



# Usability Testing Results for Legal Icons, Northwest Justice Project: A Case Study



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*Visual icons can make court forms easier to understand. This article discusses the development and testing of icons for forms in family-law cases in Washington State.*

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## Background

The Northwest Justice Project (NJP—Washington's publicly funded legal aid program) and the Superior Court of Washington have long relied on plain language and readable design to support people who want access to legal forms and information, but do not have lawyers.

**Plain Language**

Plain language is writing designed to promote quicker and easier understanding. It is sometimes called plain English or plain legal English. It avoids complex sentence structures and unneeded legal jargon. Transcend is a language services company that uses plain language, design, and usability testing to promote increased access to justice.

In 2018 NJP asked Transcend to create six new legal icons to enhance the readability of their family-law-document-assembly project. These new icons are now included in the legal icons set at [transcend.net/legal-icons.html](https://transcend.net/legal-icons.html) (learn more about the legal icons project by watching this video at [bit.ly/LSC-rapid-fire-talk-legal-icons](https://bit.ly/LSC-rapid-fire-talk-legal-icons)). NJP uses the icons to support step-by-step court-form instructions on Washington Forms Online (see <https://tinyurl.com/yfcfz8yr>). The icons provide a visual summary of each step, aiding comprehension and making a complex process feel more manageable.

This article shares the various testing methods used to ensure the legal icons conveyed their intended messages. We detail the testing steps below.

**NJP requested icons for these phrases:**

1. Review your forms
2. Print
3. Sign
4. Copy [forms] (show the number of copies)
5. Deadline
6. Parenting Plan

NJP requested icons 5 and 6 at a later stage. These icons were not tested for recognizability, only in context.

NJP provided from [thenounproject.com](https://thenounproject.com) as "inspiration" and asked Transcend to create and test icons that matched the style of Transcend's existing set of 200+ legal icons. The Noun Project is a website that collects symbols created and contributed by graphic designers from around the world. (Many are free; some are available at a nominal fee.)

**Comparative Example of Legal Text Before and After Transcend's Plain-Language and Icon Adaptation**

**Original text**

**WARNINGS AND INFORMATION TO THE RESTRAINED PERSON: VIOLATION OF THIS ORDER IS A MISDEMEANOR PUNISHABLE BY A \$1,000 FINE, ONE YEAR IN JAIL, OR BOTH, OR MAY BE PUNISHABLE AS A FELONY. PERSONS SUBJECT TO A RESTRAINING ORDER ARE PROHIBITED FROM OWNING, POSSESSING, PURCHASING, RECEIVING, OR ATTEMPTING TO PURCHASE OR RECEIVE A FIREARM (PENAL CODE SECTION 10201 (G)). SUCH CONDUCT IS SUBJECT TO A \$1,000 FINE AND IMPRISONMENT OR BOTH.**

**Plain-language formatted**

**To the Restrained Person**



**Warning!** If you disobey this order, you may be:

- charged with a misdemeanor or felony,
- fined \$1,000, and
- sent to jail for 1 year.



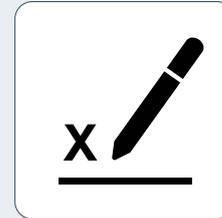
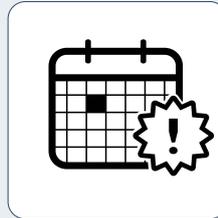
**No Firearms:** You must not own, have, buy, receive, or try to buy or receive a firearm while this or any other restraining order is valid.

If you do, you may be fined \$1,000 and sent to jail.

Icons created for Northwest Justice Project by Transcend

**Left to right:**

Deadline-1, Sign, Review forms, Custom-Copies, Parenting Plan, Copy, Deadline-2, and Print.



## Usability Testing Procedure

### Research/Identify Existing Icons

The first step was to collect existing icons for these phrases. Icons were selected based on a Google search of each phrase.

### Preference Test Existing Icons

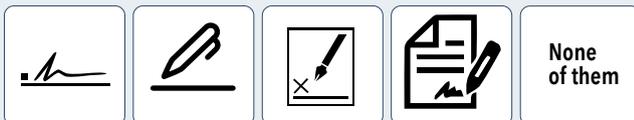
Next came individual preference testing with 5-12 users of existing icons to ask users which image they most preferred for each phrase. (Learn more about preference testing at [Usabilityhub.com](https://usabilityhub.com), especially the examples at <https://tinyurl.com/ycyq4bjk>.)

#### How to Preference Test

Show each user the inspiration image along with other popular icons for each phrase. Ask, "Which icon do you think best represents the phrase:?"

**Example:**

Which icon do you think best represents the phrase "Sign"?



If you chose "None of them," do you have a suggestion for a better icon for this phrase?

At the end of this test, the icon with the most votes was redesigned to match the style of the previous icon set. It was ready for the next phase.

### Test Icon Recognizability (Icon Only)

In this phase, icons were tested for recognizability. Three *new* participants were shown the icons and asked what each icon meant to them.

**Example:**

I am going to show you some pictures of things you might find on a legal website or in legal self-help documents.

I'd like you to tell me what you think they mean.

There are no right or wrong answers.

It's OK if a picture has NO meaning for you.

You can just say, I don't know. All answers are OK.

The information you give us helps us get better.

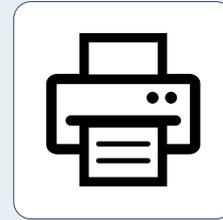
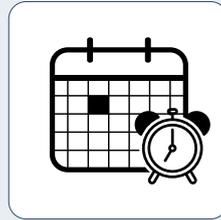
Two of the icons (Review and Copy) did not test well. But because these icons would not be used in isolation (i.e., they would appear next to text), it was decided to test them in context with text.

**Example:**

Look at the picture for #8. Now look at the words. Does this picture do a good job communicating **Deadline**?



Write down the deadline for your court form.



### Test Icons in Context (Icon with Text)

Each participant was shown some icons next to typical text and asked to rate how well they communicate a particular phrase. Participants were asked to rate their answers using the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5
No!	A little	Pretty good	Good	Great!
	✓			✗
	<b>Unsuccessful</b>		<b>Successful</b>	
	Icon needs more work		Accept icon	

Icons rated Good or Great were considered a success. The icons were accepted without further changes. Only Print and Sign were deemed successful by every participant.

### Get More Input on Unsuccessful Icons

The four other icons (Review Your Forms, Copy, Deadline, Parenting Plan) received low ratings. At the end of each test, each participant was asked for more input on each of these icons.

The artists and production team then translated the participants' input to revise the icons; this triggered a new round of in-context testing with new users.

### Iterative Testing on Unsuccessful Icons

It took several more rounds of iterative testing, feedback, and reworking the icons to produce icons for Parenting Plan, Copies, and Review that participants successfully connected with. For Deadline, participants gave equally positive responses to two icons. However, they sensed the urgency in the icon with the exclamation point more than the alarm clock. For more information about iterative testing, see J. C. R. Bergstrom, E. L. Olmsted-Hawala, J. M. Chen, and E. D. Murphy, "Conducting Iterative Usability Testing on a Website: Challenges and Benefits," *Journal of Usability Studies* 7, no. 1 (November 2011): 9-30; online at [bit.ly/iterative-testing-JUS-article](http://bit.ly/iterative-testing-JUS-article).

### Customized Copy Icon

NJP requested a customizable copy icon where the user could specify the number of copies required.



A



B



C

Transcend conducted a preference test at Usability Hub, asking, "Which image best represents the phrase '5 copies'?" Please explain why you chose this option."

Choice B got the most votes as it appeared less cluttered and most effective to the participants.

Further testing helped determine that some users would have difficulty figuring out how to use the customizable version of this icon, so Transcend also created a how-to video.

## Summary

Effective images can do much to enhance access to legal information and court forms and websites. Testing them is not that difficult. Follow the basic steps outlined in this article:

1. Research/Identify existing icons
2. Conduct preference testing
3. Conduct recognizability testing
4. Conduct in-context testing
5. Get feedback on unsuccessful icons
6. Rework unsuccessful icons
7. Conduct iterative testing until icons are successful