

## Why Is Choosing the Right Definition So Difficult?

Defining terms has become a difficult task for groups developing guidance documents. Multiple definitions in various documents make it difficult to maintain a list of consistent terms. Some standards, like ISO/IEC 17025:2005, provide references as “the relevant terms and definitions given in ISO/IEC 17000 (*Conformity Assessment Vocabulary and General Principles*) and VIM (ISO/IEC Guide 99, *International Vocabulary of Metrology—Basic and General Concepts and Associated Terms*),” while ISO/IEC 17011:2004 (*Conformity Assessment—General Requirements for Accreditation Bodies Accrediting Conformity Assessment Bodies*) includes actual definitions. It is important to define terms using the current internationally accepted definition because confusion occurs when definitions are updated in one document, but not in another.

### ALACC Definitions

The Analytical Laboratory Accreditation Criteria Committee (ALACC) provided definitions in the 2004 edition of *AOAC INTERNATIONAL Guidelines for Laboratories Performing Microbiological and Chemical Analyses of Food and Pharmaceuticals* (ALACC Guide). When the 2006 revision of the guide was published, ALACC chose

to post the definitions on the AOAC Web site rather than include them in the guide to ensure that the most currently internationally harmonized definitions would be specified.

In doing so, ALACC had to determine which definitions to use. To place a structure on the selection process, ALACC used a hierarchy of references, with VIM being the premiere source. The hierarchy is reflected in the bibliography section found at the end of “Terms and Definitions” on the AOAC Web site at [www.aoac.org](http://www.aoac.org) (click on “Accreditation”) or directly at <http://www.aoac.org/accreditation/terms.htm>. Definitions were created only for those terms not defined in the references.

Maintaining the list on the Web site has been challenging. ALACC is considering changing this approach to listing the references in which users can find the definitions, rather than the actual definitions. Some guidance as to the hierarchy of definitions could be provided. Thus, the list would be much easier to maintain and still give laboratories common sources for definitions.

### The Revised VIM

The second edition of VIM (*International Vocabulary of Basic and General Terms in Metrology*) was published in 1993. The need to cover measurements in chemistry and laboratory medicine for

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the first time, as well as to incorporate concepts such as those that relate to metrological traceability, measurement uncertainty, and nominal properties, led to the third edition in 2008. Its title was changed to *International Vocabulary of Metrology—Basic and General Concepts and Associated Terms*, to emphasize the primary role of concepts in developing a vocabulary.

Development of the third edition of the VIM has raised some fundamental questions about different current philosophies and descriptions of measurement in regards to metrology, traceability, uncertainty, and validation. Discussions about the interpretation of the new VIM for analytical chemists continue. Full text of the VIM is available for free at [www.bipm.org/en/publications/guides/vim.html](http://www.bipm.org/en/publications/guides/vim.html).

### ISO 17000

ISO/IEC 17000:2004 specifies general terms and definitions relating to conformity assessment, including the accreditation of conformity assessment bodies, and to the use of conformity assessment to facilitate trade. A description of the functional approach to conformity assessment is included as a

further aid to understanding among users of conformity assessment, conformity assessment bodies, and their accreditation bodies, in both voluntary and regulatory environments. ISO/IEC 17000:2004 does not set out to provide a vocabulary for all of the concepts that may need to be used in describing particular conformity assessment activities. Terms and definitions are given only where the concept defined would not be understandable from the general language of the term or where an existing standard definition is not applicable.

### Conclusion

Definitions continue to generate many hours of discussion. Achieving the consistency required is not an easy task. The third edition of the VIM is a helpful resource, but even after years of revision, interpretation is still required. Ensuring that the most currently internationally harmonized definitions have been specified—when the definitions are not available in the VIM or ISO/IEC 17000—is a challenge.

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