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# The Master Plan

## My Journey from Life in Prison to a Life of Purpose

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Guide written by Chris Gilbert

G.P. Putnam's Sons

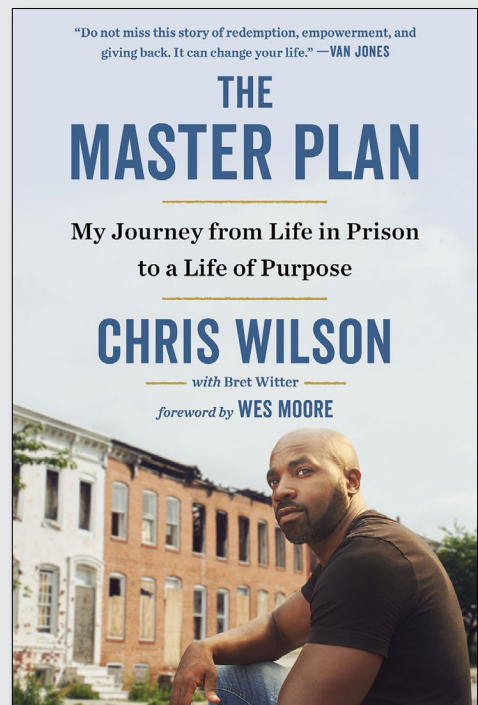
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Reading Level: 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> Grade

### INTRODUCTION

In *The Master Plan*, the reader experiences Chris Wilson's moving story. The reader learns of his traumatic early life, the violent act that led to his incarceration, his efforts to improve himself and others while incarcerated, and his social entrepreneurship as a returning citizen. Chris' tale is gripping, and it beckons the reader to explore a number of noteworthy themes: the dysfunction of our criminal justice system; the dangers of sentencing juveniles to life in prison without parole; the liberating power of education; and the importance of self-determination, second chances, and paying it forward to others. This is a timely, thought-provoking book, and this guide was written to assist teachers and students as they engage with it. Through the questions, activities, and resources featured within, students are encouraged to adopt an analytical view of *The Master Plan*, relevant personal experiences, and related topics. This guide contains five sections: discussion questions, various classroom activities, research opportunities, service learning projects, and other resources for students, teachers, and programs. Each section is applicable to multiple curricular areas, and as such, this document has an interdisciplinary focus. Activities can also be easily modified and scaled, as they were constructed with flexibility in mind. Lastly, students are encouraged throughout to utilize technology and work collaboratively as they complete their First-Year Experience® (FYE); this guide should provoke meaningful analysis and reflection, and it supports the overall purpose of the FYE: to fuse rigorous classroom study with immersive, communal learning experiences.

# First-Year and Common Reading Guide



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions can be posed to an entire class, given to small groups, used to initiate online discussions, etc.

1. In what ways do you believe Chris' early life experiences shaped his adult identity?
2. How does Chris utilize Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" throughout *The Master Plan*?
3. How does Chris, both during his early years and as an adult, benefit from reading and other forms of education? In what ways does education serve as a form of empowerment for him?
4. "Every child needs a safe space. They need love, and, like, quiet to think. They need an adult they can talk to, and a hot meal on the table once in a while. I wasn't getting that" (p. 45). How does the absence of these things ultimately affect young Chris?
5. How does Chris' relationship with his mother change throughout the book? If you could use one word to describe their relationship, which word would you use? Why?
6. How would you describe Chris' relationship with his son? How does Chris' time in prison affect this relationship? How does this relationship change over time?
7. In what ways does the prison system dehumanize? How does this dehumanization affect inmates?
8. "*Your greatest accomplishment is molding yourself*" (p. 112). How does Chris acquire agency during his time in prison? How does he establish some control over his own life?
9. "*Think of all the good you could be doing for people in here. Those words really stuck with me*" (p. 140). In what ways does hearing these words function as a turning point for Chris?
10. What larger points does the book make about the intersections of the criminal justice system and systemic racism?
11. "Whether by bad people or by good people who didn't comprehend the consequences of their actions, black poverty was planned. Society didn't put me in prison; I would never say it did. But society created the cave. Society put obstacles in the way of black people" (p. 171). What is Chris getting at here? In what ways do broader social structures and obstacles shape individual actions?
12. "The last thing I want is for you to read this far and think the system works . . . The system doesn't work" (p. 231). In what ways is the system broken? How should it be reformed?
13. What are some of the challenges returning citizens face as they return to society?
14. How do you view Chris' story in the larger context of the Black Lives Matter movement and continued police violence against people of color?
15. After his release, in what ways does Chris use business as a force for social good?
16. If you could ask Chris Wilson a single question about *The Master Plan*, what would you ask and why?

## VARIOUS CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

The following are activities applicable to a variety of curricular areas.

### 1. Paideia Seminar

A Paideia Seminar is a student-centered, Socratic discussion. In it, the teacher serves as facilitator by providing students with open-ended questions, prompting students to respond, and by linking student comments. There are three main question categories: *opening questions*, *core questions*, and *closing questions*. *Opening questions* identify main ideas from the text (What larger points does the book make about the criminal justice system?). *Core questions* require students to analyze textual details (What do you consider to be some of the central turning points in Chris' early life? Why?). Finally, *closing questions* personalize textual concepts (What sort of lessons did you take from the book? What makes it such a timely text?). Construct multiple questions like these, and have students gather in a large circle.

Establish group goals for the discussion and have students create individual goals as well. Some group goals could include practicing active listening strategies, disagreeing constructively, and having each participant express at least two thoughts. Individual goals could include referring to specific passages, building on another student's comment, and making consistent eye contact with others. Facilitate the conversation and concentrate on eliciting student responses. When the discussion concludes, have students self-assess and provide feedback on the seminar. Note that many of the discussion questions in this guide can be used during this activity.

For more information, consult <https://www.paideia.org/our-approach/paideia-seminar/index>

### 2. Student Generated Questions (QAR)

When students are able to generate their own questions, they are typically more invested in the analytical process. Allow them to take ownership of inquiry and explore *The Master Plan* through this activity. QAR refers to Question-Answer Relationships, and this activity works well in terms of encouraging both close analysis and personal connections. The types of questions include:

- **Right there questions:** answers to these questions are found explicitly in the text. (When does Chris first experience trauma?)
- **Think and search questions:** answers lie in the text, but may only be found by examining several different sections and piecing them together. (How does the theme of empowerment through education surface in the text?)
- **Author and you:** answers require personal interpretation based on textual evidence. (How do you think Chris is ultimately changed by his experiences in prison?)
- **On my own:** answers connect personal experience with themes of the text. (Have you ever witnessed a form of violence or experienced it? How did it affect you?)

**VARIOUS  
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**  
(CONTINUED)

Have students work independently or in pairs to generate several questions per category for a specific section of the book. After these questions are generated, instructors have several options:

- Have students trade and answer each other's questions in writing
- Have students pose their questions during small-group discussions
- Have students select one question to expand upon in an extended written response or brief presentation ("Right there" questions do not work well for this).
- Have students answer each other's questions via collaborative documents on Google Docs (<http://docs.google.com>). \*

For more information on this strategy, consult this resource: <http://www.readingquest.org/qar.html>

\*All Google resources mentioned in this guide are accessible with a free Google account.

### 3. Compare and Contrast Returning Citizens' Experiences

"I didn't know how many hurdles the system throws in your way until I hit the streets myself. But I knew starting a life, after years in prison, had to be hard. You're out of touch with the modern world. You have no job experience. You're broke. You're homeless. You're a dung beetle, pushing your giant ball of crap" (p. 245).

After reading *The Master Plan*, have students access the sources below. Each one details the experiences of returning citizens. Students can access additional stories by performing a Google search for "reentry stories."

- "4 Ex-Cons turned CEOs": <https://bthechange.com/4-ex-cons-turned-ceos-ee1ebea7315d>
- FAMM's "Reentry Stories": [https://famm.org/story\\_category/reentry-stories/](https://famm.org/story_category/reentry-stories/)
- Root & Rebound's "Stories of Reentry": <https://www.rootandrebound.org/our-work/stories-of-reentry/>

To begin, have students browse these sources. Next, ask students to select one or more of these narratives to compare and contrast with Chris Wilson's experiences as detailed in *The Master Plan*. They should read/view with an eye on both the successes and challenges these returning citizens have experienced.

To facilitate this process, instruct students to use a Venn diagram. In one circle, students should note unique aspects of the returning citizen experience depicted in their chosen narrative; in the other circle, they should note unique aspects of Chris Wilson's experiences from the book. In the middle section of the Venn diagram, students should record similarities. Have students pair up and share their analysis before transitioning to a whole class conversation. Students could also further explore their noted similarities and differences through extended writing.

VARIOUS  
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES  
(CONTINUED)

#### 4. Create a Master Plan

“I typed my notes. The first draft was three pages long. I went over the list again and again until I’d condensed it to one page. In the end, I had thirty-five things I needed to do to live the life I wanted. I titled it: *My Master Plan*” (p. 103).

Chris’ master plan is at the heart of the book, and it serves as a profound driving force in his life. Invite your students to follow his lead via the construction of their own master plans. Like Chris, they should begin by considering the question, “What’s your endgame?” (p. 98). From there, they should draft a master plan. Encourage them to compose multiple drafts until they feel they have a document that fully reflects their ambitions and goals. Next, encourage them to share their master plans with each other. If possible, build in time to periodically check in with students and allow them to share their progress in fulfilling their plans.

#### 5. Craft a Positive Delusion Collage

“So I started collecting pictures....I called the pictures my Positive Delusions....I started pasting the photos into my notebooks to make collages. I’d take a beach, add a few pretty girls in bikinis. Maybe a Corvette parked on the side. I loved art when I was a kid....Now I was noticing colors again, working shapes off each other, and figuring out compositions” (p. 117).

Chris uses his Positive Delusion collages to represent aspects of his Master Plan, to keep his focus on his goals, and to give himself strength. Invite your students to create their own Positive Delusion collages with this activity.

To get started, first have them identify several aspects of their Master Plan they feel they can visually represent. Next, have them locate or create associated images. Like Chris, students can certainly use physical materials to construct their collages, or they can use the online resources below to create digital collages. As they work to complete their collages, have students pay close attention to color, shape, the arrangement of their images, and other elements of design. When finished, invite students to share their work with each other.

Online collage makers:

- BeFunky’s Collage Maker: <https://www.befunky.com/features/collage-maker/>
- Photo Collage: <https://www.photocollage.com/>

## RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

The following topics are designed to provide students with opportunities for extended inquiry and analysis. In response to these, students could:

- Compose a research paper
  - Deliver a presentation
  - Design a lesson plan and teach a class
  - Record a podcast (<https://lifelife.com/how-to-start-your-own-podcast-1709798447>)
  - Create a website (<http://www.wix.com>, <http://www.weebly.com>, and <https://sites.google.com> are excellent free resources for this)
  - Use Adobe Spark (<https://spark.adobe.com/>) to create and share a variety of graphics and videos
1. “The only white people we ever saw in Lincoln Heights were cops, and those cops *did* hate us, and they *were* trying to keep us down. . . . All they did was eyeball us, harass us, make us feel like criminals, even though we were kids. Then suddenly, they barreled down the road twenty at a time in six-wheeled combat vehicles, battering down doors and throwing everyone to the floor” (pp. 14-15). Perform research to learn more about how contemporary policing practices harm communities of color. How did racism come to have such a profound influence on policing practices? What drives the current militarization of law enforcement? What sort of reform is needed to address the current state of policing and to improve relationships between people of color and law enforcement?
  2. “He raised his gun, I stepped back, and he pistol-whipped me so hard I blacked out....I opened my eyes. I saw a broken lamp, Lisa lying on her side, a table, a chair, and the cop on the bed, in the next room, punching my mother. I could see his fist rising and falling, jackhammering her face until she finally stopped struggling and lay still” (p. 30). Perform research to learn more about the psychological effects of both experiencing and witnessing violence. What are the emotional and mental consequences of witnessing and/or experiencing violence? How do such experiences lead to PTSD? What intersections can you locate between poverty, race, and the development of PTSD?
  3. “I don’t like courtrooms. Even today, if I’m giving a speech, I hate doing it in a courtroom. I don’t understand the rules there, but I know they are against us: the poor, the dark, and the accused—rightly or wrongly—because that’s the room’s purpose. These are the places America created to finish us off” (p. 218). Perform research to learn more about how the criminal justice system works against the underprivileged and people of color. Within the system, how is the deck stacked against these groups? What aspects of the system need to be reformed? How?
  4. “We could have sold the photos and not only made money, but preserved those memories. I had been reading about social entrepreneurship: starting businesses that made money by doing good. And here it was. An opportunity to be a social entrepreneur in prison” (p. 166). Perform research to learn more

**RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES**

(CONTINUED)

about what it means to be a social entrepreneur. What exactly does being a social entrepreneur entail? Who are some high-profile social entrepreneurs you can identify and learn about? How do their business ventures compare with Chris'?

5. "Society put obstacles in the way of black people--slavery, lynchings, redlining, job discrimination, voter discrimination, and all manner of segregation, official and otherwise--then criticized us when we didn't rise above it" (p. 171). Perform research on one or more of the obstacles Chris mentions here. What is the history of the obstacle? How does it connect with other discriminatory and racist practices in our country? What will it take to eliminate it?
6. "People in prison have the potential to achieve great things....I'm talking about entrepreneurs, executives, and artists. I'm saying we can turn prison into a success factory. We have the information, the infrastructure, and the human potential. All we need is the desire" (p. 234). Perform research to investigate how the prison system in the United States can be reformed into a "success factory." Why is the prison system currently more centered on punishment than rehabilitation? How can and should the system be reformed to make it better promote inmate empowerment and rehabilitation?

**SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS**

These projects are designed to connect students' learning experiences with the larger community.

**1. Support the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth (CFSY)**

"In 2016, sentencing juveniles under eighteen to life in prison without parole was declared illegal by the United States Supreme Court. However, it is still legal, as in Maryland, to sentence them to life without any realistic chance of being paroled" (p. 402)

As Chris Wilson details in the quote above, the sentencing of juveniles to life in prison without parole is still a significant issue, and one at the heart of *The Master Plan*. Invite your students to get involved by supporting CFSY, an organization that works to "[c]atalyze the just and equitable treatment of children in the United States by demanding a ban on life without parole and other extreme sentences for children who cause harm; advancing alternative responses that focus on their unique characteristics as children, including their capacity for change; and creating opportunities for formerly incarcerated youth to thrive as adults and lead in their communities."

Have your students navigate to <https://www.fairsentencingofyouth.org/get-involved/>. Here, they can learn about different ways to support the campaign. These include fundraising, donating goods and services, mobilizing support at the state level, creating content for social media, and other forms of involvement.

**2. Debunk Myths regarding Returning Citizens**

"... society turned its back on its returning citizens long ago. It doesn't want us back. It wants permanent retribution, and it wants to separate us from the ordinary, the normal, and the good. It refuses to consider us citizens, even though it's against the law and

**SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS**

(CONTINUED)

the Constitution to continue punishing us once we've served our time" (p. 245).

Powerful cultural myths serve to separate returning citizens from "the ordinary, the normal, and the good." Have students identify and debunk myths regarding returning citizens and their rights through the creation and distribution of brochures and/or fact sheets. These two document forms are ideal for this activity because they typically feature concise language, statistics, and they are easily distributed and quickly read.

- To begin, place students in small groups. In these groups, students should list some of the most prominent myths about the formerly incarcerated population. After this, have students perform online research to locate additional myths and information about them.
- Next, have students perform research (using credible sources) to debunk the myths they have identified.
- Finally, students should organize their information in a concise, visually-appealing format. If possible, show them examples of exemplary brochures and fact sheets, and direct students to create their own and distribute them to the campus population. Note that students could also distribute digital versions of their work through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

Useful resources for this activity:

- [https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset\\_library/REENTRY\\_MYTHBUSTERS.pdf](https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/REENTRY_MYTHBUSTERS.pdf)  
A "Reentry Mythbusters" document from the Federal Interagency Reentry Council.
- <https://www.careeronestop.org/BusinessCenter/RecruitAndHire/HiringADiverseWorkforce/JusticeInvolvedWorkers/TalentBank/myths-and-facts.aspx>  
"Myths and facts" from CareerOneStop, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor
- <https://www.canva.com/create/brochures/>  
A free, online brochure maker
- <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/participation/promoting-interest/fact-sheets/main>  
Suggestions and guidelines for composing fact sheets

**3. Mentor and Tutor Local Youth**

*"Think of all the good you could be doing for people in here. Those words really stuck with me. . . . I got young guys to enroll in GED school. I got guys into carpentry and other trade programs. I got guys to start working out, stop smoking dope, write letters to their moms. It was mentoring, but unofficial"* (pp. 140, 143)

Chris benefits immensely from his relationships with Steve and Tooky, and there are other individuals described in the book who also mentor and assist Chris during his time both in and out of prison. As evidenced by the quote above, Chris also serves as a mentor himself. Have students follow Chris' lead and become mentors and tutors by encouraging them to do good for others by locating local schools in need of qualified tutors/mentors.



**SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS**

(CONTINUED)

While students can certainly investigate any school for potential tutoring and mentoring opportunities, encourage them to seek out schools serving underprivileged populations. Students can contact local schools directly to inquire about specific opportunities, but the following resources can also help with this activity:

- <https://www.volunteermatch.org/>  
VolunteerMatch lists volunteer opportunities throughout the country.
- <https://www.unitedway.org/get-involved/volunteer>  
This resource allows students to view United Way volunteer opportunities across the country.
- <https://www.bbbs.org/>  
The Big Brothers Big Sisters of America website provides access to numerous mentoring opportunities.
- <https://www.indeed.com/q-Tutor-jobs.html>  
Indeed lists a variety of paid tutoring opportunities.

**4. Support a Non-Profit or Charity that assists Inmates or Returning Citizens**

To initiate this activity, have students organize themselves into groups and invite them to select one of the charities/non-profits described below (note that these are just suggestions; students can look online to locate others as well. If they do so, encourage students to vet charities/non-profits through the use of <https://www.charitynavigator.org> and <http://www.guidestar.org>; <https://greatnonprofits.org/categories/view/inmate-support> is also a useful resource):

- Books to Prisoners (<http://www.bookstoprisoners.net/>) works to “foster a love of reading behind bars, encourage the pursuit of knowledge and self-empowerment, and break the cycle of recidivism.” The organization mails tens of thousands of free books to inmates each year.
- University Beyond Bars (<http://www.universitybeyondbars.org/>) is an organization that “serves incarcerated individuals at the Washington State Reformatory in Monroe, WA. We provide transferable AA and BA degrees along with a range of cultural and college prep offerings and an Arts and Lecture series that is open to the entire prison population.”
- Adopt an Inmate (<https://adoptaninmate.org/>) “is a nonprofit that seeks to create extended family for prison inmates. We match inmates with volunteers who write to them.” In addition to supporting this nonprofit, students might also be interested in becoming an adopter.
- All of Us or None (<https://prisonerswithchildren.org/about-aouon/>) “is a grass-roots civil and human rights organization fighting for the rights of formerly—and currently-incarcerated people and our families. We are fighting against the discrimination that people face every day because of arrest or conviction history.”

After students select an organization, ask them to plan and implement several different fundraising activities to support it. To provide students with some fundraising ideas, refer them to the extensive list located here: <https://www.causevox.com/fundraising-ideas/>.

**SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS**  
(CONTINUED)

Whatever students choose to do, encourage them to promote their efforts through social media. After students conclude their fundraising efforts, have them debrief and reflect on what was successful and what could be improved.

**5. Become an Expert and Educator**

Have students select a topic related to *The Master Plan* to research in small groups. Some suggested topics include:

- Life sentencing without parole for juveniles
- Mental illness among the prison population
- Racist law enforcement practices
- Dehumanization and the prison experience
- Redlining
- Voting rights of returning citizens

The purpose of this activity is for students to become experts on their topic so that they may effectively educate other members of the campus community. First, student groups should read and analyze the applicable sections of *The Master Plan* while performing secondary research as well. After students have sufficiently researched their topic, have them answer the following two questions:

1. What is the essential information that others must know about my group's topic?
2. What are controversial elements, if any, of my topic?

Finally, have students present their research to the campus community in such a way that it both informs and invites them to discuss the issue. Groups could:

- Staff an information booth (be sure to obtain permission first) in a visible area and distribute brochures, fliers, or other documents. Free web resources such as <https://www.canva.com/> will work for this, or students could use programs such as Microsoft Publisher to create documents.
- Launch an online campaign through social media or a designed website. Encourage students to create captivating presentations through Prezi (<http://www.prezi.com>), Google Slides (<http://www.google.com/slides/about/>), or Microsoft Sway (<https://sway.com>). Students could also blog through a site such as WordPress (<http://www.wordpress.com>).
- Design and publish infographics. An infographic is a visual representation of information that features short sections of text and multiple charts, graphs, and other visuals. The digital medium offers students a unique way to package and convey knowledge while sharpening their digital literacy skills. Free resources for this include <http://piktochart.com>, <http://easel.ly>, and <https://spark.adobe.com/>.

Regardless of the format students select, their presentations should invite their audience to ask questions and engage in dialogue.

## OTHER RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND PROGRAMS

The following are resources useful for extending a study of *The Master Plan* and its related subjects:

- <https://www.kalw.org/post/chris-wilsons-journey-life-prison-criminal-justice-reform#stream/0>  
Audio recording of an interview with Chris Wilson.
- <https://www.commonwealthclub.org/events/archive/podcast/master-plan>  
Audio recording of a talk from Chris Wilson.
- <https://www.salon.com/2019/02/17/chris-wilsons-master-plan-transformed-his-life-after-prison-he-insists-hes-not-an-anomaly/>  
A dialogue with Chris Wilson.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LKGDBfsMCNg>  
A book talk from Chris Wilson at the University of Baltimore.
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_zxUum2jwyw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zxUum2jwyw)  
Chris Wilson at the 2020 First-Year Experience Conference.
- <https://www.aclu.org/issues/criminal-law-reform>  
The ACLU's web resource on criminal law reform.
- <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/juvenile-life-without-parole/>  
"Juvenile Life Without Parole: An Overview," from The Sentencing Project.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

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