



Safety

## Didn't You See the (Safety) Sign? Your Guide to OSHA's Rules on Hazard Warnings

James Langford | Nov 27, 2024

No matter how eye-catching a safety warning sign is—whether it has vivid color, gripping language, clear symbols or all three—it blends into the background after about 30 days.

Safety professionals have dubbed the phenomenon, caused by the human brain's tendency to downplay familiar sights in favor of new sensory data, "sign blindness."

It doesn't happen only in workplaces. Drivers often become numb to street signs they pass routinely, which is how some receive tickets for failing to slow down in more restrictive speed zones that are part of their daily commutes.

Combating that tendency is a vital element of effective workplace safety signage, which begins with the basic elements of color, shape and letter-size detailed in OSHA Standard **1910.145** and an ANSI guideline incorporated by reference to some of its provisions.

The signs are "there for attention purposes, for training and they're meant to be readily recognizable," says Phil Zee, vice president for channel and content strategy at safety-sign maker AccuformNMC. "Visual acuity is critical."

Along with requiring that signs be hung prominently, OSHA establishes colors to designate different types of messages: Red is used for danger signs, yellow for caution, orange for biohazards, gold for warning and green and white for safety instructions.

# Compliant Signs Save Lives

Your visual guide to OSHA's workplace safety signage regulations.

## Color Guide



### Caution

Cautions about potential hazards or unsafe practices



### Danger

Conveys immediate danger: If not avoided, the hazard will cause serious injury or death



### Biohazard

Alerts workers to infectious agents: If not avoided, these present a risk of illness, injury or death



### Warning

Warns of potential danger: If not avoided, the hazard could cause serious injury or death



### Safety Instructions

Provides general information such as procedures, instructions or suggestions related to safety measures

## Make Sure Every Sign...

Has rounded corners

Is hung safely and securely

Is prominently hung



## How to Use Safety Tags

Something out of the ordinary?  
Temporary hazard?  
Tag it.

Safety tags should be used to alert workers to a temporary hazard or a hazardous operation for which there are no OSHA signs. Tags should remain up until the hazard is removed or the operation is completed. Smaller than safety signs, tags can be made of card stock, paper, pasteboard, plastic or another material and should be clearly visible.

Sources: Standard 1910.145, OSHA; Milbank Quarterly, Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality

## Final Thought

Clear, consistent safety signs may help reduce the risk of injury to employees. Additionally, reducing workplace injuries could mean cost savings for employers. Make sure your safety signs are compliant.

Danger, caution and instruction are OSHA's three main classifications, each signaling different levels of risk to employees, Pete Nemmers, former director of training development for the National Association of Safety Professionals, says in a blog post on the organization's *website*:

- **Danger:** Indicates immediate hazard that requires special precautions, such as high-voltage electrical current or toxic chemicals; has the potential to cause serious injury or death; should only be used for extremely high-risk conditions.
- **Caution:** Warns against possible dangers and unsafe practices, such as entering an area with hazardous chemicals without appropriate eye and ear protection; used in areas with the potential to cause mild to moderate injuries.
- **Safety Instruction:** Communicates general directions or procedures; might indicate an area restricted to authorized personnel, for example, or one where personal protective equipment can be picked up.

More narrowly targeted types of signs, Nemmers says, include:

- **Notices:** Convey non-safety information, such as identifying equipment that's out of order.
- **Biohazard warnings:** Signal the presence of blood or other infectious materials. OSHA also requires labels on any containers, including refrigerators, used to ship or store such materials.
- **Fire safety information:** Identify fire exits and the locations of emergency firefighting equipment.

Following OSHA's sign regulations—which also require that signs have rounded corners, be free of sharp edges, burrs and splinters and be hung securely—has benefits beyond simple compliance.

Doing so can also help insulate businesses from liability in case of an injury, Zee points out. "If an incident occurs, the employer, at minimum, can point to the sign to demonstrate that a hazard warning was given and unfortunately, the employee didn't heed it."

While OSHA allows use of pictographs as well as text, the message must be accurate and convey a clear direction, Nemmers says. Signal words, which communicate the most important message, must be readable from a safe distance, he adds. That varies by hazard but is always at least 5 feet away.

## Supplementing Signs with Safety Training

The distance needed for workers to safely navigate a hazard directly influences how large both signs and their lettering should be, Zee explains. "Do you need to see and understand the sign 10 feet away, 20 feet away or 50 feet away?" he asks. "If you've got something that's potentially explosive or very volatile, you probably want to be reading about it from as far away as possible."

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ANSI guidelines spell out that signs should also convey information in the languages spoken by workers. In businesses with employees who don't speak English fluently or have difficulty reading, pictographs and symbols can help overcome communication barriers.

Since even the most effective signs grow progressively less capable of attracting viewer attention, it's important for businesses to actively engage workers in safety training programs, too.

## High-Tech Safety Signs

"They need to talk about not only the information in the signs themselves, but about topics such as PPE, from safety glasses to hard hats, shoes and gloves," Zee says.

Unlike ads and displays in grocery stores that can easily be relocated or replaced when shoppers lose interest, safety signs are somewhat less flexible. In many cases, their locations are dictated by the sites of stationary hazards and rules governing visibility so even if they can be adjusted, they can't be moved far.

AccuformNMC, however, has developed a variety of products to address that dilemma. Its sign projectors, for instance, can display images on walls, ceilings and floors and even add movement, says Pete Bloniarz, director of national accounts.

"These not only create awareness but can also change the attention span of viewers," he explains. "Some people may pay more attention to the projected signs because they pause to figure out where the projection is coming from."

AccuformNMC also offers electronic safety scoreboards that track the number of days without an accident; shadow boards that have outlines of the tools needed for specific safety tasks, showing where they're stored so that workers can find them easily; and rolls of temporary safety tags that help employees avoid losing them, a common occurrence with loose tags sold in traditional packs.

"Sometimes, workplaces aren't aware of all the signs they might need and might not identify a location as hazardous until something goes wrong," Zee says. "Getting a second set of eyes can help. We offer sign surveys where we walk through facilities and look for potentially hazardous areas that are unmarked. Employees can contribute to that, too. Having top-down as well as bottom-up communication in an organization helps identify what the hazards are and where they are so they can be marked."

**How does your company combat sign blindness? Tell us in the comments below.**

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