

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## FEATURE

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### **Write for Rights: A spontaneous, grassroots idea that grew into a global force**

Every year, around Human Rights Day on 10 December, hundreds of thousands of people around the world send a message to someone they've never met. It's a classic Amnesty technique: 52 years of human rights work show that words really do have the power to change lives.

Last year, activists in at least 77 countries took a record-breaking 1.9 million actions during our annual letter-writing event. Millions more have taken part since Write for Rights became a global Amnesty event in 2002.

Mighty oaks from small acorns grow, somebody wise once said. Today, Write for Rights – also known as the Letter Writing Marathon – is the world's largest human rights event. It started small 12 years ago, when a boy met a girl with a bright idea at a festival in Poland. Grzegorz Zukowski, from Amnesty Poland tells us what happened.

"A local Amnesty group co-ordinator in Warsaw, Witek Hebanowski, was organizing an event at a festival," Grzegorz explains. "A girl called Joanna came up to him. She'd just been to Africa, where she said they organized 24-hour events, writing protest letters to governments."

"Witek really wanted to see her again, so he asked her to come along to his local Amnesty group meeting. They decided to write Urgent Action appeals for 24 hours from 12 noon on Saturday, and then count how many letters they'd written."

"They emailed their idea to all the other Polish groups, and it turned into something much bigger, bringing together activists across the country," explains Grzegorz. Then, their idea went viral.

"They emailed Amnesty offices across the world," he continues. "People started sending back pictures of themselves writing letters – by Niagara Falls, in Japan, in Mongolia. It was a spontaneous, grassroots initiative that grew and grew."

Every December since, Write for Rights – now the marathon's official name – has inspired thousands of people to write letters to distant governments on behalf of people they've never met.

It is a huge event for Amnesty offices worldwide. Some still do it Polish-style, over a hectic, sleepless 24 hours. Many prefer a more gentle marathon, run over several days and weeks, allowing people to write letters when it fits their schedule.

Amnesty Poland still does the classic 24-hour marathon – now described as the country's biggest human rights event. "Any place in which the marathon takes place should be open all night," says Grzegorz. Publicity is key: "We try to get well-known people involved" says Grzegorz."

And it still has real grassroots appeal: "The main power behind the marathon are the local communities and groups," Grzegorz says. "The school groups write more letters than anyone else. Our record is held by Bircza, a small town with only 1,000 inhabitants. In 2011, they wrote 13,000 letters."

"I think Write for Rights has such a strong appeal because it is so simple and so engaging," Grzegorz continues. "The stories of the people they are writing to, or for, are very important. Many would

never hear these stories otherwise – they just aren't interested. But once a year they have an opportunity to open their minds to what's going on in the world."

**Write for Rights: How it works**

1. Amnesty identifies people and communities at risk of human rights abuses worldwide, who need solidarity and justice.
2. We pick 12 cases where global activism can make a huge difference, right now.
3. We share them with Amnesty offices worldwide.
4. Activists organize amazing events and actions on behalf of some or all of the 12 people and communities highlighted by Amnesty International around Human Rights Day on 10 December.
5. People worldwide write letters, tweets, emails, faxes, SMS messages and sign petitions.
6. Messages start arriving at government offices, in prison cells and family homes.
7. Change happens, hope grows: Prisoners might get better conditions, or be released. People know that others worldwide are taking their injustice personally.
8. Amnesty receives updates showing that people's actions are making a difference.