



Best Practices

**How to
design vote by
mail envelopes
for USPS**

May 2026
Center for Civic Design

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This is part of the Vote by mail toolkit.
For more information go to
civicdesign.org/topics/vote-by-mail/



Introduction

This guide provides an introduction to the United States Postal Service (USPS) requirements for vote by mail (VBM) envelopes. The goal is to provide an overview of the design elements, with links to the official USPS rules. We hope this will help offices create envelopes that travel through the mail swiftly and accurately to voters and back to the election offices.

Who are these best practices for?

Election offices that are designing envelopes for their vote by mail programs. It will help make the design process and review by the USPS Mail Design Analysts easier.

How can I use this best practices guide?

Use this guide to learn:

- The elements required for mailing your VBM envelopes and USPS features specifically for election mail.
- Best practices and helpful tips for putting all of the elements together.
- Where to find additional information and relevant resources.

What are these best practices based on?

The information in this guide is a summary of information from many parts of the USPS documentation. It started as a quick cheat sheet for our own work designing envelopes and to help the offices we worked with understand the USPS requirements that go along with requirements in the election code.

We have provided links to relevant publications, including the State and Local Election Mail User's Guide (Publication 632) and sections of the Domestic Mail Manual (DMM).

There are more resources for vote by mail envelopes and other voter information at civicdesign.org/topics/vote-by-mail.

Follow the official USPS recommendations

If this guide conflicts with any existing or new USPS guidelines, follow the official USPS recommendations.

The official USPS guide to election mail starts online at: about.usps.com/what/government-services/election-mail/



What USPS recommends on VBM envelopes

Outgoing and return envelopes

- A** Return address (may be the election office address on both envelopes)
- C** Election mail logo
- D** Intelligent Mail barcode (IMb) with STID
- E** Correct postage insignia mailing type

Outgoing envelope only

- B** Return Service Requested (for undeliverable mail)
- F** Voter's mailing address: may be printed on back of return envelope and seen through window of outgoing

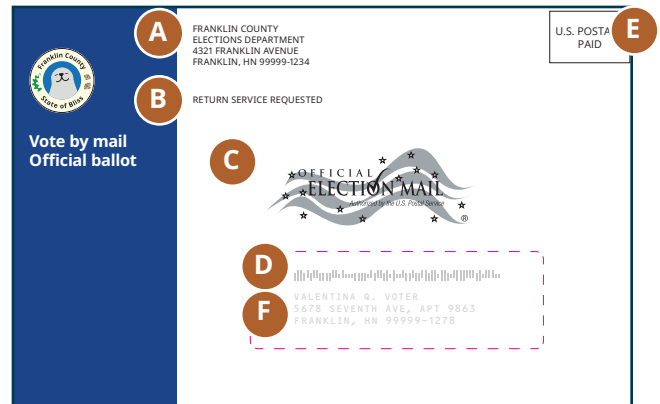
Return envelopes only

- G** Facing Identification Mark (FIM)
- H** Postage Paid or Postage instructions

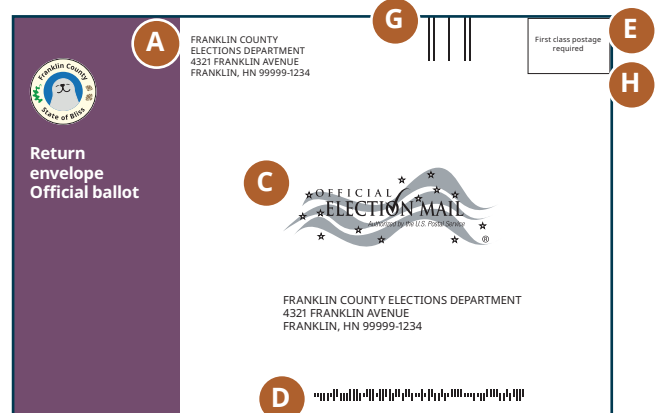
Resources

- Learn about election mail:
about.usps.com/what/government-services/election-mail/
- Publication 632 - State and Local Election Mail User's Guide, Section VIII Election Mail Checklist (p16):
about.usps.com/publications/pub632.pdf

Outgoing envelope



Return envelopes

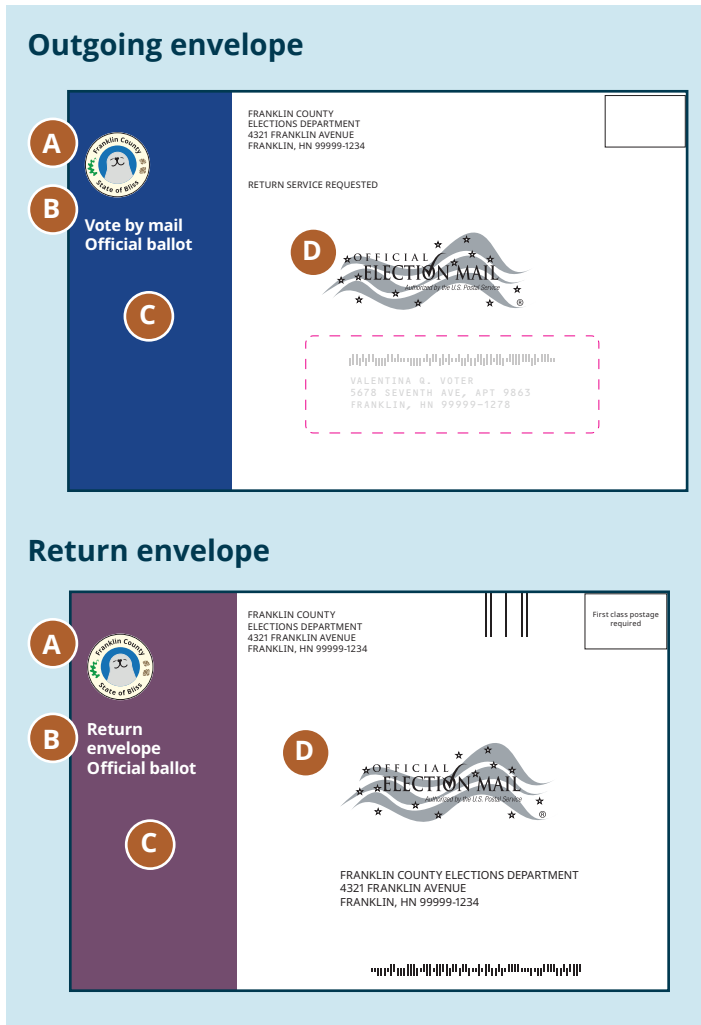


Envelope designs help voters and USPS recognize them as ballots

What helps voters recognize a VBM envelope when it arrives

Outgoing and return envelopes that have:

- A** County seal
- B** Official ballot notice
- C** Wraparound color bar helps identify all the envelopes by function. The color can be seen on the front and edges.
- D** The Election Mail Logo



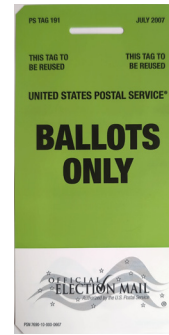
Some elements are visible only to the USPS systems

USPS uses the term “visibility” for all the features that help the postal network systems identify VBM envelopes.

They include:

- Using Intelligent Mail barcodes (IMb)
- The Ballot Mail Service Type Identifier (STID) in the IMb
- A green TAG 191 for ballots delivered to the post office:

about.usps.com/forms/ps1910.pdf



- Checking the boxes for Election Mail on the Postage Statement:

about.usps.com/forms/ps3600fcm.pdf

Political Campaign Mailing	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Election Mail - Official Ballots	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Election Mail - Non-Ballot Materials	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No

Official election mail logo

The official USPS logo tells voters that they'll find trusted information inside.



The logo can only be used by federal, state, and local government voter registration and election officials. It may not be used for partisan mailing.

There are 3 different sizes for the logo:

- Small logo: for envelopes **smaller** than 4.125 × 9.5 inches (the standard #10 envelope)
- Medium logo: for envelopes **larger** than 4.125 × 9.5 inches (the standard #10 envelope)
- Large logo: for all envelopes **larger** than 6.125 × 11.5 inches

When applying the logo:

- Follow requirements for clear space required around the logo
- Stay out of the 'exclusion zone' that is 4.46" from the right edge of the envelope and 0.9" from the top

Resources

- USPS Pub 631: information about the election mail logo and samples of correct placement
about.usps.com/publications/pub631.pdf
- Go to page 6 for info on logo size
- Go to page 8 for info on exclusion areas

Tips and best practices

Most election mail envelopes use the medium size logo.

Color of the logo: use the logo in black instead of the red or blue. Black is easier to read and more neutral, allowing other color-coding elements on the envelope to stand out.

Use the right size logo: Use the right size logo for the envelope size. Do not shrink or stretch the logo image for any reason.

Want help with the logo?

Contact a **Mail Design Analyst (MDA)** for a copy of the logo to use. MDA Customer Service Help Desk:

- By phone at 855-593-6093
- By email at mda@usps.gov

Color

Color is a useful way to differentiate types of envelopes. This helps election offices and USPS get the right envelope to the right place.

Use different colors for different types of envelopes. For example, one color for all envelopes going to voters and another for those being returned to the election office.

You can also use different colors of return envelopes for overlapping elections or to differentiate them from those of a neighboring county that shares a postal distribution center.

There are a few USPS guidelines to consider when applying color:

- Keep the envelope white around the address and other USPS markings.
- Print the delivery address and other USPS markings in black ink.

USPS automation can read the address and other information on the ballot better with black text on a white background. If you are planning to use colored envelopes, check the color with a Mail Design Analyst.

Resources

- MDA Customer Service Help Desk
 - By phone at 855-593-6093
 - By email at mda@usps.gov

i Don't use green on the outgoing or return envelope

USPS reserves the use of green for Certified Mail. Using it can slow delivery when the envelope is pulled for special handling.

Tips and best practices

Wrap a color from the front of the envelope to the back. The color will be visible from the side, making ballot envelopes easy to see in a stack of other mail.

This also helps sort envelopes and even pick out ones that belong in other districts.



Outgoing envelopes

PMS: 7687
CMYK: c100 m78 y0 k18
RGB: r29 g66 b138
Hex: 1a428a

Return envelopes

PMS: 7659
CMYK: c57 m76 y35 k15
RGB: r116 g76 b110
Hex: 744c6e

UOCAVA

PMS: 483
CMYK:c35 m68 y99 k31
RGB: r130 g77 b32
Hex: 824d20

The full CCD envelope color palette: bit.ly/ccd-vbm-colors

Size and weight

To keep postage costs down, choose an envelope size that fits the ratio, size and weight in the USPS definition of a letter.

How USPS defines a letter

The ratio between the width and height of an envelope must fall between **1.3 and 2.5** to be considered letter-sized mail. To find the ratio of the envelope, divide the length of the envelope by its height.

Your envelopes must also have a:

- Maximum thickness of .25"
- Minimum size of 5" length × 3.5" height
- Maximum size of 11.5" length × 6.125" height
- Maximum weight of 3.5 oz

Resources

- Basic Design Elements Letters and Cards postalpro.usps.com/node/6247

Tips and best practices

Using familiar sizes makes it easier to create envelopes that work with the vendor and USPS machines.

The most common sizes for return envelopes used across the U.S. are:

- 6 x 9"
- 10.5 x 4.5"

Outgoing envelopes are a bit bigger, by at least 0.125".

6x9" envelope set

Outgoing
6.125" x 9.25"

Return
6" x 9"

10.5" x 4.5" envelope set

Outgoing
11" x 4.75"

Return
10.5" x 4.5"

What else to consider

If you include a ballot secrecy envelope, be sure it will fit inside the return envelope easily. Remember that the postage depends on all of the materials inside the package.

Intelligent Mail Barcode (IMb)

The Intelligent Mail Barcode (IMb) is a barcode made up of 65 vertical lines.



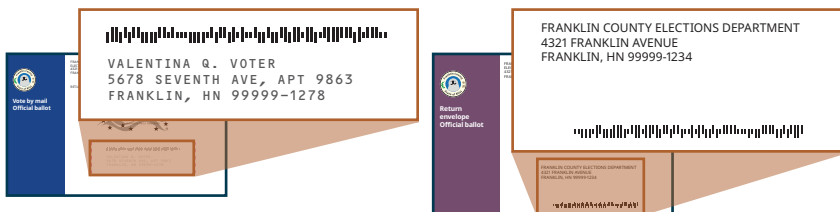
The USPS uses this barcode to track mail and ballot envelopes through the system. The IMb embeds unique address information in a barcode to get the envelope where it needs to go. Ballot tracking tools use the record an IMb creates to let election offices and voters look up the location of a ballot in the mail.

The IMb for each address is different, so you need to create a unique code for every voter and for the return envelope.

Where does the IMb go?

Common places to put the IMb:

- Above or below the address block
- Above or below the optional endorsement (such as Business Reply Mail or Official Use Only)
- Above or below any “Keyline information” (unique code that assists in locating the addressee in their database like the voter record lookup code)



Resources

- About the Intelligent Mail Barcode postalpro.usps.com/mailing/intelligent-mail-barcode
- IMb Technical Resource Guide postalpro.usps.com/node/221
- IMB Tracing (also called tracking) User Guide usps.com/mailtracking/_pdf/imb-tracing-user-guide-v1-6-final.pdf

Tips and best practices

If you do not have an IMb with a delivery point routing code in the address field, then you must leave space for a barcode. This rectangular area starts at the bottom right edge of the envelope on the side with the address.

The ballot envelope clear zone dimensions are:

- Left: 4.75” from the right edge of the piece
- Right: right edge of the piece
- Top: 0.625” from the bottom edge of the piece
- Bottom: bottom edge of the piece

Contact a **Mail Design Analyst** for help with the IMb. MDA Customer Service Help Desk:

- By phone at 855-593-6093
- By email at mda@usps.gov

Mailing and print vendors can also help you with IMb placement.

Service Type Identifier (STIDs)

The Service Type Identifier (STID) is a unique 3-digit code at the beginning of the IMb. It tells the post office that they are handling election mail.



When scanned, the STID tells USPS workers that they are carrying official election material.

What info you need

When deciding which STID to use in IMb, you need to know

- The mail class
- The address correction service
- The service option
- The fees, if any, that will be associated with the use of each STID

Election mail STIDs

STIDs have different identifiers for outbound and return ballots.

- Return ballot first class mail: 777
- Return ballot business reply mail: 778
- Return ballot permit reply mail: 779

USPS PostalPro has a tool to help you select the correct STID.

Resources

- Election Mail and Ballot Mail STID Finder
postalpro.usps.com/stid-tool

Tips and best practices

Election officials advocated for STIDs to help USPS sort envelopes quickly and identify ballot packages as election mail.

STIDs are used to:

- Offer voters up-to-date tracking information for both outbound and return Election Mail.
- Provide USPS with enhanced tracking capabilities to quickly identify and process ballots throughout the mail network.

Delivering Democracy

The election mail STIDs are one part of USPS protocols to make sure every mail ballot is recognized as more than just another piece of mail. As former election official Tammy Patrick put it, “it’s someone’s vote.”

Facing identification mark (FIM)

The FIM tells USPS equipment which side of the envelope is the front and the postage class. This primes the machines to find the addresses embedded in the barcodes.

Selecting the right FIM

There are 5 types of FIMs that you might use:

- **FIM A:** use for Courtesy Reply Mail with an IMb
- **FIM B:** use for Business Reply Mail, without IMb
- **FIM C:** use for Business Reply Mail with an IMb
- **FIM D:** use for letter-size First-Class Mail with postage meter
- **FIM E:** use for postcard-size and letter-size First-Class Mail with an IMb

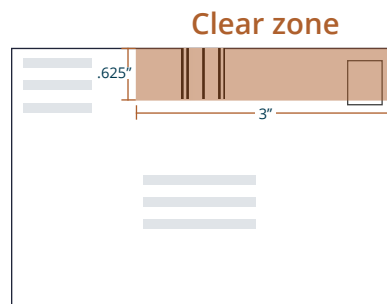
Placing the FIM

The FIM goes at the top of the envelope, to the left of the postage area in the exclusion zone.

USPS requires clear space for the FIM measuring:

- 3" wide, from the right of the envelope
- 0.625" high, from the top of the envelope

If you use postage meter tapes, make sure they do not cover the FIM.



Resources

- DMM 202 Elements on the Face of a Mailpiece FIM Section 8.0: pe.usps.com/text/dmm300/202.htm#ep1123678

Tips and best practices

Using a FIM is not required, but highly recommended.

The FIM tells USPS machines what side of the envelope is the front. This way the machines can read the bar codes or IMbs and deliver the envelopes to the right place.

These images are not to scale, but will help you recognize the two FIMs used most with election mail.

FIM A

Courtesy Reply (voter must add postage)



FIM C

Business Reply (office pays the return postage)



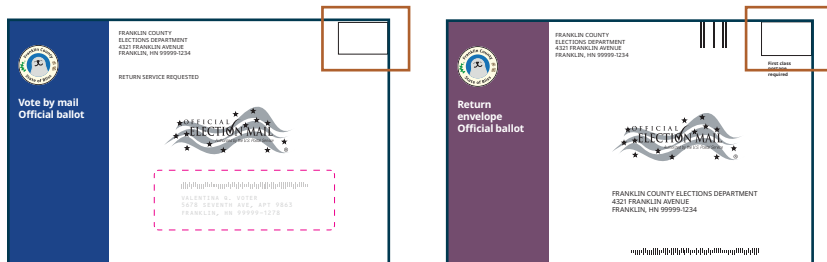
Talk to your print or mail vendor about USPS elements like the FIM. They have to be in the right location and the right size for the USPS automation to read them correctly.

Postage paid or postage instructions

The postage block tells voters what type of postage—if any—they need to add.



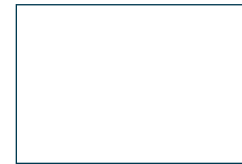
The postage block goes in the upper right corner of the envelope. The font size must be a minimum of 8 points. Follow USPS regulations, including clearance areas.



Tips and best practices

What to do if postage is needed

Put language below an empty box. This tells people that postage is needed. If the words are put into the box, some people in our research thought that they did not need a stamp.



First class postage required

Include postage, if you can

Providing postage increases voter turnout. If paying for return postage, print postage like this:

NO POSTAGE NECESSARY IF MAILED IN THE UNITED STATES

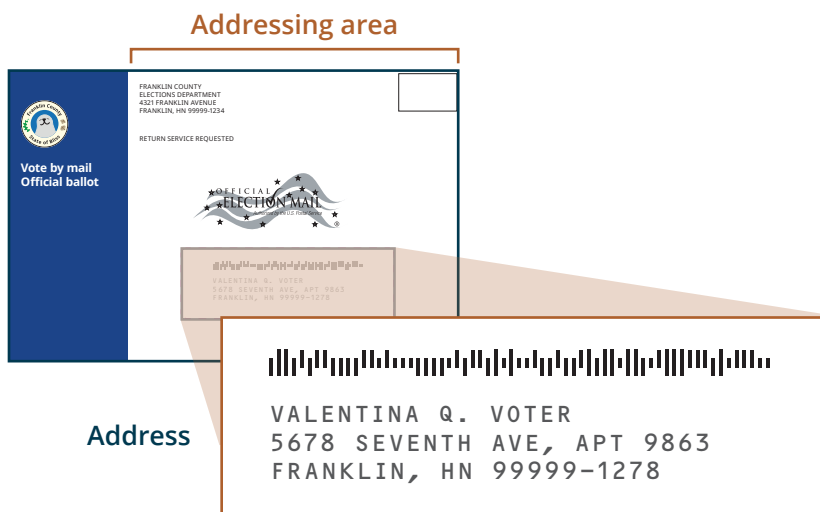
Resources

- Learn about what goes in the postage area in PUB 631 page 8: about.usps.com/publications/pub631.pdf

Address and addressing area

Follow these guidelines to make sure USPS machines and postal employees can read addresses and get ballots to the right place.

On the VBM envelope templates, the USPS addressing area is the space to the right of the wraparound color bar.



Make sure the address is in correct USPS format. Write addresses in text that is:

- Left justified
- At least 10-point font
- All uppercase letters

Resources

- Addressing standards in DMM 602 pe.usps.com/text/dmm300/602.htm
- Publication 28 Postal Addressing Standards pe.usps.com/text/pub28/welcome.htm
- Publication 632 - State and Local Election Mail Manual Section III - Preparing your Address List on page 9: about.usps.com/publications/pub632.pdf

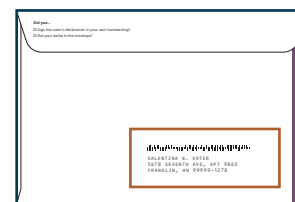
Tips and best practices

You have options for how to print the voter's address. Choose the option that works best for your technological and staff capacity.

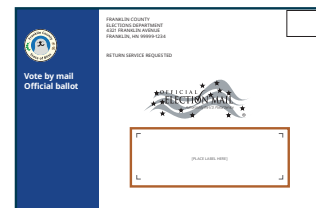
Option A: Print the address on the return envelope and position it through the window on the outgoing envelope.



Outgoing envelope shows voter's address printed on the return envelope and visible through the window. **Return envelope** with voter's address.



Option B: Print the address on labels and affix to outgoing envelope.

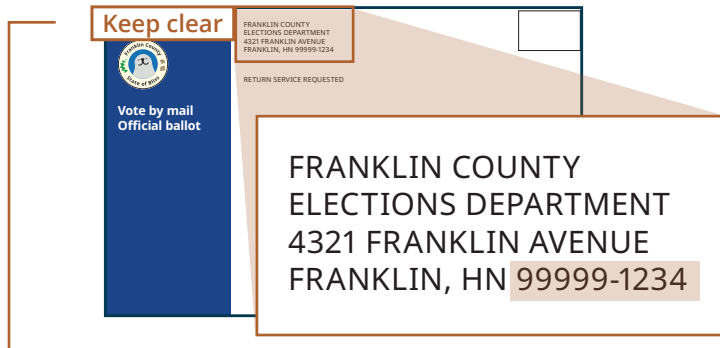


Outgoing envelope shows where to affix label. Print gray marks on envelope to help with consistent label placement.

Election office's return address

Outgoing envelopes

The election office's return address must match the postal permit number used for postage. This should be the full zip code, including the 4 extra numbers: 99999-1234.



CCD's VBM templates

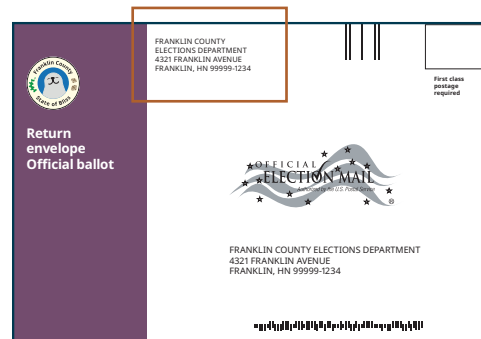
We've created VBM templates to help you get started. To use our templates, visit civicsdesign.org/tools/designing-vote-by-mail-envelopes

Any logo or text in the color bar or to the left of the return address must be placed at least 0.625" from the top of the envelope. This is to help the USPS systems find the return address.

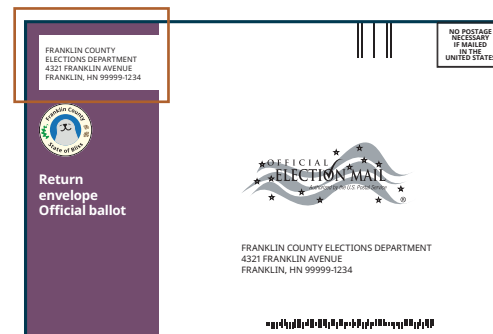
For return envelopes with pre-paid postage

You need to include space for a return address. You have 2 options:

Option A: Print your elections office return address in this space. This puts the election office as both the outgoing and return address, which adds one more chance for the ballot to get returned to the right place.



Option B: Print your elections office return address inset into the color bar. Leave a little bit the color bar at the top to wrap around the envelope. This can be especially helpful for smaller envelopes where space is limited.



USPS rules checklist

Check that your envelope:

- Follows restrictions for:
 - Size
 - Weight
 - Ratio
- Includes an official election mail logo on both the outgoing and return envelope
- Leaves clearance space where required by USPS:
 - Around postage
 - Around logo
 - Around return service
 - Exclusion zone at top right of instructions
 - Exclusion zone at bottom right of instructions
- Applies FIM to front of the return envelope
- Uses IMb customized to the voter's address with STID on outgoing and return ballot
- Uses black ink on white envelopes in the addressing area
- Uses correct USPS format for all addresses
- Uses a font for the addresses that is:
 - Left justified
 - At least 10-points
- Has a return address that matches the postal permit number used for postage with a full ZIP code on the outgoing envelope
- Provides postage instructions for the return envelope (whether it's paid or will require postage)

Best practices

When designing your envelope, consider:

- Using common envelope sizes
- Using a wraparound color bar to indicate different types of envelopes
- Setting up round trip tracking to trace that outgoing envelopes get to voters and ballots get received and counted
- Offering pre-paid postage for voters

About the Center for Civic Design

We strive to make every interaction with the government easy, effective, and pleasant. We work with elections offices, democracy advocates, and civic engagement organizations to make elections easier to run, support innovation, and invite participation in elections. From our practical experience and applied research, we share best practices for civic design and our core skills of plain language, accessibility, information design, and civic research.


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