



A Guide to OSHA Safety Signs

A guide to marking your facility according to OSHA and ANSI requirements.

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Introduction

Safety signs and labels play an important role in the workplace. They communicate information to keep people safe in the face of hazards. They provide warnings, instructions, and recommendations, and when they're designed and implemented correctly, they allow people to go about their work safely without needing to ask further questions. The signs tell them what they need to know.

This guide will explain the types of safety signs and address updates

made by standards organization such as the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) that impact what signs employers use in the workplace. ANSI made updates to its sign requirements in 2011, and OSHA adopted these as best practices in 2013. In the following pages we will examine many categories of signs and discuss how you can go about implementing new signs or updating the signs and labels you use in your facility.

What Are OSHA and ANSI Signage Standards?

The American National Standards Institute is an organization responsible for overseeing the development of consensus standards for use in a variety of industries. ANSI weighs in on safety standards, and OSHA chooses to refer employers to ANSI for best practices on a number of safety topics.

The ANSI Z535 Standard explains how to properly alert people to safety issues using signs, labels, and other instructional materials. The Z535.2 section, American National Standard for Environmental and Facility Safety Signs, pertains specifically to signage. The ANSI Z535 standard was updated in 2011, and these updates reflect the accepted best practices for sign design, color, and text. In 2013, OSHA updated its own standards (29 CFR 1910.145, 29 CFR 1910.6) to align with ANSI's standards for signs.

Why Should You Adopt the New Standards?

While the revised OSHA standard does not mandate the use of these new signs—businesses can choose to follow the older ANSI Z35.1-1968 and ANSI Z53.1-1967 standards, which were the signage

standards previously accepted by OSHA—understanding the updates and aligning with them has a number of benefits.

It's true that updating safety signs costs money, which is one of the reasons OSHA has allowed businesses to use older sign designs. The new signs, however, can:

Increase the safety of the workforce

Better protect companies from liability issues should an incident occur

These signs increase safety by using symbols in addition to text to communicate about safety issues. These symbols allow speakers of other languages to more easily understand signs. The new signs also contain more detailed text instructing viewers about dealing with or avoiding hazards. While these changes may seem minor, they clarify important information and help people better understand the hazards they may face.



If an accident occurs at your facility, it's possible you could find yourself in a difficult legal situation if you don't have the most current signs posted. Organizations are required to provide "adequate warnings" about hazards. The new signs were designed with the legal criteria for "adequate warnings," as well as research about what makes signs most effective for viewers, in mind. In the event of an accident, you may not get into trouble with OSHA for using old signs, but you could face litigation for not properly warning people of a hazard. This is something to consider as you decide how to proceed with signage in your facility.

Explanation of the New Sign Components

ANSI/OSHA safety signs have several new components:

Safety alert symbol

Signal words

Symbols

Word messages

Safety Alert Symbol

The safety alert symbol is used whenever a potential hazard exists. It is placed in the sign's header on the upper left. It consists of an exclamation point surrounded by a triangle.



Safety alert symbol

Signal Words

The following words appear at the top of signs as headers:

 **DANGER**

Danger – Used for a hazardous situation that will result in serious injury or death if not avoided. Reserved for extreme situations.

Color: White text on red background.

 **WARNING**

Warning – Used for a hazardous situation that could result in serious injury or death if not avoided.

Color: Black text on orange background.

 **CAUTION**

Caution – Used for a hazardous situation that could result in minor or moderate injury if not avoided.

Color: Black text on yellow background.

NOTICE

Notice – Used for signs that convey important information that is not hazard-related such as information about hygiene or security.

Color: White text on blue background.

SAFETY

Safety Instructions – Used for signs that have explanatory information such as instructions.

Color: White text on green background.

Note: This exact signal word isn't required; the signal word could be something more specific to the instructions listed. For example, "Emergency Eyewash Procedures" or "Machine Operation Procedures."

Symbols

Images help communicate with non-English speakers and highlight the sign's message. Generally, these graphics are black on a white background, although in some cases colors including red, green, yellow, and blue are allowed. It's best to use consistent symbols on signs throughout the workplace so they're easier for people to comprehend. Additional information about safety symbols can be found in ANSI Z535.3, Criteria for Safety Symbols.



Word Messages

The sign's message should be written in concise language that only contains the necessary information and has no factual errors. This text is usually written in active voice with a sans serif font so it's easy to read. In the case of hazard signs, text messages usually include information about the nature of a hazard and procedures for avoiding it.



Note:

Not all safety signs contain all four of these components. Hazard signs will, but others will not.

For more detailed information about sign formatting, consult ANSI Z535.2.

Sign Categories Impacted by OSHA/ANSI Updates

Hazard Signs

Hazard signs are some of the most important signs in your facility because they provide the information people need to avoid or handle safety issues. These signs should contain the new safety alert symbol, the appropriate signal word, a pertinent symbol, and a relevant text message. Signal words available for use on these signs are “Danger,” “Warning,” and “Caution.” Symbols on these signs are generally those developed by the International Standards Organization (ISO).

Old Signs

These signs, whose styles were developed throughout the last century, tend to be less descriptive than new signs. Many also don't contain symbols.



New Signs

These new signs use bold colors, text, and symbols to convey information. They're better for use in situations with language barriers and they help people make safer choices.



General Policy and Security Signs

Informational signs related to workplace policies and security issues should contain the signal word “Notice.” These signs usually use ISO symbols.

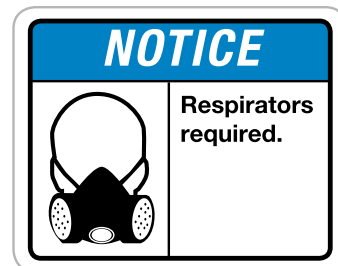
Old Signs

These older signs, while similar to the new signs, vary slightly in format and do not contain symbols.



New Signs

These new signs use symbols to improve communication and conform to the layout of the new OSHA/ANSI best practices.



Safety Instruction Signs

Safety instruction signs convey information about procedures or about the locations of first aid supplies such as emergency eyewash stations. These signs may contain the signal words “Safety Instructions,” but they can also contain more specific headers such as “First Aid Instructions.” Current ANSI signs incorporate standardized symbols from the ISO.

Old Signs

These older signs do not use symbols and often contain instructions that are too simplistic.



New Signs

The new signs use symbols to improve communication and usually contain more detailed information.



Exit Signs

Exit signs—sometimes called egress signs—help people evacuate during an emergency or simply find their way out of a building. Signs pertaining to assembly points for emergencies also fall into this category. These signs often contain arrows to point people in the right direction. If the signs will be used to guide people during a power outage or fire, many of them are photoluminescent. Their formats reflect guidelines from the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and ISO.

Old Signs

These signs do not contain symbols and they're usually not made from glow-in-the-dark materials.



New Signs

These signs incorporate arrows and symbols to improve communication. In many cases, they also are made from photoluminescent materials.



Fire Equipment Signs

These signs are used to label fire-fighting equipment such as fire hoses and fire extinguishers, as well as fire alarms and phones used for communication during a fire. Over the last several decades, fire equipment signs have evolved to be more descriptive in both images and text. Sign formats were developed by the NFPA and ISO and adopted by ANSI in 2011.

Old Signs

Older sign formats often contain text or images (but not both). When the signs only contain text, they make it difficult to communicate with non-English speakers.



New Signs

These signs contain both images and text to improve communication.



Some Notes About Formatting

A well-formatted sign conveys its message more clearly than a poorly designed one. Keep some of the following design tips in mind:

Write signal words in all capital letters and center them in their panels. Italicize “Notice”.

Align the safety alert symbol to the left of hazard signal words.



Keep your word message short and to the point. You don't need to include every word as you would in a sentence. You can eliminate pronouns, articles, and forms of the verb “to be.” For example, instead of saying “This machine will cause an electric shock or a burn” you could say “Will cause electric shock or burn.”

Write sentences in the active voice instead of the passive voice. (The subject of the sentence comes first.) Doing so simplifies the text, making it easier to understand. For example, you can say “Keep body parts away from machinery” instead of “Your body parts must be kept away from the machinery.”

Left align text, unless the text is a one-line message, in which case it can be centered or left aligned. Avoid justifying text.

Use sans serif fonts (such as Arial, Helvetica, Futura, etc.) so text is easier to read.

Helvetica Bold	Arial Bold	Times New Roman Bold

Choose an orientation—horizontal or vertical—that makes sense for your application.

If people in the workplace speak multiple languages, include text in the appropriate languages.



When a sign contains multiple messages, list the most important message first.

For detailed information about sign formatting and text guidelines, see ANSI Z535.2.

Creating a New Sign System

Assess Your Space

To start implementing or updating a signage system, first look at what you have. Where are the hazards? Are the signs you currently have still relevant? Are there too many signs in one place? Not enough?

Creating a consistent system of signs will help employees and visitors more easily understand what is expected of them.

Choose Sign Content & Materials

After assessing the current sign situation in your space, make a list or facility map showing which signs you need. You'll have to select sizes, text, symbols, and more.

You will also need to choose materials suitable to your work environment. Will signs be placed outside? They may need special coatings to protect from water damage or UV rays. Will indoor signs be subjected to chemicals? Then print your signs on chemical-resistant materials.

In some cases, you will want larger signs that you hang on a wall. Other times, you'll want smaller, adhesive-backed labels to post on machinery. A sign system has many components, and you'll want to cover all your bases.

To obtain your signs and labels, you have several options. You can purchase pre-made or custom labels from a third-party vendor. This option lets you select what you need and have it delivered right to your facility. Many facilities require hundreds or even thousands of signs, though, and in these situations

printing signs yourself with a label and sign printer may be the most cost-effective option. These printers give you the flexibility to create signs tailored to your workplace. Many also come with templates to help you create compliant signs.

Place the Signs in Appropriate Locations

Once you have the signs you need, it's time to install them. As a general rule, you should place them so that they will be easy for viewers to see. For hazard signs, you should place them so that they will be read in time for a person to react appropriately before encountering the hazard.



Signs should not be distracting, so try not to clutter an area with too many signs.

Place signs at an appropriate height for your specific applications. For example:

A fire extinguisher sign could be placed high up on a wall above a fire extinguisher so people can see where it is, even from a distance.

A general policy sign about who has permission to enter an area could be placed in the middle of a wall or door where people would be most likely to notice it. Putting signs at eye level is often the most logical placement.

A photoluminescent exit sign should be placed near the floor so people could see it even in a room filled with smoke during a fire.

Maintain Your Sign System

Once you have everything set up, educate people about the new signs and point out any significant changes. Many signs should be self-explanatory, but communicating facility-wide changes is usually a good idea.

Your system is complete and ready to use, but that doesn't mean you can sit back and ignore it. Maintaining clean, high-quality signs is an ongoing task. Put someone in charge of monitoring signs and labels for damage or wear and tear, and whenever the layout of the facility changes or new equipment is brought in, assess whether new signage is necessary

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