

Reference Letter Writing: A Volunteer Handbook

About PLSN Reference Letters

This document is for volunteers answering reference questions sent to the Prison Library Support Network's Reference Project. It contains guidance and tips for answering reference letters based on our own experience doing this work and the following resources:

- [The Toolkit: Reference by Mail Program](#) - NYPL's Correctional Services Division
- [SxHx NYC Toolkit for Organizing Letterwriting Events](#)
- [CCWPs Letter Writing Guide](#)
- [Frequently Asked Questions – Prisoner Correspondence Project](#)
- [Mentor By Mail "How To" Sheet](#)

Reference Project Goals & Values

In doing this work, PLSN aims to:

- To connect incarcerated people with any information resources they determine they need
- To establish lines of communication between people inside who aren't able to get the information they need and people outside with access to libraries, information resources, and search tools
- To develop methods for sharing information which are not tied to the carceral or colonial state

Values

No Cops, No Saviors: Rather than deciding what's best for people, we believe people know best what they need. We approach reference with the goal of responding to stated needs by offering people the best information possible to do what they feel is in their best interest. Apart from following mail policies from the DOC, we reject the idea of imposing judgments on what is safe to share. We don't police the content of reference questions or the information needs of those who reach out to us.

Accountability and Sustainability: There is a significant power difference between those of us on the outside who are sending letters in and people receiving letters behind bars. This makes it particularly important to structure this service in a way we can

maintain, honor our commitments, and regularly communicate what we can offer in an accurate, clear, and consistent way.

Reciprocal + Personal: Reference establishes a line of communication for those of us outside to understand how to support people inside directly. We, therefore, value the knowledge and intellectual contributions of those on either side of the letter. While our goal in reference exchanges is to share information and not find penpals, we are still transparent and personal about our identities because we believe in the lived relationships and imaginative possibilities emanating from connections built through letter-writing.

Anti-colonialism + Anti-Racism: We understand part of the explicit and expressed function of libraries is to maintain a system of intellectual property within a larger context of a white supremacist state that depends on colonialization, genocide, ableism, and enslavement. We know that truly realizing the emancipatory potential of the library requires:

- prioritizing collective access in ways that move beyond able-bodied/-minded normativity
- supporting Indigenous resistance to the settler state and movements for decolonization
- actively fighting anti-Blackness and racism within ourselves, our work, and beyond it
- creating resources for sharing information which are not tied to the carceral or colonial state¹

Abolition: Our work is rooted in an abolitionist framework and represents a commitment to fostering our collective understanding of abolishing mass incarceration and building a constellation of alternative information resources that exist outside of the carceral state. As abolitionists, we seek out radical possibilities by building connections across our communities with others struggling for abolition and reject work that expands the reach of the carceral state.

¹ Based on work by nina de jesus

<http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2014/locating-the-library-in-institutional-oppression/> and [Sins Invalid https://www.sinsinvalid.org/blog/10-principles-of-disability-justice](https://www.sinsinvalid.org/blog/10-principles-of-disability-justice)

Before Starting Your Letter

Review Facility Mailroom Policies

Check mailroom policies before writing. For the most part we will be answering letters that have to follow one of these policies but make sure to look up the mailroom policy for your particular facility. *Especially make sure to double check page limits!*

Quick links:

- Mail policies for the prisons we receive the most mail from are available on an evolving airtable database (please double check these policies and addresses)
 - <https://airtable.com/appQXQACML9mSGmut/shrnVLugaj8q8U4kl/tbl6bX7QRJogRtiTt>
- Prison Censorship Mail Rules Database (look up facility rules by state)
 - <https://www.prisoncensorship.info/rules>
- NYS DOCCS Mail Guidelines & NYC Mail Policies
 - <https://doccs.ny.gov/mail-packages>
- Rikers Island & NYC DOC Mail Guidelines
 - <https://portal.311.nyc.gov/article/?kanumber=KA-01968>

Every prison system has a slightly different policy on what is permissible. Even then it depends on who is working in the mailroom when your envelope arrives. What gets refused on one day may get through on another. Try not to get discouraged by arbitrary policies. Letters are a vital source of connection with the outside world for imprisoned people.

What do we know so far? PLSN is documenting letters that get returned and rules that get applied. Following is list of restrictions we have come across thus far:

Almost always restricted

- Sexual content
- Nudity
- Weapons
- Gang-related
- Maps (esp of nearby areas or states)
- Escape plans
- Content written in code
- Letters to other incarcerated people
- Personal information about other people
- Cash/checks/money orders
- Greeting cards

- Instructions to make drugs/alcohol/bootlegging
- Operating businesses (in or outside)
- Hate speech/hate “groups”
- Polaroid photos

Common requests that are sometimes restricted

- Catalogs or order forms (including pen pals)
- Tattoos
- Information about crimes committed
- Homesteading/survival skills
- Tradeskills
- How to code
- Games like sudoku, crosswords
- RPG material
- non-English content
- Tax forms
- Martial arts

Other Important Considerations

Privacy. Incarcerated people are subject to constant surveillance and, in practice, are not given the same constitutional right to privacy as those of us outside the prison system. In an effort to be respectful of our letter writers’ privacy, to counteract cultural biases, and to provide a level of autonomy which our letter writers are routinely denied, PLSN volunteers are asked to be mindful of our treatment of any private information they provide, and in the research we undertake in our responses. We ask that volunteers:

- Do not perform any online searches of the letter writer (except in the event this is something they have explicitly requested)
- Avoid online searches of any friends, family, or names mentioned in their correspondence unless there is a specific and explicit request for us to search a person for genealogical information or family photos, etc.
- We can send personal/contact information published on a publicly available website with the consent of the person it is about); however, we respect the right

to privacy and do not share private information, including that found on social media accounts and spokeo (or similar services).

Be sensitive to queer people's safety: It's good practice to be careful about sharing queer resources in our responses unless they have been specifically requested, since our letter writers may not always be out. To quote from guidelines provided by Black and Pink: "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."

Establish boundaries that feel right for you. PLSN's reference letter project is not a penpal program, but you are welcome to develop a penpal relationship with an incarcerated person whose reference requests you're answering. You are also welcome to decline any penpal request you might receive and instead refer your correspondent to one of the established penpal services listed below or in [the Pen Pal Template](#), if that feels better for you. Think realistically about your time and resources, and do not make promises that you can't keep.

- Survived & Punished survivedandpunished.org/letter-writing-action/
- Black & Pink blackandpinkpenpals.org/
- SRLP Pen Pal Postcard Project
srlp.org/about/prisoner-advisory-committee/prisoner-pen-pal-postcard-project/
- Human Writes www.humanwrites.org/

Writing Your Reference Letter

Read the letter and identify reference question(s) with care

- Start by counting the number of questions you find in the letter. If it seems like it contains more than one question, assess your capacity to make sure you have time to answer all of them in full. We request that patrons not ask more than three questions per letter, and you are empowered to decide how many questions you answer from a letter based on your capacity; please communicate to the patron if you are not able to answer all of their questions and reiterate our limits on questions.

- Make your best guess if questions are unclear. Always trend towards giving more information rather than less.
- FAQs that PLSN can't address or needs to refer:
 - We include this [PLSN Guidelines document](#) with every letter we send to patrons. It outlines what to expect, what we can send, and what we can't send. You don't need to include it in your response (a coordinator will do this), but it can be a helpful reference.
 - Penpal: If it's clear that the letter writer is asking specifically for a pen pal, see the [Pen Pal Letter Template](#) (see also the section on establishing boundaries, page 4)
 - Book Requests: if they ask about obtaining a specific book, you can forward their request to NYC Books Through Bars (PLSN has direct contacts there). To request Books through Bars send a particular title to someone who's written us a letter, do the following:
 - Write a cover letter response to the patron, letting them know that you passed their request along to NYC Books Through Bars.
 - When you share this response back to the coordinator, **explicitly say in the email to them that the letter includes a BtB request.**
 - If needed, BtB guidelines are available here: booksthroughbarsnyc.org/requests
 - Material not allowed by a facility's mailroom policies: For example, stamps, letters from other people, stickers, Polaroids, etc. We will do our best to respond according to each facility's page limitations for printed materials. See [Mail Policy Template](#).
 - Legal Advice: We can't help with legal advice. However, we will do our best to refer or connect to appropriate legal help or information. See the [Extensive Legal Template](#).
 - Medical Advice: Similarly, we cannot provide advice, opinions or diagnoses, only overviews of basic medical diagnoses and/or conditions. See the [Extensive Medical Template](#).

- Personal/private information about living individuals: We can send personal/contact information published on a publicly available website with the consent of the person it is about); however, we respect the right to privacy and do not share private information, including that found on social media accounts and spokeo (or similar services). See [Personal Information Template](#)
- Contacting third parties on behalf of a patron: We do not have the capacity to reach out, follow up, or communicate reliably on behalf of a patron. See [Third Party Template](#).
- Fascist and white supremacist materials/organizations: Although we do not assume intent, we are an abolitionist organization and do not support actions that will actively harm others. See [White Supremacist Topics Template](#).

Find Information and Resources

- Brainstorm a list of resources to consult. Don't forget to think creatively about the types of resources you have access to.
- Take a peek at [the subject resources](#) for suggestions about where to start. If you are faced with many options, revisit the question for clues that help identify the best source for a patron.
- Include images when possible
- Always give someone the next step they can take. If they ask for something outside of your scope, try to refer them to another organization who may be better able to help them.
- Include mailing addresses, do not include hyperlinks. Keep your language analog. (For example, "please see the enclosed article" not "please see the attached article.")
- If you need to share more information about the PLSN Reference Service, you can use or adapt this [reference](#).

A note on printing/mailling resources and page limit: PLSN is an all volunteer organization with no budget so printing and mailing costs come out of coordinators pockets. To sustain this, we've started using a 50 physical page limit (which is 100 pages of materials if printed double sided or 200 pages of materials with 2:1 ratios) for letters by default. If someone asks for something directly (e.g. printing sections of the Jailhouse Lawyers Manual or Computer Game Walkthroughs) that calls for more, let us

know. We can address these on a case by case basis depending on the resources we have available via calls to the listserv for printing help (you are always welcome to offer to print and mail a letter to someone directly if you are able). Please be certain that the way you are formatting the letter is still legible—for example, even if a patron asks for 4:1 printing to fit a lot of pages into a response, we have found this is unclear when printing (you may want to print a test page to make sure).

We know people want to share as much as possible, but this type of constraint creates opportunities to work our librarian magic: reference asks us to be creative and value driven in how we summarize available materials, choose selections of works, and synthesize content to answer questions

When there is an ask for something that is more than we can provide, you can use the following:

*“We’ll send as many pages as our printing resources allow (no more than 50 pages). This week it looks like we can send **INSERT HERE**. Sorry, we couldn’t get you more and please don’t hesitate to write back for the rest.”*

Also, keep in mind that some prison mailrooms impose page limits. Don’t forget to check the mailroom policy of the facility you’re sending mail to! If there is no page limit that you can find, default to 50 pages.

Draft your Letter

Writing Your Intro.

- Make a copy of the [PLSN Letter Template](#) (there’s also a [Pen Pal Letter Template](#) if someone asks you about pen pal resources and [various other templates](#) for other types of responses)
- Begin your letter by restating the questions you answered
- Share important details about where you found the material you are sending and why you’ve included it. This should be unique to each letter but here are a few things it might include:
 - A note on what you weren’t able to find
 - A list of potentially helpful resources you weren’t able to include
 - An explanation about why something is too long to send or outside of what we can help with

- Follow up questions

Including Materials

- Documentation: always identify the information you're providing.
 - If you are including resources from the web, explain who made them and why you choose them
 - If you're inserting scans, excerpts, images, or tables, make sure to label them with what they are and where they came from.
 - If you include a quote, put quote marks around it and a source.
 - If you're paraphrasing, indicate that you're doing so.
- Layout:
 - Keep in mind how information will look on a printed page prioritize readability AND not wasting donated printing supplies
 - Include images when they are printable, relevant to the content asked for; do not include images when they are stock images for web articles, ads, or can't be printed on a letter size sheet of paper
 - Unless uniquely important to the letter writer, ALWAYS reformat web articles into a txt document for printability and readability.
- Sharing Info about Resources
 - Remember when including contact information or suggesting someone reach out to another organization that you should include **always include a mailing address *don't assume people have extended internet access***
 - Never rely on hyperlinks; URLs are only useful for someone's records so they can comeback to what you found or refer another volunteer to do so
 - Ask yourself: have I provided all the details someone would need for their next step? Remember every facility provides varying levels of access to the internet, mail and other information sources like prison libraries and librarians.

FAQs

Getting involved

What are the qualifications for getting involved in the reference project? Do I have to be a librarian? Do I have to live in New York?

If you are interested in helping us with this work, you are qualified! You do not have to be a professional librarian or have an MLIS degree. We need help from volunteers, who respond to our patrons' letters, and coordinators, who work on administrative tasks. While many PLSN folks live in or around New York City, people volunteer from across the country, and almost 100% of the work can be completed remotely.

Volunteering with PLSN doesn't require any specialized knowledge. Many of the questions we receive from patrons are easily answered using Google. One coordination team requires access to a printer, but all other coordinating roles can be performed on a computer. You do not need to have answered reference letters in the past to be a coordinator.

You do need to be able to do the following:

- reformat web sources for printing
- critically evaluate who created information you are sending and why
- describe your process for searching
- communicate reliably if you get swamped

I want to volunteer to respond to letters! How can I get involved? What is the time commitment?

We have monthly volunteer trainings where you can be trained to answer reference letters entirely online.

After you're trained, you can answer as many or as few letters as you'd like and are able to. Until you are comfortable with the process, we recommend you block out at least two hours per letter for your first few letters. (It may take shorter or longer depending on the difficulty of the question!) We ask that you complete your letter within five days, but this can be adjusted if you find that you need more time.

If you're interested in becoming a Reference Project Coordinator (getting letters from our patrons inside to volunteers, and getting the volunteers' responses back to the patrons), see our For Coordinators page

For letter writing volunteers

*I'm feeling overwhelmed by the sign-up sheet. How can I filter or sort letters?
What are the letters that would be the most helpful to answer?*

If you want to filter letters by topic, you can click on the "Filter" button on the top left corner of the screen. Click "Add condition" and use the drop-down menu on the right to select "Reference category." Then you can choose as many categories as you'd like. If you feel comfortable tackling letters related to legal topics or business questions, these tend to be the questions that linger the longest!

If you want to answer the oldest letters, you can do so by clicking the search bar in the upper left corner of the screen. You can most reliably search by ID numbers – the bulk of our oldest letters are from August 2022, so if you search "2208" these letters will be highlighted.

I don't want to answer reference letters. Are there other ways to get involved with the reference program?

There are so many ways to get involved! A recurring need for us is help with coordinating, which mostly involves administrative tasks and does not require any special subject expertise. You do not have to answer any reference letters to be a coordinator. Respond to this email if you are interested in learning more.

I need support answering a letter! Where can I go for help?

There is a "Reference" chat room where all PLSN volunteers are encouraged to ask and answer each other's questions about the letters they are working on. We use the platform Element, which is similar to Discord or Slack. You can see our guide to getting started with Element for more information.

If Element is not an option for you, you can also email the PLSN coordinators for assistance (plsn_nyc@protonmail.com).

Responding to letters

How much material do I need to send a patron for each letter? Is there a minimum that I have to send?

You only need to provide as many pages as needed to answer the question! Many facilities have page limits, and PLSN has a 50-page per letter limit (or 100 double-sided pages).

You do not need to provide the maximum 50 pages or the facility limit for every letter – if you can answer a letter just using the cover sheet, that’s great! There is no minimum page count.

This letter asks more questions than I can answer – what should I do?

Our current guidelines state that we answer up to three questions per letter. (You can answer more questions if you’d like, but there is no expectation to do so!)

If a patron asks more than three questions, you can inform them in your cover letter that we can only answer three questions at a time and invite the patron to write us back if they’d like responses to the additional questions. Please list all questions asked in your cover letter so that the patron can refer to them easily. You can choose which questions to respond to using your best judgment and respond accordingly.

What are PLSN’s printing capabilities?

We can print up to 50 single-sided pages or 100 double-sided pages per letter. (Some facilities might have stricter limits – it’s always a good idea to Google a facility’s policy before starting your letter! You can also find guidance around a facility’s policy using the Volunteer Handbook.) This is the maximum – there is no minimum!

We typically can print images and in color, but if you have any special printing concerns, please let the coordinators know when you submit your letter.

What are types of information we cannot provide?

We do not provide:

- Legal advice. (We can include legal resources, e.g., printouts of case law, but we cannot give our legal opinion.)
- Personal/private information about living individuals, especially contact information. (e.g., the office address of a former healthcare provider is okay because of the professional context, but a phone number for a friend from Whitepages is not.)
- Anything related to or created by fascist or white supremacist organizations.
- Any information that is against a facility's policy. This typically includes sexual content, gang-related information, and information on potentially illegal activities.
- Although we do not assume intent, we are an abolitionist organization and do not support actions that will actively harm others. We work towards the safety and liberation of all bodies we are in community with—land, water, plants, and beings—no compromises will be made that risk community safety.

While we don't agree with facility censorship, we also know that sending information that is likely to be censored often results in the letter not reaching the patron. It is often a good idea to communicate this to the patron if this is something you're running into in your letter.

Is there a place I can go to see resources or templates?

[The PLSN Reference Wiki](#) is where we keep all of our recommended resources. This includes a template for pen pals requests. (If you use this template, please include all forms and attachments needed to complete the letter when sending the final version to the coordinators.)

We are planning some ongoing organizing work around creating a template library for volunteers to use and contribute to. If you have any feedback or would like to get involved, please send us an email!

I have a copyright question – help!

Copyright issues can vary widely in scope. Each one should be taken on its own merits, and we should feel empowered to take full advantage of our Fair Use rights. There are a variety of tools to use to determine fair use, both in and out of the traditional library setting, Fair Use refers to the legal concept of sharing information for educational purposes. See this resource from the American Library Association for more info.

Education here refers to non-traditional and autodidact education efforts as well as traditional types provided in institutions. That said, you might not feel totally comfortable answering a question on your own. As with other tricky questions, if you're stuck, ask for help in our Reference chatroom or email the coordinators on duty during that month. If you need a quicker response or are reluctant to use the chatroom for any reason, please email Ana at noriegaga@gmail.com.

I'm worried that my letter isn't good/thorough/accurate/complete enough. What can I do?

If you're stuck, ask for help in our Reference chatroom or email the coordinators.

Please remember that there's no such thing as perfect! We appreciate your work, and encourage you to send a draft along even if you're not feeling totally confident in it. Rest assured that the review team will step in to help if a second draft is needed – the buck doesn't stop with you!

Submitting completed letters

How does PLSN prefer to receive letters? What needs to be included? What's the best format?

You should use our letter template and email your response with any attachments to plsn_nyc@protonmail.com. If you use a template, please include all forms and attachments needed to complete the letter.

Our preference is that the letter and printouts are compiled together in a PDF format with page numbers, but if this is not possible for you, please send what you have and do not feel limited by this! Our coordinators can also do the formatting work.

What are some formatting tricks and tools?

To reduce page count, we recommend doing a print-to-PDF at a 2:1 or 4:1 print ratio. (Be mindful that not all patrons are able to read small print, so please defer to any font size preferences requested by the patron.)

To make a webpage more print-friendly, including removing or shrinking images and text, we recommend Print Friendly.

We recommend TinyWow to edit, merge, and add page numbers to PDFs. They also have a large number of other formatting tools. Adobe Acrobat is also a great option to do similar work if you have access to the paid version.

What are the next steps after I submit my letter?

A PLSN coordinator will confirm that we received your letter, and then send it to a team of reviewers. (If you are interested, here's our reviewing checklist!) If another draft is needed, someone from the review team will get in touch. If not, the reviewers will send your letter to the print team, who will print and mail your letter to the patron.

We aim to confirm receipt of your response within one week. We aim to have letters reviewed within 30 days. (These dates can be much faster or a little slower depending on our capacity!) We are not able to confirm with our volunteers every time a letter is mailed – if you don't hear from us within a month, you should assume your letter was mailed out!