9/18/2026 **FOR YOUR INFORMATION** 2026-330/8-30

2399317

To: FAA (ATM NCT TRACON, ATM PHL TRACON)

Info: FAA (AVP-1, AVP-200, AFS-260, AFS-200, Director of Air Traffic Operations WSA, Director of Air Traffic Operations ESA North), A4A, ALPA, AMFA, APA, ASAP, ATSG, CAPA, IAM, IATA, ICASS, IFALPA, NTSB, PAMA, TWU

From: Becky L. Hooey, Director
NASA Aviation Safety Reporting System

Re: ATC Phraseology Concerns

We recently received ASRS reports describing a safety concern that may involve your area of operational responsibility. We do not have sufficient details to assess either the factual accuracy or possible gravity of the report. It is our policy to relay the reported information to the appropriate authority for evaluation and any necessary follow-up. We feel you should be aware of the enclosed deidentified report.

To properly assess the usefulness of our alert message service, we would appreciate it if you would take the time to give us your feedback on the value of the information that we have provided. Please contact Dr. Becky Hooey at (408) 541-2854 or email at becky.l.hooey@nasa.gov.

Aviation Safety Reporting System
P.O. Box 189 | Moffett Field, CA | 94035-0189

ACN 2399317

DATE / TIME	
Date of Occurrence	202608
Local Time Of Day	No Local Time Of Day Stated
AIRCRAFT / EQUIPMENT X	
Make Model Name	Commercial Fixed Wing
Operating Under FAR Part	121
PERSON 1	
Function - Flight Crew	First Officer
ASRS Report Number	2399317
EVENTS	
Anomaly	ATC Issue - All Types
Anomaly	Deviation / Discrepancy - Procedural - Published Material / Policy
Detector - Person	Flight Crew
Result - General	None Reported / Taken

NARRATIVE 1

I am submitting this report to raise a concern regarding what appears to be an increasingly frequent use of abbreviated ATC altitude phraseology. I have noticed this particularly during operations in the SFO and EWR terminal areas, although I have also encountered it elsewhere frequently.

On multiple occasions, when the aircraft is level at one altitude and ATC assigns a different altitude, the instruction has been transmitted simply as “maintain [altitude],” omitting the expected “climb and maintain” or “descend and maintain” terminology.

For example, an aircraft level at 5,000 feet may receive “maintain 8,000” rather than “climb and maintain 8,000.” Similarly, during arrival operations, I have heard “maintain 10,000” when the aircraft is above that altitude and a descent is clearly required.

My concern is not with an individual controller or facility. I am reporting this because I have encountered it frequently enough that now it appears to be becoming normalized.

The new FAA JO 7110.65 publishes assignment phraseology. I have reviewed FAA guidance attempting to determine the precise legal and operational effect of receiving only “maintain [altitude].” The guidance is surprisingly complex. FAA material also appears to recognize circumstances, particularly involving SID/STAR clearances and previously issued altitude restrictions, where “maintain [altitude]” alone can authorize an unrestricted climb or descent.

If my understanding is correct, I believe this presents a significant human-factors concern.

As line pilots, we are conditioned to comply promptly with ATC altitude assignments. In practice, when ATC says “maintain 8,000” while we are level at 5,000, crews will normally read back 8,000, select the altitude and initiate the climb. The same occurs in descent. We generally do not stop to analyze whether the omission of the words “climb and” or “descend and” changes the authority conveyed by the clearance.

The problem is that “maintain 8,000” does not explicitly tell the crew whether ATC is issuing a new climb clearance or believes the aircraft has already been cleared to climb to 8,000. Those are two very different situations. If ATC and the flight crew have different understandings of the previous clearance, the standard words “climb and maintain” provide an additional opportunity to identify that discrepancy. Using only “maintain” removes that redundancy.

The potential for confusion is greater during high-workload terminal operations, where frequency congestion, rapid instructions, frequency changes, complex SID/STAR procedures and multiple simultaneous cockpit tasks are common.

I am particularly concerned that there may be a disconnect between the technical meaning contained in FAA guidance and the way this phraseology is understood and acted upon operationally by pilots. If “maintain [altitude]” alone is officially considered sufficient authorization to initiate a climb or descent from a different altitude, I believe that should be made very clear to flight crews. Conversely, if controllers are expected to use “climb and maintain” or “descend and maintain” when initiating an altitude change, recurrent omission of those words should be addressed.

I am submitting this report because I believe the increasing use of this abbreviated phraseology warrants review before it contributes to an altitude deviation or a loss of separation.

SYNOPSIS

Air carrier First Officer reported the increasingly frequent use of abbreviated ATC altitude phraseology is not only confusing and disconnected from FAA guidance but can also contribute to an altitude deviation or a loss of separation.