



Words matter. Words can wound. Words can build.

And subtle differences in the vocabulary we choose can make a BIG difference when it comes to caring for a prison.

Virtues-based vocabulary focuses the attention of the listener on elements of CHARACTER. Consistently encouraging prison residents to cultivate the development of good character is transformative.

Words that remind of CORE VALUES are powerful in encouraging corrections professionals to do their difficult jobs well and with integrity.

And prisons have their own set of words that aren't really used on the outside, or have prison-specific meanings. Understanding them is helpful.

You don't need to learn all the prison slang, of course, but a basic knowledge of common prison vocabulary will help you connect with your resident pen-pals. And a choice on your part to use virtues-based vocabulary, and to keep focused on core values, will help you BUILD with your words, and do it in a way that moves away from "us. vs. them" in your prison's neighborhood.

Let's start with some basic prison terms and expressions.

* DOC - Dept. of Corrections. In the U.S., a DOC facility is one that is owned and operated by the state. In many states, there are also private prisons, usually owned by CoreCivic or GEO Group, for-profit corporations that are paid a set dollar amount per inmate, and then run the facility with little direct oversight from the state. Private prisons are philosophically a very risky proposition, even though some individual facilities may be well-run.

* DOWN - to be in prison serving your sentence, as in, "He's been down for 14 years."

* COPS - corrections officers, CO's.

* RESIDENTS/INMATES/OFFENDERS/PRISONERS/CONVICTS/MEN/WOMEN - different DOC's use different terms to refer to the people incarcerated in their prisons. Opinions run strongly on these terms! "Offenders" and "Convicts" are typically the least popular with people

serving sentences. “Residents,” is gaining popularity; “inmates,” is very commonly used and less offensive than “offender,” or “convict.”

* TIER - one level of a multi-story cell block. Most prisons have at least two tiers connected by stairs.

* COUNT - the time twice daily when each resident must return to their cell, the doors are locked, and the staff conduct a count of inmates to be sure that no one has escaped, no one is dead, and no one is where they should not be. “Count Cleared!” is the announcement every warden wants to hear twice a day.

* LOCKDOWN - times other than routine count when everyone must be locked in their cells. This happens for a variety of reasons - a violent incident somewhere in the facility will lockdown the whole prison until the investigation is complete. Highly contagious illnesses require extensive lockdowns in an attempt to control the spread. If someone attempts escape, the facility goes on lockdown. Lockdown typically means 23 hours in your cell, one hour out each day to make phone calls and shower. Lockdowns are extremely stressful for residents, CO's and staff, alike.

* STAFF - corrections professionals who are not CO's, including but not limited to Case Managers (like social workers, each responsible for the welfare and rehabilitative progress of individual inmates), medical staff, administrative staff, educational staff, etc.

* YARD - the outdoor exercise area itself, or exercise time.

* CHOW - the cafeteria itself, or meal time.

* PROGRAMS - court-ordered addiction treatment, sex offender rehabilitation, and the like are a part of some people's sentences. There are residents who have served more than their minimum sentence, have excellent behavior records, who have support and employment waiting for them on the outside, but who are not eligible for parole simply because they are still on a waiting list for their court-ordered program. A tremendous source of frustration for people in prison is the lack of adequate program slots.

* INCENTIVE - many prisons have special living areas, units that are only available to people who have earned good behavior points. Many focus on a particular area of interest, like music, faith, or art, and offer privileges tied to that area of interest.

* SO - Sex Offender. This is actually a VERY broad category; many things are legally sex offenses even though they are not what people would automatically understand that way outside the courtroom.

* GENERAL POP - general population; not an incentive living area.

These terms are provided not because you **need** to use them when writing to your pen-pal, but because they may help you quickly understand insider language that your pen-pal might use with you. The terms above are likely to come up, and it may be helpful to have simple definitions already in your brain.

Let's move on to VIRTUES-BASED LANGUAGE. This is great stuff to keep in mind when you are writing to an incarcerated person!

RESPECT. This is a good place to start. Mention something that you really respect in others. Note something that you respect about your pen-pal. Mention self-respect and how important it is that we carry ourselves as the people we *want* to be. A source of communication, cooperation, and non-violent solutions to problems is rooted in residents who respect themselves, live as the people they want to be, and respect the value of each individual in their neighborhood. Respect, inside a prison, is often given to people who are thought of as tough enough to not be victimized by others, but living according to a code that means they don't want to sink to the level of deceit, theft, or violent response.

WELLNESS. Mental and physical self-care is very important for people who live behind the walls. Maintaining a commitment to wellbeing is hard for most. To applaud your pen-pal's reported efforts of trying to do a few minutes of yoga each day, or following a pre-sleep routine to battle insomnia (a VERY common problem in prison), or reducing caffeine in an attempt to handle feelings of anxiety, is to give them an extra commitment-boost they will appreciate.

CREATIVITY. There is so much sameness in prison. Any way that you can encourage creativity, do it! Visual art. Writing. Crafts. Music. Share your own creative endeavors, and ask your pen-pal to share theirs with you.

PERSPECTIVE. Binary thinking is a constant problem for people who are incarcerated. "Us vs. Them," rules the day. Subtle encouragement to acknowledge differing perspectives is important. However, we outside pen-pals have to be so careful not to become "preachy" in any way, so tread carefully with this! Share situations from your own life in which you are trying to see someone else's point of view, whether it's your kid, your coworker, or your neighbor. Seeing the shades of gray in another person's behavior is helpful to people who must live so close to other people they would never have chosen as roommates.

RAPPORT. Relationships are tricky inside a prison. It can be more effective to talk about healthy rapport among residents, developing rapport between an inmate and a CO, etc. Rapport emphasizes good communication, understanding of one another even where agreement is not possible, and a willingness to collaborate in pursuit of shared goals.

COMPASSIONATE. KIND. WISE. THOUGHTFUL. PATIENT. GENTLE. HONEST. GENEROUS. Watch for these qualities in your pen-pal, and call them out whenever you can. Remind your pen-pal that these virtuous qualities are in them, and that you respect the effort it takes to live a life that expresses such virtue in prison.

To wrap it up, let's remember the power of naming core values, especially when celebrating someone.

"You're a great guy!"

That's nice to hear, I suppose, but isn't it more powerful when someone is specific with their praise?

"The work you do requires a lot of sacrifice of time with your family and friends, and I admire the perseverance you've shown in this career for all these years."

"It must be tempting to pass the buck when a messy situation comes up, but you are obviously taking point on finding solutions. Congratulations on the promotion!"

“We’re coming into the holiday season, and I just want you to know that I see the extra stress the holidays bring to your world. Hang in there; you are doing important work.”

When we hold CO appreciation events, when we send a note to a warden to encourage them, we need to be as specific as we can be. People need to be told what they are doing right. They came into this career with some desire to do a hard job that matters, but their daily struggles probably make it very hard to remember what that desire felt like at the start of it all. If you affirm and compliment work and attitudes that point to the things they truly VALUE on a core level — things like diligence, courage, a desire to protect others, and a good work ethic — they will draw energy from that specificity.