Best Practices for Online SNAP Applications

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Introduction

As government agencies move more and more services onto the web, they sometimes struggle with the best ways to present information so that it is clear and easy to use for a range of clients. This Guide can help State Agencies create online SNAP applications using a client-centered approach. To develop this Guide, we surveyed online SNAP applications across State Agencies. Our assessment asked, "Can clients understand and use this application to apply for SNAP benefits confidently?" Within our assessment, we identified strengths within existing online applications. In parallel, we identified opportunities to improve the applications, and along the way, improve clients' ability to complete applications correctly, confidently, and independently.

We translated those opportunities into guidelines and design models to offer State Agencies a user-centered foundation for developing and refining their online applications. We also developed a self-assessment checklist that parallels the Guide to help State Agencies:

- apply and use the Guide on their own sites, and

- benchmark and track the usability of their applications.

The best practices contained within this Guide are drawn from various design specialties that contribute to user experience, including usability, plain language, visual design, and persuasive design. The research supporting the best practices draws on disciplines including, but not limited to, cognitive psychology, motivation, attention, vision, and computer-human interaction.

Evidence-driven best practices proactively resolve many of the choices and debates that designers have, so using them speeds up the design process.

To work well, online applications need to proactively support and guide clients through the process. Online applications are not simply a means to take in data. Rather, they build conversations—much like the conversations clients would have with eligibility workers if they were applying in person. Therefore, this Guide also speaks to communicating the process, engaging clients in it, and supporting them through their application experience, from submission of the online application through the review process.

Using these best practices can help State Agencies build applications that are easier to understand and use, making the process more seamless for applicants and State workers alike.

About the Guide

This Guide to improving online applications was developed based on a state-by-state analysis of online SNAP applications conducted in Spring 2014. That analysis, described in detail in Appendix B, provided a baseline of the issues and opportunities present in existing online SNAP applications. This Guide is based on those findings and tailored to the unique goals and challenges of individuals designing government benefits applications.

This Guide includes descriptions of best practices in web design and a Self-Assessment Checklist in Appendix C.

Best Practices

This Guide is centered on best practices with short explanations that draw on user-centered research in the fields of service design, web-based form design, and plain language. These best practices are broken into the following groupings:

This Guide also includes sample online screens that demonstrate best practices and offer ideas for State Agency use. These are integrated into the chapters on best practices.

Self-Assessment Checklist

Finally, this Guide includes a self-assessment checklist to help State Agencies identify what their online applications do well and where there are opportunities for improvement. Each question also maps to a specific best practice in this document. A copy of this Self-Assessment Checklist can be found in Appendix C.

Getting the most from the Guide

This Guide is designed to help you develop and/or revise your State's online applications. You can use the best practices to learn what works in online applications and why. At the same time, the models give a visual representation of the best practices and can inspire new designs. Finally, the checklist allows you to benchmark your site and track improvement.

Specifically, you can follow these steps:

1. Use the Self-Assessment Checklist to benchmark your current site.

2. Use the Self-Assessment Checklist scores to prioritize your redesign by fixing the elements with the lowest Best Practice scores first.

3. Use the information in the Guide to shape redesigns.

4. Use the Self-Assessment Checklist to re-evaluate after you redesign.

5. Calculate your new score and compare it to your benchmark to demonstrate improvement.

6. Repeat the process each time you make major changes. Track your score and iterations over time to show continuous improvement.

Help the client understand the process

1   Explain the process

Clients who understand the process before they start the application can finish the application more quickly and confidently. This is particularly true for low-literacy individuals. Clear overviews and concrete instructions can help clients better understand what is expected of them from start to finish.

1.1 Break the application process into steps

Clients applying for SNAP must be able to submit applications with minimal information. To allow for this, SNAP online applications naturally break down into three major steps:

1. The applicant enters the application by either (a) creating an account; or (b) entering the site with basic log-in information (no account or email required).

2. The applicant submits an application to establish the filing date.

3. The applicant either adds personal and financial information to support the benefits request online (optional) or provides this information during an interview.

When presenting the SNAP application process, give each part of the process a distinct label. Use the labels to refer to each part consistently. For example, you could label the parts of the process as: (1) Request SNAP Benefits or Establish Your Filing Date; and (2) Provide Supporting Information.

1.2 Provide a diagram of the process

Many State Agencies describe what applicants need to do, but not how to do it. Tell applicants visually or with words how to use the tools provided on the site. When they finish a step, tell them what to do next, including what to do after they have submitted their application and are waiting for their interview or eligibility determination.

If a client's next step is to wait for a response or interview request from the State Agency, tell them:

- That they need to wait.

- What they are waiting for.

- How long they should wait before following up.

- How to follow-up.

Process diagrams help clients both see the big picture and learn the major steps and activities in a process.

Figure 1: Sample process diagram for SNAP

1 Complete and submit your request for benefits.

Prepare for your interview

2 Print and use the worksheet to gather supporting information.

Watch your mail for an interview date. If you do not receive one within within 10 days of submitting your SNAP request, call 1-800-234-5678.

Start gathering the supporting information for your application and interview right away.

3 Add supporting information to your online profile before your interview.

4 Download or print a copy of your application information for your records. Have it with you during your interview.

Interview

5 Interview in person or on the phone. Have your application information with you.

6 Within 10 days, submit information requested by your interviewer.

7 Check your application status on the benefits portal while you wait for your response letter.

8 Watch your mail for your eligibility decision. If you do not receive it within 30 days of submitting your SNAP request, call 1-800-234-5678.

1.3 Explain how the steps fit

Explain how each step fits into the overall process. For instance, some State Agencies offer applicants the option to create a "benefits account" with a personal username or user ID and password. Having such an account can be helpful to clients because they can save information for later and apply for other programs. However, they may not understand the benefits of this step until you tell them. Explain how this step could be helpful before they create an account. Also explain that there are alternatives to applying online.

1.4 Make the starting points visible and clear for clients seeking benefits

Typical applicants are looking for information about how to apply for SNAP benefits. Therefore, the site should provide a prominent "Apply" link to the online application on the homepage. That link should take clients to the online application to encourage them to apply online. However, it is also important that the State Agency's web site include prominent links to other ways to apply, such as using a paper form or applying in person, in close proximity to where clients access the online application. By presenting alternate methods to apply, State Agencies can increase the likelihood that clients will review all the available methods.

Figure 2: Use organization, color, and layout to make starting points for benefits clients stand out

State Logo

SNAP Food Assistance

Have questions?
Live Help
is available from
8am-5pm weekdays
except state holidays.

Request SNAP (Food assistance)

Complete and submit this form to apply for SNAP benefits. You add family and financial information in the second step. If you are eligible, your benefits start on the date the SNAP office gets this form, so don't delay your request. You can submit the form online or in person.

Given name [Required]   Middle name   Family name [Required]   Jr, Sr, etc

Select

Address [Required]
Street   PO Box

City   State   Zip

If you receive your mail at a different address, enter that address here.
Street   PO Box

City   State   Zip

People in some situations can get SNAP in less then 7 days.

☐ Do you have less than $100 in cash or in the bank?
☐ Do you get less than $150/month in earned or other benefits?
☐ Is your income this month less than your rent or mortgage?
☐ Is someone in your household a migrant or seasonal farm worker?

Oath of honesty [Required]
☐ I certify that under penalty of perjury that my answers to all questions about each household members, including those about citizen or alien status, are correct and complete to the best of my knowledge.

Request SNAP benefits

Standard Footer

1.5 Tell clients what information they will need before they start filling out the application

Clients must provide detailed personal and financial information to complete a SNAP application. Give them a list—preferably a checklist—of the information they will need to help them gather it.

Figure 3: Tell clients what they need
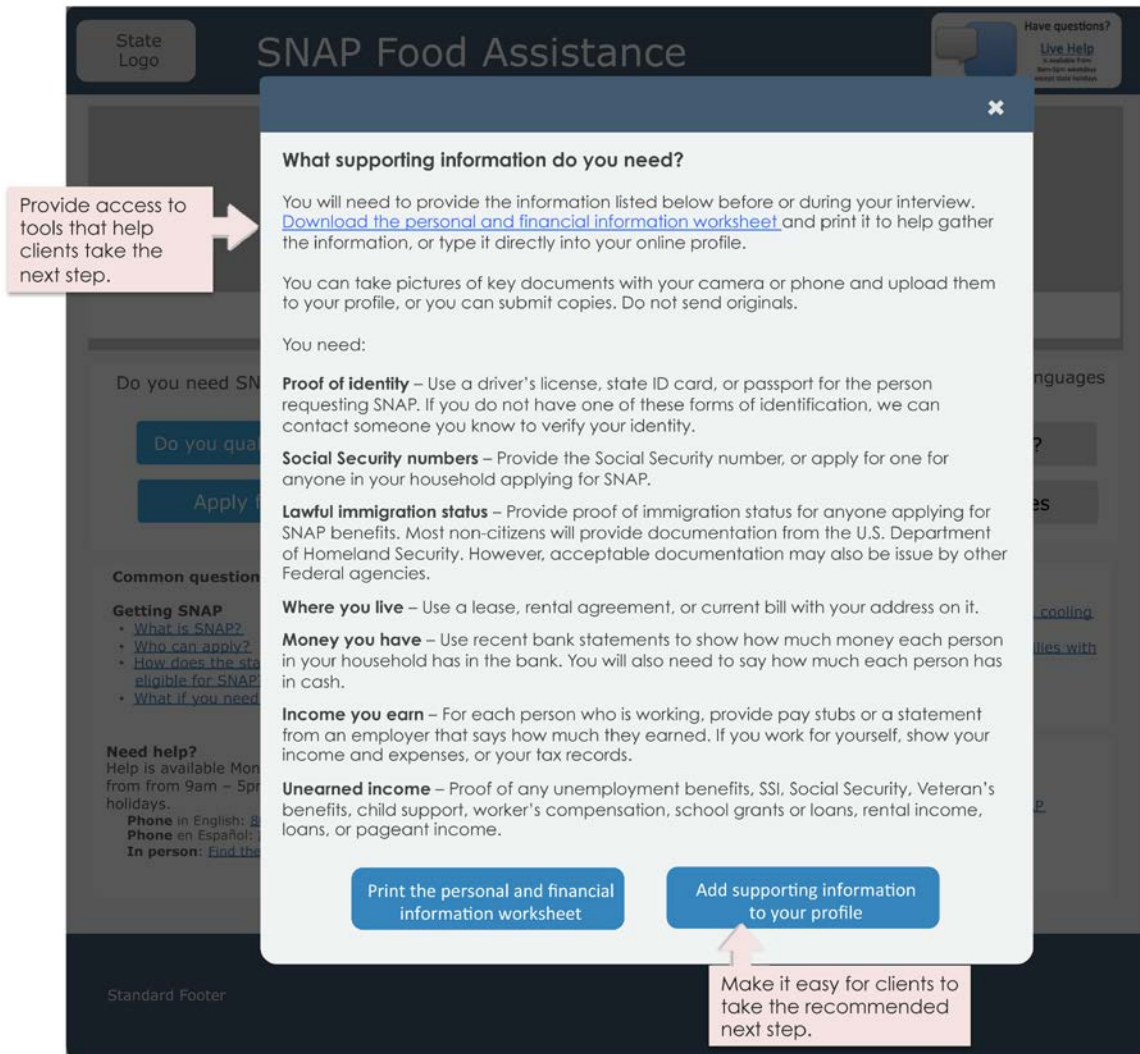
1.6 Tell clients when they do things right

Giving clients positive feedback lets them know that they are completing the application correctly. Frequent positive feedback on partial progress toward a large goal is a strategy that increases motivation, engagement, and confidence. Dividing the application into smaller steps allows designers to give frequent positive feedback. Feedback does not need to be effusive and can consist of showing clients their progress so that they know what they still have to do. For example, in an application, you may see your progress bar move forward, indicating that you have completed a page or a step.

Since it is impossible to know how many data fields apply to each person, percent-complete progress bars are likely to be misleading. Instead, show progress on a page-by-page level so that clients can quickly determine which pages they may need to revisit, as shown in Figure 4. In this Figure:

- Checkmarks indicate completed pages or sections.

- Red dashes indicate there is still work to do on that page.

Figure 4: Use indicators, such as checkmarks or dashes, to provide feedback to clients

1.7 Offer to help clients like an eligibility worker would

Offer help in the same place on every page of the application. Tell clients about the different kinds of help your State Agency has and how and when they can get it. Provide context-specific help where clients may need it. Make help labels clear and specific, not generic.

Figure 5: Provide persistent global help on every page of the application
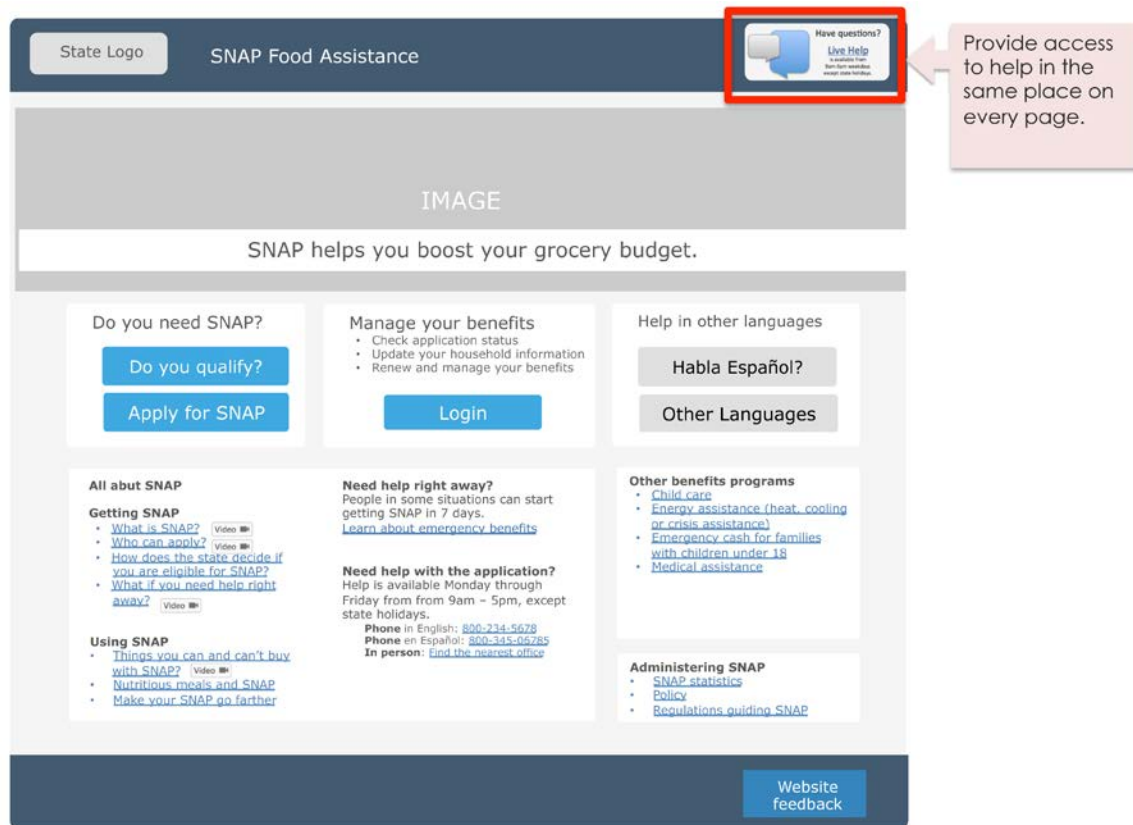
1.8 Tell clients how information will be used

If clients are uncertain of how the State Agency is going to use the information they provide, they may decline to give it.

Explain why information is requested and how it will be used in key places in the application, including:

- In the application overview or instructions.

- Near the request for information (with a direct link or access to information about that application element).

- In the frequently asked questions (if provided).

Figure 6: Provide context-specific help in areas where clients have questions

Is anyone in your household blind, disabled, or elderly (aged 60 or over)?

○ Yes
○ No

▼ Why do we ask this?

We need to know if anyone in your household is blind, disabled, or elderly (aged 60 or over) as there are special rules for these groups that may affect your benefits.

▼ How will we use this information?

We will use the information to calculate SNAP benefits and to help you find other benefits you may be eligible for. Keep in mind that your eligibility worker may need to know more about your disability later, and you may be asked to show proof of your disability.

2   Use plain language

Plain language applications are easier to understand and use than applications that include a lot of jargon. When content is in plain language, clients are also more likely to read it. When they understand the instructions, they need less help and finish tasks more confidently.

Plain language applications need to provide the same support that an eligibility worker would give. Eligibility workers explain tricky questions and give help where they know clients need it. They may even provide more guidance in areas where they know clients are likely to make mistakes. To make online applications as helpful as a conversation with a real person, you need to:

- Learn when clients are likely to make mistakes.

- Redesign instructions and interactions that are unclear.

- Understand when clients need help.

- Offer help if the designs are not clear enough.

2.1 Use common words instead of jargon

Replace jargon with common or lay-terms where possible. If knowing technical terms can help clients succeed, teach them the new words. Use the term correctly, then follow it with a short definition (for example, "earned income, or money you get for doing work"). Reintroduce and redefine the term again in each major section. Do not assume that clients will understand that they can click or hover over to learn a new word.

2.2 Use common words instead of or to explain acronyms

Avoid using acronyms whenever possible. If acronyms must be used, write out the full phrase the first time you use it in each major section, followed by the acronym in parentheses (for example, "Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)"). Not all clients will know even common acronyms. For instance, while "FAQ" may be familiar to native English speakers, individuals who speak English as a second language may not know what it means.

2.3 Write in a conversational tone

Write as though you are having a conversation with someone. One way to create a conversational tone is to use active verbs that make your content easier to read and understand. Compare these two sentences:

1. **Passive voice:** The client was called by the eligibility worker.

2. **Active voice:** The eligibility worker called the client.

In sentence one, the passive verb slows readers down because it takes extra effort to sort out who is taking the action. Clients read the second sentence faster because the active verb makes it easier to understand who did what to whom.

Another way to achieve a conversational tone is by using pronouns ("you") instead of repeating proper nouns ("the applicant"). People sometimes repeat words instead of pronouns for the sake of consistency or uniformity. However, content is harder to understand when writers use a full noun to refer to the same idea or person over and over.

2.4 Use a readability tool to check your writing

A variety of online tools are available that can evaluate the complexity of your writing. Many provide helpful feedback, including specific recommendations, to help individuals improve their writing. While each has limitations, try to use at least one tool to index how difficult your writing is to understand.

You can find the reading level of your application by using one of the freely available readability checkers on the web. While Flesch-Kincaid is probably the most familiar tool, it is not the best one to assess online applications. Because it is designed to evaluate narrative texts, it measures sentence length by counting the words between periods. As a result, its scores are skewed on forms that include labels and instructions. The following site describes different readability formulas, and includes a range of free calculators: http://www.readabilityformulas.com/free-readability-calculators.php.

2.5 Highlight links to alternate language content

Many clients are more comfortable reading in another language. Highlight your alternate language materials on the SNAP landing page, as in Figure 8. When possible, list the

other language materials using the name of the language written in that language's script.

Provide a "language switch" to the other language materials on every page. Language switches typically appear in the upper right corner of the page. Language switches are one of just a few instances in which using pull-down menus work well. This is because readers looking for other language materials are highly motivated to find in-language materials.

Figure 7: Provide persistent access to other language materials
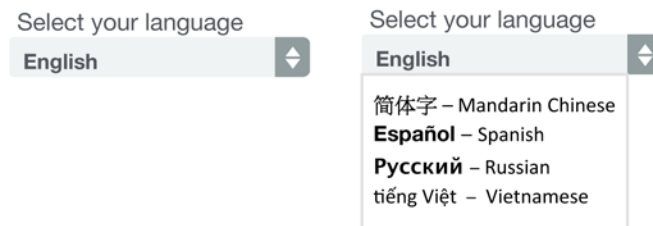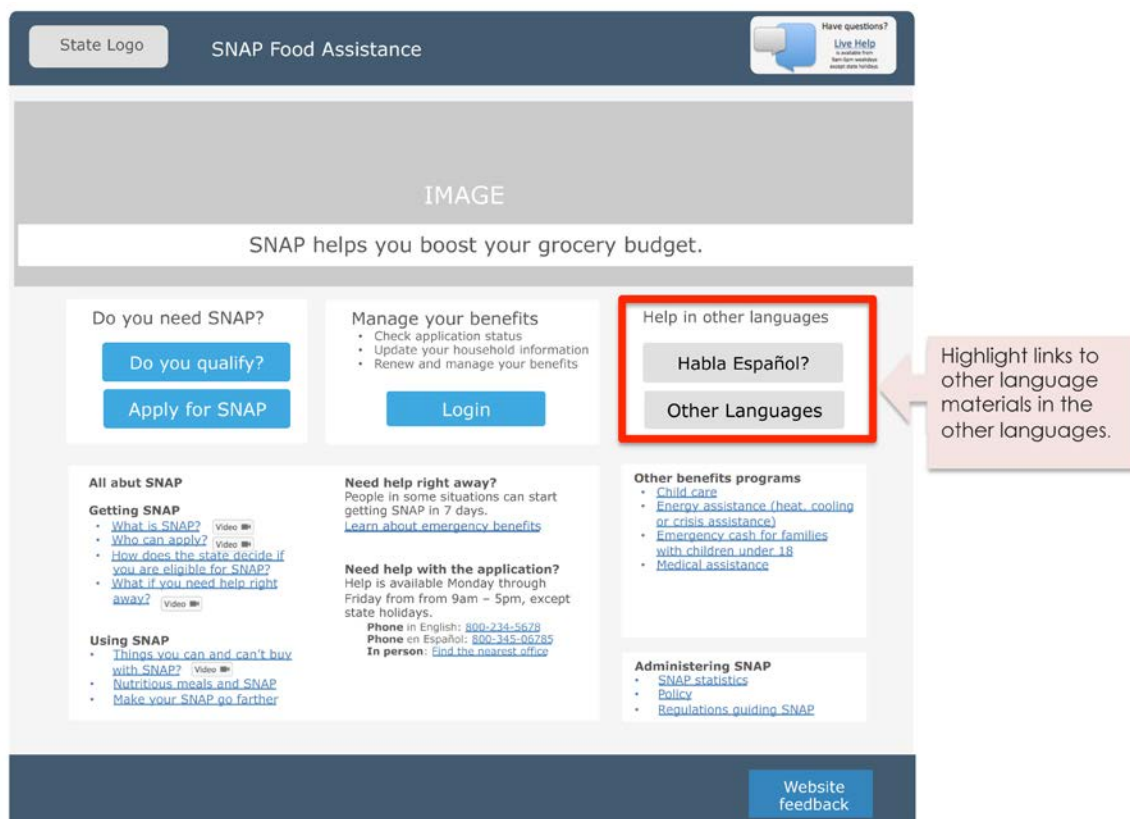

Figure 8: Give materials in other languages prominent billing

2.6 Use model language for complex parts of the application

Some elements of the application are naturally complex—such as discussing rights, responsibilities, and penalties. Appendix B, Language Models, provides plain language examples for presenting critical or particularly complex parts of the application.

3   Make navigating easy

Clients may want to add information to the application as they gather it. Therefore, they need a way to quickly find specific sections deep within the form. Providing a clear structure and navigation system will not only help clients move around within the application, it will also help clients learn and predict what they must do to complete their application.

3.1 Break long sections into several shorter ones

To help clients navigate the application, break big sections into smaller ones. Smaller sections allow clients to see their incremental progress. Each section should represent a phase in the process or content. Within the SNAP application, establishing a filing date and then entering supporting information are the highest-level natural steps. However, the process of adding supporting information is a significant step in itself and requires dividing the sub-tasks into their own sections. Presenting each sub-section (for example, "household members" or "assets") on its own page can help the applicant follow the process more easily and efficiently.

Since processes with many steps feel harder than processes with just a few, you should try to limit the number of steps (or items in a menu) to seven sections. However, since long pages can also be daunting, the number of sections and sub-sections should be weighed against the lengths of individual pages.

Anecdotal usability testing evidence shows that clients can work effectively with pages between two to three scrolls in length. Longer pages begin to feel unwieldy. Conversely, pages that are limited to one scroll (or cut off at the "fold") may feel too short. They also add unnecessary clicks to the interaction. Therefore, you should strike a balance between keeping similar content on the same page and page length.

3.2 Present sections in logical order

Group questions, sections, and sub-sections by content type, and present them in a logical order. This organization helps clients stay on track in the application. It helps them predict what will come next and remember how the application works.

3.3 Give sections and sub-sections meaningful labels

Like road signs, headings should help clients tell what is coming next and help them to decide if they want to move forward. Therefore, give each section and sub-section a meaningful heading. Use familiar, descriptive terms in the headings. Headings are not a good place to introduce new concepts or acronyms.

3.4 Make the navigation always available and prominent

Clients will probably not know all of the supporting household and financial information that the application requests off hand. More likely, they will enter what they know, review what they need, logoff, gather the information they need, log back in, and add it. They may repeat the process several times.

Since we do not know the order in which applicants will enter information, the applications themselves must provide navigation that supports random access to the various sections. Provide primary navigation that is always available on every page to let clients immediately go to the section they want. You do not want to force them to click through each page from the beginning.

Figure 9: Persistent navigation model
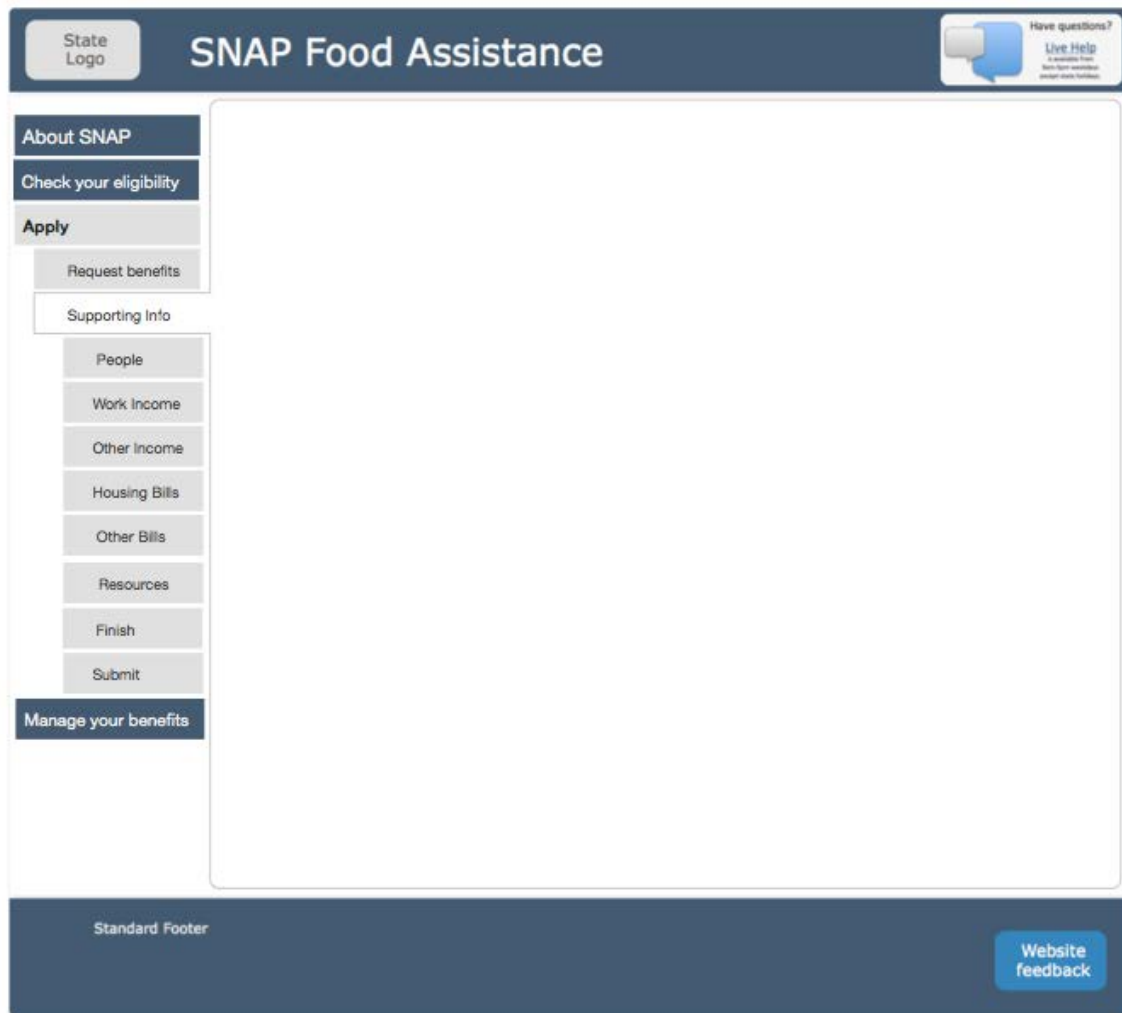
Primary, persistent navigation typically appears below the page banner or along the left side of the page. Since presenting navigation horizontally limits the space available and, by extension, the number of sections, it is more practical to use the left edge for navigation within SNAP applications, as shown in Figure 10 above.

Some organizations experiment with placing persistent navigation on the right edge of the page, with the intent to make the user experience unique and memorable. While usability testing shows that clients can learn and use navigation in non-standard locations, they favor sites with navigation in the standard locations.

3.5 Make secondary navigation look and work predictably and consistently

If sections are further divided, clients will also need secondary navigation. Secondary navigation includes tabs or buttons that provide a method for clients to move around the sub-sections easily. Secondary navigation should look and act the same way across sections within the site. It should be visible on every page in that section. Use color, for example, shades of the same hue, and proximity to help clients connect the primary and secondary navigation related to the same section.

In Figure 10 below, when a client selects a section, the section opens to reveal all pages. Sub-pages are indented below the section tab to visually group them with the section tab. One way to use color, as the example demonstrates, is as a guide to help clients follow a predictable pattern. For example, tabs for pages within a section can be shades of the same hue as the section tab, except when the section landing page is active. The tab for the active page can be the same color as the page body background, to connect the active tab label with the page itself.

Figure 10: Interaction model for secondary navigation
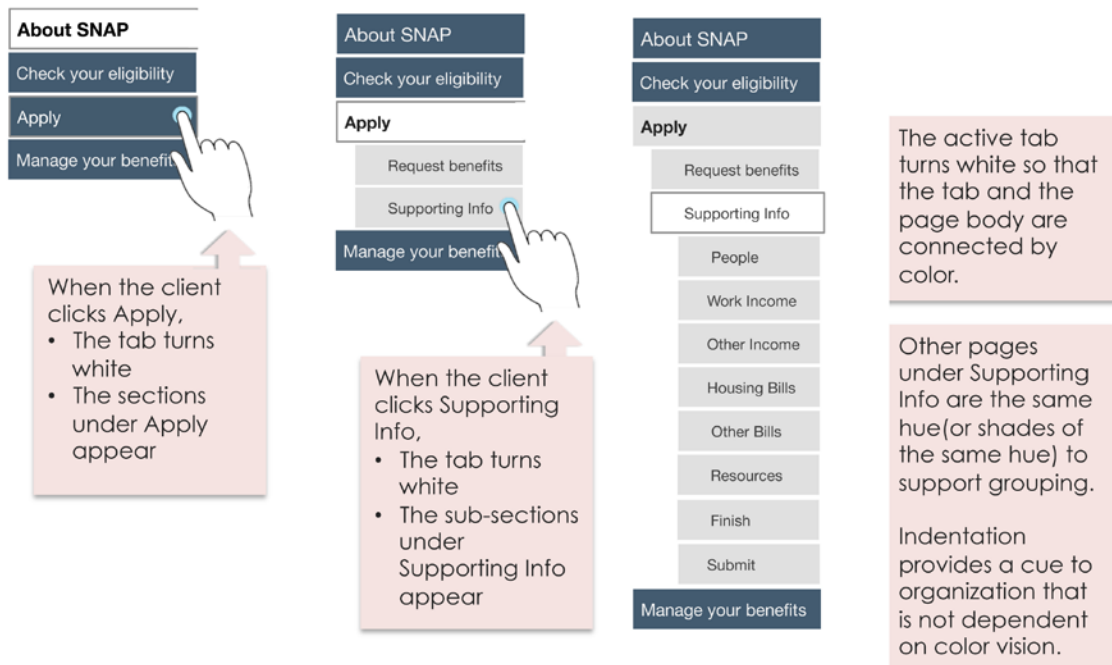
3.6 Offer prominent Next, Back, and Apply Now buttons

State Agencies must allow the client to both navigate through the application and apply at any time. Providing Next, Back, and Apply Now navigation at the top or bottom of each page helps clients with these tasks. Next buttons help clients move through the application in the intended order. Apply Now buttons allow applicants to submit the application at any point in the process without the pressure of feeling they need to complete everything.

Figure 11: Provide prominent navigation buttons
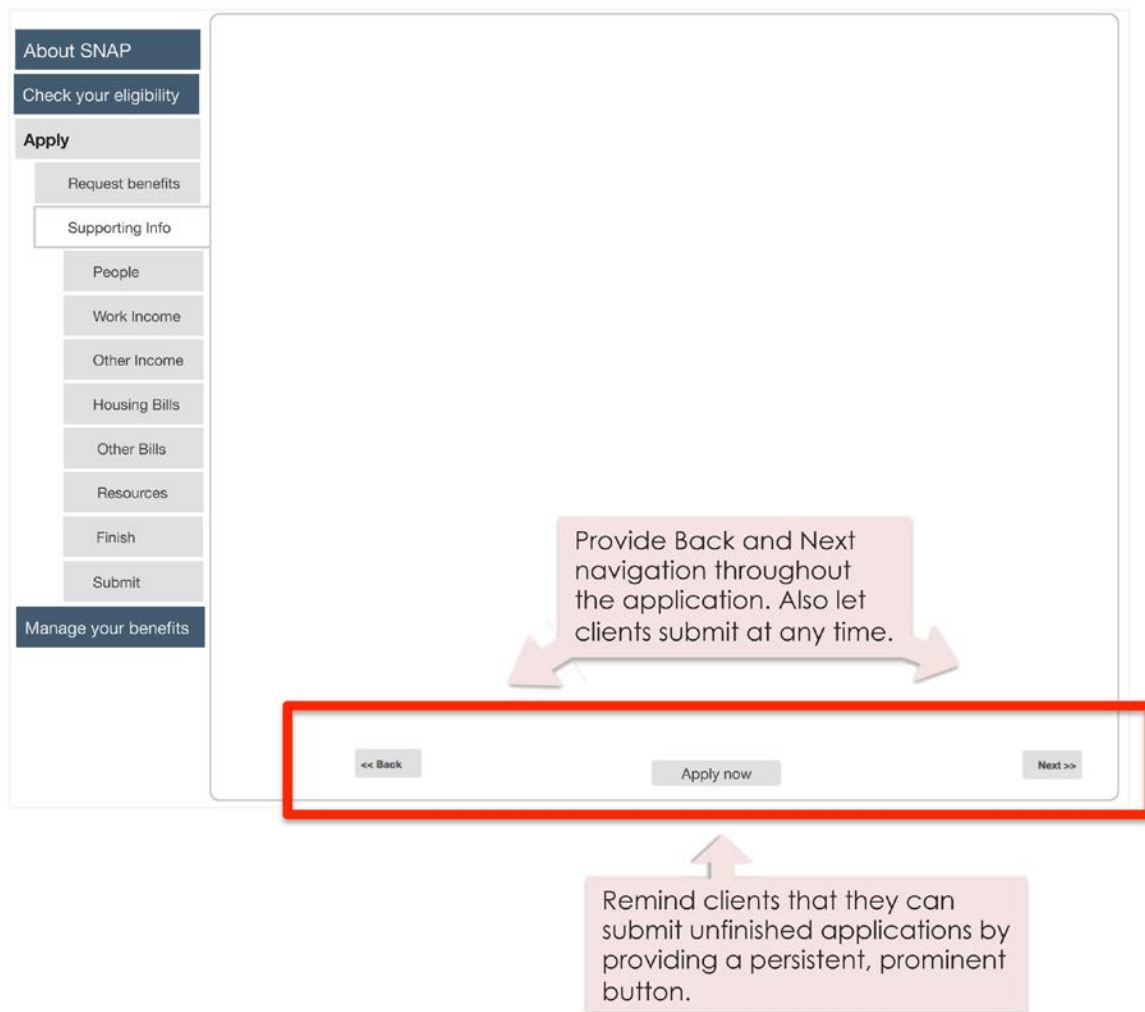
Help the client apply

4   Make information accessible

Online applications only help if clients can use them to access services without significant support from the State Agency. Make information accessible by simplifying the log in process, reducing questions, and having the computer do work "for" the client.
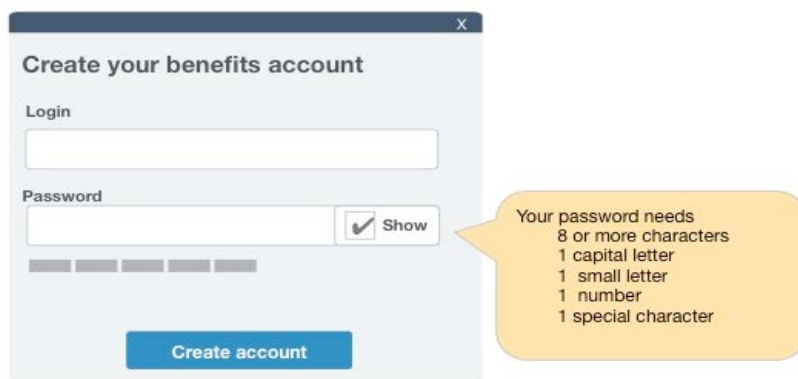
4.1 Make it easy to create an account

Most applications offer a way for clients to create an account so that they can save their work. Clients should be encouraged to create a unique log-in name, but State Agencies cannot require applicants to use their email addresses. A mandatory email address imposes an additional condition of eligibility, which is prohibited in federal statute and regulations governing SNAP.

Some applications make password creation more difficult than necessary. Give clients the option to see their passwords as they type. Default to "show" instead of "hide" the password. Provide immediate feedback on the password requirements list so clients know which requirements they still have to fulfill.

Web designers are often concerned with fending off "robots" which can flood a web site with spam. You should try to identify robots using an automated, behind-the-scenes method instead of putting the burden on the client. Automated approaches are more efficient than methods like "captchas" where an individual has to decipher an unclear image or word to prove that they are a real person and not a robot.

Figure 12: Make the login process as simple as possible

4.2 Limit content to information clients need

Streamline the application content aggressively so that it only includes information that will help the client complete an application successfully. Remove any archival details about the program history, regulations, and successes. Present those details in areas of the State Agency web site designed for researchers, advocates, and policymakers.

Figure 13: Limit content to only information that the program immediately needs

4.3 Save clients' work for them

Have the system automatically save the clients' work as they enter it into the application. If the system cannot save for them, remind them to save early and often.

4.4 Let clients use familiar tools to attach supporting documents

Provide multiple ways for clients to attach documents to their application. Let them:

- Upload using drag and drop.

- Email their documents to a unique address.

- Share a document with a specific upload account.

4.5 Offer extra instructions when clients are likely to want or need them

Use "just in time" instructions only at the point where clients may need them. These types of instructions help keep applicants from becoming overloaded with extra information.

Use dialogue boxes to give clients extra information or guidance about particular items. Make the dialogue boxes appear so that users can read the instructions and look at the question at the same time.

4.6 Encourage clients to save, print, and archive

Offer clients both print and electronic copies of their application and supporting materials. Provide a visible, persistent print button so that clients can print some or all of their application at any point in the application process. Make the printed version printer-friendly automatically.

4.7 Let clients sign electronically

Do not require clients to print and send or fax a paper application to the local office. Give them the option to authenticate and sign online. If the client has an account, save the signed applications into that account for them.

5   Help clients enter data

Using the online application to proactively collect personal and financial data can simplify and streamline the review process for both State Agencies and clients. How questions are presented can make the application easier or harder to work with.

Well-designed questions communicate why a question is being asked, how the information should be entered, and how the answer will be used. This helps the client focus on the *answer*, not on *how* to answer the question.

5.1 Design to eliminate mistakes

State Agencies should collect usability data from at least two sources when planning to redesign a form. First, you should ask your eligibility workers (or other subject matter experts who support clients directly, such as call center support staff) on which items clients consistently make mistakes or wait to complete in the interview. These items are high-priority items for redesign. Since eligibility workers support many clients over time, they have a unique perspective on the patterns of errors or omissions that emerge.

Once you have learned which items clients typically struggle with or skip, observe real clients completing real applications to find out why those items are hard to answer. Consider:

- Do clients not understand what is being asked?

- Do they not have access to the correct information?

- Do they enter the correct information in an incorrect format?

Combining data collection methods makes the process more cost and time efficient. You could achieve the same effect by just observing users, but since each applicant's situation is different you would need to observe many clients to arrive at the insights that you can gather quickly by talking to your eligibility workers.

5.2 Follow usability best practices for structuring questions and responses

The structure of a question can improve the client's ability to answer it. Ensure that your application follows usability best practices for structuring questions and responses.

1. **Use the appropriate format for the question.** The format of a question provides clients with information about the response they should give. For

example, checkboxes indicate that clients can give more than one response. Radio buttons indicate they must pick only one response. Use the question format that is appropriate to the answer the client should give.

Figure 14: Use the appropriate format to provide clients with an indication of the answer they should give

People in some situations can get SNAP in less then 7 days.

☐ Do you have less than $100 in cash or in the bank?
☐ Do you get less than $150/month in earned or other benefits?
☐ Do you have less than you need to pay your rent/mortgage, counting what you will earn this month?
☐ Is someone in your household a migrant or seasonal farm worker?

Checkboxes – Indicate ability to pick multiple selections

Is anyone in your household blind, disabled, or elderly?

◯ Yes
◯ No

Radio buttons – Indicate only one selection is possible

2. **Take care with pull down lists.** Clients typically skim quickly through the response options until they see one (usually the first one) that applies to them without reviewing all of the possible choices. State Agencies can address this issue by using radio buttons or checkbox questions instead of pull-down lists.

3. **Present response requirements clearly and visibly.** If space is not limited, describe the requirements in words and show an example. If space is limited, just describe the requirement in words.

4. **Limit the number of response requirements.** Questions that have many response choices are often really two or more questions rolled into one. If your question has more options than can be shown visibly, think about breaking it into multiple, simpler questions.

5.3 Ask for information the way clients think about it

Use how clients think about information to drive form design choices. For example, when clients think about their birthday, they think about a month name, a number for the day, and a number for the year. Populate the data input tools with choices that reflect clients' mental habits.

Figure 15: Clients think of their birthday in terms of month-name, day-number, and year-number

5.4 Use color to highlight required fields

Very few items on SNAP applications are actually required. Highlight required fields with color so that sighted clients can find them quickly and easily.

Figure 16: Use color to highlight required fields

5.5 Use [Required] to mark required fields for visually impaired clients

Color markings on required fields will not help clients who are using readers to access the application. However, in many cases, neither will asterisks. Clients who use assistive technology often set it to skip punctuation. Since asterisks are considered punctuation, readers skip them. Add the word [Required] after the field label, as shown in Figure 16 above, to indicate items that are required on forms.

5.6 Place instructions and examples above the text entry fields

Clients read instructions more often when they are placed above the text entry field. These are more effective than other approaches, such as "ghosted instructions" that disappear when the client starts typing. Putting instructions above the text entry makes your form more responsive to the natural questions that clients may have.

Figure 17: Question layout and instructions

5.7 Provide tutorials and coachmarks

On a web site, we can use design strategies to guide and teach applicants as they go. These strategies include screen overlays that proactively explain functions, and coachmarks, to recreate the types of conversation that clients would have with an eligibility worker. Some people will skip the coachmarks, but others will use them, and they will make a difference.

Figure 18: Create tutorials and coachmarks to guide clients

SNAP Food Assistance

State Logo

Have questions?
Live Help
is available from
9am-5pm weekdays
except state holidays.

SNAP helps you boost your grocery budget.

Already getting SNAP? Login to update your personal and financial profile.

Do you need SNAP?

Do you qualify for SNAP?

Apply for SNAP

Manage your benefits
- Check application status
- Update your household information
- Renew and manage your benefits

Manage your benefits

Show

Information in other languages

Habla Español?

Other languages

Common questions about SNAP

Getting SNAP
- What is SNAP? Video
- Who can apply? Video
- How does the state decide if you are eligible for SNAP? Video
- What if you need help right away? Video

Using SNAP
- Things you can and can't buy with SNAP? Video
- Nutritious meals and SNAP
- Make your SNAP go farther Video

Other benefits programs
- Child care
- Energy assistance (heat, cooling or crisis assistance)
- Emergency benefits for families with children under 18
- Medical assistance

Need help?
Help is available Monday through Friday from from 9am – 5pm, except state holidays.
Phone in English: 800-234-5678
Phone en Español: 800-345-06785
In person: Find the nearest office

Show me more

End the tour

SNAP sta...
policy
Regulations guiding SNAP

Standard Footer

SNAP Food Assistance

State Logo

Have questions?
Live Help
is available from
9am-5pm weekdays
except state holidays.

IMAGE

SNAP helps you boost your grocery budget.

Do you need SNAP?

Do you qualify for SNAP?

Use the benefits calculator to learn if you qualify for benefits.

Apply for SNAP

n in other languages

bla Español?

er languages

Show

Common questions about SNAP

Getting SNAP
- What is SNAP? Video
- Who can apply? Video
- How does the state decide if you are eligible for SNAP? Video
- What if you need help right away? Video

Using SNAP
- Things you can and can't buy with SNAP? Video
- Nutritious meals and SNAP Video
- Make your SNAP go farther Video

Other benefits programs
- Child care
- Energy assistance (heat, cooling or crisis assistance)
- Emergency benefits for families with children under 18
- Medical assistance

Need help?
Help is available Monday through Friday from from 9am – 5pm, except state holidays.
Phone in English: 800-234-5678
Phone en Español: 800-345-06785
In person: Find the nearest office

Show me more

End the tour

SNAP sta...
policy
Regulations guiding SNAP

Standard Footer

Figure 19: Tell clients when they have met response requirements

5.8 Fix what errors you can automatically

If clients enter data that is readable, but in a format that is different from what your system expects, let the system fix it. Examples include:

- Entering phone numbers with periods or no spaces, rather than dashes.

- Entering dollar figures with or without a "$."

If the system cannot fix the error automatically, include how to fix the error in the error message. Use words to describe the fix, in addition to an example (for example, "Did you mean June 5th or May 6th of 1945?").

5.9 Provide clear error messages right away and near the problem

When a client enters information that the system cannot understand, tell them right away next to where the problem occurred. Do not group error messages at the top of the page or on an error summary page.

5.10 Make clients confirm significant actions

Sometimes as clients enter data, they may accidentally do something they do not intend, like clearing out a form. When a client does something that may be catastrophic such as closing out their application when they risk losing all of the entered data, ask them if they really mean to do it.

Help the client see the information

6   Make the information legible

A web site is legible when it is easy to see and clients can correctly identify individual letters. Legibility is determined by the typography. In addition to picking legible type, you can use typography to draw applicants' attention and help them organize the page visually. Used well, typography can significantly decrease the mental load associated with working on a form.

6.1 Align page elements on a vertical grid

Forms are easier to use and look at when the page elements are aligned vertically. Using an underlying grid to line up elements helps clients see the organization better. The lines below show a clear, consistent pattern across the page. You should try to use less than seven vertical grid lines when possible to reduce visual clutter.

Figure 20: Align pages on a grid

6.2 Use easy-to-read fonts

Use sans serif fonts like **Arial** or **Verdana** for applications. Sans serif fonts are fonts that do not include the small flags at the end of the letters. These do not improve reading speed on screen, but research has shown that individuals prefer to look at them instead of serif fonts like Times New Roman.

6.3 Use a reasonable font size

Smaller fonts allow you to fit more information on a page and use fewer pages overall. However, this is not necessary on the web. Using a base font size of 14 pixels improves readability and universal access. You can also provide automatic tools that give clients a way to make text bigger or smaller if they choose.

6.4 Use high contrast dark text on a light background

Text is easiest for most people to read when the letters are dark, the background is light, and the contrast between them is at least 4.5 to 1. To check your color choices and contrast, use tools like the WebAIM contrast checker: http://webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker/.

Figure 21: High background-foreground contrast makes copy more readable
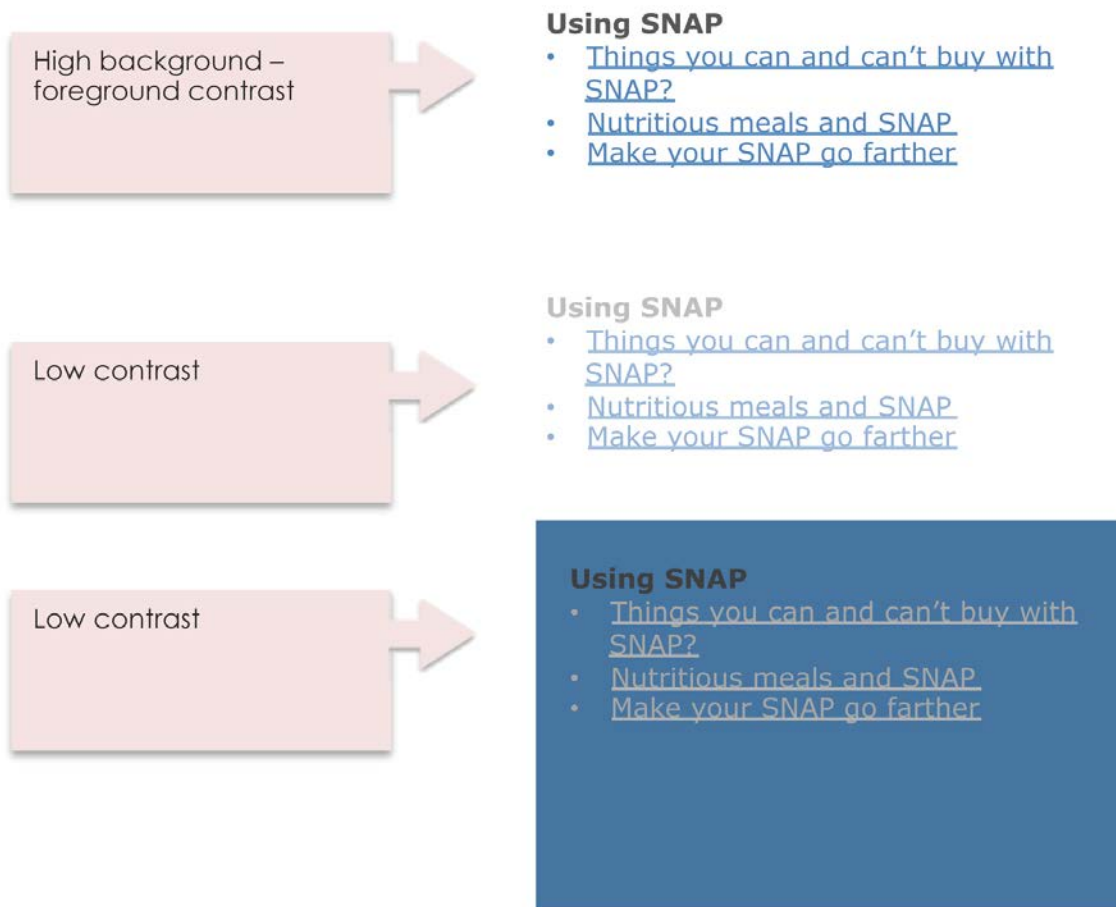
6.5 Use mixed upper and lower case type

You should use mixed case for all text, including headings, labels, and error messages to improve readability. When writers present headers, labels, error messages, or even complete text in all upper case, the words become uniform in shape which makes them harder to read and decipher. All upper case text slows reading speed by up to 20%.

Figure 22: Clients read all upper case text up to 20% slower than mixed case

SNAP OFFERS NUTRITION ASSISTANCE TO MILLIONS OF ELIGIBLE, LOW-INCOME INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES AND PROVIDES ECONOMIC BENEFITS TO COMMUNITIES. SNAP IS THE NATION'S LARGEST DOMESTIC NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM.

SNAP offers nutrition assistance to millions of eligible, low-income individuals and families and provides economic benefits to communities. SNAP is the nation's largest domestic nutrition assistance program.

6.6 Use type characteristics to draw and guide attention

Use details of typography, such as size or color, to grab and guide clients' attention within a page. For example, help them find sections they need to work on by segmenting pages with headers, and making the headers visually pop with text size and white space. Use colored text to draw clients' attention to important information.

6.7 Ensure your web site is ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliant[1]

Individuals with disabilities face unique barriers when attempting to use web sites. Often, they use "assistive technology" to enable them to access the Internet and navigate web sites. For example, voice recognition software allows individuals with motor disabilities to use verbal commands and visually impaired individuals use screen readers to tell the user what is on the web page.

Government web pages are required to remove barriers for those with disabilities and to provide tools to support assistive technologies. For example, individuals who are visually

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[1] Information in this section has been adapted directly from the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Civil Rights guidance entitled: *Accessibility of State and Local Government Websites to People with Disabilities*

impaired often use screen readers to tell them what is on a web page. However, screen readers cannot "read" images unless they are tagged with text that explains what the image is. Adding a code that explains what the image is will allow blind user to make sense of the page and ALL of the information on it, including images. Incorporating accessibility features is not difficult and usually does not change the layout or appearance of web pages. These techniques also make web pages more usable for those using older computers as well as latest technologies (e.g., cell phones).

Here are best practices from the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Civil Rights guidance for ensuring that your online applications are ADA compliant:

1. Establish a policy that your web pages will be accessible and create a process for implementation.

2. Ensure that all new and modified web pages and content are accessible.

3. Check the HTML of all new web pages. Make sure accessible images are used including alt tags, long descriptions, and captions, as needed.

4. If images are used, including photos, graphics, scanned images, or image maps, make sure to include alt tags and/or long descriptions for each.

5. If you use online forms and tables, make those elements accessible.

6. When posting documents on the website, always provide them in HTML or a text-based format (even if you are providing them in another format, such as PDF.)

7. Develop a plan for making your existing web content more accessible. Describe your plan on an accessible web page. Encourage input on improvements, including which pages should be given high priority for change. Let citizens know about the standards or guidelines that are being used. Consider making the more popular web pages a priority.

8. Ensure that in-house staff and contractors responsible for web page and content development are properly trained.

9. Provide a way for visitors to request accessible information or services by posting an accessible telephone number or email address on your home page. Establish procedures to assure a quick response to users with disabilities who are trying to obtain information or services in this way.

10. Periodically enlist disability groups to test your pages for ease of use. Input from actual disabled users can provide important feedback to increase accessibility.

For more information, including examples, please use the following resource document:

http://www.ada.gov/websites2_prnt.pdf

For other resources about ADA standards go to:

http://www.ada.gov/2010ADAstandards_index.htm

http://www.ada.gov/pcatoolkit/chap5toolkit.htm

7 Give graphics meaning

Graphics and images make designs more interesting to look at, but they should serve a purpose. Well-chosen graphics help people understand and remember the content and move around the structure more quickly and more confidently.

7.1 Use a consistent look and feel throughout the State Agency and program site

Often a SNAP application is a component of a larger State Agency website. The look and feel should be consistent throughout the State Agency, program, and application but does not need to be absolutely uniform. Design elements and design patterns that are consistent within the application help clients know that they are still in the right place (for example, to help them know that they are still in the SNAP portion of the site and not in the TANF portion of the web site). Show the program and State identity on every page, including application form pages.

7.2 Use words, rather than logos alone, to identify programs

Words communicate a program name effectively, and often more quickly, than a logo. Do not create unnecessary confusion by branding every level of the organization. Lean on the highest level of identity possible. Use words to identify the program.

Figure 23: Keep State Agencies and programs from competing by using the State portal logo as the common identifier and words for everything else
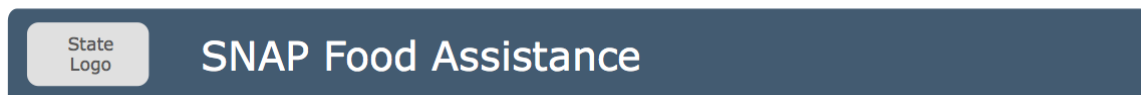
7.3 Include words with icons

Icons make things easier by letting clients rely on a picture rather than words. Icons are helpful when they:

- Represent concrete concepts or actions.

- Are interpretable at a quick glance.

- Are used frequently and over time.

In most online SNAP applications, icons should be used with care because SNAP applicants typically only use the online application a few times. Therefore, they never have the opportunity to learn what the icons mean. Think about whether they are needed and if they add value to the overall design. If you do use icons, add a word or words to the pictograph to help clients understand and memorize what it means.

7.4 Use graphics to draw and guide attention

Color helps clients understand, organize, connect, and interact with information. Designers can use this technique to help clients recognize and interact with specific kinds of information. For example, if help text is always presented on a grey background, clients learn to look for grey backgrounds when they need help.

Address policies and regulations

8   Address policies and regulations

In addition to making sure that your online application is usable, you must also assess how well your online application complies with federal regulatory, statutory, and policy requirements. Every State Agency should conduct a periodic assessment of its online application. The assessment should be led by a member of your Agency who is tasked with updating the online application and ensuring that it complies with federal regulatory, statutory, and policy requirements. Additionally, there are other ways for State Agencies to collect feedback about their online applications: for example, from other Agency employees who are not familiar with the application, from focus groups with typical users, or from advocates. Those individuals can provide an "outside" perspective on ways to best meet requirements while still meeting the needs of users.

This section discusses 29 compliance criteria across 11 different areas of interest: Pre-Screener, Registration, Right to File, Privacy Act Notice, Expedited Service, Race/Ethnicity, Social Security Number (SSN) Information, Citizenship Information, Non-Discrimination Statement, Perjury Statement, and Description of Penalties. While most of these criteria are required, some are best practices based on our review of all current online applications. All items that are best practices, and not requirements, are labeled with (Best practice) throughout this section. Additionally, all compliance criteria are represented on the self-assessment checklist. For each criterion, you can provide a rating of "yes" (application is in compliance) or "no" (application is not in compliance). For any areas that receive a "no", use the corresponding section of this guidance to get suggestions and techniques for revising your application. Please note that suggestions and techniques are optional recommendations for ways to meet the requirements. There may be multiple ways to address requirements, and we encourage you to work with your FNS Regional Office on the best solutions for your State Agency.

Pre-screener

A pre-screener allows users to see what types of benefits may be available to them. This section summarizes some tips for developing pre-screeners.

8.1   Is it clear that a pre-screener is optional? (Required)

Some recommended ways to address this requirement:

— Clarify to users upfront that the pre-screener is not a requirement and that users can go directly into the application.

— Provide a statement that tells why a user might want to be pre-screened but emphasizes that they may simply want to apply.

8.2   Does the pre-screener inform users that they can apply for benefits now without going through the pre-screener? (Required)

Some recommended ways to address this requirement:

— Provide different buttons for the pre-screener and for the application itself. This is a visual reminder to users that they can do one or the other and do not have to go through a screening process.

— Remind the user that they can go to the application at any time.

— Provide an option for the user to move to the application at any time and transfer pre-screener inputs to the application.

8.3   Does the pre-screener include a disclaimer or statement that users have a right to apply regardless of whether the online tool indicates they are likely to be eligible for the program? (Required)

Some recommended ways to address this requirement:

— Provide a disclaimer or statement of users' right to apply regardless of pre-screener results. For example:

> *"Please keep in mind that this page of the website or pre-screening tool is just to see if you might be able to get benefits. You'll have to apply for these programs to get a final decision about benefits, but we'll let you know how to do that. If you want to go ahead and apply online for any of the programs, you may apply here now."*

— Make it clear that the benefits the client may qualify for may be completely different than those indicated on the pre-screener once a full application is submitted.

— Do not imply that the pre-screener results are accurate and the application would serve to confirm.

8.4   Does the pre-screener include a "results" page explaining that the eligibility and benefit information it provides is only an estimate based on limited data and that the result may be different after a complete application? (Required)

Some recommended ways to address this requirement:

— Provide a results screen at the end of the pre-screener that tells clients this is just an estimate. For example:

> *"Please remember that the results you received today are only an ESTIMATE. The results may not be right. You might get more or less SNAP benefits than the estimate shows because you will provide more complete information during the application process."*

— Make sure the language on this page is clear, direct, and reminds users to go through the actual application process.

8.5   Does the pre-screener avoid requiring users to check off the programs for which they want to be screened? (Best practice)

Some recommended ways to address this best practice:

— Do not require the user to check off the programs they want to be pre-screened for.

— Use programming that allows users to enter information and lets them know what benefits they might be eligible for.

— Remind users that they may be eligible for a range of benefits if they apply.

8.6   Does the pre-screener pre-populate the application with the information the user provided in the screener so that the user does not have to re-enter it? (Best practice)

A recommended way to address this best practice:

— Consider pre-populating the application with information entered in the pre-screening process. This step is a "value-added" element that some states currently use which saves time and energy for the user.

Registration

8.7   Does the registration provide a simple system (just a few steps) allowing users to set up usernames, application numbers, and/or passwords? (Required)

Some recommended ways to address this requirement:

— Provide an easy registration that includes just a few steps or does not require a registration at all.

— Allow users to create their own usernames instead of assigning a username or number (which users often cannot remember as easily).

— Do not require a social security number to register.

8.8   Is providing an e-mail address optional? (Required)

Some recommended ways to address this requirement:

— Do not require users to provide an e-mail address.

— Do not use a system that requires e-mail confirmation.

8.9   Does the registration tell users that by saving an application to finish it later, they may be sacrificing benefits by not establishing a filing date? (Best practice)

Some recommended ways to address this best practice:

— Emphasize to users in the registration process the importance of establishing a filing date and that by saving an application to finish it later, they may be sacrificing benefits by not establishing a filing date.

— State the benefits of submitting an application as soon as possible, even if it the application is incomplete.

Right to file

8.10   Does the application provide, in plain and prominent language on or near the front page of the application, notification of the household's right to

immediately file the application as long as it contains the applicant's name and address and the signature of a responsible household member or the household's authorized representative? (Required)

Some recommended ways to address this requirement:

— Explain in clear, plain language that users can file right away with only a name, address, and signature of a responsible household member or representative.

— Explain clearly *what* a "filing date" is and *why* it is important for setting the application date on a potential client's case.

— Ensure that this explanation is prominent and easy to find.

8.11   Does the application provide a place on or near the front page of the application where the user can provide his/her name, address, and signature? (Required)

A recommended way to address this requirement:

— Provide an obvious question or button that allows users to provide filing information and submit immediately.

8.12   Does the application provide a way for users to submit the application at any point after providing a name/address? (Required)

Some recommended ways to address this requirement:

— Provide a statement that tells individuals they can submit their incomplete application at any time.

— Provide an obvious method—such as a distinct tab or button—for users to submit the application at any point in the process or on every screen.

— Ensure that the button to "file now" is prominent, easy to see, and not hidden on the bottom of the screen.

— Do not rely on individuals skipping ahead to the last screen of the application to submit. Some will not know they can do that, and it is an unnecessary impediment to allowing them to file at any time.

Privacy Act information

8.13   Does the application provide the Privacy Act notice? (Required)

— Provide a clear, plain language Privacy Act statement to inform users of their rights.

— Avoid providing the Privacy Act statement only at the end of the application because this informs the user of protections only after they have entered sensitive information.

Expedited service

8.14   Does the application include a description of expedited benefits near the beginning of the application? (Required)

Some recommended ways to address this requirement:

— Provide a description of expedited benefits near the beginning of the application.

— Ensure that the description is clear and in plain language.

— Ask expedited benefit questions early in the application process.

8.15   Does the application explain what expedited benefits mean instead of just asking the user if he/she wants to apply? (Required)

A recommended way to address this requirement:

— Explain to users what expedited benefits are and when they can get them.

Race/ethnicity

8.16   Does the application mark all questions regarding race and ethnicity as having no impact on benefits or eligibility? (Required)

Some recommended ways to address this requirement:

— Use clear methods such as color coding, shading, or other obvious marking to show which questions are required and which are not.

— Provide explanations of what is required and what is not. (For example, some states explain that race/ethnicity questions are not required but are important for determining the state's compliance with Federal civil rights laws).

— Do not state or imply that race or ethnicity could impact an individual's application for any benefits.

— Mark race/ethnicity questions as "optional". For example, some states do not label questions as optional but let the user continue with the application if no answer is provided. This method is not clear or explanatory.

— Use caution with asterisks on race/ethnicity questions. Users may not know what the asterisk means, especially if the explanation for it (that it marks a question as optional) is on another screen.

Social Security Number (SSN) information

8.17   Does the application explain that providing the SSN is optional on the application, how the state will use the number, and under what statutory authority the number is being requested? (Required)

Some recommended ways to address this requirement:

— Clearly explain that State Agencies cannot require that households provide an SSN in order to apply. However, an SSN (or proof that an applicant has applied for one) *is* required for all household members seeking assistance before certification. Non-applicant household members do not have to provide an SSN.

— Explain how the state will use the number.

— Provide and explain the statutory authority under which the SSN is being requested.

— Clearly explain that those not applying for benefits do not need to provide an SSN.

— Avoid odd or vague wording regarding the SSN. For example, "SSNs do not need to be provided for those who do not want help."

— Provide all explanatory SSN information in close proximity to where you are asking for the SSN to be provided.

— Do not bury SSN information at the beginning or end of the application in dense text about rights and responsibilities.

— Let users know that State Agencies can help them apply for an SSN if they do not have one but qualify. Provide a link to information as well as an application for SNN if your Agency has one.

8.18   Does the application allow users to proceed without providing SSNs? (Required)

Some recommended ways to address this requirement:

— Allow users to proceed without providing an SSN.

— Do not force an answer to the SSN question. Some applications allow you to proceed despite what you enter (for example, you can enter "000-00-0000," and it would allow you to keep going), but this still forces a person to enter an SSN.

Citizenship information

8.19   Does the application only ask for citizenship information of applicants (not of other, non-applicant household members)? (Required)

Some recommended ways to address this requirement:

— Do not require users to attest that all household members are citizens. This is in violation of Tri-Agency guidance[2]: *"States may not require applicants to provide information about the citizenship or immigration status of any non-applicant family or household member or deny benefits to an applicant because a non-applicant family or household member has not disclosed his or her citizenship or immigration status."*

— Do not stop users from proceeding with the application if they do not want to enter information about a household member.

— Do not prompt users to enter sensitive household member information with "error statements" or statements like, "We will be able to process your application more quickly if you provide your citizenship information. Would you like to input the information now?"

8.20   Does the application only ask for sensitive information from applicants and not other, non-applicant household members? (Required)

Some recommended ways to address this requirement:

— Do not require sensitive information about household members who are non-applicants.

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[2] Discussed in memo titled "SNAP - Conforming to the Tri-Agency Guidance through Online Applications" (dated 2/18/11), http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/Tri-Agency_Guidance_Memo-021811.pdf.

— Clarify the difference between the applicants, household members, and non-applicants.

— Do not use vague terminology such as "people who want benefits" (non-applicant members of a household may want benefits but are not eligible).

— Avoid language that could be frightening to families with mixed immigration status. For example, the following statement is vague and could stop individuals from applying:

> *"We check the immigration status of people who are applying for benefits. If you want to get benefits, please show your Immigration papers to DHS. These papers help us decide if you are eligible for benefits. Once you provide these papers, DHS will confirm them for us. We will never contact immigration for anyone who is not applying for benefits."*

— Use clear, direct, non-conditional statements to explain what users do or do not need to provide. For example, the following statement is difficult to understand due to the conditional elements and the negatives:

> *"You do not have to provide immigration status information, Social Security numbers, or documents for any family members who are not eligible for Food Stamp benefits because of immigrant status and who are not asking for Food Stamp benefits."*

8.21 Is the functionality of the web program designed to only require necessary questions of non-applicants? (Required)

Some **recommended** ways to address this requirement:

— Use the functionality in web programs to avoid asking sensitive questions (by automatically skipping them, etc.).

— Try to use effective methods to denote optional questions:

- Provide a notice next to optional questions that the information is "optional" (avoid providing the notice at the top of the page which users may miss).

- Mark required questions prominently (avoid asterisks which users may miss). Some examples are: bolded questions, a parenthetical statement such as "(Optional)", or a heading that states "The following questions are optional. You do not have to answer them unless you want to."

8.22   Does the application let the users know that if some household members opt-out of the application, it will not delay or deny the application for the remaining household members? (Required)

Some recommended ways to address this requirement:

— Clearly state that if some household members opt-out, it will not delay or deny the application.

— Provide this statement in a prominent place near where information is entered.

8.23   Does the application let the user know that only those who disclose their citizenship or establish satisfactory immigration status will receive benefits if otherwise eligible? (Required)

Some recommended ways to address this requirement:

— Clearly state that only those who disclose their citizenship or establish satisfactory immigration status will receive benefits if otherwise eligible.

— Avoid burying this information at the beginning/end of the application or otherwise not in close proximity to where information is being entered about household members.

— Clearly explain that an applicant who is not eligible can apply for others who are, which is a critical distinction, particularly for immigrant families who would like to apply for children. For example:

> *"You can apply for and receive SNAP for eligible family members, even if your family includes other members who are not eligible because of immigration status. For example, immigrant parents may apply for Food Stamp benefits for their U.S. citizen or qualified immigrant children, even though the parents may not be eligible for benefits."*

8.24   Does the application explain how it is handled if a household member does not provide information about citizenship or immigration status or SSNs? (Required)

Some recommended ways to address this requirement:

— Clearly explain how the application will be handled if a household member does not provide information about citizenship or immigration status or SSNs. For example:

"If you are applying for someone else, and not for yourself, we do not need your SSN or citizenship status. We will not contact immigration services for anyone not seeking benefits. If you do not have a SSN yourself, other family members who do have SSNs may still qualify."

— Place this explanation in a prominent place near where this information is entered.

8.25   Does the application explain that applicants who do not have a SSN can provide proof that they have applied for one and that State Agencies must also help them apply for one? (Required)

Some recommended ways to address this requirement:

— Clearly state that a user can provide proof that they have applied for a SSN if he/she does not have one.

— Clearly state that State Agencies will help an individual apply for a SSN.

— Tell users how to get help/apply for a SSN.

Non-discrimination statement

8.26   Does the application include the FNS-required non-discrimination statement? (Required)

A recommended way to address this requirement:

— Prominently display the FNS-required non-discrimination statement.

Perjury Statement

8.27   Does the application include a perjury statement certifying the truthfulness of the information on the application and possible penalties for providing false information in immediate proximity to where the user signs? (Required)

Some recommended ways to address this requirement:

— Provide a clear perjury statement certifying the truthfulness of the information on the application and possible penalties.

— Place the perjury statement in immediate proximity to where the user signs.

Description of penalties

8.28 **Does the application include a description of the civil and criminal provisions and penalties for violations of the Act? (Required)**

A recommended way to address this requirement:

— Provide a clear, easy to read penalty section that includes a description of the civil and criminal provisions and penalties for violations of the Act.

Ensure success

9   Measure improvement

In the end, effective application design is a continuous, iterative process. No one gets a design right the first time. Even if we did, the constant evolution of technology, devices, client experiences, and expectations would trigger on-going improvement.

While many organizations talk about continuous improvement, only a few collect reliable, objective data to benchmark improvement. Even organizations that do usability tests often change the methods, test guides, or vendors for each test. Comparing one test to another is like comparing apples to oranges.

Since both clients and State Agencies will depend increasingly on online applications to do business, it is important to continually evaluate how well these applications are working. Robust evaluation programs that identify what works and what can be improved will ultimately benefit everyone.

9.1   Establish your usability benchmark

Use the Self-Assessment Checklist to benchmark your application. Ideally, have an experienced usability researcher work with someone who knows the challenges of using the application first hand, like an eligibility worker or client. If that is not possible, have several people work together to benchmark the site.

Follow this process:

1. Have each person work through the application alone, entering data into the forms. Use data that is as realistic as possible.

2. Complete the self-assessment checklist, still working independently.

3. Discuss items where the scores differ.

4. Come to an agreement for each item.

5. Use the revised, consensus self-assessment checklist to compute the benchmark.

Figure 24: Benchmark and record your scores regularly

SNAP - Best Practices Checklist Results

Does your application apply best practices?

Scores are calculated on a scale of 1 to 3, where 3 = Consistently applies best practices and 1 = Rarely applies best practices. Agencies should strive to score 2 or more.

By best practice

Best practice	Score
Overall	1.8
1 Explain the process	1.3
2 Use plain language	2.4
3 Make navigation easy	1.6
4 Help clients apply	1.9
5 Help clients enter data	2.1
6 Use typography to organize	2.1
7 Give graphics meaning	1.6
8 Show improvement.	1.5

Target = 2
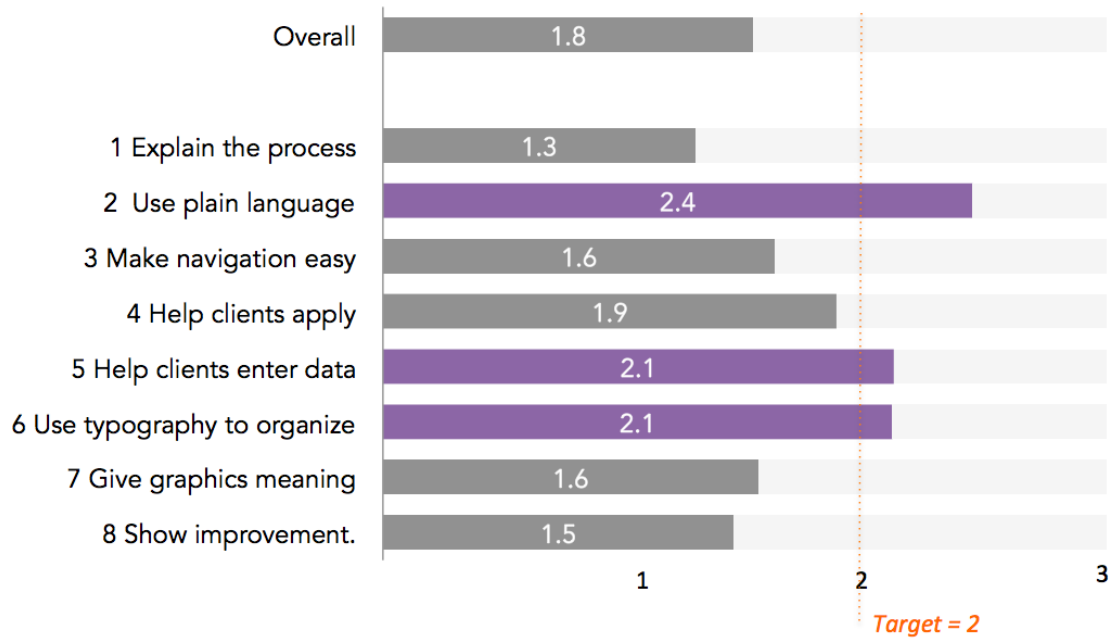
9.2 Combine the assessment checklist with other feedback methods

Self-assessment checklists are one way to evaluate online applications. Usability tests, surveys, web analytics, and interviews with clients, eligibility workers, or call center staff are other ways to collect usability feedback. Each method has pros and cons. They work best when they are together.

Figure 25: Usability.gov offers a wealth of user-centered information, tools, as well as collaboration and learning opportunities
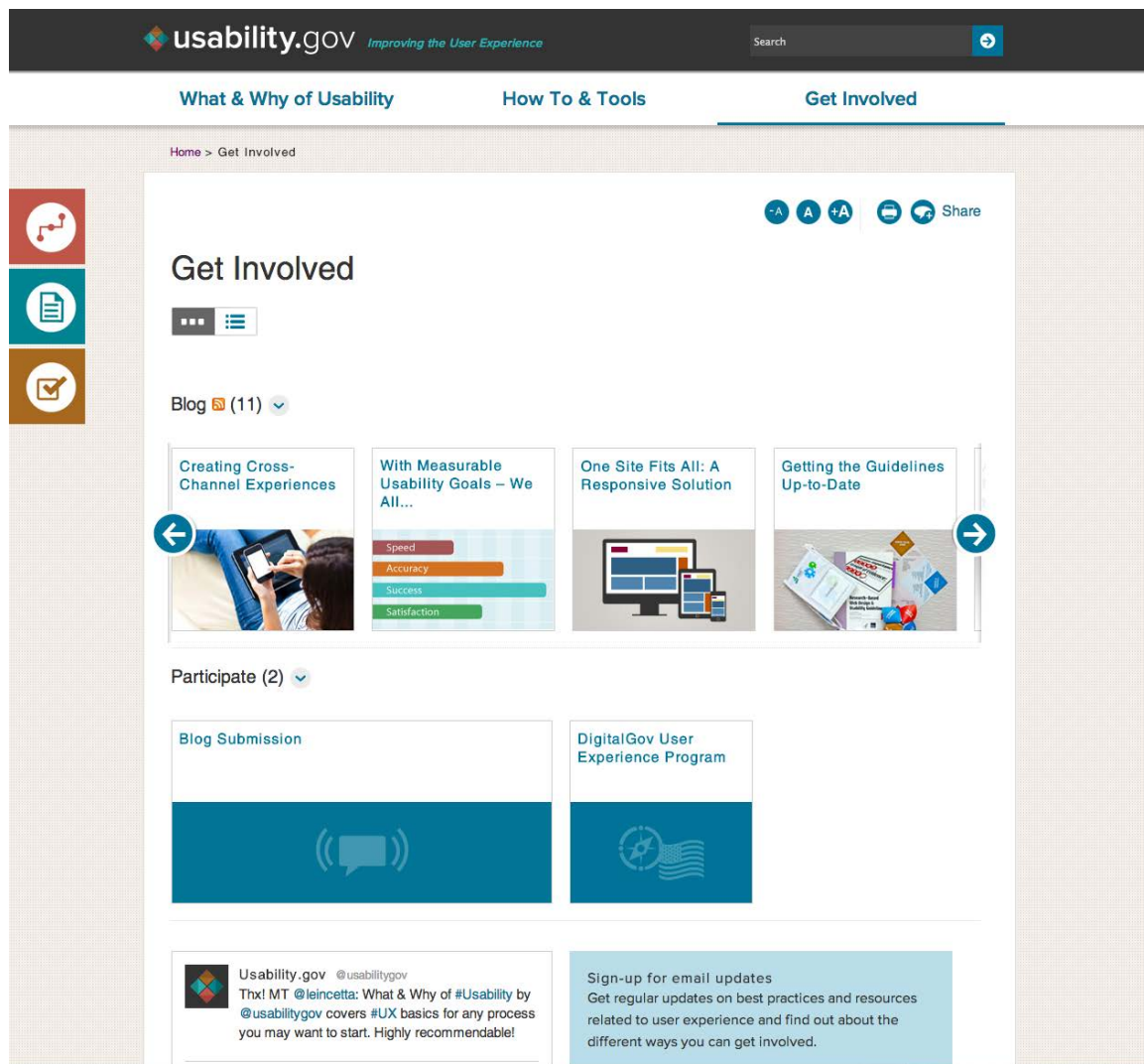
Appendix A. Online application analysis

We developed the best practices, models, and the Self-Assessment Checklist in this Guide based on a review of existing SNAP online applications. For this review, we created a customized self-assessment checklist, analyzed state-by-state applications, and noted things done well and those needing improvement.

Customizing the scorecard

We created a custom scorecard to analyze SNAP applications. We started a 250-item interaction design best practices checklist as the foundation. This checklist includes published, evidence-based design guidelines and is updated each year based on new research in human-computer interaction.

Then we identified usability challenges that our checklist did not cover by applying for SNAP in 10 different States. We added items to the checklist to address those problems. The new items focused on the specific requirements and process of applying for SNAP. We deleted items that did not apply to SNAP sites, such as usability of search and distractions caused by advertising.

Comparing the applications State-by-State

We analyzed 38 online SNAP applications using the new scorecard. We conducted cognitive walkthroughs (stepping through tasks like a client) with heuristic reviews (using a common scorecard to benchmark against best practices and unique challenges).

On each site we:

1. Registered.

2. Started the application.

3. Established a filing date.

4. Added supporting family and financial information.

5. Logged off.

6. Logged back on and finished the application.

7. Submitted a full application with all screens reviewed.

Two to three usability experts worked through each online application. Our analysis focused on:

- Clarity: Will clients understand how to apply for SNAP?

- Intuitiveness: Is the application easy to use?

- Support: Can clients get help if they need it?

- Progress: Do clients know if they are making progress?

- Next Steps: Will clients know what to do next?

Things done well

Many State Agencies already use the following best practices for web-based applications:

- Allowing clients to establish a filing date by submitting only their name, address, and signature.

- Allowing clients to apply or submit from any page.

- Letting clients save, log off, and continue later.

- Providing standard placement for navigation.

- Letting clients know how much progress they have made.

- Providing multiple levels of instructions.

- Using legible text.

Opportunities to improve

Many of the opportunities to improve focused on building a relationship and rapport with the client, similar to the one an eligibility worker might develop face to face. Others highlight opportunities to better leverage technology and coding languages, like HTML5. State Agencies can make improvements to online SNAP applications by:

- Simplifying and focusing the applications.

- Giving an overview of the process.

- Streamlining registration and login.

- Designing to eliminate data input errors.

- Using defaults and pre-fill forms.

- Writing in plain language.

Appendix B. Language models

How do I apply for SNAP?

1. Request benefits—Submit your application with at least your name, address, and signature. You can do this online or in person at a SNAP office. Submit your request for benefits as soon as you think you may need benefits. If you are eligible, your benefits will be prorated from the date the SNAP office receives your application, known as your filing date.

2. Provide supporting information—You will need to provide information about your household and finances before you can get SNAP. You can do this online, over the phone, in person, or through a combination of these methods.

What supporting information do I need to provide?

1. **Proof of identity**—Use a driver's license, state ID card, or passport for the person requesting SNAP. If you do not have one of these forms of identification, we can contact someone you know to verify your identity.

2. **Social Security numbers**—Provide the Social Security number, or apply for one, for anyone in your household applying for SNAP.

3. **Lawful Immigration Status**—Provide proof of immigration status for those household members applying for SNAP benefits. Most non-citizens will provide documentation from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. However, acceptable documentation may also be issued by other Federal agencies.

4. **Where you live**—Provide a lease or rental agreement or current bill with your address on it. If you are homeless, you can use the address of a friend or family member, or ask someone at your local office for assistance.

5. **Money you have**—Use recent bank statements to show how much money each person in your household has in the bank. You need to provide information about income you received for any work that you do, even if you are paid in cash. Proof can come in the form of pay stubs, statements from your employer, or your State Agency can assist you in obtaining proof.

What are my rights and responsibilities?

Rights

You have the right to:

- Apply with only your name, address, and signature.

- Apply using any method that is offered (online, in person, etc.).

- Receive an application in person, and have your application accepted on the same day that you go to the SNAP office.

- Have an adult who knows you apply for you.

- Get your SNAP benefits within 30 days after you apply, if you qualify for them.

- Qualify for faster service if you are entitled to expedited service, and get SNAP benefits within 7 days.

- Be told in advance if the SNAP office is going to reduce or end your benefits during your certification period because of a change in your situation, unless you reported it in writing.

- Look at your own case file and a copy of SNAP rules.

- Have a fair hearing if you do not think the program rules were applied correctly in your case. At a fair hearing you may explain to a hearing official why you do not agree with what the SNAP office has done.

Your rights to a fair hearing include the following:

- You can ask the SNAP office for a fair hearing in writing, in person, or over the phone within 90 days from the date the decision that you are appealing was made. The office will give you information about the hearing rules in your State.

- You can ask a friend or relative or anyone else to help you prepare for the hearing and go to the hearing with you.

- In some cases you can continue to get your SNAP benefits while you are waiting for the hearing decision or you can opt out of receiving them during that period. However, it is important to know that:

  - If the case is not decided in your favor, any benefits that you received during this time that you were not entitled to must be paid back.

  - If the case is decided in your favor, your benefits will be reinstated. If you did not continue to receive benefits, you will receive a retroactive payment.

Responsibilities

You have the responsibility to:

- Answer all questions completely and honestly.

- Sign your name to certify that all your answers are true and you understand that you can be charged with perjury if you have not been truthful.

- Provide proof that you are eligible.

- Promptly report changes in household circumstances to the SNAP office.

- Not put your money or possessions in someone else's name in order to be able to get SNAP benefits.

- Not sell, trade, or give away your SNAP benefits, or any SNAP cards or documents.

- Use SNAP benefits to only buy eligible items.

People who break SNAP rules may be disqualified from the program, fined, put in prison, or all three.

Oath of honesty (perjury statement)

I certify under penalty of perjury that my answers to all questions about each household member, including those about citizenship or alien status, are correct and complete to the best of my knowledge.

Appendix C. SNAP—Self-assessment checklist

Usability and Plain Language Scorecard

The following scorecard has been developed to help you track the best practices-based usability of your online application over time.

Re-evaluate your application each time you make a major change to the language or design. To determine your application's score, place an x in the response column next to each detailed design element (blue and white rows).

Help the client understand the process

			Yes	Sometimes	No
Principle 1. Explain the process.	1.1	Is the application process broken into steps?			
	1.2	Is a diagram of the process provided?			
	1.3	Is there an explanation of how the steps fit?			
	1.4	Are the starting points visible and clear for clients seeking benefits?			
	1.5	Are clients told what information they will need before they start filling out the application?			
	1.6	Does the application tell clients when they do things right?			
	1.7	Does the application offer to help clients like an eligibility worker would?			
	1.8	Does the application tell clients how information will be used?			

Principle 2. Use plain language	2.1	Does the application use common words?			
	2.2	Does the application use common words to explain acronyms?			
	2.3	Is the application written in a conversational tone?			
	2.4	Was a readability tool used to check the language?			
	2.5	Are links to alternate language content highlighted?			
	2.6	Is model language used for complex parts of the application?			
Principle 3. Make navigating easy	3.1	Are long sections broken into several shorter ones?			
	3.2	Are sections presented in a logical order?			
	3.3	Do sections and sub sections given meaningful labels?			
	3.4	Is the navigation always available and prominent?			
	3.5	Is secondary navigation predictable and consistent?			
	3.6	Are there prominent Next, Back, and Apply Now buttons?			

Help the client apply

			Yes	Sometimes	No
Principle 4. Make information accessible	4.1	Is it easy for a client to create an account?			
	4.2	Is the content limited to necessary information?			
	4.3	Is client's work saved automatically?			
	4.4	Can clients use familiar tools to attach supporting documents?			
	4.5	Does the application offer extra instructions when clients are likely to want or need them?			
	4.6	Does the application encourage clients to save, print, and archive?			
	4.7	Can clients sign electronically?			
Principle 5. Help clients enter data	5.1	Is the application designed to eliminate mistakes? (For example, accepting both an amount with and without a ($) dollar sign)			
	5.2	Does the application follow usability best practices for structuring questions and responses?			
	5.3	Does the application ask for information the way clients think about it?			
	5.4	Is color used to highlight required fields?			
	5.5	Is [Required] used to mark required fields for visually impaired clients?			
	5.6	Are there instructions and examples above text entry fields?			
	5.7	Are tutorials and/or coachmarks provided?			
	5.8	Are errors automatically corrected?			
	5.9	Does the application provide clear error messages immediately and near the problem?			
	5.10	Does the application require clients to confirm significant actions?			

Help the client see the information

			Yes	Sometimes	No
Principle 6. Make the information legible	6.1	Are page elements aligned on a vertical grid?			
	6.2	Does the application use easy to read fonts?			
	6.3	Does the application use a reasonable font size?			
	6.4	Does the application use high contrast dark text on a light background?			
	6.5	Does the application use mixed upper and lower case type?			
	6.6	Does the application use type characteristics to draw and guide attention?			
	6.7	Is the web site ADA compliant?			
Principle 7. Give graphics meaning	7.1	Is there a consistent look and feel throughout the State Agency and program site?			
	7.2	Does the application use words, rather than logos alone, to identify programs?			
	7.3	Does the application include words with icons?			
	7.4	Are graphics used to draw and guide attention?			

Requirements

			Yes	No
	Pre-screener			
	8.1	Is it clear that a pre-screener is optional? (Required)		
	8.2	Does the pre-screener inform users that they can apply for benefits now without going through the pre-screener? (Required)		
	8.3	Does the pre-screener include a disclaimer or statement that users have a right to apply regardless of whether the online tool indicates they are likely to be eligible for the program? (Required)		
Principle 8. Address all relevant policies and regulations	8.4	Does the pre-screener include a "results" page explaining that the eligibility and benefit information it provides is only an estimate based on limited data and that the result may be different after a complete application? (Required)		
	8.5	Does the pre-screener avoid requiring users to check off the programs for which they want to be screened? (Best practice)		
	8.6	Does the pre-screener pre-populate the application with the information the user provided in the screener so that the user does not have to re-enter it? (Best practice)		
	Registration			
	8.7	Does the registration provide a simple system (just a few steps) allowing users to set up usernames, application numbers, and/or passwords? (Required)		
	8.8	Is providing an e-mail address optional? (Required)		
	8.9	Does the registration tell users that by saving an application to finish it later, they may be sacrificing benefits by not establishing a filing date? (Best practice)		

		Right to file		
	8.1	Does the application provide, in plain and prominent language on or near the front page of the application, notification of the household's right to immediately file the application as long as it contains the applicant's name and address and the signature of a responsible household member or the household's authorized representative? (Required)		
	8.11	Does the application provide a place on or near the front page of the application where the user can provide his/her name, address, and signature? (Required)		
	8.12	Does the application provide a way for users to submit the application at any point after providing a name/address? (Required)		
		Privacy Act information		
	8.13	Does the application provide the Privacy Act notice? (Required)		
		Expedited service		
	8.14	Does the application include a description of expedited benefits near the beginning of the application? (Required)		
	8.15	Does the application explain what expedited benefits mean? (Required)		
		Race/ethnicity		
	8.16	Does the application mark all questions regarding race and ethnicity as having no impact on benefits or eligibility? (Required)		
		Social Security Number (SSN) information		
	8.17	Does the application explain that providing the SSN is optional on the application, how the state will use the number, and under what statutory authority the number is being requested? (Required)		

	8.18	Does the application allow users to proceed without providing SSNs? (Required)		
	Citizenship information			
	8.19	Does the application only ask for citizenship information of applicants (not of other, non-applicant household members)? (Required)		
	8.20	Does the application only ask for sensitive information from applicants and not other, non-applicant household members? (Required)		
	8.21	Is the functionality of the web program designed to only require necessary questions of non-applicants? (Required)		
	8.22	Does the application let the users know that if some household members opt-out of the application, it will not delay or deny the application for the remaining household members? (Required)		
	8.23	Does the application let the user know that only those who disclose their citizenship or establish satisfactory immigration status will receive benefits if otherwise eligible? (Required)		
	8.24	Does the application explain how it is handled if a household member does not provide information about citizenship or immigration status or SSNs? (Required)		
	8.25	Does the application explain that applicants who do not have a SSN can provide proof that they have applied for one and that State Agencies must also help them apply for one? (Required)		
	Non-discrimination statement			
	8.26	Does the application include the FNS-required non-discrimination statement? (Required)		

			Yes	Sometimes	No
	Perjury statement				
	8.27	Does the application include a perjury statement certifying the truthfulness of the information on the application and possible penalties for providing false information in immediate proximity to where the user signs? (Required)			
	Description of penalties				
	8.28	Does the application include a description of the civil and criminal provisions and penalties for violations of the Act? (Required)			

Ensure success

			Yes	Sometimes	No
Principle 9. Measure improvement	9.1	Have you established a usability benchmark?			
	9.2	Have you combined this scorecard with other testing and feedback methods?			