Vol. 01

Designing usable ballots

Field-researched, critical election
design techniques to help ensure that
every vote is cast as voters intend

Field Guides
To Ensuring Voter Intent

Vol. 01

Designing usable ballots

About the Field Guide series

There have been excellent ballot design guidelines around since about 2007 when the U.S. Election Assistance Commission published AIGA's work in its report, *Effective Designs for the Administration of Elections*. Everyone involved in that project quickly figured out that, as juicy as the design specs were in that report, they needed to be boiled down to essentials that local election officials could easily act on within the constraints they had. *Field Guides To Ensuring Voter Intent* were inspired by that need.

— Dana Chisnell, *Field Guides Editor*

About this Field Guide

We know now from several years of testing ballots all over the U.S. that implementing simple principles of design make it much more likely that voters are able to vote the way they intend. In research conducted by AIGA's Design for Democracy Project for the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC), Mary Quandt and Drew Davies and their team learned the nitty-gritty of what makes design in election signage, posters, ballots, and other print materials effective for all kinds of voters.

This Field Guide pulls 10 key guidelines from the research for the EAC. To learn more about the research behind this guide, and to download examples, go to civicdesigning.org or AIGA.org.

About ballot design

A ballot is a form that represents perhaps the most important interaction between a government and its citizens. Thousands of votes are lost in elections every year because of poorly designed ballots. And yet, avoiding these design issues is not difficult or expensive.

What a ballot looks like is constrained by legislation, technology, history, custom, cost, and other factors. But the anatomy of a ballot is fairly consistent throughout the more than 3,000 counties, parishes, and boroughs in the U.S. Design guidelines provide a tool for helping voters focus on their goal to cast votes for their preferred candidates.

Before   THIS LINE IS ALL CAPITAL LETTERS.

After   This Line is Upper and Lowercase.

No. 01

Use lowercase letters.

Lowercase letters are more legible than ALL CAPITAL LETTERS because they make shapes that are easier to recognize.

Before   Insert the completed ballot
          into the ballot sleeve. Hand in the
                ballot to be counted.

                (center-aligned)

After   Insert the completed ballot
     into the ballot sleeve. Hand in the
     ballot to be counted.

     (left-aligned)

No. 02
Avoid centered type.

Left-aligned type is more legible than centered type, which forces the eye to hunt for the start of the next line.

Before   Fill in the oval to the left of the name of your choice. You must blacken the oval completely, and do not make any marks outside of the oval. You do not have to vote in every race

(8-point)

After   Fill in the oval to the left of the name of your choice. You must blacken the oval completely, and do not make any marks outside of the oval. You do not have to vote in every race.

(12-point)

No. 03
Use big enough type.

Small print is hard to read for many voters.

Use these minimum type sizes:

- 12-point for print
- 3.0 – 4.0mm for screen

(Larger text may increase the number of pages but it is a worthwhile investment in election accuracy.)

Avoid   Times New Roman

Georgia

Cambria

Use   Arial

Helvetica

Univers

Verdana

Pick one sans-serif font.

Use sans-serif fonts with clean strokes.

For dual-language materials, use bold text for the primary language, regular text for the secondary language.

Using just one font makes the ballot more unified. Different fonts make voters stop reading and adjust.

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

No. 05

Support process and navigation.

Put instructions where they are needed. Use page (or screen) numbering to show progress.

For electronic ballots, let voters change language or display options, with instructions available at any time.

Post easy-to-see instructions for both voting and moving around the polling place.

Before   If an overvoted ballot is encountered, the voter is entitled to another blank ballot after surrendering the spoiled ballot.

After   If you make a mistake, ask a poll worker for another ballot.
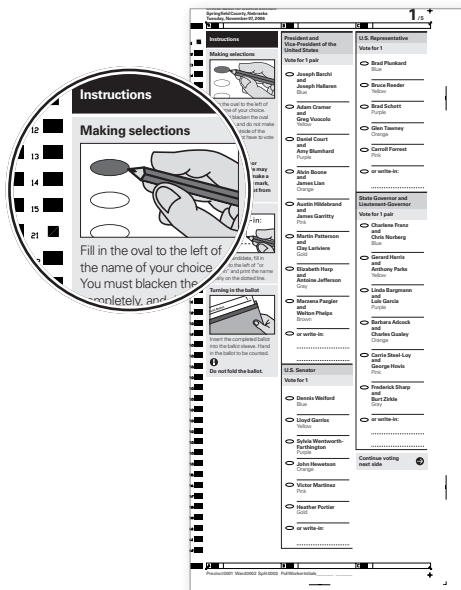
No. 06

Use clear, simple language.

Make instructions and options as simple as possible.

Do not include more than two languages on any one material.

If possible, summarize referenda in simple language alongside required formats.

Simple language is often shorter, taking up less space.

Illustrations at the beginning of the ballot demonstrate how to use the ballot.

No. 07

Use accurate instructional illustrations.

Visual instructions help low-literacy and all voters.

Illustrations must be accurate in their details, highlighting the most important instructions.

Do not use photographs.

Avoid

Independent

Democrat

Republican

Use
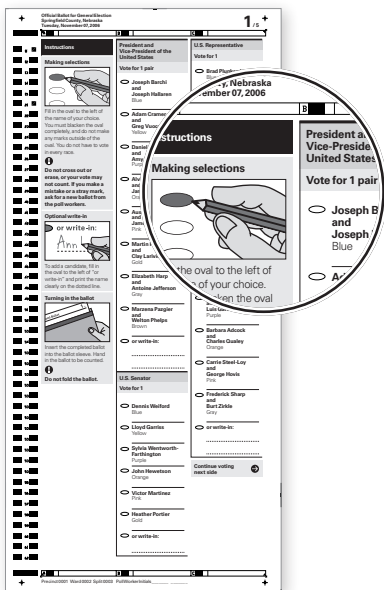
Attention

Continue, proceed

No. 08

Use informational icons (only).

Use icons that call attention to key information and support navigation with care.

Don't use political party emblems.

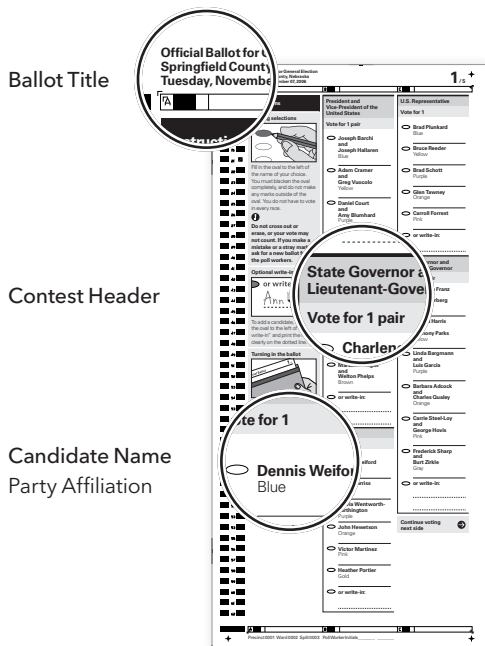**Shading and color** can help voters quickly see the structure of the ballot.

Use contrast and color to support meaning.

Use color and shading consistently:

- On paper ballots, to separate instructions from contests and contests from each other.

- On electronic ballots, to support navigation, call special attention, and provide user feedback.

Do not rely on color as the only way to communicate important information.

Ballot Title

Contest Header

Candidate Name
Party Affiliation

Within the ballot illustration:

Official Ballot for U...
Springfield County
Tuesday, November...

1 /5 +

President and
Vice-President of the
United States

Vote for 1 pair

Joseph Barchi
and
Joseph Hallaren
Blue

Adam Cramer
and
Greg Vuocolo
Yellow

Daniel Court
and
Amy Blumhard
Purple

or write-in

State Governor a...
Lieutenant-Gove...

Vote for 1 pair

Charlene...

U.S. Representative

Vote for 1

Brad Plunkard
Blue

Bruce Reeder
Yellow

Brad Schott
Purple

Glen Tawney
Orange

Carroll Forrest
Pink

or write-in

Ma...
and
Welton Phelps
Brown

or write-in

Linda Bargmann
and
Luis Garcia
Purple

Barbara Adcock
and
Charles Qualey
Orange

Carrie Steel-Loy
and
George Hovis
Pink

Frederick Sharp
and
Burt Zirkle
Gray

or write-in

te for 1

Dennis Weifor...
Blue

John Hesetman
Orange

Victor Martinez
Pink

Heather Portier
Gold

or write-in

Continue voting
next side

No. 10
Show what's most important.

Use layout and text size to help voters know what to pay attention to.

The ballot title should be the most prominent.

A contest header should be more prominent than the candidates' names.

A candidate's name should be bolder than his/her party affiliation. Candidates' names and options should be presented with equal importance.

Tip

Check that the ballot communicates clearly.

Can voters

☐ read all of the information on the ballot easily?

☐ navigate through the ballot to find all contests and ballot questions?

☐ identify the different sections of the ballot?

☐ find, read and follow instructions accurately?

Notes

Notes

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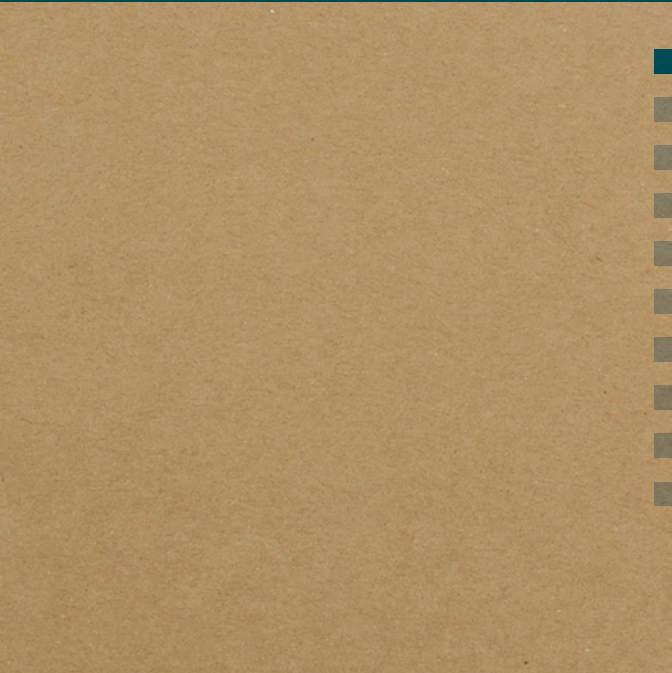
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Order more or download PDFs of this Field Guide and the other guides in the series at: civicdesigning.org/fieldguides

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