Best Practices for Official Voter Guides

How to Use Plain Language in Voter Guides

Webinar 4
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Welcome

Introduction of Trainers

To better serve California’s diverse voters, voter information must be more accessible in design and delivery.

• Aim to make voter information more effective and inviting.
• Provide trainings, webinars, and other technical assistance in implementing recommendations.
• Identify impediments to adopt best practices including regulatory, legislative, and financial barriers.
"To raise voter confidence and increase participation, we must learn how voters get information and how to implement best practices for voter guides"
In today's webinar...

What are the plain language principles

How to present the right information at the right level of detail.

How to organize information an in easy to follow path.
Plain language basics

Clear information helps bridge the civic literacy gap
What is plain language?

Information in plain language helps people

- find what they need
- understand what they find
- and use it to participate in elections

Plain language speaks to the readers, using words they understand.
Plain language helps...

- People who don't read English well
- People with cognitive disabilities
- People with low literacy

44% of Americans read at basic or below-basic level.

National Assessment of Adult Literacy

- Plain language is also easier to translate.
Follow these plain language principles

- Write in short sentences
- Use short, simple, everyday words
- Write in active voice
- Keep the message positive
- Keep paragraphs short
- Separate paragraphs with a space, so each one stands out on the page
- Use text that is large enough – 12 pts
Write directly to the readers

Vote Early – The Registrar of Voters office is open as a polling place for the November 5, 2013 Election, beginning on Monday, October 7, 2013 through Tuesday, November 5, 2013. You may vote a vote-by-mail ballot at the Registrar of Voters office.

Vote early in person
You may vote early at Registrar of Voters office, or at the voting centers listed on page 5.

October 7 through November 5
Monday – Friday, 8am to 5pm
Registrar of Voters
4321 Franklin Avenue.
Write headings as questions or active instructions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Heading Style</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Why it works</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>What is the last day to request a vote-by-mail-ballot?</td>
<td>Suggests a question that voters ask</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quasi-Question</td>
<td>How to request a vote-by-mail ballot</td>
<td>Suggests what the question the text will answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>Request a vote-by-mail ballot by October 29</td>
<td>Provides the answer to an implicit question</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Help people ask the right questions and find the answers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th># Asking</th>
<th>Variations of the question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What’s on the ballot?</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>• What’s on the ballot?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Who do I support or vote for?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Who is running?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Who will I be voting for?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Who are the candidates?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Who supports the candidates?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• What are the candidates’ positions on [specific issue]?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• What are the ballot measures?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• What are the pros and cons for the measures?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Does this measure mean a tax increase?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• How does the official guide compare to the TV ads?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Who is in office right now?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Simplify and define election terms

Confusing words
- Top Two Primary
- Endorsement
- Sample Ballot
- Partisan contest
- Split your vote
- Rebuttal
- Redistricting
- Polls
Describe election terms

What is the difference between:
- vote by mail
- early voting
- vote at the polls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Voting Option</th>
<th>Before Election Day</th>
<th>On Election Day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vote by mail</td>
<td>Yes from home</td>
<td>Yes drop off ballot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early voting</td>
<td>Yes in person</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote at the polls</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes In person</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Questions?
Organization

Creating a good path through the information
Provide a table of contents

What’s in this guide?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What’s in this guide?</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 ways to vote</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voter Bill of Rights</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to vote by mail</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to vote early in person</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to vote in person at the polls</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility and language voting assistance</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What’s on the ballot for this election?</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who are the candidates?</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paid candidate statements</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local ballot measures: E</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local ballot measures: F</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice ballot</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Anticipate and answer voters' questions.
- A table of contents acts as a roadmap.
- Clearly separate how to vote from information about the ballot
Connect the state and county guides

What’s on the ballot for this election?

You will receive two voter information guides for this election:

Franklin County Guide (this guide)
Local and county races and measures are in this guide.

California State Guide
U.S. national races, and state races and state propositions are in the guide from the state.

Help voters understand how the two guides work together, and recognize them when they arrive.
Organize information by activity or task

- All of the information for one topic on one page
- Only one topic per page

How to vote by mail

You can vote by mail before Election Day.

To vote by mail, you have to request a ballot. Then you can mark the ballot and send it back or drop it off at any polling place.

How to get your vote-by-mail ballot

You can request a vote-by-mail ballot starting on October 7. You must request a vote-by-mail ballot by October 29. You can:

- Go to www.franklinvotes.org and request a vote-by-mail ballot.
- Send a letter with your signature that includes your address and where to send the vote-by-mail ballot:
  Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk
  4321 Franklin Avenue, Franklin, CA 99999

After you apply to vote by mail, you will receive your ballot within ten business days.

How to return your vote-by-mail ballot

Place your ballot in the official envelope, following the instructions on the vote-by-mail packet. Your ballot must be at the Elections Office or a polling place by 8pm on Election Day, November 6, to be counted.

You can:

- Send it by mail to:
  Franklin County Elections Dept.
  123 Main Street, Franklin, CA
- OR
- Drop it off at the secure ballot drop-off location, from October 7 to November 6
  Franklin County Elections Department
  123 Main Street, Franklin, CA
- OR
- Drop it off at any polling place on Election Day, November 6, from 7am to 8pm
Use the page layout to make different information look different
Help voters find their way through the candidate and measures pages
Questions?
The right information

Include the right information at the appropriate level of detail
Maximize the value of the front cover

- Show that it's an official guide (county name and seal)
- Name or type of election
- Date of election day
- Times the polls are open
- Polling place information
- How to contact the election office
- Languages offered
Organize information into a bite-snack-meal

The official term is "progressive disclosure"
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Where in the Guide</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Bite** | Cover | General Election  
Tuesday, November 4, 2014  
Polls are open from 7am to 8pm |
| **Snack** | Three ways to vote page | **Vote in person at the polls**  
Polls are open on Election Day, November 4, from 7am to 8pm  
The location of your polling place is printed on the front cover of this guide.  
Or, you can look up your polling place:  
• On the web: www.franklinvotes.org  
• Using the automated phone service: 1-222-555-1216 |
| **Meal** | Detailed instructions on page 6 | **How to vote in person at the polls**  
[ instructions on the voting process and how to mark the ballot ] |
Make it easy to compare candidates

Something to consider:

- Voters want to know about candidates in a way that helps them compare their choices.
- Structured information was easier to scan and compare.
Help voters understand measures

- Break measures information into a structured summary, followed by details, arguments, and full text.
Voters preferred structured information

When we asked about their preferences, most wanted short, easier to scan information.

"Simpler. Takes time to read."

"Clear headings. More space. Less of a pitch and more facts."

"I just want to focus on the priorities, not so much about who they are."

"Less words, more info per page."

"Good layout vs. blocks of text."

"Easy to read. Names and information are separated so you can read each one."
But some wanted as much information as possible

Even if they might not read it, they wanted to know the information was available.

"[The summary] is good because if I don’t want to read, I can just ignore all that, but other people can go to the detail."

"It's good to have choices about what to read. Full text is important so you can compare the arguments."

"Put the extra in the back, so you have a way to answer your questions."

"Not many people will look at it, but if it’s in the book more might."
Questions?
Resources

To help you create or revise your voter guides
See all the webinars

1. **What are the Best Practices for Developing and Reviewing Voter Guides?**
   Monday, April 27, 11:00am-12:00pm

2. **How to Use Layout and Visual Presentation in Voter Guides**
   Monday, April 27, 1:30pm-2:30pm

3. **How to Use Voter Guides to Close the Civic Literacy Gap**
   Friday, May 1, 11:00am-12:00pm

4. **How to Use Plain Language in Voter Guides**
   Friday, May 1, 1:30pm-2:30pm

Sign up or view the archived webinars: [http://cavotes.org/](http://cavotes.org/)
Download the manual from https://cavotes.org/download-best-practices-manual
Use the checklist

Ask yourself these questions when creating or revising your voter guide, so it has the answers voters need.

VOTER GUIDE RECOMMENDATION CHECKLIST

Use this checklist of our recommendations when creating or reviewing a voter guide.

Include the right information at the appropriate level of detail

☐ Is the information organized by activity or task?
☐ Does the cover page include the following information?
  • County name and seal (or other official insignia)
  • Name or type of election
  • Date of election/day and times the polls are open
  • Polling place information
  • How to contact the election office
  • Languages offered

☐ Is it clear how the county and state guides are different and connected?
☐ Are the headings written as questions or active instructions?
☐ Are the plain language principles incorporated? This includes
  • Writing short sentences
  • Using short, simple, everyday words
  • Writing in active voice and writing in the positive
  • Keeping paragraphs short
  • Separating paragraphs by a space, so that each one stands out on the page

☐ Are there definitions and descriptions for election terms and processes?

Organize information in an easy-to-follow path

☐ Is there a table of contents?
☐ Are there questions, quasi-questions, or instructions as headings?
☐ Does each page have a clear topic?
☐ Are there visual elements to make each section easy to see?
☐ Is the voter information organized to include both an overview and details?
Download additional materials

Report and recommendations
- Sample voter guide pages illustrating the recommendations
- Icons and illustrations from the prototype voter guide

Preliminary reports and presentations
- Landscape analysis from the 2014 primary election

Research protocol materials
- Voter demographic questionnaire forms
- Sample pages and prototypes tested

http://civicdesign.org/projects/how-voters-get-information/
League of Women Voters of California Education Fund
cavotes.org | easyvoterguide.org | smartvoter.org

Center for Civic Design
civicdesign.org | @civicdesign
civicdesign.org/projects/how-voters-get-information/

How Voters Get Information
Best Practices Manual for Official Voter Information Guides in California
https://cavotes.org/download-best-practices-manual