

## WRITING GUIDE

# WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

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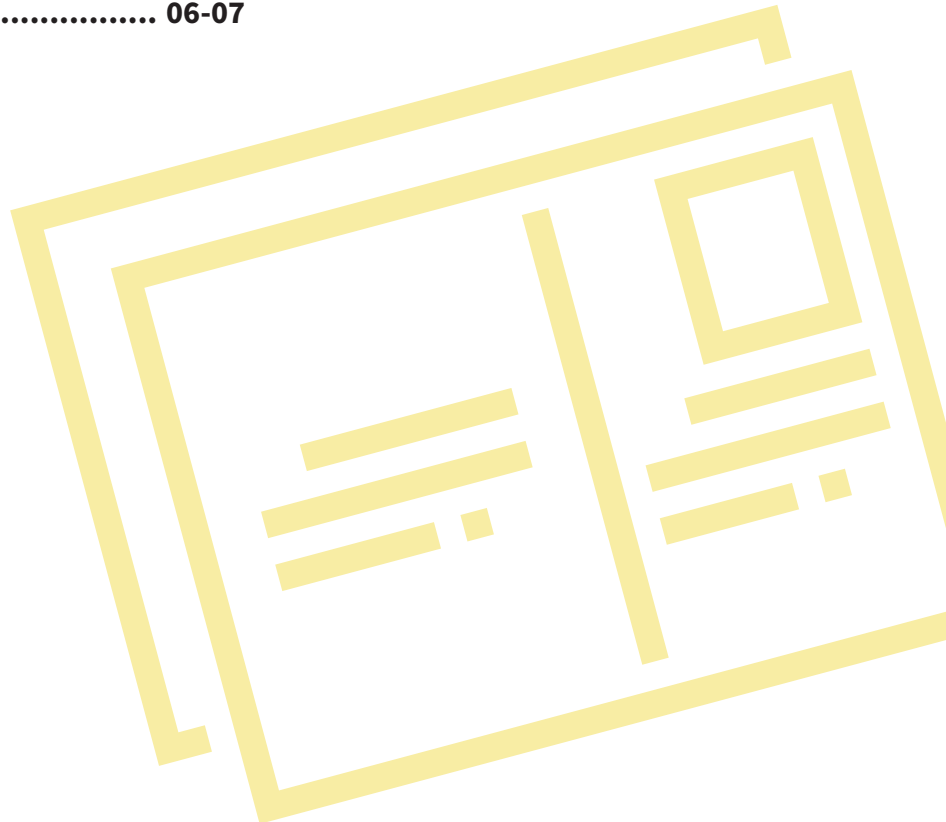
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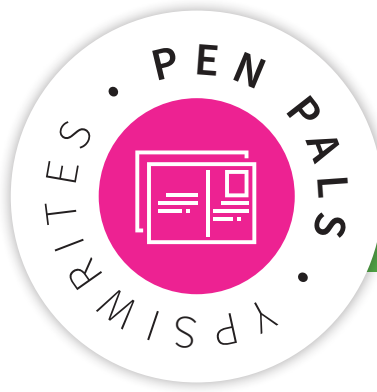
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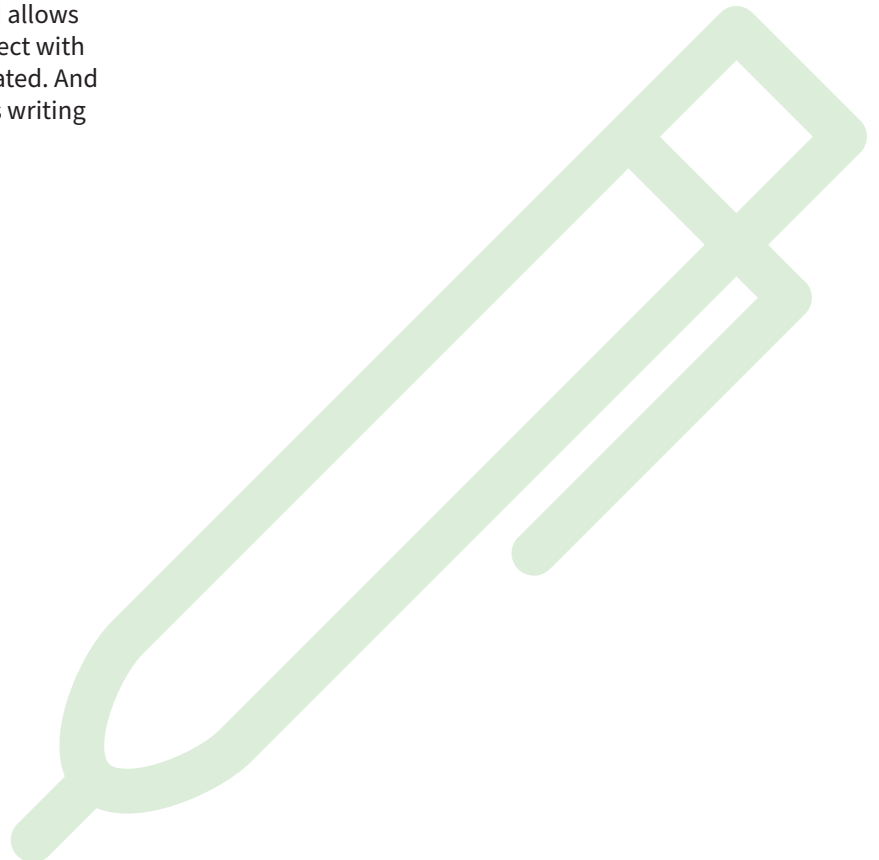


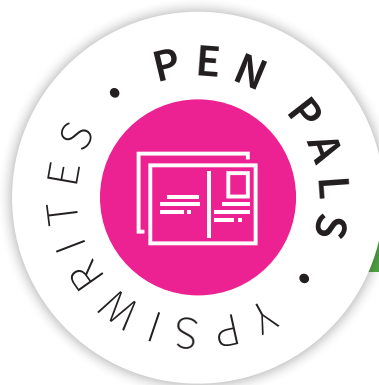
## INTRODUCTION

Are you curious about other cultures or other people's experiences? Would you like to communicate through letter writing and connect with someone across your community or even the globe? Then having a pen pal might be for you! You can exchange information and carry on a conversation as you expand what you know about each other's lives and experiences.

Writing to a pen pal is a way to connect with others who may be very different from us. It also allows us to learn about things we might not have taken time to investigate on our own. Most importantly, it demonstrates that we may have a lot in common even with someone from a different location or background.

Taking the time to write a letter slows us down and allows us to be more intentional. It also allows us to connect with another person on a deeper level and feel less isolated. And it's a great way to polish those writing skills! This is writing with a purpose!





## HOW TO GET STARTED

### Finding a pen pal

There are many ways to locate and connect with a pen pal. One great way is to work through an established pen pal program. Below are some that we found.

#### Established pen pal programs

[Penpalooza](#) is a pen pal exchange that started in Spring of 2020 to connect people during the pandemic. It now has over 10,000 members from over 75 countries. The exchange has been featured in [The Guardian](#), [The New York Times](#), and elsewhere.

[Worldwide Snail Mail pen pals](#) is one of the largest and most active free pen pal communities on Facebook. Run by two pen pals, Aisha Conolly and Stephanie Elyse (they've met up in person), this closed group requires all members to read and accept rules (such as not posting anyone's address) once they join. Once approved, new members are encouraged to post short bios about themselves, inviting others to connect if they wish, as well as share letter-decorating tips and inspirations.

With over two million members from around the world, [PenPal World](#) has been connecting pen pals since 1998. Created and run by pen pal enthusiast and California-based web developer, Jakob Herrmann (who's also been a tech wiz for Sony and Disney), this online network is a great resource if you're seeking more of a cultural exchange.

[International Pen Friends](#) has over 300,000 members in 192 countries. It was established in 1967 and since that time has processed over 2 million application forms.

The goal of [Postcrossing](#) is to allow anyone to send and receive postcards from all over the world! The idea is simple: for each postcard you send, you will receive one back from a random postcrosser from somewhere else in the world.



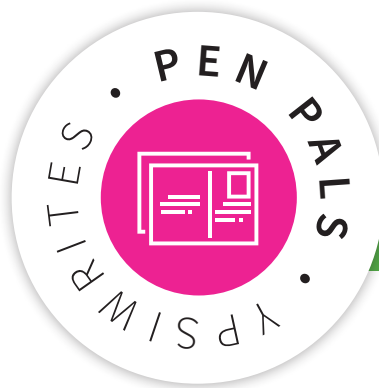
Letters, handwritten, typed or electronic, have these components:

- an introduction (brief paragraph)
- a main body (typically 2-3 paragraphs)
- a conclusion/invitation to continue writing (usually one paragraph)

[InterPals](#) is a free site for online correspondence, cultural exchange, and learning foreign languages. Created in April 1998, the site began as the "International Penpal Page." It's a friendly forum for people to find email and postal penpals from around the world. The page quickly became so popular that it was rebuilt from the ground up in 1999 and renamed InterPals.

### Other ways you might connect

- Reach out to a senior center or senior living complex.
- Partner or work with a church or community group.
- Write to someone who's incarcerated.
- Correspond with someone in the military.



## BEFORE YOU WRITE

Your letters to your pen pal should always be respectful and appropriate. Write about things that are engaging, relatable, and meaningful. Generally avoid sharing information that's highly personal or sensitive. Writing and receiving letters should be an exciting experience for everyone, so be thoughtful and kind and also have fun!

Below are some general and important suggestions for writing pen pal letters:

- Write in the tone (the level of formality) you would when communicating with a new friend.
- Consider an array of topics, but cater to the interests of your pen pal and/or focus on information that's relatable—e.g., information about school, work, home, hobbies, food, interests, pets.
- Ask general questions to find out more about them. Show interest and curiosity.
- Be sure to reread and revise what you've written in order to communicate most effectively with your pen pal.

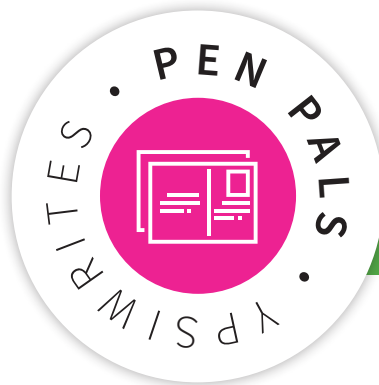
These are some of the qualities your writing should have:

- Subjective – make it about you.
- Descriptive – give details; help your pen pal visualize what you're writing about.
- Narrative – tell a story.
- Creative – make it uniquely yours: if you like to draw, for example, you could add some sketches or decorate your stationary. Or maybe you write poetry and want to include a poem you wrote.
- Genuine – be yourself!
- Clear and straightforward – write with a purpose; it helps with this, especially if English is a second language for your pen pal.

In many pen pal programs you sign up for, you'll be paired with another person randomly. This means you won't know much about the person you're writing to when you start your first letter. Below are some additional, helpful tips that we found through the [American Psychological Association](#):

- **Think beyond race and ethnicity.** A person's culture is shaped by more than the color of their skin or the way they dress. It's shaped by the person's life experiences and traditions, which may be seen or unseen. These are the things that can bring a great deal of meaning and interest to your exchanges.
- **Learn by asking.** Don't be afraid to ask questions. People feel respected and appreciated when others take a genuine interest in who they are, so ask open-ended questions about your pen pal's culture and experience.
- **Exchange stories.** Storytelling is a great way to share experiences that both connect to and go beyond culture. Initiate a conversation by sharing a personal story or experience.

These qualities will help you develop rapport with your pen pal and build an understanding between you. In your letters, you might communicate your feelings, show empathy, use language to help your reader visualize places you describe, and/or reflect on experiences you've had. Doing all of these things will help you touch the heart and mind of your pen pal and will communicate that you value them.



## WRITING YOUR FIRST LETTER

How do you start? Writing that first letter to your new pen pal can be challenging. Here are some helpful tips for writing your first letter. We've also included a sample letter.

- Keep it simple. The first letter doesn't need to be too long. Just introduce yourself and get your pen pal interested in writing back to you.
- Share what interests you. Tell them about the little things that make you unique; share what interests you. If you share what you're passionate about it's likely your pen pal will have a desire to answer back.
- Be yourself. This is your letter and should represent you. Pen pal letters are meant to be informal, so use the language you're comfortable with.
- Ask questions. Consider writing about more than just you. Ask your pen pal about what's unique about them and what interests they have.
- Be considerate. While it's good to ask questions, avoid questions that might be considered too personal. For more on this, see our section, previously, on cultural consciousness. Just like in-person ones, pen pal relationships need time to develop and grow. It takes time to build trust and rapport.
- Be enthusiastic. Your interest and enthusiasm for establishing a pen pal relationship can show in your writing.
- Be purposeful. Close your letter in a way that invites your pen pal to respond. Let them know you are interested in and look forward to hearing from them!

### *Sample first letter*

*Dear XXXX,*

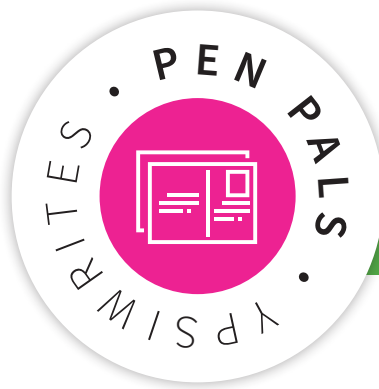
*Hi! My name is XXX and I'm from Ypsilanti, Michigan. I found your information on (pen pal site) and am looking forward to exchanging letters with you. I haven't had a pen pal before but I like the idea of connecting with someone this way when we've all been so isolated.*

*A little bit about me. I wear lots of "hats" but the ones that are most important to me are: (in no particular order) teacher, mom, writer, wife, volunteer, reader, jigsaw puzzle lover, and dog owner. During the pandemic I've also been trying out some new crafts (cross-stitching and diamond painting) as well as going on lots of long walks and hikes when the weather allows.*

*I'm curious to hear more about you! What's your favorite thing to do on a rainy afternoon? I'm a big reader and always looking to add to my TBR (to be read) pile - do you have any suggestions for me? Have you taken up any new hobbies or activities this past year?*

*OK, I need to sign off and get dinner on the table or I'll be dealing with 'hangry' kiddos... (Send recipe ideas if you have any!) I'm looking forward to hearing back from you!*

*With regards,*



## THINGS TO WRITE ABOUT

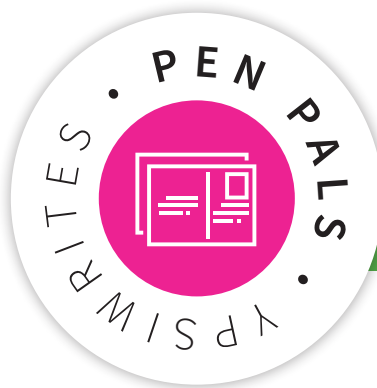
In this section are several prompts and questions to help you get started and discover things you might write about and share with your pen pal.

### Starter prompts

- Find a photo, write about your memories of the event in the photo, send that writing and a copy of the photo.
- Your “bug me” list: 20 things that bugged you during the pandemic – or just in life more generally.
- Your “joy” list: 20 things (big or small) that bring you joy.
- You’re creating a time capsule to represent your life currently: describe what you would put in it and why.
- Finish the following sentence: To me, happiness is...
- Tell the story of your name or a nickname.
- Two truths and a lie: Share three pieces of information about yourself with them, two of which should be true and one false. Ask them to pick the false one (the “lie”) in their return response and you’ll provide them with the correct answer in your next letter.
- Tell the story of “a day in your life.”
- Describe a new habit or interest that you’ve taken up in the last year.
- Describe your dream vacation or getaway.

### Question prompts

- Are you a dog or a cat person?
- What questions do you (my pen pal) have for me? What would you like to know about me?
- What situations make you nervous?
- What are your favorite ideas, foods, pastimes, etc. right now?
- How would you want others to see you? How do others see you/know you?
- Who are you on the inside—how would you describe this?
- Example: I am interested and passionate about children’s literature. I often describe myself as an amalgamation of three characters: Alice for her curiosity, Hermoine for her smarts and know-it-all attitude, and Tinkerbell for her sparkle and sass.
- What is the last thing that made you excited? (Describe in detail and explain why.) What are you most excited about for the future (next month, next 6 months, next year)?
- What is your favorite food/meal/drink? Do you remember when you first encountered it? Is it part of your culture? What makes it your favorite?
- If you were having a dinner party, who are three people (dead or alive) you would most like to invite? Why?
- Do you have a favorite quote? Why is it meaningful to you?
- What are you most grateful for in your life right now and why?
- What hobbies do you have? What are you passionate about?
- What is your favorite song/music artist? How long has it been your favorite? Why?
- If you could have any superpower, what would it be? Why?



## RESOURCES

### Writing kits

- [Let's Write! Tips for Tackling All Kinds of Writing from YpsiWrites](#). Use these other “writing kits” to help you compose different kinds of writing from resumes and cover letters to short stories to memoirs and even songs. Each document contains an explanation of the genre along with tips for how to compose your own. Each also contains examples and links to additional resources.

### Online

- [Pen pal Wikipedia page](#). Terrific overview; contains neat media resources.
- [The Pen Company](#). A how-to for writing your first letter to a pen pal.
- [WikiHow](#). Tips about writing to a pen pal.
- [I'm 27 Years Old, and I Have a Pen Pal](#). Here's Why. Compelling personal account of having a pen pal.
- [Dear Friend: Quarantine Pen Pal Campaign program model](#). An overview of how one library created their pen pal program.

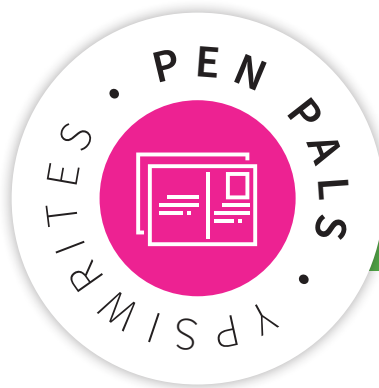
### TED Talks

- [Hannah Brencher: Love letters to strangers](#). Hannah Brencher's mother always wrote her letters. So when she felt herself experiencing depression after college, she did what felt natural—she wrote love letters and left them for strangers to find. The act has become a global initiative, The World Needs More Love Letters, which rushes handwritten letters to those in need of a boost.
- [Alessandra Nicole: The power of paper letter exchange](#). In the wake of her grief from losing a loved one, Alessandra Nicole makes an appeal for tangible handwritten letters as artifacts of value and permanence. Pen pals and building connected relationships over time through the mail is a way of sharing that has lasting impact where communicating via social media falls short.

- [Jennifer Richmond: Letters from the heart: How words change lives](#). When was the last time you received a hand-written note or letter? Jennifer Richmond shares an idea of reconnecting our world by writing compassionate letters to family, friends, or even someone you've never met!

### Films

- *84 Charing Cross Road* (1987): Biography, Drama, Romance. True story of a transatlantic business correspondence about used books that developed into a close friendship.
- *Holiday for Heroes* (2019 TV Movie): Romance. The plot revolves around a woman (Egan) and a soldier (Blucas) who exchange letters for a year before their worlds collide.
- *Mary and Max* (2009): Animation, Comedy, Drama, Family. A tale of friendship between two unlikely pen pals: Mary, a lonely, eight-year-old girl living in the suburbs of Melbourne, and Max, a forty-four-year old, severely obese man living in New York.
- *Shop Around the Corner* (1940): Drama, Romance. Employees Alfred and Klara at Matuschek and Company, a general store in Budapest, are constantly at odds with each other, butting heads and disagreeing on almost everything. Both are enamored of their respective pen pals, who serve as welcome distractions in their lives. Little do they know they are each the other's pen pal and, despite outward differences, have unwittingly fallen in love through their letters.

**Books****Non-fiction**

*Signed, Sealed, Delivered: Celebrating the Joys of Letter Writing* by Nina Sankovitch. Sankovitch goes on a quest through the history of letters to discover and celebrate what is special about the handwritten letter, examining not only historical letters but also the letters in epistolary novels, her husband's love letters, and dozens more sources.

*When Words Matter Most: Thoughtful Words and Deeds to Express Just the Right Thing at the Right Time* by Robyn Freedman Spizman. This book explores the art of finding the right words and actions at the right time—an invaluable handbook for expressing compassion, kindness, caring, and congratulations to friends and family, neighbors and colleagues, and anyone else who touches your life.

**Novels**

*The Readers of Broken Wheel Recommend* by Katarina Bivald. Broken Wheel, Iowa, has never seen anyone like Sara, who traveled all the way from Sweden just to meet her pen pal, Amy. When she arrives, however, she finds that Amy's funeral has just ended. Luckily, the townspeople are happy to look after their bewildered tourist—even if they don't understand her peculiar need for books.

*This Light Between Us: A Novel of World War II* by Andrew Fukuda. In 1935, ten-year-old Alex Maki of Bainbridge Island, Washington, discovers that his new pen pal, Charlie Laevy of Paris, France, is a girl, but in spite of his initial reluctance, their letters continue over the years and they fight for their friendship even as Charlie endures the Nazi occupation and Alex leaves his family in an internment camp and joins the Army.

