



Coffee Break Training - Fire Protection Series

Administration: Reading Codes and Standards: Part 2

No. FP-2013-31 July 30, 2013

Learning Objective: The student shall be able to explain the difference between “general” and “specific” requirements in the model codes.

This Coffee Break Training continues the second part of administrative tips on how to read and apply the model codes.

- Always read the exceptions. There is an old saying, “What the Code giveth, the Exceptions taketh away.” Code writers cannot anticipate all circumstances when they write code language, and occasionally their decisions have inadvertent consequences. In those cases, rather than rewrite an entire code section, one or more exceptions to the rules may be added.
- Always read the footnotes. Many tables, graphs and text have footnotes. Occasionally, the requirements found in the footnotes exist nowhere else in the code. Footnotes can provide limitations or exceptions to the rules printed in the tables, graphs or text.
- Check for “and/or” details. Sometimes the codes or standards will list several requirements or conditions, divide them with commas, and precede the last item with “and.” In that case, **all** of the items or conditions apply. For example, if the code or standard says, “The requirements shall include A, B, C and D,” **all** four items are required.

When several requirements or conditions are listed, divided with commas, and the phrase is finished with “or,” **any** of the conditions, requirements or options applies. For example, if the code or standard says, “The requirements shall include A, B, C or D,” **any** of the four items are permissible, and usually the permit applicant gets to choose the option.

- Understand the difference between “general” and “specific” requirements. When the code gives choices between general requirements (such as “mechanical ventilation sufficient to prevent the accumulation of flammable vapors”) or specific requirements (“provide ventilation at the rate of four air changes per hour”), the specific takes precedence.

This does **not** mean the “most restrictive” applies. It means just what it says: Specific requirements take precedence over general ones. In some cases, the specific may be less restrictive.

- Understand what “most restrictive” means. It does not mean the most expensive. For example, in the International Building Code, there is a requirement that mixed occupancies within a single building footprint have rated fire-resistive separations. If the uses are not separated, they must be evaluated for compliance with height and area limits, and “the most restrictive type of construction, so determined, shall apply to the entire building.” In this case, it means the type of construction that most restricts the building’s area or height.

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>).



The “specific” requirements for minimum egress width maintenance in this occupancy will take precedence over a “general” requirement to maintain a clear egress path.



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