



LETTER WRITING EXPECTATIONS & GUIDELINES

Please read these guidelines in full before signing up to be a penpal. If you need further information, please don't hesitate to get in touch. We also have a Frequently Asked Questions page on our website: www.bentbarsproject.org/frequently-asked-questions

1. Before you become a penpal: Things to consider

a) Why do I want to write to someone in prison?

It's important to take some time to ask yourself what you want to get out of a pen pal friendship. It is absolutely okay to not have a complete answer, but it is good to think about what your motivations are. We all carry lots of assumptions and need to continuously challenge them. Ask yourself what assumptions you might have about people who are imprisoned and how that might impact the way you write.

b) What is my capacity and commitment?

For many prisoners, receiving one or two letters from someone who promises to write regularly but then fails to follow-up can be incredibly disappointing. So please think about whether you can realistically commit to regular letter writing. Being a pen pal doesn't have to be an intense time commitment; letters can be as long or as short as you want them to be, but we do ask you to write at least once per month. It's also important to be upfront with your penpal about how often you will write, so you don't create false hope or unfulfilled promises.

c) How might I deal with hearing about the prison system?

Writing to people in prison can often lead to a deeper understanding of the physical and emotional hardship of imprisonment. Sometimes people inside share experiences of trauma that can be upsetting to hear about, so it's good to be prepared for that possibility. You may want to think about what supports you have in place if things come up that are upsetting or triggering.

d) Am I anxious about writing to a prisoner and/or giving out my personal address?

Many of us feel nervous about sharing personal information with brand new people in our lives and that is quite reasonable. There is, however, extra stigma around sharing information with imprisoned people. It is important to be clear about our own boundaries while also reflecting on what assumptions may lay beneath any fears or worries we hold. If you do not wish to give your home address, you can use the Bent Bars PO Box as the return address. If you live with other people, you might also want to check in with them about using your home address for correspondence. We encourage everyone to do what feels right for themselves while at the same time looking deeper at what might reduce fear as we try to build connections and community across prison walls.

e) How comfortable am I in potentially navigating class, community and social differences?

Because of the highly discriminatory nature of the criminal legal system, and the ways that prisons deprive people of community, support and communication, you and your penpal may have very

different life experiences and expectations. Penpals may not always have a shared language or approach, particularly in talking about LGBTQ+ issues and especially for those who are newly coming out or exploring their identities.

It is important to consider how you will navigate these differences when letter writing - particularly power dynamics as the non-imprisoned person. If challenging things come up in writing, we encourage everyone to give each other the benefit of the doubt and respond from a place of generosity, understanding and mutual learning. Try to keep any judgemental feelings in check.

f) What kind of difference does letter writing make?

Letter writing may seem like a small act, but it can have a big impact – for everyone involved. Not only do letters provide an important form of connection, but when prisoners receive mail, it is a message to prison staff and other prisoners that this person has support and is not forgotten. This can be a vital way to reduce violence against people who are locked up. Likewise, writing may have a big impact on you – it may change the way you think about prisoners, it may challenge assumptions you have, and you may learn important things about yourself in the process. Try to be open to the possibilities.

2. How our penpal project works

The Bent Bars Project is run by a small, completely volunteer-run collective, which aims to connect lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and gender-nonconforming people inside and outside prison in Britain. The collective meets one evening per week to respond to mail, forward letters and generally keep the project running.

When the collective first receives a penpal request from a prisoner (“inside penpal”), we send back an introductory letter that provides general info about our project. We ask the inside person to fill out a short questionnaire and to provide a self-description to help us find them a penpal. This is similar to the questionnaire we ask non-imprisoned people (“outside penpals”) to complete. Using that information, we then ‘match’ people according to interests, writing preferences, etc. When a match is made, we usually forward the prisoner’s self-description to the outside penpal, who then can write directly to them. We normally do the matching process once per month.

3. Writing your first letter

Writing your first letter can be exciting and daunting. If you aren’t sure what to write, start by saying something about yourself, your interests, and why you want to be a penpal. Ask some questions about what your penpal is interested in and what they'd like to get from the penpal project. If you received a self-description from your penpal, try to respond to some of the details they have included.

Don't worry if it takes a bit of time to build up a relationship - as with any friendship, you'll probably find you have lots to write about once you've got to know each other better.

Tips for your first letter:

- ★ Write your first letter on plain or lined paper, in a plain envelope (no stickers, no photos, etc.) to increase the chances of your first letter getting through.
- ★ Make sure you include the following on the envelope (or your letter will not go through):

- Prisoner's full name and prison number
 - Prison address and postal code
 - Full name and Address of Sender
 - Many prisons will not give a letter to a prisoner without a full name of sender and return address. If you wish to use the Bent Bars PO box as your return address, just put your name c/o P.O. Box 66754 London WC1A 9BF, and we will forward any mail when we receive it.
- ★ If you choose to correspond using a nickname or pseudonym rather than your legal name, please make sure you make sure you notify us of that name.
 - ★ Make a copy of your first letter in case it doesn't get through right away. There are many problems with mail going 'astray' and people getting transferred without notice.
 - ★ **Please confirm with us once you successfully get in touch with your penpal.** Just drop us a line either by email or post to say that you've written and when you've heard back from your penpal.
 - ★ If you don't hear back from the person you're corresponding with within 3 weeks, send them a follow-up letter. Unfortunately many letters go "missing" in the prison system and so the person may not have received your first letter. Prisoners also have limited access to stamps and envelopes so they may not be able to respond right away. If you don't hear back on the second letter, please let us know, as it's possible that they have been transferred or released.

4. Things to keep in mind when writing

Be conscious of trying to approach letter writing from a framework of solidarity rather than charity. The Bent Bars Project is not about condescending notions of 'helping' prisoners, but rather about connecting with and supporting each other. The project is about building and strengthening queer and trans community across prison walls.

Don't pretend to know someone else's situation if you don't. Expressing things in this way will compromise effective communication and can create unfair power dynamics. That being said, this is an ongoing learning process for us all. If you want more information about navigating these issues (solidarity, support, privilege, etc.) get in touch with us directly. We also have lots of resources on our website, including a list of Frequently Asked Questions.

It is generally impolite to ask people what they are in prison for. Imagine if someone asked you to describe the worst thing you've ever done and how that might make you feel. Check your assumptions about why you want to know the reason they are imprisoned. If your penpal voluntarily discloses their conviction history (which many people do), that's one thing, but requesting that information can come across as invasive and judgmental. Likewise, if your penpal has not voluntarily disclosed their conviction history, we ask you not to try to find out this information by other means. In our experience, knowing this information can create unhelpful barriers and judgments that impact trust building. For more info on this, please see our 'Reflections from Outside Penpals' document, on our website.

Confidentiality: Please be respectful of privacy when it comes to sharing the content of letters with other people. It is great to talk generally about the project with others, but you should not disclose personal or detailed information with other people, unless you have permission to do so. Again, this is not only a privacy issue, but one of trust.

5. Prison Mailrooms

While we generally encourage outside penpals to take their lead from their inside penpal, it is also important to note that **mail going into prisons is screened and read more frequently than mail coming out of prisons**. Don't assume that just because your penpal disclosed personal information in their letter that it's alright to discuss it freely from then on. If unsure, ask which topics they feel comfortable talking about, and whether it's okay to reference information they revealed in previous letters.

If you want to send something to your penpal beyond a simple letter (such as a photo, or magazine or newspaper clipping, stamps, etc.), you should ask what specific restrictions apply to the prison or detention facility where they are held.

6. Safety and outness

Don't assume your penpal is out in prison as being LGBTQ. Many people aren't out because it can open them up to administrative abuse and violence. Following the guidelines below will help you to avoid unintentionally outing someone without their consent.

- ★ Check in with your penpal on your first or second letter and ask whether or not it is okay to send them materials that are gay, queer, or trans themed or focused.
- ★ Keep in mind that envelopes are seen and handled by many prison workers and other prisoners. Avoid including any markings on the envelope, including a return address, or return organisation name, that might out your penpal (especially when sending resources from LGBT groups, etc.). We generally use "BB Project" for the return address on envelopes going into the prison.
- ★ Names: Many prisons will only distribute letters that are addressed to the prisoner using their legal name. This can create problems for people with chosen names that are not legally recognized (such as trans people who are transitioning, gender non-conforming people with preferred names, etc.). Avoid using a person's chosen/non-legal name on the envelope without explicit permission. If you are unsure, it is best to ask your penpal directly if they have a chosen name, if it is recognised by the prison, if you can use it on the envelope, if you can use it on the letter, or if you should avoid using it altogether.
- ★ If your penpal discloses that they are HIV+: Many people inside are not out about their HIV status because it can open them up to violence, harassment, medical neglect, and surveillance. As noted above, even if your penpal discloses their HIV status, this doesn't mean it's always safe for you to bring it up in following letters. If unsure, check with them.

7. Setting boundaries

If you feel ill-equipped to support your penpal on any front, whether it's in terms of finding them the resources they need, or in terms of emotional support, **please don't hesitate to seek the support you need** in doing this. You can send us an email directly or we can put you in touch with other outside penpals who can offer support and advice.

If things don't work out with your penpal, or you decide you can no longer continue the correspondence for whatever reason, that is completely your decision, and we can match you up with someone else. Please just let us know so we can find them a new penpal.

Some letters received by our project have a sexual or romantic tone. This is in part because sex, gender, and sexual identities are foregrounded in the project, and in part because people in prison often have limited access to representations of LGBTQ experience and may want to talk about these issues. Being interested in and asking questions about your romantic life isn't necessarily an indication of romantic interest in you, though it may be. In our introductory letter to prisoners, we explain that the Bent Bars Project offers friendship and support and is not intended to facilitate romantic exchanges. If you feel uncomfortable with sexual or romantic content, we encourage you to be upfront with your penpal in setting boundaries, and expressing your intentions, in a firm but caring way.

8. Negotiating your own safety

Always keep in mind that it is very possible that all incoming letters will be read and screened. Do not include any incriminating information about yourself, or the person you're corresponding with. Prison Services have been known to share sensitive information with other arms of law enforcement. Be mindful not to disclose your immigration status or other information that might compromise your safety. If unsure, err on the side of caution. That being said, our intention is not that you be completely self-censoring; we understand this project as a political act, so if you and your penpal have established what you are each comfortable discussing, we don't discourage political discussion, just exercise caution.

You should also communicate your own needs in corresponding, and the specific information you do and do not want disclosed in letters. This might include your own history of imprisonment, parole conditions, or added surveillance you are under as a result of this, etc, that you think your inside penpal should know. This way they can be better informed in terms of what they should and should not be communicating in their letter, in the interest of not compromising either of your safety.

9. Important note about matches

We aim as much as possible to match people in accordance with the preferences stated by both inside and outside penpals. Having said that, there are often significant differences between inside and outside penpals, particularly with respect to personal experiences, levels of privilege, and areas of interest. So it is important to be aware that you may be matched with someone who is different from you in lots of ways. From our experience so far, this has been a positive thing, and most people (both inside and out) have made great connections through and across both similarities and differences. We hope that you will too.

The Bent Bars Collective is committed to supporting all prisoners, regardless of their charge or conviction. We take this approach because we recognise that the reasons why people end up in prison are complex and we are not in a position to judge. We also recognise that the prison system disproportionately targets people who already face high levels of inequality, discrimination and oppression.

This is not to excuse the serious harms that some people in prison may have committed; rather, it is to recognise that giving up on people or reducing them to their conviction is not a successful strategy for accountability and healing. The Bent Bars Collective is committed to anti-violence work and believes that such work requires us to break cycles of violence rather than perpetuate them through isolation and marginalisation.

Outside penpals sometimes request not to be matched with someone charged or convicted of a particular offence. We always try to meet people's requests as much as possible, as the Bent Bars Collective feels it is important to respect all penpals' boundaries and comfort levels. At the same time, it is important to be aware that we do not ask prisoners to disclose what they are in prison for (just as we do not ask outside penpals to tell us the worst thing they have ever done). We have no direct access to prisoners' records, so we can never fully guarantee the background of the person you are matched with (just as we don't/can't guarantee the background of outside penpals either). Many prisoners voluntarily disclose what they are in prison for, so when outside penpals have specified preferences relating to type of offence, we try to match them with someone who has voluntarily disclosed their charge/conviction as one that does not fit the concern in question.

Because of the stigma associated with certain kinds of offences, prisoners with convictions for violence sometimes wait a long time for a penpal. Prisoners with such convictions are often people who have experienced high levels of violence, trauma and discrimination in their own lives. If you are willing to write to someone regardless of charge or conviction its helpful if you state that on your penpal questionnaire form.

We understand that this is a lot of information to take in all at once. So if you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to get in touch. We also have various resources on our website, including a list of Frequently Asked Questions.

10. Checklist

- First letter: Have you included your full name and return address (or the Bent Bars PO Box) on the envelope? Have you included your penpal's full name, address and prison number? Did you make a copy of your letter (or a note of the date you sent it) in case it doesn't get through?
- Please let us know when you've sent your first letter to your penpal and drop us a line when you hear back from your penpal so we can confirm the match.
- If your penpal is moved or released, please let us know so we can update our records.
- If you move or change your contact details, please let us know so we can update our records.
- If you decide you aren't able to write to your penpal anymore – for whatever reason – please let us know so we can match them with someone else.
- Be sensitive and careful about not putting the safety of your penpal at risk. If in doubt, check in with us. If you run into any problems, have questions or want to talk about issues that come up, please get in touch with us.



P.O. Box 66754 London WC1A 9BF
bent.bars.project@gmail.com
www.bentbarsproject.org

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