

Toolbox Talk Training: Basic Electrical Safety – Identifying Disconnecting Means & Breakers

In many workplaces, authorized employees and outside technicians must shut off electrical power to equipment and fixtures to prevent accidental electrocution or unexpected startup during maintenance or repairs. However, it is not always easy to determine which disconnect switch or circuit breaker controls a specific piece of equipment. If the wrong one is turned off, the results could be extremely dangerous or even fatal.

For this reason, electrical standards require that most disconnecting means for motors, appliances, and electrical systems be clearly identified. These labels must indicate what equipment or circuit they control and should be placed at the source of the circuit as well as at any related disconnects or over-current protection devices. This includes breakers, switches, and other control devices for service lines, feeders, and branch circuits that supply power to equipment such as lighting systems and receptacles.

The only exception to this requirement is when the function of the disconnect or breaker is already obvious due to its location, installation, or arrangement. Refer to the handout provided with this toolbox talk for examples of properly and improperly labeled equipment.

It is also important that all identification markings remain durable and legible. Over time, exposure to heat, moisture, sunlight, chemicals, and general wear can cause labels to fade, peel, or become covered with dirt or debris. In high-use areas, markings may also wear off completely due to repeated contact or handling.

Everyone should take time to inspect electrical disconnects, breakers, and similar devices in their work areas to ensure they are properly labeled and easy to read. If you find missing, unclear, or damaged markings, do not attempt to label the equipment yourself unless you are specifically authorized to do so. Instead, report the issue to your supervisor or safety representative so a qualified electrician can trace the circuit and ensure all devices are correctly identified.

Thank you for participating in today's toolbox talk. Please remember to sign the training certification form to receive credit for your attendance.

