



# WebAssembly Spec Addendum: Legacy Exception Handling

WebAssembly Community Group  
Andreas Rossberg (editor)

Dec 23, 2024

## Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Structure</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Validation</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Execution</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Binary Format</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Text Format</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Index of Instructions</b>	<b>8</b>

---

## 1 Introduction

This document describes an extension of the official WebAssembly standard developed by its [W3C Community Group](https://www.w3.org/community/webassembly/)<sup>1</sup> with additional instructions for exception handling. These instructions were never standardized and are deprecated, but they may still be available in some engines, especially in web browsers.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.w3.org/community/webassembly/>

## 2 Structure

### 2.1 Instructions

#### Control Instructions

The set of recognised instructions is extended with the following:

$$\begin{array}{lcl} \textit{instr} & ::= & \dots \\ & | & \text{try } \textit{blocktype } \textit{instr}^* \text{ (catch } \textit{tagidx } \textit{instr}^*)^* \text{ (catch\_all } \textit{instr}^*)^? \text{ end} \\ & | & \text{try } \textit{blocktype } \textit{instr}^* \text{ delegate } \textit{labelidx} \\ & | & \text{rethrow } \textit{labelidx} \end{array}$$

The instructions `try` and `rethrow`, are concerned with exceptions. The `try` instruction installs an exception handler, and may either handle exceptions in the case of `catch` and `catch_all`, or rethrow them in an outer block in the case of `delegate`.

The `rethrow` instruction is only allowed inside a `catch` or `catch_all` clause and allows rethrowing the caught exception by lexically referring to the corresponding `try`.

When `try-delegate` handles an exception, it also behaves similar to a forward jump, effectively rethrowing the caught exception right before the matching `end`.

## 3 Validation

### 3.1 Conventions

#### Contexts

The context is enriched with an additional flag on label types:

$$\begin{array}{lcl} \textit{labeltype} & ::= & \text{catch}^? \textit{resulttype} \\ C & ::= & \{\dots, \text{labels } \textit{labeltype}^*, \dots\} \end{array}$$

Existing typing rules are adjusted as follows:

- All rules that extend the context with new labels use an absent `catch` flag.
- All rules that inspect the context for a label ignore the presence of a `catch` flag.

---

**Note:** This flag is used to distinguish labels bound by `catch` clauses, which can be targeted by `rethrow`.

---

### 3.2 Instructions

#### Control Instructions

`try blocktype instr1* (catch x instr2*)* (catch_all instr3*)? end`

- The block type must be valid as some function type  $[t_1^*] \rightarrow [t_2^*]$ .
- Let  $C'$  be the same **context** as  $C$ , but with the **label type**  $[t_2^*]$  prepended to the labels vector.
- Under context  $C'$ , the instruction sequence  $\textit{instr}_1^*$  must be valid with type  $[t_1^*] \rightarrow [t_2^*]$ .
- Let  $C''$  be the same **context** as  $C$ , but with the **label type** `catch`  $[t_2^*]$  prepended to the labels vector.
- For every  $x_i$  and  $\textit{instr}_{2_i}^*$  in  $(\text{catch } x \textit{ instr}_2^*)^*$ :

- The tag  $C.\text{tags}[x_i]$  must be defined in the context  $C$ .
- Let  $[t_{3i}^*] \rightarrow [t_{4i}^*]$  be the tag type  $C.\text{tags}[x_i]$ .
- The result type  $[t_{4i}^*]$  must be empty.
- Under context  $C''$ , the instruction sequence  $\text{instr}_{2i}^*$  must be valid with type  $[t_{3i}^*] \rightarrow [t_2^*]$ .
- If  $(\text{catch\_all } \text{instr}_3^*)^?$  is not empty, then:
  - Under context  $C'''$ , the instruction sequence  $\text{instr}_3^*$  must be valid with type  $[] \rightarrow [t_2^*]$ .
- Then the compound instruction is valid with type  $[t_1^*] \rightarrow [t_2^*]$ .

$$\frac{C \vdash \text{blocktype} : [t_1^*] \rightarrow [t_2^*] \quad C, \text{labels}[t_2^*] \vdash \text{instr}_1^* : [t_1^*] \rightarrow [t_2^*] \quad (C.\text{tags}[x] = [t^*] \rightarrow [])^* \quad C, \text{labels}(\text{catch } [t_2^*]) \vdash \text{instr}_2^* : [t^*] \rightarrow [t_2^*]^* \quad (C, \text{labels}(\text{catch } [t_2^*]) \vdash \text{instr}_3^* : [] \rightarrow [t_2^*])^?}{C \vdash \text{try blocktype } \text{instr}_1^* (\text{catch } x \text{ instr}_2^*)^* (\text{catch\_all } \text{instr}_3^*)^? \text{ end} : [t_1^*] \rightarrow [t_2^*]}$$

---

**Note:** The notation  $C, \text{labels}(\text{catch } [t^*])$  inserts the new label type at index 0, shifting all others.

---

*try blocktype instr\* delegate l*

- The label  $C.\text{labels}[l]$  must be defined in the context.
- The block type must be valid as some function type  $[t_1^*] \rightarrow [t_2^*]$ .
- Let  $C'$  be the same **context** as  $C$ , but with the result type  $[t_2^*]$  prepended to the labels vector.
- Under context  $C'$ , the instruction sequence  $\text{instr}^*$  must be valid with type  $[t_1^*] \rightarrow [t_2^*]$ .
- Then the compound instruction is valid with type  $[t_1^*] \rightarrow [t_2^*]$ .

$$\frac{C \vdash \text{blocktype} : [t_1^*] \rightarrow [t_2^*] \quad C, \text{labels}[t_2^*] \vdash \text{instr}^* : [t_1^*] \rightarrow [t_2^*] \quad C.\text{labels}[l] = [t_2^*]}{C \vdash \text{try blocktype } \text{instr}^* \text{ delegate } l : [t_1^*] \rightarrow [t_2^*]}$$

---

**Note:** The label index space in the **context**  $C$  contains the most recent label first, so that  $C.\text{labels}[l]$  performs a relative lookup as expected.

---

*rethrow l*

- The label  $C.\text{labels}[l]$  must be defined in the context.
- Let  $(\text{catch}^? [t^*])$  be the **label type**  $C.\text{labels}[l]$ .
- The catch must be present in the **label type**  $C.\text{labels}[l]$ .
- Then the instruction is valid with type  $[t_1^*] \rightarrow [t_2^*]$ , for any sequences of value types  $t_1^*$  and  $t_2^*$ .

$$\frac{C.\text{labels}[l] = \text{catch } [t^*]}{C \vdash \text{rethrow } l : [t_1^*] \rightarrow [t_2^*]}$$

---

**Note:** The rethrow instruction is stack-polymorphic.

---

## 4 Execution

### 4.1 Runtime Structure

#### Stack

#### Exception Handlers

Legacy exception handlers are installed by try instructions. Instead of branch labels, their catch clauses have instruction blocks associated with them. Furthermore, a delegate handler is associated with a label index to implicitly rethrow to:

$$\begin{array}{lcl} \text{catch} & ::= & \dots \\ & | & \text{catch } \text{tagidx } \text{instr}^* \\ & | & \text{catch\_all } \text{tagidx } \text{instr}^* \\ & | & \text{delegate } \text{labelidx} \end{array}$$

#### Administrative Instructions

Administrative instructions are extended with the caught instruction that models exceptions caught by legacy exception handlers.

$$\begin{array}{lcl} \text{instr} & ::= & \dots \\ & | & \text{caught}_n \{ \text{exnaddr} \} \text{instr}^* \text{end} \end{array}$$

#### Block Contexts

Block contexts are extended to include caught instructions:

$$\begin{array}{lcl} B^k & ::= & \dots \\ & | & \text{caught}_n \{ \text{exnaddr} \} B^k \text{end} \end{array}$$

#### Throw Contexts

Throw contexts are also extended to include caught instructions:

$$\begin{array}{lcl} T & ::= & \dots \\ & | & \text{caught}_n \{ \text{exnaddr} \} T \text{end} \end{array}$$

### 4.2 Instructions

#### Control Instructions

$\text{try } \text{blocktype } \text{instr}_1^* (\text{catch } x \text{ instr}_2^*)^* (\text{catch\_all } \text{instr}_3^*)^? \text{end}$

1. Assert: due to validation,  $\text{expand}_F(\text{blocktype})$  is defined.
2. Let  $[t_1^m] \rightarrow [t_2^n]$  be the function type  $\text{expand}_F(\text{blocktype})$ .
3. Let  $L$  be the label whose arity is  $n$  and whose continuation is the end of the try instruction.
4. Assert: due to [validation](#), there are at least  $m$  values on the top of the stack.
5. Pop the values  $\text{val}^m$  from the stack.
6. Let  $F$  be the current frame.

7. For each catch clause (catch  $x_i$   $instr_{2i}^*$ ) do:
  - a. Assert: due to **validation**,  $F.module.tagaddrs[x_i]$  exists.
  - b. Let  $a_i$  be the tag address  $F.module.tagaddrs[x_i]$ .
  - c. Let  $catch_i$  be the catch clause (catch  $a_i$   $instr_{2i}^*$ ).
8. If there is a catch-all clause (catch\_all  $instr_3^*$ ), then:
  - a. Let  $catch'^{?}$  be the handler (catch\_all  $instr_3^*$ ).
9. Else:
  - a. Let  $catch'^{?}$  be empty.
10. Let  $catch^*$  be the concatenation of  $catch_i$  and  $catch'^{?}$ .
11. Enter the block  $val^m instr_1^*$  with label  $L$  and exception handler  $handler_n\{catch^*\}^*$ .

$$\begin{aligned}
 F; val^m (\text{try } bt \text{ } instr_1^* (\text{catch } x \text{ } instr_2^*)^* (\text{catch\_all } instr_3^*)^? \text{ end} \hookrightarrow \\
 F; label_n\{\epsilon\} (\text{handler}_n\{(\text{catch } a_x \text{ } instr_2^*)^* (\text{catch\_all } instr_3^*)^?\} val^m instr_1^* \text{ end}) \text{ end} \\
 (\text{if } expand_F(bt) = [t_1^m] \rightarrow [t_2^n] \wedge (F.module.tagaddrs[x] = a_x)^*)
 \end{aligned}$$

try *blocktype*  $instr^*$  delegate  $l$

1. Assert: due to **validation**,  $expand_F(blocktype)$  is defined.
2. Let  $[t_1^m] \rightarrow [t_2^n]$  be the function type  $expand_F(blocktype)$ .
3. Let  $L$  be the label whose arity is  $n$  and whose continuation is the end of the try instruction.
4. Let  $H$  be the **exception handler**  $l$ , targeting the  $l$ -th surrounding block.
5. Assert: due to **validation**, there are at least  $m$  values on the top of the stack.
6. Pop the values  $val^m$  from the stack.
7. Enter the block  $val^m instr^*$  with label  $L$  and exception handler  $HANDLER_n\{DELEGATE\sim l\}$ .

$$\begin{aligned}
 F; val^m (\text{try } bt \text{ } instr^* \text{ delegate } l) \hookrightarrow F; label_n\{\epsilon\} (\text{handler}_n\{\text{delegate } l\} val^m instr^* \text{ end}) \text{ end} \\
 (\text{if } expand_F(bt) = [t_1^m] \rightarrow [t_2^n])
 \end{aligned}$$

throw\_ref

1. Let  $F$  be the current frame.
2. Assert: due to **validation**, a reference is on the top of the stack.
3. Pop the reference  $ref$  from the stack.
4. If  $ref$  is `ref.null ht`, then:
  - a. Trap.
5. Assert: due to **validation**,  $ref$  is an exception reference.
6. Let `ref.exn ea` be  $ref$ .
7. Assert: due to **validation**,  $S.exns[ea]$  exists.
8. Let  $exn$  be the exception instance  $S.exns[ea]$ .
9. Let  $a$  be the tag address  $exn.tag$ .
10. While the stack is not empty and the top of the stack is not an **exception handler**, do:
  - a. Pop the top element from the stack.

11. Assert: the stack is now either empty, or there is an exception handler on the top of the stack.
12. If the stack is empty, then:
  - a. Return the exception (ref.exn *a*) as a result.
13. Assert: there is an **exception handler** on the top of the stack.
14. Pop the exception handler handler<sub>*n*</sub>{*catch*<sup>\*</sup>} from the stack.
15. If *catch*<sup>\*</sup> is empty, then:
  - a. Push the exception reference ref.exn *ea* back to the stack.
  - b. Execute the instruction throw\_ref again.
16. Else:
  - a. Let *catch*<sub>1</sub> be the first catch clause in *catch*<sup>\*</sup> and *catch*<sup>'\*</sup> the remaining clauses.
  - b. If *catch*<sub>1</sub> is of the form catch *x l* and the exception address *a* equals *F.module.tagaddrs*[*x*], then:
    - i. Push the values *exn.fields* to the stack.
    - ii. Execute the instruction br *l*.
  - c. Else if *catch*<sub>1</sub> is of the form catch\_ref *x l* and the exception address *a* equals *F.module.tagaddrs*[*x*], then:
    - i. Push the values *exn.fields* to the stack.
    - ii. Push the exception reference ref.exn *ea* to the stack.
    - iii. Execute the instruction br *l*.
  - d. Else if *catch*<sub>1</sub> is of the form catch\_all *l*, then:
    - i. Execute the instruction br *l*.
  - e. Else if *catch*<sub>1</sub> is of the form catch\_all\_ref *l*, then:
    - i. Push the exception reference ref.exn *ea* to the stack.
    - ii. Execute the instruction br *l*.
  - f. Else if *catch*<sub>1</sub> is of the form catch *x instr*<sup>\*</sup> and the exception address *a* equals *F.module.tagaddrs*[*x*], then:
    - i. Push the caught exception caught<sub>*n*</sub>{*ea*} to the stack.
    - ii. Push the values *exn.fields* to the stack.
    - iii. **Enter** the catch block *instr*<sup>\*</sup>.
  - g. Else if *catch*<sub>1</sub> is of the form catch\_all *instr*<sup>\*</sup>, then:
    - i. Push the caught exception caught<sub>*n*</sub>{*ea*} to the stack.
    - ii. **Enter** the catch block *instr*<sup>\*</sup>.
  - h. Else if *catch*<sub>1</sub> is of the form delegate *l*, then:
    - i. Assert: due to validation, the stack contains at least *l* labels.
    - ii. Repeat *l* times:
      - While the top of the stack is not a label, do:
        - Pop the top element from the stack.
    - iii. Assert: due to validation, the top of the stack now is a label.
    - iv. Pop the label from the stack.
    - v. Push the exception reference ref.exn *ea* back to the stack.
    - vi. Execute the instruction throw\_ref again.

- i. Else:

1. Push the modified handler  $\text{handler}_n\{\text{catch}'^*\}$  back to the stack.
2. Push the exception reference  $\text{ref.exn } ea$  back to the stack.
3. Execute the instruction `throw_ref` again.

$$\begin{array}{ll}
\text{handler}_n\{(\text{catch } x \text{ instr}^*) \text{ catch}^*\} T[(\text{ref.exn } a) \text{ throw\_ref}] \text{ end} & \hookrightarrow \text{caught}_n\{a\} \text{ exn.fields instr}^* \text{ end} \\
& \quad (\text{if } \text{exn} = S.\text{exns}[a] \\
& \quad \wedge \text{exn.tag} = F.\text{module.tagaddrs}[x]) \\
\text{handler}_n\{(\text{catch\_all instr}^*) \text{ catch}^*\} T[(\text{ref.exn } a) \text{ throw\_ref}] \text{ end} & \hookrightarrow \text{caught}_n\{a\} \text{ instr}^* \text{ end} \\
B^l[\text{handler}_n\{(\text{delegate } l) \text{ catch}^*\} T[(\text{ref.exn } a) \text{ throw\_ref}] \text{ end}] & \hookrightarrow (\text{ref.exn } a) \text{ throw\_ref}
\end{array}$$
rethrow  $l$ 

1. Assert: due to **validation**, the stack contains at least  $l + 1$  labels.
2. Let  $L$  be the  $l$ -th label appearing on the stack, starting from the top and counting from zero.
3. Assert: due to **validation**,  $L$  is a catch label, i.e., a label of the form (catch  $[t^*]$ ), which is a label followed by a caught exception in an active catch clause.
4. Let  $a$  be the caught exception address.
5. Push the value `ref.exn`  $a$  onto the stack.
6. Execute the instruction `throw_ref`.

$$\text{caught}_n\{a\} B^l[\text{rethrow } l] \text{ end} \quad \hookrightarrow \quad \text{caught}_n\{a\} B^l[(\text{ref.exn } a) \text{ throw\_ref}] \text{ end}$$

## Entering a catch block

1. Jump to the start of the instruction sequence  $instr^*$ .

## Exiting a catch block

When the end of a catch block is reached without a jump, thrown exception, or trap, then the following steps are performed.

1. Let  $val^m$  be the values on the top of the stack.
2. Pop the values  $val^m$  from the stack.
3. Assert: due to validation, a caught exception is now on the top of the stack.
4. Pop the caught exception from the stack.
5. Push  $val^m$  back to the stack.
6. Jump to the position after the end of the administrative instruction associated with the caught exception.

$$\text{caught}_n\{a\} \text{ val}^m \text{ end} \hookrightarrow \text{val}^m$$

**Note:** A caught exception can only be rethrown from the scope of the administrative instruction associated with it, i.e., from the scope of the catch or catch\_all block of a legacy try instruction. Upon exit from that block, the caught exception is discarded.

## 5 Binary Format

### 5.1 Instructions

#### Control Instructions

```

instr ::= ...
| 0x06 bt:blocktype (in1:instr)*
  (0x07 x:tagidx (in2:instr)*)*
  (0x19 (in3:instr)*)? 0x0B      ⇒ try bt in1* (catch x in2*)* (catch_all in3*)? end
| 0x06 bt:blocktype (in:instr)*
  0x18 l:labelidx                ⇒ try bt in* delegate l
| 0x09 l:labelidx                ⇒ rethrow l

```

## 6 Text Format

### 6.1 Instructions

#### Control Instructions

The label identifier on a structured control instruction may optionally be repeated after the corresponding end, else, catch, catch\_all, and delegate pseudo instructions, to indicate the matching delimiters.

```

blockinstrI ::= ...
| 'try' I':labelI bt:blocktype (in1:instrI')*
  ('catch' id1? x:tagidxI (in2:instrI')*)*
  ('catch_all' id1? (in3:instrI')*)*
  'end' id2?
  ⇒ try bt in1* (catch x in2*)* (catch_all in3*)? end
  (if id1? = ε ∨ id1? = label, id2? = ε ∨ id2? = label)
| 'try' I':labelI bt:blocktype (in1:instrI')*
  'delegate' l:labelidxI l:labelidxI
  ⇒ try bt in1* delegate l (if id? = ε ∨ id? = label)
plaininstrI ::= ...
| 'rethrow' l:labelidxI ⇒ rethrow l

```

## 7 Index of Instructions

Instruction	Binary Opcode	Type	Validation	Execution
try <i>bt</i>	0x06	$[t_1^*] \rightarrow [t_2^*]$	validation, validation	execution, execution
catch <i>x</i>	0x07		validation	execution
rethrow <i>n</i>	0x09	$[t_1^*] \rightarrow [t_2^*]$	validation	execution
delegate <i>l</i>	0x18		validation	execution
catch_all	0x19		validation	execution