

WCAG1 or Section 508?

By Wendi Fornoff

How does one choose between the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (hereafter "WCAG1") and the Web accessibility piece of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 ("Section 508")?

WCAG1 is more comprehensive than Section 508. Its guidelines are broken into 3 Priority levels, with Priority 1 checkpoints defined as "musts": basic requirements Web documents must meet, or else "one or more groups will find it impossible to access information...". Priority 2 checkpoints are "shoulds," without which access will be "difficult." Priority 3 checkpoints are "mays" which improve access to Web docs even further.

Sites that meet WCAG1 Priority 1 guidelines are said to be "A" compliant. Those meeting Priority 1 and 2 are said to be "AA" compliant. And those meeting all 3 are said to be "AAA" compliant.

There is a great little Web site by Jim Thatcher, accessibility guru, that outlines the differences between WCAG1 and Section 508. I recommend looking it over:
<http://www.jimthatcher.com/sidebyside.htm>

WCAG1 Priority 1 checkpoints and Section 508 are similar or the same in most respects. To summarize the main differences briefly:

WCAG1 Priority 1 requires provision of an auditory description of the important information of the visual track of a multimedia presentation. Section 508 does not.

WCAG1 Priority 1 requires that changes in the natural language of text be identified. Essentially this refers to using markup such as lang="en" in the html code. Section 508 does not require this because few assistive technologies support this language change markup.

WCAG1 Priority 1 requires that any text alternatives to dynamic content must be kept up-to-date. So if the dynamic content changes, text equivalents must also be updated. Section 508 does not require this.

WCAG1 Priority 1 requires that pages have to be usable when scripts and applets are turned off. Section 508 is not so restrictive: it assumes that scripts will be turned on and requires that all scripts and applets be accessible.

WCAG1 Priority 1 requires, "Use the clearest and simplest language appropriate for a site's content." This is not required by section 508, deemed to difficult to enforce.

Section 508 states, "When a timed response is required, the user shall be alerted and given sufficient time to indicate more time is required." This is not in WCAG1. One place this can come into play is when users are automatically "timed out" or logged out due to inactivity or some other factor. If Section 508 is the standard used, there must be a mechanism for warning users "you will be logged out of this program in 4 minutes if no further action is taken. Select the "yes" button if you wish to remain logged in." Or something similar.

Practically speaking, choosing between WCAG1 and Section 508 could be based on how difficult it would be to meet the differing requirements of each. For example, if your site relies heavily on scripts (assuming these scripts test accessible), and turning them off would wreak havoc with the site, you may want to choose Section 508 standards over WCAG1 guidelines.

On the other hand, if timed responses are heavily used on your site, you may want to choose WCAG1, which does not require warnings that one is about to be timed out.

Ethically speaking, who are your users? Does timing out without warning interfere with the accessibility of your site?

Politically speaking, do you provide this service to a lot of United States government or government-related (or U.S. government-funded) institutions? If so, adopting Section 508 may actually be required of you.

A final note: it is possible to meet both WCAG1 and Section 508 requirements if one is willing and able to follow the strictest interpretations of all the points.