

Effective Design for the Administration of Federal Elections

Second Edition



U.S. Election Assistance Commission

The role of design in election materials

Think of how simple highway signs look. Lengthy studies of color, type size, and arrangement, and materials went into making sure they were clear and easy to understand. Airport signs use similar information design principles, as do airplane safety cards and nutrition labels. Effective information design is critical to successful communication in each of these examples.

Information design is the process of communicating information in a clear, engaging, accessible, and usable manner. Information design principles include common-sense ideas, such as:

- Knowing your audience;
- Using plain language;
- Using hierarchy and structure to organize content; and
- Using typography, imagery, and color consistently.

To share information effectively, you can't ignore information design. Design that focuses on usability, clarity, and accuracy can be the difference between communicating complicated ideas to people and just confusing them.

Election officials and the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) share an objective. We all want to achieve a voting experience that:

- Attracts citizens to vote;
- Makes casting their votes for candidates and issues easy; and
- Ensures that voters can successfully navigate the voting process.

With this knowledge, we introduce *Effective Design for the Administration of Federal Elections, Second Edition*. This guide draws on numerous interviews with local election officials and experts nationwide, as well as a thorough review of current best practices.

Election officials are encouraged to implement these best practices, which are informed by extensive design expertise, research, testing, and evaluation. By applying principles of information design, you can effectively support your staff and enhance the voter experience.

Design and election compliance

The best practice designs recommended in this document provide guidance for election officials seeking to meet voter needs while adhering to the law and working within vendor capabilities. To put it plainly, compliance with these best practice recommendations is *voluntary*. If something you read here conflicts with state law, always follow the applicable law.

How to use this guide

While we hope all the tips included in *Effective Design for the Administration of Federal Elections* are helpful, the good news is that even implementing one or two at a time will still be impactful. You don't have to take an all-or-nothing approach to improving election materials design.

If you'd like to focus on a particular problem area, each of the six modules included in *Effective Design* can stand alone. Want to get right to working on ballot design? Everything you need is in Module 4. Want to know how to handle post-election materials, like audits or observer information? That's Module 6.

Start with these broad guidelines before you drill down into specifics. They apply to all election design.

- 1. Review best practice materials for inspiration.** Compare best practice prototypes with your own materials to:
 - Identify the differences between them.
 - Determine how you could adopt new practices that answer voters' questions or address issues you recognize.
 - Create a revised election design plan, which might include new contributors, production steps, and so on.
- 2. Work with best practice templates.** All design templates are customizable — much of their content is variable. While some may already comply with local requirements, be prepared to refine and edit templates to accommodate your specific needs. The EAC has several templates available in editable formats for election officials and your design and production partners at www.eac.gov/election-officials/toolkits.
- 3. Recruit election design contributors.** Professional designers and writers with plain-language writing skills are helpful when it comes to adapting best practice guidelines for use in your elections. Don't forget cultural experts and translators — they can offer you advice on how to best include and design for alternate languages. Recruit these subject matter experts to support your core team's capabilities.
- 4. Develop a collaborative production workflow.** To implement any change in ballot and voter information design, you must successfully collaborate with stakeholders, including election vendors, printers, designers, writers, county election boards, and others. Plan in advance with collaborators to identify goals, constraints, and requirements before enacting change. This will go a long way toward implementation success during an election.

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Best Practice Module 1

Designing Printed Voter Information Materials



**Effective Design for the Administration of
Federal Elections**
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What's inside

This module offers design guidelines for printed voter information materials, like:

- Pre-election mailers;
- Notifications about primary and general elections; and
- Voter guides.

People who may not have access to the web or email are more likely to use printed booklets or flyers for election information. And better information design can improve response to required voter registration notices and other forms.

Why follow these guidelines

Whether a voter prefers to get their election information online or from a printed mailer, everyone wants to know the same things:

- What's on the ballot?
- When do I vote?
- How do I vote?
- Where do I vote?

They want to be able to find their polling place and voting options easily and perhaps be reminded about how the voting process works. And they want this information in a language they understand.

Most of all, they want the right information, in the right format, at the right time.

How to use this module

As you put your materials together, use the guidelines in this module along with your jurisdiction's specific rules for elections. When in doubt, always favor the simpler option.

Need a cheat sheet for a quick idea of what to do? This module starts with a list of high-level design suggestions and explains each one in further detail on the following pages.

And remember:

- Focus on incremental improvement.
- Consider the needs of new voters.
- Use plain language whenever possible.
- Transfer your knowledge — share this module with others in your office and with the next local election official who comes after you.

Whether you're designing pamphlets, flyers, or postcards, make sure you're answering the questions that voters already have. After you've answered those, then you can give voters information they didn't know they needed.

To convey printed voter information clearly and quickly, keep this module's guidelines in mind — though, of course, if something you read here conflicts with the law, always follow the law.

Best Practices for Designing Printed Voter Information Materials

- 1.5 **Start with a table of contents.**
- 1.6 **Prioritize the most relevant information.**
- 1.7 **Answer the most common questions first.**
- 1.8 **Address the needs of new voters.**
- 1.9 **Help voters know what to expect.**
- 1.10 **Point voters to online tools.**
- 1.11 **Be specific about dates.**
- 1.12 **Be direct and clear in your messaging.**
- 1.13 **Make voting look simple (even if it is not always so).**
- 1.14 **Write headings as questions.**
- 1.15 **Use simple and accurate diagrams.**
- 1.16 **Use instructional icons only.**
- 1.17 **Use familiar formatting.**
- 1.18 **Use fonts consistently.**
- 1.19 **Use color consistently and purposefully.**
- 1.20 **Use one language per designed piece.**
- 1.21 **Offer extra support for ranked choice voting.**

Start with a table of contents.

For longer pieces, give readers an overview of the document so they can easily find what they're looking for. A good table of contents can also work as a high-level map to the voting process.

- Include only top-level headings in your table of contents.
- Read through your table of contents to ensure that the organization of information makes sense.
- Keep headings consistent (make them all complete sentences or all questions).

Prioritize the most relevant information.

Save important spaces, like the front side of a mailer, for critical details. Consider what first-time voters need to know about voting in general, and what long-time voters need to know that's new.

- Make the election date and year prominent.
- Make it clear what the purpose of the piece is.
- Include contact information for the election office or department, including a physical address, an email address, and a phone number.

Answer the most common questions first.

General voter education should clearly answer common voter questions. Easy access to information lowers the barrier to voting, so answer questions like:

- What's on the ballot?
- Where and how do I vote?
- How do I get a sample ballot?
- What are the important dates?
- How do I contact local election officials?
- What happens at the polling place?

Address the needs of new voters.

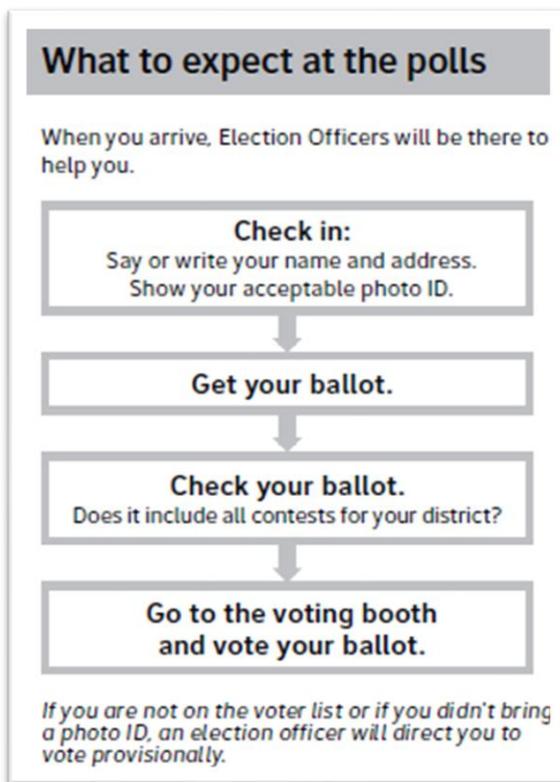
Give first-time or infrequent voters information well before they vote. This can help reduce anxiety around voting and empower voters to make any necessary preparations to vote. Make sure they know answers to questions like:

- How do I register to vote?
- What are the options for how I can vote — can I vote early or by mail?
- Where is my polling place?
- What time do polls open and close on Election Day?
- What do I need to take to the polling place?
- What do I do at the polling place?
- What happens to my ballot after I vote?

Help voters know what to expect.

Explain what voting looks like, whether voters cast their ballot at a polling place, a vote center, or by mail. This information helps voters know which voting options work best for them. Be sure to answer questions like:

- What do I bring with me to the polling place?
- How do I check in if I'm voting in person?
- How do I mark my ballot?
- How do I use the voting system?
- How do I vote by mail?



This page from a sample voter pocket guide tells voters what to expect when they vote in person.

Point voters to online tools.

Connect your voter information resources to one another and tell voters in print where they can find answers online. You can keep your printed materials simple and concise, presenting details online for voters who want to know more.

- Provide links or addresses (URLs) to your registration website.
- Include URLs that point voters to specific, relevant information, not just your home page.
- Keep URLs as short and clear as possible.
- Include words in the URL that match what the voter is looking for (like *registration* or *vote by mail*).

Be specific about dates.

Make sure voters understand when they need to take certain actions, well before the deadline. Giving them time to prepare lowers the barrier to completing the voting process.

- Show real dates for the current election (like *November 3rd, 2024*), not just formulas (like *two weeks after Event A, Event B happens*).
- Show dates either in a chronological list or in a calendar format.

Deadlines

 **October 17th:**
Register to vote, or update your address.
If you move, your polling place will change. Be sure to update your voter registration address every time you move

November 1st:
Request that an absentee ballot be mailed to you.

November 5th by 5pm:
Vote an absentee ballot, in person, at your local voter registration office.

 **November 8th:**
Election Day — polls open 6am to 7pm.

Find out more at vote.virginia.gov or (800) 552-9745 or TTY 711.

This page from a sample voter pocket guide shows voters exact dates.

Be direct and clear in your messaging.

Printed mailers are still an effective outreach method. Postcards and one-pagers with a specific purpose and clear information are easier for voters to absorb than dense content.

- Communicate with voters early in the election cycle, with specific mailers for topics like:
 - Did you move?
 - Watch for Official Election Mail
 - Register to vote
- Eliminate unnecessary details to highlight the most important points.
- Have one topic per page for easy scanning without skipping important details.
- Have clear headings, in consistent locations, on every page.
- Use headlines to summarize an idea, then follow with a more detailed explanation.
- Try to limit each printed piece to a single topic to increase clarity.
- Always use the [USPS Official Election Mail logo](#) to assure voters that each mailer is official information.

Make voting look simple (even if it is not always so).

Focus on making voting look approachable and accessible. Simplicity is key to lowering the barrier to vote.

- Show the most common options first, then explain exceptions.
- Help voters know what to expect, whether they vote at a polling place, a vote center, or by mail.
- Be sure to include options for voters with specific needs in your jurisdiction, such as voters with disabilities, military and overseas voters (UOCAVA), and others with specialized voting requirements.

Ways to vote

At the polls on Election Day

 Polls are open on Election Day **November 8th, from 6am until 7pm**
Look up your polling place:

- On the web: vote.virginia.gov
- Call the Virginia Department of Elections at (800) 552-9745

In person before Election Day

 You may qualify to vote early at the voter registration office. Learn more at vote.virginia.gov.
September 23rd until November 5th

By mail, as an absentee voter

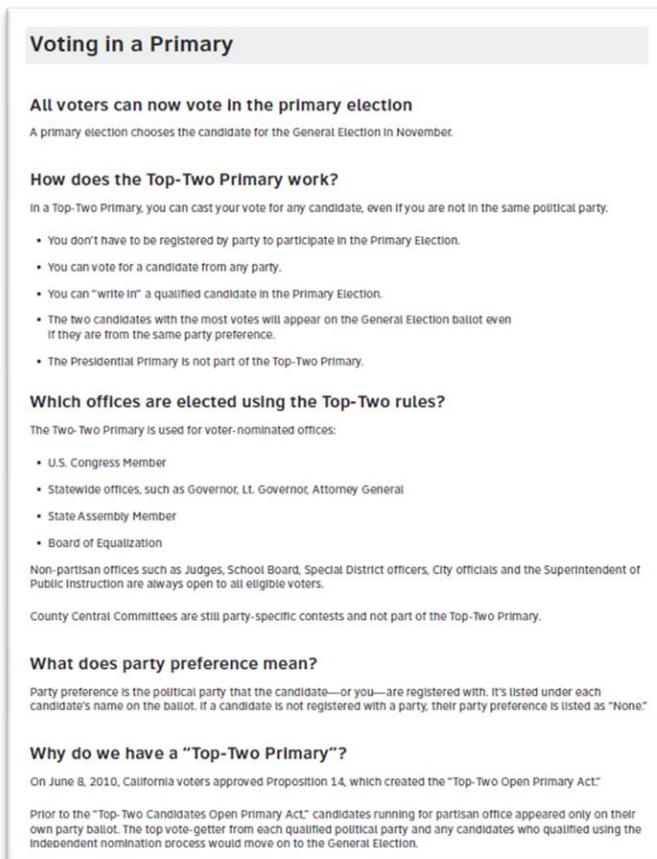
 Request an absentee ballot by **November 1st**, online at vote.virginia.gov.
Return it by mail, deliver it to the voter registration office, or drop it at your polling place on Election Day

This page from a sample voter information guide shows three distinct ways to vote.

Write headings as questions.

Voters already have questions in mind when they engage with information materials. Seeing their question in print helps them quickly find answers to questions like:

- Am I eligible to vote?
- How do I register to vote?
- What’s the deadline for registering?
- What’s on the ballot?
- How do I vote if I can’t do it on Election Day?
- How do I get a mail voting ballot?
- How can I return my mail voting ballot?
- Where do I go to vote?
- Do I need to show my ID?

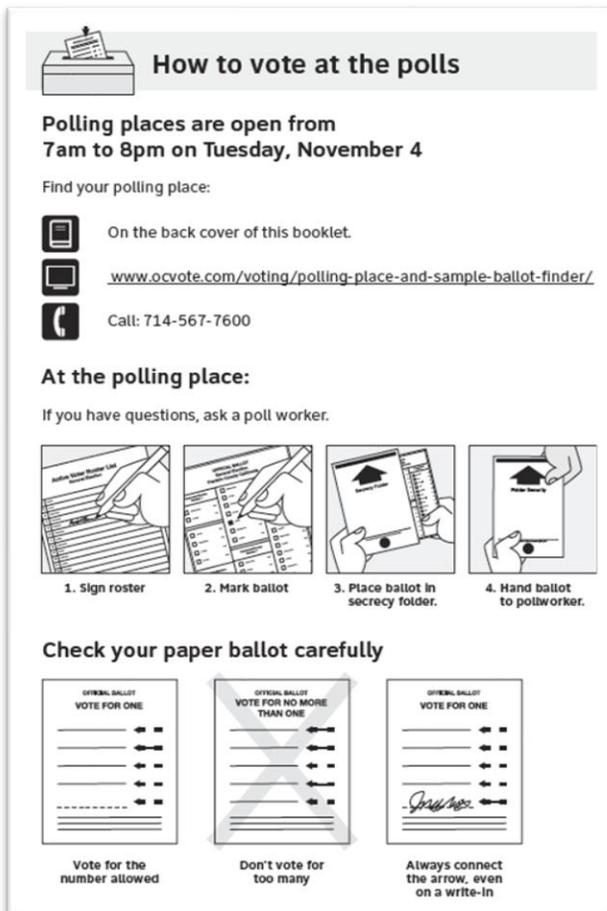


This sample one-pager explaining the workings of a Top-Two primary uses questions for headings.

Use simple and accurate diagrams.

Visually show voting technology, equipment, and processes simply and accurately. This reduces confusion and anxiety during the voting process.

- Use illustrations, maps, and diagrams that focus on only one piece of information at a time.
- Use line drawings instead of photographs.
- Remove any unnecessary elements from illustrations; show only what's useful for the task at hand.
- Use illustrations and diagrams only to convey key ideas, never for decoration or visual interest.
- Provide alternative text for visually conveyed information (using plain language to describe the visual).

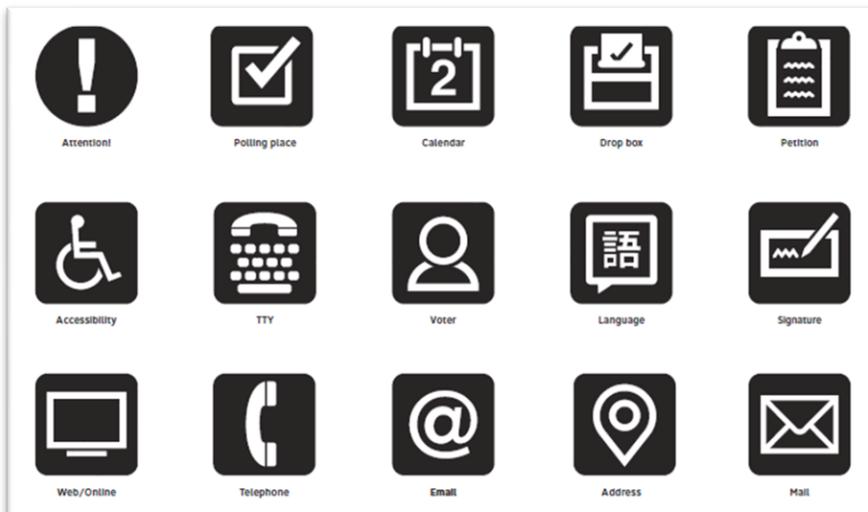


This sample voter information guide uses illustrations without any unnecessary elements to help voters accurately visualize a ballot.

Use instructional icons only.

Make sure that all icons you use have a consistent instructional purpose. This keeps your design looking clean and its meaning clear.

- Whenever possible, use universally recognized icons like arrows, exclamation, and information symbols.
- Use icons consistently to help voters quickly scan information.
- Avoid unique, custom icons whose meaning may be unclear.



Standard icons like these have clear purpose and readily understood meanings

Use familiar formatting.

Keep your printed designs straightforward — now isn't the time to try something trendy. Voters can more easily read and navigate information that is presented in a standard, traditional format.

- Use upper- and lowercase type (sentence case), rather than all caps.
- Use a legible sans-serif font.
- Use left-aligned text, rather than centered.

Use fonts consistently.

Use the same fonts and type sizes for the same kind of content across your printed materials. Consistency helps voters learn how they should absorb information.

- A change in font should indicate a change in the type of information you're delivering.
- Minimize the number of fonts you use.
- Use a consistent font size for headlines, and a smaller (also consistent) font size for other text.

Use color consistently and purposefully.

Be particular about what you emphasize with color. Remember — highlighting everything on a page means that nothing is highlighted.

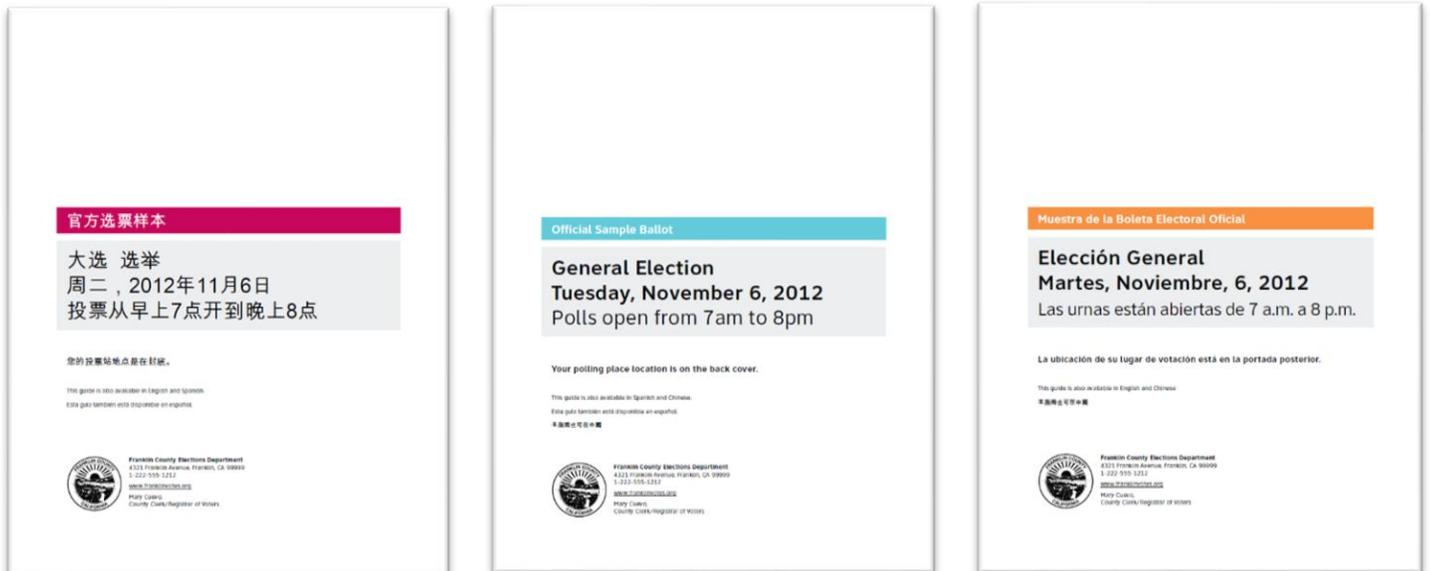
- The same color should consistently indicate the same type of information.
- Use color intentionally with other design elements, like contrast, icons, and fonts.
- Use red minimally and only for situations that may create critical error, as voters often equate red with danger.
- Never rely solely on color to distinguish an element, as this may cause colorblind users to miss key information.
- Never use color solely for decoration.

Use one language per designed piece.

To avoid a cluttered design, have a separate piece for each language your community needs. Neatly designed, focused content is easier for voters to absorb than trying to navigate multiple languages in the same document.

- Have one poster in English and a separate poster in a second language.
- If you must display multiple languages on a piece, usability standards suggest no more than two.
- Use the same imagery and general layout for each language.
- Point voters to materials with other languages when they exist.

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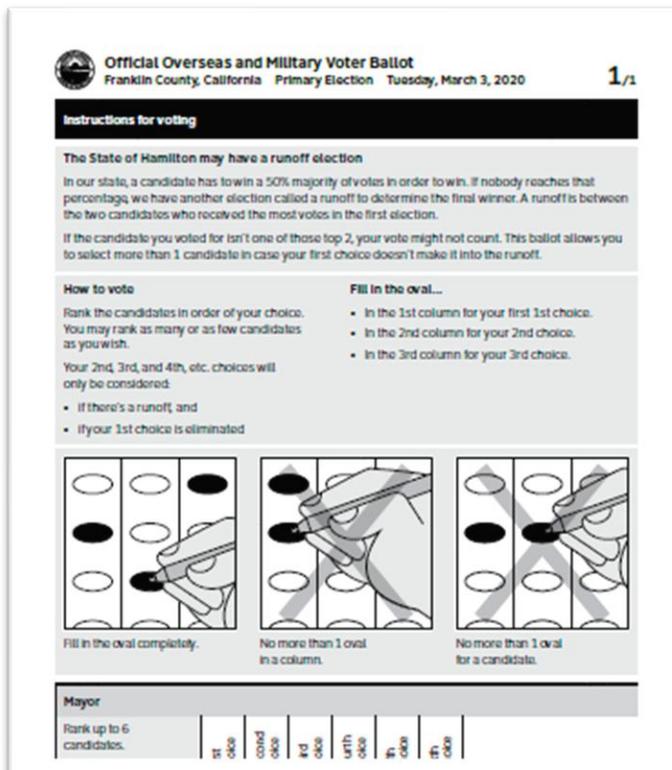


The covers of these single-language voter information guides show matching treatment for three different languages.

Offer extra explanations on ranked choice voting procedures.

Ranked choice voting (RCV) is still new to a lot of communities. If you're using an RCV system, help voters feel confident that they've ranked their choices as intended.

- Start with a simple definition of how RCV works.
- Use illustrations to emphasize how an RCV ballot differs from a standard ballot layout.
- Answer voter questions about how to make their choices, such as:
 - How many candidates can I rank?
 - How does ranking affect my first choice?
 - Do I have to rank all the candidates?
 - When are my additional ranks counted?
- Plan multiple points of communication with your voters to help them feel confident in a new voting method.



This sample of a printed ballot shows clear instructions for marking an RCV ballot.

Use plain language

Clear and concise writing is beneficial to voters of all reading levels. It also makes it easier to accurately translate voting materials into all the languages your community needs.

Election materials written in simple language can increase voter usability and accuracy. If a third grader can read your materials, most voters should also find them accessible.

To use plain language:

- Use personal pronouns, like *you* and *we*.
- Use numerals instead of spelled-out numbers: *1*, not *one*.
- Use simple words.
- Remove unnecessary words.
- Avoid election jargon and unfamiliar acronyms.
- Separate instructions from results.
- Keep paragraphs short.
- Write in the active voice.
- Tell voters what to do, rather than what not to do.
- Use short, simple, everyday words:
 - *Find*, not *locate*
 - *Help*, not *assist*
 - *Make sure*, not *verify*
 - *Use*, not *utilize*
 - *Give*, not *disseminate*

Simple usability tests

Usability Testing 101

There's no need for anything fancy when it comes to testing the usability of your election materials. To conduct a simple usability test:

- Go find about five people who've never seen the material before and are of voting age (at libraries, farmers markets, community centers, etc.).
- Show them the form, site, or graphic you want to test for usability.
- Ask them to interact with the material as it directs them to (vote, fill out a form, etc.).
- Do not help them while they work with the material.
- Make a note of any difficulties they have working with the material.
- If multiple people have the same problems, consider how to fix the problem for your final materials.

Usability tests for printed voter information materials

Whatever design changes you do put in place, double-check that your printed voter information materials are still usable by all voters. Have you:

- Established a conversational but authoritative voice?
- Put the right level of detail onto each page?
- Provided a way for voters to get more information when they need it?
- Focused on helping voters take action?

Can voters of all abilities easily find out:

- What's on an upcoming ballot?
- Dates for important deadlines, such as when to register?
- How to get a sample ballot?
- Where to vote?
- How to vote in-person, early, or by mail?
- How to contact their election office?
- Who created the voter information material?

Resources

For more information on topics in this module, check out the following resources:

Clearinghouse

Read more about the topics introduced in this module with these in-depth sources.

- **Communications 101 for Election Officials**
U.S. Election Assistance Commission
<https://www.eac.gov/election-officials/communications-101>
- **Effective Designs for the Administration of Federal Elections, First Edition**
U.S. Election Assistance Commission
https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/eac_assets/1/1/EAC_Effective_Election_Design.pdf
- **plainlanguage.gov**
U.S. General Services Administration
<https://www.plainlanguage.gov/>

Templates

Use these templates and libraries as a starting point for your own materials.

- **Voting 101: Election Information for New Voters**
U.S. Election Assistance Commission
<https://www.eac.gov/voters/voting-101-election-information-new-voters>
- **Voter Education Design Toolkit**
U.S. Election Assistance Commission
<https://www.eac.gov/election-officials/voter-education-design-toolkit/>

Appendix

Have feedback?

Have some feedback for this module? Share your thoughts at clearinghouse@eac.gov and help us improve future versions of *Effective Designs for the Administration of Federal Elections*.

Want to learn more?

This module is just one part of the complete *Effective Design for the Administration of Federal Elections*. We encourage you to review the other modules from the document:

- [Designing Online Voter Information Materials](#)
- [Designing Polling Place Materials](#)
- [Designing Ballots](#)
- [Designing Mail Voting Materials](#)
- [Designing Post-Election Materials](#)

Best Practice Module 2

Designing Online Voter Information Materials



**Effective Design for the Administration of
Federal Elections**

Second Edition

What's inside

This module offers design suggestions for online voter information materials, like:

- Election department websites
- Social media
- Online voter forms

Voters increasingly rely on online sources for information about where to vote, what's on the ballot, and when they can vote.

Why follow these guidelines

When voters aren't sure about where to go or what to do when they find a polling place, they're less likely to vote at all. A website that answers voters' questions, and social media that meets them where they're at, will help voters show up at the right place with everything they need to vote.

How to use this module

As you put your materials together, use the guidelines in this module along with your jurisdiction's specific rules for elections. When in doubt, always favor the simple option.

Need a cheat sheet for a quick idea of what to do? This module starts with a list of high-level design suggestions, and explains each one in further detail on the following pages.

And remember:

- Focus on incremental improvement.
- Consider the needs of new voters.
- Use plain language whenever possible.
- Transfer your knowledge — share this module with others in your office and with the next local election official who comes after you.

With more and more voters going online for voting information, make sure your community knows where to find your online resources. When they get there, make sure they can find what they're looking for quickly and easily.

To convey online voter information clearly and quickly, keep the following guidelines in mind — though, of course, if something you read here conflicts with the law, always follow the law.

Best Practices for Designing Online Voter Information Materials

- 2.4 **Make your website easy to find.**
- 2.5 **Make your site easy to navigate.**
- 2.6 **Make it easy for all voters to interact with your site.**
- 2.7 **Make information easy to find for readers of all abilities.**
- 2.8 **Prioritize the most relevant information.**
- 2.9 **Describe what's on the upcoming ballot.**
- 2.10 **Link to other government sites.**
- 2.11 **Make heading styles visually distinct.**
- 2.12 **Use good contrast.**
- 2.13 **Be consistent with button design.**
- 2.14 **Make sure links are clear.**
- 2.15 **Cover one subject or idea per page.**
- 2.16 **Keep social media simple and consistent.**
- 2.17 **Have a social media plan.**
- 2.18 **Make sure voters can understand online forms.**
- 2.19 **Keep form layouts simple and clear.**

Make your website easy to find.

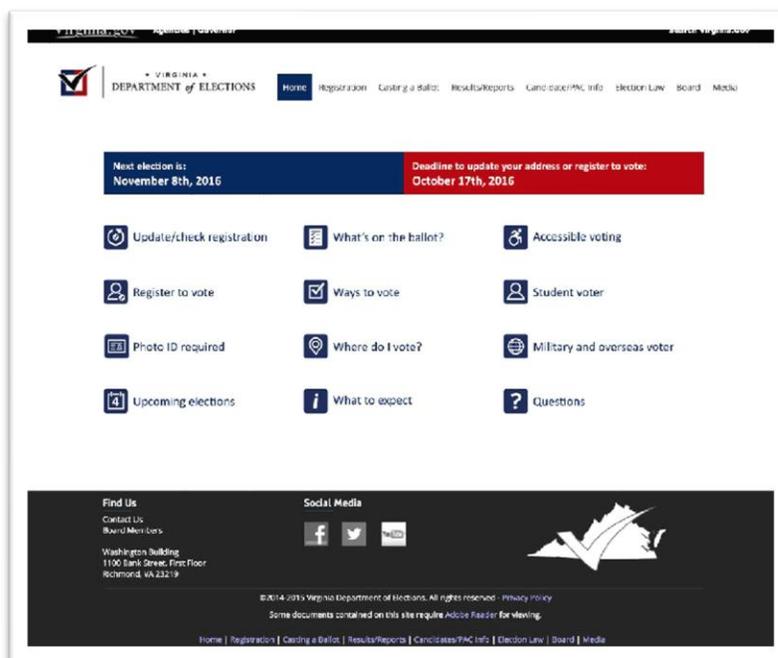
Throughout your content (headings, body text, links, etc.), use common words that people search for when it comes to elections in your area. Search engines will use keywords like these to help people get to the right place:

- Election
- Vote
- Voting
- Ballot
- Register
- Absentee
- Mail
- Polling place
- Voter ID
- Results
- Contact
- The name of your county and largest towns

Make your site easy to navigate.

Organize your site according to voter questions, not according to how your team or department is organized or your internal deadlines. Remember, you're trying to answer voter questions about elections and the voting process, not advertise the election department. Anticipate — and then answer — voter questions, like these:

- **How do I vote by mail?** You can vote even if you cannot get to the polling place on Election Day. Find out how to vote by mail and check the status of your mail voting ballot.
- **What do I need to know about Election Day?** Find out where your polling place is, what is on the ballot, and where to view election results.
- **How do I know if I'm registered to vote?** Find out if you are registered, learn how to register, or update your registration.



This sample home page highlights important dates and clearly labels links to key information.

Make it easy for all voters to interact with your site.

Allow voters of all abilities to use your site, even if they need to adjust the display or use a screen reader.

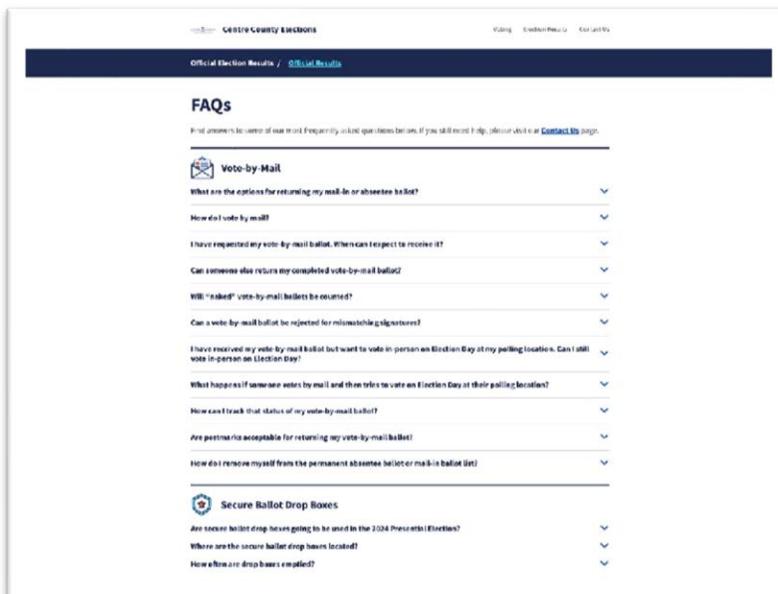
Ensuring that everyone can access voter information helps lower the barrier to voting information.

- Try to move through your site with the tab and arrow keys. Check to make sure the cursor moves through the page in a logical order. This helps voters who only use keyboards.
- Make sure content makes sense when read aloud. This helps voters who use screen readers.
- Make sure content doesn't get lost or hidden when the screen changes size. This helps voters who use large or small screens.
- Add a text alternative to all images and multimedia, such as image descriptions, audio transcripts, and video captions. This helps voters who don't use audio or video.
- Put links to different document or media files together. This helps voters choose the file format that works best for them.
- Ensure that the site meets federal [Section 508 guidelines and Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\)](#) and similar state requirements for accessible online information.

Make information easy to find for readers of all abilities.

People with low literacy read straight down the middle of a page and tend to miss content to the left and right. Uncluttered web pages help everyone, including speed readers.

- Put the most important information in the main menu or the center of the page.
- Help voters see at a glance what each chunk of information is about.
 - Use clear, simple headings in plain language.
 - Decide what's most important and stress that.
 - Use bulleted lists rather than long paragraphs.
- Use a single column for your primary text content to help your site adjust from desktop to laptop to mobile.



This sample web page presents clearly sorted information in a single column.

Prioritize the most relevant information.

Save important spaces, like “above-the-fold” on your home page, for critical details. Consider what first-time voters need to know about voting in general and what longtime voters need to know that’s new.

- Leave most of the room on the page for answers to voter questions.
- The most relevant information should take the fewest clicks, and the least scrolling, to find.
- Don’t make voters hunt to piece together information (put dates, locations, and hours all on the same page, etc.).

Describe what's on the upcoming ballot.

Simply showing the ballot's format and a list of contests will help reduce voter anxiety and make the voter feel prepared.

- Show an example of what the ballot will look like.
- If sample ballots are within a widget or wizard, make them easy to find and use.
- If sample ballots require voters' personal information to access, explain why it's necessary.

Link to other government sites.

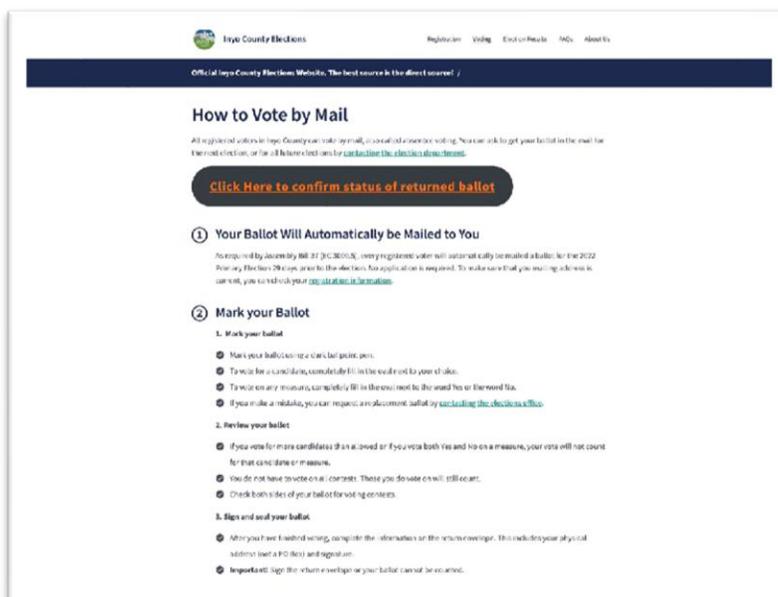
There's no need for you to include all election information on your website — simply link to other trustworthy government sites that already have it. This will save you time and energy while still ensuring that voters have all the details they need. Consider linking to pages for:

- Federal elections.
- Your state election website.
- Explanations of voting options and systems (ranked choice voting, top-two primaries, etc.).
- Online voter registration.
- Ballot tracking.

Make heading styles visually distinct.

Headings indicate the hierarchy of information, so make sure there's a noticeable difference between your first-level and second-level headings, and so on.

- Use the same font and type size for the same kind of content consistently across the material.
- Ask your web designer to code headings in ways that help people using assistive technology to read the page (in HTML, a top-level heading would be `<H1>`, next level down would be `<H2>`, etc.).



This sample web page shows a clear hierarchy of information with proper headings, subheads, and body copy.

Use good contrast.

Legible text and clear imagery help readers avoid screen fatigue and support voters with visual issues. Clear and concise information helps voters understand how to complete forms.

- Start with large enough text.
- Use a legible sans-serif font.
- Use high contrast (a 10:1 contrast ratio between the type and the background) for text on all digital materials.

Be consistent with button design.

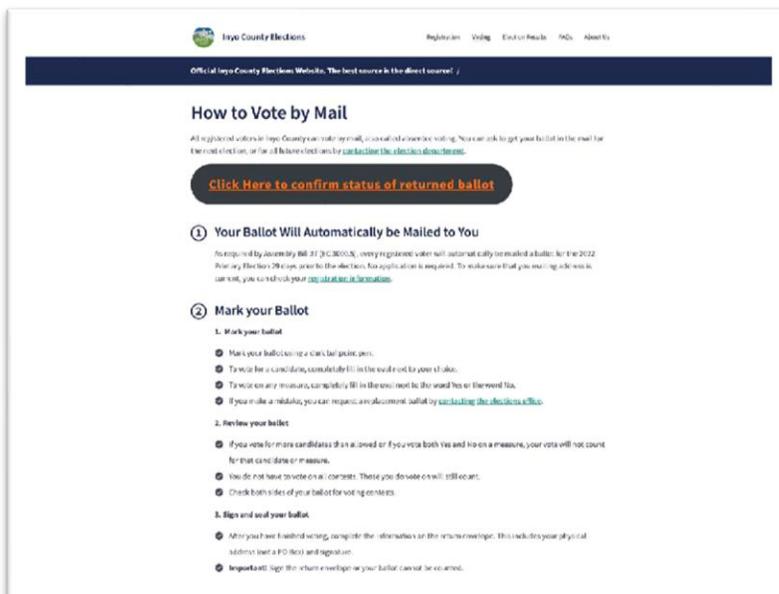
Predictable patterns are key to providing guidance and increasing user confidence in interactive elements online.

- Label buttons so that they clearly say what they do or where they lead.
- Place buttons in consistent locations so voters know where to find them.
- Ensure that buttons behave in the same way throughout the website.
- Give buttons throughout your website and other online materials a standard visual style.

Make sure links are clear.

The text links you create should have an obvious purpose. Voters are more likely to click through links when they know where they’re going.

- List options together, like all the options for voting, and then link to their own pages.
- Make the text of the link describe where it goes (“Find your polling place” instead of “Learn more”).
- Listen to what it sounds like when you read it aloud. Use enough of the right words in links so they make sense and stand alone.
- Make sure in-line text links are visually obvious and consistently styled.



The in-line and stand-alone links on this sample web page are clearly defined by consistent color and underlined formatting.

Cover one subject or idea per page.

Give each topic its own page on your site. Voters can easily save or share a page that addresses a specific need, without sifting through information that doesn't answer their question.

- Ensure your page headlines are obvious (*Register to vote here, etc.*).
- Ensure that your page URLs are plain (*yoursite.gov/register tovot e, etc.*).

Keep social media simple and consistent.

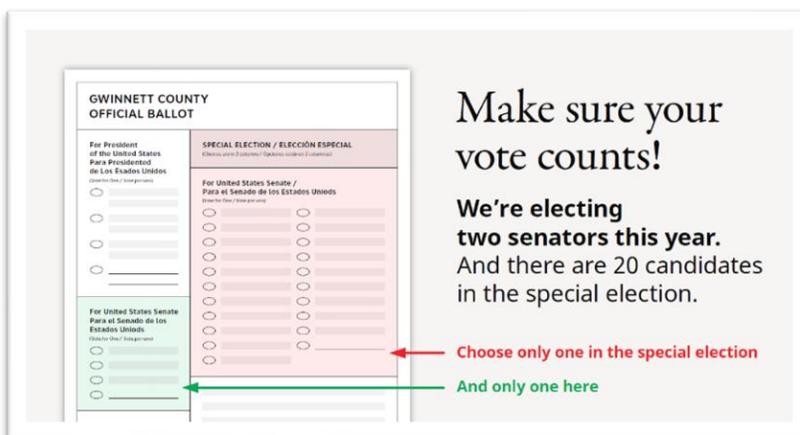
Of course, online voter information material extends beyond websites. Your social media content needs to have the same focus on clarity and easy access to information. Good posts should cover a single topic and provide a link to more information, such as:

- **Last day to register for the November 2 election is September 30!**

Register online at vote.yourcounty.st.gov/register tovote.

- **Early voting starts on October 15.** Find where to vote at vote.yourcounty.st.gov/findmypollingplace.

- **Curious about how ballots are counted?** Learn more about our secure process at vote.yourcounty.st.gov/ballotcounting.



This sample social media post clearly describes a single piece of important information — how to properly mark an upcoming ballot.

Have a social media plan.

To build trustworthiness and clarity, have a consistent, professional look across your social media accounts.

- Have a posting schedule so you know well in advance what information you'll be posting on what days.
- Develop a simple, standardized visual style for your posts, and stick to it.
- Assign specific people the tasks of posting, monitoring comments, and responding so you have consistency and accountability.
- Have a general plan for what your responses to online comments should look like.

Make sure voters can understand online forms.

If you need voters to interact with a form on your site, make sure what you're asking of them is clear. Voters who aren't confused are more likely to complete and submit a form correctly.

- Give your form an active title (*Register to vote, etc.*).
- If a form has two purposes, make that clear (*Register to vote -OR- Update your voter registration, etc.*).
- Indicate when a field is a required field.
- Give voters a way to answer every question so they don't worry about leaving a field blank.
- Make fields big enough to fit the expected answer.
- Use plain language for field labels to help people who are reading quickly or don't read well (*Your address, Your email, Your name, etc.*).
- Make sure forms are accessible to all voters, just like the rest of your site.

Keep form layouts simple and clear.

A well-organized, official look can reduce user error, make information easy to find, and ensure that forms are easy to interact with.

- Line things up with consistent spacing and margins.
- Make sure the form's text is large enough with good contrast.
- Make signature fields stand out by using a bold X to mark the location(s) for signatures.

Use plain language

Clear and concise writing is beneficial to voters of all reading levels. It also makes it easier to accurately translate voting materials into all the languages your community needs.

Election materials written in simple language can increase voter usability and accuracy. If a third grader can read your materials, most voters should also find them accessible.

To use plain language:

- Use personal pronouns, like *you* and *we*.
- Use numerals instead of spelled-out numbers: *1*, not *one*.
- Use simple words.
- Remove unnecessary words.
- Avoid election jargon and unfamiliar acronyms.
- Separate instructions from results.
- Keep paragraphs short.
- Write in the active voice.
- Tell voters what to do, rather than what not to do.
- Use short, simple, everyday words:
 - Find, not locate
 - Help, not assist
 - Make sure, not verify
 - Use, not utilize
 - Link, not URL

Simple usability tests

Usability Testing 101

There's no need for anything fancy when it comes to testing the usability of your election materials. To conduct a simple usability test:

- Go find about five people who've never seen the material before and are of voting age (at libraries, farmers markets, community centers, etc.).
- Show them the form or site or graphic you want to test for usability.
- Ask them to interact with the material as it directs them to vote, fill out a form, etc., or ask them to find a particular piece of information.
- Do not help them while they work with the material.
- Make note of any difficulties they have working with the material.
- If multiple people have the same problems, consider how to fix the problem for your final materials.

Usability tests for online voter information materials

Nothing helps you improve an election website or form quite like seeing real voters try to find information on it.

Check that your website answers voters' questions. Can testers find:

- Your election website?
- What's on the ballot?
- Where to vote?
- How to get a mail voting ballot, and when is it due back?
- What district are they in?
- Who is in office now?
- Dates for important deadlines, such as when to register?

On your website, can testers with different abilities find, read, and use:

- All the content on the website?
- Their sample ballot?
- Their own voter registration status and preferences, even just by following a link to another government site?
- Information about accessible voting systems?
- Requests for mail voting ballots?
- Early voting locations and hours?
- The location of their polling place?
- Online voter registration forms?
- How to get help?

Regarding online forms, can testers:

- Understand the purpose of the form?
- Identify who will have access to the information in the form?
- Tell what is required and what is not?
- Complete the form accurately?
- Sign in the right place?
- Send the form to the right place?
- Receive confirmation that their completed form was submitted?

Watch for signs that testers are having difficulty with a form, like:

- Making corrections
- Hesitating while filling in information
- Overfilling entries that don't fit in the space
- Reading labels or instructions several times
- Hunting for information on or off the form
- Skipping required fields
- Making a mistake that would invalidate the form

Resources

For more information on topics in this module, check out the following resources:

Clearinghouse

Read more about the topics introduced in this module with these in-depth sources.

- **Voter Education Design Toolkit**
U.S. Election Assistance Commission
<https://www.eac.gov/election-officials/voter-education-design-toolkit/>
- **Accessible Elections – Information for Election Officials: Considerations for Website Accessibility**
U.S. Election Assistance Commission
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1brUUFy6QaI&list=PLwk7IuIKtO8bZZHwNc1hSF3YPcjPoAPNL&index=4>
- **Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1**
World Wide Web Consortium
<https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG21/>
- **Creating Accessible Forms**
WebAIM
<https://webaim.org/techniques/forms/>
- **Captions, Transcripts, and Audio Descriptions**
WebAIM
<https://webaim.org/techniques/captions/>
- **WCAG Color Contrast Checker**
WebAIM
<https://webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker/>
- **plainlanguage.gov**
U.S. General Services Administration
<https://www.plainlanguage.gov/>

Appendix

Have feedback?

Have some feedback for this module? Share your thoughts at clearinghouse@eac.gov and help us improve future versions of *Effective Designs for the Administration of Federal Elections*.

Want to learn more?

This module is just one part of the complete *Effective Design for the Administration of Federal Elections*. We encourage you to review the other modules from the document:

- [Designing Printed Voter Information Materials](#)
- [Designing Polling Place Materials](#)
- [Designing Ballots](#)
- [Designing Mail Voting Materials](#)
- [Designing Post-Election Materials](#)

Best Practice Module 3

Designing Polling Place Materials



**Effective Design for the Administration of
Federal Elections**
Second Edition

What's inside

This module offers design suggestions for polling place materials, such as:

- Informational signage
- Legally required postings
- Voting diagrams

Why follow these guidelines

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 navigate the process smoothly, keeping lines moving and minimizing waiting time.

How to use this module

As you put your materials together, use the guidelines in this module along with your jurisdiction's specific rules for elections. When in doubt, always favor the simple option.

Need a cheat sheet for a quick idea of what to do? This module starts with a list of high-level design suggestions and explains each one in further detail on the following pages.

And remember:

- Focus on incremental improvement.
- Consider the needs of new voters.
- Use plain language whenever possible.
- Transfer your knowledge — share this module with others in your office and with the next local election official who comes after you.

To convey polling place information clearly and quickly, keep the following guidelines in mind — though, of course, if something you read here conflicts with your local law, always follow the law.

Best Practices for Designing Polling Place Materials

- 3.4 **Give each physical location materials that are appropriate for it.**
- 3.5 **Have a plan in place for on-location signage.**
- 3.6 **Make it easy for voters to navigate the polling place.**
- 3.7 **Help voters quickly identify the purpose of signs.**
- 3.8 **Make signs easy to read from a distance.**
- 3.9 **Provide different sizes and types of signs.**
- 3.10 **Clearly explain behavioral rules.**
- 3.11 **Ensure accessibility.**
- 3.12 **Use simple and accurate diagrams.**
- 3.13 **Use instructional icons only.**
- 3.14 **Reduce visual clutter to improve readability.**

Give each physical location materials that are appropriate for it.

Every polling place has its own unique needs for signage and other materials; not every piece will work in every building. Package polling place materials that are suitable for each specific physical location to ensure that no one is confused by unnecessary or incorrect materials.

- Evaluate each polling place to make a list of exactly what signage is necessary for that location, including all signage required by law.
- Tailor these packages to meet the needs of the number, language, culture, and abilities of voters anticipated at each location.
- Design for quality voter experience rather than a generic, easy production.

Have a plan in place for on-location signage.

A key to successful polling place signage is to help poll workers know what signs should be displayed where. Well-designed and thoughtful materials can promote efficiency for poll workers and confidence for voters.

- Label signs according to where and how they should be placed:
 - Indoor
 - Outdoor
 - Include IDs on signs that key to a placement map (e.g., *signs A1 and A2 are placed on wall A*).
- Greet voters at the entrance to the polling place with a poster explaining the voting process.
- Build off the process poster with additional posters throughout the area, color-coded to correspond to the main process poster.

Make it easy for voters to navigate the polling place.

Help voters move through the polling place. This will alleviate bottlenecks and questions for poll workers. Use signage to give voters obvious and immediate answers to questions like:

- Where do I start?
- Do I have to go to multiple tables?
- Where is the voting system to facilitate private and independent voting for people with disabilities?
- What precinct, district, or ward is the polling place serving?
- Who can help me?

Help voters quickly identify the purpose of signs.

Using consistent color and contrast helps voters quickly and easily understand what kind of information a sign will have before they even read it. Think of how a blue highway sign indicates services available at an exit, brown signs indicate landmarks, and green signs indicate other roads.

- Use a bold, consistent color for general information.
- Use another consistently applied color for voting instructions or ballot information.
- Use ample white space to separate items on the same sign or poster.

Make signs easy to read from a distance.

For polling place materials to be effective at guiding voters through a physical space, they must be placed where voters will see them and can read them.

- Hang signs at eye level for most readers.
 - The average eye level for a standing adult is 61" from the floor; hanging signage at 48"–67" is comfortable; 48" is the average eye level for someone in a wheelchair.
 - Optimal viewing distance is 72".
- Use a font large enough to be seen from a distance. Increase type size by about 2 inches in height for every 50 feet of viewing distance.
- Use upper- and lowercase type (sentence case), rather than all caps.
- Use a legible sans-serif font.
- Use left-aligned text, rather than centered.

Provide different sizes and types of signs.

Make use of the variety of opportunities to convey information at your polling place. One voter may notice a poster on a wall, while another only notices the table topper at the check-in table. Give voters several opportunities to notice information:

- Put posters on walls for voters to read while in line.
- Put the process poster at the entrance to the polling place.
- Use table toppers for easy reference during check-in.
- Place in-booth notices for reminders and instructions during voting.
- Use sandwich boards for displaying posters where there is no wall.

Clearly explain behavioral rules.

Write a heading or sentence to summarize each law for polling place behavior. If possible, paraphrase in plain language but indicate the source of the law so others can look it up. This helps your staff avoid making repetitive statements and lowers the chance of confusion or conflict. Keep it simple, with signs like:

- *Please limit voting time to 5 minutes.*
- *Review your ballot.*
- *Put your phone away. Cell phones are not allowed in the polling place.*
- *Political clothing or materials are not allowed within 200 feet of the polling place.*

Ensure accessibility.

Combine color with text or shape and use plain language to ensure accessibility. Consistent use of elements together with clear messaging ensures that voters of all abilities can quickly absorb information.

- **Does the content make sense when read aloud?**

This helps low-literacy readers.

- **Is the contrast high between text and background?**

This helps voters with visual impairments.

- **Is the text size large enough?**

This allows voters to read from a distance and helps voters with visual impairments.

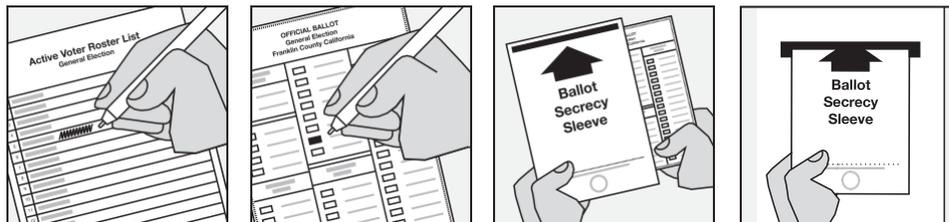
- **Is signage placement accessible to everyone, including those in wheelchairs?**

This helps reduce confusion, keep lines moving, and improve the voting experience.

Use simple and accurate diagrams.

Visually show voting technology, equipment, and processes simply and accurately. This reduces any confusion and anxiety during the voting process.

- Use illustrations, maps, and diagrams that focus on only one piece of information at a time.
- Use line drawings instead of photographs.
- Remove any unnecessary elements from illustrations; show only what's useful for the task at hand.
- Use illustrations and diagrams only to convey key ideas, never for decoration or visual interest.

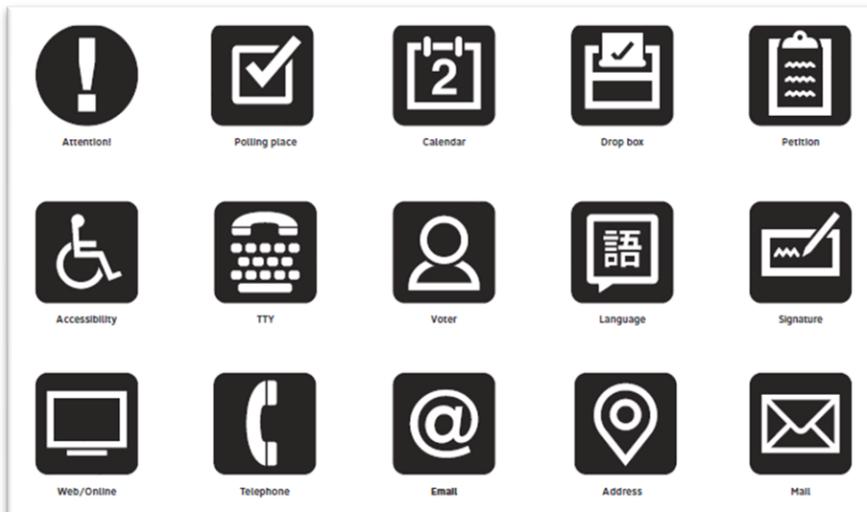


These samples of instructional illustrations demonstrate the steps for voting in person.

Use instructional icons only.

Make sure that all icons you use have a consistent instructional purpose. This keeps your design looking clean and its meaning clear.

- Whenever possible, use universally recognized icons like arrows (meaning *look here*), exclamation marks (*caution*), and boxes (*information*). See chart below.
- Use icons consistently to help voters quickly scan information.
- Avoid unique, custom icons whose meaning may be unclear.

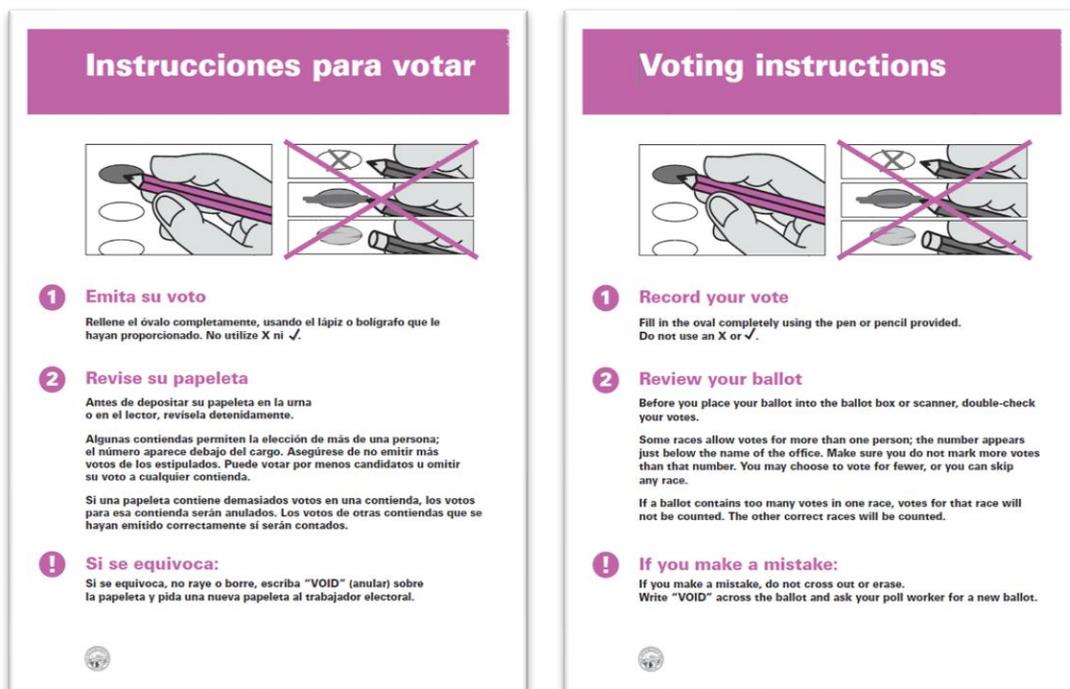


Standard icons like these have clear purpose and readily understood meanings.

Reduce visual clutter to improve readability.

Avoid a cluttered design by using simple, concise instructions, such as limiting each piece to a single language, if permissible by law. Neatly designed, focused content is easier for voters to absorb.

- Consider producing one smaller separate piece for each language, rather than combining languages into a single larger piece, if allowable by law.
- If you must display multiple languages on a piece, ensure you use the same imagery and layout for each language and place all the different language versions of any given piece in the same location, so multi-lingual voters can easily compare information.



These sample voting instructions show matching treatment for two languages, each on a separate sheet.

Use plain language

Clear and concise writing is beneficial to voters of all reading levels. It also makes it easier to accurately translate voting materials into all the languages your community needs.

Election materials written in simple language can increase voter usability and accuracy. If a third grader can read your materials, most voters should also find them accessible.

To use plain language:

- Use personal pronouns, like *you* and *we*.
- Use numerals instead of spelled-out numbers: *1*, not *one*.
- Use simple words.
- Remove unnecessary words.
- Avoid election jargon and unfamiliar acronyms.
- Separate instructions from results.
- Keep paragraphs short.
- Write in the active voice.
- Tell voters what to do, rather than what not to do.
- Use short, simple, everyday words:
 - Find, not locate
 - Help, not assist
 - Make sure, not verify
 - Use, not utilize
 - Link, not URL

Simple usability tests

Usability Testing 101

There's no need for anything fancy when it comes to testing the usability of your election materials. To conduct a simple usability test:

- Go find about five people who've never seen the material before and are of voting age (at libraries, farmers markets, community centers, etc.).
- Show them the signage or graphic you want to test for usability (ideally at the same size and distance as the finished piece will be seen by voters).
- Ask them to interact with the piece as it directs them to, and explain to you what they understand it to mean.
- Do not help them while they work with the material.
- Make a note of any difficulties they have understanding the piece.
- If multiple people have the same problems, consider how to fix the problem for your final materials.

Usability tests for polling place materials

Testers should be able to identify the purpose of polling place materials from a variety of distances. For example, most people should be able to read details on a poster standing about three-to-five feet from a wall. Check that signs and posters are easy to find and read. Can testers:

- 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?

Resources

For more information on topics in this module, check out the following resources:

Clearinghouse

Read more about the topics introduced in this module with these in-depth sources.

- **plainlanguage.gov**

U.S. General Services Administration

<https://www.plainlanguage.gov/>

Appendix

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- [Designing Ballots](#)
- [Designing Mail Voting Materials](#)
- [Designing Post-Election Materials](#)

Best Practice Module 4

Designing Ballots



**Effective Design for the Administration of
Federal Elections**
Second Edition

What's inside

This module offers design suggestions for ballots, like:

- Multiple languages
- Color and contrast
- Imagery and icons

Why follow these guidelines

Implementing simple principles of design makes it much more likely that voters can vote the way they intend. The guidelines in this module demonstrate that it doesn't have to be expensive or difficult to help voters cast votes for their preferred candidates and choices.

How to use this module

As you put your materials together, use the guidelines in this module along with your jurisdiction's specific rules for elections. When in doubt, always favor the simple option.

Need a cheat sheet for a quick idea of what to do? This module starts with a list of high-level design suggestions and explains each one in further detail on the following pages.

And remember:

- Focus on incremental improvement.
- Consider the needs of new voters.
- Use plain language whenever possible.
- Transfer your knowledge — share this module with others in your office and with the next local election official who comes after you.

What a ballot looks like is constrained by law, technology, history, custom, and cost, among other things. Existing rules and regulations often don't position the voter at the center of the design process. But a few simple design choices around navigation, instructions, color, typography, imagery, and language can go a long way toward ensuring voters can cast their votes as they intend. And don't forget that you can always work with your voting system vendor to develop a more voter-friendly design.

To convey information on ballots clearly and quickly, keep the following guidelines in mind—though, of course, if something you read here conflicts with the law, always follow the law.

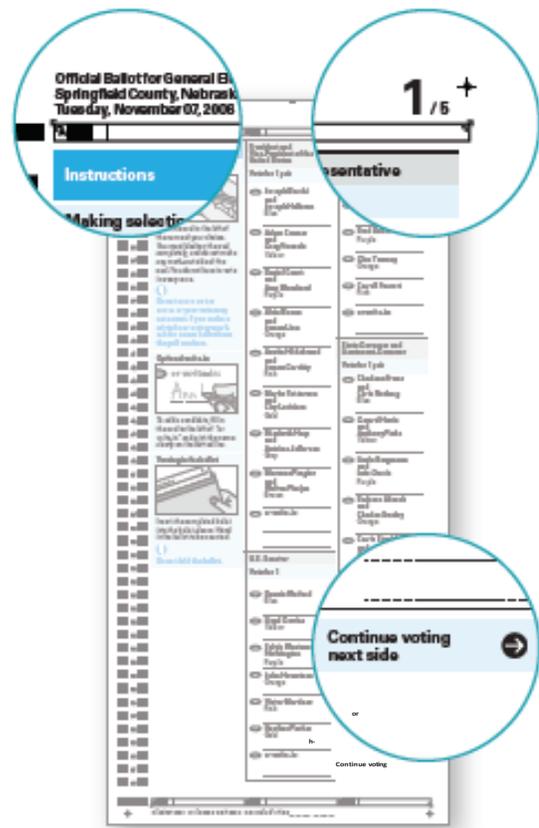
Best Practices for Designing Ballots

- 4.4 **Make it easy to navigate the ballot.**
- 4.5 **Put instructions where voters need them.**
- 4.6 **Use color consistently and purposefully.**
- 4.7 **Make sure type is easy to read.**
- 4.8 **Use simple and accurate diagrams.**
- 4.9 **Use instructional icons only.**
- 4.10 **Use plain language.**
- 4.11 **Ensure ballots with multiple languages are still usable.**

Make it easy to navigate the ballot.

Focus your improvements on creating greater clarity and visual hierarchy in the ballot — is it clear how voters should move through the ballot? This avoids confusion and anxiety as voters work through the ballot and reduces voter errors.

- Create ballot navigation guides, telling voters where they are in the process and where to go next.
- Include the election name, type, and date prominently on each page of the ballot.
- Display dates in standard U.S. format — Month/Day/Year.
- Place current and total page numbers in bold in a consistent location on every ballot page.
- Place the selection oval (or other shape) to the left of the candidate/choice, where voters most expect it to be.
- On printed ballots, place navigational instructions at the bottom of the final column on each ballot page.
- On digital ballots, place clear navigational buttons in a consistent location on each page.

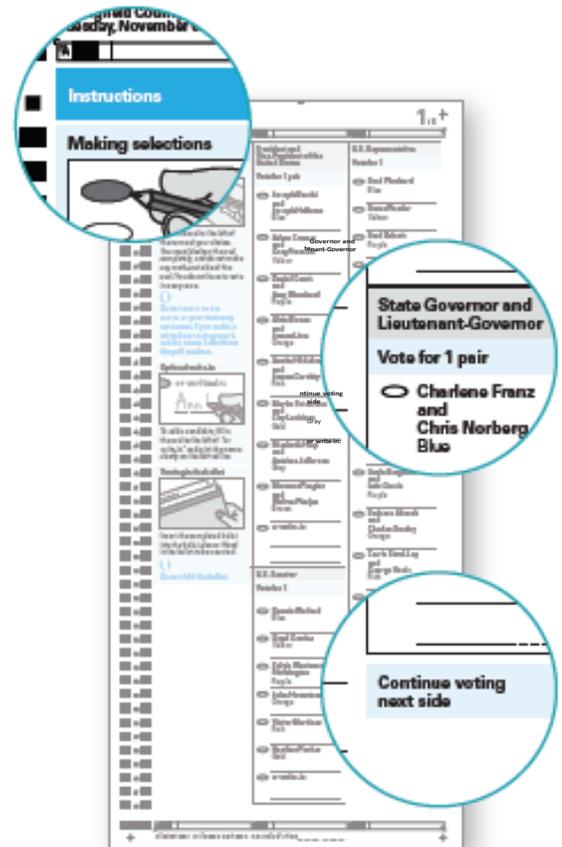


This sample paper ballot has several navigation guides, such as page numbers and where instructions are, and where they continue.

Put instructions where voters need them.

Place instructions thoughtfully within the ballot to help voters avoid overlooking contests or making other errors.

- Ensure that ballot instructions are self-contained and separate from contest data.
- Break instructions into groups. For example:
 - On printed ballots, put instructions on how to fill out the ballot at the start of the ballot, and put instructions to turn the ballot over in the bottom right-hand corner.
 - On digital ballots, put instructions for writing in candidates on the write-in screen.
- When you need to introduce new or modified instructions, call them out to alert the voter (with an Attention icon, color change, etc.).
- 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.
 - Clarify write-in as an option, not a requirement.
 - Clarify when voters can vote for more than one candidate or should only vote for one.

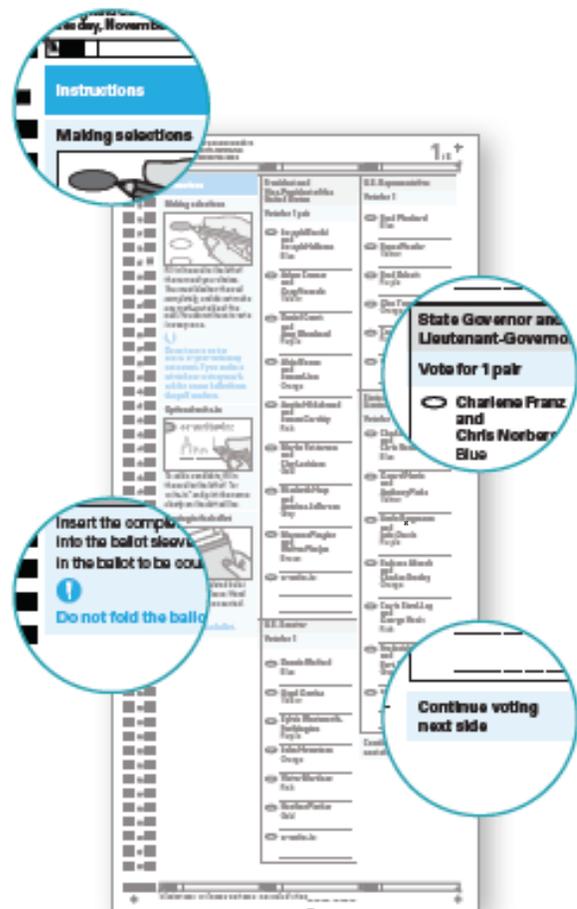


Clear instructions on this sample ballot show voters how to indicate a vote, what their voting options are, and where to continue voting

Use color consistently and purposefully.

Be particular about what you emphasize with color. Remember — highlighting everything on a page means that nothing is highlighted.

- The same color should consistently indicate the same type of information.
- Use color intentionally with other design elements like contrast, icons, and fonts.
- Use red minimally and only for situations that may create critical error, as voters often equate red with danger.
- Never rely solely on color to distinguish an element, as this may cause color-blind users to miss key information.
- Never use color solely for decoration.
- Confirm that any colors meet applicable WCAG contrast requirements.



This sample printed ballot uses cyan consistently to denote instructions.

Make sure type is easy to read.

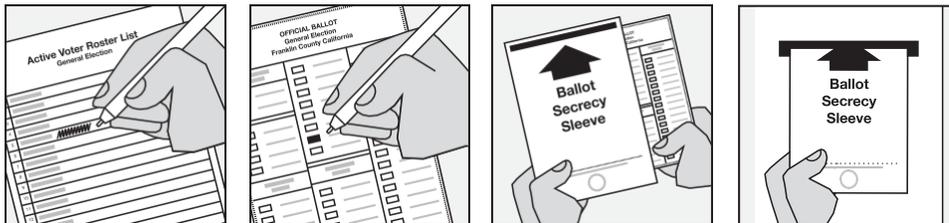
Consistency helps voters learn how they should interpret information. And the size and clarity of text, especially in ballot measures, has a lot of impact on a ballot's usability.

- Use the same font and type size for the same kind of content consistently across the ballot.
- Consider setting your type at 10 points as a baseline. Given a choice between adequate type size and fewer pages, ballots with 10-point type and more pages are more usable than those with fewer pages and smaller type.
- If you change the size of the type, remember to change the space between the lines of type (also known as leading), as well. Lines that are too close together are difficult to read (as are lines that are too far apart).
- Use upper- and lowercase type (sentence case), not all caps.
- Use a legible sans-serif font.
- Use left-aligned text, rather than centered.
- Minimize the number of fonts you use.
- Give all candidates in a contest the same amount of vertical space. If one candidate's name must break onto a second line, adjust the vertical space for all candidates to match.
- On ballot measures and other long text, strive for about 40–60 characters per line. Many users find line lengths of more than 60 characters or fewer than 20 characters hard to read.

Use simple and accurate diagrams.

Visually show voting technology, equipment, and processes simply and accurately. This reduces confusion and anxiety during the voting process.

- Use illustrations, maps, and diagrams that focus on only one piece of information at a time.
- Use line drawings instead of photographs.
- Remove any unnecessary elements from illustrations; show only what's useful for the task at hand.
- Use illustrations and diagrams only to convey key ideas, never for decoration or visual interest.

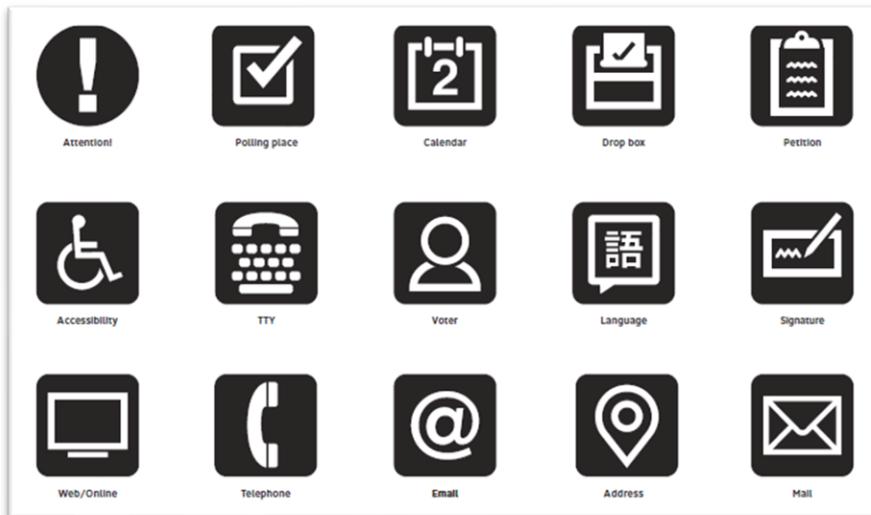


These samples of instructional illustrations demonstrate the steps for voting in person.

Use instructional icons only.

Make sure that all icons you use have a consistent instructional purpose. This keeps your design looking clean and its meaning clear.

- Whenever possible, use universally recognized icons like arrows (*look here*), exclamation marks (*caution*), and *i* (*information*).
- Use icons consistently to help voters quickly scan information.
- Avoid unique, custom icons whose meaning may be unclear.



Standard icons like these have clear purpose and readily understood meanings.

Use plain language.

It's no secret that text on ballots can be lengthy and complex, especially when it comes to ballot measure questions. Summarizing text in plain language, when law allows, reduces voter confusion and anxiety, as well as voter errors.

- Write or summarize ballot measures in the simplest language your law allows.
- If your required format for ballot measure text is lengthy, provide a plain-language summary to improve usability for voters.
- For contests with two-person tickets, such as President and Vice President, instructions should read *Vote for 1 pair* rather than *Vote for 1*.
- For contests with two-person tickets, place the word *and* alone on a separate line between the two candidate names.

Ensure ballots with multiple languages are still usable.

Take care that ballots with multiple languages are still easily understandable, starting with ensuring proper translation. Accurate translations are vital for non-English-speaking voters.

- Work with certified translators to ensure proper grammatical, syntactic, and structural content. Online or AI translations are often misleading, unclear, or wrong.
- Write your materials in simple English before sending them to your translator. This helps ensure that your text is easy to read, regardless of the language it's in.
- Give your translator a copy of your designed material, not just the raw text that needs translating. Context is critical to the quality of a translation.
- Plan on at least two rounds of refinement (or editing) to achieve quality translations.
- Have a certified translator or language committee review translated material to ensure translations are accurate, relevant, and that their visual presentation is appropriate, such as how text wraps, and lines break.
- On digital ballots, display only one language at a time but offer the ability to change languages throughout the process.
- Some voters will want to vote in English but may want to confirm information in their native language, so ensure required language translations are available for voters.

Use plain language

Clear and concise writing is beneficial to voters of all reading levels. It also makes it easier to accurately translate voting materials into all the languages your community needs.

Election materials written in simple language can increase voter usability and accuracy. If a third grader can read your materials, most voters should also find them accessible.

To use plain language:

- Use personal pronouns, like *you* and *we*.
- Use numerals instead of spelled-out numbers: *1*, not *one*.
- Use simple words.
- Remove unnecessary words.
- Avoid election jargon and unfamiliar acronyms.
- Separate instructions from results.
- Keep paragraphs short.
- Write in the active voice.
- Tell voters what to do, rather than what not to do.
- Use short, simple, everyday words:
 - *Find*, not *locate*
 - *Help*, not *assist*
 - *Make sure*, not *verify*
 - *Use*, not *utilize*
 - *Mark*, not *indicate*

Simple usability tests

Usability Testing 101

There's no need for anything fancy when it comes to testing the usability of your election materials. To conduct a simple usability test:

- Go find a group of people who've never seen the material before and are of voting age (at libraries, farmers markets, community centers, etc.).
- Give them the sample ballot you want to test for usability. (It's ideal if any sample ballot uses fictitious candidate names rather than real names.)
- Ask them to interact with the ballot as if they're voting. (It can be useful to give them a specific list of candidates that you'd like them to vote for.)
- Do not help them while they work with the document.
- Make a note of any difficulties they have working with the document.
- If multiple people have the same problems, consider how to fix the problem for your final document.

Usability tests for ballots

Usability testing answers questions about how and why voters will use the ballot. Test when you know what is going to be on the ballot or when something has changed.

To prepare a usability test for ballots, have you:

- Put together a sample ballot?
- Picked an interviewer or someone to take observation notes?
- Found 12–15 "voters"?
- Found a place to watch them use the ballot?

Listen for questions and comments, but don't answer them. Write them down and ask open-ended questions afterward. Did testers:

- Ask for help with instructions?
- Ask questions?
- Make comments?
- Take out reading glasses or lean closely to the ballot?
- Mark the ballot incorrectly?
- Have trouble moving through the ballot?
- Seem confused, puzzled, or frustrated

Check that the ballot communicates clearly. Can testers:

- Read all the information on the ballot easily?
- Navigate through the ballot to find all contests and questions?
- Identify the different sections of the ballot?
- Find, read and follow instructions accurately?
- Easily and successfully mark the ballot?
- Mark the ballot exactly how they said they intended to vote?

Check that the information is written in plain language. Can testers:

- 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?

Resources

For more information on topics in this module, check out the following resources:

Clearinghouse

Read more about the topics introduced in this module with these in-depth sources.

- **Top 10 Election Design Guidelines**

AIGA

<https://www.aiga.org/membership-community/top-10-election-design-guidelines>

- **Ballot Design**

MIT Election Data + Science Lab

<https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/ballot-design/>

- **plainlanguage.gov**

U.S. General Services Administration

<https://www.plainlanguage.gov/>

Appendix

Have feedback?

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Want to learn more?

This module is just one part of the complete *Effective Design for the Administration of Federal Elections*. We encourage you to review the other modules from the document:

- [Designing Printed Voter Information Materials](#)
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- [Designing Mail Voting Materials](#)
- [Designing Post-Election Materials](#)

Best Practice Module 5

Designing Mail Voting Materials



**Effective Design for the Administration of
Federal Elections**
Second Edition

What's inside

This module offers design suggestions for mail voting materials, like:

- Official Election Mail envelopes
- Mail voting-related forms
- Supporting materials

To vote by mail, voters sign a legal statement declaring that they're qualified to vote and have followed the rules for this method of voting. These statements are often hard to understand. Their complicated language and confusing layout can often lead voters to mistakenly leave out crucial information, like their own signature.

Why follow these guidelines

Making a mistake on mail voting forms can cause ballots to be rejected. When voters can understand and use ballot envelopes for their intended purpose, you'll see fewer rejected ballots. Try to design ballot envelopes and other mail voting material with voter needs in mind.

How to use this module

As you put your materials together, use the guidelines in this module along with your jurisdiction's specific rules for elections. When in doubt, always favor the simple option.

Need a cheat sheet for a quick idea of what to do? This module starts with a list of high-level design suggestions and explains each one in further detail on the following pages.

And remember:

- Focus on incremental improvement.
- Consider the needs of new voters.
- Use plain language whenever possible.
- Transfer your knowledge — share this module with others in your office and with the next local election official who comes after you.

A successful design makes voting by mail easier for voters, affordable and robust for election administrators, and efficient for the U.S. Postal Service.

To convey mail voting information clearly, keep the following guidelines in mind — though, of course, if something you read here conflicts with your local law, always follow the law.

Best Practices for Designing Mail Voting Materials

- 5.4 **Ensure compatibility with USPS operations.**
- 5.5 **Present clear steps for voters.**
- 5.6 **Include helpful supporting materials.**
- 5.7 **Use plain language.**
- 5.8 **Create white space.**
- 5.9 **Make legal text easier to read.**

Ensure compatibility and efficiency with USPS operations.

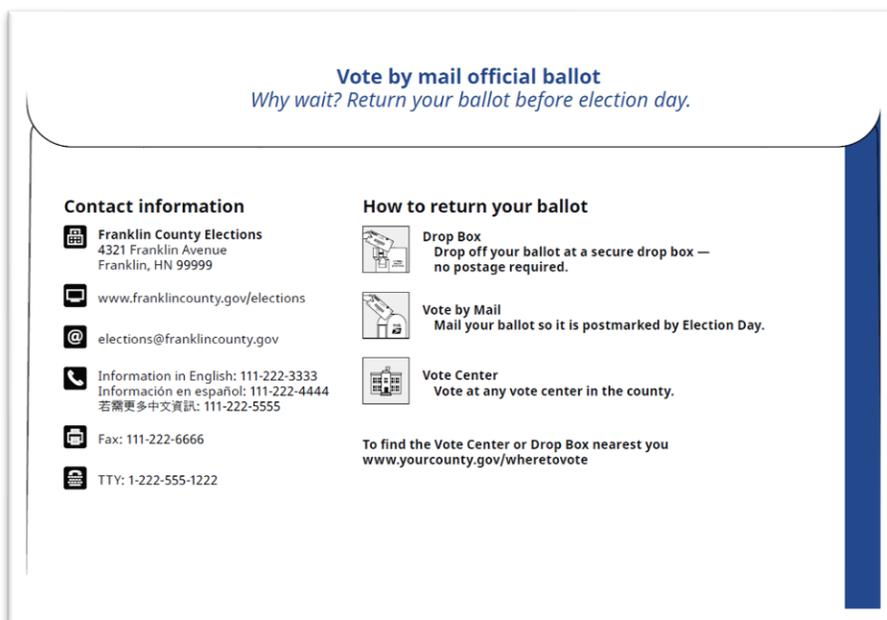
Make sure your mail voting materials work well with the United States Postal Service's equipment and capabilities. This helps ensure timely delivery and gives voters the most time to work with their mail-in voting ballot.

- Locate and communicate with a USPS Mail Design Analyst (MDA). This person can help answer questions and ensure the viability of your designs for U.S. mail. (This is a free service!)
- Have your MDA review all materials before you get them printed, to ensure they follow USPS Election Mail guidelines.
- Use the Official Election Mail logo with registered trademark that's designed exclusively for election mail. Use it to mark:
 - Envelopes for outgoing ballots and materials
 - Postcards and envelopes for return mail
 - Any mailing going from your election office to the voter
- Use the Intelligent Mail Barcode (IMB) to enable tracking within the USPS system.
- Use the appropriate Service Type Identifier (STID) for ballots in your IMBs to improve ballot mail visibility. These identifiers help the USPS identify and track ballots in the mail stream.
- Use Green Tag 191 to bundle all outgoing envelopes.

Present clear steps for voters.

Give voters specific guidance for how to complete, pack, and return their mail voting ballot. This reduces voter mistakes and, in turn, ballot rejection.

- Use a numbered list to guide voters through the exact steps they need to take.
- Clearly identify each piece included in the mail voting packet so voters easily understand which element is which.
- Use labeled fields rather than fill-in-the-blank sentences for voter personal information.
- Highlight any fields that are required for a ballot to be counted.
- Ensure that the signature field is prominent, ideally identified with a large X.



This sample mail voting envelope shows the basic steps explaining how a voter can return their ballot.

Include helpful supporting materials.

Vote-by-mail ballot packages often come with supporting materials, like instructional inserts, privacy sleeves, or other information. These provide guidance to the voters as they work through their ballot outside of a polling place staffed with people who can answer their questions in person. Consider including:

- Options for how to return the ballot
- Location of the election office, and drop boxes, if available
- The last date for mailing a ballot based on postal delivery estimates
- Voter rights
- URLs to online information
- How to contact your office with any questions
- How to track their ballot, if available
- How to correct the ballot or request a new one, if needed

Use plain language.

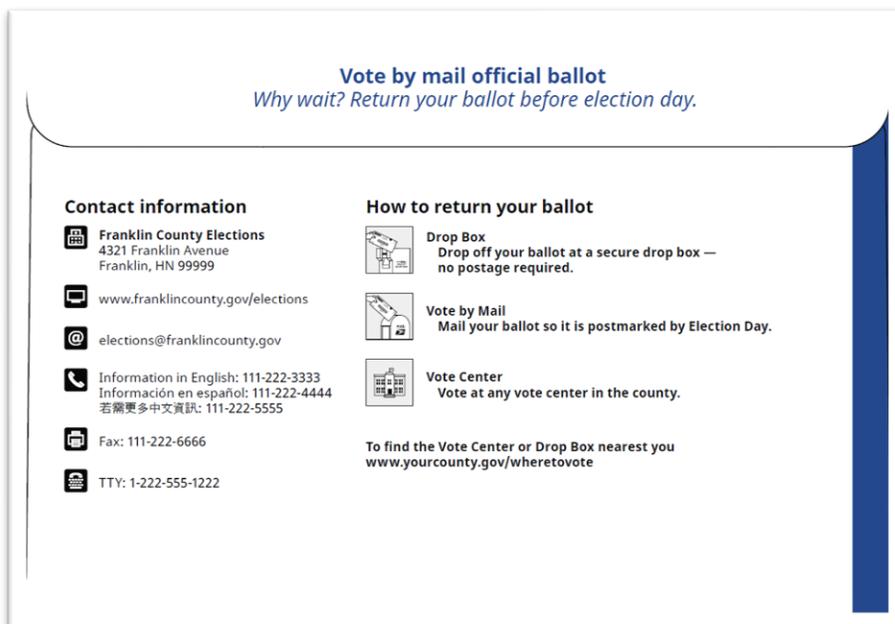
Edit for clarity and simplicity, as long as the material meets legal requirements. Plain language can reduce voter mistakes and minimize ballot rejection, thanks to a few benefits:

- High-literacy readers tend to scan. Text that is easier to read is also easier to scan.
- Less text also means voters can quickly identify required actions.
- Concise language leaves more room for two languages, ensuring higher accessibility.

Create white space.

Reduce the sheer amount of text so there's more white space. Uncluttered materials are easier to read, especially for those with low literacy skills.

- Reduce the number of words in a sentence or a heading.
- Remove any content or visual elements that do not directly support the process of voting.
- Simplify complex words.
- Avoid repetition of a concept.
- Separate information with bullet points.
- Include supporting information on a separate piece, rather than trying to fit it on the primary envelope.



This sample mail voting envelope presents elements with plenty of breathing room for maximum simplicity, making it easier to read.

Make legal text easier to read.

Ensure voters can understand any legal text you are required to put on mail voting materials. Voters who can understand what's required of them are less likely to send in ballots that will be rejected.

- Rewrite legal text in the simplest language your laws allow or include a plain language summary alongside the required text.
- Break each clause in a legally required declaration or affidavit into its own separate bullet point.
- Separate complex sentences into shorter, stand-alone sentences.
- If a required warning is lengthy, provide a plain language summary to improve understanding for voters.

Use plain language

Clear and concise writing is beneficial to voters of all reading levels. It also makes it easier to accurately translate voting materials into all the languages your community needs.

Election materials written in simple language can increase voter usability and accuracy. If a third grader can read your materials, most voters should also find them accessible.

To use plain language:

- Use personal pronouns, like *you* and *we*.
- Use numerals instead of spelled-out numbers: *1*, not *one*.
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- Show them the materials you want to test for usability.
- Ask them to interact with the piece as it directs them to and/or explain to you what they understand it to mean.
- Do not help them while they work with the material.
- Make a note of any difficulties they have understanding the piece.
- If multiple people have the same problems, consider how to fix the problem for your final materials.

Usability tests for mail voting materials

Check that your mail voting materials are ready for a smooth and easy delivery and return.

Have you:

- Double-checked the readability of the instructions and materials, both with real users of varying abilities and with a readability tool like the Hemingway Editor?
- Determined that all information asked of voters is worth the burden, both on the voter and on your office?
- Built enough time into your schedule for mail delivery timeframes?
- Included the Official Election Mail logo on all outbound and return mail?
- Submitted your new mail voting materials to USPS to ensure they comply with current mailing standards?

Resources

For more information on topics in this module, check out the following resources:

Clearinghouse

Read more about the topics introduced in this module with these in-depth sources.

- **Election Mail Resources for New Election Officials**

U.S. Election Assistance Commission

<https://www.eac.gov/election-officials/clearinghouse-resources-election-mail>

- **About Election Mail**

U.S. Postal Service

<https://about.usps.com/what/government-services/election-mail/>

- **Creating Election Mail**

U.S. Postal Service

<https://about.usps.com/election-mail/creating-election-mail.htm>

- **plainlanguage.gov**

U.S. General Services Administration

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- [Designing Polling Place Materials](#)
- [Designing Ballots](#)
- [Designing Post-Election Materials](#)

Best Practice Module 6

Designing Post-Election Materials



**Effective Design for the Administration of
Federal Elections**
Second Edition

What's inside

This module offers design suggestions for post-election materials, like:

- Signage for ballot-counting / audit observers
- Technology security explainers
- Election results reporting

Voting systems are more than voting machines. They're a collection of unified subsystems, like scanners, databases, and counting and reporting equipment. An election is not complete immediately after the polls close on Election Day.

There are, of course, different kinds of events that happen throughout the process of each election. This module focuses on the importance of specific signage to explain different parts of the election process such as canvassing, auditing and mail ballot processing.

Why follow these guidelines

The accuracy and security of voting systems is essential for a trustworthy election. That may be obvious for you as an election official, but your general community may not be aware of the many steps you take to administer and safeguard the voting process. Information design can go a long way toward helping you educate the public about what happens before, during, and after their vote to ensure the security and accuracy of the election.

How to use this module

As you put your materials together, use the guidelines in this module along with your jurisdiction's specific rules for elections. When in doubt, always favor the simple option.

Need a cheat sheet for a quick idea of what to do? This module starts with a list of high-level design suggestions and explains each one in further detail on the following pages.

And remember:

- Focus on incremental improvement.
- Consider the needs of new voters.
- Use plain language whenever possible.
- Transfer your knowledge — share this module with others in your office and with the next local election official who comes after you.

To convey election process information clearly and quickly, keep the following guidelines in mind — though, of course, if something you read here conflicts with your local law, always follow the law.

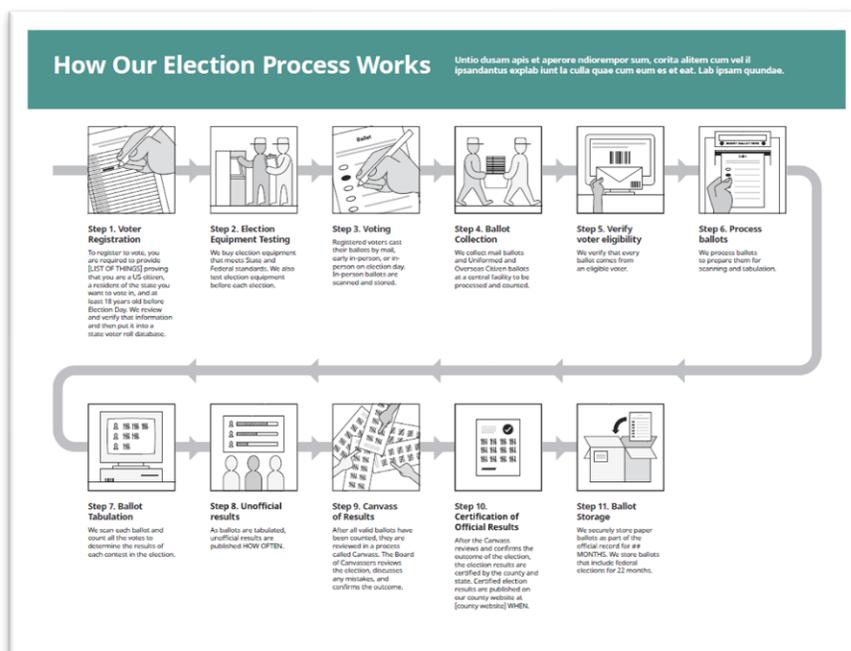
Best Practices for Designing Post-Election Materials

- 6.4 **Keep signage in observation areas simple and clear.**
- 6.5 **Have a plan in place for on-location signage.**
- 6.6 **Prepare communication ahead of time for election observers.**
- 6.7 **Provide identification badges.**
- 6.8 **Describe your technology security simply and clearly.**
- 6.9 **Have a prominent FAQ.**
- 6.10 **Share trustworthy information.**
- 6.11 **Ensure accessibility.**
- 6.12 **Be clear about how you'll report on election results.**
- 6.13 **Be clear with your election results reports.**
- 6.14 **Display election information visually.**

Keep signage in observation areas simple and clear.

Explain post-election procedures for observers on obvious signage. This helps reduce repetitive questions for your staff and reduces opportunities for confusion or conflict.

- Greet observers with a process poster at the entrance to your facility.
- Build from the process poster with additional posters throughout the area, color-coded to correspond to the main process poster.
- Make sure signs are easily visible.
- Make it easy to navigate the area — offer a map that indicates where observers may go.
- Help people quickly identify the purpose of the signs.
- Identify designated areas for observers and those that are only for authorized staff.



This sample poster explains the election process for observers.

Have a plan in place for on-location signage.

Help your staff understand which signs to display and where during any observation. Much like in a polling place, a pre-set signage plan can increase efficiency for your staff and confidence for observers.

- Label signs according to where and how they should be placed:
 - Indoor
 - Outdoor
 - An ID that keys to a placement map (*signs A1 and A2 are placed on wall A, etc.*).
- Plan for what kinds of signage will be necessary to guide observers through the process and answer their most common questions.

Prepare communication ahead of time for election observers.

Observers may come to observe election processes (such as post-election audits) with questions in mind. Information design can help you answer their questions quickly and clearly, possibly even before they ask.

- Create and share written procedures for what observers are witnessing. For example, during an audit, ensure that observation packets explain how discrepancies are resolved.
- Create a workflow diagram to visually explain the audit process.
- Keep pocket guides on hand year-round for observers and interested voters to educate themselves at any time.
- For transparency, make sure your website includes all relevant information, such as any rules or expectations that observers are required to follow.

Issue identification badges.

Get ahead of confusion by providing identification for everyone present at any election proceeding.

- Ensure that all staff wear identification badges.
- Create badges for observers, with their organization name and access level, that are easy to distinguish from staff badges.
- Visually identify a designated staff member who will interact with observers and media, answer questions, and take comments.

Describe your technology security simply and clearly.

Build confidence with voters by providing clear explanations that describe how your election technology is secured. Keep your descriptions simple but accurate:

- “Vote-counting equipment is on a closed system, not connected to the internet.”
- “We don’t install unauthorized applications or software to any part of the voting system.”
- “All systems are running approved and correct versions of their software.”
- “An audit log tells us what exactly happens in the system, when, and who initiated what.”
- “Staff members only have enough access to the system to perform their assigned tasks, and no more.”
- “Access, control, and custody of ballots always involves two or more people from separate political parties.”

Have a prominent FAQ.

Getting ahead of observer questions can instill confidence in voters and keep election processes running smoothly for your staff. Build and maintain an easily accessible FAQ (for public distribution online, in polling places, via mailers, and/or at election observation places), answering questions like:

- Did my ballot count?
- How do I know that the results are accurate?
- How do I know if the voting equipment is trustworthy?
- Can a voting machine switch votes?
- How do you keep someone from voting twice?

Share trustworthy information.

For voters and nonvoters who have questions, concerns, and fears about election processes, be proactive when it comes to providing information to the public about the election processes. Prominent, reliable information can promote confidence in voters and reduce the number of questions your staff has to field.

- Give your community cues for how to find trusted election information in mailers, online, and on social media.
- Provide clear, concise information to local news media to create consistency in what voters read about local elections.
- Be proactive about sending helpful information to local political parties, who will send observers to your facility.
- Rebut any misinformation as quickly and clearly as possible.

Ensure accessibility.

Everyone should have equal access to election information. Focusing on accessibility helps ensure that everyone is included in every phase of the process.

- For online icons and illustrations, use concise alt text that explains their purpose to screen-reading technology.
- Be Section 508-compliant with your online materials.
- Use plain language as often as possible in all content.
- Use high contrast in signage.
- Ensure that text size is large enough.
- Ensure that signage placement is accessible to everyone, including those in wheelchairs.
- Use colors consistently to identify related elements, but do not rely exclusively on color to call out important information.

Be clear about how you will report on election results.

Explain online and in the polling place what voters should expect regarding results reporting.

Transparency and accuracy go a long way toward raising confidence in the voting process. Explain for both voters and the media:

- How will voters be able to find the results of the election?
- When can voters expect to be able to see the results?
- Where can voters go to find results (specific URLs, media sources, etc.)?
- What are the official sources of results reporting that voters can trust?

Be clear with your election results reports.

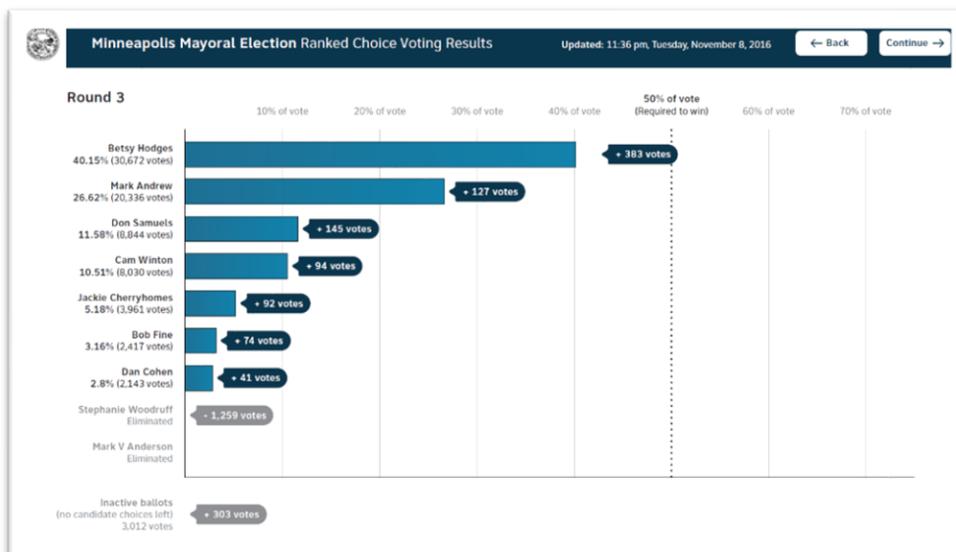
Election results reports can contain a lot of information, so be intentional about conveying details clearly. This can reduce confusion and frustration for your community, as well as reduce the number of questions your staff may have to field.

- Display election result report time stamps.
- Use common data formats; provide results as .csv, .xml, or .pdf files.
- Explain which ballots (early voting, mail voting, write-in, etc.) are included in each report.
- Post all reports in chronological order to show how vote totals changed throughout the reporting period.
- Provide a timeline for when to expect updates and when the election results will be final.

Display election information visually.

Visual displays can help the public absorb election reports more easily. Charts, graphs, and tables quickly convey key information about the election and make results easier to understand. Consider using:

- Bar charts for quick visual comprehension
- Radial progress charts (circular progress bars) to help visualize percentages toward a goal of 100%



This sample web page displays in-progress results for an RCV contest.

Use plain language

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- Ask them to interact with the piece as it directs them to and/or explain to you what they understand it to mean.
- Do not help them while they work with the material.
- Make a note of any difficulties they have understanding the piece.
- If multiple people have the same problems or confusion, consider how to fix the problem for your final materials.

Usability tests for post-election materials

Observers should be able to identify the purpose of post-election materials from a variety of distances in a central election facility. For example, most people should be able to read details on a poster standing about three to four feet from a wall. Do observers:

- Need to ask for help with instructions?
- Take out reading glasses or lean way in?
- Misunderstand signage?
- Have trouble understanding where they can sit or stand?
- Seem confused, puzzled, or frustrated?
- Understand what is allowed (and not allowed) in the central election facility?

Check that your plans for election results reporting are complete. Do you:

- Have a plan for posting to social media, including a schedule and a designated staff member?
- Have a place on your website for users to find result reports easily and quickly?
- Have a plan for reporting results to media, including a schedule for reporting, a point of contact, and a template for your reports?

Resources

For more information on topics in this module, check out the following resources:

Clearinghouse

Read more about the topics introduced in this module with these in-depth sources.

- **Observers & Transparency**

U.S. Election Assistance Commission

<https://www.eac.gov/election-officials/clearinghouse-resources-observers-transparency>

- **Best Practices: FAQ**

U.S. Election Assistance Commission

<https://www.eac.gov/best-practices-faqs-election-officials>

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