Quick Start Guide

Ballot Building

About the Quick Start Guides: The EAC's Quick Start Guides are intended to familiarize local election officials with various topics they will likely encounter in election administration. The guides are a starting point to identify areas of concern and give officials a broad idea of factors they should consider in approaching a given topic.

What is Ballot Building?

Ballot building, or ballot production, is the act of designing, creating, and producing official ballots. Each ballot requires precise data, which must be thoroughly proofed for accuracy, and must contain certain design elements that help voters understand how to mark their ballot. These elements may include voting instructions, section headings, and contest placement. Once digital images of the ballots have been produced, paper ballots must be printed to the correct specifications to be properly read by a ballot scanner. It is crucial to test ballots thoroughly at every step of production. Is the data on the ballot accurate? Does the design meet all legal requirements? Does the tabulation equipment recognize the ballot? An accurate, well-designed ballot is essential to a successful election.

Ballot Data

- **Gather** all official documentation of data that must be included on the ballot. This includes any contests that must be included in the election, candidate filing affidavits, official ballot language for ballot questions, and any reports showing precisely which contests should appear on each ballot style.
- **Review** any voting system documentation before entering ballot data. Be sure to double-check any system settings that change from election to election, including any voting rules that vary by election type. These may include primary election rules that do not apply to general elections.
- **Proof** all ballots thoroughly. Compare all ballot text to original documents (e.g., not candidate listings), and read all ballot text thoroughly to check for omissions or spelling errors.
- **Develop** procedures for recording the audio ballot for accessible marking devices. Listen to all candidates' names and contests to ensure that the pronunciations are correct. In addition, jurisdictions offering ballots in languages other than English should develop procedures for reviewing the pronunciation of all ballot text in the alternate language(s).
- **Reproof** ballots after changes or corrections are made. Be aware that any change made to the paper ballot also requires changing the data for voting equipment.

Ballot Design

- **Review** state laws and administrative procedures related to ballot design and ballot marking instructions. Remember to include specific instructions, if required, for accessible voting devices.
- **Confirm** that ballots meet all applicable state laws relating to contest order, party order, order or rotation of candidates' names, placement and wording of contest headers, font size, and any other design elements.
- **Ensure** that ballot target areas are located clearly next to each candidate's name and that all target areas are free of any folding lines, timing marks, and other ballot text or images. If ballots are double-sided, ensure target areas do not overlap with those on the opposite side of the page.
- **Require** that several people proof all ballots at each stage of the design and production processes—during initial data entry, when the preliminary proofs are available, and when printed ballots are delivered. In addition, proof each ballot style on all ballot scanners and accessible voting devices.
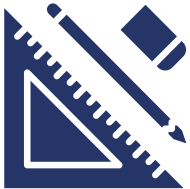
Top Tips for Ballot Proofing

1. Read all text on the ballot backwards.
2. Proof ballots to original documents, like official candidate filings.
3. Ensure that all office titles and district names are spelled correctly.
4. Verify all offices are assigned to the correct districts, precincts, or ballot styles, and they are listed in the proper order.
5. Verify candidate names are rotating properly (when applicable), and that political parties are listed in the correct order.

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Ballot Printing

- **Use** vendor-certified or prequalified printing companies. Printing contracts should include details about paper stock quality and weight, ink density, and other printing specifications. Ask print vendors to provide a copy of their internal quality control procedures. Poor-quality ink may cause ballots not to be read by scanning equipment. Paper stock that is of the wrong weight or grain direction may cause ballot scanners to jam.
- **Ensure** official ballots have been properly printed and that the ink and paper quality pass inspection immediately upon delivery. To ensure that all ballots have been properly printed, inspect several ballots from different ballot styles, checking the overall quality of the selected ballots. (**Note**: accessible voting devices and ballot-on-demand systems may require additional testing procedures.)
- **Store** ballots in a cool, dry environment to prevent the ballot stock from absorbing moisture from the air. Ballots stored in humid conditions may swell, causing tabulation errors on some ballot scanners.

Pre-Election Logic and Accuracy Testing

- Logic and accuracy testing is a vital part of preparing for every election. Most states have legal or procedural requirements for testing election equipment before each election. These procedures vary by state but commonly include:
  - Verifying all ballots can be read by ballot tabulators.
  - Verifying digital media has the correct data.
  - Verifying all voting equipment, including accessible devices, is in proper working order.
  - Verifying test results are accurate and match a predetermined set of results based on the chosen vote pattern.
- Once ballots are printed, it is important to conduct proper testing using preprinted ballots (if applicable) to ensure they were properly printed and will be counted accurately. For jurisdictions that use a preprinted test deck, hand-marked ballots with a variety of marks should also be included to test the responsiveness of the tabulator. If possible, ballots should only be delivered to voters after testing has been completed.
- Logic and accuracy tests assure the public that the equipment they use to cast ballots will count their votes as intended. States should encourage public viewing of logic and accuracy testing and reporting of test results.

Contingency Planning

- If allowable by law, order more ballots than you think you need. Voter registration activity typically increases after ballots must be ordered, so be sure to adjust any ballot orders to reflect an anticipated increase in the total number of registered voters in your community.
- Ensure accessible voting devices have proper battery backup or a Universal Power Supply (UPS) that will allow voters to mark and print ballots in the case of a power outage.
- Make a plan for delivering official ballots to military and overseas voters at least 45 days before each election. While many of these ballots are sent electronically, make sure that official ballots are available for UOCAVA voters who request a paper ballot be sent by mail.
- Assess the total number of paper ballots on hand throughout the election cycle. If more ballots have been sent by mail than anticipated, it may be necessary to print additional ballots. Check with your print vendor to ensure that additional ballots can be printed after the initial order, and make sure that if additional ballots are ordered, they will arrive in time. Additionally, identify local print shops or in-house printing capabilities that can be used to produce additional official ballots in the case of an emergency.