

Confusing Controls: Fix the Design Trap

Todd Jerome Jenkins | v1.0 | Reviewed October 9, 2026 | Discussion + field checks

Why this matters

Two similar controls, an unreadable label or a display that hides important information can make the wrong action easier. Repeated reminders do not remove that problem. Capture the specific difficulty and involve the people authorized to improve the equipment or interface. Ask users from other shifts whether they encounter the same difficulty.

Objective: Identify one interface problem and trace it to an authorized correction, safe interim arrangement and user review.

Key hazards or failure points

Similar controls; unclear labels; poor visibility; inconsistent displays; improvised markings; a change that creates a different error.

Practical controls

- Describe the difficult task and the exact confusing feature. Include operating and maintenance users. Keep the report factual: what information is missing, what appears similar and under what normal conditions the problem occurs.
- Hold an action when identity or expected response is uncertain. Use the site's approved escalation and interim protection. Do not operate a likely control to see what happens or rely on an informal memory rule.
- Route changes through the responsible equipment, engineering and change-control roles. Evaluate effects on instructions, training and other users. Do not relabel, relocate, reprogram or modify equipment without the required review and authorization.

Verify It in the Field

At a safe standstill or using an approved image, have a user explain the intended item and action against the current instruction. Capture ambiguity without touching controls, exposing confidential information or reproducing the hazardous action.

Confirm the issue reaches an identified owner. Record the interim restriction, correction decision and review point. A submitted request does not establish a safe interface; keep required protection in place while the issue remains open.

After authorized correction, involve affected users in the approved safe review. Compare the result with documented requirements and check updated instructions. Record source, method, actual finding, checker and time; retain HOLD for unresolved required criteria.

Stop and reassess

Pause affected use for uncertain identity, unreadable essential information or an unauthorized change. Escalate recurring confusion. Resume only after required checks, communication and release; this discussion does not approve a design or operational test.

Ask the crew

1. Which feature makes the intended action unclear?
2. Who can authorize a durable correction?
3. How will users safely confirm the improvement?

Use the task plan and required specialist decisions before exposure.

Sources: DOE-HDBK-1028-2009, Vol. 1, pp. 5-4-5-6; HSE Design.

Free next step: [JHA/JSA planning & field-verification worksheet](#)

Expanded guidance and separate forms: toddjeromejenkins.com/toolbox-talks/confusing-equipment-controls-design-traps

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