

## How To Learn English: Find a Penpal

The idea of a penpal is very old. A penpal is someone—normally from another country—who you never met 'in real life,' but who you trade letters with. Of course, just like everything else, it's been updated by the Internet. Now, a penpal can be someone you trade email with. Still, it's normally not a person you met in real life.

And that's the danger of it.

### A Quick Warning

I think penpals can be a great way to learn English. It's fun to get to know another person and, because you're writing about things that you think are interesting—and not things that an English teacher wants you to write about—you're triaging your vocabulary as you go. But there's a little bit of danger involved.

Not everybody on the Internet is a good person. (I think you know this much.) And not everybody who says they want to practice their English and learn about different countries is honest, or telling the truth. And so, because I believe in the phrase “better safe than sorry,” here's a little bit of advice:

- **NEVER** give out your address and think twice—that means, be very careful—before you give out your phone number. **ALWAYS** ask yourself “does my penpal have a good reason to *need* my address or phone number?”
- **BE CAREFUL** with the photos that you send. Remember: on the Internet you're pretty anonymous—that means, nobody knows who you are—and so you don't have to worry about your penpal knowing any more about you than you tell him or her. If you send a photo of yourself, it's no problem: he or she still couldn't find you, if they tried. But if you send a photo of yourself with your house in the background. . . that can be a problem.
- **LEARN AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE** before you write someone an email. The websites I've recommended (they're coming in a second) will let you view the people looking for penpals without giving any information about yourself. My advice is this: look for someone who's written a lot about him or herself. And, in the first couple of emails, ask yourself if what the person is writing is the same as you saw on the penpal site.
- **WOMEN SHOULD BE CAREFUL.** Men can be jerks. (As a man, I can say that women can be pretty crazy, too.) But, if you're a woman and you're over eighteen years old, you know men can be a little bit crazy about women. If you *aren't* looking for an overseas

boyfriend, avoid “penpals” who seem to be looking for overseas girlfriends. And **NEVER** write the people who say things like “I’m going to be traveling in Europe for a month and I’d like to find people to meet.” I think they’re saying “I’d like to find people to sleep with.”

### **The Horror Story**

A “Horror” story is a 'scary' story. The movies of Alfred Hitchcock, for example, are sometimes called 'Horror movies.' When we aren't talking about books or movies, a 'horror story' is a 'worst case' story. Or it's a story in which everything goes bad.

My horror story is about a friend of mine named Jenn. She and I are good friends from college and she came to visit me in Germany for a month. While she was here, she decided she should see London. After all, the flight is cheaper from Germany than it is from the U.S. And she had a penpal in London she'd been writing to for a long time. She thought she could visit him.

As soon as she got off the plane and met him at the airport, her penpal—I think his name was Alex, but I'm not sure anymore—was touching her, flirting. He was acting like she was his girlfriend and she wasn't. She said it made her feel weird and she got away from him and stayed at a hostel in London. She still had a great trip, but Alex wouldn't stop calling her cell phone, and sending her text messages to come back and 'talk about what happened.' He even called me to ask me to talk to her for him.

It was creepy. Creepy describes a situation that feels 'wrong,' or where you start to get 'goosebumps.' It was a bad situation.

Nothing happened to Jenn and she loved her time in London. But nobody wants to be in the same situation. That's why I have some advice on how to find penpals.

### **How To Find Penpals**

At the end of this post, there are three web addresses to find penpals. The question is, how can you find someone to help you practice your English and avoid a 'horror story' like Jenn's? Well, I have a two pieces of advice:

- **Have a common interest** with your penpal. A common interest can be a hobby that you both have. If you both like to garden and your emails are mostly about gardening, then hopefully your penpal won't be looking for a new girlfriend, or boyfriend. A common interest can be anything that you both find interesting: books, music, movies, hobbies. . .
- **Know what your penpal is looking for.** Most sites have a space for a person to write “what kind of person” they're looking for. If the person writes that they only want to write with women between seventeen and twenty-one years old, then, even if you're a woman

between seventeen and twenty-one years old, my guess is that the person isn't looking for 'just chat.' It's okay if they say they want 'open-minded,' or 'funny' or 'friendly' people. But if they only want to write with women—or only with men—I start to wonder what they're looking for.

### **Penpals Can Be Great**

I know that this is a strange piece of advice: it's more warning than anything else. But, I know that penpals can be a great experience. I had two really good penpals when I was learning German—and we still trade emails about once a year—and students say they think it's really interesting. And, because many English speaking countries—the U.S., Canada, and Australia—are 'immigration' countries, you might find a native speaker whose family comes from your country. He just might want to learn about life in Germany—or Malaysia, or wherever you are—and be glad to correct your English in order to learn more.

This brings us to my last pieces of advice: how to write your penpal:

- **Ask to have your English corrected.** Many native English speakers don't speak another language, and so they might feel like it's not polite for them to correct your English. If your penpal is a native-speaker, you might need to ask two or three times before they feel comfortable giving your corrections.
- **Email isn't a letter.** This is obviously a matter of 'feeling,' but I have found that my penpals don't always write back if I write them emails like I would write letters. A letter is long, and takes a long time to write. When they get long emails, many people think they have to write a long email back. . . and they never seem to have time for it. At first, it might be better to write shorter emails and see if your penpal answers them more.
- **Patience is a virtue.** I hate to wait. If I write an email today, I want an answer today. But that's almost never the case. Normally, if I get an email, it takes me several days—or even several weeks—to answer. And it's natural for other people to need as long before they can answer. So, don't be upset if you have to wait a week or two for an answer. I try to remind myself that it's still faster than paper mail would be.
- **Have fun!** After all the warnings and the horror story, I feel like I should remind you that you can have a lot of fun with a penpal. You can learn a lot, see the world differently, and hopefully improve your English! I hope you enjoy your new friendship.

### **Where To Find a Penpal**

The last piece of advice that I have are three websites where you can search for penpals. If the sites are confusing, consider doing a Google search for 'penpal' in your own language. You will probably find a site in your own language to search.

- [Http://www.interpals.net/](http://www.interpals.net/) This is a site that actually has 'Find penpals for language practice' in the bottom right hand corner.
- [Http://www.penpalparty.com/](http://www.penpalparty.com/) This site is a bit more confusing, I think. (There's a lot of information in very little space.) But they try to keep people away who are looking for money or love. And I think that's good.
- [http://www.europa-pages.com/penpal\\_form.html](http://www.europa-pages.com/penpal_form.html) The Europa Pages' International Penpal Service is a website that includes a section for people who are interested in learning languages, but also penpals organized by interests.

### **Now Go and Find a Penpal**

I'm sorry that this post was more warning than anything else, but I hope that you still give writing a penpal a try. It can be a lot of fun, and you can learn a lot. And, of course, I'm interested to hear what you think. Do you have any great experiences with penpals that you want to share? Is there a website you think should be on the list? Let me know!