

## Section 508 explained

All U.S. federal agencies were mandated under Section 508 of the U.S. Rehabilitation Act to make their websites accessible by June 21, 2001.

### U.S. law and international standards: Section 508 and W3C guidelines

Accessibility policies vary from country to country, but most countries, including the European Union, have adopted standards based on the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\)](#) of the [World Wide Web Consortium \(W3C\)](#). In the United States, [Section 508 of the U.S. Rehabilitation Act](#) mandates that web content maintained by the federal government must be made accessible to people with disabilities. This law is based on [W3C Priority One checkpoints](#).

Adobe accessibility content often refers to Section 508. If you are working in another country or under different standards, please be aware that Section 508 issues are, for the most part, parallel to W3C Priority One issues. While there are subtle differences between Section 508 and W3C Priority One and different approaches to implementing them, the checkpoints for each are very similar.

### The federal mandate: Section 508 standards

Section 508 of the U.S. Rehabilitation Act prohibits federal agencies from buying, developing, maintaining, or using electronic and information technology that is inaccessible to people with disabilities. Although Section 508 was enacted more than 14 years ago, little progress was made until 1998, when Congress passed the Workforce Investment Act, amending the law to give members of the public and government employees with disabilities the right to sue agencies in federal court and file administrative complaints for noncompliance.

The deadline for full compliance of federal websites (does not apply to web pages of private industry) with Section 508 was June 21, 2001. Specifically, the law directs all federal agencies that develop, procure, maintain, or use electronic and information technology to ensure that this technology is accessible to employees and members of the public. The amended Section 508 requires that:

"...electronic and information technology allows Federal employees with disabilities to have access to and use of information and data that is comparable to the access to and use of information and data by Federal employees who are not individuals with disabilities, unless an undue burden would be imposed on the agency." [Read the full regulation](#).

Section 508 also requires that:

"...individuals with disabilities who are members of the public seeking information or services from a Federal agency have access to and use of information and data that is comparable to that provided to the public who are not individuals with disabilities, unless an undue burden would be imposed on the agency." [Read the full regulation](#).

While applying legal leverage to agencies, Section 508 also uses government buying power to pressure companies to produce accessible products. Section 508 standards will become part of the Federal Acquisition Regulation and other federal laws that govern agency buying. Simply put, companies will no longer be able to sell federal agencies any software or hardware that fails to meet accessibility standards.

For more than two years, federal agencies have been working together to realize the goal of fully accessible federal websites. To coordinate training and offer technical assistance regarding Section 508, the Federal Access Board and the General Services Administration created the Federal Information Technology Accessibility Initiative. FITAI's website is a gateway for information regarding this topic. Noted below are FITIA's interpretations of the portions of Section 508 that relate to web accessibility.

- **Web-based intranet and Internet information and applications (1194.22)**

The criteria for web-based technology and information are based on access guidelines developed by the Web Accessibility Initiative of the W3C. Many of these provisions ensure access for people with vision impairments who rely on various assistive products (such as screen readers, which translate the contents of a computer screen into automated audible output, and refreshable Braille displays) to access computer-based information. Certain conventions, such as verbal tags or graphic identification and format devices like frames, are necessary so that these devices can "read" them for the user in a sensible way.

The standards do not prohibit the use of website graphics or animation. Instead, they aim to ensure that such information is also available in an accessible format. Generally, this means the use of text labels or descriptors for graphics and certain format elements (HTML code already provides an Alt text tag for graphics that can serve as a verbal descriptor for graphics.) This section also addresses the usability of multimedia presentations, image maps, style sheets, scripting languages, applets, plug-ins, and electronic forms.

- **Video or multimedia products (1194.24)**

Multimedia products involve more than one media and include, but are not limited to, video programs, narrated slide production, and computer-generated presentations. Provisions address caption decoder circuitry (for any system with a screen larger than 13 inches) and secondary audio channels for television tuners, including tuner cards for use in computers. The standards also require captioning and audio description for certain training and informational multimedia productions developed or procured by federal agencies. Also, viewers must be able to turn captioning or video description features on and off.