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The Government Agency Guide to Section 508

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act sets accessibility requirements for government agencies. The law has similarities to other accessibility laws, but its differences are important for government professionals to understand. In particular, Section 508 is a critical piece of legislation related to **online access**. As virtual spaces become increasingly relevant to everyday life, inadequate online accommodations for people with disabilities are generating frustrations and resulting in more litigation.¹

As an essential partner for government agencies' accessibility efforts, Automatic Sync Technologies (AST) has insight into the solutions that help the public sector meet public needs. Adhering to Section 508 is a necessary part of those initiatives.

1. [Digital Accessibility](#)

Introduction to Section 508

The [Rehabilitation Act](#) is an early accessibility law that legislators enacted in 1973. The Act outlaws disability discrimination in federal programs, federally funded programs, federal workplaces and involving federal contractors.

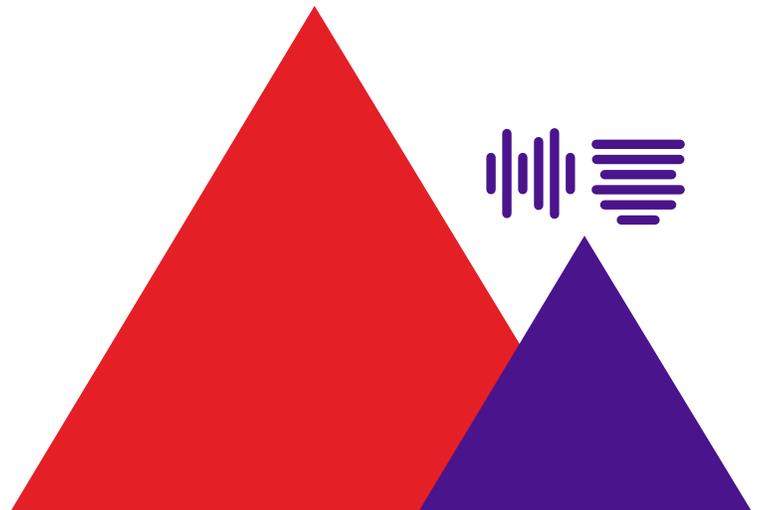
Although the Rehabilitation Act predates the more well-known Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) by nearly two decades, it addresses online accessibility issues that the newer law does not.

The Rehabilitation Act includes web accessibility requirements because Congress amended it in 1998 and again in 2017.²

Who must adhere to Section 508?

Section 508 only covers federal agencies. A similar provision, Section 504, also applies to organizations that accept federal funding, including many universities and non-profits.

Under Section 508, federal agencies must offer accessible tools, training, forms and more to their employees and potential employees. Federal agencies must also offer accommodations for members of the public who are accessing information or resources from federal public programs.



WCAG: The world's source for online accessibility standards



The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) aim to make online content accessible to people with disabilities. Section 508 shares that objective. Unlike Section 508, WCAG isn't a law.³ Instead, the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) created the WCAG to share accessibility best practices and guidance. Over the years, governments worldwide have referenced WCAG or codified it into their national law. Section 508 references WCAG as well.

Although the current requirements align with WCAG 2.0, the Biden Administration is pushing for the federal government to reach the updated WCAG 2.1 standards. The White House is leading by example by meeting the more recent standards on its own website.⁴

Government site accessibility audits

Although Section 508 creates legal requirements for government agencies, recent audits found that [most government sites](#) include some accessibility flaws.

Here are three of the agencies with the most accessible sites and three that received the lowest scores:⁵

Leading

- ▶ White House
- ▶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- ▶ Department for Homeland Security

Lagging

- ▶ National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
- ▶ Marine Corps
- ▶ Energy Information Administration

Ways to promote online accessibility

In today's tech-centric world, the applicability of Section 508 is broad. Below are some issues that government agencies should consider when working to create accessible online spaces.

Keyboard navigation

Many online forms include buttons or links that users can click on to fill in data or request personal information. Unfortunately, many government websites fail to make these features accessible for people who are blind or have low vision. As a result, it can be extremely difficult or impossible for these employees or members of the public to navigate government sites. People who are blind should not have to forfeit their autonomy to access government websites, work for federal agencies or take part in federal programs.

Alt Text

Alt text describes images so that people who are blind or have vision loss can access the visual elements of a website. Sometimes the images might be there for aesthetic purposes, while other times, a chart or graph could contain critical information. In either case, all users should have access to the context that visual aspects of websites and forms provide.

Captions and transcriptions

Government agencies are increasingly using video content to connect with the public. Whenever an agency posts or shares video or audio files, it should provide captions, transcriptions or both. People who are Deaf and hard of hearing rely on these accommodations when viewing videos or accessing audio recordings.

Screen reader access

Screen readers are a tool that people who are blind use to navigate online. These devices either read the text on a page aloud or convert it to braille. However, many online assets, including common file types like PDFs, aren't automatically accessible to screen readers. Government agencies need to be making their assets screen reader-friendly to accommodate employees and the public.

Colors and contrast

Color blindness comes in various forms, and people with this visual condition may not be able to read text that lacks the appropriate level of contrast.

The WCAG 2.0 requires a contrast rating of 4.5:1, and there are tools that can gauge contrast to ensure that sites aren't creating a barrier for people with color blindness.⁶

Time limits

Forms often include time limits as a security precaution, especially when a site requests personal or sensitive information. However, people with various disabilities may not be able to complete forms within the designated time. If a time limit is necessary, the site should offer the user opportunities for extensions.

Audio description

Audio description is a solution that allows people who are blind or have vision loss to benefit from visual cues and information in videos. Standard audio description involves a speaker who provides descriptions during breaks in the original audio. AST also offers extended audio description that provides additional context when the user pauses the video file.

Flickering screen images

Flickering on-screen images can trigger seizures in individuals with certain medical conditions. Guidelines require flicker frequencies of greater than 2 Hz and lower than 55 Hz.⁷



AST can serve as an essential partner to you

AST has been partnering with government agencies for over 18 years. As a [GSA scheduled accessibility provider](#), AST makes it easy to offer accurate captions, transcriptions and audio descriptions. [Contact us](#) to learn how our specialized government support teams can help your agency improve its accessibility and inclusivity practices.

6. [Contrast Checker](#), 7. [Questions on Section 508 Compliance](#)