

## Being a Pen Pal

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Why be a penpal with someone in prison?

Being a Pen Pal builds relationships. Relationships break isolation. Lends support, and also takes away some of the power the system has to isolate people.



### Expectations

- What we expect from you:
  - 6 month commitment to write at least twice a month. (*Let us know if you don't hear back from the person within a month.*)
  - Communicate frequency - Send a quick note if this changes one month.
  - Communicate your boundaries clearly.
    - Your & their ability to disclose personal information (i.e. – immigrant status, age, history of incarceration, sexual preferences, etc.).
    - The type of relationship you are engaging.
    - It is not unusual for mail to be screened in by prisons and jails.
  - Focus on getting to know each other. Share your faith journey, hobbies, ...
  - Do not ask what they are incarcerated for.
- What we do to support you write to [uupmi.info@gmail.com](mailto:uupmi.info@gmail.com)
  - We match you with a CLF member in IL (or beyond).
  - If you haven't heard from your penpal in a while
  - If you aren't sure how to handle something:
    - Advocacy
    - Trauma
    - Visits
    - Topics to write about
  - Let us know if you have to end the relationship.

### Intro to IDOC

- Assume all your mail is read
- There are things you can/can't send
  - Crayon, markers, colored pencils,
  - Anything shiny or metallic,
  - No water mark on it (ie you set down a coffee cup and it left a mark),
  - No glue or sticky material of any kind,
  - No money

Here is a link to IDOC's page

<https://www2.illinois.gov/idoc/aboutus/pages/faq.aspx#qst8>

## Important Things to Know and Do! <sup>1</sup>

**1. 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 pen-pal's preferred name. When you receive an email from the ambassador program with your pen-pal's address, these lines will be separated with:

Legal First Last Name #Number	EX: Gerry Richards #F05B56
Cell/Bunk Location	B1 Lower
Facility Name	Arrendle Correctional Ctr
PO Box #	PO Box 400
City, State, Zip	Springfield, IL 00000

**2. Use your first and last name in your letters.** It might be useful to say in the first letter how you found out about the person. 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.

**3. 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.

**4. Boundaries are important and...** There might be some letters which feel flirtatious or sexual. Your safety and comfort are your own, so if you're okay with that conversation, 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 the Unitarian Universalist Prison Ministry of Illinois (UUPMI)<sup>2</sup> know by writing to [uupmi.info@gmail.com](mailto:uupmi.info@gmail.com).

**5. Money and needs.** If you decide to send money to your penpal, for them to purchase stamps or any other things from commissary, be sure you have decided how much and how often you can send money before you do so.

**6. Some of the reply letters from your pen-pals 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.

**7. 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 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.

**8. Do not speak down to, discriminate against, shame, or condescend any correspondent you are communicating with.** We are about building relationships and validate. Please be conscious and aware of power dynamics and actively seek support around the acknowledgment and eradication of these dynamics in your correspondence.

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to *Black and Pink* for this list of important information. For more context see their web site: <http://www.blackandpink.org/pen-pals/pen-pal-guidelines/>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.uupmi.org/penpals.html>

## **Commonly asked Questions:**

### **I want to end a pen pal friendship. How do I do that?**

Just like friendships on the outside of prison, sometimes pen pal friendships don't work out the way we want. Sometimes the person just isn't a good fit or maybe they are refusing to respect your boundaries. While it is important to remember that your pen pal is living in a traumatizing environment and maybe they communicate differently than you are used to, there is no expectation that you keep up a pen pal friendship that is hostile or makes you feel unsafe.

Based on our experience, being clear and direct in your letter ending your pen pal friendship is your best strategy. If you have particular things that made you uncomfortable that you want the person to know about, it can be helpful to note those things. It is important to note at the end of your letter if you want the person to respond and acknowledge your letter, or not. If you feel uncomfortable or unable to be direct about why you are ending the friendship, it is also okay to be vague. You may try something like, "Due to personal reasons and capacity, I can no longer commit to this pen pal friendship. I wish you the best, though I cannot keep writing with you. This will be my last correspondence." While being vague about your reason can be appropriate, it is important to be clear that you are ending the friendship. You can decide for yourself what level of reason you want to offer to the person you're writing.

### **My pen pal wants me to look up their family member, ex-lover, friend, etc. Should I?**

It is up to you to make the decision about how much support work you are able and willing to do for your pen pal. Given that your pen pal is incarcerated, they have no access to the internet to do their own type of outreach. If you do wish to reach out to someone on behalf of your pen pal, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Rather than give your pen pal the contact information for the person they are looking for, if you find them, give that individual your pen pal's contact information so they can decide if they want to be in touch.
- Be aware that the person you reach out to may not be glad to hear from you. Maybe they are homophobic/biphobic/transphobic/zoophobic and hold hostile feelings towards your pen pal because of their identity. It is also possible that your pen pal caused harm to the person or someone they care about. You are not responsible for their feelings, you do not need to take care of them, though it is important to prepare yourself for the potential of a negative reaction when you reach out.
- If your pen pal is asking you to connect with someone on the outside that they already have a positive relationship with, see this as an invitation into their closer circle. If they want you to call their mom who visits them regularly, this is an invitation to become closer to their family. It is up to you to decide how close you want to get. There are times when this closeness can be really powerful and create new community for you, but it may also feel like too much. It can be helpful to reach out to national staff or the Pen Pal Support Working Group to help you decide.

### **How do I communicate with my pen pal that I do not want to write or receive sexually explicit letters?**

While it is fine and reasonable for your pen pal to want to write sexually explicit letters, it is not okay for them to write you sexually explicit letters if that is not what you want. We do our best to clarify to prisoners that we are not a romantic pen pal program.

If your pen pal writes a sexually explicit letter to you, and you do not want to write sexually explicit letters with your pen pal, it is important to be very clear with them. We encourage you to write back and be clear about the type of friendship you are looking to have and what your boundaries are about the types of things you want to write about. We suggest giving your pen pal a chance to hear from you that you don't want to write sexually explicit letters and allow them a chance to respond appropriately. If your pen pal does not respect your wishes, please see our suggestion about how to end a pen pal friendship.

## **My pen pal expressed that they are feeling suicidal, what should I say?**

The following may be helpful for you to read as you think about what you want to say to your pen pal.<sup>3</sup>

Feeling suicidal is a very common feeling behind the wall. You are not alone in that. Sometimes that can feel like the only way to have power over anything. There is no shame in having those feelings. Life can feel like too much some times. What I want to encourage you to do, though, is try to take some deep breaths when you're having those moments. Try to pay attention to your breathing. Feel your feet on the floor. Try to feel your heart beat in your chest. Try to be aware of every feeling in your body. Even when everything around you feels terrible, your body is a miracle. Try to pay attention to the moments of life that feel good. Try to clear your mind.

When that doesn't work, it's ok to just cry in your bunk. Push your face into your mattress. Cover yourself with your blanket. Imagine being anywhere else. Imagine a different life, one where you are free. Cry and feel angry. Try to feel all the rage in your body. Feel yourself get hot from the anger. Feel your face get wet from the tears. Know that it is ok to feel weak and broken some times. You are not the first one to feel this way. Life can be horrible; life is completely unfair. Each day you make a choice, a choice about living, and my hope is that even as things are so bad, that you will keep choosing life. As part of Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF)<sup>4</sup> and UUPMI you have a family that does care what happens to you. Even if we can't always write, even if we can't get you free, even if we can't make everything better or right, we care about you. We care about your life. You are valuable to us.

I wish words could be more comforting. I wish I could give you a hug or hold your hand when things feel so horrible. Please know that we are fighting for a better world and that we want to end the suffering you are experiencing. We will not win soon enough. We will not make things better fast enough. We will keep fighting though. I hope you are able to keep fighting alongside us.”

## **Is this a safe thing to do?**

While there are certainly moments when writing letters can get uncomfortable, for any number of reasons, we would not suggest that our program is unsafe. We have never had the experience of an outside pen pal being physically harmed by their prisoner pen pal. Just like any new relationship with another person, there are risks. We do not believe there to be greater risk in these relationships.

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<sup>3</sup> Lydon, Jason. A Message from Jason, pg. 3. Black and Pink Newspaper, Volume 8, Issue 4, May 2017. Retrieved from [https://issuu.com/blackandpink/docs/black\\_pink\\_news\\_vol.8\\_issue\\_4](https://issuu.com/blackandpink/docs/black_pink_news_vol.8_issue_4).

<sup>4</sup> <https://worthynow.org/>

## Thoughts to consider when writing to someone who is incarcerated:<sup>5</sup>

### **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 pen pal friendship. It is absolutely okay to not have a complete 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 pen pal 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 pen pal 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 a deep education about what incarceration means that one might not have been expecting. It's important to have support systems to deal with the stories of trauma you might hear. It is also very helpful to do this work in community so you can discuss what you are learning and how you might engage the system as well. Individual pen pal 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 struggle in relationship with other people.

### **4. Am I anxious about giving my mailing address to a new pen pal?**

Many of us feel nervous about sharing personal information with brand new people in our lives and that is quite reasonable. There is, however, 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 pen pal there are a number of options you can use. You could get yourself a P.O. Box for your pen pal letters. You could use [Jmail.cc](mailto: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.

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<sup>5</sup> Based on the guidelines created for the *Write to Win Collective and Prisoner Correspondence Project*.

## **In the Spring of 2018 a Free World pen pal writing for 10 years shared these thoughts:**

These are some of the things that I learned as a pen pal:

**Boundaries (personal).** Some inmates are looking for love. When I started writing I talked mostly about work and family in what I think of as a casual, conversational tone. At some point I realized he thought I might be interested in something more (this was all between the lines) so I emphasized to him that I am not only happily married but I am 15-20 years older! We have been just friends since then.

He did eventually get my home address which I am okay with. He wanted my email address but I have always declined. Also, he asked for my phone number but I told him that if he has the money to make a phone call, he should call his mother, since nothing makes me happier than talking to my own kids.

**Boundaries (financial).** Sometimes inmates will ask their pen pal to send them things. When you think about all that you have and how little they have it can be tempting to respond to requests. A better idea would be to send your pen pal a modest birthday or holiday gift.

**Pictures.** Some people are reluctant to share pictures of themselves or their families. I understand that, especially if they have young children. I don't mind sharing family photos though I send fewer and fewer.

**My lifestyle.** We are pretty solidly middle class but to someone who grew up in inner city New Orleans and has been incarcerated for several years, middle class can seem wealthy. I once sent him a picture of my friends and me having lunch on my patio. He described it as a movie set. I don't send him pictures of things anymore and I don't recount all my travels. I tell him when we drive to Tucson or Minneapolis to see our children but I did not tell him that we flew to Hawaii.

**What do we talk about?** Sports, though I don't really know much about football or basketball. I just know who he likes. I sent him some pictures of the Mississippi River in Minnesota because it is a clean, pretty river there as opposed to the dirty Mississippi in Louisiana. He liked the pictures and could hardly believe it was the same river. A couple of years ago we had a very cold, snowy winter and I sent him pictures from Starved Rock of frozen waterfalls and fields of snow. He had never seen anything like it.

## **In Spring 2014, incarcerated Black and Pink<sup>6</sup> members shared some things they think Free World family members should keep in mind when writing to a pen pal. Take a look!**

“Don't be afraid to really open up and tell us about yourself. We're still people, and we crave connections with others too. If this is just a trial/temp thing, be upfront about it. A lot of us don't get much mail and are grateful for what we do get. The most important thing is to just be yourself.”

“Be honest about what type of correspondence you are looking to engage in (upfront), whether it be personal, legal/activist- oriented, networking, card-sharing, gift-giving etc., any combo of the above.”

“Be honest about how often you can write.”

“Understand that because of the U.S. Legal system's class discrimination... the prisoner you would write to is probably poor which could lead to some common problems, such as 1) Free World people offering money and books in their initial letters when they don't really mean it, giving false hope to the prisoner, and 2) prisoners thinking they have to “play” you for money instead of just being honest.”

“Advice on how to handle the issue of money: decide before you write to a prisoner whether or not you can/will assist them with money. Overall, be clear and direct about this.”

“Realize that a lot of us are going through living hell in here, isolated and cut off from family and friends, so a lot of times we will write and just need to “vent.” It's ok don't panic ... Some of us are just so cut off we just want to be heard and have a friend to talk to.”

“When you can and if it is not too much, send pictures!”

“Be Honest, Be True, Be Real, and Be You. Know your boundaries, respect yourself first and foremost... and understand yourself first to better understand others.”

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<sup>6</sup> For more context, see <http://www.blackandpink.org>.