

I Taught Myself How to Read in Prison. Then I Sued the System and Won

“Just like the rest of life, everything about the court system is a puzzle I’ve had to piece together.”

By Andre Jacobs



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I entered prison at 15, lost and illiterate. A lot of the guys I knew were too ashamed to admit that they didn’t know how to read, but I wasn’t. I taught myself how. I would take a novel and look up every word that stumped me. My first year in prison, I read the same book, “The Last Don,” over and over for about nine months.

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All of that work learning how to read helped me when I went back to school while in prison. It’s also helped me become a successful “jailhouse lawyer” representing myself in court. Over the years, I’ve won hundreds of thousands of dollars from the state, all thanks to countless hours I’ve spent pouring over legal books and documents.

I filed my first lawsuit when I was 19 years old. I had been put in solitary, and there was this one guard who would walk past my cell

and kick my door, call me the N word, play with my food. And then one time he pulled out his baton and beat me with it.

One of the guys on the block sent me a note that said, “Listen, man, that’s a violation of your rights. I can help you with that.” He told me to start documenting everything and to get this book called “The Prisoners’ Self-Help Litigation Manual,” which is designed for beginners and allows you to personalize pre-written legal arguments.

Learning prison law and policy was a maze at first, but I found myself in situations where I really believed the guards would kill me. So my life depended on getting it right. There were times when I would spend months reading nothing but legal cases and John Grisham novels.

More than 15 years later, I’ve filed more than a dozen pleadings in court and have been awarded almost half a million dollars by two separate juries. I won my first case after three correctional officers destroyed my legal materials and retaliated against me. A jury awarded me \$185,000—that was later reduced to \$75,005 by a federal judge. In 2017, I won again, this time on claims including excessive force and violations of due process from a 2008 lawsuit. The jury awarded me more than \$270,000, which the county appealed, ultimately settling on an award of \$190,000.

With this most recent win, I felt vindicated and relieved.

My life experience equips me for trial. From the time I was 6 years old, I have pretty much been on my own, whether it was in hospitals or on the streets. As a child, I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder from all the abuse I experienced and witnessed at home. I’ve always been alone, trying to grasp at any resource I could to grow and find myself in this world.

Just like the rest of life, everything about the court system is a puzzle I've had to piece together. I've spent endless hours researching cases and procedures, where to file your claim and how, understanding the language they use. I had to learn when to yell "Objection!" and what to say after the court asks you for the basis of your protest.

I also had to learn how to read a jury. As a man who is alive today only because of my ability to read people and sense danger, I was well-prepared to develop this skill.

During jury selection, I look for certain things. Has this juror ever filed a lawsuit? Are they at all rebellious? I want to assess whether they just follow along with what those in authority say or whether they tend to reject that.

What you say in front of the jury is the most meaningful part of a trial. To prepare, I would talk to myself while pacing my cell, figuring out my approach. Sometimes I'd ask the other guys in solitary to listen to my arguments, give me their thoughts. When I had a mirror to use, I would practice in front of it.

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I also knew that what I wore during the trial would be important. A friend of mine delivered a bunch of suits to the courthouse, and I would change into the outfit of my choice each day.

While representing myself during the first case that I won, I was forced to wear



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an electroshock belt the whole trial, which carries 50,000 watts. The discomfort alone was a distraction. The belt presses against your spinal cord and makes your entire stomach sweat. These belts have malfunctioned in the past, and so I had this fear that it would go off and the

court officers would shoot me in the back.

When I returned to court again on a different case, the prison guards requested that I again put on the belt.

When the judge said she saw no reason for it, since I'd always been respectful and professional in my other appearances before her, one guard said, "I'm just following orders. To remove the belt, I would have to make a bunch of calls and ask the superintendent."

The judge looked at him, almost confused. "Well, make the calls. He's not wearing the belt. That's an order."

It's difficult to get other prisoners to testify on your behalf, because everyone is afraid they could get retaliated against. One time, one of my witnesses, who was a real talker, told a story about how a bunch of guards had run up the block with pepper spray and batons and ordered everyone to go back to their cells. He said, "I complied with the order, but I walked slow, in a defiant yet compliant way, so I had the feeling of a little bit of dignity." The jurors all laughed approvingly. I thought it was significant that he could connect with

them on such a personal level that they would disregard the fact that he was a prisoner.

During my most recent case, the warden for the prison sat with the opposing side's lawyers during the trial. At first, he seemed to think I was some kind of joke. But as the days unfolded, and he saw the pieces coming together, he slid his chair over to my table on a break and offered to settle mid-trial. We could not agree on valuing the case in the six-figure range, however, so I refused and proceeded.

In civil cases, the only tangible justice you can get is money. So, I go for the maximum, just like they go for the max. Throw the book at them, so to speak.

I get asked by other prisoners for help with their cases. The court system is ruthless and routinely dismisses good cases filed by prisoners because they can't articulate their arguments, or they filed the wrong pleading, or they filed the right pleading in the wrong way.

But in general, I believe that prisoners have a better chance of winning their cases than most attorneys, if they're serious. No attorney in America can tell me more about prison than I already know. That makes them my student in every case.

With the money I won from my cases, I recently bought a property in Pennsylvania and got it all fixed up. Being in prison since I was a teenager, I am beyond ready to start my life.

Andre Jacobs, 37, was incarcerated until March 2019 in Pennsylvania's State Correctional Institution at Albion on a six to 18 year sentence for aggravated assault. He is currently being held in federal custody for a 2006 assault conviction and is scheduled to be released in August 2021.