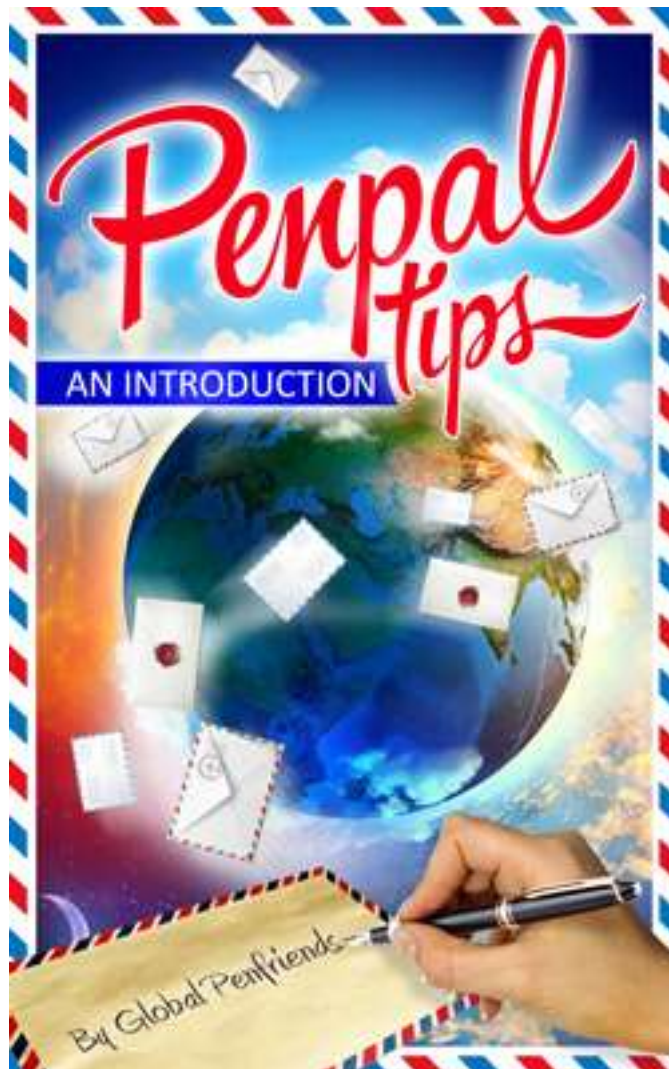


# Penpal Tips

An Introduction to Penpalling

by Global Penfriends



# Getting Started with Snail Mail Penpalling

by Global Penfriends

In the age of social media, many people have forgotten the art of letter writing. Sure, email and texts are fast and instantaneous but nothing can beat the feeling of holding a handwritten letter in your hands, knowing about the effort put into creating a letter. It's a completely different experience as though you're with that person and they have given you a gift in the form of a letter. I know I'm always excited to hear from my penpals, and I look forward to receiving surprise mail every week, because with snail mail you don't know exactly when it will arrive and what surprises might be inside.

I really believe that letters are more personal compared to emails or texts. When you send a letter, you are sending something you created with your own hands, with your own handwriting. You probably also choose the stationery to write on and perhaps even the stamp. All these either reflect your personality or selected to please the recipient of your letter.

Some people might say that writing letters takes too much time and effort, but that is precisely why letter writing is special and why receiving a handwritten letter sent from halfway across the world with stamps is so much better than receiving an email. It means you actually took the time to write a letter and the person receiving the letter feels special because by spending all this time and effort, you are saying they are worth the time and effort.



## Finding the right pen pal

Before you start penpalling, the first thing you have to do is to find someone to write to. In my case, I have friends and family who moved to other countries that I write to regularly, or if you want to learn about another culture and another country, you can write to someone from that country. You can find potential pen pals through penpalling websites like [www.globalpenfriends.com](http://www.globalpenfriends.com). But before giving away your snail mail address, make sure to get to know someone really well first.

The Global Penfriends website is safe to use for all ages and is very family friendly. For one thing, all profiles are thoroughly checked by site admins to make sure that users are suitable for penpalling. Anyone with an inappropriate profile is deleted immediately. The website also performs regular scans to detect scammers to ensure the safety of its users. What's great about Global Penfriends is that it also has an internal messaging system, so you don't have to give out your email address or snail mail address to a prospective pen pal in the beginning. You may choose to do so when you feel more comfortable that your potential pen pal is the right match for you.



In Global Penfriends, there is a section where people can have profiles describing themselves, their hobbies, their likes and dislikes. You can find people with similar interests to yours, so that you can share your love for dubstep, for example, or pets. I remember when I was looking for pen pals, I would check if they also liked books, and if we had the same taste in movies. But of course, it's also interesting to find out about other things you wouldn't otherwise know through pen

pals. One of my pen pals from Luxembourg introduced me to rockabilly music, a musical genre I wouldn't otherwise listen to. But we both bonded over our love of Morissey. Other pen pals would recommend books to read or films to watch. It is especially interesting when these are books or films from their country because you get to learn so much more about their culture and history. In other words, it's really like you're being opened to a whole different world through your new friends.

Some pen pals are more prolific than others and can write more letters a week, and can have more pen pals, but for some people who may be a little busier, it is probably best to start with just a few pen friends in the beginning. It is really important to find the right persons to correspond with, so you must choose your pen pals with care. Here are the questions to consider:

*1) Will I have time for a pen pal?*

Writing letters can be very time-consuming and takes commitment and dedication. Before initiating a pen friendship, assess if you will be able to follow through because penpalling is supposed to be about maintaining communication and friendship through snail mail so there is an expectation that letters will be exchanged at least once a month. You and your pen friend may have to discuss how much time you can devote to writing letters.

But in general, most pen pals are very understanding when it comes to the length of time that pass between letters, so long as you're courteous enough to also explain your side of things. Sometimes life does become a bit busier or you've had to prioritize something else for the time being. What I do is I let my pen friend know via email that my response might be a little late because I'm busy at work at the moment.

*2) What kind of pen pal do I want?*

This is also an important consideration because the basis of most pen friendships are the common hobbies and interests you share. With the Global Penfriends website, it is easy to find out these things in their profiles. You can also enter parameters if you prefer to write to people in your age group. As for me, I write to all sorts of people of all ages. It's more interesting that way and you learn more.

The answer to this question may also depend on your purpose for wanting to take up the penpalling hobby. Perhaps you want to learn about a new language or a new culture. For example, if you'd like to learn Norwegian, you might want to look for a Norwegian pen pal. There will be someone in the Global Penfriends website who might be interested in your country and culture as well, or you might have a lot in common when it comes to your hobbies.

Other people are also swappers. For example, deltiologists who swap postcards, or philatelists who collect stamps, or numismatics who collect coins or bills. You can also find similar people and make swap agreements with them. I know a girl in Finland who used to swap earrings because she just got her ears pierced, and a guy who collects pens and T-shirts. Penpalling is a great way to complete your collection with items from all over the world, and I'm sure it will be the envy of your friends if you have things from places like Suriname or Tanzania.

Don't be in a rush to choose your pen pal. There are thousands of members in [www.globalpenfriends.com](http://www.globalpenfriends.com) and one or two of them may just be the perfect pen pal for you.



## ***Things You Need for Penpalling***

When I started penpalling again, I first scoured all the bookstores in town for cool stationery and fun things to send to my pen pals. Most bookstores still carry greeting cards, stationery and letter sets, or if you want, you can also get them online as I sometimes do. Ever since I've revived my penpalling hobby, I've noticed that I've been collecting a lot of penpalling supplies, and I make sure to buy stationery when I'm traveling abroad so I have a great variety to send to various pen friends. Now I've got boxes of stationery, fountain pens, rubber stamps, stickers, seals etc. But of course, you don't have to go overboard like me.

Basically all you really need is paper, a pen, an envelope and stamps. You can even print stationery templates from websites if you prefer. There are lots of free templates online to choose from. As for me, I really like matching the type of stationery I use to the person I'm writing to, so I have all kinds with different designs, floral, or ones with cartoons, or art on them. Your letter is like a gift to a friend, so it has to look nice and it has to be presentable. And remember, your letter represents you as well.

I have a pen friend who adds all sorts of decorations like stickers, or decorative tape, or washi tape to her letters. Her letters are among of my favorites because she's so creative with them. She even decorates her envelopes. Her creativity and obvious joy in decorating her letters like her very own art projects also inspired me to try and be creative as well. But don't feel pressured to create a masterpiece with your letters like my friend does. Different people have different tastes, but it's also nice to try new things.

Keep in mind that while decorations are nice, it's the writing and the content in your letter that counts the most. Decorations are just an extra, like icing on a cake. That said, since the writing is the most important, make sure that your penmanship is legible. If this is a problem, you can type your letters either by typewriter or by computer. However, some people don't like typed letters, so it's best to let your potential pen friends know if this is all right with them.

## ***What to write in your first letter***

Assuming you've already contacted your potential pen friend and have exchanged addresses, the two of you will usually decide which one will write a letter first. If you're the one that has to write the first letter, it is advisable to read your new friend's profile and talk about what you have in common based on his or her profile.

After introducing yourself, and perhaps talking about what's going on in your life briefly as an opening to your letter, you can dive right in and discuss common interests. For example, if your new pen friend has listed biking as a hobby, and assuming it's also your hobby or something you're planning to try, you can ask questions about that, like, "How long have you been riding? What kind of bike do you have? Where have you biked?" And then you can also share your own experiences with biking. Perhaps you're preparing for a race, or organizing a ride for charity. I'm sure your pen pal would love to hear about that.



Because no two people are exactly alike, there will probably be a few things where you and your pen pal might differ. You might even choose a person like that if you prefer because you can learn about a completely different person from a different country. For example, I've always been interested in Art Nouveau, so I have a pen pal from the Czech Republic, where the artist Alphonse Mucha is from and where there are a lot of buildings with Art Nouveau architecture. So I often ask my friend what it's like to live in a place like that, or what life is like in her country. From there, you can also share what it's like in your own country.

We also might celebrate holidays differently in every country, so it's always interesting to read about someone else's experience or traditions and also share your country's customs. Having a person from a different country talk about their lives is much deeper and more meaningful than reading about it on Wikipedia.

If you happen to be learning a different language, you can also mention that to your new friend and they might even help you learn a new language. For example, I've been trying to learn Russian, so a pen friend would sometimes help me with a few difficult phrases and idioms, and explain where they come from or their history.

Another possible topic to discuss are your jobs, or what you're studying at school or the events at school if you're a student, but it's not necessary to make it too personal, especially for the first letter. For example, when you discuss your job, a general description will do, and maybe add a few details about what you do during the day.

In the beginning of a pen friendship, most of the discussions I have with my pen pals revolve around TV shows, films, books and music. So perhaps you may discuss favorite TV shows or films, and get recommendations from each other. For instance, my Czech pen pal is a big Doctor Who fan and told me all about the program, and I ended up really liking the series too. Sometimes we'd have different reactions to films, so it's also good to discuss what we think worked, or what didn't, and this way we end up learning a lot from each other by reading about another person's perspective.



## ***Making sure that your letters arrive***

So you've written your letter and now it's time to send it. But all your hard work might be for nothing if the letter doesn't even reach your pen pal. Take note of the following tips to help ensure that your letters arrive safely and securely at their intended destination.

### *1) Make sure you have the correct name and address.*

Check that you have written the name and address of your pen pal correctly onto the envelope. If you wish, you can print it out with a sticker label, or paste it onto the envelope to make sure it's readable. Also, remember those envelopes from the letters of your pen pals? Sometimes the addresses are written there, so if you cannot find the address of your pen pal, you can check the envelope. But to be really sure, message your pen pal to confirm their address.

What I do is keep all the addresses of my pen friends in an excel file. I also had an address book before, but sometimes they move around so much that I have to keep crossing out addresses. It's much more convenient to have a copy in your computer. That way, you can also note when you send a letter or when you receive a letter from your pen pals to track them.

You have to make sure that you write the address correctly. If there's a street number, do include it. The zip code or post code and the country is also important, and I learned that a few years ago when I once made a mistake with a letter I sent. For some reason, I got confused and wrote Germany instead of Austria for a friend's address. I think the letter is lost forever in a post office somewhere in Germany, which is too bad, because I had collected Harry Potter postcards for this friend and now she will never receive them.

Another reason why including the post code is important is that in some countries, the post office might not process letters with missing post codes. If you cannot understand the address that someone has sent to you, you can take the original envelope you received to the post office and ask the post office workers to decipher it for you. The post office workers are usually very good at deciphering handwriting and are familiar with international addresses, probably from having to deliver so many letters or postcards with somewhat illegible handwriting.

*2) Seal your envelopes securely.*

If your letter has more than ten pages, you can tape the flap to keep it secure. While we're at it, to make sure that your letter makes the journey safely, you can also tape the sides of the envelope, just in case.

*3) Use airmail stickers.*

When sending mail overseas, you will need to affix an airmail or par avion sticker to your letter. The post office gives these away for free. Alternatively, you can also print an airmail logo on sticker paper, and then stick them onto the envelopes. You can even add the airmail logo on your envelopes if you're using a printer to print out your envelopes. You can also just write Airmail on your letters if you don't use a printer and cannot find the appropriate sticker at your post office

*4) Send your letter with the correct amount of postage.*

When sending letters to friends all over the world, you must pay by weight. If your letter is more than a couple of sheets of normal paper, it is always a good idea to weigh the letter at your post office first. The post office worker will then tell you how much you should pay in postage to send the letter to the country of your choice. The post office should be able to provide you with a listing of prices and weights to different countries or regions.

Another option is sending letters via registered mail. This is more expensive than regular post, but if you want to make sure that the recipient will receive your letter, you might want to consider registered mail. Some postal systems sometimes such as those in Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Russia and Seychelles take longer to distribute mail. Keep this in mind and be patient when awaiting post from these countries.



## **OTHER TIPS**

### *1) Make your letters a little bit more special.*

There are a number of ways to make your letters unique. You can add character to your envelope by decorating it. You can add doodles, stickers, or make the entire envelope out of gift wrap, add pictures, glitter or sequins. Just make sure the address is clear and is easily found and read by the postal worker.

You can also create your own stationery if you don't like any of the templates available online, or if you feel that what's available in stores does not reflect your personality. You can make the letter itself colorful by using different colored pens or markers. Maybe you'd like to write every other line in a different color, highlight some words you want to emphasize with color, etc.

You can even use hieroglyphics in your letter. For example, you can draw the word instead of spelling it out, or substitute some letters with pictures, like a drawing of an eye for the letter. Just use your imagination... the possibilities are endless!

### *2) You can also add a few little extra things to your letter.*

A fun thing to do can be clipping an interesting article or headline from the day's newspaper. Maybe you were featured in the local paper? Cut out the clipping and add it to your envelope. You can also add other bits and pieces of flat things like candy or gum. It would be nicer if it's candy that can only be bought in your country. A friend from the Netherlands once sent me licorice, which is her favorite. It wasn't anything like the licorice I've had before, and I suppose it's an acquired taste, but it was certainly interesting to try! You can also include interesting tags from a shop, pin buttons or flyers for a concert or show. I use them as bookmarks and I think they're really cool because they traveled nearly halfway around the world to find themselves in between the pages of my books.

One of the fun things about having a pen pal is you can show off your country to your new friend. Why don't you choose a postcard that reflects a major attraction in your city? If your city doesn't have a major attraction, perhaps choose another favorite place in your country, or send a map of your country. I myself love maps and I am always happy to add a new one to my collection.

Speaking of flat things, what about tea bags, or instant coffee mixes from your country? As long as they're flat, it would be no problem at all. Maybe you want to send a bookmark, or samples of your photography, or photos from your vacation, or maybe a dried leaf you picked up somewhere in your area, or maybe a keychain.

You can send your pen pal stickers that reflect your country, your interests or hobbies. International pen pals love to receive stickers that have your country's flag or symbols on them. Same goes for patches they can sew on clothing or bags.

Another fun thing to send are CDs from local artists in your country, especially if it's folk music and truly unique to your country, with songs sung in your language and accompanied by ethnic musical instruments. Your pen pals would probably never have access to this type of music unless they become world famous.

Some of my pen pals are writers too, so if they write in English, they send their poems or short stories so I can read them and comment on them. If you like a poem or a song, you can print the lyrics and send them to your pen pal too.

I have also received some things in the mail that I didn't think could be sent through the mail. For example, I have received books, fortune cookies, chocolate (it sort of melted, but it was great), a wood carving of my name, matryoshka or Russian dolls... which was very exciting for me. Since then I've also been more adventurous and sent things like pencils, a coin purse with coins from my country, small paintings (I occasionally dabble in art), a bracelet I made, a wooden letter opener, or a scarf.

Once I even sent a little elephant plushie in my letter to a friend in the Netherlands. He loves elephants. Another friend from France spent the holiday at the beach, so he sent me a couple of postcards from that region and very tiny shells with some sand in a ziplock bag. I showed it to my niece, and she also thought it was the coolest thing ever. It's moments like these when I realize what an amazing hobby penpalling is. And when you do little extra stuff like this, it's even better. It's so simple and takes so little effort but it can really make someone happy.

But keep in mind that while it's fun and exciting to send little items to your friends via post, one shouldn't feel obligated to send gifts, and in the same way, one should not expect gifts from pen pals. Of course there are exceptions, such as if you had an agreement to swap, but there's risk involved, and it is possible that your pen pal might not fulfill his or her end of the bargain, so proceed with caution. If you like sending gifts, that's really great, but keep in mind that expensive or inappropriate gifts may embarrass your pen pal.

I do think it is OK to send cards on a special occasion like a birthday, or a holiday like Christmas. But check first if they celebrate Christmas or if they don't mind receiving Christmas cards. Since we are writing to friends all over the world, we must be sensitive about other people's culture and beliefs. That said, this is a great opportunity to learn about their culture, as well as share your culture with other people.

3) *Consider renting a postbox at your post office.*

If you're worried that your mail might be tampered with, you might want to look into renting your own box at the post office. These normally rent out for a nominal amount per month or year. You might also have security and privacy concerns and might prefer not want to give out your real address to your pen pals, in which case, a private postbox might be a good idea.

One Last Note - Snail mail penpalling is truly a rewarding hobby and gives you a chance to make friends with people all over the world. It is also an easy and inexpensive way of spreading love and happiness. Now that you know all about how to start snail mail penpalling from finding the right penpal, getting snail mail supplies, knowing what to write in your letters, and making sure your letters are sent, what are you waiting for? Go ahead and find your new pen pals at [www.globalpenfriends.com](http://www.globalpenfriends.com). Imagine the feeling of your pen pals as they receive snail mail from you. People will be charmed and flattered to get a new letter from you in their mailbox. Handwritten letters are very special and are very rare treats these days. Share your stories and your dreams, and make it a personal goal to send more snail mail this year. Now, I'm off to get started on a few letters of my own.

And remember, keep on writing, and most of all, have fun!