

HUMANITIES



BEHIND BARS

Why is writing to pen-pals important to our overall mission?

- Writing to someone incarcerated is truly eye-opening to people who do not have a loved one in the system, by nature of forming a relationship with someone who is finding out or knows what life is like on the inside.
- Pen-Pal relationship-building is a way to push back against the way society attempts to marginalize people who are incarcerated.
- It is a form of organizing, community-building, and developing mutual aid networks that are vital to people who are incarcerated—not just while they're on the inside, but for when they get out as well. Having networks of care and support on the outside for re-entry is crucial.
- Maintaining regular contact with people incarcerated is a powerful form of resistance because the Prison Industrial Complex is constructed to deter people from communication and is designed to isolate people and build barriers of human contact. Pen-Pal writing serves as the antithesis for that and is a direct abolitionist practice.
- It is important for people who are incarcerated to be reminded that people on the outside are fighting for them, knowing that incarcerated people are leaders in the movement for abolition. Receiving a handwritten letter as opposed to something written by a lawyer lets people on the inside know they have people who radically support and care for them.
- Writing is tangible. Even though we can't physically see or touch someone who is incarcerated, we give a piece of ourselves in our writings and receive the same in return.
- Letter-writing is an act of solidarity and building inside/outside alliances, which are centered around intimacy, trust, mutual respect, and a bond that is healing and holistic.

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Basic Rules & Regulations

1. Writing to someone incarcerated and getting to know them while building a friendship involves the same principles one would use in getting to know someone on the outside. This should go without saying, but it needs to be said: Never ask someone what they're in for or what crime they committed. Just as nobody would ask intrusive questions upon meeting someone on the outside, the same etiquette applies.
2. Remember that the correspondence between you and the person you're writing to is never unmediated. Someone is always potentially watching as all incoming mail is inspected and may be read. Thus, it is very important to be mindful of this and avoid saying anything that could potentially have your letter rejected or thrown away.
3. There are difficulties in forming a relationship with someone you don't know so TRUST is the basis of that communication. Again, let the friendship unfold organically and earnestly work towards earning the trust of the person you're writing to. Be open and genuine and do not ask prying questions.
4. When writing your first letter, it is important to set some boundaries for both yourself and the person you're writing to. Ask them what type of correspondence they're looking for (e.g. someone to talk about prison conditions with, a friendly correspondence, an exchange of creative writing/art, etc.)
5. In your first letter, you should start by introducing yourself and why you're writing to them and how you got their name.
6. Do NOT be condescending, or make racist, sexist, classist assumptions or assertions as people tend to fetishize jails and prisons and the people in them.
7. Don't be afraid to have more personal conversations! If you would like to communicate with your pen-pal more frequently, you should consider setting up a JPAY account for email correspondence (offered in prisons), a SmartJailMail account (for jails), or ask if your pen-pal would be interested in speaking via phone conversations.
8. **Do not make any promises you can't keep.** This point is crucial. You should tell the person you're writing to how often you can realistically write to them. Letters can get "lost" or take months to receive so it is important that the person writing to you knows you didn't just stop writing them or are ignoring them. If you know you'll be going out of town or have other obligations that will get in the way of your letter writing, just let them know.

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9. Ask your pen-pal if they know or are willing to find out if anyone they know on the inside who would like to be written to! Relay this information back to us so that we can add them to our pen-pal database and continue to build inside outside alliances.
10. Cultivate a keen awareness of the important difference between solidarity *as a verb* and pity or charity. Feeling sorry for someone is an assertion of power; being outraged at the Prison Industrial Complex is not. Recognize everyone's complex humanity and agency (see the Ethics of Teaching section of our website for more on this point).
11. Just as in the "free world" outside, there are some people you won't vibe with, or who will not respect your boundaries (sadly, most women and femmes know this fact all too well). If your boundaries aren't being respected, it is by all means your right to communicate this to your pen-pal and cease writing if a renegotiation of boundaries isn't possible. However, we ask that you give special care to communicating through the process, as incarcerated people have been denied basic human contact, care, and intimacy.

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Our Guidelines

- Write your name and return address on both the envelope and in your letter (some facilities make photocopies of your letter and throw the envelope and original copy away).
- Write on 8.5 x 11 white paper. Types of paper vary depending on the facility but white paper is the standard.
- Most facilities have a 3-page maximum rule. If writing a letter with multiple pages, it would be helpful to number them.
- Use traditional letter envelopes (#10 envelopes are ideal).
- Always date your letters.
- If you are struggling with how to set up your first letter or would like more guidance as to what an introductory letter would look like, please see the Sample Letter we have provided in our resources.
- You may want to make a copy of your letter in case it is intercepted arbitrarily and not returned (not an uncommon occurrence).
- The mailing address that will be written on the envelope will vary--all rules/regulations regarding inmate mail is provided on that facilities' website, usually under a tab called "Mail" or "Inmate Services." All mailing addresses must include the comrade's full name and identification number, which will be provided. If you need more general help as to how to fill out your envelope, please see the Sample Envelope we have provided in our resources.
- If you do not have a personal return address you can use for letter-writing, you can use the official PO Box for our program. Please do your best to attend our pen-pal letter-writing hours regularly because this is the time that we disburse the correspondence we receive. Our mailing address is:

PO Box 11142
Norfolk, VA 23517