

QUILTS Penpal Guide

(formerly Black & Pink NYC)

Link to this guide: bit.ly/quiltspenpalguide

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How to select a penpal and assign yourself on Airtable

We encourage you to read/skim through the below document before you match yourself with a penpal. Once you're ready to select your penpal, follow these steps:

- Login into our [Airtable database](#) with the account `nyc@blackandpink.org` (password: `black&pinknyc`).
 - If you're not able to edit the Airtable, you've likely logged in with a personal account and not as QUILTS
- Confirm that you're in the right tab and view:
 - Desktop:
 - Look at the tabs at the top of the sheet (under "QUILTS Letters for Liberation") and make sure you're in the tab labeled "Inside Members."
 - On the left side toolbar, confirm you're in the "penpal waitlist" view (or you can alternatively use the "penpal gallery" view).
 - Mobile:
 - At the top, under "QUILTS Letters for Liberation" you should see the text "Inside Members / penpal waitlist." If you see different words, click on the text and navigate to Inside Members > penpal waitlist (or you can alternatively use the "penpal gallery" view).
- From there, you can scroll through and see the names, locations, bios, and other demographic info for all of the people who have requested penpals with our chapter.
- When you have decided on someone you would like to match with, click on their name to open their profile. Scroll down in their profile to find a field called "Outside Penpal" (if

you can't find it, you may have to click "show hidden fields"). Click "add member," then click the plus sign in the top right corner, and add your name and email address.

- Send your first letter to your penpal!

About QUILTS

QUILTS works toward prison abolition and supports LGBTQIA2S+ people and people living with HIV/AIDS who are impacted by incarceration. We do this through pen pal matching, mail correspondence and visitation, community reentry support, sending solidarity packages and commissary to inside members, and organizing with community partners in advocacy campaigns.

Abolition is our goal and our strategy for action. Any advocacy, services, organizing, and direct action we take will remove bricks from the system, not put up more walls. We believe a just world requires abolition of the prison-industrial complex and the creation of community solutions to address harm. We believe in solidarity with movements for liberation to recognize and resist oppression in all its forms.

Why be a penpal?

As Bryan Stevenson says in *Just Mercy*, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done." In an ideal world, there would be no need for inside/outside penpals because there would be no people in cages. This is a proverb that is core to an abolitionist praxis. No one deserves to suffer the conditions of prison, and penpalling is an essential opportunity to build community between incarcerated people and the "free world".

There are many reasons to be a penpal with an incarcerated person. Prison is extremely isolating. It is common for inside members to face long sentences – potentially decades of their life behind bars. Incarceration already isolates many from their support systems of friends and family. Since all of our members are LGBTQIA+ and/or HIV+, they face additional stigma and relational isolation from their loved ones even further, if not permanently. Relationships break isolation, one of the basic functions of the carceral system. Not only is penpalling a great opportunity for us to make a new friend, lend support, and learn from someone directly in the struggle but it also takes away some of the power the system has to isolate people.

Mail Call often happens in public spaces in the prison. When someone hears their name called by a prison guard during Mail Call it is a reminder that people on the outside care about that person. It is also a message to the guards and other incarcerated people that this person has support and is not forgotten. This can be a harm reduction strategy for people who are locked up, especially queer and trans folks.

People who have been incarcerated, as political prisoners or politicized prisoners, have often learned a lot about how power is exercised by the state and about how to survive under repressive conditions, so we on the outside aspiring for a better world in liberation have a lot to benefit from their wisdom.

There are no “qualifications” or strict standards to become a penpal, but we do ask for commitment. Evaluate your ability to write to someone—who is a stranger and who is in an ever-traumatizing environment—on a regular basis. QUILTS inside member Delon says, “Be patient, honest, and keep a positive mind. Everybody is beautiful and unique from the inside and outside... plus QUILTS would help you find a special friend so let them work their “MAGIC” ;P”

Materials

Stick to these materials:

- Lined or plain white paper (no colored paper)
- Black/blue ink (never use sharpie or marker)
- Plain white envelope (no colored envelopes)
- Colored pencils (optional - although letters with colored pencil are being rejected in some facilities outside of New York)

You may also type and print out your letter, as long as you use plain white printer paper. Color printing on white paper is allowed, though some facilities may scan your mail in black and white.

If you want to send a card or something more than the above materials, you can ask your penpal for details on what they can receive and/or call to ask the facility. Most facilities allow plain greeting cards (no glitter, glue, pop ups, etc.). Most facilities allow photos, but not polaroids. You unfortunately **cannot** send stamps or cash in the mail to incarcerated people.

If you wish to share art, doodles, or drawings, it's best to stick to drawing with colored pencils only. Rules vary by facility, but most will reject your mail if it uses crayons, markers, construction paper, sharpie, glitter, glue, or other craft materials.

What address should I use?

In general, we encourage penpals to use their home address if possible. We understand there are many valid reasons why you may not wish to give your personal address to a new person you haven't had the chance to get to know yet. At the same time, it's important to be aware of the added stigma that exists around sharing personal information with incarcerated people. We encourage people to do what feels best for them, while also carefully examining what may be causing their hesitation. It's always helpful to hear from other people's experiences, so feel free to reach out to us

at nyc@blackandpink.org or come to a Letters for Liberation event where you can speak with others who have had experience with penpalling and/or are formerly incarcerated.

That said, if you choose not to use your personal address at this time, there are a few options:

1. You can stick to digital correspondence (e.g. JPay, Corrlinks, Securus) either permanently or until you get to know your penpal better.
2. You can use an online mail delivery service like [Jmail](#) (note that this can sometimes lead to mail being rejected as “third party mail”).
3. You can purchase your own P.O. box to receive mail.
4. You might use your workplace’s address.
5. You may ask to use another community group’s address that you are part of.
6. If none of the above options are available to you, you may use our chapter P.O. box. Since we receive a lot of mail, often addressed to different volunteers, this option is the least reliable. To ensure your mail makes it to you, please request that your penpal use the following format.

PENPAL [NAME OF FREE WORLD PENPAL]
c/o Penpal Program
QUILTS
P.O. Box 1741
New York, NY 10013

If this format is not followed, it is unlikely we will be able to forward your mail to you, since we won’t be able to identify it as a penpal letter. **Please also notify us at nyc@blackandpink.org so that we know who is utilizing the P.O. box.** Note that we are unable to physically forward mail, so you will receive a scanned copy of the letter.

Getting Started

When we write letters between incarcerated and free world people, we are writing to human beings who have lived and continue to live complex lives. Here are some tips to share to help you get started.

Address format

Use the following format to address your envelope and letter to your penpal:

Your Full Name
Your Address
City, State Zip

Legal First Name Legal Last Name¹ #DOC number
Facility Name
Street Address/PO Box
City, State Zip

Please remember to include your return address on the envelope and the letter itself (sometimes people inside don't get the envelope). Use your first and last name in the letters. Make sure to use your pen pal's LEGAL name on the envelope. This sucks, but guarantees that it will get to them. You should write the letter greeting to your penpal's chosen name.

Writing your first letter

- Mention you found them through QUILTS/Black & Pink.
- Be upfront about how often you can write, and be clear about your friendship/relationship boundaries.
- If this is your first time writing a pen pal in prison, you can say that! Ask them what they want to write about and what their boundaries are too.
- Consider a conversation you might have with someone you just met at a party or new job. You might talk about why you're there, where you grew up, what your favorite hobbies are, and/or what you did over the weekend.
- Refer to something in their bio such as a shared interest or a question about something they said.
- It does not need to be perfect! Keep it simple – just one page is fine to get started.
- From an inside member: "Don't be afraid to really open up and tell us about yourself. We're still people, and we crave connections with others too. If this is just a trial/temp thing, be upfront about it. A lot of us don't get much mail and are grateful for what we do get. The most important thing is to just be yourself."

What to talk about

- Your name and pronouns
- Where you are located and/or places you grew up
- How you spend your time (work, school, hobbies, etc.)
- Family/friends
- Other interests

Some inside penpals include a bio with their request, so you can also ask follow up questions about what they've shared about themselves.

Initial outreach

Penpalling with one person will be more than enough to get started. Sometimes, people don't answer the first correspondence for many reasons, including mail getting lost, surveillance by correctional staff, or simply not having funds for stamps to write back. We encourage double-checking the DOC website ([New York State DOCCS](#); [New York City DOC](#); [New Jersey DOC](#);

[Connecticut DOC](#); [Federal BOP](#)) to see if the person has been released or transferred and, if they're still incarcerated, sending another letter. We also recommend trying an electronic message (see "Methods of Communication" below), since this is often easier and cheaper for inside folks. If you haven't heard after 2-3 attempts, at least once per month, let us know and we'll workshop together, but usually we'll match you with a different person.

Frequency of communication

When you establish contact, be upfront about how much and how often you can write/communicate. For example, one of our organizers commits themselves to writing one letter per month to their penpal. Another organizer and their penpal agreed to speak via phone 2-3x each week outside of work hours. Your level/type of communication might be more or less frequent or intimate, and may shift over time, but the important thing is to be consistent and clear about what you're able and willing to offer. Sending at least a one-page letter once per month is a good rule of thumb to start with.

We encourage you to start with a realistic boundary that doesn't set expectations too high for responding to an incarcerated penpal and inevitably lead to hurt if you don't meet those expectations.

Communication Tips

You should be aware of DOC rules, and follow them so your mail doesn't get rejected. If you're not sure, you can call the facility to ask, although you can also expect rules to be applied arbitrarily. In general, you should abide by the following:

- Assume all of your mail is read by DOC staff, and some of what you write may be censored.
- Always put your name and return address on the envelope.
- Never use the word "escape."
- Be careful with inflammatory/revolutionary language (e.g., "burn it to the ground").
- Don't send stamps, oversized greeting cards, electronic greeting cards, cash, or things with glue, crayon, glitter, tape, sharpie or marker.
- NYSDOCCS has a limit of 5 pages of printed/photocopied material.
- Third-party mail is not allowed, so use a different name and send separately if you want to send a message on behalf of someone else.

Methods of communication

Many facilities utilize electronic communication systems (similar to an email inbox). NJDOC and some NYSDOCCS facilities use [JPay](#); Connecticut and some NYSDOCCS facilities use [Securus](#); and Federal BOP uses [Corrlinks](#). Some of these are free to use, while others charge per message. Some allow you to add an incarcerated person to your contacts list, while others require that the incarcerated person adds you first.

Many inside members prefer e-communications because they are quicker, easier, and cheaper to communicate through. You may also have the option of phone calls and/or in-person visitation. Whatever your preference, you can work together with your pen pal to figure out your types and frequency of communication.

Suggestions from a formerly incarcerated penpal:

- Remember your penpal's birthday (unless they say they don't want that)—it's a nice way to communicate that there's someone out there thinking of them.
- Just have normal conversations. Act like the penpal knows who your friends are. Tell them what's going on and what your day has been like.
- Ask questions about them, "We want to hear about your life, and we also want you to ask us how we're doing."
- Often, it can be about the little things.

Sending Money/Packages

You may encounter requests for money, including for commissary—where inmates get a lot of their basic necessities like toiletries, snacks, and writing materials. Think about how much you're comfortable giving—it could be zero; a set amount each month or week; only for special occasions (like birthdays); only when you can; or for specific needs. When setting boundaries around finances with each other, free world penpals should of course consider our comparative access to money, even if limited.

It's important to be clear and direct about what you can contribute. Some sample responses that might help: "I can commit to sending you \$20/month. What's the best way for me to get it to you?" / "I can send \$X this month as a one-time birthday gift, but I'm unable to commit to ongoing financial support." / "No, I'm unfortunately tight for money right now, but I'm happy to keep writing."

Navigating Difficult Topics

Tips for boundary crossing

Being able to address when a boundary is crossed is key to the well-being of any relationship. Harm exists bidirectionally, and we should be ready and able to address it both when we are harmed or if we have done harm. If you have been harmed, it's okay to say you need space from a relationship for a period of time and to come back to it. A formerly incarcerated penpal advises, "If you feel uncomfortable in any way, tell your penpal that if that happens again, you won't write back; and then don't if necessary." Although there is a power differential to consider in any correspondence, you are always allowed and encouraged to disengage from a relationship where your boundaries are not being respected.

That said, we should understand the distinction between being challenged and patterns of toxicity/harm. Penpal relationships are not always within our comfort zone. While we may not

tolerate harm, we can attempt to tolerate discomfort. Similarly, sometimes we are the ones to cause harm. If that is the case, do your best to own the harm you caused, apologize, and make amends.

Nature of the relationship

Some inside members desire romantic and/or sexual partners. It's important to remember that prisons deprive people of love and care, and inside members should not feel ashamed for wanting these. At the same time, free world penpals often are not looking for sexual or romantic correspondence, which is also understandable. You should be upfront about your boundaries and what you are comfortable developing with your penpal. As a formerly incarcerated penpal has said, "Let them know exactly what you want." The vast majority of inside penpals who indicate that they're interested in romance are equally eager for many forms of connection, including friendship. Let them know from the beginning what you're looking for. This includes the nature of the relationship, but also applies to writing frequency, how you contact each other, etc.

Power

You will experience a significant power differential in your relationship with your penpal. People in the free world have large material differences than those who are incarcerated. Those of us who are free have more access to freedom of movement, the internet, and ways to make money—even if limited compared to others in the free world. It is okay to acknowledge this power differential and to talk about it as it comes up. You don't have to force a conversation about it, but it's important to acknowledge and process with each other.

People in the free world also have access to the conviction history of currently incarcerated people. Some penpals do look up this history due to concerns for safety or out of curiosity; some don't because they want to respect privacy and what their penpal shares. Please be aware that outside penpals aren't subject to that kind of personal scrutiny—your penpal cannot look up anything about you on the internet—and that's a significant power differential in your relationship.

Trauma

Because you will get to know your penpal intimately, you will also likely encounter their trauma. Not only are prisons inherently traumatic places, but we also know that those who experience trauma and oppression are often criminalized. Your penpal may want to talk about and share their experiences with you.

While it is not a perfect model, the [modified "silk ring theory" for allyship](#) may be a helpful consideration as you consider the trauma others have experienced. The premise of this is that it is important to understand your relationship to the person most impacted. You may be very disturbed to hear about the violence and trauma someone has experienced. We encourage outside penpals to "comfort in" and "dump out," meaning that we should support those who are most impacted by the trauma and oppression (comfort in) and also have a robust support system who we can acknowledge and process intense feelings with who are more distant from the center of the oppression (dump out). While oppression is often more complex than the simplicity of this model, silk ring theory might be a helpful visual and theoretical starting point.

As a reminder, you are no one's chaplain, counselor, social worker, or lawyer—even if you are trained and have worked as such. You won't be able to do everything for your penpal, and it's okay to remind them of this. We are people who are in relationship with each other, and you can support someone without being their "lifeline" or a savior. Some penpals have found it helpful to have a "penpal buddy" on the outside—someone they can check in with when stuff they need to process inevitably comes up.

Oppression

Incarcerated people are oppressed, which is why we want to consider carefully how we communicate about power and trauma. Prisons are also microcosms of our interactions with each other, so people in prison can carry oppressive behaviors, the same as those of us in the free world. Incarcerated members who are white sometimes say f*cked up things about Black and Brown people; incarcerated members who are cis can say f*cked up things about trans people, etc. Race is constructed in different ways in prison, and there are different things people have to do for survival and different ways people conceive of their identities due to different life experiences and access to political education. Not everyone uses contemporary language, so think about how your communication can be opportunities to learn for both of you.

We can navigate these interactions both compassionately and intentionally by directly addressing these dynamics when they arise, talking explicitly about them, and asking each other questions. Some of our currently and formerly incarcerated members have in fact encouraged us to do this. When people are released, being able to practice how they interact with and relate to others is an essential part of adjusting to the free world.

Ending the relationship

If you can't write anymore, your capacity changes, or you need to set some sort of boundary, please communicate this with QUILTS and your penpal. This happens. Sometimes we aren't matched with someone we connect with, which is okay. Please don't just stop writing, though. Even if you have only exchanged one letter, we do not want to contribute further to the isolation and abandonment that prison already engenders. Many of us have witnessed a lot of inside folks be ghosted by their free world penpals. It doesn't always feel significant for free world folks, but it can be very hurtful for people who are incarcerated. We want to navigate the end of relationships and/or new boundaries with care and intention.

Coming Home Support

At some point, your pen pal may be released into the free world. Welcoming our incarcerated friends home is a joyous occasion, although it can invoke some nerves. This is a change in the relationship, and it means your dynamic with each other will shift. For example, they may want to communicate with you using methods that you haven't used before, such as via phone or text. We

encourage you to continue developing your relationship, to meet them, and welcome them home to the “free world.” In any case, communicate what you are comfortable and able to support with.

Consider asking your penpal to keep you updated on if/when they’ll get out and where they think they’ll be paroling to. Re-entry is a very difficult and arduous process. For the person who has been incarcerated, it can be a moment of emergency hardship: they are going out into the streets with little to no money and lacking connections after being locked away from family/community. As such, your penpal may ask for material support or for support finding housing, creating a resume, finding a job, and accessing social services. You can also look up and recommend [resources](#) from other orgs, which we can attempt to help you with as well.

Questions

You will likely have questions about how to navigate your penpal relationship, which is encouraged and welcomed. Questions are part of the political education process. We are happy to discuss more of these 1:1. Reach out to us at nyc@blackandpink.org, or come to one of our events where you can speak with others who have had experience with penpalling and/or are formerly incarcerated. We are building relationships between the free world and the inside together, and we can do that most generatively when we work together to do so.

More Penpal Resources

[Black and Pink Penpal Webinar Recording](#)

Multiple Black & Pink members talk about being a penpal from perspectives both inside and outside.

[Black and Pink National Pen Pal Support | Facebook](#)

Join a Facebook group to read about other people’s experiences interacting within Black & Pink, and discuss questions you have about interacting with your penpal.