

Mixed Greens

An assortment of fresh tossed ideas.

004 A ballot instructions odyssey

Stuart Holmes, election supervisor at Benton County and Jenny Greeve Design 4 Democracy fellow worked together to redesign Benton County ballot instructions. In this edition of Mixed Greens they answer questions about their experience.

Why did you decide to undertake a ballot instruction redesign project?

Stuart: Voters didn't read the instructions. Even I didn't read the instructions. That is when I knew something needed to be done. I saw a few examples from other states and decided we could create something better.

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Jenny: I first noticed ballot instructions when voting in New York in the 2004 Presidential Election.

I walked out of the polling center thoroughly confused by my ballot, praying that I had voted correctly. Being an art student at the time, I had become acutely aware of the design of daily experiences, and so after leaving the polling center so confused, I wondered what the experience must be like for those that have weak reading or comprehension skills, or low vision, or a disability, if it was that difficult for an educated, design-oriented, 20-something.

This inspired me to apply for the Design for Democracy Fellowship and to work on ballot instructions for Washington State.

Please outline the steps that were involved.

Stuart: First, I spoke with our Election Administrator and our County Auditor, Bobbie Gagner. Second, I created a draft illustration. I knew we had something special because everyone was excited and had suggestions. Third, I revised my first version and, fourth, did some internal usability testing which concluded with great success. Last, I did external usability testing. I continue to take voter feedback into consideration.

Jenny: Research: there is almost 10 years of research and development that has been done on the design and language of ballot instructions. I based our designs off what has been tested and successful in other jurisdictions and usability studies.

Washington usability: Libby Nieland and I did a quick usability study in June which confirmed our design and language.

Development and deployment: Stuart and I have been consulting throughout the process. Stuart provided technical details for creating the instructions and also made them available on the Hart Usergroup Site.

"The instructions...are based on 10 years of research and testing. There is method and reason behind every aspect."

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Before

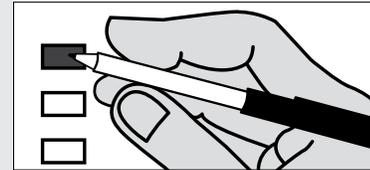
How to Vote:

1. Vote your ballot in private
2. Use a black or blue ink pen
3. Fill in the box to the left of your choice
4. To correct any mistakes draw a line through the entire candidate's name as shown below. You then have the option of making another choice.
5. For a write-in candidate, fill in the Write-in Box and write the name of the candidate in the space provided
6. Vote for only one candidate in each race
7. If you sign or identify yourself on this ballot, it will not be counted
8. For additional information about disability access units, please call (509)736-3085 or (509)786-5618
9. Refer to your yellow Secrecy Envelope for additional instructions

After

Instructions

Making selections



Completely fill in the box to the left of your choice.

Voting more than once for a contest will be an over vote and no votes for that contest will be counted.

How to correct a mistake



Draw a line through the entire candidate's name.

You then have the option of making another choice.

What was the biggest challenge?

Stuart: There are people that say "you can't do that" – including associates from our vendor. I knew it could be done.

Jenny: The magnitude of this project, and the diversity of the 39 counties. I am still grappling with how best to work with counties to implement ballot instructions and other design improvements. I am beginning to think that a county by county work model might be the best way to address the needs of each county.

Tell us about the feedback you've received.

Stuart: We got a lot of feedback on our first version of the ballot image. There was confusion about the ballot image. It showed someone marking their ballot with a pencil while the instructions directed readers to "vote your ballot with a black/blue pen."

Another problem we noticed is that voters were still not following the write-in instructions or how to correct a mistake instructions. That eventually led to the creation of two additional images for those situations.

Jenny: There has been more positive feedback than negative. Some negative commentary I have heard is, "My ballot is fine as it is." "I can't do this because of the ballot design software." "I can't do this because my county has bilingual requirements." "I don't think these changes will work."

The range of commentary is why I believe it might be time to work on ballots county by county, to address their individual needs and concerns.

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How can other counties benefit from the work you've already done?

Stuart: Some counties do not have the time to design and test their own ballot image. We have done that for them with excellent results. In previous elections we would receive several phone calls about ballot instructions. In the 2009 Primary, we received one phone call. The voter was not convinced yet that instruction image showed a pen and not a pencil.

Jenny: Hart Counties are able to access ballot instructions for the 2009 General through the Hart Usergroup Site. Ballot design will ramp up in 2010, as we begin to consult county by county.

Do you have any hints for a county interested in duplicating this project?

Stuart: Make sure you do all your usability testing before committing anything to your ballot. There is nothing worse than a voter pointing out a mistake once you have already mailed 90,000 ballots.

It was very helpful for me to see what other election administrators have created. I look at what has worked elsewhere and used it in Benton County.

Jenny: My favorite phrase, and one I have to recite to myself with any project in all aspects of life: baby steps! Shannon Cortez of Pierce County is a shining example of the power of this motto. She works on adopting certain changes election by election, instead of trying to implement change across the board in one election.

Also, do some homework. Talk to counties that have begun making changes. Ask for my assistance. See what is being done in other counties and other jurisdictions across the country.

What are the next steps for ballot design in Washington?

Stuart: I would like to continue improving our ballot design to all parts of the ballot. Including ballot titles and READ notices. With the ability to export data from the WEI and import that into our ballot design software it is certainly possible to create ballot title images that each county can use.

Jenny: Our guiding purpose is to make the ballot more usable for the voter and the voting process accessible. I hope to work one on one with counties to redesign their ballots, both the instructions and the rest of the ballot, as Stuart mentions. It's also time to begin reviewing the entire ballot experience: envelopes and additional inserts. I will work with Tracy Buckles and Snohomish County to redesign outer envelopes and secrecy envelopes.

Stay tuned, Washington. I have been asked by Design for Democracy to begin a nationwide blog and discussion group on ballot and election design, that will feature the work of Washington and will ask for good thoughts, input, ideas and similar stories from other jurisdictions.

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