Field Guides
To Ensuring Voter Intent

Vol. 02

Writing instructions voters understand

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*
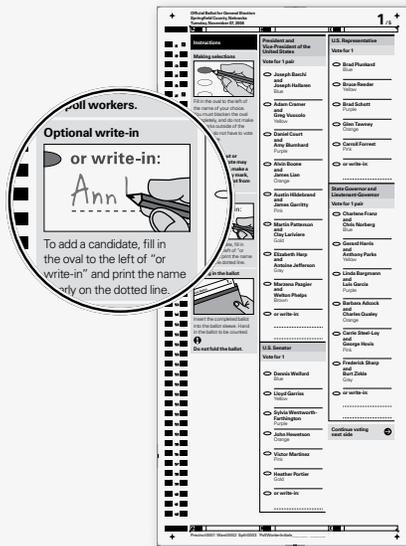
About this Field Guide

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.
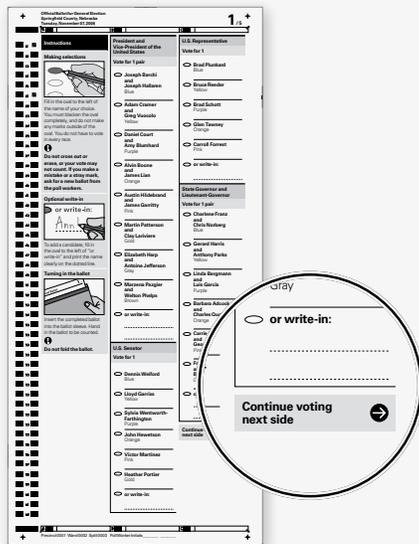
For more information about plain language, see centerforplainlanguage.org.

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.

Continue voting next side instruction is placed at the end of the last column on the page.

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

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.

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.

No. 04

Write short sentences.

Use simple words.

Remove unnecessary words.

Separate instructions from results.

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

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."

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.

Before   If that oval is not marked, your vote cannot be counted for the candidate.

After   You must fill in the oval for your vote to count.

No. 07

Write in the positive.

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

Non-sequential steps

Vote!

- Mark your votes in private.

- Follow the instructions on the ballot.

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

Sequential steps

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. 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.

No. 09

Keep paragraphs short.

A one-sentence paragraph is fine.

Good

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.

No. 10

Separate paragraphs by a space so each paragraph stands out on the page or screen.

Before

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.

After

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.

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?

Notes

Notes

Who made this Guide possible?

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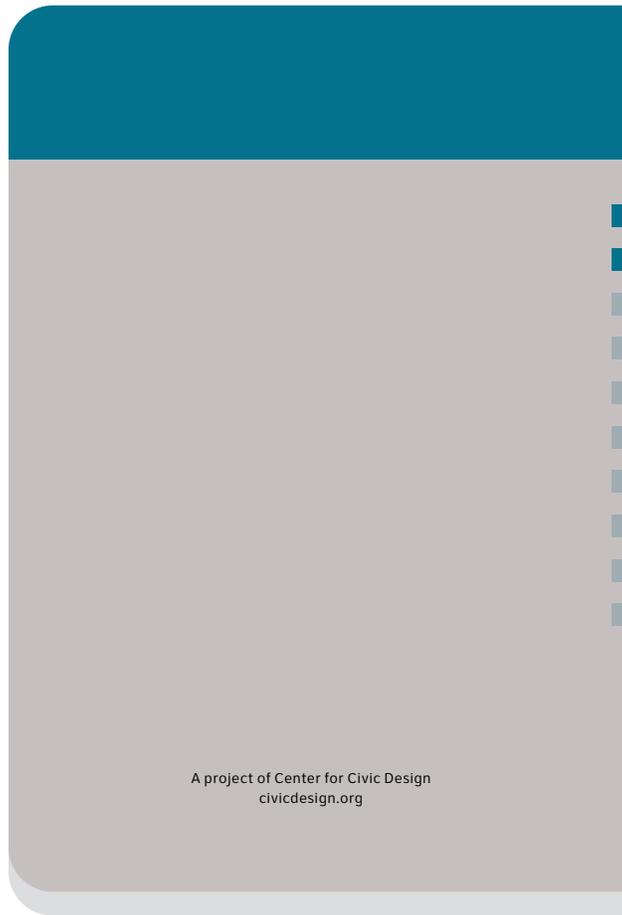Boon Sheridan, strategist
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