

A hand holding a pen writing on a notepad, overlaid with a green filter and large white text.

PRISONER LETTER WRITING:

A HOW TO FOR AGENCIES AND INDIVIDUALS

WHY ARE YOU INTERESTED TO WRITE A PRISONER?

The first step in becoming a pen pal is asking yourself why do you want to write to a prisoner? Taking some time to self-reflect about your motivations for being involved in letter writing is helpful in uncovering your own feelings and navigating the sometimes deeply personal feelings you might hold in relation to prison and prisoners.

Some people might be interested in letter writing because you might know someone else that is doing it, or someone that is incarcerated, or you yourself might have been incarcerated. Sometimes, it is because we feel isolated our-selves, or would like to understand incarceration on a deeper level. Maybe you like the idea of communicating through letters or the idea of having a pen pal in another place with another context to their

lives. Possibly you are interested because it is cool or trendy at the moment. There are no wrong reasons to get involved in letter writing, it is an essential support for people inside. It is important to know where your interest in writing to a prisoner comes from. This is part of what anchors you during your actual correspondence. When something challenging or emotionally poignant comes up for you, you will have point of reference to focus your thoughts and feelings on.



**If you're just trying this
out, be up front about it!**



HOW MUCH TIME DO YOU HAVE AND WHAT KIND OF COMMITMENT CAN YOU MAKE?

Prison letter writing is as much about your needs as it is about the needs of the prisoner. A correspondence relationship with a prisoner can be at many different places on a spectrum of involvement. This is dependent on how much time you can invest into that person, or multiple people. Take some time to consider realistically what is going on in an average week for you, and what amount of time you might need to give a genuine response. This may include imagining yourself sitting down to read a letter, and then composing your correspondence. Think about where that would be, the things you need around you, and when can you be most present for another person. For some that could be lunchtime at work, others might need all of a Sunday morning. This could be once a week, or once a month or once a year. Prisoners

are in a position where they meet people and they never see them again. It's important for us to be consciously aware that this happens frequently and they are powerless in those relationships. Being clear with yourself on commitment gives you the ability to communicate this with ease to your pen pal and follow through successfully.

* If you're just trying this out, be up front about it!

There's nothing wrong with trying things out. Being upfront about what you are after. Maybe that's sending one or two letters, maybe that's seeing how it goes, maybe that's sending a Holiday card one time. The most important thing for the well being of your pen pal is being very clear about what you are able to give and following through with that.

ARE YOU WRITING FROM AN ORGANIZATION OR AS AN INDIVIDUAL?

Many people who are interested in writing to prisoners wear two or more hats. If you work for an organization interested in HIV/HCV/ Drug use, etc. your writing might be part of your bigger mandate. This is a very positive thing for organizations to engage in that brings prisoner justice into the fold of their work. However, take some time to consider if you are writing as a professional supporter

or advocate and what that means for your relationship with a prisoner, versus writing as an individual. A potential friend. This might mean the prisoner will ask different questions, disclose to different topics and have a specific general tone with you. Both are great relationships that break down the isolation that people feel inside, yet come from two different places.

WHAT CAN YOU ANTICIPATE MIGHT COME FROM HEARING ABOUT LIFE ON THE INSIDE?

Whether or not you have done time yourself, writing to people inside can be emotionally challenging and might bring up things for you that were not anticipated. Some examples might be hearing about people treated unfairly, not having their needs met, violence including sexualized violence, issues around

racism, medical neglect or gender and sexuality based discrimination. For this reason, it is important to be aware of the things that you think might come up, as well as grounding yourself in support for when the unexpected happens.

WHERE WILL YOU GO FOR SUPPORT/ QUESTIONS?

Even before you start the process of writing to a prisoner, it is a good idea to set up support for yourself in case something challenging happens. Support takes many forms and there is no set answer for best practices. Whatever keeps you healthy and grounded should become part and parcel with your correspondence practice.

Some ideas are gathering a group of people who are interested in letter writing, or even

one other person who you trust who you can talk through things with. This might mean setting up a time to meet on a regular basis to avoid letting things build up and spilling out or becoming overwhelming. Even if there is no news, sometimes our bodies speak volumes or just need a contact point with someone else to be followed throughout the process of letter writing.

If you are unable to find someone in your own circles, consider journaling, a physical practice like going to the gym or yoga, this could even be seeking out some online support. Getting in touch with your local AIDS Service Organization and talking with a counsellor there is also a great idea and a valuable connection when writing to HIV or HCV positive prisoners.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

Language can be used in a really particular way on the in-side, or in different ways than it is used on the outside. In sake of using our pen pal relationships to make inside-outside connections, its ok for us to feel challenged

or admit to not understand what a person is saying. Letting some comments go might be a good option, otherwise feel free to ask for clarification from your pen pal.

ALWAYS DO WHAT YOU SAY YOU ARE GOING TO DO, AND IF THINGS CHANGE COMMUNICATE THAT

Prisoners commonly experience intense isolation that causes them to put all their eggs in one basket with supporters. This might mean putting a high focus on the plan you have agreed upon together and disappointment if it does not go accordingly. For instance, if you mentioned that you would

“

Its always a good idea to think of a back up plan. In case things don't work out (life happens) Think of an alternate time, way to communicate, options for the plan you have made.

”

write them on a certain date, research an agency or phone number, send materials, etc. and you are unable to follow through with your plans, it is important to communicate the change. Small things for us on the outside can be a very big deal for someone on the inside whose life is entirely regimented and scheduled. Prisoners are powerless when this happens.

*Its always a good idea to think of a back up plan. In case things don't work out (life happens) Think of an alternate time, way to communicate, options for the plan you have made.

HOW TO HANDLE MONEY ISSUES

Prisoners are very resourceful because they have to be. They have a very difficult time getting the essential things that they need and live in a system that promotes scarcity as a method of control. Many people in prison do not have family or friends who will stick with

them during the length of their sentence, and if they do they often do not have resources to share with their loved ones inside. They also may not have someone that has been kind to them on a personal level in a while.

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT GIVING OUT YOUR MAILING ADDRESS?

If you feel comfortable to give out your address to a prisoner for correspondence reasons, that is your decision to make. For others, you might be unsure. This should not be a barrier for your letter writing as there are many solutions to not giving your address out directly.

It is also absolutely an acceptable choice to not give out your home address. For many reasons it is not always something that feels safe and you should not feel like you aren't doing enough, or

doing it right, or are acting in judgement towards a prisoner by not giving out your address.

Some options to consider are receiving mail through an organization or through a community mail box service if they are easy to access. This might be a local AIDS Service Organization who you can contact to make arrangements to receive your mail from an institution. Otherwise, you can consider renting a PO box at your local post office.

OUTLINE YOUR BOUNDARIES AND INTENTIONS FROM THE BEGINNING

There is a spectrum of relationships that you can have with your pen pal. Again its important to be clear what you are looking for and where your boundaries lie.

Decisions related to money are ultimately up to you- but if you are unclear or need advice or suggestions around this topic its always a good idea to talk to someone who you trust. It is a common thing to have someone you are writing ask you for money, the best thing to do is be upfront with your decision without

any guise or leading the person on. Saying no will not damage your correspondence relationship, being unclear or waffling might.

*People inside are often from backgrounds of extreme intergenerational poverty, which is a large part of the rea-son they are susceptible to incarceration. These are some reasons that that we see people of economically marginalized backgrounds disproportionately incarcerated in Canada and around the world.

“

People inside are often from backgrounds of extreme intergenerational poverty, which is a large part of the reason they are susceptible to incarceration. These are some reasons that that we see people of economically marginalized back-grounds disproportionately incarcerated in Canada and around the world.

”

PEOPLE NEED TO BE HEARD, VENTING IS IMPORTANT

During your correspondence you might receive a letter or series of letters from a prisoner in deep frustration over their life situation or the conditions they are forced to live in. This might range from deep sadness, to intense anger, to specific feelings around themselves and others.

When we are confronted with these expressions, it often prompts an “I must fix this” response. We jump to the conclusion that because they are expressing these things to us, they must want us to help. When this starts to happen, its time to pause, reflect and remind ourselves of our role.

Writing to someone on the inside is like getting a window into that Prisoner’s world that is rarely seen. This venting means they trust you enough to show you their honest self. It might be difficult to see, but most likely these things have been going on before you started communicating with your pen pal. You

don’t need to do anything in this situation other than let your pen pal know they are heard and validate their experience. Venting is a very helpful practice, but it may also be threatening to a prisoner’s personal sense of security. Your letters give them room to let go of painful or challenging experiences, or simply the day to day difficulties of life in prison.

**If your pen pal is encountering a situation that you think is solvable, check to see if there is an organization or service that you can direct them towards.*

“

If your pen pal is encountering a situation that you think is solvable, check to see if there is an organization or service that you can direct them towards.

”

ALL MAIL IS VETTED BY SECURITY

Institutions have the ability to screen all mail incoming and outgoing. This means that they screen for anything that might be considered a security risk, inappropriate relationships or content in your letters, or contraband material. Some examples of this are sexual content, graphic images, staples, glitter, anything sticky like tape or glue. Even special paper like construction or coloured paper could be subject to scrutiny. Contraband means anything that is given to a prisoner that is not authorized by the institution or could be used for a reason that is not authorized by the prison. It is intentionally vague to limit the free use of materials inside and is part of the institutional control of men and women.

Be mindful of writing in ways that may incriminate the person you are writing to. Its always a good idea to re-read your letter before mailing it to double check you haven't said anything that would lead to institutional suspicion. Sometimes this isn't obvious and

it's easy to make a mistake. If the person you are writing to mentions this to you, don't be overly apologetic, just move forward.



Contraband means anything that is given to a prisoner that is not authorized by the institution or could be used for a reason that is not authorized by the prison



BE AWARE OF BIG DELAYS IN SENDING/ RECEIVING A LETTER

You can't call or email people inside. Your only communication is letters that may be subject to long delays for various reasons outside of both of your control. It's not uncommon for someone to be writing you about a dramatic situation that has been unfolding in their lives, which by the time you receive the letter has come to a conclusion. Be mindful of your

reaction to life events in this context. The pace of life in prison is generally very slow and things unfold as such, yet occasionally things happen very abruptly or quickly.

You can always check in to see if a situation is still relevant to your communication with that person.

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT IS A HIGHLY VALUABLE CONTRIBUTION

We can't always change people's situations, but what we can do is be decent and supportive human beings. We often take for granted the spectrum of supportive relationships that exist on the outside, yet folks inside may never meet someone who will give them genuine care and

dignity. This is of immense value for people and does not require a specific set of credentials to be done well. The best emotional support comes from you making yourself available to your pen pal, to hear, feel, and validate the difficulties of their life.

A close-up photograph of a hand writing on a spiral-bound notebook. The image is heavily overlaid with a vibrant green color, which is darker at the top and bottom edges and lighter in the center. The text is contained within a white rectangular border in the upper-middle section of the image.

**THIS GUIDE HAS BEEN PRODUCED IN
PARTNERSHIP WITH PASAN (PRISONER
HIV/AIDS SUPPORT ACTION NETWORK)
AND THE CANADIAN COALITION FOR HIV
CRIMINALIZATION REFORM (CCHCR)**

**FOR MORE INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT
PASAN AT 416-920-9567**