



Standard Practice for Probability Sampling of Materials¹

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1. Scope

1.1 This practice is primarily a statement of principles for the guidance of ASTM technical committees and others in the preparation of a sampling plan for a specific material.

2. Referenced Documents

2.1 *ASTM Standards:*

E122 Practice for Calculating Sample Size to Estimate, With Specified Precision, the Average for a Characteristic of a Lot or Process

E141 Practice for Acceptance of Evidence Based on the Results of Probability Sampling

E456 Terminology Relating to Quality and Statistics

E1402 Guide for Sampling Design

3. Terminology

3.1 *Definitions:*

3.1.1 For general terminology, refer to Terminology **E456** and Guide **E1402**.

3.1.2 *judgment sampling, n*—a procedure whereby enumerators select a few items of the population, based on visual, positional, or other cues that are believed to be related to the variable of interest, so that the selected items appear to match the population.

3.1.3 *probability sampling plan, n*—a sampling plan which makes use of the theory of probability to combine a suitable procedure for selecting sample items with an appropriate procedure for summarizing the test results so that inferences may be drawn and risks calculated from the test results by the theory of probability.

3.1.3.1 *Discussion*—For any given set of conditions, there will usually be several possible plans, all valid, but differing in speed, simplicity, and cost. Further discussion is provided in Practice **E141**.

4. Significance and Use

4.1 The purpose of the sample may be to estimate properties of a larger population, such as a lot, pile or shipment, the

percentage of some constituent, the fraction of the items that fail to meet (or meet) a specified requirement, the average characteristic or quality of an item, the total weight of the shipment, or the probable maximum or minimum content of, say, some chemical.

4.2 The purpose may be the rational disposition of a lot or shipment without the intermediate step of the formation of an estimate.

4.3 The purpose may be to provide aid toward rational action concerning the production process that generated the lot, pile or shipment.

4.4 Whatever the purpose of the sample, adhering to the principles of probability sampling will allow the uncertainties, such as bias and variance of estimates or the risks of the rational disposition or action, to be calculated objectively and validly from the theory of combinatorial probabilities. This assumes, of course, that the sampling operations themselves were carried out properly, as well. For example, that any random numbers required were generated properly, the units to be sampled from were correctly identified, located, and drawn, and the measurements were made with measurement error at a level not exceeding the required purposes.

4.5 Determination of bias and variance and of risks can be calculated when the selection was only partially determined by random numbers and a frame, but they then require suppositions and assumptions which may be more or less mistaken or require additional data which may introduce experimental error.

5. Characteristics of a Probability Sampling Plan

5.1 A probability sampling plan will possess certain characteristics of importance, as follows:

5.1.1 It will possess an objective procedure for the selection of the sample, with the use of random numbers.

5.1.2 It will include a definite formula for the estimate, if there is to be an estimate; also for the standard error of any estimate. If the sample is used for decision without the intermediate step of an estimate, the decision process will follow definite rules. In acceptance sampling, for example, these are often based on predetermined risks of taking the undesired action when the true levels of the characteristic concerned have predetermined values; for example, acceptable and rejectable quality levels may be specified.

¹ This practice is under the jurisdiction of ASTM Committee **E11** on Quality and Statistics and is the direct responsibility of Subcommittee **E11.10** on Sampling / Statistics.

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5.2 The minimum requirements that must be met in order to obtain the characteristics mentioned in 5.1 appear in Section 6, which also indicates the minimum requirements for the description of a satisfactory sampling plan.

6. Minimum Standards for a Probability Sampling Plan

6.1 For a sampling plan to have the requirements mentioned in Section 5 it is necessary:

6.1.1 That every part of the pile, lot, or shipment have a nonzero chance of selection,

6.1.2 That these probabilities of selection be known, at least for the parts actually selected, and

6.1.3 That, either in measurement or in computation, each item be weighted in inverse proportion to its probability of selection. This latter criterion should not be departed from; for example, equal weights should not be used when the probabilities of selection are unequal, unless calculations show that biases introduced thereby will not impair the usefulness of the results.

6.2 To meet the requirements of 6.1.1 and 6.1.2, the sampling plan must describe the sampling units and how they are to be selected. It must specify that the selection shall be objectively at random. To achieve random selection, use random sampling numbers, since mechanical randomizing devices usually lead to biases and are not standard tools. The requirements of 6.1.3 may be met, in nonobvious ways, by various special methods of computation.

6.3 In meeting the requirements of 6.1.3, carefully state the purposes served by sampling, lest a relatively unimportant aim overbalance a more important one. For example, estimates of the overall average quality of a stock of items may be less important than the rational disposition of subgroups of the stock of inferior quality. In this case the method of using subsamples of equal size drawn from each subgroup is more efficient, although at some expense to the efficiency of the estimate of the overall average quality. Similarly, in acceptance inspection, samples of equal size drawn from lots that vary widely in size serve primarily to provide consistent judgment with respect to each lot, and secondarily to provide an estimate of the process average. Where the estimate of the overall average of a number of lots is the important objective, samples proportional to the sizes of the subgroups will usually yield an efficient estimate. For other possible criteria, sizes intermediate between equal and proportional sampling from the subgroups will be appropriate.

6.4 It is not easy to describe in a few words the many sorts of plans that will meet the requirements of 6.1.2 (see Guide E1402). Nor is it easy to describe how these plans differ from those that do not satisfy the requirement. Many standard techniques, such as pure random unstratified sampling, random stratified sampling, and sampling with probabilities in proportion to size, will satisfy the requirement; likewise every plan will do so where the sample is made up of separate identifiable subsamples that were selected independently and by the use of random numbers.

6.5 A probability sampling plan for any particular material must be workable, and if several alternative plans are possible,

each of which will provide the desired level of precision, the plan adopted should be the one that involves the lowest cost.

6.6 A probability sampling plan must describe the sampling units and how they are to be selected (with or without stratification, equal probabilities, etc.). The sampling plan must also describe:

6.6.1 The formula for calculating an estimate (average concentration, minimum concentration, range, total weight, etc.),

6.6.2 A formula or procedure by which to calculate the standard error of any estimate from the results of the sample itself, and

6.6.3 Sources of possible bias in the sampling procedure or in the estimating formulas, together with data pertaining to the possible magnitudes of the biases and their effects on the uses of the data.

6.7 The development of a good sampling plan will usually take place in steps, such as:

6.7.1 A statement of the problem for which an estimate is necessary,

6.7.2 Collection of information about relevant properties of the material to be sampled (averages, components of variance, etc.),

6.7.3 Consideration of a number of possible types of sampling plans, with comparisons of overall costs, precisions, and difficulties,

6.7.4 An evaluation of the possible plans, in terms of cost of sampling and testing, delay, supervisory time, inconvenience,

6.7.5 Selection of a plan from among the various possible plans, and

6.7.6 Reconsideration of all the preceding steps.

7. Some Problems Encountered in the Probability Sampling of Bulk Materials

7.1 There are two major difficulties that may be encountered in planning and carrying out the probability sampling of a lot of bulk material:

7.1.1 Lack of information on the pertinent statistical characteristics of the lot of material, and

7.1.2 The physical difficulties or the costs of drawing into the sample the specific ultimate sample units to be specified in the sampling plan.

7.2 There may be little information on the nature of the distribution of the desired property in any given lot or in the universe of such lots, or on the magnitude and stability of the components of variance involved. This circumstance is to be expected if the manufacturing process has not had the benefit of statistical methods to eliminate assignable causes of variability. It will then be difficult to specify in advance the exact size of sample for a prescribed degree of precision. For further discussion of sample size related to specified precision, see Practice E122.

7.3 As experience is acquired, however, the sample can be increased or decreased to meet the requirements more exactly and more economically. In any case, a valid estimate can be made of the precision provided by any probability sample that was selected, based on an examination of the sample itself. In

this connection, random fluctuations that arise from the measurement process must be considered and appropriate allowance made, if necessary.

7.4 Because of the physical nature, condition, or location of the material at the time of intended sampling, selection of the units specified in a proposed sampling plan may not be feasible, physically or economically. No matter how sound a given sampling plan is in a statistical sense, it is not suitable if the cost involved is prohibitive or if the work required is so strenuous that it leads to short cuts or subterfuge by those responsible for the sampling.

8. Planning for Sampling

8.1 Different problems or difficulties are encountered with various kinds of materials, and they require specific solutions for individual cases. Some general features of solutions to common difficulties are as follows:

8.1.1 Lack of specific information on the pertinent statistical characteristics of the class of material to be sampled may sometimes be overcome to a satisfactory degree, without excessive cost or delay, by investigation and utilization of existing, apparently unrelated data and general information.

8.1.2 The cost of a sampling plan is not confined to the direct monetary costs of sampling and testing. Plans that secure greater simplicity, convenience, or speed at the expense of higher direct costs sometimes have lower total costs and may then be appropriately adopted.

8.1.3 Random error can sometimes be reduced by proper stratification. Where physical difficulties are encountered in stratified sampling, the statistician requires the cooperation of the engineer for possible solutions; in any case, the knowledge and cooperation of the engineer will be helpful in choosing the nature and extent of stratification.

8.1.4 Economic reduction in the variance of the ultimate sampling unit is sometimes possible, as by a change in size or shape, or by a choice of units that cut across natural strata.

8.1.5 Inability to obtain economically the desired sampling units from a lot of material in place is frequently a major stumbling block in the actual sampling of such material. For

such units to become accessible, the material must be handled or moved. Since movement (transportation) is usually necessary at some stage in the utilization of the material, consideration should be given to the possibility of drawing the sample at this time.

8.1.6 Certain forms of transportation of some classes of bulk materials sometimes effect a mixing of the elementary particles of the material, and sometimes a segregation. The sampling plan may often be modified to take advantage of this mixing or segregation. Sometimes a modification in the transporting system will emphasize such a change, so that a modified sampling plan will permit still more economical sampling.

8.1.7 Selection by use of random numbers need not be more onerous or costly than hit-or-miss methods of sample selection, provided the sampling plan is thoughtfully formulated. For example, where the actual use of random number tables is difficult, random numbers may be selected in advance and provided in envelopes for use as needed. In the selection of material from boxes, templates with random cutouts can be used. Units difficult to move in warehouses may be divided into rows or stacks or other appropriate subgroups; the subgroups, and the units within subgroups, that are to be drawn into the sample can then be determined by the use of random numbers. A general rule is that where the use of tables of random numbers appears cumbersome or costly, there can usually be found a reformulation of the sampling plan that will minimize the cost without sacrificing the probabilistic nature of the desired estimate.

8.1.8 The sampling devices that are used in any given place can affect enormously the accessibility of the ultimate sampling units specified by the sampling plan, and therefore the possibility of attaining randomness, and proportionality within strata. The expenditure of considerable effort is frequently warranted in the development of superior devices. As statistical and engineering factors are mutually interacting throughout the design of an efficient probability sampling plan, close cooperation is necessary between specialists in the two fields. It is possible, of course, that adequate specialized knowledge of both fields may be combined in one person.

APPENDIX

(Nonmandatory Information)

X1. SELECTION OF SAMPLE

X1.1 Calculation of the margin of error or the risk in the use of the results of samples is possible only if the selection of the items for test is made at random. This is true whether the procedure is stratified or unstratified.

X1.2 For a method of sampling to be random it must satisfy statistical tests, the most common of which are the “run tests” and “control charts,” and certain other special statistical tests. Randomness is obtained by positive action; a random selection is not merely a haphazard selection, nor one declared to be without bias. Selection by the proper use of a standard table of

random numbers is acceptable as random. It is possible and feasible to adapt the use of random numbers to the laboratory, to the field, and to the factory.

X1.3 Mechanical randomizing devices are sometimes used, but no device is acceptable as random in the absence of thorough tests. The difficulties in attaining randomness are greater than generally known. Thus, special randomizing devices intended for the production of random numbers have often failed to give satisfactory results until adjusted and retested with perseverance. However, mechanical selection is

still usually preferable to a judgment-selection.

X1.4 Some other methods of sampling should be mentioned that do not meet the requirements of randomness. For example, one may declare that a lot of item is “thoroughly mixed,” and hence that any portion, even the top layer, would give every item an equal chance of selection. In the absence of elaborate steps to mix the product, followed by careful tests for randomness, such assumptions are risky, as they often lead to wrong results.

X1.5 Again, another common practice is to take a systematic sample consisting of every k th item. Even if the first item is selected at random, this type of sample, although random, is actually a sample of only one of the k possible sampling units that can be formed with an interval of k . Hence, in the absence of knowledge concerning the order of the material, such a sample does not permit a valid calculation of the standard error. Moreover, it does not yield a comparison of the variances between and within groups of units, statistical information that might indicate the direction of change toward a more efficient sampling plan.

X1.6 However, the use of 10 independent random starts between 1 and 10 k , together with every 10 k th unit thereafter, to form 10 independent systematic subsamples does permit a valid calculation of the standard error, together with some information on the variances between and within groups of units.

X1.7 The foregoing paragraphs do not mean that nonrandom and judgment sampling are of no value. A preliminary judgment sample, for example, may provide useful information for the efficient design of a probability sampling plan. Again, if the material being inspected is known to vary but little, a “grab” sample will be helpful in assessing the level of the characteristic concerned.

X1.8 It also should be noted that judgment plays an important role in the *design* of a probability sampling plan. For example, it may be used to assess costs, to estimate spreads and likely values of variances; also definitions of strata. In the actual probability sample, however, judgment is not used in the selection of the individual items of the sample, nor in making the inferences, nor in calculating the risks of decisions based wholly on the sample of succession of samples.

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