

A Guide to Writing to Prisoners

One of the main problems that puts people off getting involved in supporting prisoners is a feeling of being intimidated about writing to a prisoner for the first time. It is very hard to write a letter to someone you don't know: people find that they don't know what to say, they feel there are things they can't talk about, or think that prisoners won't be interested in what they have to say. Well this is a problem most of us have had to get over, so we've drawn up some suggestions to help you. Obviously these aren't rigid guidelines, and we don't pretend to have solved all problems here. Different people will write different letters. Hopefully they will be of some use.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Some prisons restrict the number of letters a prisoner can write or receive, and they may have to buy stamps and envelopes: and prisoners aren't millionaires. So don't necessarily expect a reply to a card or letter. A lot of prisons allow stamps or an s.a.e to be included with a card or letter, but some don't. Letters do also get stopped, read, delayed, 'diverted'. If you suspect that your letter has been or will be nicked by the screws, you can send it with delivery confirmation, which unfortunately costs a bit more but then they have to open it in the prisoners presence. Also you should put a return address, not just so the prisoner can reply (!), but also because some prisons don't allow letters without a return address. Of course it doesn't have to be your address, but be careful using PO box numbers as some prisons don't allow these either!

WRITING FOR THE FIRST TIME

Say who you are, and if it's relevant that you're from such and such a group. Some people reckon it's better to be up front about your politics as well, to give prisoners the choice to stay in contact with you or not.

Say where you heard about them and their case. The first letter can be reasonably short, maybe only a postcard. Obviously when you get to know people better you'll have more to talk about. If you are writing to a "framed" prisoner, and you believe them to be innocent, it helps to say so, as it gives people confidence to know that you believe them.

Some people when they write to prisoners are afraid to talking about their lives and what they are up to, thinking this may depress people banged up, especially prisoners with long sentences, or that they are not interested in your life. Although in some cases this may be true, on the whole a letter is the highpoint of the day for most prisoners. Prison life is dead boring and any news that livens it up, whether it's about people they know or not. Especially if you didn't know them before they went to prison, they want to know about you, what your life is like etc. Use your sense, don't write about anything that is likely to get a prisoner in shit, or get you or anyone else in trouble with the cops.

THEY'RE IN THERE FOR US, WE'RE OUT HERE FOR THEM

For people imprisoned from our movements and struggles it's vital to keep them involved in the ongoing resistance - telling them about actions, sending them magazines if they want them, discussing ideas and strategies with them. Don't send anything that could get you or the prisoner in trouble. Some people will just want to keep their head down till they get out.

For more information about prisoner support, visit www.spiritoffreedom.org.uk, www.freewebs.com/books4prisoners, and www.impassionedinsurrection.info/prisoners.html

NO COMPROMISE, NO SURRENDER... FREE ALL POLITICAL PRISONERS!