



TIPS ON WRITING TO A PRISONER

Thank you for writing to a prisoner. You must be a very special person. Very few people would be willing to share their time with these men and women who have become the castaways of our society. The fact remains - they are human beings. Loneliness is one of the greatest challenges they face each day. Mail call may be the lowest point of their day, yet communication is essential in the rehabilitation process. Studies have shown that those inmates who have folks on the outside taking an interest in them have a much lower recidivism rate than those who do not. So, thank you for this selfless act which is more than the price of a stamp. It is an act of faith - faith that you can reach out and make a positive difference in another person's life.

We hope these helpful hints will enhance this letter writing experience for you.

Letters from members of the same sex are welcomed. Most are just looking for friendship and to communicate with positive individuals outside prison walls.

FIRST LETTER:

1. Write a little background about yourself - your interests and hobbies, what you like to do in your spare time, your studies, work, pets, your favorite movies, what bands you like, what books, what religion or philosophies interest you, etc. Avoid sharing too much personal information.
2. Be upfront about your ability to write on a regular basis. If you are only able to write once a month, let that person know so that he or she doesn't look for your letter and feel that you are not interested.
3. If you are not looking for a romantic relationship, let them know upfront. Don't play head games.
4. Getting to know an inmate and them to know you takes time and a bit of patience. It's best to begin with a basic friendship and build relationships from that point.
5. Ask questions. Show you're interested in the person and not in the situation, the fact that he or she is in jail.
6. Do NOT include gifts IN your letter. If you want to make your letters more interesting, we offer some ideas below **ITEMS THAT ARE WELCOMED WITH YOUR LETTERS.**
7. Greeting cards can be a good way to make initial contact. There are so many

friendship-type cards available just to say "hello" to the prisoner. This can take the pressure off of you worrying about what to write that first time.

Prisoners are happy to get your letter(s) and are looking for words of encouragement.

1. Remember to put your return address on the upper left hand corner of the envelope (be sure it is legible) and include it again in the body of the letter in case something happens to the envelope. The prison won't accept letters without return addresses. Unless you are a close friend or relative, use a church address or post office box as a return address. This is not because the one you are writing can't be trusted, but simply because addresses have a way of getting into the hands of others. Privacy is not a part of the culture. Avoid divulging any personal information that you wouldn't want other inmates to know. You should always write your letters with the awareness that what you divulge to the one you are writing can easily be read by others. You can use our church address 421 Grantham Road, Mechanicsburg PA 17055 as your return address and when we get the mail, we will scan it and email it to you.
2. You might want to include a photograph of yourself so the prisoner has a "face" to put with the name. Many prisoners are forthright in stating they are looking for relationships, but others are simply looking for a friend with whom they can correspond. A photo would be a nice gesture of friendship. If you are going to send a photo, make sure and write the prisoner's full name and DOC number on the back of it. Otherwise it will be rejected and sent back to you, at the inmate's expense.

FOLLOW-UP LETTERS:

- 1 Maintaining an ongoing correspondence with a prisoner can be a mutually rewarding experience. Your uplifting words of encouragement can make their prison sentence more bearable. Encourage them in their endeavors such as getting an education while in prison, learning a trade, becoming more spiritual, etc.
- 2 **Do NOT send significant amounts of money.** We can't stress this enough. If you send any money at all, money for postage is usually greatly appreciated. Be extremely leery of any inmate that tries to get you to send them funds no matter the reason. If you wish to assist a prisoner with legal expenses, ask for his attorney of record and deal with that person. NEVER send money directly to inmates for attorneys' fees.
- 3 It's a prudent practice **not** to give out your phone number unless you get to know the inmate very well.
- 4 Don't be judgmental. Keep a cheery tone to your letters. You will find that most prisoners are sincerely lonely.
- 5 It might be best to avoid talking about the particular crime that person has committed. Many times the inmate will volunteer the information themselves.
- 6 If you would like to send a gift to a prisoner, you must use an authorized vendor. You can purchase a softback book (NO hardback books) online from a publisher or Amazon and have it shipped directly to the inmate. You can send an inmate gifts of food and snacks, personal hygiene products, electronics, and some apparel via www.accesscatalog.com Prisons will not accept a package from an individual.

GENERAL INFORMATION:

1. Don't write to more than one inmate from one prison at a time. It's just not a very good idea. From previous experience we have found that many times a person that writes to more than one inmate in the same facility can create a rivalry between inmates. It's best to avoid that situation all together.
2. All prisoners are not the same. As with any group of people there are vast differences in personalities and cultures. If you find that you don't relate well with one individual, don't let that stop you from writing to another. As with any person you meet on the outside, each one has his or her own particular quality's that may be appealing or unappealing to your own sense of taste. You will find every denomination, race, educational background and class inside prison walls. If after a letter or two you find that the person you are writing to is not a good fit, please contact Friends Over Fences (or whoever gave you the contact) to discuss how you should handle it.
3. Inmates do NOT have access to the Internet but they may have email through ConnectNetwork <https://www.gtl.net/pa-doc-inmate-services-by-gtl/> If you are writing a prisoner with an email address, please be sure you include where they can write back to you via regular mail. Inmates are given a number of stamped envelopes each month so this maybe the most cost effective way for them to communicate with you.
4. If you allow a prisoner to make a collect call to you, be aware that these calls can be extremely expensive. The prison usually takes a cut on all phone calls made from their facility, and most of them charge significantly more than normal pay phone collect calls.

ITEMS YOU SHOULD **NOT** INCLUDE WITH YOUR LETTERS

All prisons have STRICT rules about the contents of mail that can be received by an inmate. Sending an inmate unauthorized materials may result in your letter never to be received by the inmate. There are as many rules as to what CAN and CANNOT be sent to a prisoner as there are prisons. However, there are some things that ALL prisons will restrict. Below is a list of several items you should NOT send with your letter.

Cards with yarn or ribbon Or Cards that are padded.	Anything that might be considered a weapon.
Laminated cards or Oversized cards larger than 8x10.	<u>Books or Magazines</u> (must come directly from the publisher)
Maps or Letters in foreign languages.	Any colored envelop besides bright white.
Sticker or adhesive signs.	Buttons, hairpins, flowers or feathers
	Plastic cards, credit cards or phone cards

<p><u>Excessive</u> magazine and newspaper clippings or photos.</p> <p>Metal or spiral bound notebooks or calendars.</p> <p>Pornography or nude pictures.</p> <p>Polaroid or laminated pictures</p> <p>Stamps, checks, cash or money orders</p> <p>Materials with gang signs.</p> <p>Liquor or items that contain alcohol.</p> <p>Personal items (find out the rules first).</p>	<p>Candy or confetti</p> <p>Pens or pencils or paper clips</p> <p>Perfume (or perfume cards) or lip stick</p> <p>Legal documents, Driver's Licenses, Birth Certificates, medical cards, personal IDs, social security cards, or savings/investment/check cashing cards</p> <p>Staples (in booklets or calendars)</p> <p>Internet URL references. (remove all email addresses or web site information)</p>
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ITEMS THAT ARE WELCOMED WITH YOUR LETTERS

These items are usually welcomed by prisoners and are good ideas for making your letters more interesting.

Photos, not Polaroid.	Letters on colorful stationary
Colorful <u>Post Cards</u> .	Colorful pictures from the Internet (remove all URL information).
Jokes.	Crossword Puzzles (on single sheets of paper).
Poems.	Newspaper or magazine clippings (not too many at one time).
Colorful one-page calendars.	Birthday or Holiday Cards. (White envelopes only.)
Cartoon Humor	Books (direct from the publisher or retailer).
Articles on current events.	Magazines (direct from the publisher).

MORE GENERAL INFORMATION

By this time, you may actually be starting to feel a little discouraged. The mere reading through this list of guidelines (though necessary) can have the cumulative effect of deflating one's enthusiasm for the entire venture. But its purpose was not to discourage you; it was written to help you operate with a greater degree of freedom. **Exchanging letters with someone in prison can be a very edifying experience for both individuals and is, without doubt, an encouraging and vital ministry to lonely souls.** Many correspondents have become good friends through the exchange of these letters, and it is possible to maintain a healthy atmosphere for an edifying relationship. But you should not go into it blindly or naively. The need, by itself, doesn't eliminate the cultural realities that surround it. We did not create these cultural dynamics; they just are. So these cautions were listed that you might be better equipped to deal with these issues when, or if, the need should arise. If you will undertake to prayerfully and thoughtfully study each one, and appropriate them, you will be more confident in your ability to keep the letters on a healthy keel.

- 1 Do not promise money or support. If they ask we usually say, "I am sorry but I don't send money"
- 2 We only match women with women and men with men as pen pals. Note: Of all the cautions that will be most ignored, it is this one. Of all the cautions that will cause the most problems when ignored, it is this one. Of all the reasons given for ignoring it, few have stood the test of time or proven to be prudent.
- 3 Be sure of your motive. What is your primary reason for writing? What other reasons could there be? List them. You should be in touch with your own emotions. There have been many cases where outside letter-writers have proven to be more emotionally needy than the inmate to whom they are writing. The desire to write is sometimes masked in a desire "to help," but it is actually the outside writer who is seeking to fill a need.
- 4 Keep your letters on a spiritual focus. This does not mean that you cannot discuss things of a general nature, or of mutual interests, ambitions, or aspirations. We need to be genuine in our communication and it is natural and appropriate to speak about such things. But your primary role in writing is that of spiritual encouragement in the form of Christian friendship. If you keep your letters bathed in spiritual realities, they will be a source of constant encouragement to both of you and will be an aid in keeping their contents on a healthy track. Be careful of Christian phrases that can be misinterpreted. Statements like "I really love you in the Lord," or even signing your letters, "In Christian Love," or "Much Love in Christ," can all be misconstrued by someone not accustomed to hearing such phrases. Similarly, the writing of poetry is a popular pastime in prison, but enclosed in a letter, it has a way of leading into deeper sentiments much more quickly than ordinary communication might generally permit. Emotionally needy people have a way of reading between the lines and hearing what they want to hear. This is true not only of the inmate correspondent, but of the outside one as well.
- 5 Do not inquire as to why they are in prison. Do not ask about or discuss their crime with them. Do not discuss their court case or legal issues with them. (If they tell you their crime, don't judge them.)
- 6 Do not engage in negative discussions concerning the prison administration, its officials, correctional staff, or any other employee. Do not feed into (or otherwise encourage) vindictive, negative, vengeful, or angry discourses of any kind. Always turn such expressions toward Biblical truths and principles.

- 7 Never discuss another inmate or divulge the names of other inmates to others on the outside. For security reasons, the institution usually prohibits this. Prayer meetings, for example, are a place where this can easily occur. If you want prayer for a particular need, you do not have to reveal the person's name.
- 8 Do not discuss details of anything pertaining to security issues within the prison. These include such things as: movement times, counts, specific disciplinary procedures, transportation practices, or places where inmates work—especially if it is outside the walls. Never inform someone else that the prisoner to whom you are writing will soon be moved to another specific location. Not even family members. This is a serious breach of security. There is usually no good reason why the inmate can't inform such people himself.
- 9 Do not include an additional note or message for an inmate other than the person to whom your letter is addressed. This also means not enclosing a note from someone else other than yourself.
- 10 Make no promises that you are not prepared to keep. The desperate state of incarceration causes inmates to cling to the slightest promise you might make, even if it has only been implied or inferred. Be clear about what you can or cannot do, including your future intentions. If asked to contact someone for them, politely refuse. Never contact other individuals on behalf of the inmate. By doing so you may actually be violating a Protection From Abuse (PFA) order.
- 11 Remember that most inmates will be released within a few years. Unless you are personally planning to work with them when they are out, make sure that the limits of the assistance you are willing to give is clearly understood. Christian kindness and pen pal support is often assumed to mean that you will be there for them when they get out. This has disillusioned many inmates over the years and given Christianity a bad name as a result. Make it clear what you can or cannot do. The earlier the better.
- 12 If you are an active volunteer, most institutions do not allow you to write inmates at the same facility in which you are serving. This prohibition usually includes personal visits in the visiting room, which are in addition to your normal volunteer activities. You will usually be asked to choose whether you want to be a volunteer or a visitor. The reason for this is because you will wind up having more time with an individual than the prison allows for any of the other inmates' visitors. This can sometimes create bad feelings between the residents and cause conflicts the prison doesn't need. The administration also feels that such extra exposure increases the risk of contraband or manipulation and could lead to a compromise of other security issues. For these same reasons, writing to inmates at the institution in which you volunteer is usually prohibited by institutional rules.
- 13 Do not permit the letters to probe too deeply into your personal affairs. (Home, business, etc.) Never send someone else's address. For example, responding to the request, "Do you know anyone else out there who might be willing to write me?" Be especially cautious if the request is for someone of the opposite sex to write. Sometimes these requests can come in the form of a need for "more Christian fellowship." Be wary of the tone of the letter becoming too forward or familiar.
- 14 You should not be a recent convert. The majority of inmates are not out to "con" you. Their need for a friend in the form of a letter is a genuine need that—using wisdom—can be appropriately met. But their culture is an emotionally lonely one. The need that letters can fill is a close cousin to the same need that can lead to relationships going further than intended. Keeping letters on a healthy keel, as well as spiritually focused, requires maturity and discernment.

- 15 Do not send “canteen money.” As the relationship progresses, it is natural to want to help financially. They may mention along the way that they have no money in their canteen fund (an inmate account that allows them to buy extra items such as toiletries or candy.) The best way of dealing with this is to establish early on that your role is to provide some spiritual encouragement and friendship— nothing else. Most inmates understand and respect this. But there is a small percentage, however, who intentionally use letter writing as their primary means for financial assistance.
- 16 Do not write to inmates as the result of answering an ad or through some other impersonal approach. This includes having a friend who is currently corresponding with someone in prison who has asked you to write to the “friend of her friend.” Also be aware that some inmates are capable of forcing the one you are writing to make this request, by threat or otherwise. Simply say no.
- 17 Set your parameters early. Let your correspondent know why you are primarily writing, and stick to it. If the relationship grows naturally and you feel it’s appropriate to enlarge those boundaries, you may do so as time and propriety permit. But if the prisoner cannot abide by those limits, then it would be best to quit writing.
- 18 Terminate unhealthy communications. If you are already in a situation that is not healthy, tell the person why you feel it has become inappropriate or uncomfortable, and that you will no longer be corresponding. In some cases, it is possible that writing less is a more appropriate response. In other cases, stopping immediately will be the best course of action. It depends on the nature of the problem and the temperament of the inmate. In the rare event that an inmate will not desist when asked, either through threats or some form of emotional manipulation please contact Friends Over Fences to handle it. Note: It might be surprising to learn that in some cases, it has been the inmate who has have been poorly treated by those writing to them. Some of these offenses can be:
 - a. Insensitivity to them as people. The outside writer has his or her own agenda. (If the inmate doesn’t “respond right,” the relationship is broken off.) In a real sense, they have been led on.
 - b. Personal insecurities or fears of the letter writer. Some are so fearful of “being conned” that they detect a conspiracy to rip them off between every line. Such people should not engage in letter-writing in the first place, just to prove some self-aggrandizing point to themselves.
 - c. Hidden motives. Oftentimes, the outside writers are not aware of their own improper motivations. These can include such things as their own emotional neediness, or a desire to be in a “safe relationship.” (No physical entanglement.) They may have a Messiah complex, a mother (or father) complex, or be on an ego trip because they can say they are “writing to someone in prison.
 - d. Do not write to inmates that have become well known in the media. If you did not know this person previously, it could be that your sudden interest in contacting him or her has its motives rooted more in the flesh than in the Spirit. You should ask yourself if your desire to write a note of encouragement to other inmates is equal to your concern for this particular person. If it isn’t, you probably shouldn’t pursue it.
- 19 **Seek advice.** If you are still in doubt as to how to proceed, contact Friends Over Fences, seek the advice of your pastor or someone you may know who has been involved in prison ministry for more than a few years. There are credible avenues and options for writing letters to inmates. Ask your local prison ministry what these options might be, or to whom they might refer you.

Final thoughts: Having said the above, it is our belief that many inmates can be greatly encouraged and built up in their most holy faith through a joyful and spiritual exchange of letters. The dear souls in prison will frequently bless you as much—if not more—than you ever expected to bless them. Their letters are often deeply touching and spiritual. There are many strong brothers and sisters in prison. The rules are simply in place to minimize the dangers and maximize the blessings that such an undertaking can bring. May God bless you as you seek to alleviate their pain by remembering them in this merciful way.

“Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering” Hebrews 13:3

Thanks to Lennie Spitale who wrote the original document that we borrowed liberally from. Our efforts to contact him were fruitless.

The **NEW and ONLY** address to writing to inmates in PA state prisons. Letter send to the prison will be returned.

Smart Communications/PA DOC
SCI _____
Inmate Name/Inmate Number
PO Box 33028
St Petersburg, Florida 33733