

ABOLITION NOW!
BLACKANDPINK.ORG



PenPal Guidelines:

Thoughts to consider when writing to someone who is incarcerated:

Based on the guidelines created for the Write to Win Collective and Prisoner Correspondence Project

1. Why do I want to write to someone in prison?

It's really important that we all take some time to ask ourselves what we want to get out of this penpal friendship. It is absolutely okay to not have a full articulated answer, but it is good to ask yourself what your motivations are. We all carry our own assumptions and need to continuously challenge them. Ask yourself what assumptions you might have about people who are incarcerated and how that might impact the way you write.

2. What is my capacity?

For many prisoners, receiving one or two letters from someone promising to correspond regularly but failing to follow up with further correspondence can be incredibly difficult. Being a penpal doesn't have to be an intense time commitment; letters can be as long or as short as you want them to be, so please be upfront about the regularity that you will be able to write —if it's only once a month, say so. It is perfectly acceptable to send postcards of support to people on the penpal list, just do not set up expectations you will not be able to meet.

3. How might I deal with hearing about the prison system?

Writing with folks in prison can often lead to an intense learning experience about what incarceration really means for those navigating the prison system in America. It's important to have support systems to deal with the stories of trauma you might hear. It is also very helpful to share these revelations with your community to deconstruct what you learn and how you might participate unwittingly in the system. Individual penpal relationships can sometimes lead to a desire to do far more advocacy for that individual or to abolish the system as a whole. We can succeed far more when we work to navigate this world together.

4. Am I anxious about giving my mailing address to a new penpal?

Many of us feel nervous about sharing personal information with brand new people in our lives and that is quite reasonable. There is, however, the extra stigma around

sharing information with incarcerated people. In general, we encourage people to use their home address and to take time to question where these anxieties are coming from. If you are not willing to share your address with your penpal there are a number of options you can use. You could get yourself a P.O. Box for your penpal letters. You could use JMail.cc You can also intentionally write to someone who is doing a life sentence in a location far from you to see if that decreases your anxiety. We encourage everyone to do what feels right and best for themselves while at the same time looking deeper at what is causing fear and work on that as we build our movement towards abolition.

Important Things to Know and Do:

Some of the reply letters from your penpals might be sent after a considerable delay, one of the infinite awful aspects of prison. If you don't hear back from the person you're corresponding with within 4 to 6 weeks, it is possible that they have been transferred or released. If this is the case, get in touch so we can help to locate the correspondent's current contact information.

Mail Call often happens in public spaces in the prison. When someone hears their name called by a prison guard during mail call it is a reminder that people on the outside care about that person. It is also a message to the guards and other prisoners that this person has support and is not forgotten. This can be a vital harm reduction strategy for people who are locked up, especially queer and transgender folks.

Use your first and last name in your letters. It might be useful to say in the first letter that you found out about the person through the Black & Pink website. Be sure to place your address both in the letter and on the return address piece of the envelope, as some prisons do not allow the envelope to be given to the prisoner. Know that prison guards often read the mail and, unfortunately, can censor things.

Some prisons will refuse to accept letters addressed to people if they are using a different name than what was legally assigned to them. Please clarify this with the correspondent so your letters will not be confiscated. Many people that you will be corresponding with are in facilities that are not gender-affirming, so pen pals should ask the name and pronouns the inmate prefers when addressing letters.

While many of the people on the Black & Pink list are living at least somewhat openly on their trans/queer/LGB/gender-nonconforming identity, ask them first if you can openly discuss these identities and whether or not it's okay to send them resources and information directly and overtly linked with these communities.

Do not speak down to, discriminate against, shame, or condescend any correspondent you are communicating with. We are about building relationships and

validating that our struggles as people of color, activists, sex workers, youth workers, immigrants, anti-capitalist, trans, queer, gender-nonconforming people are intricately connected with prison abolition and prisoner liberation. Please be conscious and aware of power dynamics and actively seek support around the acknowledgment and eradication of these dynamics in your correspondence.

Remember to be transparent about your own boundaries/ability to disclose any personal information about yourself in your correspondence (i.e.—immigrant status, age, history of incarceration, sexual preferences, etc.). It is not unusual for mail to be screened in by prisons and jails, so please keep your own safety in mind! There might be some letters which feel flirtatious or sexual. Your safety and comfort are your own, so if you're okay with sexy letters, keep writing them! If you aren't, please respond respectfully and firmly to your pen pal. Please voice any concerns you have/your own boundaries with your correspondent in a loving and affirming way. If for any reason you are not comfortable, or can no longer engage with your correspondent, please let Black & Pink know.

Here's the format to address a letter to a prisoner! Please remember to include your return address on the envelope and the letter itself. You can (and should) write the letter itself to your penpal's preferred name. When you receive an email from Black & Pink with your penpal's address, these lines will be separated with:

Legal First Name

Legal Last Name

#Number

(eg. Gerry Richards #F05B56)

Cell/Bunk Location

(if given after the number, eg. B1 Lower)

Facility Name

(eg. Michael Unit or Arrendale SP or SCI Greene)

PO Box #

City, State Zip