

**BECOMING A HUMAN RIGHTS PEN PAL:
SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR YOUR FIRST FEW LETTERS**
(A Project of the Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity Coalition:
www.prisonerhungerstrikesolidarity.wordpress.com)

*“A wall is just a wall;
It can be broken down.”*
Assata Shakur

Groundings:

- *** All people in prison are human beings.
- *** All human beings have human rights.
- *** All human beings need respectful and loving relationships.
- *** All prison walls are just walls; human relationships can transcend them.

Some Suggestions for Writing Your First Letter:

^ Addressing your letter

Use 'Mr' before the imprisoned person's name. He may not be used to being respected as a person in prison, and he will appreciate that little bit of courtesy.

Always include the person's CDC prison number which starts with a letter and then usually has five digit numbers. Without this identification, your letter will get lost. If you are writing to an African-American prisoner, he may often give his New Afrikan name first, then 's/n' and his U.S. name. 'S/N' stands for 'slave name.' But you must include that 'slave name' along with the prison ID number on your envelope, because prisons do not recognize anyone's chosen political or cultural identity.

Your envelope must have a return name and complete address or else the prison officials might not deliver it to your imprisoned pen pal. Decide whether you want to use your home address, an organization or school address, or a p.o. box. That is your choice.

Use a plain white 'business' envelope, the kind you have to lick to stick. If you want your new pen pal to want to know when you mailed the letter, consider putting 'Mailed/.../2014' in the bottom left corner. That way your pen pal will know how long the prison is delaying his mail.

^ The Inside of your letter

The top of your letter: Begin with the date, your complete name and address, and your imprisoned pen pal's complete name and address. Most imprisoned activists have their mail delayed or censored by prison authorities. Prisoners like to keep records of the date and postmark of a letter sent to them, and the date they receive it. They will need this information if they want to file a '602' complaint to the prison about censored or delayed mail.

Sometimes the prison officials keep the outside envelope of incoming mail after they finished reading and photocopying the contents (which they regularly do). So you need to put your contact information in the letter so your pen pal can write you back.

Keep your first letter brief, and explain why you are writing. For example, “I understand that you are interested in corresponding with a pen pal who respects the human rights of prisoners.” Keep it general enough so that the imprisoned person can guess how you got his contact information. If you are writing from a school or a church, it might be fine to mention the name of the institution. But if you are coming from a community based social or racial justice organization, you might want to save that information for a future letter, lest the prison censor decide not to deliver your first letter.

Suggestions for Topics and Tone for your first letter: Introduce yourself briefly, without being super personal or very political, if you are. Write the way you might talk with a stranger whom you have just met at a community event, a friend's house or a cafe -- polite, friendly, open, natural, but not pouring out your life's story.

Tell him a little about your public life, such as, “I work at a restaurant,' or 'I'm in college,' or 'I'm job hunting.' Tell him a little about your interests, broadly speaking, such as, 'I like to make videos,' or 'I like to grow my own food when I can,' or 'I love jazz,' or 'I like to draw.'

Share why you are interested in corresponding with him, such as your belief in human rights for all people; how inspired you were by the courageous, peaceful actions prisoners in California engaged in last summer. Tell him how much you hope to learn from him, and to share what your life is like.

Consider mentioning some positive events that have happened recently in your community, such as, “Our local legislators just voted to raise minimum wages of city workers, after my community conducted a two year campaign.' or, “A local youth organization decided to create a neighborhood community garden, and invited the adult neighbors to join them. It's been great to meet these young people.” Consider that stories of people working together peacefully, respectfully, multi-racial and cross class and genders, might give your pen pal a glimmer of hope that such a world is possible.

If you have a news clipping of the event or activity you have mentioned, you might enclose it, but remember to note at the bottom of your letter, 'Enclosure: 'Youth build community garden' from ___ newspaper or website, date.'

Consider enclosing a few sheets of paper, an envelope, and some 'forever' stamps (not affixed to an envelope) in your letter. Many prisoners are indigent, and would appreciate that simple enclosure which can enable them to write you back without having to go through the paperwork of requesting writing materials from the prison. Be sure to write 'Enclosed are...' at the bottom of your letter so that your pen pal is more likely to actually receive the paper, stamps and envelope.

Keep track of your mail to your pen pal. Keep the date in your calendar. Make a copy of your letters! If you have not heard back from your imprisoned pen pal in two-three weeks, you can assume his mail is being delayed or censored, or he has been moved. Write him again, as you did the first time. Express concern that he may not have received your first letter, datedYour pen pal can use that

information to write a prisoner's complaint form (called a '602') about his delayed mail.

-2-

^ Some terms and topics to avoid

Events: 'hunger strike,' 'revolution,' Attica, Black August, Chicano Moratorium.

Names of other prisoners, in California and nationally. Mumia Abu-Jamal, Leonard Peltier, Lynne Stewart, George Jackson, Angola 3, any of names of Pelican Bay Representatives, Kevin 'Rashid' Johnson.

Radical authors, leaders and organizations: Black Panther Party, Howard Zinn (!), Zapata, Che Guevara, Malcolm X, Mao Tse-Tung, Angela Davis, Michelle Alexander, Frantz Fanon, etc.

Symbols associated by prison officials with gangs: shamrock, eagle, dragon, different tattoos, 'M', colors red and blue, Swahili language, some Spanish language terms like 'familia,' 'tio,' 'papa,' 'companero/a,' eagle, snake... 'gang' or any names of gangs.

Your pen pal's crime or legal case: remember that the prison staff read all letters. Your relationship should not be based on your opinions of what your pen pal may or may not have done in the past, but on your communication in the present.

^ A few guidelines for future letters

(Note that the pronoun 'he' is used to refer to imprisoned pen pals. At the present, the Human Rights Pen Pal program writes to men imprisoned in solitary in California. For information on writing to women prisoners, please contact Ca. Coalition for Women Prisoners: www.womenprisoners.org; or Justice Now: www.jnow.org. For information on writing to transgender prisoners, please contact Transgender, Gender Variant and Intersex Justice Project: www.tgijp.org.)

**** Please make a commitment to write your pen pal at least every other week.*

He will likely be waiting for your mail in the ever constant effort by people in solitary to communicate with people in the outside world. If you know ahead of time that you will not be able to write for a certain period, please let your pen pal know.

Keep your letters on a friendship level. Your relationship can grow deeply through friendship and common values, and it will be rewarding to both of you. If you find that your relationship by mail is getting more intimate, use your own self-reflection, talk with trusted friends, and figure out how to say respectfully and carefully what you want to say in a letter to your pen pal.

Discussions about race, class, gender, gender orientation, life experiences. As your pen pal relationship deepens, you and your pen pal might be likely to engage in challenging and inspiring discussions about similarities and differences around topics often called 'sensitive issues' in corporate

media. These discussions can be vital to truly 'transcending the walls.'

-3-

But please keep in mind that the prison guards will be reading your letters; and these guards may be extremely racist, sexist, homophobic, and generally reactionary in their social and economic values. Moreover, the guards look for any signs of genuine respect and trust between people inside and outside the walls; and try to criminalize them -- that is, call them 'evidence of gang relationships.'

So, please be mindful of this dilemma. Discuss it as openly as you can with your pen pal. Generally speaking, take his lead on how to handle this problem. He knows the context in which he is living, and what risks he is willing to take.

In relationship to political discussions, let your imprisoned pen pal take the lead.
Your pen pal knows how much he is willing to risk in terms of retaliation from prison officials.

Avoid sarcasm, as it can be easily misinterpreted.

Do not make phone calls for prisoners, nor contact people for them. You can call legislators to put forth an issue at a prisoner's request, or send a prisoner's letter to the press, but you **MUST** have a signed release from the prisoner in order to do so.

Never try to contact a prisoner's family, nor to deliver messages from a prisoner to someone in the community. Prison officials often call this 'third party communication,' and they will cut off your relationship with your pen pal. If your pen pal asks you to look something up on the website, you might consider sending the information to your pen pal, and let your pen pal make the direct contact. Not you.

Reflect carefully on your own boundaries in relation to requests from your pen pal.
Are you willing to send him stamps regularly? What about magazine subscriptions and books?

Are you considering visiting him? Are you willing to help pay for a correspondence or college class for him if it becomes available to people in solitary? Would you consider putting money into his canteen? Would you be willing to advocate for him with prison authorities if he is being retaliated against?

Maybe in your case none of these issues will come up, but often they do. Once trust develops between you, he may ask you to do things that friends might try to do for each other. But everything gets more complicated, expensive and time consuming when your friend is in solitary confinement.

Whatever you decide, be clear and honest with your pen pal. Never say 'yes,' if you mean 'no.' Honesty and respect between friends, especially human rights pen pals, is crucial.

With all these apparent challenges, please keep in mind that the relationship you and

your pen pal develop can be life transforming for both of you. And hopefully, it will help motivate you to put more of your efforts into ending solitary confinement in California.