

PEN-PALS

Advice & Information

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Charity Number 1093710



Writing to prisoners is not always easy, although it can often be rewarding. Fortunately, most of our clients are looking for someone with whom they can maintain a friendly correspondence, but there are occasions on which a great deal of anger, bitterness and frustration can arise. For this reason writing to our clients demands a certain level of maturity which is why we do not accept any pen-pals under the age of eighteen. It also demands emotional stability and the ability to put another person first whilst remaining true to oneself. This leaflet gives some advice and information and also deals with some of the difficulties that may arise.

1 Writing to prisoners

- When we receive your application form, we will try to match you up with a suitable pen-pal, taking into account your interests and other information that you give us. When this is done, we will send you the name and address of a client who has requested a pen-pal; it will then be up to you to make the first contact. There is often a waiting list for pen-pals so please be patient if you do not hear from us straight away.
- All information on our clients is held in the strictest confidence and for this reason no details apart from a name and address will be passed on to you. Asking a prisoner about his or her offence can be seen as intrusive and offensive, perhaps causing irreparable damage to a relationship; if a prisoner wants you to know about his/her offence he/she will volunteer the information when he/she is ready. Since we offer a non-judgmental service we are unable to distinguish between different offences when matching pen-pals and this may not be agreeable to some people but the scheme needs to be in line with our policy.
- All mail going into prisons will be opened and inspected for contraband before being passed to the recipient; in some countries the mail will also be censored. Be wary of including unrestrained criticism of prison authorities, religion or governments. These may well cause offence and it is not unheard of for the recipient to suffer as a consequence.
- Don't make promises that you can't keep. Disappointments in prison are especially hurtful. Always ensure that something is possible before you undertake to do it.
- Enjoy writing. If you find that you are totally incompatible, let us know so that we can find someone else for each of you. Obviously, it is better if you and

your pen-pal can agree to end your correspondence amicably but if this is not possible, once again, please let us know.

- Do write about ordinary, everyday things even if they seem trivial. Such news helps to introduce a sense of normality into what is an essentially abnormal situation and acts as an emotional lifeline.
- Our pen-pal coordinator and/or your pen-pal's caseworker at Prisoners Abroad is available to provide you with any support that you may need. Please feel free to discuss the situation with him/her if you have any worries with regard to your pen-pal.

2 Post and enclosures

When writing, please

- Put your name, c/o Prisoners Abroad and our address, 89-93 Fonthill Road, London N4 3JH on the top of your letters and on the back of the envelope, except for the USA when it should be on the top left hand corner of the front of the envelope. If this is not done it is likely that the letter will not reach your pen-pal. Furthermore, if letters are returned for one reason or another, we are in a position to monitor the situation. We will forward replies unopened from your pen-pal as soon as they arrive in our office.
- Underline the prisoner's surname, and write it in BLOCK CAPITALS to avoid confusion when it reaches the prison. If your pen-pal has an inmate number it is very important that you include this as part of the address.
- If you move, let us know your new address and telephone number. It is, of course, also helpful if you can let us know if your pen-pal is moved to another address as we will not always be immediately informed of this.
- Do send books, magazines, newspapers, presents etc. if you wish but check first on what you are allowed to send into the prison. Your pen-pal should be able to tell you him/herself what he or she is able to receive or it may be that they will need to ask for special permission before anything can be sent. In any case, don't send anything in the hope that it may slip through as this is a waste of your time and money; it may even result in your pen-pal being punished and persistent flouting of these regulations may lead to tighter restrictions being imposed. If there is any doubt please consult your pen-pal's caseworker.
- You may find that your pen-pal asks you for money. If you choose to do so do not send it by post but ask your pen-pal's caseworker for advice on the best way to send it.

Bear in mind that a pen-pal may resort to emotional blackmail in order to persuade you to send money; some may be writing to a number of different people asking for money and some may be receiving money from Prisoners Abroad. Don't be afraid to say no if, for whatever reason, you don't want to send money and never send money that you can't afford as this may cause you to feel resentment toward your pen-pal.

“He might not write again if I don’t comply”, is not a good reason to send money or do anything else for that matter.

3 Personal details

Always bear in mind that, in most cases, your pen-pal will be released eventually and will return to this country. If he or she has your address it will be very easy to trace you. For this reason, we strongly recommend that all mail from your pen-pal is sent via Prisoners Abroad, as directed above. Some pen-pals have chosen to disregard this advice and this has, on occasion, led to unfortunate results.

For the same reason, we suggest that you do not pass your phone number on to your pen-pal although, once again, this is ultimately your decision.

4 Possible reasons for pen-pals not replying

- There are a number of reasons why your pen-pal may not be replying to your letters. It may be that they have written and that their letters are lost somewhere in the system. For example, letters may be confiscated or, where all letters to and from remand prisoners have to go through a judge, there may be bureaucratic delays.
- Remember that prisoners are often moved without warning and that mail is not always re-directed to them. It may be that your pen-pal has been moved to the punishment block where he/she may not be allowed to receive mail.
- It may be that your pen-pal has no money to purchase stamps and stationery.
- Many prisoners are heavily involved in their own legal situations or in some form of education. This, of course, places great demand on their time and may limit the frequency with which they may respond to your letters.
- Your pen-pal may be experiencing an emotional crisis and may not want to reply immediately.

5 What if prisoners’ letters become romantic/sexual?

Although not a frequent occurrence, it can be a very upsetting experience to discover that letters from pen-pals are taking an unwelcome turn. In the unlikely event of this happening, here are a few suggestions on how to cope with the situation:

- Do not try to avoid the subject and hope that it will go away; your pen-pal may think that you are tacitly accepting this behaviour
- Do not treat the subject humorously as this, too, may be interpreted as tacit acceptance
- If you are not prepared to accept this behaviour, say so - kindly, with understanding, but clearly as soon as this arises. If the pen-pal persists, please don’t hesitate to get in touch with us and we will contact the person to

reinforce what you have said. If the pen-pal still persists, we will have no hesitation in refusing to forward further letters and ultimately we can find another correspondent for you

- Never give the impression that your pen-pal is the only person in your life – or that you want to be the only person in his/hers

6 Equal opportunities

Prisoners Abroad is an equal opportunities organisation and does not discriminate against anyone on the basis of gender, race, religion, age or disability. All pen-pals are requested to comply with this policy.

When considering applications from pen-pals, Prisoners Abroad will not take into account any discriminatory requirements. If a pen-pal's behaviour is offensive, we reserve the right to exclude her/him from the scheme. Similar rules apply to prisoners.

7 Random Audit of Mail

Prisoners Abroad has a responsibility to the prisons we send mail to. Although rare, we have in the past discovered evidence of inappropriate material being sent to and from pen-pals. For this reason pen-pal letters may occasionally be opened in order to monitor the contents.

We hope that you enjoy the experience of writing to a prisoner, and we are sure that both of you will benefit from the relationship. If you do have any questions or comments, please contact us.

If you require this leaflet in a large print format, please contact us. Our details are below.

Tel: 020 7561 6820

Email: DirectServices@PrisonersAbroad.org.uk

Mail: Prisoners Abroad, 89-93 Fonthill Road, London, N4 3JH.