Guiding voters through the polling place

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
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
Hurricane Sandy, which struck the East Coast just before Election Day in 2012, delivered lessons and opportunities. Election officials proved just how resourceful they could be as polling places disappeared under water or were without power. The many success stories that came out of that election pointed to a few themes, one of which was about helping voters find their polling places and then make their way to voting within them. The guidelines in this Field Guide come from AIGA Design For Democracy’s excellent work in Effective Designs for the Administration of Federal Elections.

To learn more about the research behind this guide and download examples, go to civicdesign.org.

The importance of guiding voters in the polling place
Polling places can be confusing, especially during peak times when there are a lot of voters waiting to vote.

Clear, easy to find, easy to read signs can help voters move through the process smoothly, keeping lines moving and minimizing waiting time.
No. 01

Make signs easy to read.

Hang signs at eye level for most voters.

Make sure that signs are visible from around the room. Are they behind poll workers?

No. 02

Show traffic patterns.

Make it easy for voters to navigate the polling place.

Where do they start? Do they have to go to several tables?

Where is the voting system for people with disabilities?

- Identify precincts, districts, or wards clearly.
- Show voters where to line up.
- Make it easy for voters to find the scanner after marking their ballot.
No. 03

Use color to identify types of information.

Color and contrast help people quickly identify the purpose and content of signs.

Combine color with text or shape for accessibility.
### No. 05

**Provide clear information about behavior in the polling place.**

- **Before**
  - Voter Assistance Table
- **After**
  - Register and get provisional ballots here

- **Before**
  - Cell phones are forbidden
- **After**
  - Please respect other voters: use your cell phone outside the polling place.

- **Before**
  - No electioneering within 100 feet of the polling place
- **After**
  - You may not show, wear, or hand out anything to support a candidate or ballot question within 100 feet of the polling place.

### No. 06

**Communicate laws and regulations appropriately.**

- **Before**
  - It is unlawful to remove any ballots from the voting place. Punishable by up to 6 months in jail. #25-2430
- **After**
  - Do not remove any ballots from the polling place. It is against the law, and you can be punished by up to 6 months in jail. State Law 25-2430

- **Before**
  - Otherwise, laws and regulations are not communicated appropriately.
- **After**
  - Write a heading or sentence to summarize the law. If possible, paraphrase in plain language.
  - Include the source of the law so others can look it up.
  - Work with your counsel to get legal review early.
Examples

Review your ballot.
You must fill in the oval for your vote to count.
Please limit voting time to 5 minutes.
Put your phone away. Cell phones are not allowed in the polling place.

No. 07

Make it easy to read all languages.
Make it easy to compare the information between languages.
Limit signs to 2 languages.*
One should be English.

Voting instructions
Instrucciones para votar

Show all languages in parallel: the two languages side-by-side or stacked. Use one image for both languages.

No. 08

Write in plain language.
Write short sentences.
Use simple words.
Think of the voter as “you.”
Write in the positive.
Use numbers on step-by-step instructions.
Keep paragraphs short.
No. 09

Use icons to reinforce instructions.

Use informational icons such as arrows and exclamation points to draw attention to important information or to help voters quickly scan dense information.

No. 10

Make the text easy to read.

Use a font large enough to be seen from a distance.
Use upper- and lowercase.
Use sans-serif fonts.
Use white space to separate items on the same sign or poster.
Tip
Check that signs and posters are easy to find and read.

Can voters:
- find the information they need?
- find the correct place to sign in?
- understand how to navigate through the polling place?
- read all signs easily?
- read information in all languages provided at the polling place?
- understand what is allowed (and not allowed) in the polling place?
Who made this Guide possible?

Kickstarter contributors, including:

Alec Perkins
Stephanie Rewis
Jess McKinnon
Alec Bash
Jonathan Knoll
Lori Landesman
Jennifer Pahlka
Jascha Franklin-Hodge
Ginny Redish
Jason Putorti
Nicco Mele
Tantek Çelik
Karen Bachmann
Sarah Swierenga
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 Sokol
Bolt | Peters
TangibleUX
EightShapes
Nick Finck
Stewart Bloom

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

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