Plain Language
for Construction

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Canada

BuildForce Canada (originally created in 2001 as the Construction Sector Council) is a national industry-led organization committed to working with the construction industry to provide information and resources to assist with its management of workforce requirements. Its mandate is to provide accurate and timely labour market data and analysis, as well as programs and initiatives to help manage workforce requirements and build the capacity and the capability of Canada's construction and maintenance workforce.

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Plain Language for Construction
Introduction

Who Should Use this Book?

Plain Language for Construction is a useful tool for any construction site. Lead hands, supervisors, administrative staff, forepersons, owners, contractors, or anyone who has a message to communicate will find helpful tips on how to write and communicate more effectively and efficiently.

What is Plain Language?

Plain language is a style of writing that presents information clearly to your intended audience. A plain language message is written to the needs and reading ability of the people who are meant to read it. The plain language style of writing improves communication between the sender and receiver because the message is short, direct, and clear. A plain language message is understood the first time it is read.

Why Use Plain Language?

There are many benefits to using plain language:

- Plain language messages are more quickly and easily read and understood.
- Plain language documents can save time and money by preventing misunderstandings and errors in communications.
- Plain language messages can have a positive impact on workplace health and safety.
- Plain language messages can help improve workplace productivity.

How do I download these materials?

Visit www.csc-ca.org.
Pages can be printed back to back.

Plain Language Quick Reference

Thinking about the message

Tip 1 Organize the information

- Put important information first
- Order and group information

Tip 2 Make it short

- Eliminate unnecessary words and information

Tip 3 Be clear

- State information directly and accurately

Writing it down

Tip 4 Write the way you speak

- Write like you are speaking to your audience

Tip 5 Address readers directly

- Use *you*, *I*, *we*, and *us*

Tip 6 Use simple sentences

- Use *subject* + *verb* + *object* sentences where possible

Tip 7 Use everyday words

- Use common, familiar words

Tip 8 Define special terms or technical words

- Write out acronyms
- Explain special terms or technical words

Putting it together

Tip 9 Make it easy to find information

- Use headings, subheadings, boldface type, italic type, underlining, colour, and boxed text

Tip 10 Use a layout that is easy to read

- Use tables, lists, flow charts, graphs, pictures, and spacing

Table of contents

Thinking about the message

TIP 1:

Organize the information.

- Help the reader make connections between ideas.
- Save the reader time.

BEFORE

Site Safety Rules

1. Substantial footwear with safety toes shall be worn.
2. Hard hats must be worn on site.
3. Hand, eye and skin protection is required when exposed to injury hazards.
4. Guard rails and hand rails are not to be removed unless required by the work in the immediate area and railings so removed must be replaced before the worker leaves the area.
5. No horseplay of any kind will be tolerated.
6. Any worker, as determined by the site superintendent, found to be unfit for his/her duties will be removed from the site.
7. Waste shall not be allowed to accumulate. Regular cleanup is required.
8. No music which inhibits communication between workers.
9. Ladders must be secured top and bottom. Do not use poorly constructed or defective ladders.
10. Scaffold planks or beams must be of sound materials, clear of defects. Do not use poorly constructed scaffold. See that scaffolding is provided with guardrails.
11. Persons failing to comply with the above or any WCB regulation and thereby causing hazards either to himself or his fellow workers will be removed from the site.

Think Safety
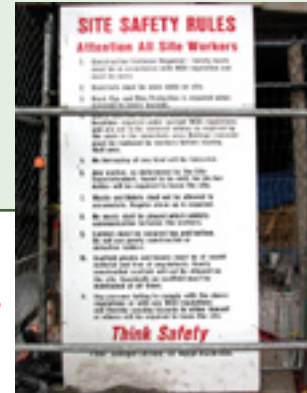
AFTER

Site Safety Rules

add heading → **PPE – Personal Protection Equipment**

group rules 1,2, and 3 together

- Wear boot with safety toes – always!
- Wear hard hats – always!
- Wear required hand, eye, and skin protection when exposed to hazards.

On Site

add heading

- Remove guard rails and hand rails ONLY in the immediate work area. Replace before leaving the area.
- Clean up regularly.
- Secure ladders – top and bottom.
  Do not use poorly made or defective ladders.

reorganize rules 4,7,9 and 10 into a group

- Check scaffold planks or beams.
  Use sound materials with no defects.
  Construct guardrails for scaffolding.
  Do not use poorly constructed scaffold.

add heading → **Behavior Code**

reorganize rules 5 and 8 into a group

- No horseplay of any kind.
- No loud music. Make sure you can hear your coworkers.

Company Policy

add heading

- Unfit workers will be removed from the site by the site superintendent.

reorganize rules 6 and 11 into a group

- Workers who fail to comply with the above or any WCB regulation will be removed from the site.

Think Safety

TIP 2:

Make it short.

- Save the reader time.
- Get to the point.
- Make the message easier to remember.

Example 1

BEFORE

> Only employees who have demonstrated competency in knowledge and operating capability should be allowed to operate machinery and equipment.
> *19 words*

take out unnecessary words →

approved ←
can ←

→ *use one word instead of many words*

> Only employees (who have demonstrated competency in knowledge and operating capability) (should be allowed to) operate machinery and equipment.
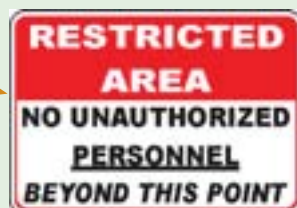
AFTER

> Only approved employees can operate machinery and equipment.
> *8 words*

Example 2

BEFORE   **AFTER**

8 words; main message is not clear; does not tell the reader what to do →

RESTRICTED AREA NO UNAUTHORIZED PERSONNEL BEYOND THIS POINT

KEEP OUT AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY

← *5 words; main message is clear; tells the reader to keep out*
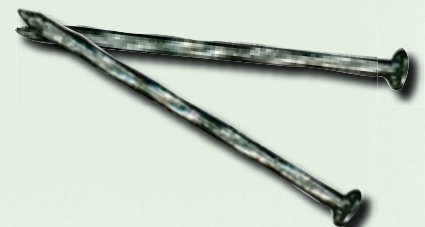
TIP 3:

Be clear.

- Be direct.
- Avoid ambiguity.
- Keep information accurate and focused.

Example 1

BEFORE

The requirements, terms and conditions of the Prime Contract as far as they are applicable to this Subcontract, shall be binding upon the Contractor and the Subcontractor as if the word "owner" appearing therein had been changed to "Contractor" and the word "contractor" appearing therein has been changed to "Subcontractor".

50 words
1 sentence

main idea → The requirements, terms and conditions of the Prime Contract

condition → as far as they are applicable to this Subcontract,

main idea → shall be binding upon the Contractor and the Subcontractor

contract language → as if the word "owner" appearing therein had been changed to "Contractor"

and the word "contractor" appearing therein has been changed to "Subcontractor".

divide long sentences into shorter sentences

AFTER

The requirements, terms, and conditions of the Prime Contract will be binding on the Contractor and the Subcontractor if they apply to this Subcontract. When requirements, terms, and conditions apply to this Subcontract, the Prime Contract will be read as if the word "owner" has been changed to "Contractor", and the word "contractor" has been changed to "Subcontractor".

58 words
2 sentences

legal language may need more sentences to make the message clear

Example 2

BEFORE

This contract extends from 1 March to 8 June.

This agreement extends from 1 March until 8 June.

Painting must be completed between 1 April and 28 April.

Are the stated dates included or not included as part of the contract?

use:
on, after, before
do not use:
from/to,
from/until,
between

begins   on   and ends on
This contract extends ~~from~~ 1 March ~~to~~ 8 June.

starts after   and ends before
This agreement ~~extends from~~ 28 February ~~until~~ 9 June.

begin after   be completed on or before
Painting must ~~be between~~ 1 April and ^ 28 April.

AFTER

This contract begins on 1 March and ends on 8 June.

This agreement starts after 28 February and ends before 9 June.

Painting must begin after 1 April and be completed on or before 28 April.

Clearly stated dates and time periods prevent disputes over written agreements.

Example 3

BEFORE

The *Subcontractor* shall make applications for payment together with supporting sworn statements and/or other documents when required by the *Subcontract Documents…*

"And/or" is ambiguous and has caused legal action. Some courts say that "and/or" means the court can choose either "and" or "or" depending on the situation. How do you interpret the "and/or" clause in the above example?

AFTER

In this case, state clearly if one or both documents are required.

Writing it down

TIP 4:

Write the way you speak.

- Engage the reader directly.
- Make the message more personal to the reader.
- Use conversational English; it is easier to understand than formal written English.

BEFORE

Construction Council Memorandum

To: Contractors
Date: 11 February 2006
From: D. Miller of Construction Council (CC)
Subject: Compensation Regulation Proposals

CC will structure a coordinated response to the compensation proposals and will subsequently distribute the resultant DRAFT to industry for comment. Contractor input will help the construction industry to get the most appropriate regulations. Contractor input may be submitted in any one of several ways. First, contractors can send the CC their thoughts and recommendations on the proposals. Second, contractors can be part of a CC regulation review group that will examine the proposals in detail. Third, contractors can respond to CC when we send out the recommendations that result from this regulation review group.

Construction Council Memorandum

To: Contractors
Date: 11 February 2006
From: D. Miller of Construction Council (CC)
Subject: Compensation Regulation Proposals

write something the way you would say it

organize a
CC will ~~structure a coordinated~~ response to the compensation

circulate this in
proposals and will ~~subsequently distribute the resultant~~

Your
DRAFT to industry for comment. ~~Contractor~~ input will help

us
~~the construction industry~~ to get the most appropriate

You can provide input
regulations. ~~Contractor input may be submitted~~ in any

you   us   your
one of several ways. First, ~~contractors~~ can send ~~the CC their~~
thoughts and recommendations on the proposals. Second,

you
~~contractors~~ can be part of a CC regulation review group that

you
will examine the proposals in detail. Third, ~~contractors~~ can
respond to CC when we send out the recommendations that
result from this regulation review group.

address your readers directly (Tip 5)

use I, we, us, or our when referring to yourself or your organization

AFTER

Construction Council Memo

To: Contractors
Date: 11 February 2006
From: D. Miller of Construction Council (CC)
Subject: **Your Input is Needed** on the Compensation Regulation Proposals

CC will organize a response to the compensation proposals and circulate this in DRAFT form to industry for comment. Your input will help us to get the most appropriate regulations. You can provide input in any one of several ways. First, you can send us your thoughts and recommendations on the proposals. Second, you can be part of a CC regulation review group that will examine the proposals in detail. Third, you can respond to CC when we send out the recommendations that result from this regulation review group.

T I P 5:

Address readers directly.

- Write so the reader takes the information personally.
- Write so the words speak directly to the reader.

BEFORE

Attention: Roofing Bid Depository Bidders

Bidders for roofing sections through Bid Depository (e.g. Section 07311 Asphalt Shingles or 07510 Built-Up Roofing) should be aware that if Section 07620 Metal Flashings and Trim is included in the Bid Depository, it may under some circumstances duplicate what is already specified for flashings in the roofing section for metal flashings. This means that it is not necessary for a bidder to bid on Section 07620 in order to have a complete roofing bid that complies with the requirements for an RA warranty. Bidders for Section 07620 should also be aware that this section excludes all flashings other than roofing flashings.

use you, I, we, us, our, *when appropriate*

show titles by using italic print

avoid words such as bidders, trades workers, subcontractors or suppliers; these words are less personal

Attention: Roofing Bid Depository Bidders

You
~~Bidders for roofing sections through Bid Depository (e.g. Section 07311 Asphalt Shingles or 07510 Built-Up Roofing)~~ should be aware that if *Section 07620 Metal Flashings and Trim* is included in the Bid Depository, it may ~~under some circumstances~~ duplicate what is already specified for flashings in the roofing section for metal flashings. This means ~~that it is~~

you do not need to
~~not necessary for a bidder~~ ^ to bid on Section 07620 ~~in order~~ to have a

to qualify
complete roofing bid ~~that complies with the requirements~~ for an RA

You
warranty. ~~Bidders for Section 07620~~ should also be aware that ~~this~~ section 07620
^ excludes all flashings other than roofing flashings.

AFTER

Attention: Roofing Bid Depository Bidders
Re: Section 07620 Metal Flashings and Trim

You should be aware that if *Section 07620 Metal Flashings and Trim* is included in the Bid Depository, it may duplicate what is already specified for flashings in the roofing section for metal flashings. This means that you do not need to bid on Section 07620 to have a complete roofing bid to qualify for an RA warranty. You should also be aware that Section 07620 excludes all flashings other than roofing flashings.

TIP 6:

Use simple sentences.

- Make your message easy to read so it is clear who does what.
- Make your sentences easy to read for people who find reading difficult.

Example 1

BEFORE

> Substantial footwear with safety toes shall be worn.

*use
subject +
verb + object
sentences*

> (subject)   (verb)   (object)
>   *You must wear   boots*
>   ^ ~~Substantial footwear~~ with safety toes ~~shall be worn~~.

AFTER

> You must wear boots with safety toes.

Example 2

BEFORE

Scaffolding must be placed on solid footing.

No barrels, blocks or boxes can be used to support scaffolding.

Toe boards must be installed about the open sides of scaffold to prevent tools, materials or equipment from falling off the scaffold.

give instructions using verb + object

(verb)

Place   (object)

^   Scaffolding ~~must be placed~~ on solid footing.

(verb)

Do not use   (objects)

^   ~~No~~ barrels, blocks or boxes ~~can be used~~ to support scaffolding.

(verb)

Install (objects)   around

^   Toe boards ~~must be installed about~~ the open sides of

anything

scaffold to prevent ~~tools, materials or equipment~~ from falling off the scaffold.

AFTER

Place scaffolding on solid footing.

Do not use barrels, blocks or boxes to support scaffolding.

Install toe boards around the open sides of scaffold to prevent anything from falling off the scaffold.

TIP 7:

Use everyday words.

- Reach more readers.
- Be easier to understand.
- Keep the message clear.

BEFORE

> Seal areas with a good quality penetrating sealer in order to maintain a permanent aesthetically pleasing repair.

use common, familiar words or phrases →

> Seal areas with a good quality penetrating sealer ~~in order~~ to
>
> *make the repair look good and last long.*
> ~~maintain a permanent aesthetically pleasing repair.~~

AFTER

> Seal areas with a good quality penetrating sealer to make the repair look good and last long.

Some Business and Legal Terms

BEFORE	AFTER
at the present time	now
by means of	by
comply with	follow
during such time	while
henceforth	from today, from now on
in the event that	if
in lieu of	instead of
notwithstanding	in spite, despite
preclude	prevent
pursuant to	following
whereas	since

TIP 8:

Define special terms or technical words.

- Ensure everyone understands these words or expressions.
- Make special terms or technical words understandable.

Example 1

BEFORE

> WHMIS provides specific health and safety information about workplace hazardous materials called controlled products.

write out the words of an acronym the first time it is used in a document

> *The Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System*
> ^   (WHMIS) provides specific health and safety information about workplace hazardous materials called controlled products.

AFTER

> The Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) provides specific health and safety information about workplace hazardous materials called controlled products.

Example 2

BEFORE

> The generally accepted slenderness ratio on Tilt-Up walls is 50.

explain special or technical terms

> *The thickness of a concrete panel is usually determined by a quantity called the* slenderness ratio. *This is the ratio of the unsupported panel height to the panel thickness.*
> The generally accepted slenderness ratio on Tilt-Up walls is 50.

AFTER

> The thickness of a concrete panel usually is determined by a quantity called the *slenderness ratio*. This is the ratio of the unsupported panel height to the panel thickness. The generally accepted slenderness ratio on Tilt-Up walls is 50.

Putting it together

TIP 9:

Make it easy to find information.

- Save time.
- Help the reader find what they need to know.
- Ensure the message will be read.

BEFORE

SECTION 7 – PREVENTATIVE MEASURES		
Personal Protective Equipment **Where prolonged and/or repeated skin exposure is expected, wear long sleeves and chemical resistant gloves.**		
Gloves (specify type) **Impervious to chemicals**	Respiratory (specify type) **Self-contained breathing apparatus**	Eye (specify type) **Safety goggles with side shields**
Footwear (specify type) **Impervious to chemicals**	Clothing (specify type) **Impervious to chemicals**	Other (specify)
Engineering Controls (specify, eg. ventilation)	**Local exhaust ventilation recommended to control emissions. Mechanical ventilation in enclosed spaces**	
Leak and Spill Procedure **Eliminate sources of ignition. Prevent spill from entering sewers and water supply. Contain spill with sand, earth or approved absorbent. Clear area and warn people downwind of the spill. Consult and expert as to the recovery and disposal of the spilled material. Notify appropriate authorities.**		

highlight headings and titles

separate headings from information

use lists

Section 7 – Preventative Measures	
Personal Protective Equipment	
Where prolonged and/or repeated skin exposure is expected, wear long sleeves and chemical resistant gloves.	
Gloves	Impervious to chemicals
Respiratory	Self-contained breathing apparatus
Eye	Safety goggles with side shields
Footwear	Impervious to chemicals
Clothing	Impervious to chemicals
Other	n/a

AFTER

Section 7 – Preventative Measures	
Personal Protective Equipment	
Where prolonged and/or repeated skin exposure is expected, wear long sleeves and chemical resistant gloves.	
Gloves	Impervious to chemicals
Respiratory	Self-contained breathing apparatus
Eye	Safety goggles with side shields
Footwear	Impervious to chemicals
Clothing	Impervious to chemicals
Other	n/a

TIP 10:

Use a layout that is easy to read.

- Is more likely to be read.
- Is faster to read.
- Highlights important information.
- Is easier to locate information.

BEFORE

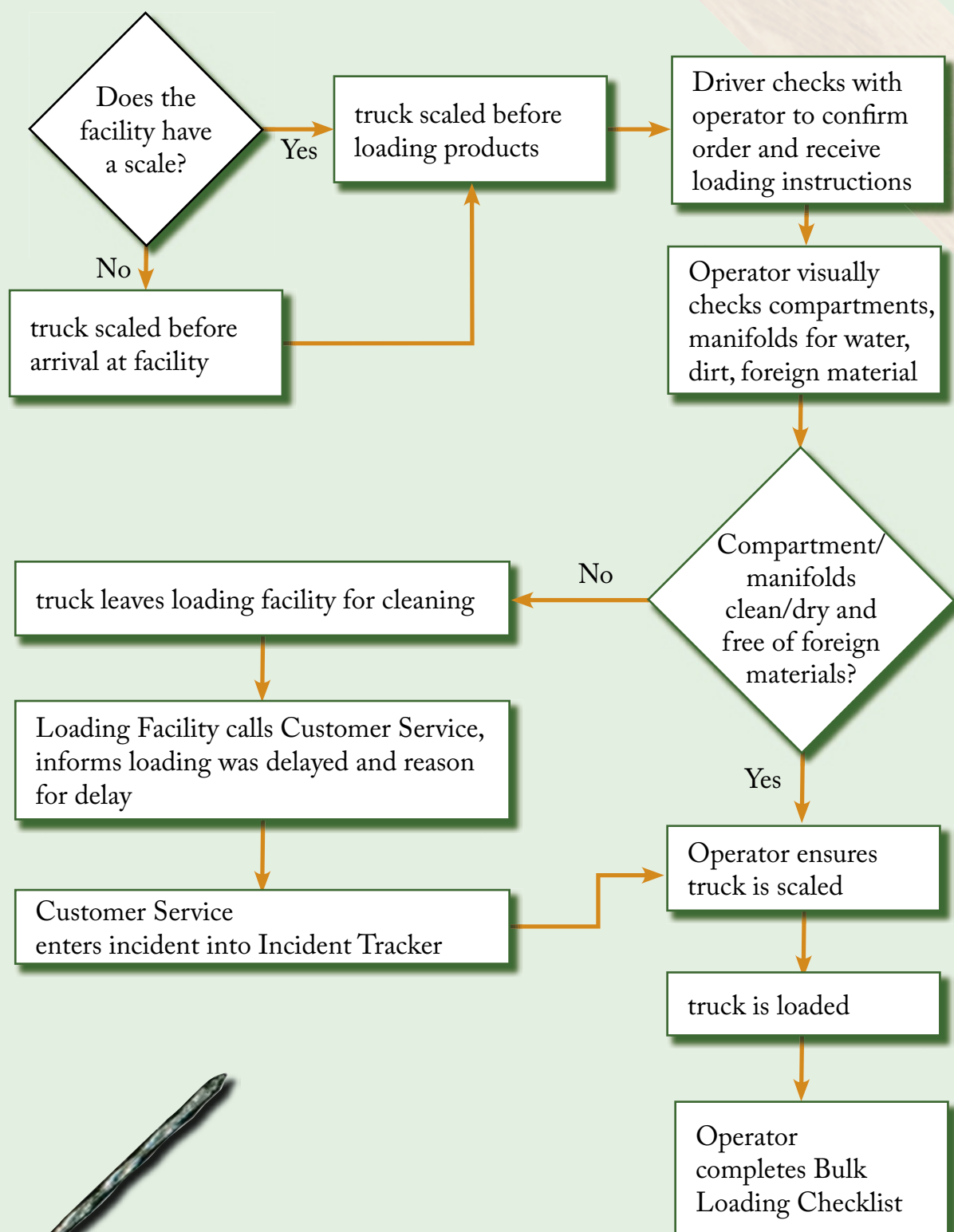### Bulk Loading Procedure

General Work Instructions

1. The truck must be scaled prior to loading. If the loading facility does not have a scale, the truck must be scaled prior to arriving at the loading facility. If the loading facility does have a scale, follow steps 2,3,4,5 and 6. At this point the truck must be scaled before any product is loaded.

2. The operator is required to complete the Bulk Loading Checklist (attached) to be submitted to the head office upon completion.

3. When truck arrives, the driver checks with the operator to confirm the order and receive loading instructions.

4. Operator visually inspects all compartments and manifolds for water, dirt or other foreign material.

5. If the compartments and/or manifolds are wet, dirty or have other foreign material present, the truck must leave the loading facility to be cleaned prior to commencement of the loading process. The loading facility must call Customer Service to inform that loading was delayed, and the reason for the delay. Customer Service must then enter the incident into Incident Tracker.

6. If the truck is clean then the loading process can begin. Ensure that the truck has been scaled prior to loading.

One way to change written procedures is to make them into flow charts. Flow charts reduce the amount of text and are easier to read and follow.

AFTER

Bulk Loading Procedure

```
Does the facility have a scale?
  ── Yes ──▶ truck scaled before loading products
  ── No ──▶ truck scaled before arrival at facility
```

truck scaled before arrival at facility ──▶ truck scaled before loading products

truck scaled before loading products ──▶ Driver checks with operator to confirm order and receive loading instructions

Driver checks with operator to confirm order and receive loading instructions ──▶ Operator visually checks compartments, manifolds for water, dirt, foreign material

Operator visually checks compartments, manifolds for water, dirt, foreign material ──▶ Compartment/ manifolds clean/dry and free of foreign materials?

Compartment/ manifolds clean/dry and free of foreign materials?
  ── No ──▶ truck leaves loading facility for cleaning
  ── Yes ──▶ Operator ensures truck is scaled

truck leaves loading facility for cleaning ──▶ Loading Facility calls Customer Service, informs loading was delayed and reason for delay

Loading Facility calls Customer Service, informs loading was delayed and reason for delay ──▶ Customer Service enters incident into Incident Tracker

Customer Service enters incident into Incident Tracker ──▶ Operator ensures truck is scaled

Operator ensures truck is scaled ──▶ truck is loaded

truck is loaded ──▶ Operator completes Bulk Loading Checklist

Using the tips

BEFORE

Tool Bin Policy

All employees taking tools from the shop must now use the new **Tool Sign Out** form. The procedure when you sign the tool out is as follows; please record the date you signed the tool out, the tool number and description, mark a check in the rental column if the tool is a rental, record the job # and print your name. When you return the tool please locate the line you signed the tool out on, record the date you are returning the tool in the "Date in" box, and please check if the tool needs repair and place it in the designated repair bin. Make certain you have clearly tagged the tool if in fact it is in need of repair and identify the problem on the repair tag. If you are returning a tool signed out by someone else, please make sure you mark your initials beside their name.

This policy has been developed by your Tool Committee.

Thank you for your cooperation.

AFTER

Tip 4
Write the way you speak

Tip 9
Make it easy to find information

• use headings

Tip 10
Use a layout that is easy to read

• divide into two sections with headings

• use numbered list for the steps

• use lots of spacing

Tip 5
Address readers directly

Tip 3
Be clear

Tip 2
Make it short

• use point form for the steps

Tip 1
Organize the information

• group information into "Sign Out" and "Return" procedures

Tool Bin Policy

@#!!*@ **Frustrated by missing or broken tools?** @#!!*@

Your Tool Committee has the answer… a new **Tool Sign Out** form.

Only you can make the system work.

Here's how it works:

Sign Out

This means everyone!

1. Record the date you signed the tool out
2. Record the tool number (for example: *0097*)
3. Print the tool description (for example: *saw*)
4. Check ✓ if the tool is a rental
5. Record the job number
6. Print your name

Return

This means everyone!

1. Locate the line where the tool was signed out
2. Record the date you are returning the tool in the Date In box
3. Sign your initials

   …if returning tools for someone else,

   initial next to their name.

For Repairs

4. Tag the tool and identify the problem
5. Place tool in the repair bin

Thank you for your cooperation.
Effective Date: May 1, 2006