Designing usable ballots

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

The Field Guides are online at civicdesign.org/fieldguides

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About the Field Guide series

If you could do just a few things that would make a big difference in the experiences voters and poll workers (and even candidates) have, what would those be? That’s the question we tried to answer in each of the Field Guides To Ensuring Voter Intent.

Every guideline and example is based in research and practice. The guidelines come from sources ranging from the Election Assistance Commission, to the National Institute of Standards and Technology, to lots of our own research conducted alongside county and state election officials. We’ve tried to make each one easy to follow. You should be able to implement most of the guidelines independent of election laws or voting system technology.

— Dana Chisnell, Field Guides Editor

About ballot design

A ballot is a form that represents perhaps the most important interaction between a government and its citizens. Thousands of votes are lost in elections every year because of poorly designed ballots. And yet, avoiding these design issues is not difficult or expensive.

What a ballot looks like is constrained by legislation, technology, history, custom, cost, and other factors. But the anatomy of a ballot is fairly consistent throughout the more than 3,000 counties, parishes, and boroughs in the U.S. Design guidelines provide a tool for helping voters focus on their goal to cast votes for their preferred candidates.
No. 01

Use lowercase letters.

Lowercase letters are more legible than ALL CAPITAL LETTERS because they make shapes that are easier to recognize.

No. 02

Avoid centered type.

Left-aligned type is more legible than centered type, which forces the eye to hunt for the start of the next line.
### Before
Fill in the oval to the left of the name of your choice. You must blacken the oval completely, and do not make any marks outside of the oval. You do not have to vote in every race.

__(8-point)__

### After
Fill in the oval to the left of the name of your choice. You must blacken the oval completely, and do not make any marks outside of the oval. You do not have to vote in every race.

__(12-point)__

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**No. 03**

**Use big enough type.**

Small print is hard to read for many voters.

Use these minimum type sizes:

- 12-point for print
- 3.0 – 4.0mm for screen

Larger text may increase the number of pages but it is a worthwhile investment in election accuracy.

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**No. 04**

**Pick one sans-serif font.**

Use sans-serif fonts with clean strokes.

For dual-language materials, use bold text for the primary language, regular text for the secondary language.

Using just one font makes the ballot more unified. Different fonts make voters stop reading and adjust.
No. 05
Support process and navigation.

Put instructions where they are needed. Use page (or screen) numbering to show progress.

For electronic ballots, let voters change language or display options, with instructions available at any time.

Post easy-to-see instructions for both voting and moving around the polling place.

No. 06
Use clear, simple language.

Make instructions and options as simple as possible.

Do not include more than two languages.

If possible, summarize referenda in simple language alongside required formats.

Simple language is often shorter, taking up less space.
Illustrations at the beginning of the ballot show how to use the ballot.

**No. 07**

**Use accurate instructional illustrations.**

Visual instructions help low-literacy and all voters.
- Illustrations must be accurate in their details, highlighting the most important instructions.
- Do not use photographs.

**No. 08**

**Use informational icons (only).**

Use icons that call attention to key information and support navigation with care.
- Don’t use political party emblems.
No. 09

Use contrast and color to support meaning.

Use color and shading consistently:
- On paper ballots, to separate instructions from contests and contests from each other.
- On electronic ballots, to support navigation, call special attention, and provide user feedback.

Do not rely on color as the only way to communicate important information.

No. 10

Show what’s most important.

Use layout and text size to help voters know what to pay attention to.

The ballot title should be the most prominent.

A contest header should be more prominent than the candidates’ names.

A candidate’s name should be bolder than his/her party affiliation. Candidates’ names and options should be presented with equal importance.
Tip
Check that the ballot communicates clearly.

Can voters
☐ read all of the information on the ballot easily?
☐ navigate through the ballot to find all contests and ballot questions?
☐ identify the different sections of the ballot?
☐ find, read and follow instructions accurately?
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