

Guidelines, Standards & Laws: What's the Difference?

Mike Thomas · Founder & Director | 3 min read · May 2026

Three words get used interchangeably in the outdoor education sector — and they shouldn't. Confusing them doesn't just create grey areas; it creates gaps in practice that put participants, providers, and programmes at risk.

Here's what each one actually means, and why the distinction matters.

Guidelines

Guidelines are recommendations made by professional organisations or subject-matter experts. They provide advice on best practices, safety considerations, and important recommendations for activities in outdoor settings.

Crucially, guidelines are typically **voluntary**. They exist to help organisations develop policies and procedures that align with industry expectations — not to enforce compliance.

They aren't law — but ignoring them without good reason would raise serious questions about an organisation's professional judgement.

Standards

Standards are similar to guidelines, but more formal and specific. They are typically created by industry associations or recognised bodies to establish **minimum requirements** for certain activities or practices — covering areas such as risk management, staff training, equipment use, and emergency response.

Compliance with standards is usually optional, but meeting them carries weight. Achieving a standard often results in a recognised certification or badge that signals to clients and partners that your organisation operates at a defined level of quality.

Think of standards as the industry's agreed definition of *good enough* — and a useful floor from which to build.

Laws

Laws are an entirely different category. These are **binding rules enforced by government**, created to protect the safety and wellbeing of participants and the environment.

Non-compliance isn't a professional shortcoming — it's a legal liability, with consequences that can fall on both the organisation and the individual instructor.

There is no grey area here. Guidelines and standards can be interpreted and contextualised. Laws cannot.

Why It Matters

Understanding the difference isn't just a theoretical exercise. In practice, it shapes how you make decisions on the ground:

- When a guideline conflicts with operational convenience, you have a choice — but you should make it consciously and be able to justify it
- When a standard exists, meeting it is the baseline; exceeding it is the goal
- When a law applies, compliance is not optional regardless of circumstance

Staying current with all three is part of what it means to operate as a professional in this sector. It protects participants, builds trust with clients, and contributes to the credibility of the wider outdoor education community.

Knowing the rules isn't enough. Knowing which rules are which is where professional judgement begins.

Mike Thomas

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