



*Please Note: The information contained in this Guide is not intended as legal advice in any individual's case. There are many exceptions and variations in the parole consideration process. If you have questions, please consult with an experienced parole attorney.*

## HOW TO WRITE A LETTER OF REMORSE

This Guide is intended to help you through the process of writing letters of remorse to the survivors and/or victim(s) of your crime, to their families, and to the communities that you affected. We recognize that each person's journey to remorse is unique, so please do not feel limited or tied to the advice shared in this resource. It is merely meant to be a helpful starting point for writing your remorse letters. If, after thoroughly reading this Guide, you still have questions, please do not hesitate to contact our office.

### I. To whom should I write a letter of remorse?

While each case is different, it is generally recommended that you write a letter of remorse to the direct victim(s) of your commitment offense. This is the person, or people, who suffered harm as a direct result of your actions. You may also choose to write letters to secondary victims, such as family members or loved ones of the victim(s), or anyone else who was negatively impacted by your crime. Examples of secondary victims include the victim's parents, their children, their spouse, their siblings, their friends, and other loved ones. Your crime might also have affected witnesses to the crime, the community that you came from, or the community that your victim(s) came from. While you do not have to write a letter of remorse to each of these people or groups of people, it is important that your letters acknowledge the wide-ranging impact of your actions on others.

If you do choose to write multiple letters of remorse, it is important to make sure that each letter is different and specific to the victim to whom you are writing. Remember, every person is different and therefore experiences harm differently. As you write to multiple people, it is crucial to consider how your actions impacted that person's life (physically, emotionally, financially, spiritually). If you knew the victim(s) prior to your crime, or discovered aspects of their life through trial and/or parole proceedings, consider that information, and describe how you imagine, or know, your actions impacted each victim's life. It should not be possible to use the same letter for multiple victims and just change the name and salutation—your letter should be specific enough that it could only be for the person who you are writing to.

### II. When should I write a letter of remorse?

Because writing a letter of remorse is often a difficult and emotionally intense process, we recommend that you begin drafting your letter(s) several months before your parole hearing so that you have plenty of time to process, write, and edit. A thoughtfully written letter will go a long way towards showing the Board that your remorse is sincere, while on the other hand, a last-minute letter may cause the Board to doubt your sincerity. In

addition, putting time and care into writing your remorse letter will most likely help you to feel more prepared to talk about your remorse and understanding of victim impact in the actual hearing.

If you have written letters in the past for previous hearings or for a self-help program, consider revising them. We encourage you to update your letter of remorse every few years because your understanding of yourself, and your reflections on your relationship with the victim(s), will undoubtedly change over time.

### **III. What should I write about?**

Letters of remorse should focus on expressing (1) remorse and empathy, (2) accountability, and (3) an understanding of how your actions impacted your victim(s). Some letters of remorse also discuss the (4) amends you are making (or planning to make) to your victim(s). Letters of remorse are not the place to list the various self-help groups you have participated in, to explain your social history prior to the life crime, to discuss who you are today, or to ask for forgiveness. Instead, focus on demonstrating empathy for your survivor and/or victim and for their loved ones, and taking responsibility for your actions. The pages following this Guide have additional prompts and exercises to help inspire your thinking.

### **IV. What should I reflect on as I consider writing my remorse letter?**

As you begin to write your letter of remorse and consider the exercises and material enclosed, you can also reflect on the first moment when you really understood the harm that you caused, and consider the following questions. These questions, along with the material enclosed, can help you to explore what you want to express in your letter of remorse.

#### Reflection Questions

- How did it feel the first time you truly accepted the consequences of your actions?
- What steps have you taken to make amends for your crime? How have you expressed your remorse and empathy?
- What do you think the victim(s) would want to hear from you? What would you want to say to them? If you have heard the victim(s) or their loved ones testify at prior hearings, how have they described the impact of your crime on their lives? If you have not heard directly from the victim(s) or their loved ones, what do you think they would say about how your crime impacted them?
- How would the life of your victim(s) or of their family be different if you had not committed your crime?
- What hopes do you have for the future of your victim(s) or for their loved ones?

- Have you made living amends? If so, in a sentence or two explain what your living amends are.

**V. What general guidelines should I consider as I write my letter of remorse?**

Be specific. As discussed above, to help the Board see that your feelings are genuine, use language that is specific and personal. It should be clear from the text of the letter that it could have only been written by you, about the victim(s) in your case.

Use active, not passive words. For example, write “I killed my victim,” instead of “my victim was killed.” Using active rather than passive words helps to show the Board that you are not minimizing your role or deflecting blame.

Keep your letter short and simple. Letters of remorse should be between 1-2 pages.

**VI. Will I actually send the letter?**

No, letters of remorse should not be sent to the intended recipient. Instead, they will be presented to the Board. It is also possible that either the Board or the District Attorney’s Office will make your letters available to those who have been negatively impacted by your actions. Writing a letter of remorse is a way to show the Board that you have begun to make amends with your victim(s).

## ADDITIONAL PROMPTS AND EXERCISES

Remorse is a strong emotion of sadness and regret for wrongdoing, and it plays an important role in healing for both those who have caused harm, and those who have been harmed. An expression of sincere remorse can help your victim(s) access a fuller understanding of what happened, validation and acknowledgement of the pain they have experienced, and an increased sense of safety and certainty that you will not cause that kind of harm again. Genuine remorse is selfless and centers those harmed and their healing. In some cases, it can help those harmed find closure. For that reason, in a letter of remorse, do not focus on how your remorse impacts you; focus on expressing your remorse and apology sincerely, deeply, and from a place of empathy. Showing empathy requires acknowledging the pain you have caused to your victim(s) and connecting to their emotional experience. If you need more support reflecting on the concept of remorse, write back and request Home After Harm Lesson 13: Remorse.

Accountability is the ongoing process of self-reflecting, apologizing, making amends, and changing your behavior so the harm you caused does not happen again. In the limited context of a letter of remorse, accountability means taking responsibility for your actions by naming your actions and the specific harm you caused, reflecting on the impact on your victim(s), and offering a sincere apology from a place of vulnerability and empathy. In order to demonstrate that you truly understand and take responsibility for your actions, it is important to be specific when naming what you did and the harmful impact it caused. It is also important to focus on your choices, without blaming other people or outside circumstances.

When writing a letter of remorse, the words and language you choose can have a big impact on how clearly you demonstrate accountability. Below are examples of accountable and unaccountable language. If as you review your letter of remorse you see any language that lacks accountability, revise and try again. You do not want your language to undermine your expression of responsibility.

### **Accountable language is active:**

- “I chose...”
- “I decided...”
- “I picked up...”
- “I hit...”
- “I shot...”
- “I murdered...”

### **Not accountable language is passive:**

- “He got killed...”
  - “He was brought to the canal...”
  - “She ended up falling...”
  - “She got hit on the head...”
  - “Mr. Smith was shot...”
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**Accountable language is honest, truthful, thorough, clear, and makes sense.**

**Not accountable language is dishonest, vague, confusing, unclear, or missing information.**

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**Accountable language takes responsibility:**

- Focuses on the thoughts or actions that *you* took and the choices *you* made
- Does not shy away from admitting to the “ugliest” actions

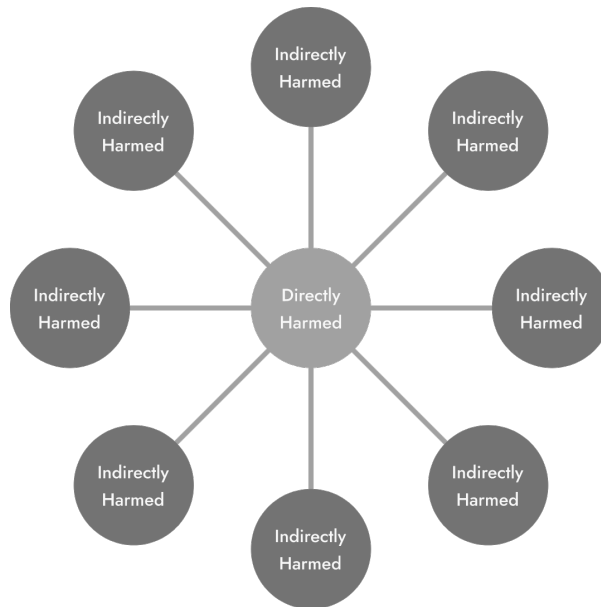
**Not accountable language minimizes, blames, and justifies:**

- Focuses on the actions of *others*
- Focuses on the circumstances surrounding the crime
- Glosses over the most difficult aspects of the crime
- Reduces the significance of certain actions by adding commentary to lessen the seriousness

If you need more support reflecting on the concept of accountability, write back and request Home After Harm Lesson 11: Accountability.

Victim Impact explores the idea of how harm from crime can have a far-reaching impact. You may have heard this concept referred to as the “Ripple Effect.” To illustrate this concept, think of a stone being thrown into a pool of water. The size of the stone and the force with which it hits the water determines how big the splash will be and how many ripples there are. This is also true of crimes – the severity of the harm determines how many people are affected, and how big the impact is. The stone colliding with the water represents the actual crime – the direct harm to the direct victim(s), while the splash and ripples represent the broader consequences of the crime – the indirect harm to the secondary victims. As a reminder, secondary or indirect victims can include: the victim’s family and community, the neighborhood or community where a crime took place, people who witnessed a crime, paramedics who responded to the crime, news reporters who covered the crime, and all those involved in the justice system and the adjudication of the crime. What the Ripple Effect does not adequately demonstrate is the many different ways victims are impacted by harm (physically, emotionally, spiritually, financially, etc.). It is important to explore these various types of harm so that you can deepen your understanding, empathy, and remorse.

You can begin to reflect on your direct and indirect victims by using the diagram on the next page to develop a harm impact chart for your commitment offense. If there were multiple people directly harmed, you can include multiple circles in the middle or develop multiple charts centered around each person that was directly harmed. Challenge yourself to think of people, places, and things that are possible victims of the harm you caused that you have never thought of before.



Next, make a list of direct victims and another list of indirect victims of your commitment offense. For every person on your list of direct and indirect victims, make a diagram similar to the example below. Then, describe the different ways that each person may have been impacted by the harm.

<i>Type of Harm</i>	<i>Example 1 – Direct Victim: John Smith</i>	<i>Example 2- Indirect Victim: Jane Smith (mother of John Smith)</i>
<b>Physical</b>	Fractured facial and skull bones, traumatic brain injury, broken teeth, intense physical pain	Could not eat for multiple days
<b>Psychological &amp; Emotion</b>	Fear for his life, confusion about why this is happening to him, memory loss	Fear, concern for her son, disbelief, confusion, sadness, regret, guilt
<b>Financial</b>	Medical bills, dental bills, therapy bills, lost income during recovery, reliance on social security disability income	Contribution to medical, dental, and therapy bills; lost income while facilitating access to recovery resources; housing another person

<b>Relational</b>	Divorce; moved in with mother after he lost his home because his disability income doesn't cover the mortgage and he needs a caregiver	Contribution to medical, dental, and therapy bills; lost income while facilitating access to recovery resources; housing another person
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<b>Ongoing</b>	Increased paranoia and impulsivity, difficulty walking down the street alone, distrust of other people, loss of home, loss of independence	Loss of independence
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If you need more support reflecting on the concept of victim and harm impact, write back and request Home After Harm Lesson 12: Harm Impact.

Last, making amends means taking action to restore the harm caused. There are three types of amends: direct amends, indirect amends, and living amends. In your letter of remorse, consider including a sentence or two about your commitment to making amends. That said, do not spend too much time in your letter writing about this because it shifts the focus onto you.

1. **Direct amends** are when someone who has caused harmed makes reparations directly to those harmed. For instance, if someone stole something from someone, they would return the item directly to the person they stole it from and apologize.
2. **Indirect amends** are when someone who has caused harm creates positivity in the world to offset the negativity created by their actions. For instance, if they assault someone but cannot have direct contact with this person, they could actively engage in anti-violence campaigns or support organizations working with violence survivors.
3. **Living amends** are the foundation of all amends; it means consistently living in a way that acknowledges your past harms and ensures you do not repeat them. It requires making genuine and radical changes in your life and committing to them. For instance, someone who assaulted an intimate partner may choose to live out their amends by committing to a lifestyle of non-violence, participating in therapy to address anger issues, and transforming beliefs about gender roles and relationships.

## TEMPLATE LETTER OF REMORSE

*Please Note: This Template was created to provide an example of how a Letter of Remorse can be written and organized and is meant to be personalized as much as possible.*

Dear [*Victim's Name*]:

I am writing to express my remorse for ... [*name the harm that resulted in your conviction*] ...

I am remorseful because ... [*share any reflections that you have related to your remorse*] ... When I reflect on my past actions, I feel ... [*name any emotions or feelings related to your remorse*] ...

I am responsible for ... [*list the actions, inactions, and choices that you made that caused harm and resulted in your conviction in active language*] ...

I impacted ... [*list your victims, which could include the survivor and/or victim's father or mother, their children, their spouse, their siblings, their friends, and other loved ones*] ...

I imagine that I impacted you by ... [*list the type of impact or harm that you know or imagine you had on the victim you are writing the letter to, including physical, emotional, financial, relational, and ongoing harm*] ...

While I know there is no way to undo and completely repair the harm that I caused, I will work every day towards the following amends ... [*outline the steps you have taken towards making direct, indirect, and living amends*] ...

Sincerely,  
[*Your Name*]