

# Talks **ZONE**

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## Make the most of safety signs

Signs. Most of us see dozens if not hundreds of them every day. Some are easily ignored or forgotten, while others can have tremendous positive impact.

They take many forms — from billboards and large video displays to placards mounted on posts, decals affixed to windows, and labels on products. Even lines or images on a road or floor can be considered signs.

Signs can be a great way to warn, inform and instruct workers about health and safety hazards. They usually are based on standard colors, shapes or sizes, and often are limited in text to reduce interpretation errors (colors and shapes also have been found to be more visually stimulating than written words).

However, just because a workplace is plastered with signs does not guarantee it will be safer and healthier. Like anything else, signs can become obsolete or unnecessary.

For example, signs warning of a particular hazard at a temporary job site might not be removed after work is completed, thus making them little more than useless clutter. Or a sign might be in place for so long that everyone has stopped paying any attention to it.

Safety signs can be used effectively to:

- Point out hazards that might not be obvious.
- Provide general information and directions.
- Remind employees where personal protective equipment must be worn.
- Control vehicular traffic.
- Show where emergency equipment is located.
- Indicate where certain actions are prohibited

It is important to know when and how signs should be placed. In some cases, this



is determined by regulations, but as a rule of thumb, warning or cautionary signs should be posted whenever a hazard or hazards could endanger passersby.

Although colors and symbols used in Canada, the United States and internationally are similar, there are variations between them. The Canadian standard is CSA Z321, *Signs and Symbols for the Workplace*. In the U.S., a family of standards covers signs, symbols and colors for a variety of uses. This standard, ANSI Z535, is made up of five parts. The international ISO 3864 provides similar guidance.

In Canada there are three basic sign categories used in the workplace:

**Regulatory** — Round shape, prohibiting an action (red and black on white) or requiring an action (white on black).

**Warning** — Triangular, indicating caution (black on yellow) or a definite danger (white on red).

**Information** — Square or rectangular, indicating emergency services (white on green) or general information and/or permission (white on blue).

Experts recommend that text-only signs

not be used unless no appropriate symbols exist. Symbols should be simple and easy to recognize.

Canadian law requires that hazardous materials used in the workplace be identified by special symbols on container labels. These symbols indicate the nature of the substance, such as compressed gas, oxidizing material, or toxic material. Detailed information on symbols to use and their color restrictions are found in the Controlled Products

Regulation under the federal Hazardous Products Act.

Here are some general guidelines for organizations and their employees to follow when designing and posting safety signs:

- Be consistent in size, shape and color.
- Identify the hazard clearly and specify the immediate action required.
- Limit one message to a sign. If more than one message is required, use a separate sign, but do not group too many signs together.
- Use no more than three symbols in the same location.
- Choose locations that provide enough time for someone to read the sign and act accordingly.
- Keep signs an appropriate distance from the hazards to which they refer.
- Keep signs well-lit.
- With directional signs, use arrows and good placement to ensure that the route to take is always clear.

Signs are just one way to help keep a workplace safe. The easier they are to read and heed, the more effective they will be.

The material contained in this document has been prepared from sources believed to be accurate and reliable. Application of this information to a specific worksite should be reviewed by a safety professional. Anyone making use of the information set forth herein does so at their own risk and assumes any and all liability arising therefrom. Specific medical advice should be obtained through consultation with a physician or other trained health care practitioner.

## The Quiz

These questions are meant to help you remember what was discussed today — not to test your patience or challenge your intelligence. The answers are at the bottom of the page. Cover them up, and complete the quiz as quickly as you can.

1. Signs are always an effective way to warn workers of a potential hazard.  
TRUE \_\_\_\_ FALSE \_\_\_\_
2. Have colors and shapes been found to be more visually stimulating than written words?  
YES \_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_
3. Signs can be used to:
  - A. Warn about hidden hazards.
  - B. Remind workers that personal protective equipment must be worn.
  - C. Show where emergency exits are located.
  - D. Indicate whether certain actions are prohibited.
  - E. All of the above
4. Warning signs are usually triangular, with a yellow message on a black background.  
TRUE \_\_\_\_ FALSE \_\_\_\_
5. Hazardous materials received by a workplace must be identified with special symbols on:
  - A. Invoices
  - B. Container labels
  - C. Lids
  - D. Applicators
6. Workplace safety signs should be consistent in size, shape and color.  
TRUE \_\_\_\_ FALSE \_\_\_\_
7. How many messages should a safety sign normally contain:
  - A. Two.
  - B. One.
  - C. Three.
  - D. No limit.
8. Are emergency exit routes and first aid locations clearly marked in your workplace?  
YES \_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_ DON'T KNOW \_\_\_\_

**ANSWERS:** 1. False, 2. Yes, 3. E., 4. False, 5. B., 6. True, 7. B., 8. Your answer

## Hold These Thoughts

When promoting safety, the use of signage is not always the best choice. Signs are just one component of an effective hazard control program.

A control program consists of all steps necessary to protect workers from exposure to a substance or system, and the procedures required to monitor exposure and health to hazards such as chemicals, materials or substance, or other types such as noise and vibration.

Selecting an appropriate control is not always easy. It often involves doing a risk assessment to evaluate and prioritize the hazards and risks. In addition, both "normal" and any potential or unusual situations must be studied. Each program should be specially designed to suit the needs of the individual workplace. The main ways to control a hazard are:

**Elimination** (including substitution): Remove the hazard from the workplace.

**Engineering Controls:** Designs or modifications to plants, equipment, ventilation systems, and processes that reduce the source of exposure.

**Administrative Controls:** Alter the way the work is done, including timing of work, policies and other rules, and work practices such as standards and operating procedures.

**Personal Protective Equipment:** Worn by individuals to reduce exposure such as contact with chemicals or exposure to noise.

These methods are also known as the "hierarchy of control" because they should be considered in the order presented. (It is always best to try to eliminate the hazard first, etc.)



## For the Record

Date of Meeting: \_\_\_\_\_

Topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Department: \_\_\_\_\_

Start Time: \_\_\_\_\_ Finish Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Meeting Leader: \_\_\_\_\_

In Attendance:


### It really happened...

A Quebec construction company was fined a total of \$80,000 for failing to post warning signs at an Ontario construction project.

The company was demolishing the decommissioned generating station in Toronto. Two people broke into the demolition site while it was closed. One of them was fatally injured. When Ministry of Labor inspectors arrived to investigate, they found that there were no signs posted to warn workers, including the police and paramedics, about the hazards in the building. There were also no signs warning about an asbestos hazard that was present.

After a trial the company was found guilty of failing, as a constructor, to ensure that signs were posted in prominent locations and in sufficient numbers to warn workers of a hazard on a project. It was also found guilty of failing to identify the asbestos dust hazard using clearly visible signs. The company was fined \$40,000 for each offense.

In addition to the fines, the court imposed a 25 percent victim fine surcharge, as required by Ontario's Provincial Offences Act. The surcharge is credited to a special provincial government fund to assist victims of crime.

**Note: TalksZone safety meetings are not intended to take the place of your own safety procedures. Always consult and/or review your procedures before attempting any work.**