Engineer

Definition of done

shared quality conditions for completed product work

What it is

A Definition of Done sets the common quality conditions work must meet before the team regards it as part of a completed product increment. “It runs on my laptop” identifies one observation. A Definition of Done gives everyone a way to tell when the same work is integrated, verified at the appropriate level and ready for another person to use or maintain. Its purpose is to make the state of the product visible.

The Scrum Guide calls the Definition of Done a formal description of the Increment when it meets the product’s required quality measures. Work that falls short cannot be released or presented as part of the Increment at the Sprint Review. It returns to the Product Backlog for future consideration. If the organization sets a standard, Scrum teams follow it as a minimum. Teams working together on one product use a common Definition of Done. Two development groups can still use different tools to collect the evidence.

Acceptance criteria name what a particular change must do. A change to an export, for instance, can require that archived accounts appear only when requested. A Definition of Done can require that changes with persistent data are integrated, verified on representative existing records and accompanied by updated operating instructions when those instructions are affected. The export criteria describe its particular behavior. The completion standard governs the quality of work across the product. Both claims need evidence when the export changes.

Use the concept in a decision

Put “What is a definition of done?” to work in a real decision. We can help relate the concept to the system you are building or buying. Somebody accountable for scope, dates and the awkward conversations, so a project has one owner instead of five opinions.

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Test the assumptions behind the term

Use the explanation and linked work to frame questions for your project. We can examine the assumptions with you before a tool is chosen. Estimated 4,000 hours saved, team from 2 to 18 — 4,000 hours saved, and a team grown from 2 to 18

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Why it matters

A shared finish line reduces uncertainty in planning and handover. Suppose a background job has passed unit tests but no one has run the migration against older records. The author may view the item as effectively complete, while the operator sees an unresolved release risk. A completion standard states what needs to happen before another team plans around the change. It also gives people a straightforward way to say which evidence is missing.

Select conditions based on the failure modes the team repeatedly needs to manage. A library might require tests of changed public behavior, compatibility evidence for affected versions and a clear upgrade note for a breaking change. A service that processes personal information may need a review of how each changed data path handles that information. An interface team might have shared keyboard requirements and a check of the changed text in its supported editions. The conditions describe a state that can be inspected. The command, artifact or review that demonstrates each state can be recorded separately.

The Definition of Done also makes comparisons meaningful. If one team calls an item complete at code review and another waits until validation on representative data, counting both items under the same status obscures the amount of work left. A common standard does not make two features equally hard. It lets the people using the status understand what still needs to happen before relying on the result.

What it looks like in practice

Consider a fictional reporting product. It loads a supplier’s file overnight and keeps the previously verified report available when an import fails. The next change accepts a new optional field. Its acceptance criteria cover the new field and what readers see when the field is missing. The shared Definition of Done for import changes might include the following conditions.

- The change is integrated into the product version that will be evaluated as a whole. The acceptance examples and affected existing behavior are verified with representative input.

- A retry and a partially completed import are exercised in a safe test environment. The previous verified report stays available when the new import cannot finish, and a retry does not duplicate data.
- Any changed operator procedure is updated where the operator will look for it. The release record identifies the test inputs, outcomes and any limitations that matter to the team.

Use a real candidate build in this example, not a sequence of screenshots of unconnected parts. Run the job once with an existing file, once with the new field and once with a controlled failure. Record the report identifier before and after the failure. Run the retry and compare totals and row identities. Ask another operator to find the revised instructions and identify the available report. That quick check can catch a useful procedure placed where no one will find it. If a test cannot observe the affected state, mark the evidence incomplete and fix the verification.

Our service levels page describes documentation and a handover covering code, access, credentials and current status. These are examples of results someone can inspect. A team could explicitly require a handover note that another maintainer can use, then ask that person to show where they would find a relevant procedure or open issue. This illustrates one possible completion condition. The page describes our published commitments, independent of any team’s choice of process.

Where it goes wrong

Problems start when the wording cannot settle a decision. “Test thoroughly” offers little help in discussing the stalled import. “Verify recovery once” leaves room to stop before the first report becomes readable again. State which relevant behavior has to be observed and what would show that it still works. For work to which a check genuinely does not apply, call out the reason and preserve the checks that do apply. Changing the completion status should not require inventing an exception from scratch.

Another trap is turning the Definition of Done into a long task inventory. A shared condition states what must be true. The route to that state depends on the change. One team checks recoverability with a fixture containing valid old reports, while another must rehearse a restore from an actual backup. The

evidence differs. The condition about recoverability remains understandable to both groups. Keep instructions near the tools, and update the common conditions when experience shows that an important state is still unclear.

Finally, a successful test suite can establish only its assertions. A test might verify that a report exists and still fail to notice that the report is yesterday's. Ask what each signal proves and whether the evidence came from the same candidate that would advance. If an item cannot meet the standard this time, record the missing evidence and the next required work. People can then distinguish useful progress from an increment ready to rely on.

Further reading

- Scrum Guide on the Definition of Done
- Scrum.org's guidance on the Definition of Done
- UK Government Service Manual on user stories and acceptance criteria



Glossary

Choose for your actual constraints

Bring the decision, the people affected and the options already considered. We can make the tradeoffs explicit and leave a documented recommendation.

See what it costs Get in touch →

Make the terminology practical

Ask how “What is a definition of done?” applies to your organisation. A concrete example from your current system is enough to start the discussion.

Explore our services

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Contact card

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