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 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 civicdesign.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.
No. 01

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

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

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.
Field Guides To Ensuring Voter Intent

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.

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

No. 04

Write short sentences.

Use simple words.

Remove unnecessary words.

Separate instructions from results.

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.
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.

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.”

Use
Avoid
find
locate, identify
help
assist
make sure
verify, validate, prompt
message
prompt
put
incorporate
turn on
power on
use
utilize

Writing instructions voters understand
Mark your votes in private.

Follow the instructions on the ballot.

Do not write your name or an ID number anywhere on the ballot.

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. 07

Write in the positive.

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

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.
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.

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.

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.

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

Before

After

Keep paragraphs short.
A one-sentence paragraph is fine.

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?
Who made this Guide possible?

Kickstarter contributors, including:

Alec Perkins  
Stephanie Rewis  
Jess McMullin  
Alec Bash  
Jonathan Knoll  
Lori Landesman  
Jennifer Pahika  
Jascha Franklin-Hodge  
Ginny Redish  
Jason Putorti  
Nico Mele  
Tantek Çelik  
Karen Bachmann  
Sarah Swieranega  
David Fiorito  
James Craig  
Caroline Jarrett  
Richard Soley

Pamela Ecker  
Ivan Wilson, Jr.  
Whitney Hess  
Scott Berkun  
Suzanne Stassavitch  
James Spool  
Livia Labate  
Mark Eberman  
Josh Clark  
Joe Sokohl  
Bolt | Peters  
TangibleUX  
EightShapes  
Nick Finck  
Stewart Bloom

With extra help from:

Sean Carmichael, videographer  
Adam Connor, illustrator  
Michelle Gray, PR  
Boon Sheridan, strategist  
Jared Spool, advisor

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