

Communicating with Voters

Research into what works in voter education brochures and flyers

Report on research for the Field Guides to Ensuring Voter Intent conducted in January 2013

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Election departments all provide basic information about voting for voters. They typically explain who can vote, how to become a voter, options for receiving and casting ballots, and other general information.

This project explored how well a sample of booklets and flyers explain US election concepts and procedures to new voters (including young adults, immigrants, and voters with lower literacy or who speak English as a second language).

We learned that voters wanted answers to their basic questions, complete information presented in a clear way, information about how to mark their ballot, and details like dates, addresses and contact information that help them take action.

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Highlights

This research is part of a larger, ongoing project to develop the Field Guides to Ensuring Voter Intent. Each of the Field Guides contains a set of 10 guidelines for election design, based on research evidence and presented in clear, simple language. They are designed to boil down research into the essentials that local election officials need to act on the advice within constraints.

This report is based on interviews with 16 new voters, asking them to look at examples of good printed voter education materials. Most of them were young and had voted for the first time in 2008 or 2012. They were men and women, black, white and Hispanic. They included new citizens from Bolivia, Algeria, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Eritrea.

We worked with 5 printed voter education booklets and flyers that followed many best practices, to learn how to make them even better.

- **VOTE! flyer** – League of Women Voters
- **Voters Guide to Elections** – San Francisco Department of Elections
- **Maryland Votes** – Maryland Board of Elections
- **Voting in Oregon** – State of Oregon Secretary of State
- **Official Election Information** – Leon County, Florida Supervisor of Elections

Voters have a short list of top questions.

Participants in this research had questions similar to those from other research, including a companion project testing the usability of local election websites. These voters had concrete and specific questions: Where do they go to vote? What will be on the ballot? As new voters, they also wanted to know about eligibility and ID requirements.

Design for first impressions

When asked to choose the booklets or flyers they wanted to read, the cover counted. Use the space on the cover for useful information – what the booklet is about, who published it. An attractive design with meaningful images worked best.

Throughout the booklet or flyer

- Use visuals to reinforce meaning.
- Make sure that important information stands out.

Organize content to help voters find and understand the information

Make it easy for voters to scan the booklet to find the information they need. Start with a roadmap—an overview or table of contents that describes the scope of the information.

Two guidelines proved important for breaking content into bite-sized chunks:

- 1 page: 1 topic.
- 1 topic: 1 heading.

That may sound like a waste of space, but valuable information that is never read is even more of a waste.

Use good headings to make the booklet or flyer easy to scan quickly.

Write headings as questions. People read election booklets looking for answers. Phrasing headings as questions makes it easy for them to recognize *their* questions. Good questions show that the elections office understands what information voters need.

Include the details that voters need

Don't make voters guess or fill in the blanks. Participants wanted concrete details about how to take part in an election.

- Be specific about dates and deadlines.
- Provide real contact information, not just a website.
- Make alternative languages easy to find.
- Include information on how to vote.
- Make any message from the election office short and useful.

Write clearly, for voters

All the guidelines of plain language are as important in printed voter education material as anywhere else.

- Speak directly to the voter (use "you" and active sentences).
- Avoid, or explain, election terminology. Even seemingly simple words can be confusing if voters don't understand their meaning in the elections context.
- Don't make voting look complicated (even if it is). Break topics down so that voters can easily see what applies to them, or the information they most need.

Background

This study was part of a larger project to create a series of *Field Guides to Ensuring Voter Intent*.

The *Field Guides* originated from frustration. On the one hand, we have many good examples of evidence-based election design, starting with the work of Design for Democracy, research for the National Institute of Standards and Technology supporting the development of the Voluntary Voting System Standards (VVSG), formal research projects at several universities, and practical projects by election offices and advocacy groups. But too often, election materials simply failed to make use of well-tested best practices from election administration and supporting design and communications disciplines. The goal of the Field Guides is to present election design guidelines in a format that makes it easy for election officials to use them.

The first four Field Guides were based on existing research on plain language, ballot design, instructions, and usability testing. For Volumes 5 – 8, we wanted to look more deeply at how voters learn about elections, even before they show up at a polling place on Election Day or put an absentee ballot in the mail.

When we looked for guidelines for general communications with voters, we found very little. There were some political science and social psychology experiments that attempted to measure the impact of get-out-the-vote campaigns, but there was little available to help us understand what questions voters have, and how to go about answering them effectively.

Our approach to understanding the effectiveness of voter education materials was qualitative, and starts with usability research with actual voters. Typically, we would ask people to try to complete a task such as finding specific information or completing an activity, and see whether they did so successfully. That approach worked well for a companion study of local election web sites.

In this study of voter education materials we asked participants to choose two booklets or flyers from a selection we offered them and to try to find answers to their own questions about elections. When they were done we talked to them about what they read. We worked with groups of 2-3 participants, so we could create opportunities for discussion and for them to compare their reactions.

We selected voters who had voted for the first time in the 2008 election or later. Our participants were young people, recently naturalized citizens, and people with lower literacy. As new voters, we hoped that they would remember

their first experiences clearly and would still have questions about elections. In all, we worked with 16 participants in three cities: New York, Baltimore, and suburban Washington DC.

Surprisingly, three participants told us stories about how they were unable to vote, or to vote completely, in the 2012 election. In all three cases, better communications with their elections office might have allowed them to vote.

Goals

In this project, we focused on printed materials: small flyers, general election information booklets, and voting guides sent to registered voters. We wanted to understand how to write and design printed voter education materials to help voters understand how to participate in an election.

- Do current voter education materials help voters – especially new voters and those without strong civic engagement – understand how to participate in elections?
- Do voter education materials help voters understand the process of participating in elections, from registering to voting?
- What concepts and terms in voter education material are difficult for new voters to understand, and how can they be explained effectively?
- What information is missing from basic voter education materials that new voters need?

Methods

We conducted usability sessions with 2-3 participants each. One researcher interviewed participants. The other took notes and asked follow-up questions. We were in the same room with the participants so we could observe how they read and marked up the materials they reviewed. The sessions were held in conference rooms or usability labs and were recorded.

Test materials

We reviewed over 100 different voter education pieces from around the country. We chose 5 that we thought were well done, in a range of formats (tri-fold, web page printout, longer brochure).

The five flyers and booklets

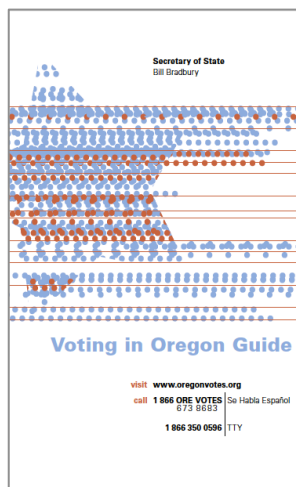


League of Women Voters:
VOTE (sometimes it takes a 4-letter word)

Tri-fold brochure, with general information about voting

San Francisco: A Voter's Guide to San Francisco Elections

Tri-fold brochure with information about voting in that city



Maryland: Voting in Maryland
8-page small booklet with information about the 2011-2012 elections

Oregon: Voting in Oregon Guide

12-page small booklet, mailed to each voter as instructions with their ballot



Leon County Florida: Official Election Guide
12-page large booklet, mailed to each voter, including a generic sample ballot

Participants

We worked with 16 people who had voted for the first time in 2008 or later. They included primarily young voters and recently naturalized citizens or the children of immigrants, and people speaking English with a range of proficiency from native speakers to those speaking it as a second language.

The educational level also varied. Some came from prestigious universities; some had attended a local college or professional school; some may have had little education, or relatively low reading literacy.

In all, we worked with 5 men and 11 women. Six were white, 7 were black, 3 Hispanic. Twelve participants were 18-25 years old; the other 4 were 38, 50 (2) and 57 years old. Five were recently naturalized or from immigrant families from Algeria, Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Eretria.

The participants had a wide range of voting experiences and support for voting from their families or social setting.

All of the participants were registered to vote and many were enthusiastic about voting. One of the difficulties of qualitative research into elections is how difficult it is to recruit participants who don't vote for any reason. People who are marginalized or disengaged in general are difficult to recruit; it is also

difficult to find people who will admit to not voting. As many as 10% of people lie about having voted.¹ They say they voted but did not.

Sessions

During the hour-long sessions we asked participants about their first voting experiences, traditions of voting in their family, how they learned about voting, and what questions they had (or might still have). If they mentioned any problems or confusions in their last voting experience, we asked them to tell us about it in more detail. Some of their stories are summarized below.

Then, we asked them to choose 2 voter education booklets or flyers from a collection we provided and read them, thinking about what it would be like to use them to learn how to vote in an election.

As they read, we asked them to mark anything:

- confusing or which doesn't give you the information you are looking for, or which you don't like for any reason
- particularly useful or explained well, or that you just like

When they were done, we talked about what they read, asking about the sections they marked, and paying particular attention to any words or sections they did not understand. Finally, we asked each person to rank the materials in their own order of preference and tell us how they made the decision.

¹ The Victory Lab: The secret science of winning campaigns, by Sasha Issenberg

Voting Experiences

Even with a relatively small sample, we discovered that participants had a wide range of voting experiences, including Election Day voting, early voting, absentee voting, and using the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot.

They all voted in the 2012 election. Or tried to. Three of them wanted to vote in 2012, but didn't vote, tried to vote, or voted only partially (on the FWAB), through a series of events and misunderstandings.

Decisions about where and how to vote can be stressful

Charles voted in the state where he attends university. There is a lot of pressure to register and vote in the community at his college. After registering, he got a packet of information from the Secretary of State, but didn't read it because it looked too dense, with a lot of small text. A student group sent out email about where to vote. He went early and encountered long lines because everyone else had the same idea.

(Male, white undergraduate student. First voted in 2010. Last voted in 2012.)

Connie's family lives in Oregon, and she voted there through college. She registered at college, but with her home address. She remembers watching her mother mark her own mail-in ballot, so the process seemed familiar, but she was a bit nervous about signing and sealing her ballot because she didn't want to make a technical error.

(Female, white, recent graduate. First voted in 2008. Last voted in 2012.)

Annie also registered at her family home while she away in college. When she came home after graduating she was pleased to see that she was still registered, even though she'd never gotten any mail or other confirmation. Her mother told her where to vote. Picking a party affiliation was stressful—it seemed like a big decision at the time.

(Female, white, recent graduate. First voted in 2008. Last voted in 2012.)

Some were enthusiastic, and sought information about how to vote

Chastity couldn't wait to vote because she wants to make a difference. "I just want to have a say in who runs the country." Everyone in her family votes. They call each other to make sure everyone gets to a polling place. She registered at the motor vehicles office when she got her state (non-driver's) ID.

(Female, 18 years old, black. First voted in 2012.)

Samia's parents are immigrants who first voted in 2008. In 2012, she looked up where to register on Google, and then voted early at a civic center. The line was really long, and she had to come back after class – luckily she was free in the afternoon to do that. "My dad is big on you've got to vote." When she saw her ballot, she didn't expect so many candidates. She wished she'd done more research. Instead, she left a lot of the contests blank.

(Female, black, 20. First voted in 2012.)

Janae decided to vote on her own. A friend told her how and where to register. She found her polling place on the voter's card she received in the mail. Voting is not a tradition in her family, but she wanted to vote, "It was the first time I saw a black president." She was excited the first time she voted, but confused by the ballot questions.

(Female, black, 24. First voted in 2008. Last voted in 2012.)

Older city residents had sporadic voting histories

Michael has voted off and on. He registered at a motor vehicles office where he just happened to notice the forms. When he went to vote the first time, he didn't know what to do, but there were long lines, which gave him time to ask questions. This election, long lines were more of a problem. "It's a good thing the boss didn't need me, so I could go all the way across town." Otherwise, he would not have been able to vote, because he can't afford to lose work hours.

(Male, black, 38. First voted in 2006. Last voted in 2012.)

Andre first voted in one of the Clinton elections. "I've had a voter card for years," after his mother took him downtown to register, but he didn't always vote. His older sister urged him to vote in 2012, and he did because "it was time for something different to be happening. It wasn't just the color of his skin."

(Male, black, 50. First voted in the 1990s. Last voted in 2012.)

Some new citizens got their registration forms at their swearing-in ceremonies, but others had to find the information on their own

Veronica got her voter registration forms at her swearing-in ceremony. Her husband told her what it would be like to vote. She voted twice before 2012, so she was surprised at the 3-hour lines. In her home country, her family is involved in community politics, but voting is an obligation there. She likes having a choice in the US.

Three (20%) had problems voting, despite wanting to do so

Alexander had a confusing time trying to vote while in AmeriCorps. He hadn't registered to vote before he left for his year in AmeriCorps and didn't know he could do so remotely. He ended up registering in the state where his group was based, but by election time, he was in another state and had to request an absentee ballot. Unfortunately, by the time his ballot arrived, it was too late. In the end, he got a notice that his ballot did not arrive in time and was not counted. He's back home now, and not registered anywhere, although everyone else in his family votes. "I just didn't get around to it."
(Male, white, 21. First tried to vote in 2012.)

Morad and his whole family voted for the first time in 2012 after being naturalized in 2010. He wanted to vote in person, but it happened that he was in Paris for his job. He went to the embassy for an absentee ballot and had to vote on the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot. This meant that he had no chance to vote for local representatives: "I was censored." He only knew to go to the embassy because of his work. It was a two-step process. He filled in the paperwork one day, then came back the next to vote. His family had an easier time because they just went to the polling place.
(White, male, 50. First voted in 2012.)

Silvia registered to vote when she became a citizen at her swearing-in ceremony. She wanted to vote this year, but couldn't find her card and thought that she needed it to vote. "I don't even know where to go to find out where I'm supposed to vote." Her father lost his, too, and then found it, so "it's good for next time." Everyone in her family has dual citizenship, and can vote in both countries. "You really want to vote there. It's really serious. You want to pick a winner because backing a loser can mean you lose your job."
(Female, black/Hispanic, 23. Never voted.)

Questions about elections

In a related study of election web sites, 41 participants were presented with a list of questions about elections in a SurveyMonkey questionnaire online and asked to identify any of the questions which they had about a recent election. The questions were drawn from a variety of sources, including reports from the Pew Center, our prior research, and a review of questions answered in elections materials.

In this study, participants were not presented with a list of questions, but were asked what questions they had about the 2012 election, or might still have. These questions were used later in the session to help evaluate the booklets and flyers.

Voters have a short list of top questions

The top questions overlapped across the two studies. In both studies, questions about what is on the ballot and where to vote appeared in the top 5 questions. They had very few other questions. Those they did have were almost all related to a problem they had encountered in the last election.

Most asked questions in the web site study and the voter education study

Question	Web site study Number asking (n=41)	Voter ed study Number asking (n=16)
What's on the ballot?	28 (68%)	4 (25%)
What's the deadline to apply for an absentee ballot?	21 (51%)	
When is my absentee ballot due?	18 (44%)	
What do I have to do to get an absentee ballot?	18 (44%)	4 (25%)
Where do I go to vote?	17 (41.5%)	9 (56%)
How do you vote (use the voting system)?		4 (25%)
How do you register to vote		3 (19%)

They wanted information that would help them plan

In general, these participants were more focused on the basic mechanics of how to vote, from registering to finding their polling place to learning how to mark their ballot or use the voting system. This may be because they were less experienced voters, the content in the materials, the format, among many possible reasons.

As one participant (Alexander) said, "They all need more about how to get registered." It became complicated for him, but shouldn't be. He got 4 or 5 different pieces of information when he tried to vote with an absentee ballot. "Which envelope do I use for what, what do I mail back... will they count your vote. The absentee process, it scares you away from voting. You can't scare people off from the start."

They wanted instructions that would give them confidence their vote would count

Many participants talked about preparing to vote. They wanted to know what's on the ballot, what it will be like in the polling place, and how to use the machines.

- "Put more on TV - use ads to tell where to find information and how to use the machines. Advise people to read before they go to vote" (Veronica)
- "I got something in the mail just like Leon [County's voter guide] with polling place locations. Good to get reminders in the mail each time." (Olivia)
- "District numbers need to be explained. When I got to the poll, I had to figure it out." (Chastity)

Describing an experience voting in the past when he learned that he had not voted on the back of the ballot, Michael said, "My biggest thing is that I didn't vote on everything I wanted to vote on. The touch screen is better, you don't get the Finish button until you get to the end. It STILL bothers me after all these years."

They wanted to know about eligibility and ID requirements

These participants also had questions about basic eligibility, including how do you know if you are eligible, and how long your registration "lasts." Reading the booklets, some of them found new information.

- A few were not aware that there were any options besides voting in your assigned polling place on Election Day.

- Some participants were very interested in the information in the Maryland and San Francisco booklets about voting rights for people who had been convicted of a felony. Michael said “I have a lot of friends in that situation, so this let you know right up front.”
- Several wanted to know if they needed to bring their voter card or other ID, and if so what ID was acceptable. (One had not voted in 2012 because she thought she needed her voter card and could not find it.)
- They also encountered election terms they didn’t understand, like “affiliate with a party” and “ranked-choice voting.”

Design for first impressions

Not surprisingly, the first impression of the format and appearance of the booklet or flyer helped determine which ones the participants chose to read.

Two participants (Mya and Calla) agreed that, “You have to make it more appealing to first time voters and show that [voting] makes a difference.”

There were no strong preferences among the booklets

At the end of the session, we asked participants to rank the pieces in their order of preference. There was no strong difference among the top 4, but the San Francisco trifold only ranked first or second for 2 participants.

Ranking of preferences for the booklets

Booklet	Ranked #1 by	Ranked #2 by	Liked best by these participants	Biggest negative cited
Leon Voter Guide	6	2	New immigrants	It’s a lot of pages
LWV Vote! Flyer	5	2	Youngest voters	Not specific enough
Oregon Voter Guide	2	6	Most enthusiasm or commitment	The cover is confusing
Voting in Maryland	2	5	Wanted all the information	A lot of pages and small text
San Francisco Flyer	1	1	(none)	Boring looking

The small trifold flyers attracted people who said they did not like reading, or thought they already had the information they needed.

- The San Francisco flyer was rejected as boring. It also fell in between, not providing as much information as the booklets, but not as attractive as the other flyer.
- The League of Women Voters flyer looked more attractive, even with the same color scheme.

The larger booklets attracted those who said they wanted to make sure they had the correct information, or who had several current questions about voting.

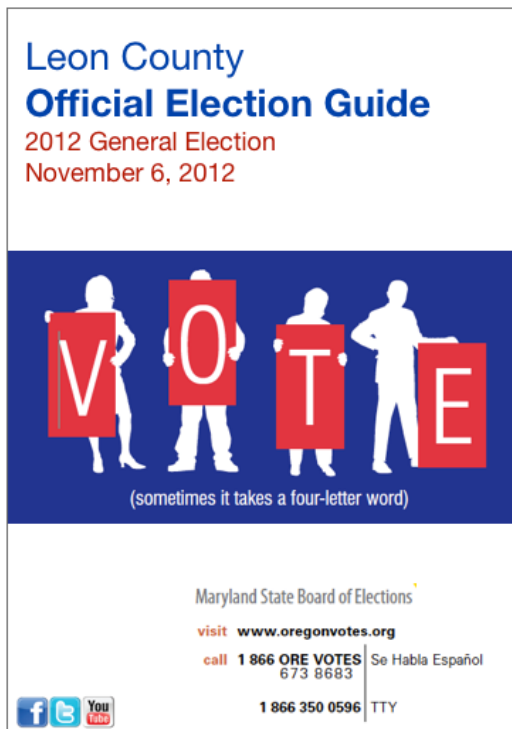
- The cover of the Oregon booklet was confusing. Participants reacted negatively to it – the strongest negatives of any of the covers. They wondered what it was supposed to be. It may be more recognizable in Oregon.
- The Voting in Maryland cover had the strongest positives. It looked clear and professional, the title was easy to read, and it had clear contact information on the front cover.

The voter guide from Leon County, Florida was the largest, both in size of paper and number of pages. Some participants read it only reluctantly, but then liked it for its completeness and visual style.

Use the space on the cover for useful information

Participants reacted strongly to the covers, and used them as a way to gauge the content inside.

Too many of the booklets ignored the cover, instead of using it to communicate critical useful information. The composite illustration below, with elements drawn from several of the booklets, demonstrates elements of a well-designed cover.



The booklet is clearly identified, including:

- geographical area covered
- type of information
- election and dates the information is valid for

The cover art is meaningfully related to elections. Color is used, but not overwhelming.

The agency that published the information is identified.

There is contact information including the web site and phone number.

Social media links, language information, and accessibility are also easy to find.

Organize content to help voters find information

Even in these relatively small booklets and flyers, participants missed information. During the discussion, they sometimes had difficulty finding the information a second time or learned something they wanted to know only by hearing it from someone else in the session. A few strategies for organizing the content seemed to work very well.

Start with a roadmap

When the opening of the booklet had a table of contents or a clear indication of what was inside, participants noticed and appreciated it.

registering to vote | 2

vote by mail | 4

voting instructions | 6

checking for mistakes | 7

returning your ballot | 8

frequently asked questions | 10

county contact information | 12

Participants considered the table of contents in the Voting in Oregon booklet to be a map of the voting process.

They said that it was informative and logically organized, that it was easy to see what the booklet contained, and that it made the booklet look simple and less intimidating.

They also appreciated that the process started with registering to vote. When this step was left out, or isolated from the rest of the process, they did not like it. These new voters wanted registering (or checking your registration) to be connected to the rest of the process.



Although it did not have a table of contents, the Leon County Voters Guide opens with the announcement that there are “3 ways to vote.”

Participants used this to make sure they had read about all of the options.

1 page: 1 topic

Booklets with a single topic per page worked best. They made it easy for participants to flip through the booklet and find the information they wanted. They were also less likely to have an important heading at the bottom of a page, where it was easily missed.

These designs featured:

- A short, clearly written title for each page, with headings as needed within the page. (Titles matched the table of contents, if there was one.)
- Information tailored to fit well on the page, making each topic look complete and coherent.
- A visually distinct typography for the title, making it easy to read when scanning through the booklet.
- Small running headings were not very effective as we thought they would be. Although they contained good information, they break the information hierarchy by putting headings at a higher level in smaller text.



1 topic: 1 heading

As a general rule, headings within the text are helpful to readers. They break up “walls of words” and act as landmarks in the content. But it turns out you can have too much of a good thing. When a topic was split across different headings, participants complained.

- It was hard to tell if they had found all of the information on the topic.
- It made elections seems complicated.

For example, one of the booklets had information about registering to vote after being convicted of a crime. Several of the participants were interested in this information and commented that they knew someone it applied to.

Information whether you can vote after being convicted of a crime is scattered in three different headings, marked with blue highlighting in our example. Each one has good information, but it forces voters to do more work than they should have to.

Voter Registration

Voter Registration

Eligibility

Am I eligible to register to vote?

To register to vote, you must be:

- > A U.S. citizen;
- > A resident; and
- > At least 16 years old*.

You cannot have been:

- > Convicted of buying or selling votes;
- > Found by a court to be incapable of voting by reason of mental disability; or
- > Convicted of a felony or if you have, you have completed a court-ordered sentence of imprisonment, including any term of parole or probation for the conviction.

*You may register to vote if you are at least 16 years old but cannot vote unless you will be at least 18 years old by the next general election.

Can I register to vote if I am in the military or live overseas?

Certain U.S. citizens who live overseas or are in the military are eligible to register and vote in If you are an overseas citizen, military personnel, or dependent of military personnel, you may register to vote in if your current or last U.S. residence was in To register, use the Federal Post Card Application available at www.fvap.gov.

Can I register to vote if I have been convicted of a crime?

If you have been convicted of a felony, you are eligible to register to vote once you have completed the court-ordered sentence of imprisonment, including any term of parole or probation for the conviction. For the purposes of eligibility to register to vote, convictions include federal, state and out-of-state convictions.

You are not eligible to vote if you have been convicted of buying or selling votes.

How can I determine if I qualify to have my voting rights restored following a felony conviction?

You should contact the Division of Parole and Probation within the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services or a comparable agency in the state in which you were convicted.

The heading structure can be simplified to have fewer headings and group all of the information on 1 topic into 1 heading.

Before

Voter Registration

Eligibility

Am I eligible to register to vote?

Can I register to vote if I am in the military or live overseas

Can I register to vote if I have been convicted of a crime?

How can I determine if I qualify to have my voting rights restored following a felony conviction?

After

Voter Registration

Am I eligible to register to vote?

If you are in the military or live overseas

If you have been convicted of a crime

Write headings as questions

Research on plain language² suggests that writing headings as questions is a good way to help people find information, even in short documents.

People read election booklets looking for answers, so it's easy for them to recognize their questions. Good questions show that the elections office understands what information voters need.

These participants reacted positively to questions in the documents. In some cases, participants had to translate from questions written in elections jargon to match what they were looking for answers about. When the questions were written clearly, in terms they understood, however, it helped them identify sections they wanted to read.

² 'Headings' by Ginny Redish, <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/guidelines/headings.cfm> and *Letting Go of the Words* by Ginny Redish, Morgan Kauffman, among others

Don't make voting look complicated (even if it is)

Elections are more complicated than most voters expect. Several of the brochures tried to explain the details in a clear way.

The image shows two sample voter information cards. The left card is titled 'POLLING PLACE ADDRESS' and lists 'Jack L. McLean Center' at '700 Paul Russell Rd.' It includes a table for 'DISTRICTS' with columns for CO COMM, SCH BOARD, CDD, CONGRESS, SENATE, and HOUSE, and rows for '1' and '3'. The right card is titled 'VOTER INFORMATION CARD' for 'LEON COUNTY, FLORIDA' and lists 'ION SANCHO' as the 'SUPERVISOR OF ELECTIONS'. It includes fields for 'VOTER NAME AND RESIDENCE ADDRESS', 'ASSISTANCE REQUIRED', 'PRINTED', 'PREFECT NUMBER', 'DATE REGISTERED', and 'DATE OF BIRTH'. A red circle highlights the number '1321' in the 'PREFECT NUMBER' field. Below the cards is a legend for district numbers:

Acronym	Description	Detail
CO COMM	County Commission	
SCH BOARD	School Board	
CDD	Community Development District	1 = Piney Z 2 = Capital Region
CONGRESS	US House of Representatives	
SENATE	Florida State Senate	
HOUSE	Florida House of Representatives	

Below the legend, a diagram shows the number '1321' with arrows pointing to 'County Commission District #' and 'School Board District #'. Text next to the diagram explains: 'Numbers less than 50 are INSIDE city limits' and 'Numbers greater than 50 are OUTSIDE city limits'.

Participants commented on how complex this information about the Voter Information Card looks, and wondered if it was all needed.

It's a good illustration of how all of the information that voters interact with has to work together. Could the card itself be simplified, making it easier to explain?

Speak directly to the voter

All of the guidelines for plain language are relevant in voter education material, such as using "you" to speak directly to voters, using words voters understand, and writing in an active voice to help voters use the information.

Avoid, or explain, election terminology

As we watched participants read, we saw many behaviors typical of people reading unfamiliar information.

- They skipped over sections or paragraphs with words they didn't understand, sometimes missing key information.
- They stumbled over phrases without enough context for them to make sense of them. One example is a heading for a section on the dates for voter registration, which said "Close of registrations." One participant, a new citizen, asked why it listed all the places you can register if registration is closed.
- They didn't understand words used in specialized ways, like "contests." To one participant (Veronica), this sounded like a sports competition, not an election.
- Even basic civics words like "legislation" were confusing. ("Law" would have been better.)

Some of the words that participants said they didn't understand or that confused them were:

- Absentee ballot
- Canvassing board
- Contests
- Legislation
- MVA
- Primary election
- Provisional ballot
- Ranked choice voting
- Remedial
- Unaffiliated
- Voter notification card
- Affiliate with a party
- Designate an agent
- Change parties
- Close of registrations
- Request deadline

The term "ranked choice voting" and the explanation of it posed particular problems, with some participants re-reading the section several times trying to understand it. Participants who reacted to this term included a wide range of educational levels and civic knowledge.

- "RCV section is unclear, but it maybe hard to make more clear. The only other time I've heard about it is in political theory class." (Charles)
- "Ranking voting? I didn't understand that. Is it a California thing? I read it several times and I just couldn't grasp it." (Michael)
- "What's ranking choice voting? Had to reread it to understand it. It's wordy, confusing. An example would be better." (Samia)

Make any message from the election office short and useful

Some of the booklets started with a message from the elections office, signed by the head of the department. Most participants skipped these messages, especially when they were long or dense.

"You have the power to change the face of Oregon politics. You have a vote!

By voting, you have the ability to make politicians listen, to drive policy direction and to be a part of the greatest experiment in government—democracy.

Registering to vote is the first step in making your voice in government count, but remember, you also have to vote.

Voting is the most important and effective way for you to participate in our Democracy!"



Secretary of State
Bill Bradbury

A few participants noticed and read this message.

They liked that it is short, motivational, and meaningful. As Janae put it, "It says important things."

Others noticed that it spoke directly to them, about why their vote matters and also told them that the first step is registering to vote.

Longer messages, with more text and smaller type were much less likely to be read.

Include the details that voters need

In almost every aspect of the discussion, participants wanted the specific details that would help them have a definitive answer to their questions.

Be specific about dates and deadlines.

Participants wanted to know the actual dates to help them make sense of all the steps in the election. They liked booklets that showed real dates for the current election. Formulas, such as, "You must register at least 21 days before the election" forced participants into problem-solving (find the date of the election) and calculations (count backwards for 21 days).

2012 Presidential Election

Last day to register to vote before the Primary Election
March 13, 2012 > 9 pm

Early Voting
March 24 and March 26-29, 2012 > centers open 10 am to 8 pm
Sunday, March 25, 2012 > centers open 12 pm to 6 pm

Primary Election Day
April 3, 2012 > polls open 7 am to 8 pm

Voter registration reopens
April 16, 2012

Last day to register to vote before the General Election
October 16, 2012 > 9 pm

Early Voting
October 27-November 1, 2012 > centers open 10 am to 8 pm
Sunday, October 28, 2012 > centers open 12 pm to 6 pm

General Election Day
November 6, 2012 > polls open 7 am to 8 pm

Voter registration reopens
November 19, 2012

Participants found this list easy to read, and commented that it helped them understand all of the dates they needed to pay attention to.

Notice that the list highlights the events and process, then identifies the dates.

EARLY VOTING OPEN AT ALL SITES FOR 12 HOURS, 7 a.m. until 7 p.m. for eight straight days, Saturday, October 27th through Saturday, November 3rd.



This calendar was another good way to show a time period and the relationship between early voting days and election day.

Provide real contact information, not just a website

Whenever they saw contact lists or lists of voting locations, participants asked for complete details, not just a general description or a link to find the information online.

They wanted a choice for how to contact the election office with questions, including:

- Phone numbers
- Mailing or street address
- Website
- Email
- Social media

People who may not have web access or email are especially likely to use printed booklets or flyers for election information.

getting a replacement ballot

Contact your County Elections Office *see page 12 for contact information* or call 1 866 ORE VOTES to request a replacement ballot if:

This cross-reference to a list at the end of the booklet was an acceptable solution.

Below are two locations to hand-deliver your ballot through Election Day:

1) MAIN OFFICE
315 South Calhoun St.
Bank of America Building
First Floor on right

2) Starting October 27th – Courthouse Plaza
301 South Monroe St.
Leon County Courthouse
Early Voting Plaza entrance on Monroe St.

This contact list gives actual addresses, rather than just identifying the type of office or location.

Even participants who don't use social media liked seeing the icons to show that election information is available there. Those who do use social media thought it very important. For a few, Facebook was the center of their online life and how they communicated with their friends. As Calla put it, "If I could, I'd go on Facebook to vote. Make sure that people get that their vote matters."

Make alternative languages easy to find

Participants, especially those who were bilingual, noticed when booklets included links to other languages. For Morad, this was an important issue, and he told us that one of the reasons he agreed to participate was to advocate for more attention to language access needs.

When information is available in a language other than English, the most effective way to signal this is by using that language. Even a few words may be enough.

Are materials and assistance available in languages other than English?

Yes! 是的! ¡Sí!

We provide ballots, information, and assistance in Chinese and Spanish.

On Election Day, we schedule bilingual pollworkers to serve at most polling places. Look for the “I’m a pollworker—may I help you?” nametags in English, Chinese, and Spanish.

To receive a Voter Information Pamphlet in Chinese or Spanish, or for more information about available services, please come by our office or:

- visit sfelections.org/toolkit and click the 中文 or Español link at the top of the page
- call us: **Chinese:** (415) 554-4367
Spanish: (415) 554-4366

Make sure the information is clear in all languages.

Before

Are materials and assistance available in languages other than English?

Yes! 是的 ¡Sí!

After

→ Voter information in English

→ 在中國的選民信息

→ Información electoral en español

Include information on how to vote

Participants liked seeing instructions on how to vote. New voters need instructions for how to mark and cast their ballot. Current voters benefit from having the process confirmed and reinforced. As Michael put it, “The instructions page is good. I’m the kind of guy who doesn’t like to make mistakes, and in no unclear terms, they say this is how you do it and this is what you will see.”

Help voters know what to expect, whether they vote at a polling place, a vote center or by absentee ballot. Be sure to cover all the steps in voting:

- Signing in and the poll book.
- Marking the ballot.
- Using the voting system or scanner.
- Returning absentee ballots.

Use clear language and design to support meaning

Make sure that important information stands out

Participants noticed and liked icons, colored boxes, and callouts to highlight critical information that affects the ability to vote. Illustrations of forms or actions voters must take were also helpful. In these booklets, important information included:

- Instructions that affect someone’s ability to vote or whether their vote will be counted.
- Rules or legal information.

! You must sign in order for your ballot to be counted.

An Elections Official will compare the signature on your ballot return envelope to the signature on your voter registration card to verify your identity.

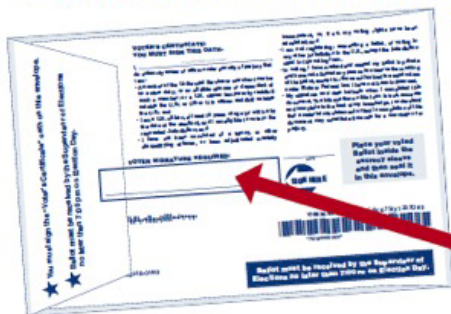
The simple exclamation point icons worked well to emphasize required actions.

BRING YOUR PHOTO ID WITH YOU WHEN YOU VOTE
 Current and valid picture ID, such as:
 FL Driver's License
 FL Identification Card
 US Passport
 Debit or Credit Card
 Military ID
 Student ID
 Retirement Center ID
 Neighborhood Association ID
 Public Assistance ID

If the picture ID does not contain the signature of the voter, an additional ID that provides the voter's signature shall be required. Voters at precincts without proper ID will be required to vote a Provisional Ballot.

Colored boxes also worked to highlight information, as long as there is enough contrast to read the text easily.

MAKE SURE YOUR ABSENTEE VOTE IS COUNTED!



★ 99% OF ABSENTEE BALLOTS IN LEON COUNTY COUNT IN EACH ELECTION!

Those that don't have one overwhelming problem:

★ NO SIGNATURE on the Voter's Certificate

Please don't let it happen to you! Put your signature on the Voter's Certificate before it gets to our office.

The Leon County booklet focused on the single biggest reason why absentee ballots were rejected.

Use visuals to reinforce meaning

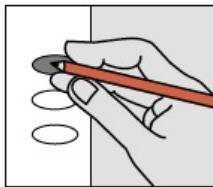
Participants liked booklets with graphical elements—as long as they were meaningful. Icons, instructional illustrations, and images of ballots or other election materials all worked well. Even people who said they didn't need the information in illustrations looked at them carefully, and said they helped them, reinforcing information.

There was some disagreement about the styles of the illustrations.

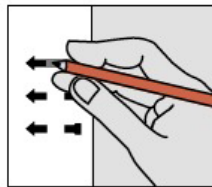


Some thought that this illustration style was too commercial looking, but others liked its clarity.

2 To vote, fill in the oval or complete the arrow next to your choice.



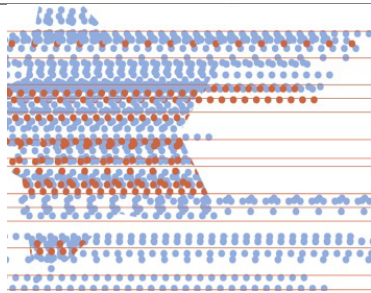
or



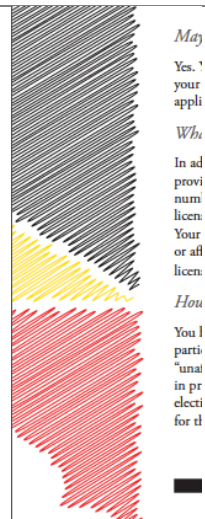
Most liked this simple illustration style.

Some drawings in these instructions, such as a picture of a mailbox seemed unnecessary.

But participants did not like visual elements that had no meaning for them.



The cover of the Oregon booklet is used in many election materials in that state. Participants, however, did not recognize the image or understand it.



The Maryland Votes booklet design used colors and elements from the state flag. Even though many of the participants were from Maryland, they did not recognize the metaphor.

This was the only brochure not in red-white-and-blue, and participants liked the colors. Some, however, wondered whether such a “scribbly” design was appropriate for a serious topic.