

# Best Practices for Writing to An Incarcerated Person





# Writing Letters To People Who Are Incarcerated

## BEST PRACTICES

Writing to an incarcerated pen pal is about forming a pro-social relationship with someone who has limited opportunities to do so. The letters you write should come from a desire to get to know your pen pal and to share your life with them in return. The end goal is for both of you to have a healthy friendship with the other. Beginning with the end in mind is important.

### Own the awkwardness.

The first letter is the hardest, but the second can still feel really awkward. Honestly acknowledging this fact can make both of you more comfortable. Include something like, "I hope it's okay a letter from a stranger showed up in your mail today," or "It's hard to figure out how to start getting to know one another, but I'm sure we'll get it!"

### Talk respectfully about prison.

You may be very curious about prison, but in general, asking very personal questions is not best unless you have a very well-established relationship. Asking general questions about prison life - How do you get your meals, and what are they like? Do you have a job? Do you do your own laundry? - is a good way to begin building a relationship.

Most folks on the inside would rather not talk in much detail about the more personal aspects of life in prison, however, until they have grown to trust you. Questions like, "Do you feel afraid when you're on the yard?" or "Have you seen a lot of violence?" or "Do you have family who come to visit you?" touch on sensitive topics. New pen pals thrive when your correspondence is about getting to know them as individual people, focusing on the kind of things they would want a friend to know, whether they were incarcerated or not.

Asking about the crime that sent them to prison is a no-no. They will bring it up if they want you to know. If they bring it up, it's fine to respond.

### Be personal, but not intimate.

Let your personality shine through. Write like you would talk in a conversation. Share your likes and dislikes, your ups and downs, but stop short of anything that feels intimate. Maintaining healthy boundaries is your responsibility in this relationship. Many people who are incarcerated may not have a good sense of what is or is not "crossing the line" in some way—it's up to you to avoid sharing too personally in a way that creates a false sense of intimacy. For example, sharing in general terms about a struggle you are having at work is okay, but sharing about a fight with your spouse is not.

Avoid anything that sounds flirtatious at all costs. If your pen pal writes something that makes you uncomfortable, address it directly and respectfully as soon as possible. Simply saying, "I would prefer if you would not make jokes like the one in your last letter. It made me uncomfortable. Thanks for understanding." will probably take care of it. If your pen pal is offended by a boundary you draw and stops writing to you, it's probably for the best.

## Don't assume the worst.

Being incarcerated is not fun, but most prisoners have some positive MOMENTS in their lives.. You might be surprised to learn many strong, beautiful friendships are formed between residents. Incentive programs, educational opportunities, and even jobs in the prison are sometimes really enjoyable. "I'd love to hear more about..." an activity or a friendship they've mentioned as positive is a powerful phrase for supporting positive prison culture from the outside.

## Encourage, but don't problem-solve.

You are not qualified to solve your pen pal's problems any more than they are qualified to solve yours. Remind them they matter to you, you think of them often. Encourage them to hang in there when times are tough. Admit you can only imagine what they are dealing with if they have shared prison-specific struggles they are having. Reflect back what you hear (e.g., "It sounds like you are really frustrated with how little your job is paying.") rather than express your opinion (e.g., "It's outrageous that you are only paid \$20 a month for work that is making a profit for the facility!") The greatest gift you can give your pen pal when they share about something difficult is to let them know you are truly listening, and you care about how they are feeling.

## Be cautious with sharing about your religious beliefs, if you are a person of faith.

If your pen pal has expressed their belief in the power of prayer, has told you they are a person of faith, then by all means share freely about yours! But if your letters often include phrases like, "Praying for you!" your pen pal may feel pressured to adopt your beliefs or pretend like they have adopted them in order to preserve the relationship. Respect the very-far-from-God position your pen pal may have. Be careful to avoid anything that sounds like you are pressuring them to believe as you do; you will likely lose the opportunity to continue building a relationship with them if they feel pressured...and that relationship is the end goal. Who knows how your steady and unconditional love for them might move them toward faith over years?

## Keep the relationship limited to correspondence.

For people who are isolated so much of the time, it is challenging to understand what is and is not okay to ask of a friend. If your pen pal asks for money, the answer is probably no. If they ask if you will visit them, the answer is probably no. If they want to put your number on their phone list, the answer is probably no. If they want you to contact people on the outside on their behalf, the answer is probably no. Certainly there can be friendships that grow over time to the point where one or more of these things might become appropriate, but that will be the unusual situation and would probably come only after years of correspondence.

## Be wise, but don't be paranoid.

You don't need to be afraid your pen pal will take advantage of you. If you make intentional choices about what healthy boundaries look like for your friendship, you risk very little. That being said, many incarcerated people have been conditioned to take what they can get from others in order to survive. Trust your gut; if something feels "off," it almost certainly is. Be direct; be honest; course correct rather than taking offense.

## Steer clear of promises.

It is better to write randomly to one prisoner from time to time than it is to begin writing to five people, tell them to expect mail from you once a month, and then find that you cannot maintain that load. If your letters just disappear on them, it hurts. People behind the walls are even more sensitive to that type of disappointment than those of us on the outside with the freedom to connect with others on our own terms. Don't set an inmate up for disappointment.

## Learn the rules for the facility.

Each prison has slightly different rules for resident mail. Make every effort to follow these rules.

Here's a list of general guidelines that will be applicable to most prisons:

- No stickers of any kind (including sticky return address labels). Only postage stamps on your envelope should stick on.
- No glitter or anything glued on.
- No musical cards.
- No staples or paper clips.
- Do not enclose anything but a card and/or letter, unless you are sending photographs and have followed the facility's guidelines for sending photos.
- Remember the staff in the mail room will read your letter. Keep your words encouraging, positive, and non-inflammatory. Do not criticize corrections officers, staff, or administrators.
- Include a complete return address on your envelope. If you are uncomfortable using your first and last name, consider using "PrisonCare" on a test letter and see if the mail room will accept it that way. Still sign your letter with a single name for your pen pal to call you, of course.
- Consider using a PO box instead of your home address for the return address on your envelope. Many PrisonCare groups are affiliated with a local church, and using the church's PO Box may be an option.
- Remember to include your pen pal's DOC number with their legal name when you address the envelope. The mail room may not allow a letter addressed to "Bill Jones" if his legal name is "William," even if you have included his DOC number correctly for identification.