

Field Guides
To Ensuring Voter Intent

Vol. 02

Writing instructions voters understand

Field-researched, critical election
design techniques to help ensure that
every vote is cast as voters intend

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Second edition, 2014

About the Field Guide series

There have been excellent ballot design guidelines around since mid-2007 when the U.S. Election Assistance Commission published AIGA Design For Democracy's work in its report, *Effective Designs for the Administration of Federal Elections*. Everyone involved in that project quickly figured out that, as juicy as the design specs were in that report, they needed to be boiled down to essentials that local election officials could easily act on within the constraints they had. *Field Guides To Ensuring Voter Intent* were inspired by that need.

— Dana Chisnell, *Field Guides Editor*

About this Field Guide

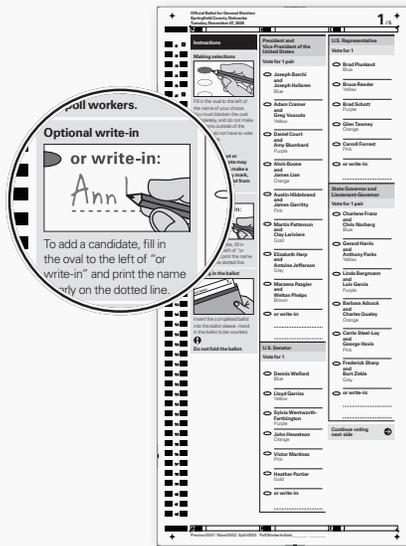
It's amazing the difference simple language can make for voters. In research conducted for the U.S. National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), Ginny Redish and Dana Chisnell found that when instructions on ballots were in plain language, voters made fewer mistakes and were more likely to vote the way they intended.

The 10 guidelines in this Field Guide come mainly from that NIST research. To learn more about the research behind this guide and download examples, go to centerforcivicdesign.org.

What is plain language?

According to the Center for Plain Language, something is in plain language if it considers who will use it, why they will use it, and what they will do with it. The language used minimizes jargon and uses sentence structure, strong verbs, word choice, and other similar techniques to make sure that the audience can read, understand, and use the information.

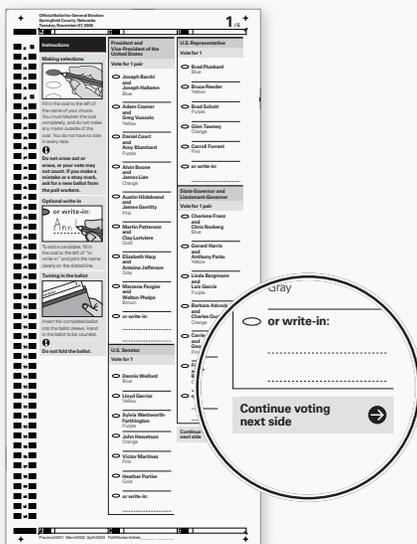
For more information about plain language, see centerforplainlanguage.org.



On optical scan ballots, instructions like these are most effective when placed just before the first contests.

No. 01

At the beginning of the ballot, explain how to change a vote, and that voters may write in a candidate.



Continue voting next side instruction is placed at the end of the last column on the page.

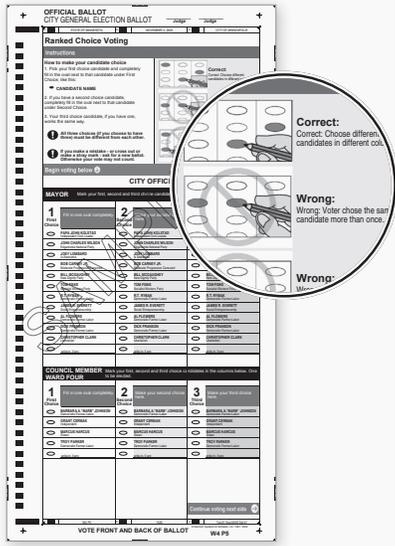
No. 02

Put instructions where voters need them.

Break instructions into groups.

On paper ballots, place instructions to turn the ballot over at the bottom right hand corner.

On electronic ballots, put instructions for writing in candidates on the write-in screen.



Simple illustrations, along with clear instructions, help voters know what to do.

No. 03

Include information that will prevent voters from making errors.

Show and tell voters how to mark the ballot.

Tell voters not to write in candidates whose names already appear on the ballot.

Before If you tear, or deface, or wrongly mark this ballot, return it and obtain another. Do not attempt to correct mistakes on the ballot by making erasures or cross outs. Erasures or cross outs may invalidate all or part of your ballot. Prior to submitting your ballot, if you make a mistake in completing the ballot or wish to change your ballot choices, you may obtain and complete a new ballot. You have a right to a replacement ballot upon return of the original ballot.

After If you make a mistake, ask a poll worker for another ballot.

No. 04

Write short sentences.

Use simple words.

Remove unnecessary words.

Separate instructions from results.

Use

find

help

make sure

message

put

turn on

use

Avoid

locate, identify

assist

verify, validate, prompt

prompt

incorporate

power on

utilize

No. 05**Use short, simple everyday words.**

Select the plain rather than the formal word.

Avoid jargon, such as “over vote,” “under vote,” and “partisan.”

Before

Moving ahead is accomplished by touching the word Next; moving back by pressing Back.

After

To go forward in the ballot, touch Next.
To go back to previous pages in the ballot, touch Back.

No. 06**Write in the active voice, where the person doing the action comes before the verb.**

Think of the voter as “you.”

Write instructions where the subject is “you,” implied or understood.

You don’t have to state “you” directly.

Before If that oval is not marked, your vote cannot be counted for the candidate.

After You must fill in the oval for your vote to count.



No. 07

Write in the positive.

Tell voters what to do rather than what not to do.

Non-sequential steps Vote!

- Mark your votes in private.
- Follow the instructions on the ballot.
- Do not write your name or an ID number anywhere on the ballot.

Sequential steps To make changes:

- 1 Touch the race you want to change.
- 2 At that race, if you have selected something before, touch the choice you do not want.
- 3 Then touch choice you want.
- 4 To return to this screen, touch Return to Review.



No. 08

When giving instructions that are more than one step, make each step an item in a numbered list.

Do not number other instructions. When the instructions are not sequential steps, use separate paragraphs or simple bullets with bold beginnings rather than numbering.

Good

If you need any help while voting, please contact your county elections office.

Seal the envelope to keep your votes private.

Do not write on this envelope.

**No. 09**

Keep paragraphs short.

A one-sentence paragraph is fine.

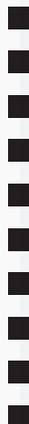
Before

Press the box of the candidate for whom you desire to vote; yellow will appear in the box. The voter must retouch the selected item to deselect it first in order to change a vote.

After

To vote for a candidate of your choice, touch that person's name.

If you make a mistake or want to change a vote, first touch the name you no longer want.

**No. 10**

Separate paragraphs by a space so each paragraph stands out on the page or screen.

Tip

Check that the information is written in plain language.

Can voters

- understand what each instruction, prompt, or message means?
- follow the instructions and prompts easily?
- respond appropriately to error messages?
- complete the ballot without making mistakes?

Notes

Notes

Who made this Guide possible?

Kickstarter contributors, including:

Alec Perkins	Pamela Ecker
Stephanie Rewis	Ivan Wilson, Jr.
Jess McMullin	Whitney Hess
Alec Bash	Scott Berkun
Jonathan Knoll	Suzanne Stassevitch
Lori Landesman	James Spool
Jennifer Pahlka	Livia Labate
Jascha Franklin-Hodge	Mark Eberman
Ginny Redish	Josh Clark
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Sarah Swierenga	EightShapes
David Fiorito	Nick Finck
James Craig	Stewart Bloom
Caroline Jarrett	
Richard Soley	

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**Center for
Civic Design**

Get in touch

hello@civicdesign.org

Twitter: @civicdesign

civicdesign.org

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