

## CERTIFICATION QUICK START GUIDE

# Plain Language

For each Standard you are seeking certification in, you'll be given a questionnaire specific to that Standard to fill out. Most questionnaires will also request that you upload nonconfidential materials, such as examples of reports you have published or your standard operating procedures documents. This guide has tips to keep in mind when preparing for and filling out the Plain Language questionnaire so that your office has a more seamless experience.

## The Standard

Your election office writes and speaks in a way that allows voters to easily find, understand, and use the information they need. To achieve this standard:

- Your public materials have a clear purpose that voters can easily identify.
- You use language that speaks directly to voters: it is in active voice, uses simple words and sentences, and defines jargon.
- You test public materials with your audience to ensure they meet their intended purpose and are appropriate for your community.

## Glossary

We've tried to keep jargon to a minimum, but some is unavoidable. Since many offices use different terminology, here are some terms used in the standard or questionnaire that may be unfamiliar or you may use in a different way:

- **Plain language:** Language that makes it easy for voters to find, understand, and use the information you are trying to communicate.
- **Active voice:** Sentences where the person or thing doing the action comes before the action. For example, "the voter fills in the bubble" rather than "the bubble is filled in by the voter." In some cases, there is an implied "you" that doesn't need to be said or written when giving instructions to the reader. For example, "fill in the bubble next to the candidate's name."

## Who to include

You will get more out of the certification process and be able to complete the questionnaire more quickly if you involve the right staff in the process. Here are some suggestions for who to include for this standard:

- Staff who write or review public-facing materials (e.g., forms, instructions, published reports)
- Staff who regularly write emails or social media posts to external stakeholders (voters, the media, community groups, etc)

## Materials requested

The questionnaire will request the following materials:

- Voter-facing informational materials (e.g., voter guides, notices, results reports)
- Public-facing materials with instructions (e.g., vote by mail request forms, cure forms, poll worker sign up forms)
- Voter-facing material that includes definitions or explanations of jargon
- Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)

You may not have documents with these titles or you may have reasons that you don't use some of these types of materials. In those cases, you can provide other documents that you use in these processes, or provide explanations for what you do instead.

Please provide only the versions or portions of these (or similar) documents that would be subject to public records requests in your jurisdiction. Do not provide any confidential documents or information. We encourage you to consult with your local counsel if you have questions about whether a document can be shared.

## Example questions

Here are some examples of questions found in the certification questionnaire, to give you an idea of what you will be asked about:

- Please upload at least two documents that provide voters with important information about voting.
- If your office uses materials created by other stakeholders, please describe your office's process for translating these materials into plain language. 3-4 sentences will suffice. This could include materials your office received from the state that you updated to define jargon and/or translate it into plain language.
- Please describe your office's process for testing materials. If you have a written document that outlines the process and/or instructions, please upload that as well.

## Resources addressing this standard

If you are looking for ways to improve your processes in this area before applying for certification or to implement feedback you received about how to meet the standard, these publicly available, nonpartisan resources may help.

- [Field Guides to Ensuring Voter Intent](#): This series of nonpartisan guides includes a variety of best practices when it comes to designing voter-facing materials. Volume 2 covers tips specifically for using plain language.
- [Toolkit for Designing Voter Education Materials](#): A toolkit for creating engaging, accessible, and action-oriented voter education materials. One particular standout for help with plain language is the bite-snack-meal framework for writing at different levels of detail.
- [Usability testing kit](#): A collection of nonpartisan guidelines and templates to help test materials.

Using or reviewing these resources is not required for your office to be certified: certification is based on achieving the standard, not on using specific materials. These nonpartisan resources are provided for informational and educational purposes only.

## Certification program information

For information on the certification program as a whole, as well as general advice on how to get the most out of the certification process, consult these resources:

- Our [guide](#) to the certification process
- [FAQs](#) about the Alliance certification program
- Go to [CertifyExcellence.org](https://certifyexcellence.org) to apply