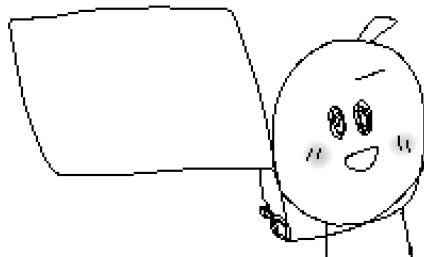


have to be from a publisher, although the guards get to decide which publishers are "legitimate". Some people get around this by sending books from an Amazon account, which many guards accept as "legitimate". You may be able to send used copies in but many prisons will only accept books from a recognized shop, distributor or publisher so check first. It's possible to get around this in some cases if you know a sympathetic second-hand bookshop who will package a used book with an official-looking receipt. Guards may withhold some literature on the grounds of content, it all depends on which guard is looking through the mail any given day. Sometimes zines get through just fine, other times a prisoner never receives them.

original text by leeds anarchist black cross
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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 – this just answers some of the questions you might ask.

Where do I find a prisoner to write? Ok this is the bit that trips most people up. You're worried that what you write might sound silly, or make the prisoner feel worse... or you simply can't think of anything. Of course if the prisoner is your friend 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 paper with whatever you can think of – crap jokes, reminiscences, what you did last Friday night after 10 beers etcetera. One former prisoner commented 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!

What should I write to them? Well, there are currently over 2,300,000 in the US alone. If you want to narrow that down a bit you could check an Anarchist Black Cross website for political prisoners. There are also prisoner support and prison abolition groups all across the US, listed on the final page.

Here are a few pointers that we'd like to remind you of:

- ★ Every letter is potentially read by the guards, 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 cop's face.
- ★ If the prisoner is in for a political offense 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 cringe-worthy. If someone is caught up for a political action they probably don'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 shows, 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 favorite 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 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. There's no problem sending this kind of thing as long as you ask the prisoner first and always respect their wishes.
- ★ Avoid turgid lefty-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 show or a demo 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 US 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.

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 mail 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 prioritize 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. 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, guards 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. 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 guards having off with it. Generally, books

