

SAFETY BRIEF: SIGNS & LABELS

Safety signs are one of the oldest types of safety tools found in the workplace. Dating back to 1914, early safety signs were fairly basic in design but lacked any standard format or guidelines. By 1941, the rise of workplace injuries and fatalities led to the introduction of safety signage standards. The American National Standards Institute (ANSI) published ASA Z35.1 *Specification for Industrial Accident Prevention Signs*. This standard provides specifications for safety sign design and formats for “DANGER,” “CAUTION,” “NOTICE,” and “EXIT” signs, among many others now enacted.



Since the turn of the 20th century, safety signs have contributed in preventing numerous workplace injuries. Whether signs identify the nearest emergency exit, fire extinguisher, or eye wash station, these signs are critical in maintaining safe workplace conditions. Signs can control access, warn or alert of unsafe conditions, and increase response time in an emergency. Proper signage may seem trivial or too “common sense” for some, but it is one of the simplest areas to remedy in your safety program—even on a budget. Safety signs increase safe workplace practices, potentially reduce maintenance and insurance costs, and most importantly, keep employees and the public safe. Today, safety signs remain an essential part of every workplace facility and save thousands of lives each year.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) guidelines for signs and tags that identify hazards are found in 29 CFR 1910.145. This standard provides specifications that apply to the design, application, and use of signs or symbols that define specific hazards that could harm workers, the public, or both, or damage property. These design elements are expanded upon in the ANSI Z35 standard, which utilizes alert symbols and pictograms to communicate hazards.

OSHA Classification of Safety Signs

1. **Danger Signs** - Alert workers to the most serious of hazards. This sign indicates that death or serious injury will occur if the immediate hazard is not avoided.
2. **Warning Signs** - Describe a hazard that could result in death or a serious injury if not avoided.
3. **Caution Signs** - These signs indicate that potential hazards may exist, and if not avoided, they may result in minor or moderate injuries. Typically, caution signs provide warning against potential injuries from unsafe practices.

OSHA/ANSI Z35.1	ANSI Z535	Signal Word	Intended Use
		Danger	Situation that <i>will</i> result in serious injury or death.
		Warning	Situation <i>could</i> result in serious injury or death.
		Caution	Situation <i>could</i> result moderate or minor injury.
		Notice	Situations that at worst will only result in property damage and <i>will not</i> result in physical injuries.

Per OSHA, there are specific colors for the letters and backgrounds of each sign. For instance, the “DANGER” signal word is printed in all white letters on a red background and is preceded by the safety alert symbol.

Different Types of Safety Signs

Other types of safety signs help workers stay safe without alerting them to specific hazards. Safety instruction signs should be used wherever general instructions and safety suggestions can help workers perform their tasks in a safe manner. These include the following:

- **Notice Signs** provide information relevant to a specific building, area, or piece of equipment/machine. These signs address practices and procedures, instructions, maintenance information, rules, and directions that are unrelated to personal injury.
- **General Safety Signs** provide notices of general building safety precautions, rules relating to health, first aid, medical equipment, sanitation, housekeeping, and recommended safety practices.
- **Admittance Signs** alert and explain the dangers and consequences associated with entering a restricted area.
- **Fire Safety Signs** provide information on available firefighting equipment and emergency exits.
- **Non-Hazard Signs** communicate general safety facility information, such as wayfinding directions procedures, usually through simple text and clear symbols. These signs should never be used to communicate hazards, risks, or dangers. Technically these are not safety signs, but nevertheless promote a safer workplace.



Where to Display Safety Signs?

OSHA's 29 CFR 1910.145(f)(3) is the standard for when and where safety signs should be placed within a facility. This standard points out that labels, tags, and signs, *"shall be used as a means to prevent accidental injury or illness to employees who are exposed to hazardous or potentially hazardous conditions, equipment or operations which are out of the ordinary, unexpected or not readily apparent. Tags shall be used until such time as the identified hazard is eliminated or the hazardous operation is completed."* When safety signage has been determined as necessary, OSHA standard 29 CFR 1910.145(f)(4)(vi) states that signs must be placed *"as close as safely possible"* to the nearest hazard.

If you are unsure whether to post safety signs at certain points in your facility, ask the following questions:

- Are hazards present? Remember that OSHA requires safety signs at all locations where a present (or potentially present) hazard threatens the safety of a worker.
- Will workers be able to see and read the sign(s)? OSHA CFR 1910.145(f)(4) requires that a signal word such as "DANGER" must be readable from at least five feet away.
- Does the location give employees enough time to avoid the hazard?



- Is there clear direction to safety and fire equipment?
- Is redirection necessary?
- Is maintenance performed in this area?
- Is this a high-traffic area?

Based on your answers to these questions, you should now have a better understanding of the safety signage your facilities have in place already, or may require.

When placing new signs or simply assessing what is currently in place, remember these four basic sign design elements: visibility, readability, noticeability, and legibility.

1. **Visibility** - The sign's lettering must be clearly distinguished from its surroundings. There are specific color choices and graphic elements that can help a sign stand out from background clutter that can distract a viewer's attention.
2. **Readability** - Ensures that the viewer can read the sign, and understand its message. Certain color choices increase readability from a distance. Studies have shown that yellow on black is one of the easiest color combinations to read.
3. **Noticeability** - The characteristics of the sign should draw the viewer's attention. The message, color, size, and shape of the sign all affect noticeability. For example, research has shown that horizontal signs are missed significantly more frequently than vertical signs.
4. **Legibility** - The sign's design should ensure that each individual letter is distinct. Use of the right type style and spacing helps viewers read the sign quickly and easily. The larger the lettering on a sign, the better its legibility.

Ensure that the safety sign itself does not cause a hazard. Safety signs should have rounded or blunt corners. Avoid signs with sharp edges, burrs, or splinters. Similarly, a sign that warns pedestrians to look out for forklift traffic at an intersection should not block their view of incoming forklifts.

In addition, safety signs can become faded and damaged over time, rendering them useless for the intended hazard message. Outdated, faded, or damaged signs can send a negative message about the employer's dedication to safety. Replace signs as soon as they have any wear or damage.

Benefits of Safety Signs

Safety signage has numerous benefits for facilities large and small. Some benefits include:

- **Reduce workplace accidents:** with clear and specific safety signs, workers can recognize when and how to take certain precautions, avoid restricted work areas, wear different types of personal protective equipment (PPE), safe access routes, and much more. Safety signs also encourage workers to be alert for hazards and minimize risks.
- **Increase efficiency:** clear and concise communication lets workers know where to go (or where not to go) in a facility. Workers will also have a better understanding of the hazards that may be present in a quick, clear manner.
- **Promote a safety culture:** good signage demonstrates to workers (and OSHA) the employer's commitment to a safe work environment that recognizes work hazards and accounts for risk.

Supervisors' Safety Checklist - Safety Signs		
Supervisor:		
Date:		Department/Area:
Yes	No	Checklist Area
		At least one "EXIT" sign is visible from all areas
		All doors have "EXIT", "NO EXIT" or "TO EXIT" sign
		Fire extinguishers have signs posted above them
		Flammable storage areas have "No Smoking" signs
		Emergency eyewash stations have signs posted
		Emergency Stop Buttons are labeled
		Confined space entrances have signs posted
		Entrances to restricted areas have signs posted
		Automatic equipment has proper Danger, Caution or Warning signs
		Equipment controls are labeled
		Special Personal Protective Equipment requirements are posted
		Signs have rounded or beveled edges - no sharp corners or edges
		Signs are legible - not faded or damaged
<p>Danger Signs warn of <i>specific</i> dangers - all Danger Signs are of the same type design. Danger signs have red as the predominating color for the upper panel; black outline on the borders; and a white lower panel for additional black letter wording.</p>		
<p>Caution Signs used only to warn against potential hazards or to caution against unsafe practices. Caution signs have yellow as the predominating color; black upper panel and borders: yellow lettering of "caution" on the black panel; and the lower yellow panel for additional sign wording. Black lettering is used for additional wording.</p>		
<p>Safety Instruction Signs used where there is a need for general instructions and suggestions relative to safety measures. These signs have a white background with black letters or white letters on a green panel</p>		

We encourage all participants to take a few minutes and conduct a walk-through within your facility/facilities to ensure proper and adequate signage is met. Feel free to use this checklist!



Additional training is available through the AMLJIA Online University at www.amljia.org. Log on to the Online University for courses related to this topic such as “Office Safety,” “Evaluating Your Workplace Behavior,” and “Safety Awareness Program for Supervisors.” For more information about the Online University, contact the AMLJIA at 800-337-3682.