

they are receiving them. If a prisoner tells you that something was not received, write a letter appealing the confiscation, usually to the warden.

*Be forward and clear in your letter as to your intentions.* If the prisoner is unfamiliar with you, it would be appreciated if you would state who you are and whether you are with an organization. Be upfront about your politics and say how you got the prisoner's contact info. Be explicit about whether you are interested in starting a pen-pal relationship; ask if the prisoner would like to correspond, and whether there are topics he or she would like to discuss or not discuss. Keep your first letter reasonably short and to the point until you have the rules worked out.

*Be patient.* Prisoners may not write back, or may take a while to respond. They may occasionally come across as cynical, angry, or disinterested. Keep in mind that people in institutionalized settings like jails are more prone to mood swings, depression and frustration. Some may have had people write to them who before and may have stopped writing or failed to come through on promises to them, and writing to you may be their only safe outlet for venting their frustrations. Try not to take it personally.

*Don't make empty promises.* Many well-meaning people write letters offering support or assistance to prisoners out of good will, then fail to follow through. Don't make promises you cannot keep. Don't offer to send items you can't afford. Be honest. It's best to extend support slowly as your relationship grows.

*Don't romanticize prisons or prisoners.* Like anyone else, prisoners have unique strengths and weaknesses. It's important to remember

that prisoners can develop manipulative behaviors as a coping mechanism to deal with the intense stress they are under in prison. Some are estranged from their families as a direct result of their own actions. Don't make assumptions about what a prisoner needs or how a prisoner will handle things.

*Do not discuss anything illegal with prisoners.* Again, this is for your security and theirs. Prisoners can be implicated for outside actions that violate the law. If the authorities find information about this in the hands of prisoners, they can face added time and harsh treatment.

*Do not make political judgments on prisoners' experiences.* Some prisoners, out of desperation, write publications for pen pals whether or not they agree completely with the views advanced in them. Rather than attack a prisoner, it's best to be polite, but firm, if they write something you find objectionable. If a prisoner declares herself or himself a white supremacist, for example, explain your disagreement, encourage the person to reconsider these views or actions, and discontinue the relationship if appropriate. White supremacist gangs often have ties to the outside; it's wise to avoid feuds with such prisoners.

*Information excerpted from the NA Earth Liberation Prisoners Support Network. An article about prisoner support from Rolling Thunder provided much of the above text. Compiled by CLDC.*

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## **Civil Liberties Defense Center**

### **Guide to Corresponding with Prisoners**



CLDC would like to encourage people to show solidarity and support for incarcerated activists. This is a brief introduction to the difficulties people often encounter when reaching out to people in the custody of the prison-industrial complex. For those who are not locked-up and have thought about writing to prisoners, but are hesitant to get started, this brochure should provide some basic information about the challenges that are unique to corresponding with prisoners.

## Corresponding with Prisoners

Writing letters is the easiest way to keep in touch with someone who has been incarcerated.

Bear in mind that everything you write to a prisoner can be read by prison guards and wardens, not to mention other prisoners. Prisons will also copy letters and forward them to local, state and federal law enforcement agencies. What you write can be used against the prisoner, yourself, and your community — so be careful and use discretion. This applies to phone calls, too.

If you are attempting to show support to prisoners, one suggestion is to commit to writing to one or two prisoner and do it well. This can be worth a lot more than several prisoners receiving one-time hastily written letters. The examples of people attempting valiantly to keep up with writing to ten prisoners and then having to scale down to one or two are numerous.

It's extremely important to learn the guidelines concerning prisoner mail. If you are writing to a prisoner for the first time, or the prisoner has been transferred to a different facility, send a simple, unadorned letter. No doodles, no decorations, no other documents or photos - just a plain, everyday letter, either hand-written with a ballpoint pen or printed from a computer. Most prisons have regulations about mail that make no sense to the outside world — like prohibitions against the use of markers and crayons.

In that first letter, ask the prisoner what he or she may and may not receive. Usually, prisoners have a fairly good idea of what will not make it past the censors. If you follow the prisoner's advice and your mail continues to be withheld, write to the warden of the prison requesting an explanation. Prison officials may

reject mail for many reasons - including smudges or stains on an envelope, the presence of a circled "A" or other perceived "code," or the use of certain words or topics, such as "anarchy" in the letter. Don't be discouraged if your mail doesn't get through. You can file an appeal (generally a long shot), or modify the package to appease them (a more reliable option). Don't give up and allow prisonrats to further isolate the person inside. It's also a good idea to keep copies of all correspondence.

Don't forget that your goal is to show support for the person being incarcerated. Try to do that with the least amount of stress on that prisoner. Know that the waves you create on the outside will be felt within the prison walls as well.

People who haven't written to prisoners before often worry about what they should write. We suggest you share something about your life with them. Tell a story about a trip. Ask about what life is like on the inside — you can learn a lot from their experiences as well — and ask what they plan to do when they get out. Because most prisoners have limited funds available, and have to buy things like hygiene items (toothpaste, shampoo, etc.), it may take them a while before they get back to you. And don't feel intimidated about writing well-known political prisoners — they are not superheroes.

Be clear about what you are willing to do for a prisoner. Try not to make promises you may not be able to fulfill. Remember that a prisoner is in a very isolated, dependent setting. Some prisoners may ask for favors that you are incapable of doing or are not of interest to you. If your "No!" causes a prisoner to stop writing to you, so be it. Sadly, there is no shortage of people in prison to correspond with.

Don't decide against writing just because you can't commit to writing someone throughout the length of his or her sentence.

Do NOT send the following items in prison mail, unless the prisoner you are corresponding with has explained the correct procedures for doing so:

Books  
Magazines,  
Cash, checks or money orders  
Stamps  
Blank paper  
Photos  
Anything with staples or paperclips  
Original artwork (color photocopies are usually okay)  
Documents that can be used as, or used to obtain ID (Social Security cards, Birth Certificates; etc.)

And do NOT use:

Tape  
Markers  
Glue  
Crayons

## When Writing a Prisoner:

*Use common sense.* Send neat, legible letters on plain paper. Use a FULL name and return address, but consider using a "neutral" address such as a Post Office Box. Do not divulge sensitive information—your home address, phone number, or people's full names. This is for your security and that of the prisoner.

*Mail Rules.* Ask the prisoners you write about the mail rules. If a prisoner wants you to send a book, ask what his or her institution requires or refer the prisoner to a books-to-prisoners program nearby. Date all your letters and list everything you've enclosed - photos, or photocopies — so that prisoners can make sure