



# Writing to LGBTQ Prisoners as a Group

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## Why write to prisoners?

Prison is a lonely and isolating time. Many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ) people are harassed by guards and other prisoners and are also less likely to have support from family members and friends on the outside. When a prisoner receives mail, both the prison guards and other prisoners know that the person receiving mail has some sort of support system on the outside. For marginalized prisoners, especially, this display of support can function as a harm reduction tactic since those connected to people on the outside are less likely to be victimized.

## Writing as a Group:

We are piloting an effort to encourage Gay Straight Alliances, youth groups, and similar groups to take on the responsibility of writing to two or three prisoners as a group over a period of several years. While the members of the group may change, the prisoner will still be getting regular support from the group. Traditionally we encouraged pen pal friendships between individuals. We are excited about groups writing to prisoners because it becomes a shared responsibility and group members will be able to talk about their experiences and developing understanding of the Prison Industrial Complex together.

## Parents:

One concern we have is that parents may object to their kid writing to a prisoner, even if it's part of a group. We'd hate for a parent to call up a prison several months into the project and cause trouble for a prisoner who was just replying to pen pal letters. As a group, you should decide how you want to handle this issue. This could be dealt with by:

1. Getting parental permission for all youth who are involved.
2. Allowing individual youth to decide whether or not they tell their parents about the project.
3. Having youth who think their parents will be fine with it get permission and have youth who think their parents might object choose an alias to use when writing instead of informing their parents.

Ideally have letters come to a school, church or an adult advisor's home. As a group discuss if you want to use different names or only first names.

If we know your group includes people under the age of 18 we will only send you the names of prisoners who have said they can correspond with youth. People who have been charged with sex offenses can get added time for writing to minors.

### **What should you write about?**

Letters will likely flow naturally after you get started, but it can be overwhelming to figure out what to talk about in your first letter.

Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Describe the group that you're writing from, its purpose, what kind of activities you do together, etc.
- Have each individual write a few sentences about themselves (interests and hobbies, age, school or work, favorite TV shows/movies/books/music)
- Mention that you got their name from Black & Pink
- Let the person you're writing to know how often the group will be able to respond to letters

One of the purposes of writing to LGBTQ prisoners is to provide support and affirmation for their gender identity or sexuality. However, be aware that some people are not open about their identity. Ask if they can talk openly about their trans/queer/LGB/gender-nonconforming identity in letters and whether or not it's okay to send them resources and information directly and overtly linked with these communities.

### **Addressing Envelopes**

It is important to include the prisoner's number after their name. Some prisoners prefer a different name than their legal name (for example transgender prisoners whose legal name doesn't match their gender identity). It's best to address the envelope with the legal name and you can address the card to their preferred name.

If you haven't sent a letter in forever, remember the recipient's info goes in the center of the envelope and the return address goes in the top left hand corner. Please put the address of your school, group, or church in the top left hand corner.

Print Sender Name Street Address City, State, zip code	Prisoner Name & Number Facility Name Street Address or P.O. Box City, State Zip Code
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Be sure to place your address both in the letter and on the return address piece of the envelope, as some prisons do not allow the envelope to be given to the prisoner. Know that prison guards often read the mail and, unfortunately, can censor things.

### **Here are two important points to think about from our Pen Pal Guidelines:**

***What is my capacity?*** For many prisoners receiving one or two letters from someone promising to correspond regularly, but failing to follow up with further correspondence can be incredibly difficult. Being a pen pal doesn't have to be an intense time commitment; letters can be as long or as short as you want them to be, so please be upfront about the regularity that you will be able to write —if it's only once a month, say so. It is perfectly acceptable to send postcards of support to people on the pen pal list, just do not set up expectations you will not be able to meet.

***How might I deal with hearing about the prison system?*** Writing with folks in prison can often lead to a deep education about what incarceration means that one might not have been expecting. It's important to have support systems to deal with the stories of trauma you might hear. It is also very helpful to do this work in community so you can discuss what you are learning and how you might engage the system as well. Individual pen pal relationships can sometimes lead to a desire to do far more advocacy for that individual or to abolish the system as a whole. We can succeed far more when we struggle in relationship with other people.

To read more questions visit: <http://www.blackandpink.org/pen-pal-guidelines/>

### **More Frequently Asked Questions**

Here are some other Frequently Asked Questions we get from people who are considering writing to prisoners:

***People who are in prison have done terrible things. Or: My friend/family member was hurt/killed by someone who's now in prison and I'm glad they're in prison. Why do prisoners deserve our letters?***

Prison is incredibly lonely and prisoners have to deal with abuse from guards and other prisoners, horrible food and living conditions, miniscule wages, and sometimes solitary confinement. Regardless of whether or not someone committed a violent crime, at Black & Pink we think all prisoners deserve support for the terrible experience of being in prison.

Additionally, no one of us wants to be defined by the single worst thing we have done in our lives. Yet, the reality is that most people who are in prison have not been convicted of violent offenses that left someone harmed or murdered. Black and Pink works with all people

regardless of their convictions, making no distinction between “violent” and “nonviolent” prisoners. It is our belief that we need to live in a world without cages. One of the key ways to get there is to build connections between people on both sides of the wall. Through an understanding of each other, an understanding of the racist criminal punishment system, and an understanding of the possibilities ahead of us we will be able to create the world we dream of.

**Why doesn't Black & Pink provide information on the crimes prisoners are convicted of?**

Black & Pink does not look up the crimes people are convicted of and we won't send that information to people who are writing from the outside, even if it is requested.

We have chosen not to do this for a number of reasons. People serving time have next to no control or autonomy over how they are represented as prisoners or as individuals. We consider it central to the intention and the politics of the project that the people we're in touch with inside have control over how they are represented, and what people on the outside know about them. This is in part motivated by an acknowledgment of the extent of surveillance which incarcerated communities are subjected to, and the lack of privacy afforded to folks inside. We consider it important to not contribute to systems of punitive surveillance by running background checks and online searches on our inside pen pals. We believe that as individuals on the outside, we can never understand the complexities of any specific case or reason why someone is inside, and we don't try to. Our mandate is and remains to offer support to incarcerated gay, queer, trans and similarly identified folks that is not contingent on the reason for which they're incarcerated.

If we know there are people under 18 in your group we will only give you the names of prisoners who have self-identified themselves as being able to write to minors. People who have been charged with a sexual offense can get in trouble for receiving mail from minors.

**Is it safe to use my full name?**

Yes. Many of us feel nervous about sharing personal information with brand new people in our lives and that is quite reasonable. There is, however, extra stigma around sharing information with incarcerated people. The majority of our 2,300 pen pals on the outside have given prisoners their full name and home addresses. We have never had any instances of prisoners showing up at someone's house uninvited or harming anyone who was writing. The one result of people sharing their full names is that prisoners often send thank you notes to Black & Pink and mention the person who wrote a card to them. Then whoever's reading their thank you note, will send good karma your way. :)

**Isn't it better to be gay in prison because you get to have more sex?**

No. Unfortunately prisons are often a very sexually violent place for people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and other non-heterosexual identities. While people certainly find consensual sexual and affectionate relationships while they are incarcerated the reality is that LGBTQ people experience much higher levels of sexual, physical, and emotional violence than other prisoners.

## Discussion Questions:

Choose 1 or more of the sets of questions below to start off a discussion. Feel free to mix and match! Think about the age and maturity level of the group as well as what kind of experiences they may have had when choosing question sets.

*Consider writing several questions on a notepad and asking the participants to write for several minutes any thoughts that come up about these questions. Then ask people to volunteer to share or go around in a circle. This method is particularly recommended for questions sets that draw on personal experiences.*

1. Ask if anyone knows someone who is or has been in prison. If they're comfortable talking about them: Do they feel like they can openly talk about the incarcerated person they know? Are they still in touch with this person? What sorts of things has this person gone through in prison?

2. Have you been harassed or discriminated against because of your LGBTQ identity? Could you get away from these people? Think about how these experiences might have gone differently if you were incarcerated with these people. In what ways might LGBTQ people be targeted and hurt while they are in prison?

3. When have you hurt someone? How did they react? Did you apologize and were you forgiven? Do most people in your life know this event happened? Think about how you'd feel if this event were part of your permanent record, visible to employers and any friends who wanted to look this information up.

[Note to facilitator: you can use this avenue of discussion to explain why we don't look up or ask prisoners why they're in prison. There is also a longer discussion of this in the FAQ section below.]

Think about a time when someone hurt you. What emotions did you feel?

4. Orange is the New Black

How many people have seen Orange is the New Black? What are some of the things that are hard for the women in prison that you might not have expected? How is Sophia, the transwoman treated? What are some things that people say about her? What happens to Piper's relationships with outside family members and friends?

How do the guards make life difficult for the women? What options do the women have for responding to the guards?

5. For a younger group: What would you miss the most if you lost your freedom? Want to draw pictures of that? [Consider including these in the letters or sending them home for the youth to talk with their family about the project.]

## Additional Resources to Spark Discussion

This is a letter written by Justin, a gay man incarcerated in Pennsylvania. It was published in Black & Pink's newspaper which is mostly written by incarcerated people. Justin describes experiences we hear from many prisoners: discrimination by the police, family rejection, and harassment because of his LGBTQ identity. Beneath his story is a list of terms that you might not have been unfamiliar with.

Dear Black & Pink Family,

Hello there, my name is Justin and I am a 28 year old gay man currently residing in the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections. I would like to thank you for the Newspaper and allowing me to be part of the B&P family. I cannot begin to express how much it means to me, to know that there are people out there like you all who actually care about someone like me.

Let me explain so you can understand what I mean...

To start, I arrested on October 10, 2013 for unauthorized use of a motor vehicle. I was at the bar and ended up hooking up with this sexy guy. We left the bar a little before closing and went driving around looking for a spot where we could park and not be disturbed. Anyway, we were messing around when we heard someone tap on the window. I'm like OMG this can't be happening. I was so embarrassed, but that wasn't the end of it. We get out of the car and the cop asks for our ID's, asks whose car it is, and I'm like "It's his," pointing at the guy from the bar. The guy looks at me, then looks at the cop, then turns to run and gets 3 steps and the cop is on him. I'm like omg, omg, omg, this is not happening, and next thing I know I'm being slammed on the ground and handcuffed. Come to find out the car's stolen. I'm trying to tell the cops I don't know anything about a stolen car, I just met this guy, but they're not trying to hear it. I get to county jail, and the first person I write is my mom.

Now, my mother doesn't know I'm gay, like whenever I'm around her I'm the perfect hetero son, talking about girls and whatever. I've even had fake girlfriends over to her house. A little pathetic, right?

The only way I can explain it all to her is to tell her I'm gay, something I wasn't really trying to do while in jail. Or really at all, because of how she is. Like she's a religious fanatic, all "Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." I'm pretty sure you know the type.

Ok, so a week after I write her I get a response in the mail and I'm hoping for good news. It ended up being the worst possible thing ever. What I read, no child should have to read from their mother. She wrote that I "must be mistaken and that she is not sure how I got her address. That her son is dead and that I am not to write that address again." It took me a while to fully understand what I was seeing, I was in shock. I don't know how long I cried, but the whole time I wished I was dead.

Every time I wrote, it was returned to sender. That was a year and a half ago. This is why it means so much to me to be part of the Black & Pink family. I may have lost my birth family, but I have gained an even bigger one with all of you. One who understands me and accepts me for who I am. I love you guys.

And now I'm in solitary confinement at the moment waiting to be transferred. It has been 6 months since I've had a breath of fresh air. They have me on Protective Custody. Because some people were trying to extort me for money and sex. I had told all the individuals who were trying to extort me that if they did not leave me alone I would report them. I didn't know what else to do, you know? I'm not a fighter, I can't stand violence. Anyway, that did not work out well because about a week later they tried to stab me in the exercise yard. So I'm like yea, I've had enough of this. I packed all my stuff, and told the Correctional Officer's I wanted to take self lock-up.

That was November 16<sup>th</sup> 2013 and I am still here. Since then I get verbally harassed since I'm openly gay, and I guess people find it amusing to torment me. I feel so alone most of the time, like I literally have no one to talk to, so whenever I receive Black & Pink it makes a huge difference. You guys and girls are the greatest and I honestly don't know what I would do without you.

Love Always,  
Justin, Pennsylvania

### **Terms you might not be familiar with:**

**Black & Pink Family:** this refers to anyone who is associated with Black & Pink including prisoners who submit to or receive the newspaper, and volunteers and pen pals on the outside.

**Protective Custody:** Prisons sometimes have special units for people who are being threatened whether because of their LGBTQ identity or another reason. Unfortunately, protective custody frequently just means solitary confinement. Solitary confinement is considered a form of torture by the United Nations and is proven to cause psychological damage after 15 days.

**Correctional Officers:** prison guards.

### **Movies and TV shows**

- **Episode 3: Season 1 Orange is the New Black:** a fictional take on a woman's prison. The Orange is the New Black depiction of prisons is somewhat inaccurate but it is a good way to get a discussion going and more fun than documentaries. Episode 3 shows the backstory of Sophia, who is a transgender woman.
- **Cruel and Unusual:** Documentary on Transgender women in men's prisons across the US
- **Up the Ridge:** Documentary about the use of super max security prisons and how prisons make a profit.
- **The Last Graduation:** Documentary about the end of PELL grants available to prisoners

**Thank you for taking on this project of writing to prisoners and learning about the Prison Industrial Complex!**

