



Coffee Break Training - Fire Protection Series

Administration: Reading Codes and Standards: Part 1

No. FP-2013-30 July 23, 2013

Learning Objective: The student shall be able to explain a simple difference between codes and standards.

For many new inspectors, interpreting and applying their legally adopted building or fire code can be a daunting task. The codes may seem overwhelming in their complexity, and the legal jargon in which they are written can be intimidating if one is not familiar with it.

This Coffee Break Training, and several that will follow, provides some administrative tips on how to read and apply the model codes. For additional information and training on building and fire code enforcement, consider some of the fire prevention courses within the technical curriculum at the National Fire Academy (<http://1.usa.gov/14XhC2i>).

Understand the difference between codes and standards.

“Codes,” such as your building code, fire code, mechanical code, or electrical code, are documents that are adopted by the legal authority in your jurisdiction and establish minimum performance requirements to achieve life safety and property protection. Codes are written in mandatory language and tell people what **must** be done. For example, it is common for a code to require the installation of an automatic sprinkler system.

“Standards” usually are referenced in the codes and tell people how to achieve what must be done. For example, National Fire Protection Association 13, *Standard for the Installation of Sprinkler Systems* explains how to install the sprinkler system to meet the code’s requirement.

Codes and standards are written in mandatory language, so the administrative authority (the code official or authority having jurisdiction) has the legal authority to enforce them. Codes and standards written with phrases like “ought to,” “should” and “nice to have” would be impossible to enforce because of the loopholes.

When reading and applying codes and standards, always consider their intent. Too often, inexperienced code readers pore through the books, find the paragraphs they want, and apply them without understanding their context. Not only is this unprofessional, but it also might compel someone to do something that he or she ordinarily may not have to do.

Understand how the codes and standards are organized. Generally, the first section of each chapter includes general requirements that pertain to all portions of that chapter. The second section usually includes definitions that are specific to that chapter. Specific requirements begin with the third part of the chapter.

Next week, we’ll offer more code-reading tips.



A “code” requires the installation of this backflow prevention assembly; a “standard” describes how it should be installed.



Eligible for Continuing Education Units (CEUs)
at www.usfa.fema.gov/nfaonline

For archived downloads, go to:
www.usfa.fema.gov/nfa/coffee-break/