

Shmanners 519: Pen Pals

Published on June 19th, 2026

[Listen here on Maximum Fun](#)

["Shmanners Theme" by brentalfloss plays]

Travis: Hello, internet! I'm your husband host, Travis McElroy.

Teresa: And I'm your wife host, Teresa McElroy.

Travis: And you're listening to Shmanners.

Teresa: It's extraordinary etiquette.

Travis: For ordinary occasions. Hello, my dove.

Teresa: Hello, dear.

Travis: It's Shmanners after dark. It's 8:30.

Teresa: Yeah. [chuckles]

Travis: The kids are in bed. There's a storm brewing outside. A nor'easter blowing in!

Teresa: That's not a nor'easter.

Travis: *Oah!*

Teresa: It's regular western—

Travis: It's a midwester—

Teresa: Weather.

Travis: A midwester!

Teresa: A midwester. Yeah, here we are.

Travis: Good for the crops.

Teresa: Summertime, things are different. They—

Travis: Things are different.

Teresa: They have a different like rhythm, so—

Travis: We do things a little differently here! Hi, I'm Mayor Travis McElroy.

Teresa: [chuckles] What?

Travis: Huh?

Teresa: Mayor of what?

Travis: Trav Nation.

Teresa: *Oh...*

Travis: I'm all—

Teresa: What does that make me? The first lady?

Travis: You're definitely the first lady of Trav Nation.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: I hold many titles.

Teresa: I see.

Travis: President, emperor, god king, all of these things.

Teresa: Well, that's what happens when there's a population of... what, two?

Travis: The entire world.

Teresa: Oh... Oh! I thought it went the other way, where you were—you were the only...

Travis: No! Trav Nation is opt out.

Teresa: Oh, okay.

Travis: Except for all the not cool people.

Teresa: They have to opt in?

Travis: No, they're just out.

Teresa: Oh, you—

Travis: And I don't mean like nerds—

Teresa: Threw them out.

Travis: Nerds are in. I mean like people where you're like, ew, that guy sucks.

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: No, they're not in there.

Teresa: All right.

Travis: None of that is what this is about.

Teresa: You're right.

Travis: We're not talking about the Shmanners of running Trav Nation.

Teresa: No, we're talking about the Shmanners of pen pals.

Travis: Did you have a pen pal growing up?

Teresa: I think that there was a time when my Girl Scout troop may have tried to do those kinds of things. I don't recall writing more than two letters.

Travis: I... once again, I think it was with scouts or church or something, where at one point, I exchanged like one postcard each with somebody in Japan.

Teresa: Mm-hm.

Travis: And I remember being like, this is incredible. I love this so much. I'll treasure this postcard forever—

Teresa: And never did it ever again.

Travis: And I'll never do it again.

Teresa: Yeah. Yeah. It's so hard to have pen pals as kids, because there's no like accountability for it.

Travis: Yeah. I also couldn't buy stamps when I was like eight, you know?

Teresa: Yeah, you can't really buy stamps.

Travis: I would say I have many friends nowadays that I would consider like text message pen pals.

Teresa: Sure. Yeah. I can see that.

Travis: Where it's not like we text—like we live in different places, and we don't like text to hang out or like, you know, coordinate stuff we're doing. It's just like once a month, "Hey, how's it going? Let me tell you what's been going on with you. Okay, amazing."

Teresa: I would say that that counts as a pen pal, as long as it's not just like the pleasantries.

Travis: No! No, no, no, it's like what's going on with your life and—

Teresa: Oh, so it's real questions.

Travis: Yeah!

Teresa: Okay, yeah. I think that the pen pal thing always works best when it's like through school, right? That's what you see TV and movies, where they do it through school and like the teacher is like, "Now everyone, take out your letters for correspondence and write one page in your composition books," or whatever it is, right? Because then there's a teacher that has this kind of like, "We are doing this now—"

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Kind of feeling. And I think that that for a young ch—a young person pen pal, makes the most sense. The other thing you see in TV and movies is prison pen pals.

Travis: Okay, why—you said that—we're not doing video.

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: But she has said that was such an intense look on her face.

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: As though she and I were prison pen pals—

Teresa: [chuckles] No, but don't you agree that happens a lot—

Travis: That is a thing!

Teresa: In movies?

Travis: But you said it... ominously in a way.

Teresa: I'm trying to make... make shared experiences.

Travis: If I went to prison, would you be my pen pal?

Teresa: Yes, I would. [chuckles]

Travis: Thank you. This is a shared experience.

Teresa: What are you in prison for?

Travis: Something cool! Not scary, not threatening.

Teresa: Tax evasion?

Travis: Yes! Oh! It's white-collar stuff!

Teresa: Yeah, yeah—

Travis: Yeah, it's white-collar stuff!

Teresa: Okay, embezzlement.

Travis: Yeah, but embezzlement and the company was corrupt.

Teresa: Oh, okay.

Travis: Right? So you're like, yeah! Get a—like a Robin Hood kind of thing.

Teresa: Like a Robin Hood thing.

Travis: Yeah, I embezzled—

Teresa: Technically illegal, but we all agree he was doing the gra—the right thing.

Travis: Yeah! Like I embezzled the money and then I gave it to charities.

Teresa: Ooh—

Travis: Yeah!

Teresa: Nice.

Travis: A modern day—in fact, where is that Robin Hood story?

Teresa: Yeah, totally.

Travis: There's gotta be, right? Where it's like a hacker who like steals from the rich through like hacking and then gives to the poor.

Teresa: Well... is it kind of like... what's that movie with Michael Bolton.

Travis: Michael Bolton?

Teresa: No, no, no, the other guy. No, no, no, Martin—no, ah, crap.
[chuckles]

Travis: No, no, no, take all the time you need.

Teresa: [laughs] Jennifer Aniston's in it with the pieces of flair.

Travis: Oh! Yes. Yes. Office Space.

Teresa: Office Space. Don't they do that? They like shave pennies off?

Travis: But they're going to keep it.

Teresa: Oh, yeah. No, you're right. They are going to keep it, but they deserve it.

Travis: I guess so, yeah.

Teresa: With the terrible existence. Isn't it Michael Bolton?

Travis: Yeah, that's the guy's name. Michael Bolton—

Teresa: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Travis: Is the character's name.

Teresa: The character's name.

Travis: Yes.

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: I was so confused when you said Michael Bolton—

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: I was like, well, that can't be it, but I have no idea... Unless that's what the B stands for in Michael B Jordan and his full name is Michael Bolton Jordan.

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: Which I would understand why you just shortened it to B at that point.

Teresa: Hey, let's talk about pen pals.

Travis: Oh, right!

Teresa: Okay. Now, let's be clear, people have always been sending people letters.

Travis: Right.

Teresa: People be writing letters, right? You can... people have used carrier pigeons, on foot messengers or couriers, right? Like horse races, things like that. And—

Travis: The Pony Express.

Teresa: The Pony—

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Express. Indeed. Indeed. The ancient world relied heavily on foot messengers, especially in war, right? We get the word marathon from the Greek Battle of Marathon, where the Greeks defeated the Persian army, but they were worried that they might try to retaliate, so they sent the messenger to Athens. He ran 26 miles. And so today the marathon race is 26.2 miles. Here's the thing about that though—

Travis: I bet that that guy, if that guy found out that he was memorialized by making other people have to do the thing he did—

Teresa: Mm-hm.

Travis: He's like, "No... don't celebrate me that way. Celebrate me by making people not have to run 26 miles."

Teresa: So... But what people don't realize is there's more to that story, because when he got there, he died.

Travis: He died.

Teresa: He died, so—

Travis: I know that from Eddie Izzard.

Teresa: Yeah. So the Romans were like, hey, instead of—

Travis: That's where I get all of my historical knowledge.

Teresa: [chuckles] That tracks.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: The Romans were like, "Hey, we'd like to do all the stuff the Greeks did, but let's not kill our messengers." So—

Travis: Don't shoot the messenger.

Teresa: *Oah.* So they had a kind of state runner's service, where they would relay the messages on horseback, which is a much better idea—

Travis: I mean, it's the Pony Express.

Teresa: Sort of. Yeah.

Travis: It was like a first pony expre—Pony Express was just like across the United States.

Teresa: Right, yeah.

Travis: But it was person like ho... horse rider to horse rider to horse rider.

Teresa: Mm-hm.

Travis: Before trains!

Teresa: Knights in the Middle Ages were often charged with couriering messages. And if you were a large merchant house, you might have had your own courier service, because you had to transport goods anyway, right? So why not put the letters in there too. And so like this is kind—that's kind of a postal service—

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Almost. In the United States, our postal service was established in the 1860s. We've talked about this before. Okay. And that is pretty much the most necessary thing for a pen pal. It has to be snail mail.

Travis: Does it have to be?

Teresa: Hm... for the—for the most pure sense of the word, because... the term pen pal appeared in the 1930s, and it had to be through letters.

Travis: So you're telling me that when you watch the movie *You've Got Mail*, starring Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks, they don't count as pen pals?

Teresa: It's email, electronic mail. So... I'll allow it.

Travis: Okay, because you specifically said snail mail.

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: Let the record show—stenographer, run it back.

Teresa: [chuckles] But they did not have 24/7 phones in their hands. They were tied—the mail was tied to the mailbox in the computer.

Travis: I—

Teresa: So delivery was instantaneous, but not gratification.

Travis: I disagree.

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: Powerfully, respectfully disagree.

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: The way that I text my friends with my ADHD, it is not instant, nor is it easy. I have to sit down and remind myself to stay in contact with the people I love. Hence why I kind of just casually slipped in at the beginning of this episode, I text those people about once a month.

Teresa: So—

Travis: And that counts!

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: I need credit for that.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: Thank you.

Teresa: So, during the 1930s, this is when... the, like I said, it first appeared in print, pen pal. Before that, 1919, we found pen friend, but it doesn't...

Travis: It doesn't work.

Teresa: It doesn't... I mean, the N sound is great—

Travis: No, it bothers me.

Teresa: But the P sound is better.

Travis: The pen friend, the problem is, you don't have a strong consonant between them. If it was penned friend, right, that would work better, right? But pen friend means that you have those soft like consonants, the N and the F, right next to each other, blurring together.

Teresa: Mm-hm.

Travis: It's too hard to say we're pen pal... are two—

Teresa: It's plosive.

Travis: Yeah, it's two very powerful. That's why that term works. It's also fun because you mentioned prison, and it almost works as like penitentiary friend.

Teresa: Huh.

Travis: Like penitentiary pal.

Teresa: Hm.

Travis: They're in the pen.

Teresa: Interesting.

Travis: Mm-hm.

Teresa: Hm...

Travis: That's not it.

Teresa: No.

Travis: But it's just fun the way that that would work.

Teresa: So this... the idea of a pen pal is credited at this time to a teacher, who was looking to add a more exciting element to his writing lessons in his classroom. And he wanted to inspire kids to be curious about other countries and cultures, but wasn't exactly sure how to get that started. So he came up with this idea of the student letter exchange, which was a project where students could write to other students in completely different countries and get a firsthand account of each other's daily lives.

Travis: Which is so am—like... I don't know if this still applies, because this might surprise you, I'm not 10 years old—

Teresa: Right.

Travis: Now. But I remember being 10 years old, and that would've been 1993, because I'm ancient. And like we still at that point were talking about digging a hole through the earth to China, right?

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: It was like this idea of like these other country—any other country really, might as well be like Narnia, you know? Of like, sure! Just go to Japan. Just go to Russia. What are you talking about?!

Teresa: Are you saying that the world felt so much bigger then?

Travis: Not only bigger, but amorphous.

Teresa: Mm-hm.

Travis: Right? Of just like—

Teresa: Well, at 10, you didn't really have any concept of the distance or the vastness or...

Travis: Well but also, there wasn't like YouTube videos, TikTok things of like creators from different places.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Or like footage, you know... cameras in everybody's hands taking pictures—

Teresa: It was much more insular.

Travis: Yeah! Right? I didn't accidentally see videos of people in France.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: You know what I mean? I'd have to find a documentary about it or look up pictures of it. You know what I mean? And so that idea of—

Teresa: Again, those pictures would probably either be from the news or from encyclopedias or something.

Travis: Right, exactly. Yeah, in '93, I wasn't on the internet. I don't know who was, right? This idea of just like, I can anchor these images, these places in my mind as to what they're like. Whereas now, Bebe will not shut up about wanting to go stay at like a capsule hotel in Japan—

Teresa: Oh! Yeah!

Travis: Because she watches videos about them and she loves the idea of staying in a capsule hotel. And we have to keep telling her, "Baby, if we ever fly to Japan, we're not doing that just to stay in a tiny capsule."

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: But anyways, like they have concepts of these places that we did not have. So having a pen pal thing where it's like, "I'm going to make this feel realer to you by letting you talk to somebody who lives there," makes the most sense to me.

Teresa: In 1936, the Student Letter Exchange was formally created as a society that helped match people with pen pals.

Travis: Well, and not to mention that this is like three years before World War II really kicks off.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Right? Where the world is about to become so much more interconnected—

Teresa: Mm-hm.

Travis: In people's minds. And like, that's wild that those two things came to being about the same time. I'll be like, hey, kids, you probably weren't thinking about a lot of these countries for a while. And then for like two years, you were thinking about 'em—about your friends over in that other country. And now get ready for that to change one more time.

Teresa: So even after the war, it became increasingly popular as an educational tool to set up children with pen pals, to foster better global understanding after, you know, a time of war, right? And so, all of these different—like you could find pen pals through newspapers, you could write in and put in a classified ad for it. And there are lots of programs that popped up throughout popular culture all throughout the '60s, '70s and '80s. And like, it was kind of like... it was almost a niche hobby that like everyone you knew had like some kind of experience with writing to a pen pal or

trying to find a pen pal, or sending my pen pal a postcard or whatever. Right?

Travis: I was led to believe by television when I was growing up that every other person in the world had a stamp collection.

Teresa: Mm-hm.

Travis: Or a coin collection, or a pen pal.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Like those three things were just the most ubi—and the fact that I really didn't have any of the three, I was like, oh my god. Look to your left, look to your right—

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: One of these people has a coin collection, one has a stamp collection. If you don't, you're the nerd You know, that kind of feeling.

Teresa: Scholars say that these pen pal records are, they kind of act as time capsules. You can always see the letters of like great historical significance of people, you know, like people have letters from Winston Churchill, the letters from John Lennon. Like you know, all of these people—

Travis: I write them both all the time and they never write me back!

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: I just thought they weren't letter writers?

Teresa: He's a paperback writer.

Travis: There it is. You know what? You know what?

Teresa: What?

Travis: That deserves a break for everyone to appreciate. We'll be back after a word from another Max Fun show.

[theme music plays]

Ella: All right, we're over 70 episodes into our show, Let's Learn Everything. So let's do a quick progress check. Have we learned about quantum physics?

Tom: Yes, episode 59.

Ella: We haven't learned about the history of gossip yet, have we?

Caroline: Yes, we have. Same episode, actually.

Ella: Have we talked to Tom Scott about his love of roller coasters?

Tom and Caroline: Episode 64.

Ella: So, how close are we to learning everything?

Caroline: Bad news, we still haven't learned *everything* yet.

Ella: Ah...

Tom: *We're ruined!*

Ella: No, no, it's good news as well! There is still a lot to learn!

Caroline: *Whoo!*

Ella: I'm Dr. Ella Hubber.

Tom: I'm regular Tom Lum.

Caroline: I'm Caroline Roper. And on Let's Learn Everything, we learn about science, and a bit of everything else too!

Ella: And although we haven't learned everything yet, I've got a pretty good feeling about this next episode.

Tom: Join us every other Thursday on Maximum Fun.

[break]

Drea: If you want to know what's going on in the world of movies, you should be listening to Maximum Film, so we can tell you all about it!

Kevin: Okay, but what if you already know what's going on in the world of movies? What if you're kind of obsessed with movies, like maybe you have a problem?

Alonso: Well, then you should definitely be listening to Maximum Film! Because we, too, have that problem, and it's important you know you're not alone.

Drea: We're talking indies you'll want to seek out!

Kevin: Blockbusters and blockbusting wannabes.

Alonso: Classics we can't get enough of.

Kevin: I'm comedian and writer, Kevin Avery.

Alonso: I'm film critic, Alonzo Duralde.

Drea: I'm festival programmer and producer, Drea Clark!

Alonso: Together, we're Maximum Film. Smart about movies in Hollywood, so you don't have to be.

Kevin: But if you already are, that's also great. And hey, we see you.

Drea: New episodes every week, on maximumfun.org!

[break]

Travis: You see, because The Beatles wrote the song "Paperback Writer—"

Teresa: I'm not sure if John wrote that song, though.

Travis: They're all the same Beatle.

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: They all blend together! They're—

Teresa: We're about to get some mail, some hate mail.

Travis: They would take turns being different Beatles. They were like, "Today I'll be Paul and you be John." They were all robots anyways. It's true. Look it up.

Teresa: [chuckles] Anyway. The idea is these letters provide an accurate window of what life was like during various eras, right? As long as people held on to the letters, then they could be passed down, they could be put into archives. And you know, we can get a little glimpse of what people were doing. Because these weren't like put in the newspapers.

Travis: Well, and that's the thing too. Correspondence has always been huge for that, because it's kind of like more realistic. Even if it's like I'm writing to this person and I'm showing them the best version of myself, or I'm not telling about my problems or whatever, it's not like the polished language of like writing a book about something or a public speech.

Teresa: Mm-hm.

Travis: Or like journalism and newspaper, right? This is like somebody being like, you could tell like this thing is the thing they're really interested in or worried about or thinking about or going on in their lives, right? It's more of a day in the life kind of feeling.

Teresa: Absolutely. Alexx went through and found some great examples of pen pals. An American named Alan Mutter began corresponding with Paul,

who was a boy his age from France. And when they started when he was about 13 years old. And he told The Guardian in, 2018, that he is still in communication with Paul's sister, Renee, 81 years later. So they have been writing for 81 years.

Travis: I was going to guess what happened to Paul, but 81, I can guess.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: I can guess.

Teresa: There's another one reported last year when a Pennsylvania woman found out that the doctor who delivered both of her children was her childhood pen pal.

Travis: Get out of town!

Teresa: From second grade.

Travis: I bet being a pen pal in Pennsylvania feels really good.

Teresa: Ooh. Here is a story from the 1930s, from the original era of the pen pals. A young girl named Jane Bomberger was offered the chance to get a pen pal at a campfire girls meeting. From a list of random names, she chose a young girl in Vienna named Marianne Winter to write to. They wrote back and forth constantly, but Marianne's letters started to take a little bit of a turn when Hitler came to Austria.

Travis: Yeah, I can imagine.

Teresa: Marianne told Jane through the letters about some of the hardships that they were facing, and the Winter family figured out a way to get them out of Austria. They did the complicated and lengthy paperwork to get them out—

Travis: Wait, the Baumgartner... sorry.

Teresa: Yes. Sorry. The Baumgartners.

Travis: Okay, the Baumgartners got the Winters out.

Teresa: Bombergers.

Travis: The Bombergers. The American people got the Vienna people out.

Teresa: Yes, they did. In fact, and met them in New York City in January 1939, when the Winters landed on American soil.

Travis: *Incredible*. That does feel like something from a like American girl doll like—

Teresa: It really does.

Travis: "And then I met my new best friend, ry—" And it's like, hey, we as adults are reading this like [yells out] *ooah!* My kids are like, "How cool!" [chuckles] And I'm like, it was a really messed up time, you guys!

Teresa: So, the Student Letter Exchange, there's Kids for Peace, there's the Girl Scout Letter Project. These are just a few of the ways that kids can interact with other kids all throughout the world through handwritten letters. The exchange alone links over 500,000 students in 100 countries every year. More specialized programs you may have heard of, the Flat Stanley Project.

Travis: What?! I love Flat Stanley!

Teresa: I know you do.

Travis: I talk about Flat Stanley all the time!

Teresa: You do. There's Write to an Author, which is another—

Travis: Because they folded Flat Stanley up into an envelope!

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: With a flattened sandwich and sent him to his grandmother's house!

Teresa: Yes, they did.

Travis: And they lowered him into a drainage ditch to get a ring out!

Teresa: This is true.

Travis: And then he was tired of being Flat Stanley, so his brother pumped him back up with a bicycle pump!

Teresa: Of course—

Travis: I love that book!

Teresa: That's what a brother's for. And there's the NASA Pen Pal Program, there's Letters Against Isolation, there's all sorts of things that you can do. So, I think that if you have ever wanted to get a slice of life from across the world, it's a great time to do that.

Travis: But how do I do it in a Shmannerly fashion?

Teresa: Well, here is some etiquette that you would like to follow. First—

Travis: Yes, I would.

Teresa: Choose your resource thoughtfully. You will be giving out an address, right? Where you can be reached. Perhaps if you are—if you are a minor and you would like to do this, your guardians might want to do it through a school, right?

Travis: Right.

Teresa: Because then the letters go to the school and you exchange it that way, instead of it showing up at your door. So your address isn't published that way.

Travis: If you are going to be setting a—like if you're a scout leader or something or—

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Might I suggest a PO box?

Teresa: Mm-hm, that's a great idea.

Travis: Right? And then you can hand out everybody's to them when you check the PO box.

Teresa: That's a great idea. When you are writing, do write neatly. Obviously, if someone can't read your handwriting, it's going to make it harder for them to write you back. So write legibly. And there is no problem with typing out your letters. I know that a lot of people find it easier to sit and type at the keyboard. Sometimes it's easier on your hands if you might have arthritis or other problems that way. You can write it out. I think a typewriter would be fun. It would be very super old-timey to—

Travis: Listen, if you're doing a pen pal thing, might as well. But there's also a lot of text to—or speech to text.

Teresa: Mm-hm, that's true.

Travis: That works as well that you could do.

Teresa: Absolutely.

Travis: I also assume like with the you're giving out information, using like a vetted organization that connects people and not just like maybe a random Reddit post or something like that.

Teresa: Yeah, something like that.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Especially for kids.

Teresa: I would say that early on, do make sure that you include a lot of questions, right? Because it can be hard to get the kind of like free-flow state going. And so, if you ask a lot of questions, the person who is answering them has like a prompt, right?

Travis: Right.

Teresa: It's not just like a diary entry that I'm sending you from my day. If you ask them questions, they'll be most li—more likely to be able to get the creative juices flowing.

Travis: It's also a good way to kind of like set a tone for also what you want to talk about.

Teresa: Right.

Travis: Right? Like if I ask you like what's your favorite animal.

Teresa: Mm-hm.

Travis: Right? It's showing that I'm a person who is interested in people's favorite animals. "So do you have a favorite animals?" You know, that kind of thing that like, "Oh, I like animals too. We can talk about animal." Right? That kind of thing.

Teresa: Sure.

Travis: It's an indicator without just listing off things you like. You know what I mean?

Teresa: Mm-hm.

Travis: It makes it feel much more open-ended.

Teresa: I would caution you against saying things like asking if you can come and see them or visit, right? That could be very rude. Just because you don't—you don't actually know this person. And it's—

Travis: What if it's like 10 years into it? You know, you guys have been writing each other—

Teresa: I mean it—

Travis: Like once a month for 10 years.

Teresa: If you guys have that kind of relationship and you've decided that you want to go see each other, might I suggest a neutral location. But like—

Travis: I would also suggest, don't make that the focus. Like say someone you—like you have a pen pal in like Italy, right?

Teresa: Right.

Travis: Don't say like, "I'm going to come and spend the week with you!"

Teresa: Right.

Travis: But like, "I'm making a trip through Italy. I will be going through, you know, the city where you live. I'd love to buy you dinner.' Right? Or, "Let's grab coffee."

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Or whatever. Not like, "Wouldn't it be great if I came and stayed with you for a week?"

Teresa: Exactly, that's a little presumptuous, right? Also, remember that people have internet all over the world, so they probably have like an inkling of current events. You probably don't have to explain it to them or ask them if they've heard about it. And don't ask your buddy anything that you can easily google yourself. For example, you probably shouldn't ask them if they

have a lion as a pet if they live in Africa, right? Because obviously you can google that and know that people don't keep lions as pets. [chuckles]

Travis: Also, you should just assume like, if I had a lion as a pet, I'm going to bring that up myself.

Teresa: Right. [laughs]

Travis: You don't have to prompt me to tell you that. I'm going to tell you that. Don't you worry about it.

Teresa: Right. And if your pen pal—

Travis: Like if I've trained a hawk, you know?

Teresa: Everybody's going to know.

Travis: Oh, I'm never shutting up about it! Are you kidding? In a dream world, I have a menagerie and a megaphone. That's my dream.

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: And everyone has to hear about it.

Teresa: Do remember that if you feel uncomfortable with anything someone has asked, you don't have to answer it. And you can politely let them know that you don't want to talk about that. And if you ever feel so uncomfortable that you don't want to write them back, that's perfectly fine. You can totally ghost a pen pal.

Travis: Another good reason for like a PO Box or whatever.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Or through an organization, and then you just tell them like, "I don't—I want to discontinue this." Right?

Teresa: Exactly.

Travis: And then you don't even have to like ignore their letters anymore, you just won't get them.

Teresa: Right. And sometimes it's fun to get extras in your letter, especially if you're sending them snail mail, right? You can do a recipe card or stickers or a little doodle, maybe a photograph or a news clipping. Something like that which would add a kind of extra personal element to your—to your letter.

Travis: I don't want to be paranoid.

Teresa: Okay?

Travis: But I would say like at least for a while, not pictures of yourself.

Teresa: No, I wouldn't say that. I'm saying—

Travis: Or like pictures of your house, you know.

Teresa: A picture that you took of the sunset or something like—

Travis: Right.

Teresa: You'd put on Instagram.

Travis: Right. Yes.

Teresa: Yeah, totally. And I would say that it is good etiquette to write back as promptly as you can. However, most pen pals report that they would rather wait a little longer to get a longer, more well thought out letter, than they would to immediately get a very short letter.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: I mean, I feel this way with like text messages, I'm willing to wait a little longer to get a better explanation. And I feel more completed than

when someone just texts me back, "K." Right? You know, like right away, get a "K" and you're like, oh, okay...

Travis: Cool, man.

Teresa: I guess we're done. [chuckles]

Travis: Especially if I just read out like eight paragraphs.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: And they're like, "Oh, that sounds cool." Okay...

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Cool, man.

Teresa: Totally. Let's see. Also, remember that, you know, things happen. You might have to wait a few months due to maybe, I don't know, like a my—a family emergency or a heavy course load at school, or moving houses, or whatever it is. Try and be patient. You're almost always rewarded. But if you would like to double a letter, so if you send one long letter, right? A reg—or a regular-sized letter, I would recommend that the next thing that you send be much shorter, like a postcard or something. More of like the way that you would do in texting a bump, right?

Travis: Right! Because—

Teresa: You just bump the conversation.

Travis: Stuff gets lost in the mail, too, right?

Teresa: Exactly. Exactly. But sending letter after letter of like long confessions and things is probably more a sign that this pen pal has run its course.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: But if you want to do, if there's a long time between, you want to do a little bump, that's great. And I think that like, I want pen pal episode to be fun, not school, right? So if things ever get a little too rough, you can always just say, "Hey, this has been really fun, but I think that I'm going to be moving into a different phase of my life. It was really great talking to you." And then you don't have to send any more.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: And you can feel good about that.

Travis: That's true! Thank you, everybody. Speaking of feeling good, thank you to our researcher, Alexx, without whom we could not do this show. Thank you to our editors, Rachel and Gino, without whom we could not do the show. Thank you to you for listening! If you think about it, this is kind of like a one-sided pen pal thing where we write you a letter—we get emails from you, I guess, so...

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: Okay, yeah. In many ways, this is a podcast pen pal situation.

Teresa: [laughs] Okay—

Travis: That kind of fell apart.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: It fell apart halfway through. But you all know what I was getting at. We could make this show without you, but why would we?

Teresa: Yeah. Why?

Travis: What else, Teresa? I need a moment.

Teresa: [chuckles] We always thank Brent 'brentalfloss' Black for writing our theme music, which is available as a ringtone where those are found. Also thank you to Bruja Betty Pin-Up Photography for the cover picture of

our fan-run Facebook group, Shmanners Fanners. If you love to give and get excellent advice from other fans, go ahead and join that group today. And as always, we are taking your topic submissions, your questions, your idioms. We just did another really fun idiom episode. Please keep sending those in. Shmannerscast@gmail.com, and say hi to Alexx, because she reads every single one!

Travis: And that's going to do it for us, so join us again next week.

Teresa: No RSVP required.

Travis: You've been listening to Shmanners.

Teresa: *Manners, Shmanners.* [clap, clap, clap] Get it?

["Shmanners Theme" by brentalfloss plays]

Maximum Fun.

A worker-owned network...

Of artists-owned shows...

Supported directly by you.