

PRISONER CORRESPONDENCE PROJECT

Expectations and Guidelines: Letter writing as allies in prisoner struggle

This is a list of general expectations and guidelines that we ask all non-incarcerated participants to keep in mind as you consider getting involved in our project. It has been written in dialogue with members of the project on the inside, and is reviewed with them periodically. There is also a full Frequently Asked Questions on the website if you find yourself with questions along the way that aren't answered here. We hope this document will be helpful for you in getting started in prisoner support.

GETTING INVOLVED

Please only initiate correspondence with the individual if you are committed to corresponding on a more or less longer-term basis. For many prisoners serving long or even life sentences, receiving one or two enthusiastic letters from someone promising to correspond regularly, but failing to follow up with further correspondence can be incredibly disappointing and disheartening. This need not be an intense time commitment; letters can be as long or as short as you want them to be, and please be upfront about the regularity that you will be able to write. If it's only once a month, say so. Don't make promises at risk of creating false hope, and be clear with your level of commitment.

OUTNESS

Prison can be a violent place and many people aren't out because it can open them up to administrative abuse and violence so don't assume your penpal is out in prison about their sexuality, gender identity, or HIV status until they explicitly tell you so.

Following the guidelines below will help you to avoid unintentionally outing someone:

- Ask in your first letter how discreet you should be. Your penpal is going to know best what they need to keep themselves safe. Even if the precautions they tell you seem silly or arbitrary, it's important that you follow their guidelines.
- Don't assume someone is out just because of their posting. Incoming mail is often screened much more thoroughly than outgoing. Additionally they may have entirely changed prisons since submitting it and now find themselves in a different environment.
- If your penpal has a chosen name that is different from the legal name they are incarcerated under, address the envelope using the first initial and last name of the legal name and ask in the first letter how you should address it in future.
- Check in with them on your first letter and ask whether or not it is okay to send them resources, materials, etc, that are gay, queer, trans, or HIV themed or focused.
- Keep in mind that envelopes are seen and handled by many prison workers and other prisoners. Avoid including any markings on the envelope that might out your penpal including drawings or a return address from an identifiably gay organization.

YOUR SAFETY

It is very possible that all incoming letters will be read and screened so do not include any incriminating information about yourself or the person you're corresponding with. Some prisons (in particular Correctional Services Canada) have been known to share sensitive information with other arms of law enforcement. Be mindful not to disclose your immigration status or other information that might compromise your safety. That being said, our intention is not that you completely self-censor; we understand this project as a political act, so if you and your penpal have established what you are each comfortable discussing, you should discuss it keeping in mind that your letters are being read.

If you have a housing situation where you are not able to receive mail of this kind, we can receive your mail for you. If you are in Montreal, you can then pick it up at our office, or, if out of town, we can forward it to you in an unmarked envelope. To do this, use our address as the return address and send us an email letting us know so that we can watch out for it.

THINGS TO KNOW / POINTS TO INFORM YOUR LETTER WRITING

Be conscious and try to follow ideas of solidarity in letter writing as opposed to a charity model. Don't pretend to know their situation because you saw something in a television show or documentary. This isn't about condescending notions of 'helping' prisoners, but recognizing that we're all bound up when our communities are criminalized, and that we all have things to learn from one another. This is an ongoing learning process for us all so just try to communicate openly and honestly.

You should make sure to communicate your own needs and intentions in corresponding too, along with the specific information and topics you do and do not want to talk about in letters. It might seem a little awkward or out of place at first, but we have found that it makes things easier in the long run.

Due to the nature of the project, letters can sometimes get romantic or sexual undertones. To date, situations that have come up where people feel uncomfortable with sexual content have been dealt with by clearly setting boundaries, and expressing your intentions from the outset of your correspondence. In the initial project description all inside penpals receive, we outline the project's intention as one that is for "friendship and support" and so you should feel confident in setting those boundaries.

That being said, it's up to you and your penpal where you take the direction of the correspondence. If you want to trade smutty stories, by all means go ahead. Keep in mind the increased surveillance that sexual minorities are often subject to, especially when they're in prison, or have a history of incarceration, for instance, panics around sexuality and youth. Be sensitive to this, use your best judgment, and be in touch if you have specific questions.

RESOURCES

From time to time, your penpal may ask you to send certain resources. We operate a resource library of materials we send inside, most of which are available on our website or in the process of being added. If you are able, we encourage you to print them off and send them in, as your penpal will almost definitely receive them faster this way. If not, send us an email and we ensure they receive them.

If you feel ill-equipped to support your penpal on any front, whether it's in terms of finding them the resources they need, or in terms of emotional support, please don't hesitate to seek the support you need in doing this. Check out our Frequently Asked Questions, ask a question to our Facebook group, or email us directly.

GETTING THROUGH THE MAILROOM

All letters to prisoners go through the mailroom where they are opened and inspected to ensure they follow the regulations which are specific to each prison. In your first letter you should ask your penpal what the mailing restrictions are for that prison. They may include restrictions on sexual content, number of pages, whether they can receive pictures or photocopies, size of envelopes, etc. Again, these will seem arbitrary and silly. That's because they are, but it is important that you follow them because they are the difference between your penpal receiving the letter or not.

For your first letter, here are some guidelines to follow to help make sure it gets through:

- Write your first letter on plain paper, in a plain envelope (no stickers, no photos, etc), using black or blue pen.
- Include your first and last name as the return address. Most prisons in Canada and the US will not give a letter to an inmate if there is not a full name with the return address. If you are not ready to disclose your personal name, including the name of the project (Prisoner Correspondence Project), or using a pseudonym should be fine.
- When writing to prisoners in the United States, all mail going into prisons must include their ID number or it will be returned. This should be provided to you when we match you up, if not, ask us right away. For prisoners in Canada, an ID number is not required on mail.
- Make a copy of your letter in case it doesn't get through on the first try. This is sometimes the case because of mailroom restrictions or because people are transferred frequently.

Please confirm with us once you successfully get in touch with your penpal. Some of these letters are being forwarded after considerable delay. 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. Get in touch with us so we can help try to locate their current contact information.

CONFRONTING EXPECTATIONS AND CHOOSING A PENPAL

Often we get involved with support projects with a vague notion of wanting to support people who we see ourselves in. This is especially true of projects like ours that are organized around identity. While this is an admirable motivation, many times it doesn't account for the demographics of who is in prison and in need of solidarity. For example, upwards of 95% of the North American prison population is incarcerated in male prisons. Woman prisoners (cis and trans) usually wait just a few weeks to get matched while those identifying as bisexual men can often wait over a year.

Additionally, the words we use to discuss our sexualities, our genders, and our desires reflect our pasts and our current contexts. As we try to build links across prison walls, we often find that these don't match up neatly. Words used outside may have no frame of reference inside, and words we

may understand as passé or offensive in some contexts don't carry the same connotations at all in others.

Lastly, we often get involved with unrecognized expectations around literacy. We are, understandably, attracted to the funniest or most articulate writer. But we also know that race and class are two of the main determining factors of literacy, and that one of the best ways for someone in prison to improve is through exchanging letters with a penpal.

There are obviously a lot of factors that people take into account when choosing a penpal, we just ask that you keep some of these dynamics in mind.

If things don't work out with your penpal, or you decide you can no longer continue the correspondence for whatever reason, that is completely your decision, and we can match you up with someone else, no questions asked. The way the project is set up, prisoners are taken off the board once matched up, so if you do decide to end correspondence with your penpal, please let us know as soon as possible so we can put them in line to be matched with someone else.

While we understand that this might be a lot of information to take in all at once, many of the points brought up here are also issues that you get used to after a while. As a collective that coordinates this project, we are here to function as a resource for you in navigating these issues and obstacles. Don't be shy! Get in touch if you have any feedback, ideas, or concerns.

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