

BUT... THEY'RE CRIMINALS!

One concern that is often voiced to us is that that the people you are writing to will be 'dodgy' in some way. After all, the media bombards us with the notion that everyone in prison is a smack-addicted, child-molesting benefit-scrounging cannibal, and it's only to be expected that many people who have no personal experience of prison are wary of contacting those inside. The simple answer is that prisoners are human, and of course there may be a small chance of encountering idiots – about the same statistical chance of encountering idiots anywhere! If you are not comfortable about writing to a particular prisoner for whatever reason, simply end contact – we have heard of isolated cases of people posing as political prisoners to draw in support and letters, but these instances are so scarce that it really is not worth worrying about, and you can be assured that any prisoners supported by organisations like the ABC would be dropped like hot bricks if there was any concern about their integrity.

USEFUL CONTACTS

The internet is a gold-mine of information about prison resistance, but be aware that many sites aren't updated very regularly, so some details can be inaccurate. We'd recommend the following sites as good places to start:

BRIGHTON ABC –
www.brightonabc.org.uk

Brighton's Anarchist Black Cross group keep a good website with up-to-date news and details of prisoners, as well as links to other groups.

NO MORE PRISONS –
www.alternatives2prison.ik.com

This informative site campaigns for prison abolition.

HAVEN DISTRIBUTION –
www.havendistribution.org.uk

Haven are a registered charity who run an invaluable service providing UK prisoners with free books and educational materials.

GET IN TOUCH WITH US

If you want any further information, please contact us. We do a regular e-mail bulletin with updates on prison issues and a list of anarchist prisoners – let us know if you want to be added to this. We also do a distro and publish pamphlets relating to the prison struggle – get in touch for a full list. If you are writing to us, please try to enclose a stamped addressed envelope or International Reply Coupon if you want a reply.

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WRITING TO PRISONERS

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



Probably the easiest and arguably most important aspect of supporting prisoners is writing to them. One of the hardest things for many prisoners to cope with is the feeling of isolation – being cut off from friends and family and everything they know in their normal lives. A letter or postcard from the real world, even from a complete stranger, helps to maintain a connection with the outside and relieves the infernal tedium of a regime that often involves spending 23 hours of the day in the same cell. For a first-time prisoner, especially in the early stages of a sentence, this type of support can make a huge difference, helping them cope with the unfamiliar and often intimidating surroundings. For political prisoners, victims of miscarriages of justice and those fighting back from within, it's a simple message of solidarity – you're not on your own!

In many cases, contact from the outside lets the prison authorities know that there are people on the outside who care and are monitoring the situation. For example, special dietary requirements (vegan etc) are more likely to be adhered to if an inmate is obviously not forgotten.

Please be aware that this isn't meant to be a list of rules – we're just trying to honestly answer some of the queries we get asked. And of course, the comments about prison procedure only apply to UK prisons.

WHERE DO I FIND A PRISONER FROM?

Well, there are currently around 80,000 to choose from in the UK alone, but if you want to narrow that down slightly the easiest way is to contact one of the many anarchist / animal rights / prisoner support groups you can find online. Be aware that prisoners are often moved and mail is not always forwarded so if in doubt email or write to check details are up to date. You can contact Leeds ABC at the address below for a list of the prisoners we currently support both in the UK and further afield.

SO WHAT DO I WRITE THEN?

Ok this is the bit that trips most people up. You're worried that what you write might sound stupid, or make the prisoner feel worse... or you simply can't think of anything. Of course if the prisoner is your mate then this bit is easy, but what

about a total stranger, someone you know nothing about apart from their name, charges and sentence? Well, there's no formula here but for the first letter you should introduce yourself. Tell them about yourself, what you do, what you're into, where you got their address and so on. This breaks the ice and also makes a reply easier. Apart from that, just fill a side of A4 of whatever you can think of – crap jokes, reminiscences, what you did last Friday night after 10 pints etcetera. One former inmate commented to us that some of the best letters he received were an ongoing debate about the merits of various Iron Maiden songs - which might seem inane but put a great big smile on his face once a week! Here are a few pointers that we'd like to remind you of:

- Every letter is read by screws (theoretically at least) so don't write anything that might incriminate yourself or others in anything dubious. The rule of thumb here is don't put anything in a letter that you wouldn't say to a copper's face.
- If the prisoner is in for a political offence you should obviously let them know you support their actions but don't start praising them as some sort of hero to the cause. Rhetoric to the effect of "I'm in awe of your great sacrifice blah, blah..." is frankly cringeworthy. If someone is banged



up for a political action they don't (or shouldn't!) want to be seen as martyrs – they're just normal people unlucky enough to get caught, so write to them like normal people rather than fawning!

- A lot of people seem wary of telling prisoners about 'fun' stuff, thinking it will depress them or make them feel homesick hearing about people having a laugh on the outside. This is rubbish! They'll already be homesick and it's just reassuring to hear normal life is going on so don't feel coy about mentioning gigs, parties and raucous nights down the boozier.
- Always ask a few questions like how they're doing, plans they have for the future, what their interests are, etc. but try to keep it general and don't make it sound like you're being nosy. Bearing in mind that they might be replying to a total stranger, it makes writing a response a lot easier.
- Similarly, some background about yourself, even seemingly trivial things like favourite bands, football teams etc, can make writing a reply that bit easier...
- Don't EVER promise things you can't deliver. If you build someone's hopes up about say visiting them, sending things into them, etc then you let them down, that's well out of order and hardly consistent with supporting them.
- Political literature – be careful! Unless the prisoner asks for it, avoid sending any overly contentious political material in as it can potentially cause them grief. Depending on the prisoner's situation and how they "choose to do their time" unsolicited subscriptions to lefty newspapers for instance may cause unwanted hassle with prison authorities and other inmates. In some cases, particularly abroad, political literature sent to remanded prisoners may even be used against them at trial. There's no problem sending this kind of thing as long as you ask the prisoner first and always respect their wishes.
- Avoid turgid leftie-isms! Phrases like "*my comrades and I have resolved to pass a motion of solidarity*" sound pompous and impersonal however well meaning they might be. "*We hope you're doing ok*" is a lot more friendly!

I'M NOT SURE I CAN MANAGE A FULL LETTER...

That's fine! A quick message of support on a postcard can still really brighten up someone's day or what about taking a card to a gig or the pub and getting a few people to sign it?

HOW DO I MAKE SURE MY LETTER GETS IN?

Well the correct postage would be a start (you'd be surprised!) and the correct address, ensuring the prisoner's full name and prison number are included. Put your name and address at the top of the letter and on the back of the envelope. These don't have to be 'real' if you've got any reservations, but bear in mind this is what the prisoner will see if they're going to write you a reply. Some prisons will refuse to accept letters with 'care of' or PO Box addresses so it's best to use a street address. Some prisons have rules forbidding certain imagery (e.g. gang symbols being banned from U.S prisons) and this may encompass political symbols as well, so circled-A's scrawled all over the envelope may not be a good idea! Sometimes hand-made cards with a picture glued to the front may be refused or defaced in case anything's concealed underneath. If you want to make sure a prisoner gets a letter, you can send it by recorded delivery – then you can check with the Post Office whether the prison received it, and all recorded mail is only supposed to be opened in the prisoner's presence.

WHAT ABOUT GETTING A REPLY?

Bear in mind that you're doing this to support the prisoner not to acquire a new pen-pal - although the two might go hand-in-hand. You may not get a reply for several reasons: obviously the prisoner might not have received your letter or they might be getting a lot of post (if they're fortunate enough) so may not have time to reply to all correspondence. They may be limited in the number of letters they can write by the prison authorities and prefer to prioritise friends and family. They may not have access to sufficient writing materials or stamps, they may have been moved, or they may simply not be very good at writing letters. Regardless, don't be put out if there's no reply and don't let this deter you from continuing to write.

CAN I SEND ANYTHING ELSE IN?

Unsurprisingly, the file-in-a-chocolate-cake routine isn't going to work! The golden rule here is to ask the prisoner if you've got any doubts. You can always try contacting the prison, but they are notoriously elusive, so you could spend ages trying to get through – for instance HMP Armley has one phone line to cover 1250+ inmates. More to the point, screws have a habit of lying through their teeth, so don't assume that the first answer you get will be anything close to the truth! The rules vary widely between different prisons and are sometimes baffling. Food and toiletries are not permitted in any prisons for obvious reasons, but sometimes apparently innocuous items are denied - for instance photographs with the prisoners face on them (actually to stop prisoners forging ID cards!). If you send anything in, clearly write at the top of your letter what you've enclosed as this lessens the chances of light-fingered screws having off with it. Some things you might consider sending in are:

- **Books** – you may be able to send used copies in but many prisons will only accept books from a recognised shop, distributor or publisher so check first. It's possible to get round this in some cases if you know a sympathetic second-hand bookshop who will package a used book with an official-looking receipt. Screws may withhold some literature on the grounds of content but this can generally be disputed by the prisoner, citing Human Rights legislation. Books and magazines are only meant to be censored or refused if they're racially abusive, identify individual screws by name, or threaten "good order and discipline" (however you choose to interpret that!). If you've any doubts again ask the prisoner.
- **Magazines** – again the policy varies so, as above, check first. Surprisingly, widely available publications are more likely to be refused while obscure zines may get through okay. This is because most prisons have an appointed local newsagent which you have to use for 'off the shelf' publications. You pay for a magazine, newspaper or puzzle book at the shop and give them the inmate's prison number and this is forwarded to them. It's even possible to set up a subscription to a daily newspaper this way.
- **Stamps** – policy varies (can you spot a pattern here?). Stamps are gold dust for prisoners, if they can receive them, not only for sending letters but also as currency. Many prisons will not allow stamps and obviously screws will often pocket them. UK prisons should all allow stamped-addressed envelopes in, which obviously makes it easier for a prisoner to reply. These are the safest bet (after all it's hardly a huge outlay) but write your address in pencil so the prisoner can remove it if they have a more important letter to send. If you want a reply, an SAE is really a matter of courtesy.
- **Cash** – while the amount most prisoners can spend on a weekly basis is limited, their actual income to spend on "luxuries" such as usable razors, tobacco, paper, phone cards etc is often microscopic, particularly if they are refusing work. On top of this, *Aramark*, the private company who run prison canteens, only sell expensive brand-named products, and incredibly get away with selling many items at more than high-street prices! Funds from the outside can therefore be vital, but cash is not used in prisons and inmates have an 'account' with a certain amount freed up each week as 'spends'. Obviously if you're sending more than a couple of quid it's worth checking first, but as a general guide funds should only be sent as postal orders made payable to "The Governor, HMP [*prison name*]". It is imperative that the prisoner's full name and prison number is written clearly on the back, or they won't get it.
- **Phone cards** – a myth. Not that you can buy them now anyway, but even when you could, phone cards from the outside didn't work on prison phones. If you want to help someone with the cost of calls to friends and family send them a postal order as they'll have to buy credit inside.
- **Music, footwear, radios** and other miscellaneous goods – this varies so widely that you have to check. Some prisons will accept almost anything, others will flatly refuse everything, often because prisoners are made to save up their spends and buy goods from 'approved' mail-order retailers such as Argos instead.