USDA

Food stamps make America strong

GUIDE

To Assessing Food Stamp **Application** Forms

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Acknowledgements

Foreword

The Food Stamp Program is the Nation's guarantee that no American has to go hungry. Every person who meets the eligibility standards is entitled to food stamps. Yet, we find that over one-third of the people who are eligible for food stamps do not participate in the program. Studies show that some of these eligible people just don't know about the Food Stamp Program; others believe their benefit would be too small to provide much help. Still others view the food stamp application process as too burdensome.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service is working hard to address the factors that keep eligible families from receiving food stamps. We have enlisted the help of food banks, faith-based organizations, and other non-profit groups in reaching out to thousands of Americans who may be eligible for food stamps. We have set up a toll-free hotline (1-800-221-5689) that connects callers with live operators who can answer questions about food stamps, in English or Spanish, and provide the toll-free number of each State's food stamp agency. Other projects focus on finding better ways to reach elderly people and encourage their participation.

Many States have been revising their food stamp application forms to make them more user-friendly. Each State develops its own food stamp application form that is used to gather the information that documents eligibility for benefits. Some forms also serve additional programs, such as Medicaid and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. These forms can become lengthy and cumbersome as they incorporate policy changes from year to year, and there is some evidence that the quality of the application form can influence participation in the program.

To help State food stamp agencies develop application forms that are easier to understand and use, the Food and Nutrition Service awarded a contract to the Kleimann Communication Group (KCG), an established Washington DC firm that has experience in providing research-based assistance to agencies that want to improve their communication with the public. KCG is providing free technical assistance to States selected this year and will begin working with several more States in September 2003.

We also asked the Kleimann Communication Group to develop this *Guide to Assessing Food Stamp Application Forms* to help State application form developers evaluate and improve their forms. Using the guide, State personnel can conduct a step-by-step analysis of their forms to improve their form's organization, wording, and directions. Numerous examples show how to fix the kinds of communication mistakes often found in application forms. The guide also shows how to make sure forms comply with food stamp regulations. While its coverage is extensive, the guide's examples and checklists make it easy to use. We are very pleased to offer this practical and useful guide to our colleagues in State government.

Kate Coler
Deputy Administrator
Food Stamp Program

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■ Overview

State staff members like you have worked hard to make food stamp application forms easier for applicants to understand and use, but the criticisms persist: the forms are too long, too difficult, and too intimidating. Now it's time to revise your state's application form again and you've got the job of guiding the revision. How do you make the form easier for applicants to complete and for workers to use?

This Guide offers a specific starting point, a way of assessing your current form to identify aspects that need improvement. It takes you step-by-step through the process of analyzing your form, using easy techniques borrowed from expert forms designers.

Once you diagnose the problems in your form, you can begin to fix them and apply solutions from experts. By using this Guide, you can create a solid foundation for the revision work that lies ahead.

Why is assessing your form so important?

It's not always easy to identify the problems your form poses for applicants. You are an expert in the subject matter of the form, and the applicant is not. What looks straight-forward to you may be very difficult for applicants to understand.

Using the tools in this Guide can improve your form in many ways. The Guide:

■ **Allows you to see the form from your applicants' perspective.** Assessing your form allows you to step back and see how well applicants can use and understand your

form. When you review your form from the applicants' perspective, you uncover problems that you might not have seen in a normal, technical review of the form which is mostly focused on getting the right content.

▮ **Provides a structure for reviewing your form.** Redesigning a form can be overwhelming—often you have many competing issues that must be addressed. The Guide allows you to use a step-by-step process to review your form so that you cover all of the important issues in a structured way.

▮ **Ensures that you don't skip or ignore important aspects of forms design.** In the hectic pace to meet deadlines, you may inadvertently miss important elements of your redesign. The tools in this Guide give you a way of checking and double-checking to make sure that you've covered all the bases and created a form that people can readily use.

▮ **Helps you balance length with improvement.** In most food stamp applications, page length is an issue. But for a form to work, it doesn't necessarily need more information or less information—it needs the **right information** for users. The tools in this Guide will help you strike the right balance between making improvements to your form and attending to the issue of length. The Guide helps you identify where you'll need additional information to explain concepts and to guide your applicants through the form effectively. At the same time, it helps you tighten your form by deleting unnecessary questions, loose constructions, and unnecessary words.

▮ **Helps you focus on continuous improvement.** The tools in this Guide are designed to ensure that you'll ultimately create a form that works—for your agency and for your food stamp applicants. The tools in this guide can be used at several points in the redesign process—allowing you to assess and re-assess new drafts of your form so that you get continuous improvement.

How do you use this Guide to help you assess your form?

The Assessment Guide provides two ways to help you assess your form and find out how well it works. It is divided into two parts.

Part 1. Assessing Your Own Form.

Part 1 of this Guide provides a structured assessment to use as you examine your current form in detail. Developed around the principles of good forms design, this structured assessment has several Checklists and Solutions sections to help you examine your form for:

- ▌ **Task Completion**: Can people use the form appropriately for its intended purpose?

- ▌ **Navigation**: Can people follow the right pathways in order to complete the form easily?

- ▌ **Comprehension**: Can people understand the form?

- ▌ **Policy Compliance**: Does the form meet all of the necessary federal regulations?

After you've assessed your form, you'll have a good idea of where your form needs more work. Your assessment will help you know where you are, so you can then decide where you need to go with your revision.

Part 2. Assessing Your Form by Testing with Applicants.

When you assess your own form, you will target areas where you **think** applicants will have problems. But how will you **know** if they do? You could wait until the form is finished, approved, printed, distributed, and being used in the field to know whether applicants can fill it out completely and correctly. If you do that, however, and then find out that applicants have problems using the form, fixing those problems will be very costly. A much better way is to test the form with users while you are developing it.

Part 2 of this Guide discusses testing your form with applicants. Testing helps you eliminate the guesswork as you revise your form. By watching real applicants work with your form, you'll have a better sense of where the form succeeds and where it needs more work. Testing allows you to stay in the real world—your applicants' world—and focus your attention where your applicants have had trouble.

Where should you look for more information?

This Guide synthesizes research from the field of document design into a functional, how-to resource for application form developers. Though the Guide came out of extensive research, some specific resources are particularly relevant and will be helpful to you as you redesign your state's food stamp application. You can find a list these resources with annotations at **https://www.fnspartner.usda.gov**. Please visit the website and explore the resources there.

▌ Part I:
Assessing Your Own Form

A form collects information, but it is also a means of communicating with applicants. In a sense, your form is a conversation with your applicants. You ask them questions and they answer. But how well that conversation goes depends on how well you've designed your form to meet your applicants' needs.

It is essential that food stamp applications contain the right information. It is equally critical that the information is structured and presented in a way that applicants can understand and use. Even the most technically accurate form is useless if applicants can't understand and use it.

What makes a form work?

A form works when it is both technically accurate and easy for applicants to understand and use. To create a form that works, you must focus on addressing four critical factors of forms design:

- **Task Completion:** Can people use the form appropriately for its intended purpose?
- **Navigation:** Can people follow the right pathways in order to complete the form easily?
- **Comprehension:** Can people understand the form?
- **Policy Compliance:** Does the form meet all of the necessary federal regulations?

How can you tell if your form works?

Often, it won't be easy to tell at first glance. Instead, you must spend some time assessing your form in a structured way. By studying your form closely, you ensure that you identify the problems and address them appropriately.

This section includes tools to help you assess your form. It will help you follow principles of good forms design to

- critically examine your form to see how well it works, and
- address and fix the problems that you uncover.

How do you assess your form?

To assess your form, you will:

1. **Review your form using the Checklists at the beginning of each section.** The checklists have several questions you'll need to answer about your form. Review your form critically to answer these questions. If you answer "Yes" to a question, then it means that you feel that your form fully addresses that aspect of forms design. If you answer "No" to a question, then you've identified a problem that you need to fix in your next draft. How you answer the questions will guide you to the areas that you'll need to focus on as you revise your form. The checklist will guide you to the Solutions section where you'll find tools to fix that particular problem.

2. **Use the Solutions section.** The Solutions section helps you better understand the problems you've identified in your form and offers clear techniques for fixing those problems. It contains examples from food stamp applications that illustrate each problem and are marked by the icon 👎. Then a revised example is shown marked by the icon 👍.

When should you assess your form?

Assessing your form is not a one-time activity. Rather, it is something that you do throughout the process of redesigning your form so that you get continuous improvement. The model of the ideal forms design process looks like this:

The Forms Design Process Model©
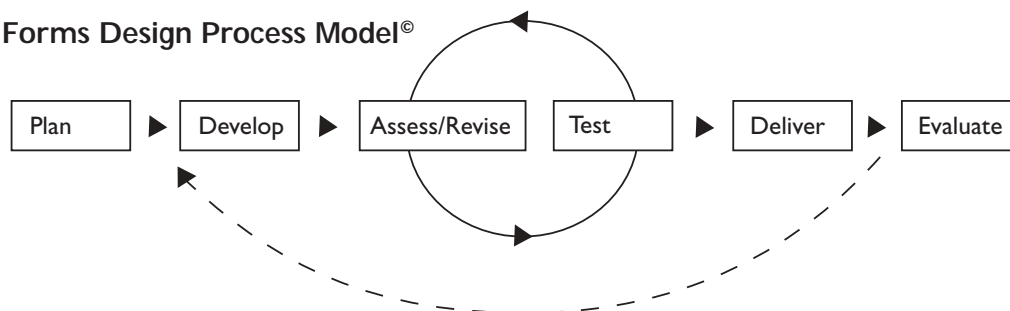
When you…	You should use this part of the Guide to…
Plan	**Assess your current form before you even begin to redesign**. Assessing at this time will help you see where the problems are in the current version and how you can start fixing those problems. Your assessment will provide a foundation for the revised form.
Develop, Assess, and Revise	**Assess different drafts of the form**. A new, revised form is never completed in one draft. Rather, you'll develop several drafts, assessing each new draft of your form to mark where you've made improvements and where your form still needs work. Your assessments can provide you with a roadmap for each new set of revisions. Each time you create a new draft, you can assess it to find out where you still might need improvements.

Task Completion

Have you ever sat down to fill out a food stamp application? If you have, then you know that it takes time and effort. To meet legal requirements, food stamp applications contain many questions to answer, decisions to make, and tasks to complete. In short, they can be hard work. When you focus on Task Completion in designing your form, you make that work easier for your applicants.

Forms at their core are action-based documents. For a form to work well, it must help applicants understand the entire process of getting food stamps, including what they need to do **before** they fill out the form, **while** they fill out the form, and **after** they fill out the form. Just as you might answer applicants' questions if they were sitting with you at your desk, you want to create a form that answers the questions of applicants who are filling it out on their own.

Your applicants need context for the form and the application process—when they understand the context, they'll understand how they fit into it. You can't always be there to provide one-on-one support to your applicants, so you need a well-designed form that can stand alone—a form that applicants can complete accurately and that helps them feel comfortable about the entire process of getting food stamps. When you tackle Task Completion, you'll find that applicants will be more successful in filling out your form. That means less work for them and less work for you.

Review your form using the Task Completion Checklist and then revise your form using the Task Completion Solutions section.

Task Completion Checklist

Principle 1.
Create an introduction to help applicants understand the form and the process of getting food stamps

1a. *Does your form have an introduction that explains the context of the form and helps applicants understand what to do with it?*

❏ Yes
❏ No ➠ *Go to page 13*

1b. *Does your form have an introduction that explains how the form fits into the entire process of getting food stamps?*

❏ Yes
❏ No ➠ *Go to page 14*

1c. *Does your form have an introduction that tells applicants what they should do after they complete the form?*

❏ Yes
❏ No ➠ *Go to page 15*

1d. *Does your form have an introduction that includes a list of items that applicants should bring to their interviews?*

❏ Yes
❏ No ➠ *Go to page 16*

Principle 2.
Make the content of the form more manageable for applicants

2a. *Are questions grouped in the same way applicants would think about them?*

❏ Yes
❏ No ➠ *Go to page 17*

2b. *Are questions ordered in the same way applicants would think about them?*

❏ Yes
❏ No ➠ *Go to page 18*

2c. *Does your form give a general overview of what's in it as well as overviews of each section?*

❏ Yes
❏ No ➠ *Go to page 19*

2d. *Does your form include instructions to introduce and explain sections?*

❏ Yes
❏ No ➠ *Go to page 20*

2e. *Does your form include a "How to" booklet?*

❏ Yes
❏ No ➠ *Go to page 21*

2f. *Does your form use examples?*

❏ Yes
❏ No ➠ *Go to page 21*

2g. *Does your form have an overall tone that is helpful and professional?*

❏ Yes
❏ No ➠ *Go to page 22*

Task Completion Solutions

Principle 1.
Create an introduction to help applicants understand the form and the process of getting food stamps

Many of your applicants are coming to you for help for the first time. Others have been through the process before but may still be unsure of how to do it "right." All applicants—no matter what their level of experience—will have questions about the form and the process. For example, they might want to know when they can get their benefits, how best to complete the form, or what happens when they've completed it. They need answers to these questions to help them understand the big picture. Having a sense of this big picture will increase their chances of filling out the form and getting through the process successfully.

Your job is to anticipate those questions and answer them in an introduction. If you were talking to your applicants in person, you would naturally answer their questions and help set context in order to inform them and put them at ease. Your form is simply a different kind of conversation with them. Don't make applicants guess what the form and process is all about—tell them clearly at the very beginning.

1a. *Does your form have an introduction that explains the context of the form and helps applicants understand what to do with it?*

Food stamp applications often jump right into eligibility questions without giving applicants a context for the form. As a result, applicants have questions that simply don't get answered.

Solution   Answer applicants' basic questions about the form and the process of getting food stamps in your introduction.

How to
- **List your applicants' basic questions.** Brainstorm a list of questions that you believe applicants might have as they sit down to fill out your application. Ask interviewers for a list of questions that applicants ask on the phone or in person.

- **Answer these questions.** Set aside some space in your introduction to answer these questions as fully but succinctly as you can.

Example   Here is a generic list of questions that most applicants will have:
- What are food stamps?
- Who can get food stamps?
- How do I apply for food stamps?

- ❚   What if I need food stamps immediately because of an emergency?
- ❚   How do I use this form?
- ❚   How do I get help with this form?
- ❚   What do I do when I finish this form?

1b. *Does your form have an introduction that explains how the form fits into the entire process of getting food stamps?*

Applicants often don't understand where the form fits into the entire process of getting food stamps. They may not understand, for example, what the timeline is or that filling out the form is just a first step in the process and that other steps will follow.

Solution   Include a section in your introduction that helps applicants understand how completing the form fits into the process of getting food stamps.

How to

- ❚   **Identify the entire process your applicants need to go through to get food stamps.** This process should include all of the typical steps your applicants will need to complete.

- ❚   **List out these steps.** Include a section in your introduction that lists out all of the steps in a clear, straightforward way. Make sure that the list includes information about how your form fits into the process.

Example   👍   **How do I apply for benefits?**

To apply for benefits, you will need to do the following things:

1. **Fill out this form.**
2. **Give the form back to us.** This will start the process and will help us decide if you can get benefits immediately (within 7 days). We will set up a time for your interview.
3. **Collect the proof that you need to bring to your interview.** You can find a list of things you will need to provide as proof on page 3.
4. **Come in for your interview.** During this interview, we will complete the rest of the application. We will also tell you which benefits you are eligible for.

1c. Does your form have an introduction that tells applicants what they should do after they complete the form?

Applicants may not know what to do once they complete the form. Often, forms end abruptly leaving applicants to guess what is next.

Solution   Explain what applicants will need to do once they've completed the form.

How to   ▮   **Identify actions that applicants need to take when they complete the form.** You should think about anything they need to do with the form or any interactions they'll need to have with your office in the future.

▮   **List these actions.** Include a section in your introduction that tells applicants what they should do after they complete the form. Consider repeating this information near the end of the form to be sure that applicants see it.

Example   ☞   Sign the form and return it to the State Assistance Office.

👍   **What should you do when you have completed the form?**

When you have completed your form, you must get the form back to our office so we can process your application. You can bring it to our office, or mail it to us, or fax it to us.

Our mailing address is: Our fax number is:
DHHS   444-444-5555
123 Any Street
Anytown, America, 12345

After we receive your form, we will call you to schedule an interview. You can start getting the proof you need to bring to the interview. Look at the checklist on page 3.

1d. *Does your form have an introduction that includes a list of items that applicants should bring to their interviews?*

Food stamp workers report that applicants often don't bring all of the right information to their interviews. This creates more work for food stamp workers, and it's inconvenient for applicants when they have to come back multiple times with items they could have brought the first time.

Solution   Help applicants come prepared to their interviews by listing what they need to bring.

How to
- **Develop a comprehensive checklist of items your applicants need to provide.** When you develop this checklist, be as specific as you can. Don't just include the general category of information (such as, "Proof of Your Identity"), instead tell what specific items would qualify as proof (such as, "Proof of Your Identity—driver's license or birth certificate.")

- **Include this checklist in your introduction.**

Example   👎 You will be required to have an interview with a caseworker. You will need to bring proof of your identity, your housing, your utility bills, and your social security card.

👍 **What do you need to bring to your interview?**

You will be required to have an interview with a caseworker. Here are the things that you will need to bring to your interview:

- ❑ Proof of your identity—Bring your driver's license, birth certificate, or [list here all other acceptable proofs].

- ❑ Proof of where you live—If you own your home, bring proof of your mortgage payment. If you rent, bring a rent receipt or your lease agreement.

- ❑ Utility bills—Bring copies of your gas, electric, and telephone bills.

- ❑ Social Security card—Bring a card for each member of your household, including children.

Principle 2.
Make the content of the form more manageable
for applicants

By following the techniques in Principle 1, you'll have an introduction that lays out a context that helps applicants better understand the form and the process. But you still need to help applicants complete the form. Food stamp forms, by their very nature, are complex and technical. You can't change the information you're legally required to include, but you can make it more **manageable** for applicants.

To help applicants manage the amount of information they have to process, you can group and structure it in ways that make sense to them. To help them understand the complexities of the information, you can also offer contextual cues like instructions and examples. Finally, to help them feel comfortable about completing the form, you can present information with a professional and helpful tone. By using these strategies, you do some of the work for your applicants—making the form easier for them and increasing the chances that they'll complete it successfully.

2a. Are questions grouped in the same way applicants would think about them?

Forms sometimes have long lists of questions that aren't grouped in any way. Without groupings, applicants may not be able to see—or effectively use—the form's structure.

Solution   Identify the information that you need to collect in your form, but then group it into chunks to help applicants process it more easily. Chunking information makes it more manageable.

How to
- **Identify all of the information your form needs to collect.** Brainstorm the information that you need to qualify applicants for food stamps as well as any information your applicants need to understand the form.

- **Group the information into related chunks.** Take all of the information you've identified and group it into chunks of similar types. If you end up with a large chunk of information, look for ways to break it up further, so that the information will be easier for applicants to process.

Example   An application has a series of thirty questions that ask about a range of topics—including the applicant's name, where the applicant lives, who lives with him, what the family income is—in no particular order.

👍 An application has thirty questions grouped into the following chunks:

❑ **About You**
This chunk has questions that pertain directly to the individual applying, such as name, date of birth, and social security number.

❑ **About Where You Live and the People Who Live with You**
This chunk has questions about the applicant's address, how long she's lived there, who lives with her, and so on.

❑ **About Your Income**
This chunk has questions about employment and other sources of income.

2b. Are questions ordered in the same way applicants would think about them?

Some forms group information, but then don't order it in a way that addresses applicants' concerns. Forms need to have a logical structure that reflects the way that applicants would think about or need to see the information. For example, if applicants need emergency assistance, they will want to see that question very early in the form. Bear in mind, however, that Federal regulations specify where some items must appear.

Solution   Order the questions in a way that is logical to your applicants. You want to start by asking questions that applicants will find easier to answer. Start with questions that address immediate need and then move from concrete to more abstract questions.

How to   ▮ **List the groups of information your form is collecting**. These are the related groups of information that you grouped into related chunks. They could include items such as "About You" or "About Your Income."

▮ **Order the groups of information**. Use the following techniques to put your groups into a logical structure for applicants:

❑ List important groups of information first. These are questions that applicants would want to answer right away—such as a request for emergency assistance.

❑ List concrete information next. Once you've listed the most important information, then move to questions about concrete details that applicants know easily—such as questions about them and the other people that they live with.

❑ List more abstract information last. After you've listed concrete, familiar information, then move to the questions about more abstract concepts—such as questions about income, expenses, and assets.

Example   👎   An application lists its groups of information like this:

- ❏ About You
- ❏ Household Members
- ❏ Assets
- ❏ Expenses
- ❏ Income
- ❏ Request for Emergency Assistance

👍   This order better reflects how applicants might think:

- ❏ Getting Emergency Assistance
- ❏ About You
- ❏ About Your Household Members
- ❏ About Your Expenses
- ❏ About Your Income
- ❏ About Your Assets

2c. Does your form give a general overview of what's in it as well as overviews of each section?

Forms often miss one very critical way to make information more manageable: telling applicants what's coming next. Instead, they simply start asking applicants for information without signals or overviews to help applicants anticipate what will follow.

Solution   Use an overview to answer the basic question: what is in this section? When you answer this question up front, the applicants can then focus on the content of your questions. Overviews give people a sense of the structure and let them know what they're going to encounter. People like structure; it helps them see the order of the form overall, as well as the sections in the form. This sense of structure makes them feel more comfortable about the tasks they're completing.

How to   Provide a list of the major parts that you'll be discussing at the beginning of the form and at the beginning of its sections.

Example   👎   This form includes all of the information you need to provide to get food stamps.

👍 To get food stamps, you must provide us with information about the following:

- ❏ About You
- ❏ About Your Household Members
- ❏ About Your Expenses
- ❏ About Your Job and Income

2d. Does your form include instructions to introduce and explain sections?

In an effort to save space, many applications do not include instructions to introduce and explain sections. Applicants are expected to intuitively know what to do—and they often don't get it right. Though you may gain space with this approach, you lose the added efficiency and accuracy that applicants gain with extra instruction.

Solution Provide applicants with short instructions for each section of the form. The instructions should answer the kinds of questions that applicants would have as they fill out the form.

How to

- ▮ **Develop instructions for the sections in your form.** These instructions should tell applicants what the section is about, why they need to complete it, and how they should complete it.

- ▮ **Develop instructions for difficult questions and tables.** If your form has difficult questions or tables, then include short instructions to accompany them.

- ▮ **Ensure that your instructions are clear and explicit.** Read over your instructions to make sure that they answer applicants' questions. Be sure that your instructions define any words that applicants may not understand.

Example 👎 **Tell us about your expenses.**
Fill out the table about expenses below.

👍 **Tell us about your expenses.**
Please answer all of the questions in the table below. These questions ask about the money you pay out every month in expenses. Your answers help us decide how much food stamp help we can give you. If you don't tell us about expenses, we can't give you the right amount of food stamps and other benefits.

2e. Does your form include a "How to" booklet?

States are very concerned about adding more pages to already lengthy application forms. To address this, some states have designed "How to" booklets to accompany the applications. Unfortunately, many of these booklets are catch-alls for information and applicants don't use them.

Solution   Consider using a "How to" booklet to keep the application shorter, but make sure that you decide on a specific purpose, select the content, write and design it clearly, and explicitly link it to the form.

How to   When you develop a "How to" booklet or brochure:

- **Select the purpose.** The booklet should have a clear purpose and shouldn't be a place to put all the information that doesn't fit on the form. You need to think about what you want applicants to do with the booklet: Will it primarily define terms that applicants might have trouble with? Will it explain the process of getting food stamps?

- **Decide what kind of content it should have.** Once you decide on the purpose of the booklet, then you can choose content. For example, if its primary use is as a glossary, then you'll need to collect difficult words for which you can provide definitions.

- **Make it inviting and easy to use.** No one wants to use a booklet full of pages of dense, gray text. Think about how you want the booklet to help applicants and then use structure and design to support users effectively.

- **Link your booklet to your application form.** If you want applicants to use your "How to" booklet, you need to clearly link the information in the booklet to the information in the form. For instance, you can provide specific page number or item number references in the form for the "How To" booklet. In that way, applicants can find the correct part of the "How To" booklet as they begin to complete each particular section of the application.

2f. Does your form use examples?

Food stamp applications are full of technical and abstract questions. Often applicants cannot see how these complex questions apply to them. Without examples, applicants can be overwhelmed by abstract concepts. One caveat with examples: don't use numbers or computations in your examples. Applicants may think they should enter the example numbers, rather than their own numbers, on the application form.

Solution	Use examples to help illustrate complex areas of your form, to make them concrete and easier to process. Examples allow applicants to place themselves in the situation and help them decide if the question applies to them.
How to	▮ **Look for complex areas in your form.** Find areas that address complex topics and questions that may be difficult for applicants to complete.
	▮ **Develop examples for these complex areas.** Your examples should explain the complex topic or question in everyday terms. Using examples may be a particularly effective technique for questions that have a history of getting wrong answers.
Example	👎 **Please list your housing costs.**
	👍 **Please list your housing costs.**
	Your housing costs include:
	❏ The amount you pay for rent or mortgage payments.
	❏ The amount you pay every month for gas, oil, electricity, and water.
	❏ The amount you pay for house insurance and taxes.

2g. Does your form have an overall tone that is helpful and professional?

Many people who use social services have an image of an uncaring, bureaucratic system filled with impediments and unnecessary delays. When applicants get a form that is filled with a tone that matches that image, they may be intimidated and may even decide that it's not worth the effort to complete the form.

Solution	Use a helpful, professional tone in your form. Although your form must ensure eligibility, you can still create a tone in your form that will show how willing you are to help applicants get any benefits they are entitled to. Your tone should sound like you are having a conversation with applicants.
How to	Convey a **helpful, but professional, tone.** Refer to the **Navigation and Comprehension** sections of this Guide to help you:
	▮ Provide ways to help the applicant navigate through the document— such as using question headings and color;
	▮ Use pronouns like "we" and "you;"
	▮ Remove and rewrite formal language that could be construed as "threatening," "bureaucratic," or "gobbledygook;" and
	▮ Use the active voice instead of passive voice.

Example 👎 Failure to report or verify an expense will be seen as a statement by your household that you do not want to receive a deduction for the unreported and/or unverified expense.

👍 Please be sure to enter all of your expenses so that you can qualify for the full amount of food stamps that you need. If you do not put an expense down, we will not be able to count it as we decide the amount of aid to give you.

Navigation

For a form to work, applicants must be able to see the structure of the form, orient themselves, and locate the questions that apply to them. Navigation is the visual roadmap of a form—it helps applicants see the relationship of each piece of information to others. With this map, applicants can more easily negotiate the application and complete it correctly.

A form with good navigation starts with a clear, logical structure. It then uses tools—like a strong visual layout and white space—to help applicants see that structure. Finally, it uses signposts—like headings—to guide applicants through the structure. Good navigation helps applicants understand where they are in the form, where they need to go, and how to get there.

Often, agencies simplify the words and sentences on a form, only to find that it still doesn't work effectively. Clear words only work if the visible structure they fit into is clear.

Review your form using the Navigation Checklist and then revise your form using the Navigation Solutions section.

Navigation Checklist

Principle 3.
Make the logical structure visible

3a.	*Does your form use a predictable grid for layout?*	❐ Yes ❐ No ➠ *Go to page 29*
3b.	*Does your form use white space to visually organize sections and items?*	❐ Yes ❐ No ➠ *Go to page 30*
3c.	*Does your form use headings to show the structure?*	❐ Yes ❐ No ➠ *Go to page 32*
3d.	*Are the headings consistent throughout your form?*	❐ Yes ❐ No ➠ *Go to page 33*
3e.	*Does your form limit the amount of information it asks applicants to provide in tables?*	❐ Yes ❐ No ➠ *Go to page 34*
3f.	*Does your form number the pages and the questions?*	❐ Yes ❐ No ➠ *Go to page 36*
3g.	*Are the spaces on your form large enough for applicants to comfortably enter information?*	❐ Yes ❐ No ➠ *Go to page 36*

Principle 4.
Present information so it looks accessible

4a.	*Does your form use a font that is clear and legible?*	❐ Yes ❐ No ➠ *Go to page 38*
4b.	*Does your form use upper and lower case for headings and for text?*	❐ Yes ❐ No ➠ *Go to page 39*
4c.	*Does your form use bullets to list important information?*	❐ Yes ❐ No ➠ *Go to page 40*
4d.	*Does your form use emphasis techniques— like bold and italics—without overusing them?*	❐ Yes ❐ No ➠ *Go to page 41*
4e.	*Does your form use color or shading as non-verbal cues to applicants?*	❐ Yes ❐ No ➠ *Go to page 42*
4f.	*Do you have a style guide to ensure consistency?*	❐ Yes ❐ No ➠ *Go to page 43*

Navigation Solutions

Principle 3.
Make the logical structure visible.

Why do some forms look clean and inviting while others look cluttered and intimidating? We often falsely think that the answer relates to how much information there is in the form: the more information a form has, the more cluttered and intimidating it will be. This simply isn't true. How your form looks and feels is usually less about the amount of information the form has and more about how that information is structured. When a form looks crowded, cluttered, and intimidating, it is often because the form lacks a clear structure and layout that organizes information visually.

When it comes to forms, people prefer a strong, clear visual structure. A visible structure helps people find information more quickly, it helps them distinguish major points from minor points, and it helps them see how the different parts of the form relate to each other. Making the logical structure of your form visible ultimately makes your form more approachable and ensures that your applicants will complete it more accurately.

3a. Does your form use a predictable grid for layout?

Some forms make you tired just looking at them. These forms seem to have lines, questions, boxes, and paragraphs everywhere—in no particular order or structure. With forms like this, it's impossible to merely look at the form and understand the major points. These forms suffer not because of the amount of information they contain, but because they don't have a strong visual layout that shows their structure.

Solution   Use a grid that clearly shows the hierarchy of information—what are the main points and what are the subpoints. Your grid should organize space on your form so that applicants can scan the form and understand its structure and how each piece of information relates to another.

How to   ▪ **Assess your form's grid.** Take your form and draw a vertical line (from the top of the page to the bottom) every time a question starts or a box or a separator line is used, creating columns. If you have tables on a particular page, each table is its own grid. This simple exercise will help you see how many columns are in your grid.

▪ **Create a new grid for your form.** Many different grids can work well. Consider setting up a grid that lets you put major headings in a left column and the rest of the text in the right. Though there is no set "formula" for creating a grid, the grid you use should make the form more organized visually and more predictable for applicants.

Generally, limit the number of columns on a grid to reduce visual confusion. Strong, clean vertical lines reduce reader fatigue by helping applicants scan your form more easily and comfortably.

▮ **Talk to an expert if you have problems creating your grid.** If you have trouble developing a grid to lay out your form, you may want to invest in using a document designer to come up with one that works effectively for your applicants.

Example

3b. *Does your form use white space to visually organize sections and items?*

Many forms are packed with text from top to bottom and from margin to margin. They look crowded, confusing, and difficult to complete—and they are. You might be tempted to save space by trying to fit as much text on a page as is physically possible. But remember that using this strategy generally creates much more expense in the long run as you spend

more time correcting mistakes that applicants make because the form confused and intimidated them.

Solution Use white space in your form to help applicants recognize the chunks of information and see how those chunks relate to the form as a whole. White space is space on the form that is not being filled—it is space between questions, paragraphs, and sections that delineates them from each other. White space is not "empty" space; in fact, applicants actually "read" white space as much as they read words. White space is an important navigational tool that helps guide readers' eyes and reduces reading fatigue.

How to
■ **Incorporate white space in your form.** Use white space to visually separate sections of the form as well as the individual items that applicants must complete. The point of white space is to help applicants see what belongs together and what does not.

■ **Use the right balance of white space and text.** As a rule of thumb, you should aim for 50% of the page to have text and 50% to have white space. Include the outside page margins as white space.

Example

3c. Does your form use headings to show the structure?

Many application forms do not use headings. Headings are visual cues that reinforce the structure of the form; they show applicants the major sections. Without headings, applicants won't have a way to see how information is grouped in the form or how the groups relate to each other.

Solution   Use headings throughout your form. At a basic level, headings break up the page so that the applicants can see the hierarchy and structure of the information. At a deeper level, they help applicants see and understand the logic of the form.

How to

◼ **Use headings to mark the groups of information in your form.** You should have headings to show the start of the big groups of information as well as any sub-groups.

◼ **Ensure that your headings match your overview.** Your headings should match the list of sections that you included in your general overview. Use the same wording as the list in the overview so that your applicants will see that these match.

Example

3d. *Are the headings consistent throughout your form?*

Headings are an organizational cue—they show the hierarchy and structure of information. But for headings to work in this way, they must be consistently applied. Inconsistent headings—headings that look and sound different from each other—lose their power as an organizational device. Inconsistent headings may even confuse applicants, making them question whether your headings are referring to the same thing or to different things.

Solution   Use consistent headings to reinforce your structure. Consistent phrasing and a consistent look for your headings helps your applicants distinguish between different types of information. The more complex your form is, the more critical it is that the headings be consistent throughout.

How to   Use consistent language, sentence structure, indenting, font, and font size for your headings.

Example   ☞   This example shows inconsistent headings for the major sections of the form. The headings are inconsistent in how they are phrased and how they look.

1. Tell us about the people in your household

In this section, you will need to tell us about the people who make up your household.

2. What is Your Income?

In this section, you will need to tell us about your household income, that is, all the money that members of your household bring in every month.

3. Your Assets

In this section you will need to tell us about your assets, including the money that you have and some of the things that you own.

☞   This example makes those same headings consistent by making them look and sound the same.

1. About you and the people in your household

In this section, you will need to tell us about the people who make up your household.

2. **About your income**

In this section, you will need to tell us about your household income, that is, all the money that members of your household bring in every month.

3. **About your assets**

In this section you will need to tell us about your assets, including the money that you have and some of the things that you own.

3e. *Does your form limit the amount of information it asks applicants to provide in tables?*

Much of the information in food stamp forms lends itself to a tabular structure. Unfortunately, tables are often misused. Since they are laid out on a grid, designers often assume they can fit all kinds of information and questions into a single table. They assume that the structure of the table will provide the organization and clarity that the information needs. However, if you ask for too much information in your tables, they can easily overwhelm and confuse applicants.

Solution   Limit the amount of information you ask for in tables and be sure that you create a clean grid for the layout of the table.

How to   You can assess and limit the amount of information in tables in several ways:

■   **Count how many pieces of discrete information you are asking applicants to provide.** A common table in forms is an initial table asking applicants to "List Everyone in your Household" and then fill in columns of information for each person. Often just completing a line for one person requires 11 discrete steps. All of these steps, especially if the household has several members, make the table cognitively difficult for applicants.

■   **Make sure that each piece of information you're asking for in the table is relatively simple.** Remember that tables, by their nature, ask applicants to provide many pieces of information. You need to make sure that each piece of information you ask for is relatively simple.

■   **Don't use asterisks or codes in the table.** Asterisks and codes are a signal that you are asking for more information than you can comfortably fit into the table. If you need to use a shorthand to guide applicants to another part of the form for more information or to get a code, then you've asked for too much information.

- **Assess the grid for the table's layout.** The more vertical and horizontal lines the table has, the more complex it is. A table with many rows and columns is harder for people to complete effectively because they may not be able to ascertain the relationship of each piece of information to the others.

- **Reduce the table's clutter.** You can simplify the table by avoiding too many spatial cues such as shading, different font sizes, emphatic devices, heavy lines, and so on.

Example

Do you or does anyone in your household have an outstanding claim or suit for injuries or illness from an automobile accident, worker's compensation claim, etc?

If Yes, please complete the table below.

Last Name, First Name MI	Date of Injury	Type of Claim (Describe)
Workers Compensation Claim? ❒ Yes ❒ No	Automobile Accident Claim? ❒ Yes ❒ No	Other Type of Claim? ❒ Yes ❒ No

Do you or does anyone in your household have an outstanding claim or suit for injuries or illness from an automobile accident, worker's compensation claim, etc?

If Yes, please complete the table below.

Who is the claim for?	Last Name First Name MI
What was the date of this person's injury?	Month Date Year
What kind of claim is it?	❒ Workers' Compensation Claim ❒ Automobile Accident Claim ❒ Other Type of Claim

3f. *Does your form number the pages and the questions?*

Applicants don't always use forms in predictable ways. In fact, they may not even go through the form in the order the information is presented. Without numbered pages and questions, applicants may mix up the order of the form, lose their place in it, or even miss the backs of certain pages.

Solution   Number both pages and questions to help applicants follow the sequence of the form. Numbering also makes it easier for them to refer to a specific item if they have questions and need help completing the form

How to   Number the pages and the questions to help your applicants proceed through the form.

3g. *Are the spaces on your form large enough for applicants to comfortably enter information?*

Some forms do not provide adequate space for the applicant to enter the information requested. Applicants often assume that the size of the space given predicts how long their answers should be. If the space is too small to fill in a response, they will abbreviate their responses, write smaller, use page margins to fill in additional information, or use other means of trying to be responsive. All of these make your job more difficult as you try to decipher what they meant.

Solution   Create a form that has adequate space for applicants to fill it out correctly.

How to
- **Look to see if your form gives adequate space for answers.** Fill out the form yourself using fake data to see where entry areas are constrained or difficult to use.

- **Create more space on your form for answer blocks.** If you don't have enough space, create more by eliminating unnecessary questions, changing the format, or adding pages.

- **Eliminate areas where you ask applicants to "attach additional pages."** When you use this strategy, you increase the chance that the applicant will not provide the correct information or will miss that part of the instructions.

- **Test the answer blocks.** Once you've designed your form, you can test it with applicants to see whether you've given them enough space to respond to each question. (See **Part 2. Assessing Your Form by Testing with Applicants** for more information.)

Example   ☞

_____
Last   First   Middle   Title   Gender

☝   ☐ Mr.
     ☐ Mrs.   _____
     ☐ Ms.   Last   First   Middle

     Gender: ☐ Male   ☐ Female

Principle 4.
Present information so it looks accessible

Part of your goal should be to create an accessible form—one that appears doable and puts applicants at ease. Presentation tools like larger font size, effective icons, bulleted lists, and clear emphasis can make your form easier for applicants to understand and use. They can also ensure that applicants don't feel overwhelmed at the prospect of sitting down and completing your form. Even as you use these tools, be careful not to use too much of a good thing; even the best presentation tools can be overused. Remember the principle "less is more" and use the presentation tools in this section effectively to help you underscore the structure and logic of your form.

4a. Does your form use a font that is clear and legible?

To keep a form short, some states try to reduce the font size to get all of the text to fit on a certain number of pages. The result is that the form is unreadable by large numbers of the people food stamps are supposed to help, especially the elderly.

Solution   Select fonts and font sizes that are clear and legible. For forms, you can use a sans serif font like Arial or Lucida Sans. They have an open look that is easier to read.

How to   ▮ **Choose a font for your text.** Use a font size of at least 10 points for the basic text and the questions on your form. Don't choose your font only by point size because different fonts in the same point size may be different sizes. Remember that the elderly may need a larger point size.

Text	Font
Here is text in 12 point.	Arial
Here is text in 12 point.	Lucida Sans
Here is text in 12 point.	Times New Roman
Here is text in 12 point.	Book Antiqua
Here is text in 12 point.	Palatino

▮ **Choose a font for your headings.** Use a larger font size for your headings (usually at least 2 points larger than your text).

Example   ☞   Please fill in this chart for everyone who is requesting benefits. You must include a social security number for each person. We will only use the information to verify income and to help us decide what kind of benefits each person can get.
Font: Times New Roman, 9 pt.

👍 Please fill in this chart for everyone who is requesting benefits. You must include a social security number for each person. We will only use the information to verify income and to help us decide what kind of benefits each person can get.
Font: Arial, 11 pt.

4b. Does your form use upper and lower case for headings and for text?

When text or headings are emphasized by using all upper case letters, applicants will have more difficulty reading them because people decipher words by shape as well as the sequence of letters.

Solution Using upper and lower case for text and headings makes the information easier for applicants to read and reduces reader fatigue. When you use upper and lower case, applicants will increase their reading speed by 13-20% and you'll save space. Upper case letters take up 30% more space than lower case letters.

How to
- Look for all upper case letters in your form. Identify any areas in your form where you've used all upper case letters.

- Replace those areas with upper and lower case text. Be sure to change regular text and headings. If you need to emphasize your headings, use a larger font or a different font. To emphasize text, use bold or italics.

Example 👎 CHILD SUPPORT ASSIGNMENT AND COOPERATION
BY APPLYING FOR HELP FROM THE STATE, I GIVE TO THE STATE ALL MY RIGHTS TO PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE SUPPORT AGAINST ANY PERSON FOR ANY FAMILY MEMBER INCLUDED IN THIS APPLICATION.

👍 **Child Support Assignment and Cooperation**

By applying for help from the State, I give to the State all my rights to past, present, and future support against any person for any family member included in this application.

4c. Does your form use bullets to list important information?

Forms have many areas where lists of items or other important information gets stuck inside of long sentences and paragraphs. Because this embedded information doesn't stand out to applicants, they may inadvertently miss it.

Solution   Use bulleted lists to help applicants see important information more easily. Bullets can be used to break out lists of information or to list important options that you want the applicant to see more easily.

How to

▮ **Select the information that will work well as bullets.** Lists of information that are embedded in sentences naturally lend themselves to being revised as a bulleted list. You can also bullet critical information or options that you don't want applicants to miss. Be sure not to overuse the technique, however; if you use too many bulleted lists, then they will lose their power as an emphatic technique in your form.

▮ **Keep your bullet style simple.** As a rule, use simple, filled-in squares or circles for bullets.

▮ **Use numbered lists instead of bullets when sequence matters.** If you have a list—such as a procedural list—where the sequence of items is important, then use a numbered list instead.

Example

👎 You may be able to get emergency food stamp benefits within seven days of the day you file your application if: you have no more than $100 in liquid assets (cash on hand, savings and checking accounts, etc.), and you have less than $150 in monthly gross income; or you are a migrant or seasonal worker; or you have shelter and utility expenses which are more than your gross monthly income and liquid resources.

👍 You may be able to get emergency food stamp benefits within seven days of the day you file your application if:

▮ you have no more than $100 in liquid assets (cash on hand, savings and checking accounts, etc.), and you have less than $150 in monthly gross income; or

▮ you are a migrant or seasonal worker; or

▮ you have shelter and utility expenses which are more than your gross monthly income and liquid resources.

4d. Does your form use emphasis techniques—like bold and italics—without overusing them?

When the text of a form uses too much bold and too many italics, the emphasis is lost. Bold and italics are meant to show that the information is different from other things around it. When everything is emphasized, then nothing is. Bear in mind that Federal regulations require that you use bold face for certain information.

Solution   Use emphasis techniques, such as bold and italics, to highlight important information. When too much information is emphasized, your form will appear cluttered and your applicants will not be able to easily decide which information is important and which is not.

How to
- **Look for important elements that are appropriate to emphasize.** Be selective about where you choose to use emphasis and keep most of your text in a standard font.

- **Use emphasis techniques sparingly.** Once you decide which elements are important in your form, use either bold or italics to set them apart. Avoid using underlining because it is hard to read.

Example   ☞ The following actions will be taken if you *miss* your appointment for food stamps:

- If you do not **reschedule** by the *30th day* from the day you <u>filed</u> your application or the last day of your certification, **we will deny your application**. If we deny your application, we *<u>may require you to reapply</u>* to receive benefits. You may lose your benefits for *failing to appear* at your interview.

☞ The following actions will be taken if you **miss** your appointment for food stamps:

- If you do not reschedule by the 30th day from the day you filed your application or the last day of your certification, we will deny your application.

- If we deny your application, we may require you to reapply to receive benefits. You may lose your benefits for failing to appear at your interview.

4e. *Does your form use color or shading as non-verbal cues to applicants?*

Forms are dependent on words—words in questions and words in answers. Applicants with low literacy skills may be intimidated by all of the words and may look for other types of visual cues to guide them through the form.

Solution   Use color or shading as non-verbal cues to help applicants through the form. Color and shading can underscore groupings of information—as long as you don't overuse the techniques.

How to
- **Use color when possible to show groupings of information.** Using color will often be a budget decision. If you have a multi-program form, you can use different colors for each program. If you have a single-program form, you can use different colors for each logical chunk of information.

- **Use shading to show groupings of information when color isn't possible.** Shading can be more versatile, less expensive, and still help applicants see the groupings. For example, you might shade any place that has directions. One disadvantage to shading: if you have to photocopy the forms, the shaded sections may not copy well.

Example   ✒

4f. *Do you have a style guide to ensure consistency?*

Over time, a form can begin to look like a ransom note. As different people revise it, they make subtle changes such as using a different font or a different size font. Soon, those subtle changes add up to big inconsistencies in the format and presentation. Even a form that is well-designed at the start can turn into a confusing patchwork if you don't ensure consistency in future revisions.

Solution   Create a style guide to help you maintain your form. You want to make sure that each person working on revising the form will know what decisions you made about the layout and the design elements at the start.

How to   Decide at the start what size and style you will use for section headings, questions, check boxes, directions text, and so on. Then write these decisions down in a short list. This style guide will make revisions easier and will maintain the integrity of your design.

Example

Text	Font
Title of form	**18 point Arial**
Section titles	16 point Arial
Questions	11 point Arial
Instructions	12 point Book Antiqua
Table Text	10 point Arial

Comprehension

When you talk to applicants in person, you probably explain things clearly to them. After all, when you talk with another person, you naturally use simple, clear words and sentences to get your point across. Unfortunately, people often throw this simple and direct approach out the window when they write. Instead, they use long words and even longer sentences. They throw out pronouns and active verbs and replace them with bureaucratic language and vague, passive sentences. Pretty soon, they've got sentences like this:

> Applying for or receiving Family Assistance (FA), Safety Net Assistance (SNA), or foster care services operates as an assignment to the State and the social services district of any rights to support from any other person that the applicant or recipient may have in his or her own right or on behalf of any other family member for whom the applicant or recipient is applying or receiving assistance (Social Services Law, 158 and 348).

It isn't pretty, but it's how some food stamp forms sound. At the most basic level, your applicants need to understand the words, sentences, and concepts in your form. If they can't, then they won't be able to provide **you** with accurate information in return. A form designed for easy comprehension is one that even applicants with low functional literacy can read and understand the first time they pick it up. So how do you ensure that your form is easy to comprehend?

One of the primary ways is to make sure your sentences and concepts are crystal clear to applicants. Another way to ensure comprehension is to make sure that the words you use are familiar to applicants. As you address comprehension, it is important to remember that writing problems often come in bunches. You will rarely see one problem without finding several others. If you have created lengthy, complex sentences, you almost surely will find that you have also used too many unnecessary words, written in passive voice, and included words that are unfamiliar to applicants.

Review your form using the Comprehension Checklist and then revise your form using the Comprehension Solutions section.

Comprehension Checklist

Principle 5.
Help applicants untangle the text

5a.	*Does your form simplify complex sentences?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➡ *Go to page 49*
5b.	*Does your form eliminate unnecessary words?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➡ *Go to page 50*
5c.	*Does your form use sentences written in the positive or simple negative?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➡ *Go to page 51*
5d.	*Does your form use the active voice?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➡ *Go to page 52*
5e.	*Does your form simplify conditional statements?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➡ *Go to page 54*
5f.	*Does your form link sentences to each other with logic marker words?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➡ *Go to page 55*

Principle 6.
Use words applicants would use

6a.	*Does your form use pronouns?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➡ *Go to page 56*
6b.	*Does your form use words that applicants would use in everyday speech?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➡ *Go to page 57*
6c.	*Does your form define difficult words and concepts?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➡ *Go to page 58*
6d.	*Does your form use words consistently?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➡ *Go to page 58*
6e.	*Does your form use action verbs instead of nouns made out of verbs?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➡ *Go to page 59*
6f.	*Does your form define acronyms and abbreviations?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➡ *Go to page 60*
6g.	*Does your form make the legal language clear and simple to understand?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➡ *Go to page 61*

Comprehension Solutions

Principle 5.
Help applicants untangle the text

Sentences convey basic information: who did what to whom. However, there are many unintentional things that writers do that can confuse, distort, and muddle this very basic information. Writing reflects the process of thinking—a process that is rarely straightforward, especially when the topic is complicated or difficult. When writers are developing a form, they often first try to get all of the main ideas down. In this "first draft" stage, sentences and paragraphs can still be awkward and difficult to understand. There's no problem with this as long as writers remember to go back to untangle what they've written—simplifying their complex ideas into language and structures that applicants can follow and understand.

Applicants will never be able to see what is going on inside your head when you write; because of this, it's important to simplify—and clarify—everything you write. Making information comprehensible means making sure that the core information in each paragraph and sentence is clear and easy to find. To accomplish this, you will need to check that each sentence conveys its core information—who did what to whom—directly and simply.

5a. Does your form simplify complex sentences?

Applications often try to convey a lot of information in a small amount of space. As information is added, the sentences grow long and complex. But most applicants don't understand complex sentences very easily. These types of sentences—ones that contain several ideas and a lot of information between the subject and the verb—force applicants to store many pieces of information in their memories before they can connect the related elements.

Solution   Write in simple sentences. In your form, you want the basic element—the sentences—to be as easy to understand as possible. The simplest way to do this is to maintain the basic sentence structure of Subject/Verb/Object, such as, "We distribute food stamps." In that sentence, "We" is the Subject, "distribute" is the Verb, and "food stamps" is the Object. You'll usually need to write sentences longer than four words, but you should still focus on keeping the Subject/Verb/Object close together. This sentence structure is easier to understand, particularly for people with low functional literacy levels.

How to   ▪ Look for complex sentences. Complex sentences are usually long, contain several ideas, or contain difficult and unfamiliar concepts.

- **Find the core information.** You want the Subject/Verb/Object to contain your key information. Long, complex sentences often spread the key information into clauses and prepositional phrases. Put your important information in the Subject/Verb/Object structure.

- **Break complex sentences into shorter, more active sentences.** Using more than one sentence or a bulleted list will also help applicants understand the information better.

- **Make sure that your new sentences have the subject, verb, and object close to each other.** Sentences that put clauses and phrases between these core parts of a sentence become complex.

Example 👎 I hereby authorize any person, agency, or institution to supply information requested by the Department of Social Services concerning me or my family, and to allow inspection and reproduction of records in his or their possession pertaining to me or my family by any authorized representative of the Department.

👍 I agree to let any person, agency, or institution give information about me or my family to the Department of Social Services. I agree to let the Department of Social Services review and copy the information it receives.

5b. Does your form eliminate unnecessary words?

Writers often use many words where one will do because they don't want to leave anything out or they've gotten tied up in their own logic. However, too many words can be confusing to applicants. Unnecessary words add density and clutter to your form, making it more intimidating to look at. They also force applicants to concentrate on longer sentences to understand them and to find key information.

Solution   Identify long sentences and rewrite them. A good rule of thumb: if someone has to read a sentence more than once to understand it, then the sentence is too long.

How to   ■   **Look for long sentences.** Read through your form out loud to listen for sentences that just go on and on. You may even want to count words in your sentences. Sentences with more than 28 words can usually be edited down by taking out unnecessary words and by breaking them into shorter sentences.

■ **Revise the sentences to be shorter**. Some ways to revise are:

❑ Say aloud what you think the long sentence is trying to get across. Usually, the translation you say out loud will be more simple and direct than what is written.

❑ Rethink the content—is everything in the sentence necessary? You may be able to eliminate words by simplifying the content you include.

❑ Cross out any words that are excessively long, confusing, or difficult to understand.

■ **Make sure your new sentences are accurate**. Your revised sentence must still be accurate. As you edit, make sure that your shorter sentences still retain their meaning and are technically accurate.

Example   👎 I declare and affirm under penalty of perjury, by my signature, that I have examined this form and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it is in all things true and correct.

👍 By signing below, I declare under penalty of perjury that I have examined this form thoroughly and filled it out with information that I believe is true.

👎 Are you or anyone in your household fleeing to avoid persecution, confinement after conviction, under the law of the place from which you are fleeing for a crime or attempt to commit a crime that is a felony under the law of the place from which you are fleeing or which, in the case of this state, is a high misdemeanor under the state.

👍 Are you or anyone in your household running from the law for:

❑ committing or trying to commit a felony in any state, or

❑ committing or trying to commit a high misdemeanor in this state.

5c. Does your form use sentences written in the positive or simple negative?

Everyone has trouble with sentences containing multiple negatives. They are hard to process because they require applicants to do abstract thinking in order to understand them. For example, "I am not eligible for benefits unless I do not live with other people" contains several embedded negatives. Applicants have to make many logical translations to figure out how this sentence applies to them. They have to turn "I am not eligible" into "how am I eligible?" and then translate all the other negative statements into positives to see how they apply to them.

Solution	Rewrite sentences so that they are in the positive or in the simple negative. The difficult sentence "I am not eligible for benefits unless I do not live with other people" becomes much simpler in the positive: "I am eligible for benefits if I live alone," or in the simple negative: "I am not eligible if I live with other people." Writing in the positive or simple negative will help your applicants' comprehension because they don't have to mentally manipulate the logic as much.

How to	▌ **Look for sentences with more than one negative.** You often find sentences with multiple negatives in the legal areas of the form.
	▌ **Rewrite the sentences to be in the positive or to have only one negative.**

Example	🖕 You will lose food stamps for 24 months if you fail to follow our requirement on not trading controlled substances for your food stamps.
	👍 If you trade your food stamps for controlled substances, you will lose your benefits for 24 months.

🖕 I understand I will not be eligible to receive food stamps if I do not follow the following work registration requirements.

👍 I understand that I must follow the work registration requirements in order to be eligible for food stamps.

🖕 Do not fill out this section unless you do not currently have shelter or are a non-resident of this state.

👍 Fill out this section if you do not currently have shelter or you live in another state.

5d. Does your form use the active voice?

People generally talk to each other in the active voice, but when they write, they often slip into the passive voice. Passive voice poses a problem for applicants because it hides the identity of the "doer." In addition, passive voice adds length and complexity to forms while also giving them a more bureaucratic tone.

Solution	Use the active voice. Here are two examples:
	▌ **We distributed the food stamps.** This sentence is active; the doer of the action—"We"—is the subject of the sentence.

- **The food stamps were distributed.** This sentence is passive; notice how the doer of the action—"we"— is no longer the subject. In fact, the doer is now completely hidden.

Active sentences are shorter, simpler, and more powerful. They are also easier to understand because the reader can clearly "see" the doer of the action. When you reverse this structure by writing in the passive voice, your sentences become more vague and complex. Readers expect the subject and the "doer" to match up; when that doesn't happen, they get confused.

How to
- **Look for passive sentences.** To do this, you can:
  - Look for sentences that have a form of the verb "to be" + a helper verb. (Forms of the verb "to be" include: am, are, is, was, were, be, been, and being.) The sentence above used "was distributed"—a flag for passive voice.
  - Look for sentences that have no doer. In the sentence above, you might read it and say, "OK, the form was distributed, but WHO distributed it?" A sentence that includes an action but no doer is another flag for passive voice.
- **Rewrite the passive sentences to be active.** To do this, rewrite the sentences so that they have a clear doer to match the action. By using the basic sentence structure of Subject/Verb/Object and keeping the doer as the subject, you can help ensure that your sentences are active. Look a at the rewritten examples below.

Example
- The benefits will be determined from the date your signed application is received.
- We will determine your benefits from the date we receive your signed application.

- Discrimination shall not occur against anyone.
- We do not discriminate.

- The following information has been explained to me at the time of application in an understandable way: estate claims, overpayments, medical programs, and availability of services.
- The caseworker has explained estate claims, overpayments, medical programs, and availability of services to me. I understand this information.

5e. Does your form simplify conditional statements?

Food stamp forms are all about deciding if someone meets the necessary conditions to get assistance. Because of this, it is natural to use some conditional statements—statements that apply to applicants if they meet certain criteria. Conditional statements look like this:

> If you fit this category, then this rule applies.

While these types of statements are common in food stamp forms, they can be difficult if they are long or if they have several conditions embedded within them.

Solution   Make conditional statements as clear and simple as possible.

How to
- **Look for conditional statements**. Most conditional statements are structured as "If/Then" statements and "or" statements. When you find conditional statements, assess their difficulty for applicants. The longer the sentence and the more conditions it contains, the harder it will be for applicants to understand.

- **Rewrite difficult conditional statements**. Start by putting the consequence at the beginning of the sentence and the conditions at the end. Then shorten the sentence to make the condition easier to understand. If your sentence is still too long or still presents too many conditions, then use a bulleted list or a table to present the information.

Example   👎 If you voluntarily quit your job, are on strike, or have committed intentional program violations in the past, then you do not qualify for benefits.

👍 You do not qualify for benefits if you:
- ❑ voluntarily quit your job,
- ❑ are on strike, or
- ❑ have committed intentional program violations in the past.

5f. Does your form link sentences together with logic marker words?

When a form is revised, writers often add new sentences without fully linking them to the existing sentences. The new information never really gets integrated into the logic that's already there; without this integration, paragraphs can lose their logical structure. Linking sentences together with marker words helps applicants understand information by showing how it relates to the information that comes before and after it.

Solution   Make the logical link between your sentences clear by using logic marker words. Logic marker words (such as, *because*, *instead*, and *however*) show the relationships between sentences and pieces of information. They can also tell applicants what to do with information that is coming; for example, whether they need to evaluate it, contrast it to what came before, or understand it as an overall topic with details to follow.

How to   ■   **Look for sentences and paragraphs where you have not logically linked your ideas.** Read over your form, paying close attention to your paragraphs—have you linked your sentences together with logic marker words that demonstrate your logic to your readers? Do sentences flow together seamlessly creating a clear logic?

■   **Include logic marker words to smooth the transition between sentences and paragraphs and to clearly show their logical relationship.** Here are some sample logic marker words that clearly show the relationship of information in sentences: *currently*, *in short*, *for example*, *because*, *furthermore*, *similarly*, *as a result*, *instead*, *excluding*, *although*, *alternately*, *on the other hand*, and *except for*.

■   **Don't overuse certain logic marker words.** Be careful about overusing the three most popular logic marker words: *however*, *but*, and *yet*.

Example   In the following example, applicants may not be able to tell how the two sentences relate to each other because there is no logic marker word to link them. Was the application denied *because* they don't have the applicant's records? Was the application denied for some other reason? Without the logic marker words, *and* or *because*, applicants can't tell the relationship between the two sentences.

   👎 We have denied your application for benefits. We do not have your records.

   👍 We denied your application for benefits *because* we do not have your records.

Principle 6.
Use words applicants would use

One of the most important ways to help applicants understand your form is simply by using words that they would use. You don't need to impress readers with your large vocabulary; you need them to understand what you mean. Some writers resist using common words because they think that they are "dumbing down" their form. In fact, using common words is a more sophisticated approach: it means you are doing some of the work for your applicants by simplifying your message.

In an attempt to satisfy both regulatory and internal organizational needs, many food stamp forms use long and complex words, concepts, and structures. Few applicants would refer to the room they rent as a "commercial boarding establishment," for example, but most would understand "room I rent from a landlord." Discussing difficult concepts is often unavoidable, but you can help by using simpler words and defining complex areas of the form. When you do this, you help readers understand what you are saying and you improve your form's tone because readers believe that you're trying to be clear and helpful—and, in fact, you are.

6a. Does your form use pronouns?

In an effort to sound official, some forms get a stilted, bureaucratic tone full of phrases like "hereinafter referred to as 'the Applicant'" and "State Food Stamp Agency." They avoid the use of pronouns because they think that it makes them sound unprofessional.

Solution   Use pronouns throughout your form. Using pronouns is natural; it's how we talk to people. Using pronouns also helps people grasp difficult concepts. One of the techniques people use to understand concepts is to imagine themselves acting out the concept they are grappling with. By using pronouns, you help applicants put themselves into the story and understand how they fit into the action.

How to   Use "we" for your agency and "you" for the applicant.

Example   👎 Applicant need not appear in person at the State Assistance office; State Assistance staff can receive applications through the mail. State Assistance staff are on hand to answer any questions said Applicant might have.

                  👍 You do not have to bring in your application in person—you can send it through the mail. If you have questions, call us at 444-444-5555.

6b. Does your form use words that applicants would use in everyday speech?

Because they deal with complex concepts and legal requirements, many food stamp forms include words and phrases that are difficult for applicants to understand. Abstract and unfamiliar words like "casehead," "eligibility criteria," "incapacitated," or "able bodied" may confuse and intimidate applicants so much that they stop trying to fill out your form.

Solution   Replace complex words with ones that your applicants would use in everyday speech.

How to
- **Look for words and phrases that applicants might be unfamiliar with.** Since it is often easier to "hear" difficult words than to see them, read your form out loud. As you do, listen for words that you might use as a food stamp worker, but that your applicant may never have heard of.

- **Replace unfamiliar words with simpler ones.** When you find difficult words or phrases, think about different ways to replace them using language that applicants would know.

Example
  👎 Casehead
  👍 Main person who is applying for food stamps, or
     You

  👎 Eligibility Criteria
  👍 How we decide whether you can get food stamps

  👎 Incapacitated
  👍 Not able to work

  👎 Able bodied
  👍 Able to work

6c. Does your form define difficult words and concepts?

Sometimes your form will require you to use legal or technical words that don't have a simple substitution. In short, you can't always replace difficult words or concepts with simple ones.

Solution   Define difficult terms to allow applicants to understand the concept you're writing about without being tripped up by your language.

How to
- **Look for difficult words or concepts that you can't easily replace.** Reading through your form out loud will help you spot words and concepts that applicants might be unfamiliar with.

- **Write short definitions for these words or concepts.** Use definitions to explain words and concepts that will be especially difficult for applicants, such as "power of attorney" or "authorized legal guardian." To avoid confusing applicants, concepts like these should be briefly defined when you introduce them. Make sure that your definitions are written in plain language.

Example   👎 Unearned Income

👍 Unearned Income
Unearned income is any money you make that does not come from working.

6d. Does your form use words consistently?

Applicants can get confused if more than one word applies to the same thing. When applicants first come across a term in a form, they read the definition and recognize the term. When you use a different term to refer to the same idea, applicants are no longer sure if you are referring to the same idea or a different one.

Solution   Use words and terms consistently so that applicants can tell when you are referring to the same thing. Consistent terms will help them better comprehend what they are reading.

How to
- **Look for places where you have used "variations on a theme."** An example might be referring to food stamp workers as: "Us," "Caseworkers," and "food stamp Staff." Be sure to focus on simple words that you use a lot, like "application" or "form" or "application form." Since these words turn up so much, you might inadvertently refer to them differently.

- **Replace all variations with only one term.** Using one defined term per concept will help clarify your meaning and reduce errors.

Example   👎 An **application** may be mailed, faxed, or picked up on site at a State Assistance Office. You do not need an appointment to pick up your **form**.

        👍 We can mail or fax your **application** to you or you may pick one up at a State Assistance Office. You do not need an appointment to pick up your **application**.

6e. Does your form use action verbs instead of nouns made out of verbs?

"Make a determination," "failure to appear," "verification of required documentation"—it's hard for applicants to get the core information from sentences that take strong verbs and turn them into nouns. Instead of asking applicants to "enroll in a training program," the form asks them to "achieve enrollment in a training program." These types of phrases squeeze the action out of sentences. Like passive voice, they make it hard for applicants to understand the meaning you're trying to get across.

Solution   Use simple verbs to express actions in your sentences. Using action verbs—instead of nouns made out of verbs—will help your form have a more conversational tone and will help applicants understand it more easily.

How to
- **Look for nouns made out of verbs.** To find these, keep an eye out for nouns that use verbs as their roots.
- **Replace these nouns with a strong, action verbs.** Some examples of common replacements are:

Instead of…	You could use…
Affix a signature	Sign
Determination of eligibility	Decide if you are eligible
Make a payment	Pay
Failure to appear	If you fail to appear

Example   👎 An interview is required for determination of eligibility.

        👍 We will interview you to decide if you are eligible.

👎 A failure to appear will result in a determination of ineligibility.

👍 If you fail to appear, we will decide that you are not eligible.

6f. Does your form define acronyms and abbreviations?

Even acronyms or abbreviations that are commonly used within a food stamp office or in daily life can be difficult for vulnerable populations to work with. So even the most seemingly obvious ones should be defined.

Solution   Define acronyms and spell out abbreviations that you use. Using acronyms or abbreviations isn't a bad thing; often, using these shorthand references instead of long institutional names can both save space in your form and help its tone to be more conversational and less wordy. The important thing is to remember to define all your acronyms and abbreviations for applicants.

How to   ▮ **Look for each undefined acronym and abbreviation.** Look for common acronyms and abbreviations, such as OCCS, LIHEAP, SSN, CCRA, FSET, FS, SSI.

  ▮ **Define each acronym and spell out each abbreviation the first time you introduce it.**

Example   👎 Please write your SSN on the line to the right. If you do not have an SSN, please speak to a caseworker.

  👍 Please write your Social Security Number (SNN) on the line to the right. If you do not have an SSN, please speak to a caseworker.

  👎 To apply for FS, please fill out this application and turn it in to your local FS office.

  👍 To apply for food stamps (FS), please fill out this application and turn it in to your local FS office.

6g. Does your form make the legal language clear and simple to understand?

Many forms that are otherwise clear and easy to use break down in the legal sections. Language that is legal and bureaucratic can be intimidating for applicants and difficult for them to understand. However, just because the subject matter is legal does not mean the language has to be unintelligible for your applicants.

Solution   Rewrite legal and bureaucratic language using words and sentences that applicants can understand and use.

How to
- **Look for legal and bureaucratic language.** Read the form out loud to listen for areas that use legal and bureaucratic "gobbledygook."

- **Work with lawyers to translate the legal language into simpler terms.** Even in law, there are very few "terms of art." Try to rewrite legal language into words that your applicants will know and understand. Ask a lawyer to review it to make sure that the simpler language still retains its legality.

- **Define legal language that you can't simplify.** If you can't remove the legal language, at least find ways to define the legal words for applicants.

- **Use the techniques in this section of the Guide to rewrite words and sentences.** The techniques in this section can help you untangle the logic and simplify the language even in the most legally binding sections of your form.

- **Test your form with applicants.** You can test the original version of the legal language and the revisions to show improvement in the applicants' understanding.

Example   ☜ Failure to report or verify an expense will be seen as a statement by your household that you do not want to receive a deduction for the unreported and/or unverified expense

☞ Please be sure to write down all of your expenses so that you can qualify for the largest possible benefit. If you do not put an expense down, we will not be able to count it to help you.

Guide to Assessing Food Stamp Application Forms

Policy Compliance

There's really no question: your Food Stamp application must comply with Federal policy. As a result, you need to make sure that you include in your application form (or sometimes in handouts) everything required by regulations and the Food Stamp Act. On the other hand, you also want to make sure that you have cleared your application form of outdated and irrelevant information.

To make sure that your form is consistent with policy, you'll need to:

▌ **Eliminate unneeded or outdated information.** By getting rid of questions and sections that no longer apply, you'll free up space in your form.

▌ **Ensure that you've met all regulatory requirements.** Regulations at 7 CFR 273(b)(1) require that application forms include certain items. You might also see that some information you thought was required is not required at all.

▌ **Ensure that you have covered all related notifications.** Regulations at 7 CFR 273.2(b)(2)-(4) require State agencies to provide applicants with specific application-related notifications. You can place these notifications in either the application form or a handout.

▌ **Ensure that you meet all the statutory requirements of the Food Stamp Act.** The Food Stamp Act requires State agencies to collect other kinds of information. You can collect this required information either on your application form or in your interview.

Review your form using the Policy Compliance Checklist and then revise your form using the Policy Compliance Solutions section.

Policy Compliance Checklist

Principle 7.
Ensure Policy Compliance

7a. *Does your form include only questions that are legally relevant to ensuring that an applicant is eligible for food stamps?*

❒ *Yes*
❒ *No* ➠ *Go to page 67*

7b. *Does your form meet current regulatory requirements?*

❒ *Yes*
❒ *No* ➠ *Go to page 67*

7c. *Have you covered all related notifications in your form or in a handout?*

❒ *Yes*
❒ *No* ➠ *Go to page 70*

7d. *Does your form meet statutory requirements?*

❒ *Yes*
❒ *No* ➠ *Go to page 73*

Policy Compliance Reference

Principle 7.
Ensure Policy Compliance

7a. Does your form include only questions that are legally relevant to ensuring that an applicant is eligible for food stamps?

Forms grow by accretion—year by year, they get a little bit longer and become a little bit more complex. Pages, sections, paragraphs, items, and words are added to deal with new laws, new regulations, and new policies. But even as new information is added to the form, old information is rarely removed. Over time forms can get very long, but staff members will usually assume that all information on the form is legally required, even though that might not be the case.

Solution Examine the forms carefully and delete outdated and unnecessary information.

How to
- **Conduct an internal regulatory review.** Put together a team of policy experts to conduct a regulatory review of your form to eliminate non-essential questions.

- **Get help from your Regional Office.** Contact your Regional Food Stamp Office to have someone assist you with a federal regulatory review.

Example One State convened policy experts from all of the different programs covered by a multi-program application form. Each program's policy expert reviewed the form, marking the questions that were absolutely necessary for their program. At the end, the State found many questions that were left "unclaimed" by any program. It then discarded those questions and freed up space so that it could better use presentation techniques.

7b. Does your form meet current regulatory requirements?

The required elements of your form may change over time because of new laws and regulations at both the federal and state level.

Solution Review your form carefully to make sure that it includes information required by federal and state regulations.

How to
- **Review your form for current regulatory requirements.** Use the table below to ensure that your form includes all of the information required by the food stamp regulations.

■ **Ask your legal representatives to review your form.** Check with legal representatives in your program to ensure that your form includes all of the information that is legally required by your state.

Table 1. Food Stamp Regulatory Requirements

Category of Information	Description of Information You're Required to Include by Regulation
A. Applicant Identity and Signature	This information must appear on the first page of the application form: ■ Name of the applicant ■ Address of the applicant ■ Signature of the applicant and the date signed
B. Information that Could Lead to Expedited Benefits These questions determine expedited benefits. If any of these questions are answered positively, the applicant should be able to receive benefits within 7 days of application.	■ Is any household member a migrant or seasonal farm worker? ■ Is household's total income for the current month less than $150? ■ Does household have less than $100 in cash or in checking and savings accounts? ■ Is the total of the household's cash, bank accounts, and current monthly income less than total shelter costs (rent or mortgage plus utilities)?
C. Required Notices Specific language is required by 7 CFR 273.2(b)(1)(i through ix) to be on the application form. These requirements are summarized here.	**1. Statements Required to be in "Prominent Boldface Lettering and Understandable Terms"** ■ Federal, state, and local officials can verify statements provided by the applicant. If any information is found to be incorrect, food stamps can be denied. The applicant can be prosecuted for knowingly providing incorrect information. ■ A description of the civil and criminal provisions and penalties for violations of the Food Stamp Act.

Table 1. Food Stamp Regulatory Requirements continued

Category of Information	Description of Information You're Required to Include by Regulation
	2. Statements Required to be in "Plain and Prominent Language on or Near the Front Page of the Application" ▌ Notification of an applicant's right to immediately file an application by providing the applicant's name, address, and signature. ▌ A description of the expedited service eligibility requirements. ▌ Notification that benefits are provided from the date of application.
	3. Certification Statement A statement signed by an adult member of the household that certifies, under penalty of perjury, that the information contained in the application is true, including the information concerning the citizenship and alien status of those applying for benefits.
	4. Nondiscrimination Statement **State agencies must meet the requirement for a non-discrimination statement by using Option A or Option B.** **Option A.** This statement must be on the form: "In accordance with Federal law and U.S. Department of Agriculture policy, this institution is prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, religion, political beliefs, or disability." "To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20250-9410 or call 202-720-5964 (voice and TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer." **Option B.** State agencies can ask FNS for a pre-approved waiver to use the joint USDA/HHS non-discrimination statement and filing addresses: "In accordance with Federal law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) policy, this institution is prohibited

Table 1. Food Stamp Regulatory Requirements continued

Category of Information	Description of Information You're Required to Include by Regulation
	from discriminating on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, or disability. Under the Food Stamp Act and USDA policy, discrimination is prohibited also on the basis of religion or political beliefs."
	"To file a complaint of discrimination, contact USDA or HHS. Write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20250-9410 or call 202-720-5964 (voice and TDD). Write HHS, Director, Office for Civil Rights, Room 506-F, 200 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, D. C. 20201 or call 202-619-0403 (voice) or 202-619-3257 (TDD). USDA and HHS are equal opportunity providers and employers."
D. Multi-Program Applications	If a State has a multi-program application, applicants must have the choice of answering only the questions relevant to the program(s) to which they are applying.

7c. Have you included all related notifications in your form or in a handout?

Food Stamp Regulations at 7 CFR 273.2(b)2-4 require that States notify food stamp applicants about some additional matters that affect their applications. Many States have incorporated these required notices in their application forms. Other States notify applicants by using an instruction sheet or handout at the time of the application.

Solution   Review your form and handouts to make sure you have included the related notifications.

How to
- Use the table below to make sure you have included the related notifications.
- Ask your legal representatives or regional office staff to review the materials where you have placed the related notices.

Table 2. Required Related Notifications

Category of Information	Description of Related Information You're Required to Provide
A. Income and Eligibility Verification System (IEVS) If a State chooses to use IEVS, certain notifications to the applicant are required.	You must notify applicants that their eligibility and level of benefits could be affected by: 1. Information available through IEVS that will be requested and used. Any discrepancies may be verified through collateral contact. 2. Information received from the INS regarding the alien status of applicant household members.
B. Jointly Processed Cases	If your application form allows applicants to apply for the food stamp program and another program at the same time, you must notify applicants that the following rules apply: 1. Applicants may file a separate application for food stamps independent of their application for other benefits. 2. Regardless of whether the application for food stamps is combined with that for other programs, the State agency must process applications for food stamps in accordance with food stamp procedures, including timeliness, notice, and fair hearing requirements. 3. A household may not be denied food stamp benefits solely because it has been denied benefits from other programs. 4. Applicants who submit a joint application for food stamps and other benefits and are denied benefits from the other program(s) do not have to resubmit the joint application. State agencies must determine eligibility from the joint application and meet food stamp processing requirements.
C. Privacy Act Statement	1. Authorization You must notify applicants that: the Food Stamp Act asks applicants to provide information, including their social security numbers, so that State agencies can determine their eligibility food stamps. State agencies verify this information through computer matching programs. They use the information to monitor compliance with program regulations and to manage the program.

Table 2. Required Related Notifications continued

Category of Information	Description of Related Information You're Required to Provide
	2. Disclosure You must notify applicants that: State agencies may disclose the information to other Federal and State agencies for official examination and to law enforcement officials for the purpose of arresting persons who are fleeing to avoid the law.
	3. Collection You must notify applicants that: State agencies may give information from food stamp applications (including social security numbers) to Federal or State agencies or to private claims collection agencies, for collection of claims against food stamp benefits.
	4. Failure to Provide SSN You must notify applicants that: Providing information for a food stamp application, including the social security number of each household member, is voluntary. However, State agencies must deny food stamp benefits to anyone who does not provide a social security number. State agencies will use and disclose any social security numbers provided to them in the manner described in these notices, whether or not they find applicants to be eligible.

7d. Does your form meet current statutory requirements?

In addition to the elements of the form that are required by Federal regulation, the Food Stamp Act requires that certain information be collected from applicants. This information can be collected on the form itself or through an interview.

Solution   Review your form and your interview procedures to be sure that you are collecting the information necessary to administer the food stamp program properly.

How to   ▮ **Review your form for current statutory requirements.** Use the table below to ensure that your form or your interview includes all of the information required by the Food Stamp Act.

Table 3. Statutory Requirements

Category of Information	Description of Information Required by the Food Stamp Act
A. Information about Members of the Applicant's Household This information must be collected for each member of the household that is applying for food stamps.	**1. Identity** For all household members, what are their: ▮ Names? ▮ Dates of birth? ▮ Social security numbers? ▮ Immigration status? In States that allow designation of non-applicants, names of household members can be listed as non-applicants when they do not have, or do not want to reveal, their social security numbers or immigration status.
	2. Special Status Are any household members: ▮ Disabled persons? ▮ Students? ▮ Foster children? ▮ Boarders? ▮ Electing to be non-applicants?

Table 3. Statutory Requirements continued

Category of Information	Description of Information Required by the Food Stamp Act
	3. Categorical Eligibility Are any household members: ∎ Receiving or certified to receive cash, in-kind, or other benefits funded under a state TANF program? ∎ Receiving SSI? ∎ Receiving benefits from a state or local General Assistance program?
	4. Earned Income, Unearned Income, and Self-Employment Income For each source of income, what is the: ∎ Name of the employer or source of funds? ∎ Amount of gross payment before deductions? ∎ Frequency of payment?
	5. Vehicles What are the make, model, and year for any vehicle a member of the household owns or is buying?
	6. Liquid and Non-liquid Assets What are the amounts and types of assets owned by any member of the household, including those jointly owned?
	7. Recently Disposed Assets What is the description and sale price of any vehicles or other assets that were sold, traded, or given away within the past 3 months by any member of the household?

Table 3. Statutory Requirements continued

Category of Information	Description of Information Required by the Food Stamp Act
B. Expenses of the Household These qualify as deductions from income and must also be collected for each member of the household.	**1. Child Support Payments** For each child support payment, what is the: ▮ Name of the household member providing support? ▮ Name of the child? ▮ Name of the person who is paid the support? ▮ Amount of the payment? ▮ Payment schedule?
	2. Shelter Expenses ▮ What is the amount and due date of any mortgage or rental payments? ▮ What is the amount and due date for any property taxes? ▮ What is the amount and due date for insurance on the property or household? ▮ What is the amount and frequency of all utility payments?
	3. Medical Expenses What are the types, amounts, and due dates of payments for medical expenses?
	4. Dependent Care Expenses What are the types, amounts, and due dates of payments for dependent care?
C. Disqualifications Applicants may be disqualified if they meet any of these conditions.	▮ Have any household members voluntarily quit their jobs? ▮ Are any household members on strike? ▮ Have any household members been convicted of drug felonies committed after 8/22/96? ▮ Are any household members felons fleeing from the law? ▮ Have any household members reached the ABAWD (Able-bodied Working Adult Without Dependents) time limit? ▮ Have any household members committed intentional program violations?

▌Part 2
Assessing Your Form by Testing with Applicants

The goal in any forms design project is to have a form that applicants can fill out completely and correctly. One way to reach this goal is to assess the form yourself: to find problems and begin to address them. You will want to test the form with eligibility workers to ensure they can use the form. But an equally important way is to test the form with applicants while you are developing it.

This section of the Guide discusses testing and answers the following questions:

- ❚ What is testing?
- ❚ Why should you test?
- ❚ How do you choose a test method?
- ❚ When should you test?
- ❚ How do you use your test results?
- ❚ Where can you get more information about testing?

What is testing?

Testing means having typical applicants try out drafts of the form, instructions, or other information while you can still make changes.[1] Some important points about testing:

∎ **Testing guides the development of forms**. When you test, you take the time to find out about problems applicants have with your form **in advance** so that you can address and fix them. Testing puts you on the right path—it lets you deal with and correct issues early before they become big problems later.

∎ **Testing helps you focus on the needs of your applicants**. In testing, it is critical that you observe typical applicants. Why is this so important? Why can't you simply ask a co-worker to use the form? The reason is that applicants are probably very different from internal agency staff, and their interactions with the form will be very different from yours or those of other State agency staff members. Typical applicants possibly:

  ▪ do not know how your agency or the government in general works

  ▪ do not know the special words that you use when you talk to other agency staff

  ▪ are less educated than most agency staff members

  ▪ have more trouble reading and writing than most agency staff members

  ▪ may be intimidated or embarrassed by needing to get food stamps

  Testing lets you find out more about your applicants and how they work with your form. By seeing where they have trouble, you can design a better form for applicants.

∎ **Testing gives you a "real world review."** You might think that you don't need to test because you already have several layers of internal review. But it is very important not to confuse testing with reviewing—the two are actually quite different.
  You probably already have your work reviewed by other subject matter experts, legal experts, managers, and specialists in other agencies or other divisions of your agency. All of these reviews can help you be sure that what you are preparing is technically and legally accurate. These reviews, however, cannot tell you whether typical applicants or eligibility workers will be able to understand or use the form or instructions. Testing gives you a different kind of review—it allows you to see if your form will actually work in the real world.

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[1] Some less experienced designers use readability formulas to ensure that an application works. Unfortunately, readability formulas rely only on word and sentence length. As the research and this Guide show, helping applicants is far more complex and includes task completion, navigation, and comprehension. For more discussion of this topic, see "Why Readability Formulas Aren't Enough" on https://www.fnspartner.usda.gov.

Why should you test?

Testing saves time and money—plain and simple.

- If applicants have problems with published forms, agency staff must spend time fixing applicants' errors—talking with applicants, making phone calls, or explaining in person what applicants did not understand from the documents. It takes time and money.

- If applicants do not complete the forms correctly, agency staff may not be able to determine their eligibility and the appropriate benefit. Applicants' errors can cause errors in deciding on eligibility and calculating benefits.

When you don't take the time to diagnose problems in your forms early, either applicants or state workers suffer—and often both do. Fixing such problems later takes more time and money—to investigate, to send notices and letters, to get the correct information, to fill out the application again, and so on. It is much less expensive to test before the forms go out so that you can eliminate most of the problems that make food stamp applications and instructions difficult to understand and use.

How do you choose a test method?

You can test in three basic ways. These methods have an extensive literature behind them that discusses specific techniques as well as the limits and strengths of each method. In general, you can choose from one of the following test methods based on what you want to learn:

- **Usability testing**—can applicants **use** the form?
- **Cognitive testing**—can applicants **understand** the words, phrases, and concepts in the form?
- **Focus groups**—what do applicants **think** about the form?

The table on the following page shows you more about these three methods including the types of information that you get from each of them.

Appropriate Uses for Different Forms Testing Methods

What is the testing method?	What will it help you learn?	How many people do you need to test?	What are the positives of this method?	What are the negatives of this method?
Usability testing (watch, listen, and talk to people one at a time)	Can people use the form accurately and appropriately? Can people integrate all of the information?	About 5 people for each draft	See and hear users as they actually do the tasks and work with the whole form	
Cognitive testing (ask specific questions of people as they "walk through" a document one at a time)	Do people understand specific words and instructions?	About 5 to 10 people for each draft	Get data on words and sentences Can help to resolve differences of opinion on team	Focuses on specific parts of the form (like vocabulary and concepts) not on overall success
Focus groups (discussion among people)	What people think of the form? Do they like it?	About 8 to 10 people in each focus group	Get impressions, feelings, suggestions, and self-reports of what people would do	Focuses on what people *think* they do or would do; not on what they *actually do*. The two are very often quite different.

With limited resources of time and money, we recommend that you conduct usability testing. Usability testing does not need to be expensive. You can get extraordinary results with small numbers.

In addition, you can combine your usability testing with the other methods of testing. When you are doing a usability test, you can ask the kinds of questions that make up a cognitive test. For example, you can ask applicants what a particular word, phrase, label,

or instruction means to them. At the end of a usability test session, you can also ask applicants what they think of the form. That way, you get the same subjective information that you get in a focus group.

When should you test?

You should test as often in the forms design process as you can. Though it is critical to test your form with actual users, you should remember that testing should not simply be a one-time activity. To help you think about the possibilities for testing, the table entitled "Testing at Different Stages of the Process" on page 83 shows several stages of the form design process and outlines what kind of information you can test for in each stage.

How do you use your test results?

Testing can tell you a lot about your food stamp application process and program. Depending upon the methods that you use, you will get different information in your results, and you will want to use the results to further revise your form.

As you analyze the data from your testing, consider three levels of information that you are getting:

- specific words, items, and design elements to change
- global information about the form
- global information about your processes: both the process that applicants go through and the process you are using to revise the form and instructions

Specific words, items, and design elements to change. You will almost certainly find some specifics that you can improve to make it easier for applicants to work their way through the form and to understand what they need to do. You might mark up a copy of the draft form to indicate these problem areas. However, solving the problems may not be trivial. You may need assistance from writers, forms designers, and subject matter specialists, working together, to find a better design and language.

Global information about the form. As you consider what you learned in the usability test, go beyond your list of specifics. Think about the applicants' entire experience with the form and instructions. What are you seeing? For example,

- Were applicants overwhelmed by the length of the form and the number of items? If so, reconsider: Must you include every item? Where can you revise the form to make it shorter?
- Did applicants have trouble finding their way through the form? If so, reconsider: Have you used navigation techniques—like a logical structure and headings—to guide them through the form?

- Did applicants have trouble understanding what you are asking for in many items? If so, reconsider: Are you using financial and tax terms when you could use plainer English with examples?
- Did applicants have trouble figuring out which parts they needed to complete and how to move from section to section? If so, reconsider the form's layout and design and the words you use to help with those transitions.

Global information about your processes. Changing the form or instructions may not solve all the problems that you see in a usability test. Sometimes the problem is deeper than the words or the layout. Sometimes, the best (or only) way to create a form that applicants can use is to make changes to the program—to policy or to process. Of course, the changes you can make are constrained by law and regulation, but within those constraints, you may be able to find ways to make it easier for applicants to give you accurate and complete information. A form that is getting you bad data is worthless. For example,

- Are there questions that you can eliminate? Is it possible to separate applications for multiple benefits? Is it possible to combine applications for some programs?
- Should you move some questions to the interview portion of your process, so applicants don't need to answer as many on the form?
- Can you delete some of the interview questions?
- Do you need to make changes to your computer system to better support the process and the form?

Where can you get more information about testing?

Testing allows you to make both small changes that can improve your form and large changes that can transform your form and your process. With a small investment of time and money, you can make your form much better for applicants. This section has provided some basic information about testing and its benefits. However, there is much more you can learn about testing, including how to actually plan, set up, and conduct a test. To learn more about testing, you can stay in touch with the Kleimann Communication Group and your State colleagues at ClearApps on https://www.fnspartner.usda.gov.

Testing at Different Stages of the Process

When you…	Your goal for testing should be…	You should test for this type of information…
Plan	To test where applicants have problems with the current form so that you can start revising appropriately	▪ What problems do applicants have with the current form? ▪ What works in the current form? ▪ Where should you start making revisions?
Draft	To test different ways of presenting information in order to choose the most appropriate one for applicants.	▪ What is the best way to approach certain sections of the form? ▪ Which approach will work best for applicants? ▪ Can applicants understand the wording of questions? ▪ Can applicants understand and use the tables?
Test	To test the entire new draft to see if applicants can use it as a whole.	▪ How does the form work as a whole? ▪ Can applicants complete the entire task of filling out the form? ▪ How long does it take applicants to complete the form? ▪ Are there areas of the form that stop applicants from being able to successfully fill it out?
Deliver	To test sections of the form that applicants still had trouble with so that you can iron them out.	▪ Is the form ready to be printed and distributed? ▪ Are there any problematic areas that were missed in earlier rounds of testing?
Evaluate	To test a final version of the form to show that it works better than the old one.	▪ How well does the new form work for applicants? ▪ Does the new form solve problems that the old form had? ▪ Can you get evidence that the new form works better?

▍Part 3:
Complete Checklist

Principle 1—Task Completion
Create an introduction to help applicants understand the form and the process of getting food stamps

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1a. *Does your form have an introduction that explains the context of the form and helps applicants understand what to do with it?*

❒ *Yes*
❒ *No* ⟶ *Go to page 13*

1b. *Does your form have an introduction that explains how the form fits into the entire process of getting food stamps?*

❒ *Yes*
❒ *No* ⟶ *Go to page 14*

1c. *Does your form have an introduction that tells applicants what they should do after they complete the form?*

❒ *Yes*
❒ *No* ⟶ *Go to page 15*

1d. *Does your form have an introduction that includes a list of items that applicants should bring to their interviews?*

❒ *Yes*
❒ *No* ⟶ *Go to page 16*

Principle 2—Task Completion
Make the content of the form more manageable for applicants

2a. *Are questions grouped in the same way applicants would think about them?*

❐ Yes
❐ No ⟹ *Go to page 17*

2b. *Are questions ordered in the same way applicants would think about them?*

❐ Yes
❐ No ⟹ *Go to page 18*

2c. *Does your form give a general overview of what's in it as well as overviews of each section?*

❐ Yes
❐ No ⟹ *Go to page 19*

2d. *Does your form include instructions to introduce and explain sections?*

❐ Yes
❐ No ⟹ *Go to page 20*

2e. *Does your form include a "How to" booklet?*

❐ Yes
❐ No ⟹ *Go to page 21*

2f. *Does your form use examples?*

❐ Yes
❐ No ⟹ *Go to page 21*

2g. *Does your form have an overall tone that is helpful and professional?*

❐ Yes
❐ No ⟹ *Go to page 22*

Principle 3—Navigation
Make the logical structure visible

3a. *Does your form use a predictable grid for layout?*

❐ Yes
❐ No ⟹ *Go to page 29*

3b. *Does your form use white space to visually organize sections and items?*

❐ Yes
❐ No ⟹ *Go to page 30*

3c. *Does your form use headings to show the structure?*

❐ Yes
❐ No ⟹ *Go to page 32*

3d. *Are the headings consistent throughout your form?*

❐ Yes
❐ No ⟹ *Go to page 33*

3e. *Does your form limit the amount of information it asks applicants to provide in tables?*

❐ Yes
❐ No ⟹ *Go to page 34*

3f. *Does your form number the pages and the questions?*

❐ Yes
❐ No ⟹ *Go to page 36*

3g. *Are the spaces on your form large enough for applicants to comfortably enter information?*

❐ Yes
❐ No ⟹ *Go to page 36*

Principle 4—Navigation
Present information so it looks accessible

4a.	*Does your form use a font that is clear and legible?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 38*
4b.	*Does your form use upper and lower case for headings and for text?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 39*
4c.	*Does your form use bullets to list important information?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 40*
4d.	*Does your form use emphasis techniques— like bold and italics—without overusing them?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 41*
4e.	*Does your form use color and shading as non-verbal cues to applicants?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 42*
4f.	*Do you have a style guide to ensure consistency?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 43*

Principle 5—Comprehension
Help applicants untangle the text

5a.	*Does your form simplify complex sentences?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 49*
5b.	*Does your form eliminate unnecessary words?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 50*
5c.	*Does your form use sentences written in the positive or simple negative?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 51*
5d.	*Does your form use the active voice?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 52*
5e.	*Does your form simplify conditional statements?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 54*
5f.	*Does your form link sentences to each other with logic marker words?*	❒ Yes ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 55*

Principle 6—Comprehension
Use words applicants would use

6a. *Does your form use pronouns?* ❒ Yes
  ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 56*

6b. *Does your form use words that applicants would use in everyday speech?* ❒ Yes
  ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 57*

6c. *Does your form define difficult words and concepts?* ❒ Yes
  ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 58*

6d. *Does your form use words consistently?* ❒ Yes
  ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 58*

6e. *Does your form use action verbs instead of nouns made out of verbs?* ❒ Yes
  ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 59*

6f. *Does your form define acronyms and abbreviations?* ❒ Yes
  ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 60*

6g. *Does your form make the legal language clear and simple to understand?* ❒ Yes
  ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 61*

Principle 7—Compliance
Ensure policy compliance

7a. *Does your form include only questions that are legally relevant to ensure an applicant is eligible for food stamps?* ❒ Yes
  ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 67*

7b. *Does your form meet current regulatory requirements?* ❒ Yes
  ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 67*

7c. *Does your form include related notifications?* ❒ Yes
  ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 70*

7d. *Does your form meet current statutory requirements?* ❒ Yes
  ❒ No ➠ *Go to page 73*