

Letter Writing Guidelines

The following is an extract from the Prison Fellowship Australia Letter Writing Policy.

DOs ...

- Do commit your letter writing to God. Ask for His guidance about what to write, what tone to adopt and what personal material (if any) to include with the letter.
- Do be natural, be yourself.
- Do remember that questioning and “listening” are important to communication in any relationship. *“And it came to pass that after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions.” Luke 2:46.*
- Do occasionally send a card or note, in lieu of a longer letter. A spontaneously scribbled note or humorous card can boost morale.
- Do include the occasional leaflet, magazine clipping, newspaper article or cartoon with your letters. Brief, positive, lighthearted literature of this sort provides a tonic for a jaded spirit. Many churches and booksellers have a supply of Christian leaflets that could be a great aid to you as God's instrument in spreading the Good News.

DO NOTs ...

General

- Do not make promises you cannot keep. Stimulate the process of self help, by encouraging responsibility for those things requested of you. This may be difficult for you, at first, but in the long run it will develop the inmate's self esteem.
- Do not ask the inmate the reason that he/she is in prison, nor for any particulars of his/her crime(s). The inmate may open up on these matters, as time goes by, but that is entirely his/her decision, and only your business if he/she makes it so.
- Do not overwhelm the inmate with Christian material or concepts on first contact. Allow the relationship to develop, so that what you are communicating has importance and relevance that is recognisable to the inmate.

- Do not assume that the inmate is reasonably literate. Many inmates are not. Make your introductory letter clear and straightforward, then respond to future letters at the level of literacy that is evident from the inmate's writing.
- Do not send money, unless after very careful consideration. Inmates will sometimes swindle innocent outsiders. If, after checking with a reliable source, you are satisfied, then do as God leads you. Note that, in any case, some jurisdictions may not allow money to be sent to inmates.
- Do not send objects, including books, with your letters. A leaflet, clipping or cartoon is usually acceptable to prison authorities, but more substantial materials are almost certainly not acceptable.
- Do not be conned by dramatic stories of being falsely accused, unjustly imprisoned, or inhumanly treated. This may be an attempt to arouse sympathy. In this respect, never write to authorities on behalf of an inmate.
- Do not always wait for a reply to an earlier letter, before writing. Take the initiative, between replies, to pop a card or note in the mail, i.e. a something that does not require an acknowledgment. It may be easier for you to do this, than for the inmate to reply to your letter, and your faithfulness to them can speak volumes!

Personal

- Do not share anything about yourself that can be used to threaten or obligate you.
- Do not use your own address, nor indicate the town or suburb in which you live. Use the Prison Fellowship address at all times. The Prison Fellowship office will forward the responses to you, unopened.
- Do not give detailed information about your family structure. It is fine to write in general terms (e.g. I have three children), but avoid specifics about your children. For example, do not give names, ages, gender or the schools they attend.
- Do not send family photographs.

Suggested approaches

Caring Christians can offer hope and comfort to prisoners, through writing to them. Through your letters, you can be God's instrument for introducing an inmate to the transforming love of Jesus Christ!

The remainder of this section addresses various emotional states that are frequently experienced by inmates. They are included to help you to approach this valuable service, with confidence that you will be able to make a difference. Your letters will be a great antidote to each of the following, and a gentle witness to the love of Jesus Christ.

Loneliness

Loneliness has many forms. Most prisoners are not short of company during the time they are out of their cells each day. However, they may spend many hours alone in their cells. In any case, many experience an inner loneliness through being isolated from all that defined them as a person in normal society.

Loneliness may lead an inmate to an awareness of his/her deeper needs. Volunteer letter writers can help towards satisfying the need for companionship and relationship, simply by communicating. Most inmates are hungry for any association with the world outside their walls. This makes news of the “little” things of everyday living immensely valuable to an inmate. It also provides fertile ground for your letters. As trivial as these things may seem to you, they are likely to be of great interest to an inmate. Examples are your hobbies and events in your life (e.g. family occasions and work).

Helplessness

Many inmates suffer frequent attacks on their self worth, from many quarters. In some cases these may even originate from their own view of themselves. An inmate’s powerlessness to attend to family needs, or to solve personal, financial or property problems, can defeat all feelings of self worth.

Be encouraging in this area! Emphasise the future, rather than the past. A little praise for an inmate’s current positive efforts goes a long way! However, be cautious of going to extremes in an attempt to instil or bolster self worth. Sincerity and honesty are essential. Do not make life on the outside sound as if it is all a “bed of roses”. An inmate can be reminded occasionally that those in the “real” world also have to cope with regular attacks on their sense of control, well being and self worth.

Loss of identity

Much of what an inmate experiences in prison is de-personalising. Many of the elements of life that previously defined them as individuals are removed. In many cases, custodial officers only use inmate’s surnames when addressing them, and all formal interactions within the system revolve around the inmate’s record number.

Inmates have very little scope to make personal decisions about their daily activities, where or when they do things, whom they can see, whom they can ring, what they can wear, what they can have in their cells and what they can read. They can become very much a cog in a machine, and can lose the incentive to do anything individual.

Your letters may give them the opportunity to think and write about themselves as real individuals. Ultimately, they will find their true and full identity when they recognise their status as loved children of God. Perhaps your letters can point them in that direction, especially once mutual trust has been established.

Bitterness

Their feelings of having been rejected by society often lead inmates to reject society in response. This rebellion is often expressed through defiance of law and authority.

Encourage proper attitudes by gently sharing the other side, while respecting the inmate's opinions. Avoid being patronising. The world may be unfair, or their perception may be that the world is unfair, but Jesus Christ is always just and merciful.

Inertia

During their time in prison, inmates are generally unable to function constructively as a part of society. They can feel powerless and, perhaps, hopeless. They may be unable to see any positive alternatives for the future. Inmates need help to develop a realistic plan for self adjustment to the present and to the future.

Your questions about interests, goals, schooling and experience can inspire positive planning in this direction.

Suspicion

To an inmate accustomed to the principle that nothing in life is free, i.e. that everything that is offered has strings attached, and that your motives for involvement may be suspect. This is often because the inmate has never experienced a positive, sharing, personal relationship.

Ground your relationship in mutual trust, respect, and understanding. Persevere, and in time your sincerity and its source, i.e. the love of Jesus Christ, will shine through!

For more details please contact Prison Fellowship Australia in your state.

Visit www.prisonfellowship.org.au

