

WRITING TO PRISONERS

Writing to prisoners is a very important part of prisoner support. It is a way to show your solidarity, as well as vital to building strong movements in which we take care of each other. Also, contact with the outside is essential to helping overcome the feelings of isolation a prisoner will experience, especially if they have just been locked up and are having to adjust to new surroundings and the intimidating features of their new daily life.



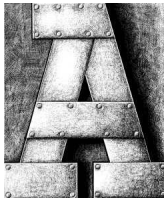
Sometimes just a friendly card can boost morale. For example, we received a letter from Herman Wallace, after sending him a card from Brighton ABC. He said:

"It is quite essential that I take out a moment to express my gratitude to all the wonderful folk who sent me so much love & support in this one card. I am really touched by the intensity of energy from this card and I just had to stand up from my seat and smile. Thank you. Right now, in spite of my repressive condition you guys have made me feel GREAT!"

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. Most of us have had to deal with this problem, so we've drawn up some suggestions to help you. Obviously, they aren't rigid guidelines, and we don't pretend to have solved all the problems here. Different people will write different letters. Hopefully they will still 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 envelopes and stamps, and prisoners aren't often millionaires. So don't necessarily expect a reply. Most prisons allow stamps or SAEs (stamped addressed envelopes) or IRCs (International Reply Coupons that can be used abroad – available from the post office) to be included in a letter – try sending one or two and ask if they got through. Letters do also get stopped, read, delayed, 'diverted'. If you send a letter recorded delivery, it will cost more but it has to be opened in the prisoner's presence. You should always put a return address (also on the envelope), not just so that a prisoner can reply but also because some prisons don't allow letters in without a return address. It doesn't have to be your home address if you're uncomfortable with that! Make sure you put the correct postage and address, including prisoner number, on, and write on clean, plain paper and use new envelopes. Some prisons have rules forbidding certain imagery (e.g. gang symbols being banned from U.S. prisons – which includes circled A anarchy symbols!) Sometimes hand-made cards with a picture glued to the front may be refused or defaced in case anything's concealed underneath.



WRITING FOR THE FIRST TIME =====

When you're writing for the first time, keep it short – you don't want to overwhelm someone. You can maybe send a card first, with greetings and a bit about who you are, what you like, what you do. If it's relevant, add that you're from such and such a group.

Some people reckon it's better to be upfront about your politics as well, to give prisoners the choice to stay in contact with you or not.

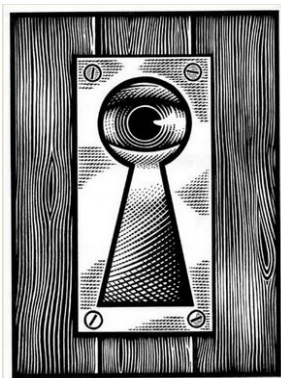
You can say where you heard about them from too. If you are writing to a framed prisoner, and you believe them to be innocent, it helps to say so, as it gives people confidence to know that you believe them. If the prisoner is in for a political charge you should obviously let them know you support their actions but don't treat them as great martyrs to the cause, but like normal people!

Don't worry about the possibility of depressing them with tales from your everyday life or having fun – prison is basically dead boring, and any news that livens it up, whether it's about people they know or not, is generally welcome. In fact humour and being a connection to 'normal' life via what you write can be more than welcome!

Remember not to write anything that is likely to get the prisoner in trouble with the screws, or get you or anyone else in trouble with the cops. Also, don't send political literature without asking first.

It'd be a shame to get totally paranoid though; if you are writing to a political prisoner and you are involved with resistance, and if they are interested, it's vital to keep them involved by telling them about actions, sending them newsletters if they want them, discussing ideas and strategies with them.

OTHER PRACTICAL SUPPORT ~~~~~



Every prison has its own rules as to what can be sent in or how visits get organised, the best thing is to ask the prisoner what s/he is allowed to get or how to arrange a visit. 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, screws 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! 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 (actually to stop prisoners forging ID cards!). 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 screws having off with it. Some things you might consider sending in are:

Books – you may be able to send used copies in but many prisons will only accept books from a recognised shop, distributor or publisher so check first. It's possible to get round this in some cases if you know a sympathetic second-hand bookshop which will package a used book with an official looking receipt. Screws may withhold some literature on the grounds of content but the prisoner, citing Human Rights legislation, can generally dispute this. Books and magazines are only meant to be censored or refused if they're racially abusive, identify individual screws by name, or threaten "good order and discipline" (however you choose to interpret that!). If you've any doubts again ask the prisoner.

Magazines – again the policy varies so as above check first. Surprisingly, widely available publications are more likely to be refused while obscure zines may get through okay. This is because most prisons have an appointed local newsagent which you have to use for 'off the shelf' publications. You pay for a magazine, newspaper or puzzle book at the shop and give them the inmate's prison number and this is

forwarded to them. It's even possible to set up a subscription to a daily newspaper this way. You can usually send small zines in, it works even better if they are sent straight from the publisher/i.e. the address on the zine and on the return envelope are the same.



Stamps – Stamps are gold dust for prisoners, if they can receive them, not only for sending letters but also as currency. Many prisons will not allow stamps and obviously screws will often pocket them. UK prisons should all allow stamped-addressed envelopes in, which obviously makes it easier for a prisoner to reply. These are the safest bet (after all it's hardly a huge outlay) but write your address in pencil so the prisoner can remove it if they have a more important letter to send. For prisoners abroad, you can usually send an IRC (International Reply Coupon)

Cash – while the amount most prisoners can spend on a weekly basis is limited, their actual income to spend on "luxuries" such as usable razors, tobacco, paper, phone cards etc is often microscopic, particularly if they are refusing work. On top of this, Aramark and Booker/DHL, the private companies who run prison canteens, only sell expensive brand-named products, and incredibly get away with selling it at more than high-street prices! Funds from the outside can therefore be vital, but cash is not used in prisons and inmates have an 'account' with a certain amount freed up each week as 'spends'. Obviously if you're sending more than a couple of quid it's worth checking first, but as a general guide funds should only be sent as postal orders made payable to "The Governor, HMP [prison name]". Write the prisoner's full name and prison number clearly on the back of the P.O., or they won't get it.

Phone cards – Phone cards from the outside didn't work on prison phones! If you want to help someone with the cost of calls to friends and family send them a postal order, as they'll have to buy credit inside.

Music, footwear, radios and other miscellaneous goods – this varies so widely that you have to check. Some prisons will accept almost anything, others will flatly refuse everything, often because prisoners are made to save up their spends and buy goods from 'approved' mail-order retailers such as Argos instead.

Visiting – If you would like to visit a prisoner, get in touch with them first, or with their support group, to check if this will be okay. Visits can be made usually with up to 3 adults and a few children at a time and can last about an hour. Remand (unconvicted) prisoners are usually allowed 3 visits a week up to a visit every day, and you might just need to show up at visiting times with photo ID. Convicted prisoners are allowed much less visits (usually only a few a months) and these visits must be pre-arranged by the prisoner sending out a Visiting Order (V.O.) to the potential visitor. If you can't use a visiting order you've been sent you should send it back to the prisoner so they can send it to someone else instead. When visiting, you may be able to hand things in for the prisoner – check the individual prison regulations – but you may not be able to take more in to the visiting area than some change for the drinks machines (you will probably be able to lock your other belongings in a locker before going in). You can expect to be searched. You definitely can't bring in drugs, alcohol, cameras, recording devices (unless you are the legal advisor), and mobile phones, explosive and so on. Smuggling contraband in - even without any intention of passing it to the prisoner! - and getting caught will place severe restrictions on the prisoner's visiting privileges so be wise!



SOLIDARITY



Solidarity knows no bounds. Writing letters to relevant places requesting something realistic such as an appeal, transfer, vegan food etc on behalf of a prisoner can help improve their chances. Prisoners [who] with outside support do tend to be treated better. Check with the

prisoner involved what might be useful, and/or respond to support campaigns' appeals. There is so much more than can be done, it's up to you and your imagination and your contact with a prisoner, such as: publicity for the case, visits, financial support and fundraising, pickets of prisons, banner hangings, to direct action in solidarity.

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

If you are offering support or to campaign for a prisoner, it is best to be realistic about what you can achieve. It is important to keep hope alive but not create illusions about you being able to spring them or 'clear their name'. If a prisoner believes you can do more for them than is possible, it can lead to disillusion. So don't promise anything you are not sure you can deliver on!

THROUGH THE WALLS



At the end of the day, writing to prisoners is about common sense and using your head. Most prisoners are not the mad beasts 'The Sun' would have us believe, they are ordinary people just like you. Prison is there to isolate people, so we must be actively keeping the link to the outside world open. Direct contact via letters is one of the most vital ways of making sure prisoners are not abandoned to the control of the State.



Useful websites:

www.brightonabc.org.uk/

Brighton Anarchist Black Cross,
anarchist/eco prisoner news lists, support
info etc.

www.spiritoffreedom.org.uk/

earth liberation prisoners support group.

www.vpsg.org/

vegan prisoners support group.

www.havendistribution.org.uk

books to prisoners scheme.

www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk

information about visiting times at
prisons, help available for families, etc.



cc creative commons

Published by
Brighton Anarchist Black Cross,
P.O. Box 74,
Brighton, BN1 4ZQ.
e-mail:
brightonabc@yahoo.co.uk