U.S. Department of Transportation
Federal Highway Administration

Accessibility Validators
FHWA-HAD-21-012

An FHWA program office may create or receive a document and need to determine whether that document complies with the applicable Section 508 Standards before the it is made available to the public, or is made available internally within FHWA as non-public information required to be accessible. To determine Section 508 compliance, the program office may need to "validate" the document against the applicable standards. Testing electronic content for accessibility can be done manually, automatically, or by a combination of manual and automatic checks[i]. The tools that automatically check for accessibility are called validators, a variety of which are available in the marketplace[ii]. A validator can be a function in a software program or a separate, stand-alone piece of software. An accessibility validator assesses a document's conformance against an accessibility standard. The federal government follows the [Section 508 Standards issued by the U.S. Access Board](#).

Most validators can find less than 40[iii] percent of Section 508 non-compliance issues. For example, most validator software can identify figures with missing alt text; however, they cannot determine if the alt text is an equivalent to the figure. As a result, manual review should be used in conjunction with automatic validators to test a document's compliance with the Section 508 Standards. Many of these manual checks are discussed in the [Making ICT Accessible](#) section of the FHWA's Section 508 website.

When using an automatic validator to test a document for Section 508 compliance, it is important to understand the compliance elements the validator is capable of identifying and those it cannot. In addition, a where a validator indicates a noncompliant element, it is important to check whether the indication could be a false positive. Manual review is critical to ensure accurate results. An automatic validator will not replace human judgment.

Liken a validator to a spell checker[iv]. A spell checker can identify obvious errors and may flag a name or technical term as incorrect. It may not catch all errors, e.g., "four this recipe use won cup of flower" instead of "for this recipe use one cup of flour." No one would automatically accept the spell checker's suggestion. The author still needs to review the flagged word and accept or reject the suggestion based on their knowledge.

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[i] https://www.section508.gov/test/testing-overview
[ii] https://www.w3.org/WAI/ER/tools/
[iii] https://accessibility.18f.gov/tools/
[iv] https://medium.com/openconcept-stories/would-you-publish-without-spellchecking-9166ce8b00de