

Mail-in ballot design

Washington State return ballot envelopes: An analysis of design elements and ballot rejections

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This work was part of a project with the Evans School of Public Policy & Governance at the University of Washington studying mail-ballot rejections in Washington State.

<https://evans.uw.edu/community-engagement/epic/washington-state-ballots-project/>

Summary

In September 2023, the Center for Civic Design conducted an analysis of the 15 return envelopes with the lowest challenge rates in Washington. Our approach involved categorizing layout structures and analyzing specific sections within each envelope: declarations, signature, witness, postmark and signature reminders, and county information.

Counties in this analysis include Franklin, Ferry, Clallam, Greys Harbor, Pacific, Whatcom, Chelan, Pend Oreille, Pierce, Skagit, Cowlitz, Thurston, Island, Asotin, and Klickitat.

Our research sought to understand how each envelope conveys information through its layout and sections. The primary research question was: are there any commonalities to the layouts that have the fewest rejections?

We identified 8 distinct layout structures within the 15 envelopes, each featuring a unique combination of sections. While we found no conclusive evidence to suggest if one layout works better than the others, we did notice that certain design features do a better job at showing important information than others and that some consistent elements create barriers to communication. Notably, we found that declarations consistently occupied the most space in the layout, signature sections were typically in a boxed or open-box format, and, despite variations in design and text, both signature and postmark reminders appeared frequently across the 15 envelopes.

Principles

We've gathered 5 principles from our research to improve return envelopes in Washington and reduce the number of rejected envelopes:

Make the text easier to read

Use the guidelines for plain language to simplify text and reduce the number of words.

Why: Having fewer words makes it easier to understand. It also allows for more white space around each block of text, so each element on the envelope stands out. This applies especially to the declaration.

Use visual cues to draw attention to important information

Use text size and bolding and visual elements like icons or boxes to make the most important things on the envelope the most visually prominent. Use icons to reinforce meaning, for example, a checkmark for actions a voter must take.

Why: When voters don't see important information or areas for them to sign and date the envelope, their ballot might not be counted. This applies especially to the signature area.

Create space between sections

Use spacing and layout to make sure each part of the envelope has its own space.

Why: White space is a buffer between each element on the envelope, helping voters see everything clearly.

Create a clear layout

Use a grid or column margins to align elements on the envelope so that it looks orderly and creates a flow through the information and actions needed.

Why: Combined with space between sections, this helps voters scan the information easily.

Put information where voters will find it

Arrange instructions and warnings so that they are in a place where they are most likely to be seen at the right time.

Why: Voters are focused on their ballot, not memorizing the process for packing the envelope. When information is in the right place, they read it "just in time." This applies especially to the reminder to sign and date the envelope and return deadlines.

A design to reduce missing signatures

This is an illustration of how required and important information can be arranged on the envelope to make it easier to read, draw attention to important information, and make the envelopes identifiable across the state.

Election logo or seal adds to official identification

Color and text identifies the return envelope

Draw attention to important information
Adding the return dates prominently on the front of the envelope gives it a prominent position with no competing information.

The illustration shows a return envelope with a purple vertical band on the left side. The band contains the text "(election logo)", "Return envelope", and a checklist: "Return your ballot as early as possible. It must be: Postmarked by Election Day OR Put in a ballot drop box by 8 pm on Election Day". To the right of the band, there is a postage meter area with vertical bars and a box that says "NO POSTAGE NEEDED IF MAILED IN THE UNITED STATES". Below this is the "OFFICIAL ELECTION MAIL" logo. At the bottom right, the return address is listed: "County Name, Department of Elections, 4321 Franklin Avenue, City, WA 99999-1234".

Create a clear layout + space between sections

Leaving space between each section and putting elements in a logical flow makes the ballot clearer.

Put information where voters will find it. The checklist on the flap puts it in view when the envelope is sealed.

Make the text easier to read. Editing the declaration for plain language makes it easier to read and adds white space

Draw attention to important information. The signature block is distinct, using graphic elements and color to make them it stand out.

The illustration shows the flap of a ballot envelope. At the top left, there is a checklist icon and the text "Did you sign and date below, so your ballot can be counted?". To the right is a phone icon and the text "206-555-1212 www.county.gov/elections". Below this is the "Voter's declaration" section with a list of qualifications to vote. To the right is the "If you cannot sign" section with instructions and two witness signature lines. At the bottom left is the "Voter, sign and date here" section with a signature line, a date line, and an optional email/phone number line. To the right is a large rounded rectangle for the voter's address. At the bottom left, there is a warning icon and text: "It is illegal to forge a signature or cast another person's ballot. Attempting to vote when not qualified, attempting to vote more than once, or falsely signing this declaration is a felony punishable by a maximum imprisonment of 5 years, a maximum fine of \$10,000, or both."

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Overall envelope layouts

We identified a total of 8 distinct layout types, each characterized by varying degrees of difference. In most cases, these layouts feature a two-column structure. As shown in *Table 1*, the left column contains the declaration, signature, and witness sections, stacked one above the other. The right column contains postmark reminders and/or county information. However, there are a few exceptions. In Thurston County, the declaration takes up the entirety of the left column, leaving the signature and witness section on the right column. In Cowlitz County, the layout is on a single column (declaration, signature, and witness section). In Pacific County, the declaration and signature reminder are on the right while the signature section and witness sections are on the left.

Declarations are the dominant element in all layout types. If included, the signature reminders tend to be positioned in the left column, above the declaration. Postmark reminders, if included, are more commonly found floating within the right column.

Table 1. Layouts of the back of mail-in ballot envelopes

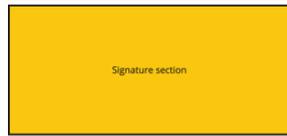
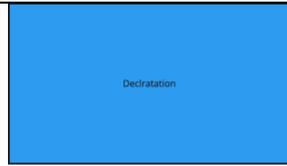
Visual presentation of the elements	Elements in the layout
	<p>Column 1: Declaration (blue) Signature (orange) Postmark reminder (green)</p> <p>Column 2: Witness signature (light green)</p>
	<p>Column 1: Declaration (blue)</p> <p>Column 2: Signature (orange) Witness signature (light green)</p>
	<p>Full page: Declaration (blue)</p> <p>Column 1: Signature section (orange) Witness signature section (light green)</p> <p>Column 2: Signature reminder (yellow)</p>
	<p>Column 1: Signature reminder (yellow) Declaration (blue) Signature section (orange) Witness section (light green)</p> <p>Column 2: County information (teal) Postmark reminder (dark green)</p>

Visual presentation of the elements

Elements in the layout

Signature Reminder	County information	<p>Column 1: Signature reminder (yellow) Declaration (blue) Signature section (orange) Witness signature section (light green)</p> <p>Column 2: County information (teal)</p>
Declaration		
Signature section		
Witness signature section		
Signature reminder		<p>Column 1: Signature reminder (yellow) Declaration (blue) Signature section (orange) Postmark reminder (dark green)</p> <p>Column 2: Witness section (light green)</p>
Declaration	Witness section	
Signature section		
Postmark Reminder		
	Signature Reminder	<p>Column 1: Signature section (orange) Witness section (light green)</p> <p>Column 2: Signature reminder (yellow) Declaration (blue)</p>
Signature section	Declaration	
Witness section		
Declaration		<p>Full page: Declaration (blue)</p> <p>Column 1: Signature section (orange) Witness section (light green)</p>
Signature section		
Witness section		

Visual presentation of the elements



Elements in the layout

Column 1:

Declaration (blue)
Signature section (orange)
Witness section (light green)

Column 2:

Postmark reminder (dark green)
Signature reminder (yellow)

Column 1:

Signature reminder (yellow)
Declaration (blue)
Signature section (orange)
Witness section (light green)

Column 2:

Postmark reminder (dark green)

Declarations

In our analysis, we identified 3 declaration formats: block paragraph text, bulleted lists, and wide text. As shown in Table 2, block text paragraphs and bulleted lists appear at nearly the same rate in the 15 envelopes, while wide text is less common. Regardless of the format, declarations consistently occupy the largest portion of any layout and typically serve as the initial focal point for readers. Declarations are presented in a single-column arrangement, stacked above the signature and witness section except for one case.

Table 2. Declaration formats

Declaration format	Image of a declaration in this format
<p>Block paragraph text is the most common declaration format. This declaration format sits above the signature and witness sections and takes up a large portion of space within a layout design.</p> <p>The block paragraph text condenses a significant amount of information into a single compact section. It's useful when accompanied by a header and draws a clear distinction from the sections around it. However, as it's the initial focal point for readers, its size, word count, and use of legal language pose readability challenges, leading many to skip it. Because of its size and proximity to the signature section, date, and witness section, it tends to bury important information under anything that comes after.</p>	<p>Voter's Declaration</p> <p>I do solemnly swear or affirm under penalty of perjury that I am: A United States citizen; A Washington state resident that meets the requirements for voting mandated by state law; At least 18 years old on election day, or 17 years old at the primary and 18 years old by the day of the November general election; Voting only once in this election and not voting in any other United States jurisdiction; Not serving a sentence of total confinement under the jurisdiction of the Department of Corrections for a Washington felony conviction or currently incarcerated for a federal or out-of-state felony conviction; Not disqualified from voting due to a court order; and Aware it is illegal to forge a signature or cast another person's ballot and that attempting to vote when not qualified, attempting to vote more than once, or falsely signing this declaration is a felony punishable by a maximum imprisonment of five years, a maximum fine of \$10,000, or both.</p>
<p>The bulleted list breaks the declaration into 6-7 bullet points. They're usually accompanied by a header and a signature reminder. Bulleted lists take up the most vertical space within their respective layouts. They are helpful because they break down a lot of information into 6-7 key points and are less overwhelming to the eye. They also leave room for a signature reminder, which most envelopes with this format include.</p>	<p>Voter's Declaration</p> <p>I do solemnly swear or affirm under penalty of perjury that I am:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A United States citizen;• A Washington state resident that meets the requirements for voting mandated by state law;• At least 18 years old on election day, or 17 years old at the primary and 18 years old by the day of the November general election;• Voting only once in this election and not voting in any other United States jurisdiction;• Not serving a sentence of total confinement under the jurisdiction of the Department of Corrections for a Washington felony conviction or currently incarcerated for a federal or out-of-state felony conviction;• Not disqualified from voting due to a court order; and• Aware it is illegal to forge a signature or cast another person's ballot and that attempting to vote when not qualified, attempting to vote more than once, or falsely signing this declaration is a felony punishable by a maximum imprisonment of five years, a maximum fine of \$10,000, or both.

Table 3. Format of the declaration used in the 15 counties

County	Block	Bulleted	Wide
Franklin	■		
Ferry	■		
Clallam	■		
Greys Harbor		■	
Pacific		■	
Whatcom	■		
Chelan	■		
Pend Oreille			■
Pierce		■	
Skagit		■	
Cowlitz			■
Thurston	■		
Island		■	
Klickitat	■		

Readability Analysis

Example 1: Original text

Difficulty: Post-Graduate

I do solemnly swear or affirm under penalty of perjury that I am: A United States citizen; A Washington State resident that meets the requirements for voting mandated by state law; At least 18 years old on Election Day, or 17 years old at the primary and 18 years old by the day of the November general election; Voting only once in this election and not voting in any other United States jurisdiction; Not serving a sentence of total confinement under the jurisdiction of the Department of Corrections for a Washington felony conviction or currently incarcerated for a federal or out-of-state felony conviction; Not disqualified from voting due to a court order; and Aware it is illegal to forge a signature or cast another person's ballot and that attempting to vote when not qualified, attempting to vote more than once, or falsely signing this declaration is a felony punishable by a maximum imprisonment of five years, a maximum fine of \$10,000, or both.

Example 2: Original text with bullets

Difficulty: High School

I do solemnly swear or affirm under penalty of perjury that I am:

- A United States citizen
- A Washington State resident that meets the requirements for voting mandated by state law
- At least 18 years old on Election Day, or 17 years old at the primary and 18 years old by the day of the November general election
- Voting only once in this election and not voting in any other United States jurisdiction
- Not serving a sentence of total confinement under the jurisdiction of the Department of Corrections for a Washington felony conviction or currently incarcerated for a federal or out-of-state felony conviction
- Not disqualified from voting due to a court order
- Aware it is illegal to forge a signature or cast another person's ballot and that attempting to vote when not qualified, attempting to vote more than once, or falsely signing this declaration is a felony punishable by a maximum imprisonment of five years, a maximum fine of \$10,000, or both.

Example 3: Simplified

Difficulty: 11th Grade

I swear or affirm under penalty of perjury that I meet all qualifications to vote:

- I am a United States citizen
- I am a resident in Washington state
- I will be at least 18 years old on Election Day or 17 years old at the primary and 18 years old by the November general election
- I am not serving a sentence of total confinement under the jurisdiction of the Department of Corrections of Washington for a felony conviction
- I am not currently incarcerated for a federal or out-of-state felony conviction
- This is the only ballot that I will cast in this election
- The signature below is my own

Example 4: Further Simplified

Difficulty: 6th Grade

I swear or affirm under penalty of perjury that:

- I am a United States citizen.
- I meet all other qualifications to vote.
- I am not serving a sentence of total confinement under the jurisdiction of the Department of Corrections for a felony conviction.
- I am not currently incarcerated for a federal or out-of-state felony conviction.
- This is the only ballot that I will cast in this election.
- The signature below is my own.

Signature Section

We identified 3 types of signature sections: boxed, open box, line. As shown in *Table 5*, boxed and open-boxed formats appear at an almost equal rate among the 15 envelopes, while the line format is less common. Signature sections usually appear in between the declaration and the witness section, although there are a few exceptions. In Pacific County, the signature section, in line format, appears to the left of the declaration. In Thurston County, the signature section, in open box format, appears to the right of the declaration.

Table 4. Signature formats

Signature Formats

The **boxed signature format** features clear boundaries between the signature line and the rest of the form. In most cases, this boxed format is positioned beneath the declaration and includes the date and phone number field within it. These boxes are typically accompanied by a header.

This format emphasizes the signature by establishing distinct boundaries within the overall layout.

The **open box format** features an unbounded space, lacking clearly defined borders. The “L” shaped signature line is positioned beneath a floating header labeled, “Sign & Date”, resulting in a semi-enclosed space. The open box signature appears as frequently as the boxed format.

Image of signature section

It is illegal to forge a signature or cast another person's ballot and that attempting to vote when not qualified, attempting to vote more than once, or falsely signing this declaration is a felony punishable by a maximum imprisonment of five years, a maximum fine of \$10,000, or both.

Sign and date below (required)

X _____ today's date / /

email or phone number (optional, in case there is an issue with your signature)

If you are unable to write your signature, make a mark in the signature area above. Have your mark witnessed and signed by two people below. You may not use a power of attorney to sign for someone else.

It is illegal to forge a signature or cast another person's ballot and that attempting to vote when not qualified, attempting to vote more than once, or falsely signing this declaration is a felony punishable by a maximum imprisonment of five years, a maximum fine of \$10,000, or both.

2 Sign & date

signature of voter above

date above

phone number above (optional, in case there is an issue with your signature)

Signature Formats

The **line format** is characterized by a single line running across the signature section. Typically, there is a brief explanatory text positioned just below the line. In some instances line format include a signature reminder in the form of a small black arrow accompanied by the text “Sign Here”

The line format appears 4 times among the envelopes, with 3 of these layouts being duplicates of each other. This suggests that they originate from a single source. While most signature lines are positioned below the declarations, 1 unique layout features the signature section on the left and the declaration on the right.

Image of signature section

I do solemnly swear or affirm under penalty of perjury that I am: a citizen of the United States; a resident of the state of Washington and meet the requirements for voting mandated by state law; at least 18 years old on election day; voting only once in this election; not under the authority of the Department of Corrections for a Washington felony conviction; not disqualified from voting due to a court order; and not voting in any other jurisdiction in the United States for this election. It is illegal to forge a signature or cast another person's ballot. Attempting to vote when not qualified, attempting to vote more than once, or falsely signing this declaration is a felony punishable by a maximum imprisonment of five years, a maximum fine of \$10,000, or both.

(Signature of Voter)

Sign Here

(Date Ballot Voted)

(Daytime Telephone)

If you are unable to sign: Attempt to sign or make a mark on the Signature line in the presence of two witnesses. The two witnesses should sign below.

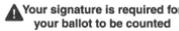
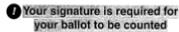
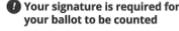
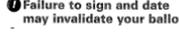
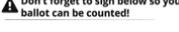
Table 5. What signature type is used in the 15 counties?

County	Boxed	Open Box	Line
Franklin		■	
Ferry			■
Clallam	■		
Greys Harbor	■		
Pacific			■
Whatcom		■	
Chelan		■	
Pend Oreille		■	
Pierce	■		
Skagit	■		
Cowlitz	■		
Thurston		■	
Island	■		
Asotin			■
Klickitat			■

Signature reminders

Reminders for voters to sign the envelope vary in design and text. While most signature reminders appear above the declaration, the most consistent reminder appears as a black arrow with text next to the horizontal signature line. Given their similarities in layout, we believe that this layout originates from a single source. As shown in *Table 11*, signature reminders appear in 9 envelopes in the 15 envelopes.

Table 6. Envelopes with signature reminders, design, and text

County	Signature reminder	Visual on the envelope
Ferry	■	
Clallam	■	
Greys Harbor	■	
Pacific	■	
Whatcom	■	
Chelan	■	
Island	■	
Asotin	■	
Klickitat	■	

Witness Section

The witness section usually appears below or next to the voter signature area.

Examples of witness section layouts

If you are unable to sign: Attempt to sign or make a mark on the Signature line in the presence of two witnesses. The two witnesses should sign below. Power of Attorney cannot be used to sign for someone else.

If you cannot sign, make your mark in the "Signature of Voter" area above. Have your mark witnessed by two people. The witnesses will sign below. You may not use a power of attorney to sign for someone else.

If you are unable to write your signature, make a mark in the signature area above. Have two witnesses sign below. Power of attorney cannot be used to sign for someone else.

If the voter is unable to sign his/her name, he/she must mark an "x" and have it Witnessed by 2 people. You may not use a power of attorney to sign for someone else.

If you are unable to sign

The voter may make a mark, witnessed by two other people, if the voter is unable to write their signature. A power of attorney cannot be used to sign a ballot for someone else.

If you can't sign, make a mark and have two witnesses sign below.

If you cannot sign Si no puede firmar

Make a mark in the "signature of voter" area at left in the presence of two witnesses. Have the witnesses sign below. POA may not sign for voter.

Intente hacer una marca en el área que dice "firma del votante" a su izquierda en presencia de dos testigos. Los testigos deberán firmar abajo. La firma notarial / de poder no es válida.

A power of attorney is **NOT** acceptable. **If you are unable to sign, make a mark or use a signature stamp to make a mark in the area above.** Your mark or signature stamp **must** be witnessed and signed below by two people.

If you are unable to sign, make a mark in the signature area above. Your mark must be witnessed and signed by two people below. A power of attorney or signature stamp is **NOT** acceptable.

If you are not able to sign, make a mark in the signature area above. Have your mark witnessed and signed by two people. *POA may not sign for voter.*

If you cannot sign make a mark and have two witnesses sign below. Power of Attorney cannot be used to sign for someone else.

If you are unable to write your signature, make a mark in the signature area above. Have your mark witnessed and signed by two people below. You may not use a power of attorney to sign for someone else.

Table 7. Witness signature formats

Formats

The **open box format** features two lines that form an "L" shape. There's usually text above it, creating an open box like design.

The **line format** is characterized by horizontal lines with the text "Witness #" underneath. This is the most common witness signature section format.

Image of witness section format

If you are not able to sign, make a mark in the signature area above. Have your mark witnessed and signed by two people. *POA may not sign for voter.*

witness 1 signature above witness 2 signature above

If you are unable to sign: Attempt to sign or make a mark on the Signature line in the presence of two witnesses. The two witnesses should sign below. Power of Attorney cannot be used to sign for someone else.

Witness #1

Witness #2

Table 8. Witness signature formats

County	Open box	Line
Franklin	■	
Ferry		■
Clallam		■
Greys Harbor		■
Pacific		■
Whatcom	■	
Chelan	■	
Pend Oreille	■	
Pierce	■	
Skagit		■
Cowlitz		■
Thurston		■
Island		■
Asotin		■
Klickitat		■

Postmark Reminders

Postmark reminders appear in various forms throughout the 15 envelopes. Franklin County’s postmark reminder stands out from the other counties because it includes the specific date for election day.

Table 9. Postmark Reminders

County	Postmark reminder	Postmark reminder with specific date	Visual (if present on envelope)
Franklin	■	■	<p>3 Postmark or deposit your ballot by 8PM on Election Day. Su boleta debe ser enviada y sellada por el correo postal o depositada en una urna electoral antes de las 8PM del Día de las Elecciones. Election Day: November 8, 2022 Día de las Elecciones: 8 de noviembre de 2022</p>
Clallam	■		 <p>Return your ballot early! Your ballot must be postmarked by Election Day or returned to a ballot drop box by 8 p.m. Election Day.</p>
Whatcom	■		<p>To be counted, return your ballot in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a ballot drop box by 8:00 pm Election Day • the mail, postmarked by Election Day
Chelan	■		<p>3 Postmark or deposit your ballot by 8pm on election day.</p>
Pierce	■		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Postmark or drop off your ballot by 8 p.m. Election Day. • Your ballot won't count if you don't sign this envelope.
Island	■		 <p>Ballots bearing late USPS postmarks cannot be counted. Ballot drop boxes close at 8 p.m. on Election Day.</p>