# **General Guidelines**

Courts are a tricky place and we need to engage in certain practices and norms around respectability and professionalism, even if we disagree with them, in order to make sure our comrades have the best possible chance to be granted the best possible sentences and return to us quickly.

The judge is looking for your letter to help them understand your comrade as a person, not just a defendant.

The court has, until this moment, been given a very limited view of who your comrade is, almost entirely defined by the statements of law enforcement officers. Now is our only chance to make the judge understand that your comrade is a person with deep connections and loved ones who miss them.

* **Start your letter by describing your relationship with your comrade.** How long have you known them? What is the nature of your relationship? Do you have specific credentials that are worth mentioning?
	+ Are they your personal friend? Your employee? A member of your faith community? Your neighbor? A family member?
	+ Are you a teacher, a local politician, the head of a non-profit organization, or a faith leader?
* **Tell the story of your comrade.** ​​​​​​​Show, don't tell. Provide specific examples and stories about your comrade instead of just loading the letter up with positive adjectives. Instead of saying "John is loyal", tell a story demonstrating this.
* **Be concise**. Judges are busy and value efficiency. Try to keep your letter to 1 page, and only make your best arguments.
* **Don't address guilt or innocence**. This can negatively impact your credibility. If your comrade has pled or been found guilty, don't say they're innocent. If your comrade has a criminal history, don't paint over it. Address what was going on in the person's life at the time or anything your comrade has down to improve themselves since the arrest (ex: started taking GED classes or attending religious services, etc.). Your job is to help the court understand who your comrade is outside of their case.
	+ "I respect that a jury has found [name] guilty of/that [name] has pleaded guilty to [x]. I'm writing this letter to offer a more complete picture of who [name] is as a person."
* Remember that unless a record is voluntarily sealed, **your sentencing letters will become part of the public court record**. If there's information that you wouldn't want to be shared with the public, it's best to leave it out of your letter.
	+ Generally, only the court will bother to read bond letters. However, if your comrade is facing intense public scrutiny or their case becomes a high-profile story, there's a higher likelihood that unconnected people, including far-right provocateurs, might look up and potentially share court documents.
	+ There's no need to put your phone number, email, or complete home address in your signature. If you wouldn't want your boss to know that you used company letterhead or included your place of work in your signature, don't.
* Type your letter, double-check for spelling and grammar errors, and then sign & date your letter (either electronically or by hand to scan and upload)

# Guiding questions while you write:

* Is your comrade thoughtful or kind? Do you have specific stories of times they've been exceptionally kind to people? Does your comrade have good relationships with friends, family, and loved ones? Mention specific examples.
	+ Aaron has an extremely gentle heart and cares deeply about the plight of community members who are less fortunate than him. Every winter, he volunteers to go around the city and helps drive homeless people to warming shelters so they don't have to spend the night outside in the cold.
	+ Ana has been my close friend for 7 years. When I broke my leg, she drove me to appointments and did all of my grocery shopping since I was unable to.
* Is your comrade a "productive member of society"? Are they in school, do they have a job, are they a member of a faith community? Judges like hearing about things like this, because it demonstrates that your comrade would easily return to life. Try to specify how long your comrade has been a member of those groups.
	+ John has been a neighborhood handyman for 3 years and has worked on homes all over the Grant Park area and has dozens of long-time loyal customers.
	+ Jason has been a student at Georgia State University studying English for 3 years. He always attends class and hopes to become a high school teacher in Dekalb County
	+ Jeremy graduated from Grady High School this summer. He has worked at CVS for 7 months and is up for a promotion to day shift manager because he is such a trusted, loyal employee.
* Do you personally believe the alleged offense is out of character? Without discussing guilt or innocence, is it unlikely that your comrade would violate the law in the future? What makes you think so?
	+ John babysits my children regularly. I trust him with my children because he is extremely gentle, and I do not believe he will have any future contact with law enforcement.
* Do you think this experience has taught your comrade any lessons? What lessons and why?
	+ Ashlee has taken this situation very seriously, and I've seen her become more reflective about how she wants to interact positively with others moving forward.
* Talk about how your comrade has dealt with or grown from hardships or setbacks if you're able to.

# **Example Letter**

Remember! This is just an example! Judges want to see you speak from the heart, and just the fact that you are taking time out of your day to write and submit a letter shows them how loved and important your comrade is. Use this as a guide to inspire your own letter, and remember you can do this!

[date]

Honorable [Judge's name]

[address of courthouse]

Re: [your comrade's case number/case title or just your comrade's full name]

Dear Judge [name]

My name is [your name], and I have been Anthony Jones's close personal friend for over 7 years. We met through the music scene playing in different bands, and I've always known Anthony to be kind and respectful

I know Anthony has pleaded guilty, but I hope that in writing this letter I can help you to understand him as a broader person, outside of his offense. When I broke my leg in 2016, very early into our friendship, I spent 6 months recovering, unable to walk. Anthony took it upon himself to drive me to my weekly physical therapy appointments for those entire 6 months. He was never late, and always kind, helping me in and out of the car and walking slowly to match my pace on crutches. He had to reschedule his shifts to accommodate my appointments, and would also often pick up groceries for me since I was unable to do so. I am now fully recovered thanks to his exceptional kindness and care for me.

Thank you for your time in reading this letter. I hope that you are able to be lenient on Anthony, as many of us at home miss our kind friend very much. I am available to answer any questions you might have.

Sincerely,

***Your Name*** (signed electronically)

Your Name (typed)