

STAYING SAFE

It is never a good idea to talk to any law enforcement agent or investigator. Other than providing your name and address to a police officer who is detaining you, you never have to talk. You will not outsmart them or make things easier for yourself by talking. Anything you say will be used against you and others.

Say: I have nothing to say to you OR I need a lawyer present to continue this conversation. Ask them for a business card and tell them your attorney will be in contact with them.

If you are contacted by law enforcement you should immediately contact a lawyer and let others in your community know. The Civil Liberties Defense Center is a great resource. <https://cldc.org>

It is imperative that we continue our work, including the support of political prisoners and prisoners of war, towards the abolition of prisons, of the state, of capitalism, and of all oppression. It is also imperative that we do so in a way that is smart, strategic, and sustainable.

RESOURCES

- <https://nycabc.wordpress.com/guide/> *Illustrated Guide to Political Prisoners and Prisoners of War (Updated monthly)*
- <https://nycabc.wordpress.com/ppow-birthday-calendar/> *Political Prisoner Birthdays*
- <http://prisonersolidarity.net/data-explorer> *A project to make data on political prisoners easy to explore, export, and integrate into other projects.*

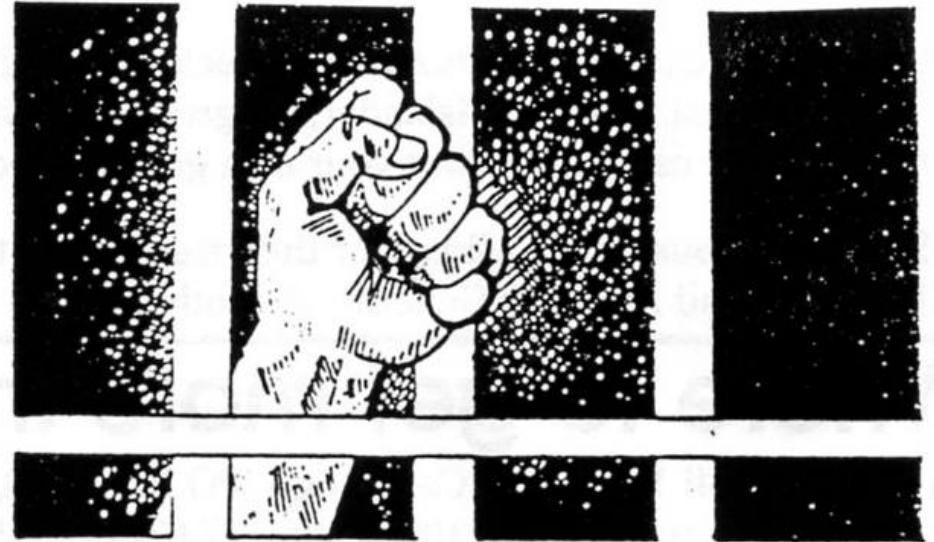
CREDITS

This guide borrows heavily from various Anarchist Black Cross resources, especially from the Political Prisoner Guide (linked above), and was *made by the Neighborhood Anarchist Collective* of Eugene, OR. “We organize locally to help build a society where neighbors support each other to meet basic needs, individuals are free to follow their passions, and empowered communities collectively shape the future.”

<https://neighborhoodanarchists.org/>

Writing to Political Prisoners

the basics



Political Prisoner- A person incarcerated for their commitment to struggle against injustices committed against the people by the government responsible for their imprisonment.

Writing a letter to a political prisoner is a concrete way to support someone imprisoned for their political struggles.

A letter is a simple way to brighten someone’s day in prison by creating human interaction and communication—something prisons attempt to destroy. Beyond that, writing keeps prisoners connected to the communities and movements of which they are a part, allowing them to provide insights and stay up to date.

Writing to prisoners is not charity, as we on the outside have as much to gain from these relationships as the prisoners. Knowing the importance of letter writing is crucial. Prisons are very lonely, isolating, and disconnected places. Any sort of bridge from the outside world is greatly appreciated.

WHAT TO WRITE

For many, the first line of the first letter is difficult to write—there is uncertainty and intimidation that come with it. Never fret, it's just a letter.

For the first letter, it's best to offer an introduction, how you heard about the prisoner, a little about yourself. Tell stories, write about anything you are passionate about—movement work and community work are great topics until you have a sense of the prisoner's interests outside of political organizing.

Include detail! Prison is so total that the details of life on the outside become distant memories. Smells, textures, sounds of the street all get grayed out behind bars. That's not to say that you should pen a stream-of-consciousness novel. Try not to overwhelm them with questions and to strike a balance of sharing and asking.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Be patient, but do not always expect a reply. Some prisons restrict the number of letters a prisoner can write or receive, and they often have to provide their own stamps and envelopes. Letters are frequently delayed. Prisoners may have limited resources to respond to each letter they receive.

Responses may occasionally sound cynical, angry, or disinterested - keep in mind many "supporters" may have made/broken promises or they could've had a tough day and are venting on paper. Be compassionate in your correspondence.

GUIDELINES

Be careful about making promises. Only commit to what you are certain you can do. It's not a good idea to make commitments to someone you don't have a relationship with.

If you can't maintain a correspondence, let them know up front. Conversely, if you want to maintain an ongoing correspondence, let them know that as well.

You can learn more about the prisoner and their case on their support sites or using the resources listed on the back of this handout.

DO

- Write the return address on the letter and envelope. It is common for prisoners to receive the letter without the envelope.
- Write in pencil or non-gel blue or black ink pens.
- Number the pages (1 of 2), so they will know if pages are missing.
- Assume that intelligence and law enforcement agencies are reading your letter. (This advice goes for any letters, digital communications, or talking in known activist spaces.)
- If you plan on long-term correspondence, ask if there are any mail restrictions you should be aware of.
- Use a neutral address for writing prisoners who you do not know, such as PO Boxes (though some prisons restrict mail from them).
- You can print/photocopy articles and write your letter on the other side.
- If mailing more than a letter, clearly write "CONTENTS" on the envelope/package and a full list of everything inside. Also, write the list on the letter so the prisoner will know if anything is missing.

DON'T

- Enclose glitter or write with gel pens or puff paint pens.
- Include article/newspaper clippings (see DO for alternative)
- Valorize the person you are writing. These are folks coming from the same movements and communities that you are. They aren't looking for adoration, but rather to maintain correspondence.
- If you are writing to someone who is pre-trial, don't ask questions about their case. Discussing what a prisoner is alleged to have done can easily come back to haunt them.
- Discussing potentially illegal political actions can cause them to be punished with solitary or added time on their sentence.
- Attempt to place political judgements on prisoners' experiences. Be polite, but firm, and avoid topics you find objectionable.

CHECK BEFORE

Each prison has its own rules and protocols. Check first to reduce the risk of harm to the person you are seeking to support.

- Sending pictures, books, subscriptions, stamps, envelopes, money, etc.
- Writing cards or letters with permanent marker, crayons, or colored pencils.