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**PER ROOM**



**To prevent the spread of coronavirus**

# THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF CLEAR SIGNAGE DURING THE PANDEMIC

by David Vinson, PhD

As we navigate public spaces, it is unlikely we think much about the processes of either creating or interpreting the signs we encounter every day. Take roadway travel, for instance. Our safety is determined by a variety of factors, not least of all the individual driver's capacity to operate a vehicle responsibly—but imagine what a disaster it would be if roadside signage were not designed in a clear, consistent “language,” or if individuals were allowed to drive without predetermined knowledge of each sign's meaning. It is a matter of safety that we know the color yellow instructs us to be cautious, whether our caution applies to slowing down, watching for pedestrians, or being alert to a sharp turn up ahead. The color red evokes more urgency in the driver, whether to stop, to yield, to avoid entering, and so on.

Even my daughter, who turns five in a few months, demonstrates how we are trained from an early age to rely on symbols as we navigate the world. Because she is just learning to read, she often relies on symbols other than letters to do this. The colors pink and blue are particularly meaningful to her, no doubt because the cultural meanings of either are scrupulously linked to gender. If we are shopping at a retail chain, she recognizes toys equipped in pink boxes as “girl” toys. (Interesting, then, that boy-regulated toys come in boxes of all colors, not only blue, and certainly never pink.) While I encourage her to explore the other aisles, too, she is nonetheless drawn to all things pink, so pervasive and powerful is the particular symbol.

At college campuses, signs and their respective symbols—like the outside world—are everywhere. The reasons for this range from keeping our campuses functional and orderly, to that of sustaining a recognizable, consistent brand identity. Some symbols are vital to our safety, alerting us to potential dangers on the road or elsewhere, while others function to keep

our campuses clean and beautiful. A recycle sign posted on a trash bin may alert us to which objects can be tossed, but the same sign can also reinforce a campus-wide commitment to sustainability. Signs can and often do communicate multiple ideas at once.

With cases of Covid-19 as high as ever, it is all the more important in the management of a functional and safe campus that our on-campus signage remain clear in meaning and design, and that they are conspicuously located. This may seem an obvious point as well as an easy task to manage—but look no further than your own experiences, and consider how commonplace it is to encounter confusing signage, whether a result of poor design or placement, or both.

Creating clear, well placed signage can go a long way towards keeping our campuses functional and safe during the pandemic. Because we want our campuses to thrive, it is necessary to consider the role of signage during this most remarkable and challenging period.

## Producing an Effective Sign with Key Design Elements

Chances are, we spend only a few seconds reading a sign, and that is assuming we read at all. Context matters in this case: If we fail to acknowledge a roadway sign, we may miss an exit that takes us home; if we fail to read a billboard tucked along the side of a highway, maybe we have missed a product advertisement. One sign has more impact on our immediate experiences than the other.

But let us say we read a sign, and the sign has instructed us to alter our behavior in some way—to stand in line at a particular point in a room; to provide a form of identification; to remain seated until someone calls our name. This exchange of information is one we all take for granted, and it assumes that we, as readers, have interpreted what was intended. The problem, of course, is that communication is not always simple or straight-forward, and confusion and misreadings can occur with regularity. For instance, what if the sign instructs us to stand in line, only it remains

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unclear where we should stand? What if we are to pull out a form of identification, but only a picture ID is accepted, which we do not have on us? What if we are to remain seated, but the sign fails to remind us that safety protocols during a pandemic require us to sit six feet apart? Worse still, what if there is a sign requiring certain behaviors, only we fail to notice one at all because its location is not central to our vantage point?

Signage produced in an unclear manner and that is located in inconspicuous spaces can

undermine any intended rhetorical purpose, thereby causing confusion or even disorder. To avoid this, there are a number of design principles we can employ, those which allow for a clear and concise exchange of ideas. What follows are a few suggestions in this regard:

- Vitally important safety messages should not compete for attention with messages of less importance, those such as house-keeping or even directional signs

- Symbols and Pictograms, when possible, should be emphasized over verbiage given today's international student body and the limited amount of time people spend reading signage
- Less really is more. By keeping your message short, your sign is easier to read and understand at a glance
- Allow for “white-space,” which is the area of a design that is left uncovered by either text or graphics; there is a tendency to fill up the available area, but when text is crowded, it becomes harder to read
- Colors, shapes, size, and placement are all significant factors for conspicuity
- With type and font, clean and crisp type styles should be used for maximum legibility
- As a general rule, avoid using more than two different fonts in a single design; choose two fonts that complement each other, so that your message can stand out

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- Adding a border can increase reading speed by up to 25%. Borders tend to cause the eye to focus on the message
- When choosing a background for your design, avoid using anything that obscures focus on the main message. The greater the contrast in colors, the more legible text is from a distance
- Always be aware that signage must be located in highly visible spaces, preferably at eye level or above, at entryways, along walls, and at exits

### Specific Covid-19 Signage on Campus (and Where to Place Them)

Just as consistency in design and meaning are key for a quick and accurate exchange of information on the road, the same is necessary at our college campuses. At this point, it is difficult to imagine anyone not knowing about the dangers posed by the pandemic, but it may be common to forget how easily we can spread germs, and further, how we can prevent the spread.

In university buildings, Facilities and Services should be installing relevant signs near high-trafficked, enclosed spaces such as building entrances, elevators, bathrooms, and stairwells. A great practice would be to have a template for such signage that can be used campus wide. Doing

so creates a consistency in appearance, thereby creating a uniform “language” that all students, faculty, and staff will come to recognize. Just as we see yellow on a roadside and register the need for caution, a familiar Covid-19-related template can have the same effect, so that after a certain point, we may not even need to read the signage to understand its message of safety. The same practice can be applied to other enclosed, high volume areas: desktops, science labs, cafeterias, auditoriums, recreation and wellness centers, in addition to other areas where students are within close proximity to one another.

Creating clear and concise design templates aid in the efficacy of keeping our campuses safe during the pandemic, but we can adopt one other key design strategy—assigning templates to pair with specific themes. What follows are four distinct groups, and ideally, each group should contain a template that is wholly distinctive from the others. (For instance, one group may use one font and a specific border, while the other three use entirely different ones.)

The first group could contain an “Office Hours” template with the department name and office hours listed below. If a distinction needs to be made between physical and remote hours of operation, these should be included and clearly distinguished.

The second group could be arranged by the theme of “Guidelines and Best Practices”, accompanied with the following signage: Face Mask Required; Practice Physical Distancing; Stay 6 Feet Apart; Please Do Not Congregate in Groups of More than 10; Wipe Down Work Area Regularly; Wipe Down Equipment Regularly; Washing Hands Saves Lives; Don’t Gather in Hallways: Stay 6 Feet Apart.

The third group could consist of “Health and Screening” signs and include the following messages: Masks Up; Stay Home if You’re Feeling Sick; Show Us Your Thumbs Up (equipped with a smartphone-ready link for individual screening tests); Stop: Do Not Come to Campus if You’re Experiencing Any of the Following Symptoms (and below this, a bullet point list of common virus-related symptoms).

The final group could focus on “Building and Directional” signs: This Space is Closed; Closed Temporarily Due to Physical Distancing; Maximum Room Occupancy (with a designated number included); “Two People Maximum in an Elevator”; Stairs This Way (with an arrow pointing the way).

### Signage Shows How Much We Care

The anxiety levels of our students, faculty, and staff are reaching unprecedented levels. This is not an exaggeration. The pandemic is accelerating each week, and increasingly we are learning about friends and families who have been impacted by Covid-19. Some of us, indeed, have experienced the virus for ourselves. And no matter how cognizant and responsible we may be as individuals, there is always the risk that others are less mindful of the safety precautions that must be adopted in order to mitigate the spread.

Informational signage that is clear and conspicuous, and that is located all over campus, is an imperative. It creates a culture of awareness and accountability. We want our campuses to thrive, and the most assured way of pulling this off is by promoting safety measures that keep everyone healthy.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** PUPN staff writer

Dr. David Vinson has a PhD in English with specializations in transatlantic literature and cultural studies. He is a committed scholar, teacher, husband, and dad. If you ever meet David, avoid the subject of soccer. His fandom borders on the truly obnoxious.



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