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## Project 3: Write to Death-Row Inmates

last edited by Joe Incandela 1 year, 11 months ago

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The third option concerns capital punishment. As you'll read in *Dead Man Walking*, what led to Sr. Helen Prejean's experiences with death row inmates was writing a letter to a convicted murderer. This paper option will allow you to correspond with someone on death row to learn about capital punishment in ways otherwise inaccessible to most people.

**FINDING PRISONER NAMES & ADDRESSES:** There are several ways to correspond with someone on death row through the following websites.

- [a] [Cyberspace Inmates](#). This site, run by Rev. Rene Mulkey, categorizes a large number of death row prisoners by last names and provides personal statements from each person describing his situation and desire for correspondence.
- [b] [The Canadian Coalition Against the Death Penalty's Penpal Requests](#) are organized by U.S. state and frequently features a picture of the inmate along with a personal statement.
- [c] [Voices from Inside Texas Death Row](#): lots of personal statements from the state that executes more than any other. There are a few inmates here who speak only Spanish. *This would be a great opportunity for someone whose Spanish is really good, especially anyone majoring or minoring in Spanish.*
- [d] [Pen Pal Requests from Virginia's Death Row](#): names, addresses and personal statements of prisoners from Virginia's death row (but no pictures). There is at least one woman listed for correspondence. This site also tells you about the [mail restrictions](#) for incoming correspondence.
- [e] [Write a prisoner](#): Once you get to this site, click on "Inmate Profiles" on the blue bar on top. Then on the page that comes up, see where it says "Search Ads," and click on "On Death Row" to get to the death row section. This site gives you a great deal of information on each prisoner including the crime for which he or she (this site lets you search for females on death row, none came up the last time I looked) is on death row. writeaprisoner.com also includes a list of [precautionary measures](#) it sponsors to insure the safety of these communications.
- [f] [Extensive collection of links to individual death row inmates in Texas, Mississippi, Penn, Ohio, Alabama, Arizona, and Florida](#)
- [g] [CellPals](#) has a death row section for inmates from Alabama, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas.
- [h] Other inmate correspondence groups are collected at [this site](#).
- [i] [Women on death row](#): There are relatively very few women on death row (approximately 60 in the entire country, or about 1.5% of the nation's death row population). Perhaps as a partial result of this, there are no specific websites dedicated to correspondence only with women on death row. I indicated which of the above sites have at least some listings for female death row inmates (some students in the past have also found several female death row prisoners through the Canadian Coalition site). There is also [a list of these women along with a description of their crimes](#). Obviously, this doesn't mean that these women are open to receiving and returning your correspondence (unlike those prisoners listed at the other sites above). But if you wish to write to female death row prisoners and are up for a challenge, you can probably find the [addresses of prisons housing these women](#). Each state that executes only has one prison in that state housing female death row inmates. So if you find the state of a woman on death row, you can be pretty confident that she's at the prison on this chart listed for that particular state. Another way to find the location of a female death row population in a given state is to look at [State-by-State Information](#) on the death penalty, select a particular state and then look over to the right under the Category "Location of Death Row(s)." Another source of addresses for women on death row is [here](#). Only a few CST students have received mail back from a woman on death row. But given our identity as a women's college and in light of the special issues that come up for women on death row, I certainly want to present this option for your consideration.
- [j] [Other prisoner names](#): *The names on this page were all chosen by previous Catholic Social Thought students. All of these prisoners have expressed a willingness to write back.*

**Note:** *Before you write to anyone, please submit the names to me and get a go-ahead.* I would like to limit the number of students writing to any one person so that no single inmate ends up with more than 3 letters from Saint Mary's College coming in all at once and all asking for responses. That will delay everyone, as well as not spread things around as evenly as they could be. I'll let up to 3 students write to the same inmate, and so it's to your advantage to select your correspondents and okay them with me as soon as possible. When you submit your choices, I'll get right back to you to say those are okay are not.

Life is not the same from one prison to the next. Think about writing to inmates in a variety of prisons and states. This

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Other Handy Resources

- [The Busy Christian's Guide to Catholic Social Teaching](#)
- [The Bible](#)
- [The Documents of Vatican II](#)
- [The Catechism of the Catholic Church](#)
- [Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church](#)
- [The Vatican Website](#)
- [Vatican News](#)

Study Breaks

will allow you to get a broad perspective of what prisons are like and will give you a chance to compare and contrast how different prisons work. [Some states](#) execute inmates more often than others. If you write to one or two inmates living in a state known for its high number of executions, your correspondent will be more likely to have known someone who has been executed or could be facing imminent execution him- or herself.

**GETTING STARTED:** Writing to prisoners convicted of horrible crimes is, of course, not meant to excuse anyone's behavior or inspire pity for people who may have refused it to others. But it is designed as a learning experience for you. Now, some suggestions:

**First**, as you read some of the descriptions that the prisoners offer about themselves, you'll notice that some may be interested primarily in romance. Within the context of this class, I would *strongly* discourage you from writing to them. Others, as you'll see, just want some connection with any person outside prison walls. Many, as you'll also see, are all alone, having been abandoned by their families.

Second, I would encourage you to write to more than one prisoner (at least 3). You need not produce a form letter (indeed--if you're writing to more than one person at the same prison, form letters only arouse suspicion), but you can write much the same things to each. Writing to more than one would be helpful in the context of this assignment because it's certainly possible that you might not get return mail from everyone to whom you write; and so this would give you some backups. (Related to this, you should try to get your initial letters out as soon as possible to allow for the lag time in receiving a response. **Do not wait to do this beyond the second week of September!** Some prisons aren't exactly prompt in delivering mail to death row inmates either. (And by the way, if you'd like to send some stamps to your prisoner(s) to encourage quicker replies, ask your correspondent first if that's okay since some prisons don't allow loose stamps but may allow stamp booklets. Violating a particular prison's rules might cause your mail to be held up or returned.) Also, if you do receive mail back from more than one person, you'll have the possibility of some nice comparisons and contrasts in their views when you come to analyze their responses.

**What should I do if *no one* writes me back?** As sometimes happens, you may get letters back from *everyone* to whom you write. If you don't want to correspond with them all, you might think about passing one or more off to another student in class who hasn't received anything back from anyone to whom she's written. *Certainly, it is possible (and it has happened in the past) that you write to three prisoners and get nothing back.* That's another reason to begin writing as early as you can so that you could write to another group of prisoners if no one in the first group writes back. If all else fails, and you still having gotten anything back by (approximately) mid-semester break, then you should think about getting your information some other way. Fortunately, there are books and websites ([some death row prisoners maintain blogs](#)) you can consult to get something like the experience of writing to prisoners. You should consult at least one of the following back-ups:

- [Compassion](#): an online journal *edited* by death row inmates and *written* by death row inmates. This would be a great place to go first to find lots of essays and writings by those on death row. There are *lots* of back issues. It's not the same as having your own correspondence, but it's probably the next-best thing.
- [The Death Row Poet](#): Ronald Clark's blog from Florida's death row
- [Minutes Before Six](#): Wayne Hunter's blog from San Quentin. Hunter spent 18 years on California's death row before his sentence was commuted in 2002 to life without parole.
- *Shadows on the Bars: Correspondence from a man on death row* (by Val Goldenbrook): This is a book available for \$16.95 through [Amazon](#) a woman's correspondence with a death-row inmate from Illinois.
- *Welcome to Hell : Letters & Writings from Death Row* (compiled and edited by Jan Arriens): This is a book which can be purchased through [Amazon](#) for \$27.95. It has a forward by Sr. Helen Prejean.
- *Women on the Row: Revelations from Both Sides of the Bar* by Kathleen O'Shea is a book on the author's conversations with ten women on death row. This book is currently out of print and so cannot be ordered. But it is available through the Hesburgh Library at Notre Dame (Call # is HV 9466 .O743 2000). Just as with the previous suggestion, this should be a last resort.
- [Death Row Speaks](#): On the left of the page, click on "Inmate writings/art," and you'll find additional options that will take you to inmate journals, art, essays, or poetry.
- [Dennis Mayfield Brewer's San Quentin blog](#)
- [Donald \(Duke\) Palmer's Ohio death row blog](#): Caution--there is profanity on this site.

**Third**, students frequently ask **what they should write in their initial letters**. My advice is to be fairly brief. Don't bombard someone right away with very personal questions. Some inmates will write back and say that they're willing to be asked about (literally) anything. Others will be more guarded. You should get a sense of what's fair to ask and what's off limits based upon the tone and content of the initial letter you receive back. You're certainly free to share however much or little information you may wish to about yourself as well. You should definitely say that you're writing for a college class just so your correspondent has full disclosure about your intentions. I also tend to encourage students in the initial letter to ask mostly factual questions just to set a foundation for later on. Factual questions would include inquiries about their physical surrounding or what their days are like. Some students also come up with clever ways to ask people 'who are you as a person?' (we all tend to like to talk about ourselves!). There may also be things on their individual ads for correspondence that you can pick up on (hobbies, interests, etc.) and that wouldn't be regarded as too intrusive too soon. What you write in your later correspondence is up to you, but you might think about asking about how they ended up on death row, what they now think about the crimes they committed, what their hopes and fears are, what they think people on the outside need to know about life on death row, and so on. As there is certainly time between now and when your paper is due for an exchange of more than one



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letter, you might want to establish contact first before asking for deeper details of their lives or actions. Whatever way you approach it, though, let *them* teach *you* about how someone comes to be on death row and what it's like to be there. Here's [a great sheet of suggestions about your correspondence](#). It was written jointly by a death row inmate and a woman with whom he was corresponding.

Fourth, if you feel better using a pseudonym in your letters, that's up to you. (Or, some students just use their first names in the correspondence. If you want to use a pseudonym, you might think about using your first name + your middle name as your last name) And you don't want to include your own return address, you can put mine down, and I could forward the mail to you; e.g., "[*your name*], c/o Prof. Joseph Incandela, Saint Mary's College, 68 Spes Unica Hall, Notre Dame, IN, 46556." Finally, even though you're writing for this class, I would ask that you be (at least) open to more correspondence than just writing during the semester, perhaps getting some letters back and never writing again. Some previous students have continued their correspondence for (literally) years. Breaking off correspondence abruptly as soon as your paper is handed in doesn't help future students of "Catholic Social Thought" who may be interested in doing this assignment. If prisoners feel used by this assignment, they may well decide not to participate in the future. No one, even those on death row, *likes* to feel used. Along these lines, and depending upon whom you write to, you could certainly get back an angry rejection for further correspondence, if a student from a previous semester just sent a few letters and abruptly discontinued writing after her assignment was turned in. Related to this, I want to pass along something that Willie Trotter, a Texas death-row inmate, wrote to a student in a previous semester: "Let me give you a suggestion here. Do not use the word 'project!' Men here on the row despise this. Just for future reference." And so *please* don't refer in your letters to writing to this particular person as your "project." People don't want to be other people's 'projects.' Say something along the lines that you're interested in learning about the death penalty and that you're requesting your correspondent to help you do that. That's just a suggestion. Feel free to come up with something else, but stay away from 'project.'

**ESSAY TOPIC:** I would like 6 – 8 pages of reflections about this exercise in which you describe what you have learned through your correspondence, how your perceptions about death row inmates have been affected by your correspondence, and what conclusions this assignment has led you to about capital punishment. What you end up writing for your final paper will in large part depend on what you get back from your inmates. For example, if you receive letters back from more than one person, you might think about arranging your paper thematically to set up some comparison and contrast between what different inmates wrote to you. Perhaps they both commented on their families or their surroundings or their trials, etc. If you receive mail back from only one person, you might try to put that person's reflections in a wider context in light of the readings assigned for the death penalty section of the course. Please feel free to arrange your own comments in whatever way you think best expressed what you learned and is most coherent in terms of the organization of the essay. It's difficult to be more specific than this, because as I said above, so much does depend on what (and how much) you get back in your correspondence. If you're unsure about how to begin writing your final paper, come see me and bring your letters. If I have a clearer sense of what you've received, I would most likely have more productive suggestions.

Another option would be to do something more creative and make your own Voicethread, for example, using the voices of those you hear through the letters you receive, along with your own commentary on them. To set something like this up, you might get friends to read from the letters with your own voice coming in around those snippets to comment on them. You could even post slides or pictures of your inmate. For about a 20-minute tutorial about polishing your Voicethread final presentation (including slide transitions, etc.), see [this link](#). To turn this in, you'd simply share the Voicethread. There are a number of ways to do this--some more public, and others more secure. Please read this tutorial on [sharing Voicethreads](#), and then choose whichever way you want. The most secure way to share is found on p. 4 of this tutorial. You would add me as a contact and send your completed Voicethread to my email (incandel@saintmarys.edu).

**EVALUATION:** In addition to the usual criteria listed on pp. 7-8 of your syllabus, you'll be graded on the depth of your reflections on capital punishment in light of the letters you receive back, especially as they are informed by the readings from that section of the course. That is, I'll primarily be looking to see what you did with the information you received back from the inmates and how well you used it to advance your own reflections and come to your own insights that dig beneath the surface to say things that are new and interesting. The more correspondence you're able to have with the same person (namely, letters in which you respond back to your inmate and she or he writes back to you), the better, as this should allow you to pursue things you're interested about and come to a deeper grasp of that person's life and the death penalty in general.

More specifically, I'll be looking for how well you combine events, background or views from the letters you received back from the prisoners with your own reflections. Certainly, I don't just want you to summarize what they said in their letters. I *do* want you to make use of what they said (events, people, narrative description) as you lay out your own ideas about the death penalty. You'll note that the way Sr. Helen Prejean discusses capital punishment is through *stories*. Try to do the same kind of thing. *Judiciously chosen quotations from the letters you got back should intersperse your own narration*. Describe events, profile people, tell stories, include and analyze your correspondent's views and opinions on capital punishment, prison life, crime, and so on. In short, *make robust use of the details in your prisoners' letters, but integrate them well with your own views and your own organization of the material*. And your views will be much more substantial if informed by a careful reading of the material on capital punishment listed on the syllabus for [November 22](#) and [November 29](#); and I'll be evaluating your paper in light of how you made use of these other readings and sources of information. There's also a tremendous amount of [very good background on the web about capital punishment](#). A specific **rubric** for this project option is available [here](#).

**FORMAT & WHAT TO TURN IN:** For this third paper option, follow a similar format as in the other two options. Number

your pages. Because I would like copies (either the originals or copies of the originals) of what you write and what you get back, come up with some way of referencing your letters so that I can better follow what you're drawing from and where. So for example, you might give each letter you receive from a particular person a letter, and follow that letter with a page numbers (as in "Inmate's name, Letter A, Page 3"). That's just an example. If you can come up with something that does the same thing, feel free to use it. Your completed project is due by noon on Friday, December 2nd. **Because I'm asking you to turn in your letters as well, if it's easier for you to turn this paper in as a hard copy rather than online, you are free to do so by bringing it by my office, Spes Unica 115, by Friday the 2nd at noon.** And if you want to turn in a Voicethread rather than a paper, then see the second paragraph under "Essay Topic" above for instructions. I would still want hard copies of your letters, and so you'd need to get those to me by the due date. Of course, you're still welcome to turn in your project [in the usual way](#) through [Edmodo](#).

**CONCERNS:** I need to say this, because the following issue always comes up: You may be wondering, 'Will the person to whom I write show up for dinner some night carrying his own cutlery?' One cannot truthfully say that there is absolutely no risk attached in corresponding with someone who has committed very violent acts. But it is also true to say that none of my students has ever felt endangered in the approximately ten years I've been offering this assignment, and there has never been a case that I know of in which a death row prisoner has been released (in itself, rare--and they don't get released unless they were innocent anyway!) or has escaped (rarer still) and made unwanted contact with his or her correspondent. Obviously, it is possible that your correspondent may try to manipulate you, con you into sending him or her money, ask you for more personal information than you want to give (requests for photos are not uncommon), or respond with hostility toward your inquiries. If you receive any responses which make you confused or anxious, you should see me and bring your letters. In the words of one of these online services, "This sounds all very serious, but it should be mentioned. Usually though your pen-pal will be someone who has been very lonely and is very glad to receive your letters. Most inmates do write back very quickly. You will discover that the inmate is as good a friend to you as you are to him/her." If you have additional questions, concerns, fears about writing to someone on death row, please do look at the extremely helpful ["Frequently Asked Questions"](#) about writing to prisoners, including important points about privacy. It's also the case that this particular project option sometimes makes students' parents nervous. You're capable of making your own decisions, but you should also respect the views of those others in your life who care about you. I don't want this assignment to be something that causes friction at home. If you think this could be an issue, you might think seriously about choosing one of the other two options.

**PICTURE REQUESTS:** Somewhat related to this, it is not unusual for inmates to ask for a picture of the person writing to him/her. If someone wrote to *you* out of the blue, you'd probably wonder what he or she looked like as well. Nonetheless, I'd *strongly* advise against sending any pictures. But if you don't acknowledge the question, it will just keep on being asked until you do. What I've always suggested is that you be honest and say something like, "I'm not comfortable doing that right now." You can leave off the last two words if you like. Including them indicates that there might come a time when you would be comfortable doing this. I will say that some students have indeed sent pictures after fairly lengthy correspondences with particular inmates. So I think the "right now" acknowledges that things may change down the road (or they may not), and all I can say is that for some Saint Mary's students, they have.

**SOME CST STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES:** If you want to read about other "Catholic Social Thought" students who have done this project in years past, you might consult a December, 2000 article from [The Cleveland Plain Dealer](#), which (among other things) described this "Catholic Social Thought" assignment and interviewed one former student who did it. You might also benefit from reading [an essay written by a former CST student that ended up getting published in a death penalty newsletter](#). I want to close with a recent message I received on Facebook from Angela Rizzo, a Saint Mary's student who graduated a few years ago and wrote to death row inmates when she took Catholic Social Thought in the Fall, 2005, semester. Angela had just noticed that the inmate with whom she was corresponding had just been executed. She then wrote to me:

Dr. Incandela,

Hello, sir. I wanted to let you in on a few bizarre events that happened to me within the past 12 hrs.

I am a nurse and I work night shift at an Air Force hospital in Biloxi, MS. It was a very slow night with only one patient. I noticed a section of a newspaper sitting near the nurses station and every time I walked past it, I meant to put it in the recycling bin. Anyways, halfway through the night one of my co-workers picked it up and shared with everyone the article printed on the front page of the Nation & World section. What he read brought chills up my spine.

My death row pen pal had been executed. God must have wanted me to know, because the news from Texas made its way to Biloxi, MS last night. The minute my coworker read the headline, I KNEW it was Mark Stroman. My heart raced as I sighed. Hearing of his execution brought back memories of sharing letters with him, hearing his story, and seeing him as a person, not only a vicious crime. This experience and your Catholic Social Thought class has forever changed my life.

If that is not a weird coincidence, I don't know what is. But there's more. This is why I write.

I told my coworkers I would find my letters from Mark and bring them to work Sunday night. When I arrived home this am, I saw a stack of papers and envelopes sitting on the kitchen counter, which is out of the ordinary. (My fiance is a neat freak.) Fear swept over me. Sure enough, they were Mark's letters!! Letters from 5 years

ago!! My puppy (who LOVES to eat paper when we are not home) had gotten into my college importance box and had demolished a folder or two. Mark's letters were untouched. My fiance collected the letters and placed them in a pile on the kitchen counter.

I don't know what to think about these events! I know God is powerful and he must have been present during Mark's execution. All I can do is pray.  
When you have time, I would be interested to hear what your thoughts are on this 'coincidence.'

Happy Sunday. :)  
Very respectfully,  
Angela Rizzo

Some students do continue to write to their inmates after they leave "Catholic Social Thought." Here is a very poignant example of this. Jenna Lewanski ('11) wrote to [Jerry Jackson, a Virginia inmate on death row](#). Jerry was put to death on August 18, 2011. Before his death, Jenna wrote to the governor of Virginia, Bob McDonnell, asking that Jerry's life be spared. It gives you a sense of the genuine friendship she developed with Jerry. In fact, Jenna's mom even ended up writing to him. Here is [her letter to the governor](#), which she said I can share with you.

**ONE FINAL OPPORTUNITY:** Sr. Helen Prejean will be speaking on September 12th at the University of Notre Dame in Andrews Auditorium of Geddes Hall. It's just west of the Library and the home of the Center for Social Concerns. Here's a [map](#). And this is the notice for her talk. *Especially* if you are doing the death penalty project, you should strongly consider going to this talk.

**Sr. Helen Prejean, CSJ – author of *Dead Man Walking***  
**Building Justice in the World: Evil vs. Justice**  
**Annual Fr. Bernie Clark, C.S.C. Lecture**

**September 12, 2011**  
**7:00 pm**  
**Andrews Auditorium, Geddes Hall, University of Notre Dame**

Sr. Helen Prejean, a Notre Dame Laetare Medal recipient, has become world-renown for her advocacy against the death penalty. On this 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Week of September 11<sup>th</sup>, she will speak about her experiences of confronting evil with justice based in gospel values. She will also be available to sign her books which will be available, *Dead Man Walking* and *Death of Innocents*.

[Submit your Semester Project Choice here.](#)

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