

Section 3

3

General design considerations

- Think about the appearance of voter materials: aim for a simple, clear and uncluttered look.
- Try to balance text and pictures (if you are using pictures).
- Avoid very long blocks of text. Use space to break up the content into smaller, manageable sections.

3A

Style

- All voter materials should have a consistent style, so that they look like part of a set.
- Content should be consistent across all materials. Use a universal 'language' throughout (wording and phrasing, instructions, terminology, pictures, colour-coding, text sizing, etc.).

i Explanation

- This helps the voter identify which documents they need to look at and to recognise them. Consistency of style also helps the voter to become familiar with the process being described to them, and with how information is being communicated.

Font

Use the same font style (typeface) throughout all voter materials, for consistency.



Detailed guidance:
Choosing a font
(Section 6B)

- Use a sans-serif font, as these are generally plainer and therefore more accessible for the reader. Sans-serif fonts, such as the one used within this guidance,⁹ do not have ‘serifs’, the small features at the end of strokes. Serif fonts do have these features, e.g. Times New Roman.
- Avoid decorative fonts.
- The font should be clear and readable – both close-up, in smaller point sizes, and also when printed in a large point size (e.g. on a notice).
- For materials the voter has to complete, or read close-up, (e.g. the ballot paper and any postal voting materials) use 14 point if possible. If size restrictions mean this is not possible, use a minimum of 12 point.
- Try to make sure that the size of your document allows for a readable font size to be used. If possible, use a larger document size rather than reducing the text size.
- For notices, or anything displayed in a poster format, use a minimum of 26 point.

Note: these point sizes refer to fonts with a similar size to Arial. Some fonts are in themselves smaller than Arial in the same point sizes. Use a font size equivalent to those given for Arial.



Explanation

- Any written communication needs to be readable for it to be successful.
- Anything that will be displayed at a distance needs to be large enough to be read at a distance. Remember to keep letters and spacing in proportion.
- Anything that will be read close-up needs to be written in a large enough font so that it can be read easily. Take account of the fact that many people have sight or cognitive difficulties and find small text difficult to distinguish and read (and often intimidating).

⁹ This guidance document is printed in Helvetica. It is very similar to Arial, the font which is commonly available in PC programmes.

Text case

- Use the appropriate case for text:
 - Sentence case for most writing, including titles and headings. The first letter of the first word is a capital, the rest are lower case.
 - Title case for individual words that are names (e.g. European Parliament). The first letter of each word is capitalised.
 - Avoid ALL CAPITALS for continuous text, although capitals are fine for one or two words. Be careful when you use capitals, and what you use them for, as they can look like SHOUTING.

Explanation


- People read by recognising the size and shape of words, rather than individual letters. Text written in all capital letters is hard to read – each word looks like a block and this makes it hard for the reader to visually recognise the word.

Alignment

- All text should be:
 - left-aligned, so that each line starts at the left-hand edge of the page or column, and they are all lined up; and
 - ‘ragged right’, not lined up at the right hand edge
- Avoid hyphenating words at the end of a line.
- Avoid writing long sentences (as a guide, aim for an average of 15–20 words). Try to make just one or two points per sentence. If your sentence needs to be longer, consider breaking it up using bulleted lists.
- Be aware of where sentences begin on the page. Do not start a new sentence at the end of a line (i.e. only one or two words on the line, with the rest on the next line) if this will interrupt its flow, or make it harder to understand. For example:

These sentences are broken up and hard to follow:

Go to one of the compartments. Number the candidates in order of preference, putting ‘1’ against the candidate of your 1st preference, ‘2’ against your 2nd preference and so on.

 Detailed guidance: Text layout and alignment (Section 6C)

These are aligned so that pieces of information are kept together, making it easier to follow:

Go to one of the compartments.
Number the candidates in order of preference, putting '1' against the candidate of your 1st preference, '2' against your 2nd preference and so on.

Explanation

- Left and ragged right alignment of text means that the spacing between words is equal, rather than the text being spread out (justified) to fill the space. Having even spacing between words makes it easier to read. People tend to read by recognising whole words or groups of words, rather than letters. Evenly spaced text helps the eye to track along the line.
- Left-aligning text makes it easy for the reader to find the start of the line, unlike centred text, which can be harder to read.
- Starting a new sentence at the end of a line makes it harder to follow, as the sentence gets broken up.
- If a sentence is too long, or has too many points, it is difficult for the reader to take in all the information. People are more likely to absorb things when they are told them one at a time.

Spacing

- There is no single rule about spacing as it depends on the typeface and font size. In general, space between letters should be less than word space, and word space less than the space between lines.
- Leave a space between paragraphs, and between each row (of candidates or parties) on ballot papers. The paragraph space should be more than the line space.

Explanation


- Having blank space between different sections and areas of a document makes it easier to read. Blank space helps to break up a document into smaller, manageable chunks, as well as identifying different sections.
- Be careful not to have too much space that might confuse the voter and make them think they need to write something in it. There is further guidance in Section 4A on ballot papers.



Ballot papers
(Section 4A)


Emphasis

- Emphasise key information so that it stands out from the rest of the text. Use bold for highlighting, and different text sizes to distinguish between different types of information.

 Detailed guidance: Adding emphasis (Section 6A)

Colour and contrast

- Think about contrast (both colour contrast and brightness) when choosing the colour for the paper, the background, and text.
- Generally you should use dark text on a pale background and avoid vivid background colours.

 Detailed guidance: Colour and contrast (Section 6D)

Explanation

- Having the right contrast of colour and brightness is key to making text legible, particularly for people with sight problems.

Paper quality

- Paper should not be glossy, as this can create glare.
- Paper for documents that voters are going to use (i.e. ballot papers, postal voting materials) should be of a good quality and weight so that they can be easily marked, without the print or mark showing through to the other side.

Explanation

- Glare can make it difficult to read a document, particularly for people with sight difficulties.
- Good quality paper gives a professional feel. Flimsy paper can seem unofficial or even get overlooked by postal voters.

Layout of text

- Break up longer sections of text using lists.
- Use bullet points for each item in a list, or for each separate piece of information. Keep each bulleted point no longer than a couple of sentences.

i Explanation

- Using a list helps to break up information and distinguish between separate points. This makes it easier to read and absorb.
 - Bullet points help to visually distinguish information from instructions. They also avoid the information looking like rules, which can be off-putting.
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- For a list of instructions, use numbers instead of bullet points (unless there is only one instruction).
 - Take care with instructions that involve the voter marking numbers on the ballot paper. In this case, make sure that the numbers of the instructions are not next to numbers in the instructions. You may want to consider an alternative, such as (lower case) letters, or bullet points.
 - Have only one task, or one part of a task, per numbered step.
 - Put the instructions in a logical order, following the steps of the process exactly.

i Explanation

- Numbering instructions implies a process to follow, and shows how many steps there are or how many tasks to complete. The number of instructions should match the number of steps.
- If there is more than one instruction in the same paragraph, the first one is likely to get noticed but the others will get missed.
- Breaking up text into smaller steps makes it easier for the voter to follow, and less intimidating than a big body of text.

Language: tone


- Write in a polite and friendly way. Be careful not to sound officious or formal, and do not use threatening language.

i Explanation

- People find formal language intimidating, particularly when it is threatening (e.g. talking about crime and fraud). This may put them off and make them more concerned that they might do something wrong. Voters need to be informed, but not threatened.

Language: style

- Be direct and use the affirmative voice, e.g. 'Do this, write this, tell us...' Use 'please' in front of the instruction to avoid sounding rude or abrupt.
- Use personal language e.g. 'we', 'you', rather than 'the council', 'the voter'.
- Try to phrase instructions so that they say what to do, rather than what not to do.
- Put the choice before the action, e.g. 'If you need help, please speak to a member of staff'.
- Write in short, simple sentences.


 Detailed guidance:
Writing in plain
language
(Section 6E)

Explanation

- Being direct makes it clear what the voter has to do, and helps to keep text concise.
- Only saying what the voter should do avoids the potential for confusion or the voter following the wrong instruction, especially if they are reading quickly or just glancing at instructions for reference.
- Putting the choice before the action means the reader can choose whether or not to do it. If the action comes first the reader may just follow it regardless.

Plain language

- Be concise and use familiar, everyday language. Avoid technical and legal terms, and jargon that would not be understood by someone unfamiliar with elections. Explain any unfamiliar terms, or everyday words used as technical terms.
- Use words that accurately and precisely describe things and actions.

 Detailed guidance:
Writing in plain
language
(Section 6E)

Explanation

- People find plain language easier to read and understand. They recognise key words and are less intimidated by familiar language.
- Being concise also means you are more likely to be able to fit the information in the space without it being cramped, using a larger font.
- Being precise avoids potential confusion or misinterpretation of instructions.

Language: consistency

- Use consistent language throughout all voter materials.

Explanation

- Using consistent language helps the voter become familiar with the words being used, and what they mean. Using different words to refer to the same thing is confusing (e.g. 'postal voting statement' and 'mailer').

Pictures

- If using pictures, choose clear, simple ones. Use one picture per instruction.
- Ensure the picture:
 - is an accurate representation of the item or action it is illustrating (e.g. an actual ballot paper that will be used at that election); and
 - fits with the context of that particular election
- Avoid pictures of ballot papers that show a vote for a particular candidate or party. Instead, show a picture of a real, but unmarked ballot paper.
- For pictorial instructions, the number of pictures should match the number of steps in the written instructions.
- Use numbers to refer to each pictured instruction and ensure that they match the written instructions.
- Put pictures with, or near, the text they relate to.
- Do not put text over the picture, and make sure the text is still aligned on the left hand side, rather than following the shape of the picture.
- For postal voting guidance, include some brief text with the pictorial instructions to say what they represent.
- Use pictures that represent real life, rather than cartoons.

Content and structure

- All voter materials should have a title to identify what they are, and what the election is.

i Explanation

- A title identifies what a document is, and shows that it belongs to an election. This helps the voter know that it is relevant to the election, and reminds them what they are voting for. This is especially important at elections that are combined, or have more than one ballot paper.

- Provide information and instructions at the relevant stage of the process, rather than all together.

i Explanation

- Giving information at the relevant stage means that people have the information and instructions when they need them, and do not have to look for them elsewhere, or remember them from before.
- If all of the information is put together, people will not read or absorb it.

- Make clear which voting system is in use, and how it works.
 - **Do not assume familiarity** – many people will be new to voting. You should not encourage people to rely on their past experience as that may not be relevant to this election, or correct.
 - **Do not rely on the voter's knowledge of other voting systems** to explain how to mark their vote, (e.g. 'instead of using an X, use numbers...'). This is confusing and does not help people who have not voted recently, or have not voted using either system before.

- Avoid duplicating information unnecessarily. Only give the same information again if it is something that the voter needs to be reminded of (e.g. how to get help). Put all relevant information together so it does not need to be repeated in other places.

i Explanation

- Grouping information together means the voter has the information they need, when they need it, and they do not have to refer to several different sources of information.
 - Duplicating information can be confusing – the voter may think they need to do something more than once, or repeat something they have already done.
- Use specific instructions tailored to each particular election. Do not use generic terms such as ‘ballot paper(s)’ and ‘vote(s)’.

i Explanation

- Instructions should be specific. Using (s) makes them ambiguous – the voter does not know whether there are one or more ballot papers, or one or more votes.

Note: if wording in legislation uses square brackets, e.g. vote[s], this means you can use the word ‘vote’ or ‘votes’. You do not need to print it with the square brackets.