

"Remember those in prison, as if you were there yourself ..."
- Hebrews 13:3

Guidelines, Dos and Don'ts, and Best Practices

More than 50% of Oklahoma's incarcerated population have no one on the outside who knows them, cares about them, and desires to be a part of their lives. They have no reoccurring letters of encouragement from anyone on the outside. Many of them have had friends and family members wash their hands of them after a lifetime of crime or extended sentences.

Despite one's past, everyone deserves to be loved, forgiven, and reminded they are still image bearers of a living God who loves them and who died for them.

That's where you step in.

Pen-pal relationships are extremely valuable both in the life of the incarcerated and the volunteer. They allow Christians to reach out and share Jesus' love and God's forgiveness, as well as assist in the process of re-entry or give hope to a resident who will never step outside of prison walls. Giving resident's attention by way of letter writing with a caring, loving, understanding, and Christ-like attitude can give hope to a broken heart and a positive outlook. Not only will the resident be blessed by your expression of love, but you will also be blessed with an insightful relationship with a resident who can grow to love you, inspire you, and pray for you.

After you complete your Pen-Pal Application, you will be connected with a resident who has also applied and been approved. You will be mailed the resident's address, then you can let the correspondence begin.

Feel free to keep the first letter short and sweet. Ask questions that fit with the guidelines below. Tell a little about yourself, also keeping within the guidelines below.

FAQ's

WHAT IS THE COMMITMENT LEVEL?

A volunteer's commitment in faithfully pen-palling at least once a month can foster a healthy and trusting relationship with just a few minutes of the volunteer's time. However, that can be decided between you and your pen-pal. Residents have to provide their own stationary, pens, and stamps. Often, they write less frequently and are limited financially to reply right away. Be patient. If you are concerned, write again and send a card of encouragement to see how your pen-pal is doing.

IS LETTER-WRITING OPEN ONLY TO CHRISTIANS?

Yes. Letter writers must reflect the love of Jesus Christ to the residents.

CAN I WRITE A RESIDENT OF THE OPPOSITE GENDER?

No. We want to make sure these pen-pal relationships stay healthy and above reproach.

WHAT ARE THE AGE REQUIREMENTS?

Volunteer pen-pals must be at least 18 years of age.

WHAT DO I WRITE?

Just be a friend. Talk about your interests, profession, or hobbies. Encourage them to talk about themselves. Residents have dreams and interests that often go unheard. Even if they are in for life, or very long sentences, they still like to talk about their life, interests, and hopes for the future.

Feel free to talk about your family, friends, and church in a general manner. Be careful not to give out specific information. For example, a resident can hear about your spouse enjoying his/her job without ever knowing the exact name or location of the employer. Be hyper-vigilant about the information you put out there. Be personable without giving specifics about times, locations, or anything on a reoccurring schedule.

ONCE A PEN-PAL MATCH IS MADE, WHAT INFORMATION DOES THE PRISON MINISTRY GIVE THE RESIDENT ABOUT THE VOLUNTEER?

No information is given to the resident regarding the volunteer. The incarcerated person is only notified that he/she will be contacted soon by a volunteer.

VISITATION

If you'd like to visit your pen-pal, ask if he/she is willing to have you visit. If your pen-pal requests a visit, ask what procedures you will need to follow to be able to visit. Each jail/prison facility has its own visitation procedure. Crossings Staff are willing to help you. If you do plan/schedule a visit with your pen-pal, please let Jeremiah Braudrick know the date, time, and location of the prison you will be visiting.

Dos and Don'ts

DOS

1. Be a Christian friend to the incarcerated. Show Christ's love and always have a listening ear. Be a voice of hope and be known by love. Exemplify 1 Corinthians 13 and Galatians 6.
2. When in doubt about anything, ask the pen-pal coordinator.
3. Share your faith, but don't be too preachy. For example, talk about your faith and life with Christ, and share that Jesus loves each one of us. That there is nothing we can do to separate ourselves from God. In addition, ask questions and be open to the questions he/she may ask you.
4. Keep your objectivity. Keep in mind that although you are forming a pen-pal relationship and growing a bond of trust, he/she is incarcerated and is behind bars for a reason. You don't—nor should—you share many details with him/her. Your pen-pal should be, by a certain point in the pen-pal relationship, sharing more than you. However, if he/she is on the quieter side, share Scripture and ask questions based off the Scripture shared. There is a certain level of confidentiality and transparency we should share with our pen-pals. If you have any questions on this, please ask the PenPal coordinator.
5. Give only the Crossings address to residents, never your home address or phone number.
6. Be dependable. Initiate the pen-pal relationship and, in return, respond in a timely manner.
7. Be patient.
8. Be honest.
9. Be a good listener. We are here to listen well, not to fix.
10. Be aware of con games.
11. Be trustworthy when a resident shares personal or confidential information with you. If he/she shares something that makes you uncomfortable or is concerning, let the PenPal coordinator know as soon as possible. What is shared between you and a resident is confidential; therefore, if something is shared that is of concern or discomfort to you, please let your coordinator know.
12. Be prepared to handle flirting or romantic advances, even same gender.

13. Don't pity them. Our mission is to show love, grace, and hope to the incarcerated and to pray with and for them. They need to know they are loved, valued, and heard. Be the Light to them.
14. Try to find ways to encourage and give hope, even to those in prison for life.
15. Be empathetic without always trying to "fix" them. God fixed many of them long ago.
16. Be open to what God wants to tell you through them. Pen-Pal ministry goes both ways, not just in one direction.

DON'TS

1. Don't make promises you can't keep.
2. Don't try to fix all their problems. Only God can really fix their problems.
3. Don't try to be a theologian by writing them only Scripture to meditate on, speaking only about God's Word, or telling them how to be a better follower of Christ. Scripture and the Word should absolutely be a part of every letter sent, but also make a point to ask them how they are doing, about their day, if they have a job on the yard, who their cellmate is, etc. He/she may be behind bars for a reason, but is still God's child and needs community, even if it's through letter writing.
4. Don't have a "holier-than-thou" or "preachy" attitude. Humility is key! You are there to be a supportive presence and a voice of hope. You are not there to be a fixer, a counselor, a doctor, or a savior.
5. Don't be an expert or reformer. Humility is key!
6. Don't do this to help yourself. The goal of a pen-pal relationship is to encourage a resident and share God's love, grace, and hope into an individual's life. Therefore, if your goal is to help yourself or meet a personal need by being a pen-pal, this may not be the right area of prison ministry for you. A pen-pal relationship is solely to be a voice of hope, to be known by love, and to show Christ to someone who may have never had a mentor or pen-pal friend.
7. Don't give anything to residents. There are procedures for residents to follow to receive things they need. Often when you start to be overly generous, they will come back for more, and you'll get letters from other residents asking for stuff. Consult with Crossings staff if there are any questions.

8. Don't give money.
9. Don't ask why a person is in prison, often the resident will tell you eventually.
10. Don't criticize staff, an institution, races, cultures, countries, religions, etc.
11. Don't enter into any personal or business transactions with residents. It could be a felony, and you could be prosecuted.
12. Don't let the resident become too familiar with you. You are there to do a job for God, and everything that is done must represent him. You shouldn't share too much detail about your family, friends, schedule, or home life. Be honest and build trust. Although you and a resident may become friends through a pen-pal relationship, he/she shouldn't be your best friend, at least not while behind bars.
13. No person of the opposite sex will be allowed to have a one-on-one relationship with a resident.
14. They do enjoy pictures; however, be careful about sending pictures to a resident. They should be of a family setting only. No single headshots. If sending pictures of your family (which is fine), please be aware of what your family members are wearing. You may trust your pen-pal, but who knows about the other residents around them.
15. Feel free to, eventually, be vulnerable in your own struggles in life and ask their wisdom. Use common sense, but inviting a resident to speak wisdom into your life is a gift they rarely get, and a blessing we rarely receive.

Best Practices

Offer encouragement. Make sure the resident knows there is such a thing as a new beginning. Jesus forgives everyone of every sin.

Try to understand the resident's feelings and his/her situation.

Write several letters that have nothing to do with prison. They're aware they're incarcerated. They often would like to talk about books/sports/TV/friends/family/etc.

Make sure you understand and acknowledge that the residents pain is real. Help to validate the resident's feelings.

Speak God's Word, but be careful not to preach. Typically, Oklahoma residents get A LOT of preaching.

Allow a resident to vent without always having the answer. Sharing in their brokenness is often a great ministry.

Do not violate the rules set forth. The incarcerated know about breaking rules—often more than we do. Be the one they see following the rules instead of breaking them.

Never betray the resident's trust. When the resident shares confidential information about his/her life, that is to be kept between the two of you and no one else. However, if the resident talks about suicidal thoughts or deep-rooted struggles, let Jeremiah or your PenPal coordinator know as soon as possible, as well as the prison's Chaplain.

Never EVER make contact with someone on the outside on behalf of your pen-pal. Making contact with someone on the outside on behalf of your pen-pal could lead to various negative results, and it could possibly put you in a situation that is not healthy or wise.

Use clean and decent humor whenever possible. Humor heals a lot of wounds.

Don't ask questions that are too personal. Let the resident share what he/she wants in time.

Don't ask the resident what he/she did to be in prison. There will be a time when the resident feels comfortable and trusts you enough to share that personal information.

If there are any problems or questions not covered in these pages, please call or email the PenPal coordinator.

I, _____, have read and understood all of the Crossings Pen-Pal Program Guidelines, Dos and Don'ts, and Best Practices and agree to abide by them. I also agree to bring any situation to Crossings staff if I ever have a question or concern about anything regarding my pen-pal relationship.

I realize I am representing the Crossings Prison Ministry with every letter I write, and any negative outcome could reflect poorly upon them and Crossings Community Church as a whole.

Preferred Correctional Facility: _____

Name (Printed): _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Gender: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Tell your pen-pal to address his/her envelope like this:

Pen-Pal
Your Name, (written clearly)
14600 N. Portland Ave.
Oklahoma City, OK 73134

Your letter will come in an envelope from Crossings Pen-Pal Ministry with the resident's letter inside.

We love hearing your praise reports. Please do not hesitate to email any time: jbraudrick@crossings.church