

## Keeping it Short

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Abbreviations have long been part of the process of producing construction drawings and specifications, used to provide brevity and uniformity in the notation of materials. When asked recently by a client to assist in re-evaluating their office standard abbreviations, I realized that what has long been a norm in the design industry has reached a point where it is time to change how we use abbreviations; and what abbreviations we use.

The ideas presented herein have been derived over the years from sources such as discussions with other specifiers, technological advancements, and the PRM CSI MOP<sup>®</sup> (**Project Resource Manual; Construction Specifications Institute's Manual of Practice**, Fifth Edition - PRM from herein).

According to the PRM<sup>1</sup>, "Abbreviations should be used only on drawings and schedules where space is limited." It continues with recommendations to use abbreviations "limited to five or fewer letters" and avoided for words that "save only one or two characters." Lastly, it advises "When in doubt, spell it out."

These recommendations had their start in earlier days when drawings were produced by hand. Because hand drawings took longer to produce than CAD (**Computer Aided Drafting**) drawings with which we are now familiar, the abbreviation was a way to cut down on production time. If one only had to write one, two, maybe three letters by hand to identify a material instead of several letters, then much time could be saved for other more "critical" elements of the drawings.

Now most of the design industry uses CAD programs to produce the drawings instead of the pen and T-square. The use of CAD to produce drawings has led to an efficiency not seen in the days of hand drawing. Since the use of CAD is much more efficient to use than the drawing board, is the use of the abbreviation still relevant? Abbreviations will never go away in the design industry, but they can be significantly reduced in number.

Let's start with common abbreviations – PNT or PT. These commonly refer to the material PAINT. If one uses the recommendation from the PRM, the abbreviations noted above save only two or three letters. In this case it would make sense to use the entire word – PAINT. Other common abbreviations are CT or T for Tile (ceramic, porcelain, even quarry). Again, these abbreviations only save two or three letters, which is an argument for just spelling out the whole word – TILE.

Using the whole words Paint and Tile, one can still identify different types of paint and tile with letter or number designations. For example, these materials could be identified with TILE-1, PAINT-2, TILE-A, or PAINT-B. Some other materials that could easily be spelled out instead of abbreviated include STAIN, CARPET, GROUT, MAT (Floor Mats), PLASTER, and many others.

Abbreviations do not pertain just to finish materials. Take, for example, stone materials. Some individuals might use a letter designation for this; maybe S for Stone, or G for Granite. Using the logic noted earlier, it makes sense to just use STONE with a number or letter designation to indicate which stone is being specified. Even if a project incorporates two or more types of stones, using STONE-1, STONE-2, AND STONE-3 as designators, the specifications will readily identify which designation is which type of stone. Using the whole word as the designator makes it very clear to the reader what the material is. If one used just S-1, there could potentially be confusion as to what the material is supposed to be.

Other examples of materials commonly abbreviated, but perhaps should not be, are glass and brick. Typically identified with G or GL, glass material could easily be spelled out (GLASS) with no loss in production efficiency. Brick is often identified as B or BR. Just spell out BRICK and move on. No need to call out "face brick," "jumbo brick," or "structural brick." Simply identify the material as BRICK-1, BRICK-2, etc. and let the specifications clarify which brick is which.

There are many materials that certainly do justify the use of abbreviations. VWC (**V**inyl **W**all **C**overing), FRP (**F**iberglass **R**einforced **P**lastic Panels), EIFS (**E**xterior **I**nsulation **F**inish **S**ystem), and ACP (**A**coustical **C**eiling **P**anels<sup>2</sup>) come to mind. However, there are many multi-word materials that could benefit from more descriptive abbreviations. For example, GWB is often identified with Gypsum Wall Board. But a clearer abbreviation for this would be GYP.BD (GYP.BD-11; GYP.BD-25, etc.). Solid Surface material is better identified as S.SURFACE-1, SOLID.SURF-2, or something other than SS, which is commonly used to identify Stainless Steel.

There are many materials that do not have a logical way to be abbreviated. For these materials, it is essential to work with the specification writer to determine the best way to identify these materials. Metal Framing, Aluminum Storefront, Dampproofing, and Traffic Coatings are examples. However, these materials are also items that could just as easily be spelled out on the drawings and in the specifications. Unless there are two or more types of these materials, there is no need to abbreviate and number them. Again, with these types of materials, it is best to agree on material designations with the specifier.

As noted above, the PRM recommends that abbreviations be used only on drawings and in schedules. However, abbreviations in the project manual cannot be avoided; it would make the project manual unwieldy. Common uses of abbreviations in the project manual include not only the abbreviations and material designators used on the drawings, but abbreviations of reference standards. It would be unreasonable to spell out **A**merican **S**ociety of **T**esting and **M**aterials (ASTM), **A**merican **N**ational **S**tandards **I**nstitute (ANSI), **W**indow & **D**oor **M**anufacturers **A**ssociation (WDMA), any of the many other standards and code organizations. This is a case where abbreviations would still be acceptable.

Regarding the use of abbreviations on schedules “where space is limited,” one only needs to adjust the width of the abbreviations column to accommodate the material designators.

Abbreviations do not just provide for clarity in the specifications. They provide consistency throughout the set of construction documents. Many projects usually contain discrepancies between the specifications and the drawings, and between drawings. One common discrepancy is the use of different terms for the same material. For example, many drawings indicate “rigid insulation,” board insulation,” and “extruded insulation” for foundation or cavity wall insulation products. This discrepancy is often caused by a lack of uniform material designators and different people working on different drawing sheets for the same project.

The use of standard abbreviations and material designators will greatly reduce the number of these discrepancies. Work with the specifier to establish these abbreviations and designators to be used in your office. Once this list is established, the specification writer can update the masters to include these material designations. For consistency throughout your office, this list can be also be generated into a Word document for distribution to the entire design team. If each team member has the list of abbreviations and material designators, then the chance for inconsistent material labeling on the drawings will be minimized.

Finally, a little trivia regarding a common misunderstanding of acronyms. Most people incorrectly use the word acronym instead of abbreviation or initials. According to the American Heritage Dictionary – Second College Edition, acronym is defined as follows:

acronym: *n.* A word formed from the initial letters of a name, as *WAC* for *Women's Army Corps*, or by combining initial letters or parts of a series of words, as *radar* for *radio detecting and ranging*.

SCUBA (Self Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus) is an acronym; CSI is not. CSI is an abbreviation or a set of initials.

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<sup>1</sup> PRM pp 5.71

<sup>2</sup> According to ASTM E 1264, acoustical panels are designated by their use with exposed suspension systems. Acoustical tiles are used with concealed or semi-exposed suspension systems, stapling, or adhesive bonding. Another rule of thumb is to use the term tile with unit sizes of 12 inch by 12 inch or 12 inch by 24 inch. Units larger than these two sizes would be identified as panels.