person, not you, decided? How does that feel?
I4	Go Deeper	What can never be repaired? Write it down and do not argue with it.
I5	Go Deeper	What is the difference between feeling guilty ("I did a bad thing") and feeling shameful ("I am a bad thing")? Which one pushes you toward repair, and which one pushes you toward hiding? (Course 6.)
I6	Hardest Question	If you never receive forgiveness, from anyone, will you still do the work? Why?

WHY THIS IS HERE

Harmed people need more than words. Zehr names restitution and vindication: the sense that the wrong has been named as wrong and that something is being done. I4 is essential because false promises of full repair can wound. I5 draws on June Tangney's research taught in Course 6: guilt tends to move people toward repair, while shame tends to move them toward hiding or striking out. I6 tests whether the work depends on a reward. If it does, the Offering will leak that dependency, and the reader will feel it.

Weak vs strong (I2):

- Weaker: "I've changed a lot and I'm going to make it right when I get out."
- Stronger: "So far: I pay into restitution from my prison job. I completed the anger class and I teach two of its sessions to new residents. I have not yet found a way to repair what I did to my own daughter's trust. I am still working on that."

10. Stage N: New Evidence (The Becoming)

Purpose: Describe who the writer is becoming, with evidence rather than promises.

Ground in: Long exhale (Course 3). **Ground out:** Resource (Course 5).

Code	Tier	Prompt
N1	Step In	Name three things you do differently now. For each one, write a date or a moment when you did it.
N2	Step In	Who would notice the change in you? What would they say they have seen, not what you told them?
N3	Go Deeper	Course 9 teaches that "every action is a vote for the person you want to become." List the votes you cast this month. Which ones were for the old you?
N4	Go Deeper	What situation would most test you after release? What is your real plan, step by step?
N5	Go Deeper	Write a short paragraph of your change story, the way you would tell it to a friend. Now read it as the person you harmed would. What would sting? Circle it.
N6	Hardest Question	What part of the old you is still here? How do you keep it from making choices?

WHY THIS IS HERE

Maruna's research shows that people who stop offending often see a good self underneath and a purpose ahead. That story matters for the writer. But a harmed reader has heard many promises. Evidence is quieter and more believable than hope. N5 is the redemption script safeguard: it teaches the writer to read their own change story through the harmed person's eyes and to cut whatever turns their suffering into the writer's triumph. N6 guards against the claim of being "fixed."

Weak vs strong (N1):

- Weaker: "I'm a totally different person now. God changed me and I will never hurt anyone again. Prison was the best thing that ever happened to me."
- Stronger: "Last month a man threw my tray on the floor. The old me would have fought. I walked to my bunk and did the breathing I learned. I am not fixed. I am practicing, and I keep a record so I can see whether I am telling myself the truth."

(Faith is welcome in the Private Working Draft and may belong in an Offering. The concern in the weaker example is the claim of certainty and the phrase that frames the harm as a benefit to the writer.)

ANALOGY

A gym does not care what you promise to lift. It cares what is on the bar. New Evidence is a training log, not a New Year's resolution.

11. Stage G: Gift Without Strings (The Offering)

Purpose: Shape the Offering Version, if the writer chooses, for a harmed reader who owes the writer nothing.

Ground in: Resource (Course 5). **Ground out:** Orienting, then a short closing circle.

Code	Tier	Prompt
G1	Step In	If a harmed person read only one sentence of yours, what should it be?
G2	Step In	Read your drafts from stages A, L, I, and N. Underline every sentence that is about you. Now underline every sentence that is about them. Which color wins?
G3	Go Deeper	What information might a harmed person want that only you can give? (Consider: that it was not their fault, that they did nothing to cause it, what you have done since.) Keep it honest and non-graphic.
G4	Go Deeper	Write the Offering using the four-part frame below.
G5	Go Deeper	Cut every request. Search for "please," "hope you," "if you ever," "I would like to," "forgive." Remove them or turn them into statements about yourself.
G6	Hardest Question	If this Offering is read and never answered, will it still have been worth writing? Write down why.

The four-part Offering frame (FACT)

Letter	Part	Plain question
F	Full acknowledgment	What did I do, plainly, in my own voice?
A	Awareness of impact	What have I come to understand about what it may have cost, without claiming to know?
C	Change, with evidence	What am I doing now, and what can I show?
T	Terms: none	What am I committing to, while asking nothing back?

Sample closing lines that ask for nothing:

- "You owe me nothing, not a reply, not a thought."
- "I am not asking for forgiveness. I am telling you the truth because it belongs to you."
- "You did nothing to cause this. It was mine."

WHY THIS IS HERE

Every rule in this stage comes from victim services practice. Letters that ask for forgiveness, excuse the crime, blame the victim, or rehash crime details are the ones victim services offices reject. The phrase "it was not your fault" appears in G3 because harmed people often carry quiet self-blame, and hearing plainly from the person responsible that they did nothing to cause it can matter. G6 is the final test: an Offering is a gift only if it is complete without a response.

Weak vs strong (closing):

- Weaker: "I hope one day you can find it in your heart to forgive me so we can both move on. I have suffered a lot too. Please write back if you can."
- Stronger: "I did this, and you did nothing to deserve it. I am working every day to become someone who will never do it again. I do not expect anything from you. I wanted you to have the truth, if you ever want it."

SIGN FOR THE DORM

A GIFT ASKS FOR NOTHING.

Tell the truth. Carry the weight. Expect no reply.

12. How Offerings Reach Readers

The reader's healing is the purpose. That means the reader controls whether, when, and how an Offering is received. The writer controls only whether it is offered.

12.1 Three pathways

Pathway	Who reads it	How it gets there	Required approvals
1. Specific victim	The person (or family) harmed by this writer	Only through SCDC's Division of Victim Services or another formal victim services or restorative process, and only when the victim asks	Writer consent, TJP staff review, clinician review, victim services approval, victim request, victim's therapist or advocate deems it appropriate
2. Non-specific harmed people	Survivors of similar harms (not this writer's victims)	Through a victim service provider, survivor support group, or restorative program that requests Offerings	Writer consent, TJP staff and clinician review, provider approval, provider decides who reads it and when
3. Educational	Classes, trainings, TJP courses, partner organizations	Anonymized excerpts only	Writer consent for this specific use, TJP staff review, Interdepartmental Committee approval for new audiences

About SCDC's Division of Victim Services: SCDC's public victim services pages list a Victim-Offender Dialogue service, an Apology Letter Program, and the Impact of Crime Program, a classroom curriculum that asks participants to put themselves in the victim's place and invites crime victims to speak. TJP should meet with the Division before any Offering is prepared for Pathway 1, learn its current procedures, and follow them exactly. Where the Division's procedures and this document differ, **the Division's procedures govern**. TJP should also explore whether completing the Impact of Crime Program should be a prerequisite for Pathway 1 (verify locally).

What TJP never does:

- Never contacts a victim directly, or asks anyone else to.
- Never tells a writer an Offering will be read.
- Never lets an Offering be used in a parole or clemency packet as evidence of remorse. (A writer may describe the TJP program in such a packet; the Offering itself stays out.) This keeps the gift clean and protects readers from feeling that their healing was used as a tool for release. The Interdepartmental Committee should confirm this rule with SCDC legal.
- Never shares a Private Working Draft.

12.2 What "for the reader's healing" means for the writing

Because the reader's healing comes first...	...the writing must
The reader may be at any stage of recovery	Be calm, clear, and short enough to read in one sitting
The reader did not choose to be harmed	Make no demands, not even gentle ones
The reader may already blame themselves	State plainly that the harm was the writer's responsibility
The reader may have a trauma response to detail	Contain no graphic or sensory detail of the harm
The reader's privacy must be protected	Contain no identifying details, even in a letter to that specific person (victim services handles addressing)
The reader may not want to comfort the writer	Not center the writer's pain, guilt, or hardship

ANALOGY

A thermostat does not decide how warm the room should be. The person living in the room does. The Offering is heat made available, never forced into the room. The reader sets the dial.

12.3 A guide for receiving therapists and advocates

This page may be copied and sent with any Offering released through Pathway 1 or 2.

What this document is. This is an Offering written by a resident of the Transformative Justice Project (TJP), a program within the South Carolina Department of Corrections operating under the oversight of the SCDC Division of Programs, Reentry, and Rehabilitative Services. The writer completed a six-week guided writing process that included content on accountability, the impact of harm, and victim-centered writing. The Offering was reviewed by TJP staff and, where available, a licensed clinician, against a written checklist.

What it is not.

- It is not a request for forgiveness, contact, or any response.
- It is not legal testimony and has not been verified as a factual account.
- It is not a clinical intervention, and it is not a substitute for therapy.
- It is not part of the writer's parole or release file.
- For Pathway 2 (non-specific) Offerings: it was not written by the person who harmed your client.

What the writer has been told. That they may never learn whether the Offering was read. That there will be no reply. That the Offering belongs to the reader once delivered.

Suggestions for you. Read the Offering yourself first. Consider your client's current stability and whether they have asked for this. Consider offering it in session rather than by mail. Your client may read part of it, all of it, or none of it, and may change their mind.

If something in it harms your client. Please tell TJP through the channel you received it from. We will review what went wrong, and your feedback will improve the checklist. Contact information: to be completed by the Programs Supervisor.

BOTTOM LINE

The reader decides. Victim services and clinicians are the gatekeepers. TJP never makes contact, never promises a reading, and never uses an Offering to help a writer's release.

13. Facilitator Guide

13.1 The six-week plan

Two core sessions of 90 minutes per week, plus an optional third session (a quiet writing lab, 60 minutes, staff present). Stages A, L, and I are staff-facilitated. Mental health staff should receive the schedule in advance.

Week	Session 1	Session 2	Optional lab
1	Welcome, safeguards, confidentiality limits, legal cautions (staff)	Harbor: stop plans (Worksheet 1), H prompts	Consent questions answered one to one
2	Early Roots, E1 to E4 (staff)	Early Roots, E5 to E7	Catch-up writing
3	Account, A1 to A3 (staff, clinician on call)	Account, A4 to A6, Impact Version option (staff)	Quiet writing
4	Lives Touched, Ripple Map, L1 to L3 (staff)	Lives Touched, L4 to L7 (staff)	Quiet writing
5	I Owe, I1 to I6 (staff)	New Evidence, N1 to N6	One-to-one draft conferences
6	Gift Without Strings, G1 to G5, FACT frame	G6, Offering decision, Consent form review, closing circle	Individual review meetings

13.2 Standard 90-minute session

Minutes	Segment
0 to 10	Check-In: one word each for how you arrive. Review the Stop Rule.
10 to 20	Teach: introduce the stage and why it is here (read the "Why this is here" box aloud).
20 to 25	Ground in.
25 to 30	Choose a prompt and tier.
30 to 50	Write (first block).
50 to 55	Ground out, stretch, water.
55 to 75	Second writing block, or voluntary pair sharing of a single sentence (never the whole draft).
75 to 85	Ground out, Reflection After Writing (Worksheet 11).
85 to 90	Closing: one thing you are leaving in the room, one thing you are taking.

13.3 Holding the room

- **Say the rules at the start of every session.** Choice, the Stop Rule, the content boundaries, and "what is shared here stays here, but nothing here is legally confidential."
- **Sharing is always voluntary and limited.** Residents may read a single sentence aloud. No one reads their Account aloud in the group.
- **No commentary on another person's offense.** Group members respond to the writing only with "thank you" or "I heard ____."
- **Watch the room, not just the page.** Look for jaw clenching, shallow breathing, blank staring, sudden jokes, pacing.
- **Model plainness.** Staff may share their own examples of plain accountability from ordinary life, never from someone else's case.

13.4 When someone shuts down

Signs: blank page, blank face, slumping, "I've got nothing," long stares.

1. Quietly approach and crouch or sit to be at eye level. Do not stand over the person.
2. Offer a choice: "Want to switch to a Step In prompt, or take a break and orient?"
3. Lead orienting or feet and seat quietly beside them.
4. Normalize: "Blank is a real response. It means something is working to protect you."
5. If shutdown lasts through the session, note it for a staff check-in. Do not push.

13.5 When someone floods

Signs: crying that escalates, shaking, rapid breathing, rising voice, anger at the page or at others.

1. Stop the writing gently: "Let's put the pen down for a minute."
2. Offer water and space. Move to a quieter corner with a second staff member if possible.
3. Lead long exhale breathing and orienting. Speak slowly and in a low voice.
4. Use the Stop Rule levels (Section 3.5). If it does not settle, move to Yellow.
5. Afterward: no discussion of the content. Discuss only what helped.

FACILITATOR NOTE

Peer facilitators may lead steps 1 to 3 while a staff member is summoned. They do not ask what memory came up, and they do not offer interpretations. Their job is to keep the person company in the present.

13.6 How to give feedback on a draft

Feedback happens only on the Offering Version, only when the writer asks, and only one to one with staff. Private Working Drafts are never critiqued.

Use the **SEE** method:

- **Strength first:** name one sentence that is plain and true.
- **Edit one thing:** point to a single sentence that asks for something, excuses, or centers the writer. Ask, "How would this read to someone who was harmed?"
- **End with choice:** "It's yours. You decide what to change."

Never rewrite a writer's sentences for them. The words must be theirs, or the Offering is not honest.

BOTTOM LINE

Hold the rhythm, hold the rules, watch the room. Shutdown and flooding are signals, not failures.
Feedback is rare, private, and always ends with the writer's choice.

14. What Could Go Wrong

Risk	How we prevent it
A writer is re-traumatized by their own history	Harbor stage first, depth tiers, stop plans, staff-led stages, clinician access
A victim receives an Offering they did not want	Only victim-initiated delivery through victim services
An Offering harms a reader (excuses, requests, graphic detail)	Offering Review Checklist, clinician review, feedback loop from receiving therapists
A narrative is used in court against the writer	Written confidentiality limits, legal caution, Impact Version, "write about the harm, not the evidence"
Residents feel pressured to produce an Offering	Offering is fully voluntary; no ranking, no scores, no mention in progress reports
Offerings become "performances" for parole	Offerings stay out of release files
A peer drifts into therapy	Clear role limits; staff-led hard stages
Private drafts are read by others	Locked storage, shred option, handwriting

15. Dorm Signage Ideas

Signs should be quiet and dignified. Print on plain paper, laminate, and post near the writing space and in common areas.

SIGN FOR THE DORM

WRITE ABOUT THE HARM, NOT THE EVIDENCE.

SIGN FOR THE DORM

MY PAST EXPLAINS. IT DOES NOT EXCUSE.

SIGN FOR THE DORM

I CANNOT KNOW YOUR PAIN. I CAN TELL YOU THE TRUTH ABOUT MINE.
(For the Lives Touched stage)

SIGN FOR THE DORM

EVIDENCE, NOT PROMISES.

SIGN FOR THE DORM

HEALING

Harbor. Early Roots. Account. Lives Touched. I Owe. New Evidence. Gift Without Strings.

Worksheet 1: Before I Write (My Resources and Stop Plan)

Name or resident number: _____ Date: _____

Question

My answer

Three things that help me settle

A person who believes in me

My steady place (real or imagined)

Body signs that I am getting overwhelmed

Thought signs that I am getting overwhelmed

What I will do first if I need to stop

Who I will tell if I need help (staff name)

Do I have a pending case, appeal, or hearing? (If yes, talk to counsel first; Impact Version available)

Yes / No

My stop word or signal to the facilitator: _____

One sentence I will say to myself when it gets hard:

I understand that I may stop at any time without explaining. Initials: _____

Worksheet 2: Stage Writing Page (Copy One for Each Writing Block)

Stage (circle): H E A L I N G Prompt code: _____ Tier: Step In / Go Deeper / Hardest Question

Ground in practice I used: _____

Before writing, how activated am I? (1 calm to 10 flooded)

After writing, how activated am I? (1 to 10)

Ground out practice I used

This page is part of my Private Working Draft. It is mine. I may keep it, lock it, or shred it.

Worksheet 3: The Ripple Map

Use no names or identifying details. Use roles only ("the clerk," "her son," "my mother," "the neighborhood").

Circle	Who (roles only)	What they may have lost
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Center: the person or people directly harmed

Circle 2: their family and closest people

Circle 3: their workplace, school, church, neighbors

Circle 4: the wider community

Circle 5: my own family and people who loved me

Circle 6: people who responded (officers, medics, witnesses, jurors)

The circle I find hardest to look at, and why:

I remember: I cannot know their pain. I can try to understand it. Initials: _____

Worksheet 4: Explain vs Excuse (Early Roots)

My past explains...

...but it does not excuse

One unwritten rule I learned growing up: _____

Where it showed up in my harm: _____

The rule I choose now: _____

Worksheet 5: "I Chose" (Account)

Write each choice on its own line. Start every line with "I chose." No names, no graphic detail. If you are writing the Impact Version, list choices of attitude and direction rather than events.

#	I chose...	Where was the exit?
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		

Minimizing words I caught myself using: _____

My one sentence, with no "but":

Worksheet 6: What I Owe (I Owe)

Debt (what I owe)	To whom (role only)	What I have done so far	What I am still doing
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What can never be repaired:

Will I do this work even if no one ever forgives me? Why?

Worksheet 7: Evidence Log (New Evidence)

Date	Situation	What the old me would have done	What I did
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Who has seen this change (role only), and what would they say?

What part of the old me is still here, and how do I keep it from choosing?

Worksheet 8: FACT Offering Builder (Gift Without Strings)

Part	My words (plain, short, no requests)
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F Full acknowledgment: what I did

A Awareness of impact: what I have come to understand, without claiming to know

C Change, with evidence: what I do now and can show

T Terms: none. My commitment, asking nothing back

Words I searched for and removed: please / hope you / if you ever / I would like / forgive / but / just / only

My one sentence (G1):

Worksheet 9: Offering Review Checklist (For Staff and Clinician Reviewers)

Offering ID (no names): _____ Reviewer: _____ Date: _____

#	Standard	Yes	No	Note
1	Centers the harmed person, not the writer			
2	Takes full responsibility; states the harm was not the reader's fault			
3	No excuses, minimizing words, or blame on the victim, others, or circumstances			
4	No requests of any kind (forgiveness, reply, contact, meeting, understanding)			
5	No graphic or sensory detail of the harm			
6	No sexual offense detail beyond plain acknowledgment			
7	No names, initials, or identifying details of anyone			
8	No claims to know the reader's feelings ("I know how you feel")			
9	Self-pity and the writer's own hardship are absent or brief and not centered			
10	Honest about change, with evidence; does not claim to be "fixed" or that the harm led to good			
11	No threats, pressure, or content that could frighten			
12	No mention of parole, release, sentence, or case			
13	Appropriate length (about 1 to 3 handwritten pages); readable in one sitting			
14	Writer's own words (not copied or rewritten by others)			
15	Consent form signed and pathway marked			

Decision: Approved / Return to writer with one change / Not suitable for sharing

The one change requested (SEE method, strength first):

Clinician review: Name and credential _____ Date _____

Worksheet 10: Consent and Sharing Form (Plain Language)

CAUTION
DRAFT FORM. This form must be reviewed and approved by SCDC legal counsel before use. Wording may change.

I, resident number _____, understand the following. (Initial each line.)

I understand that...	Initials
Writing an Offering is my choice. Saying no has no penalty.	
My Private Working Draft will never be shared by TJP.	
Nothing I write is legally confidential, and staff must report certain things (list attached).	
I was advised to talk to my attorney if I have any pending case, appeal, or hearing.	
My Offering will be reviewed by staff and, when possible, a licensed clinician before it leaves the unit.	
TJP will never contact a victim. A specific victim receives my Offering only if they ask, through victim services, and their therapist agrees.	
I may never learn whether my Offering was read. There will be no reply.	
My Offering will not be used in my parole or release file.	
I may withdraw consent in writing at any time before delivery. After delivery, the reader keeps it.	

I agree to share my Offering through (check any, or none):

Pathway	Yes	No
1. Specific victim, only through victim services and only on their request		
2. Other harmed people, through an approved victim service provider		
3. Educational use, anonymized excerpts only		

Resident signature: _____ Date: _____

Staff witness: _____ Date: _____

To withdraw consent: write "I withdraw consent for pathway ____" with your number, sign, date, and give it to the Programs Supervisor.

Worksheet 11: Reflection After Writing

Date: _____ Stage: _____ Prompt code: _____

Question	Circle or write
Where was I in my window?	Too flat / Steady / Too flooded
Did I use my stop plan?	Yes / No / Did not need it
Which grounding practice helped most?	
What surprised me?	
One thing I understand now that I did not before (start with "I realize" or "because")	
Do I want to talk with staff or a clinician?	Yes / No

One thing I am leaving in this room:

One thing I am taking with me:

Further Study

FURTHER STUDY

Staff and Think Tank members may use these for deeper preparation. Residents without internet can request print copies through the Education Leader or partner libraries.

- **Howard Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*** (Good Books; revised edition 2015). The clearest short statement of what harmed people need: information, truth-telling, empowerment, and restitution or vindication. Core to Course 2.
- **Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses*** (Herald Press, 1990). The foundational argument for seeing crime as harm to people and relationships, not only as lawbreaking.
- **James W. Pennebaker and Joshua M. Smyth, *Opening Up by Writing It Down*** (Guilford Press, 3rd edition, 2016). Accessible explanation of expressive writing research, including when it helps and when to be careful.
- **Karen Baikie and Kay Wilhelm, "Emotional and physical health benefits of expressive writing"** (*Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, 2005). A short, balanced review with clinical cautions. Useful for the clinician partner.
- **Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*** (Basic Books, 1992). The three stages of recovery: safety, remembrance and mourning, reconnection. Why Harbor comes first.
- **Danielle Sered, *Until We Reckon*** (The New Press, 2019). Accountability as something you do, from the founder of Common Justice, which works with survivors of serious violence.
- **Shadd Maruna, *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*** (American Psychological Association, 2001). The redemption script and why change stories matter. Read alongside Stage N's caution.
- **Mark Umbreit and colleagues, *Facing Violence: The Path of Restorative Justice and Dialogue*** (Jossey-Bass, 2003). Research on victim-offender dialogue in cases of severe violence. Helpful context for Pathway 1 (verify edition locally).
- **Dan Siegel, *The Developing Mind*** (Guilford Press, 1999) and Peter Levine, *In an Unspoken Voice* (North Atlantic Books, 2010). Sources for the window of tolerance and titration (Courses 1 and 5).
- **State apology bank programs** (Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Colorado). Short public pages that show how victim services offices screen apology letters. Good models for the Offering Review Checklist.
- **SCDC Division of Victim Services**. Ask for current procedures on Victim-Offender Dialogue, the Apology Letter Program, and the Impact of Crime Program before launching Pathway 1.

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6. Kentucky Department of Corrections, Victim Services Branch, Offender Apology Letter brochure. <https://corrections.ky.gov/Victim-Services/Documents/Offender%20Apology%20Letter%20Brochure.pdf>
7. Oklahoma Department of Corrections, Apology Bank brochure (2023). <https://oklahoma.gov/content/dam/ok/en/doc/documents/community-outreach/Apology%20Bank%20Brochure%202023.pdf>
8. Colorado Department of Corrections, Offender Apology Bank. <https://cdoc.colorado.gov/victim-services/offender-apology-bank>
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