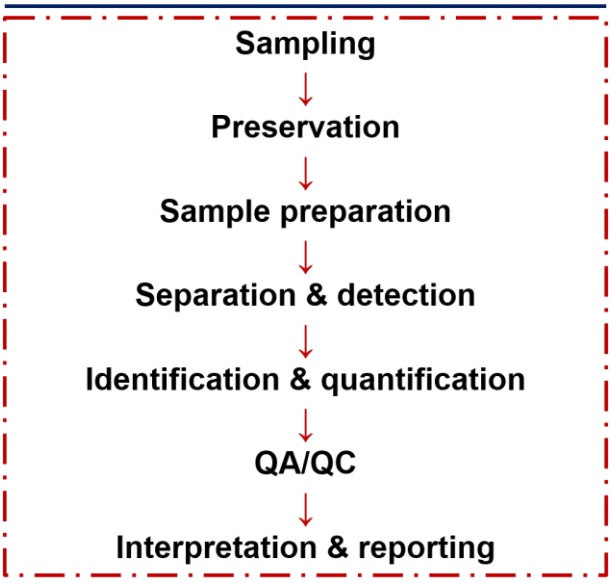


Environmental Analysis Workflow: Key Steps, Importance, Challenges, and Common Mistakes

Ahmad Aqel Ifseisi
Professor of Analytical Chemistry
College of Science, Department of Chemistry
King Saud University
P.O. Box 2455 Riyadh 11451 Saudi Arabia
Building: 05, Office: 2A149, Lab: AA53
Tel. 014674198, Fax: 014675992
Web site: https://faculty.ksu.edu.sa/aifseisi
E-mail: aifseisi@ksu.edu.sa
ahmad3qel@gmail.com

The Environmental Analytical Workflow



Environmental Sampling

Environmental sampling is the process of collecting a representative portion of an environmental matrix, such as air, water, soil, sediment, or biological material, for subsequent laboratory analysis.
The quality of analytical results can never be better than the quality of the sample. So, even a highly accurate analytical instrument cannot correct for a sample that was collected incorrectly, was not representative, or changed before analysis.

Why is environmental sampling important?

Environmental samples are usually heterogeneous and variable in space and time. The concentration measured in a small sample may not represent the actual environmental condition of the whole site.
The sampling process therefore determines whether the final analytical result answers the original environmental question.
A mistake during sampling can propagate through the entire analytical process.

What does representative sample mean?

A representative sample is a sample whose composition adequately reflects the environmental material or condition being investigated within the defined sampling area and time.
For example:
If the objective is to determine the average lead concentration in agricultural soil, collecting soil from only one location near a visible waste pile would not provide a representative estimate of the entire field.
The sampling design must consider:
-Where to collect
-When to collect
-How many samples to collect
-Sample depth or height
-Sampling frequency
-Sample volume or mass
-Environmental conditions
-Possible contamination sources
-Spatial and temporal variability

Common sampling mistakes

-Sampling only where contamination is expected
This can produce selection bias.
Finding a contaminated hotspot is useful, but it cannot automatically represent the entire environmental area.

-Taking only one sample
A single sample provides very limited information about spatial or temporal variability.
Where appropriate, use:
-Replicate samples
-Multiple locations
-Different depths
-Different sampling times

-Ignoring the background/reference site
Without an appropriate reference or background measurement, it can be difficult to determine whether a measured concentration is unusual.

-Using inappropriate containers
Examples:
VOCs in poorly sealed containers → volatilization
Trace metals in contaminated containers → false elevation
Organic compounds in unsuitable plastic → adsorption or contamination
Some compounds are sensitive and could be degraded in light of at high temperature.

-Delaying preservation
Some environmental samples continue to change after collection.
For example:
Microorganisms + nutrients + organic matter
may continue reacting after sampling.
Therefore:
Collection time ≠ analysis time
The sample must be preserved appropriately.

-Not recording field conditions
For air pollution, failing to record Wind, Temperature, Humidity, Sampling time, and Traffic, can severely limit interpretation.
For soil and water, location, depth, weather, flow conditions, and land use may be equally important.

-Cross-contamination
Imagine sampling:
Highly contaminated site → clean site
using the same uncleaned sampling equipment.
Contaminants can be transferred from the first location to the second.
This may produce a false positive.

Why is environmental sampling critical?
Environmental samples are:
-Spatially heterogeneous
-Temporally variable
-Chemically unstable
-Vulnerable to contamination
-Often difficult to collect representatively
Therefore:
Good environmental analysis begins with good sampling.

Best sampling methods for environmental analysis
The best sampling method depends on the environmental matrix, target analyte, sampling objective, expected concentration, and analytical method. There is no single sampling technique suitable for every environmental investigation.
The most important principle is to collect a representative, uncontaminated, and properly preserved sample that is suitable for the intended analysis.

Overview of environmental sampling methods

Environmental matrix	Main sampling methods	Typical applications
Air	Active sampling, passive sampling, filter-based sampling, canister sampling, sorbent-tube sampling	$PM_{2.5}$, PM_{10}, gases, VOCs, and industrial emissions
Water	Grab sampling, composite sampling, depth-integrated sampling, automatic sampling	Metals, nutrients, organic pollutants, wastewater, and water-quality parameters
Soil	Random sampling, systematic/grid sampling, stratified sampling, targeted sampling, composite sampling	Metals, pesticides, petroleum hydrocarbons, PAHs, and soil quality

The choice should begin with the question: What do we want to measure, and what environmental condition should the sample represent?

Sample Preservation and Handling

Sample preservation and handling is the set of procedures used to maintain the chemical, physical, and biological characteristics of an environmental sample from the moment it is collected until it is analyzed in the laboratory.
After collection, a sample may undergo chemical reactions, biological activity, volatilization, adsorption, precipitation, or contamination. These changes can alter the measured concentration of the target analyte and lead to results that do not accurately represent the original environmental conditions.
The main objective is to ensure that the sample arriving at the laboratory remains as representative as possible of the environment at the time of collection.

Why are preservation and handling important?

-Maintain chemical stability
Prevent or minimize degradation, oxidation, reduction, hydrolysis, and other chemical transformations.
-Prevent analyte loss
Reduce the loss of volatile compounds through evaporation, leakage, or inappropriate storage.
-Avoid contamination
Prevent contamination from containers, sampling tools, preservatives, dust, hands, and other samples.
-Control biological activity
Limit microbial growth and biological transformations that may change nutrients, organic pollutants, and other analytes.
-Support reliable results
Help ensure that measured concentrations reflect the original sample and that results are defensible for environmental monitoring and regulatory assessment.

Main challenges in sample preservation and handling

EPA guidance emphasizes that holding times and preservation requirements depend on the matrix, target constituents, and method. Some analytes may require analysis sooner than the maximum stated holding time.

Challenge	Why it matters	Example
Analyte instability	Compounds can degrade or transform	Pesticide degradation in stored water
Volatilization	Analytes escape from the sample	Benzene loss from a vial with headspace
Microbial activity	Microorganisms consume or transform compounds	Changes in nitrogen species
Container contamination	Materials can introduce target analytes	Trace metals leaching from an unsuitable container
Adsorption to container walls	Some analytes bind to surfaces	Loss of selected hydrophobic organic compounds
Inappropriate preservation	A preservative may interfere with the target analyte	Acid preservation of a compound unstable at low pH
Temperature excursions	Warm conditions may accelerate reactions	Samples left in a hot vehicle
Holding-time exceedance	Sample integrity may no longer be assured	Delayed analysis of unstable samples
Cross-contamination	One sample contaminates another	Reusing a sampling tool without proper cleaning
Incomplete records	Sample history cannot be verified	Missing collection time or preservation details

Main methods of sample preservation

Preservation must be selected according to the target analyte, sample matrix, analytical method, and applicable standard method. There is no single preservation procedure suitable for every environmental sample.

Preservation method	Purpose	Example
Cooling, often near 4°C	Slows many chemical and biological processes	Water samples for nutrients or organic pollutants, when specified by the method
Chemical preservation	Stabilizes specific analytes or controls chemical changes	Acidification of a water sample for many total-metal analyses
Protection from light	Reduces photochemical degradation	Certain pesticides and light-sensitive organic compounds Use umber (brown containers)
Airtight, low-headspace collection	Minimizes volatilization and exchange with air	VOCs such as benzene and toluene in water
Appropriate container selection	Minimizes adsorption, leaching, and contamination	Glass containers for many organic compounds; Validated plastic containers for specified metal analyses
Filtration or separation	Defines or isolates the fraction being measured	Filtration of water for dissolved metals, following the prescribed method
Controlled transport and storage	Maintains sample integrity until analysis	Insulated cooler, secure containers, temperature monitoring, and timely delivery

Environmental Sample Preparation

Sample preparation is the set of physical and chemical operations performed on an environmental sample before instrumental analysis to make the target analytes suitable for reliable measurement.

Environmental samples, such as air filters, river water, wastewater, soil, and sediment, often contain complex mixtures of target pollutants, natural organic matter, suspended particles, salts, and other substances that interfere with analysis. Sample preparation converts the collected

sample into a form that is compatible with the selected analytical technique, such as HPLC, GC-MS, ICP-MS, or UV-Vis spectroscopy.

Sample extraction is one important part of sample preparation. It transfers target analytes from the original sample matrix into a suitable phase, solvent, or collection medium for subsequent analysis. For example, extracting pesticides from soil into an organic solvent allows the resulting extract to be analyzed using GC-MS or LC-MS/MS.

The following terms are related but not identical:
Sample preparation: The overall process, which may include homogenization, filtration, drying, digestion, extraction, cleanup, concentration, dilution, and derivatization.
Sample extraction: The step used to transfer the target analytes from the sample matrix into a suitable phase.
Sample cleanup: The removal of unwanted matrix components that could interfere with measurement.
Preconcentration: Increasing the analyte concentration relative to the original sample volume to improve the ability to detect trace pollutants.

Why are sample preparation and extraction important?

-Remove interfering substances
Reduce matrix components that may overlap with analyte signals, suppress ionization, or contaminate analytical instruments.
-Transfer analytes into a suitable phase
Extract pollutants from water, soil, sediment, or other matrices into a form compatible with the analytical method.
-Improve detection of trace pollutants
Concentrate low-level contaminants so that they can be measured more effectively by sensitive instruments.
-Improve analytical accuracy and reliability
Reduce matrix effects and improve the reproducibility of extraction and measurement when the procedure is properly designed and validated.
-Protect analytical instruments
Reduce the introduction of particles, nonvolatile residues, salts, and other undesirable materials into instrument components.

Main sample preparation and extraction techniques

Different environmental matrices require different preparation strategies.

Technique	Principle	Typical environmental application
Filtration	Separates suspended particles from liquid	Dissolved metals or dissolved organic compounds in water, when defined by the method
Liquid-liquid extraction (LLE)	Transfers analytes between immiscible liquid phases	Organic pollutants in water
Solid-phase extraction (SPE)	Retains analytes on a sorbent, followed by washing and elution	Pharmaceuticals, pesticides, and other organic contaminants in water
Solid-phase microextraction (SPME)	Extracts analytes onto a coated fiber or other sorbent with little or no extraction solvent	VOCs and selected organic pollutants in water, air, and other matrices
Soxhlet extraction	Repeatedly washes a solid sample with heated solvent	PAHs, pesticides, and other semivolatile organic compounds in soil or sediment

Ultrasonic-assisted extraction	Uses ultrasound to enhance contact between sample and solvent	Organic pollutants in soil, sediment, and particulate samples
Microwave-assisted extraction	Uses microwave heating to accelerate extraction	Selected organic pollutants from solid matrices
Acid digestion	Uses acids and controlled heating to release elements from a solid matrix	Metals in soil, sediment, and particulate matter
Pressurized fluid extraction	Uses elevated temperature and pressure to extract analytes	Organic pollutants in soil and sediment
QuEChERS	Uses extraction and dispersive cleanup, often with acetonitrile and salts	Pesticide residues in soil and other suitable matrices
Centrifugation	Separates particles from liquid by centrifugal force	Suspended solids and sample extracts
Evaporation or controlled concentration	Reduces solvent volume	Increasing analyte concentration before chromatographic analysis

No technique is universally superior. Selection depends on analyte chemistry, matrix complexity, expected concentration, required detection limit, available instrumentation, safety, cost, and method performance.

Main challenges in sample preparation and extraction

Challenge	Why it occurs	Potential consequence
Incomplete extraction	Analytes remain bound to soil, sediment, or organic matter	Underestimated concentration
Matrix effects	Co-extracted substances interfere with detection or ionization	Signal suppression, enhancement, or inaccurate quantification
Contamination	Impure solvents, dirty glassware, sorbents, or tools introduce analytes	Falsely elevated results
Analyte degradation	Heat, pH, light, oxygen, or chemical reactions alter compounds	Incorrect results or loss of target compounds
Poor selectivity	Extraction also transfers many unwanted substances	Dirty extracts, interference, and instrument contamination
Analyte loss during concentration	Volatile or thermally sensitive compounds are lost during evaporation	Falsely low concentrations
Sorbent breakthrough in SPE	The sorbent does not retain all analytes under the selected conditions	Reduced recovery
Inappropriate solvent	Analytes are insufficiently soluble or incompatible with the method	Low recovery or poor chromatographic performance
Excessive dilution	Extract concentration becomes too low	Analytes may fall below the detection or quantification limit
Variable sample mass or volume	The initial test portion is not accurately measured	Errors in final concentration calculations
Cross-contamination	Equipment or containers transfer analytes between samples	False positives or biased concentrations
Poor reproducibility	Extraction time, mixing, temperature, or other parameters vary	High variability between replicates

Common sample preparation mistakes

-Choosing a technique before defining the analytes

First identify the target compounds, matrix, required detection limit, and intended measurement.

-Using an unsuitable solvent or sorbent

Check analyte solubility, chemical properties, sorbent retention, and compatibility with the analytical system.

-Assuming a clear extract is a clean extract

Many dissolved matrix components are invisible but can still interfere with measurement.
-Overheating or evaporating the extract to dryness
Some analytes may degrade, volatilize, or become difficult to redissolve.
-Filtering without considering the measurement objective
Filtering may remove particle-associated analytes when the target is the whole sample.
-Ignoring extraction recovery
A strong instrumental signal does not prove that the original sample was extracted quantitatively.
-Skipping blanks, spikes, or replicates
Without these checks, contamination, recovery problems, and poor precision may go unnoticed.
-Reporting results without accounting for preparation
The final result must account for sample mass or volume, dilution, concentration steps, and any relevant recovery correction.

Analytical Methods (separation, detection, and measurement)

Selecting an analytical method is the process of choosing the most suitable analytical technique and procedure for identifying, measuring, or characterizing target substances in an environmental sample.
Environmental samples, including air, water, soil, sediment, and wastewater, contain complex mixtures of chemical substances at widely varying concentrations. The appropriate method depends on what must be measured, the sample matrix, the expected concentration, the required detection limit, and the intended use of the results.
For example, measuring trace lead in drinking water requires a different approach from measuring nitrate in river water, identifying unknown organic pollutants in wastewater, or determining $PM_{2.5}$ concentrations in urban air.

Why is this step important?

-Achieve the analytical objective
Choose a technique that can identify the target analyte or quantify its concentration at the required level.
-Obtain adequate sensitivity and selectivity
Detect low concentrations while distinguishing target analytes from interfering substances in the sample matrix.
-Ensure reliable and defensible results
Use methods with appropriate accuracy, precision, calibration, quality control, and validation.
-Meet environmental monitoring requirements
Select methods compatible with the relevant regulatory criteria, approved procedures, and reporting requirements.
-Balance performance and resources
Consider analysis time, cost, sample throughput, solvent consumption, operator expertise, and instrument availability.

How to select an appropriate analytical method

The selection process should begin with the environmental question, not with the instrument available in the laboratory.
-Define the objective
Is the purpose screening, identification, quantification, compliance monitoring, or source characterization?
-Identify target analytes

Determine the compounds, elements, particles, or properties to measure.
-Characterize the matrix
Consider water, wastewater, soil, sediment, air, or another sample type and its potential interferences.
-Establish performance needs
Define expected concentrations, required detection limits, selectivity, accuracy, and precision.
-Choose the analytical technique
Select a suitable spectroscopic, chromatographic, mass spectrometric, electrochemical, or other method.
-Check method suitability
Review approved methods, sample preparation, calibration, matrix effects, QC, and validation.
-Evaluate feasibility
Check equipment, cost, time, safety, expertise, and environmental impact.
-Validate and apply
Confirm performance for the intended matrix and use, then analyze samples with appropriate QC.

Major analytical techniques used in environmental analysis

The following techniques are widely used to determine environmental pollutants and characterize environmental samples. Each has strengths, limitations, and appropriate applications.

1. Molecular spectroscopy

UV-Vis, FTIR, Raman
Principle: Measures the interaction of electromagnetic radiation with molecules.
Environmental applications:
-Nitrate or phosphate using suitable colorimetric methods.
-Dye concentrations in industrial wastewater.
-Functional-group identification in selected environmental materials using FTIR.
Main limitation: Spectral overlap and matrix interferences can reduce selectivity. Some analytes require a chemical reaction to produce a measurable signal.

2. Atomic spectroscopy and elemental analysis

AAS, ICP-OES, ICP-MS, XRF
Principle: Measures element-specific radiation or mass-to-charge signals to determine elemental composition.
Environmental applications:
-Lead, cadmium, arsenic, and nickel in water or soil.
-Multi-element analysis of industrial emissions collected on filters.
-Screening metals in soil using XRF.
Main limitation: Digestion or other preparation may be required. Spectral interferences, matrix effects, contamination, and differences in detection limits must be considered. XRF results can be strongly affected by the sample matrix and calibration.

3. Liquid chromatography

HPLC, UHPLC, ion chromatography (IC)
Principle: Separates mixture components according to their interactions with stationary and mobile phases.
Environmental applications:
-Pesticides, pharmaceuticals, and selected emerging contaminants.

-Anions such as nitrate, nitrite, sulfate, and chloride using IC.
-Organic pollutants using HPLC with UV, fluorescence, or mass-spectrometric detection.
Main limitation: Separation depends on the column and mobile-phase conditions. Complex matrices may require extraction and cleanup; detection with UV alone may not provide sufficient selectivity for some trace contaminants.

4. Gas chromatography
GC-FID, GC-TCD, GC-MS, GC-MS/MS
Principle: Separates compounds that can be vaporized under the method conditions, with detection based on the selected detector.
Environmental applications:
-BTEX and other volatile organic compounds.
-Selected pesticides, solvents, and PAHs.
-Petroleum hydrocarbons in contaminated soil and water.
Main limitation: Many compounds require suitable volatility and thermal stability. Some analytes require derivatization, and sample preparation must minimize losses of volatile compounds.

5. Mass spectrometry
GC-MS, GC-MS/MS, LC/MS, LC-MS/MS, high-resolution MS, ICP-MS
Principle: Measures ions according to their mass-to-charge ratios; tandem and high-resolution instruments can provide additional selectivity and structural information.
Environmental applications:
-Trace pharmaceuticals, pesticides, PFAS, and other emerging contaminants.
-Identification of unknown or suspected organic pollutants.
-Trace elemental analysis using ICP-MS.
Main limitation: High instrument cost, matrix-dependent ion suppression or enhancement, contamination risks, and demanding calibration/QC requirements. A mass spectrum alone does not always establish a unique compound identity.

6. Electrochemical methods
pH, ion-selective electrodes, potentiometry, voltammetry
Principle: Relates an electrical potential or current to the chemical properties or concentration of a target species.
Environmental applications:
-Field measurement of pH and conductivity.
-Measurement of selected ions using ion-selective electrodes.
-Determination of selected metals using voltammetric methods.
Main limitation: Sensor selectivity, calibration, electrode condition, temperature, and matrix effects can affect results.

7. Bulk and general water-quality methods
TOC, COD, BOD, turbidity, gravimetry, titration
Principle: Measures an aggregate property or a defined operational parameter rather than necessarily identifying each individual compound.
Environmental applications:
-TOC for organic carbon in water.
-COD for chemically oxidizable material.
-BOD for oxygen consumed under specified biological test conditions.
-Gravimetric suspended solids and titrimetric alkalinity or hardness.

Main limitation: These measurements often indicate overall water quality or pollutant loading, but do not independently identify every contributing chemical.

8. Microscopy and particle characterization
Optical microscopy, SEM-EDS, TEM, selected particle-size methods
Principle: Examines particle morphology, size, surface features, and, with suitable detectors, elemental composition.
Environmental applications:
-Characterization of airborne particles and industrial dust.
-Examination of soil minerals and corrosion products.
-Investigation of selected microplastic particles when combined with appropriate polymer-identification methods.
Main limitation: Morphology alone cannot reliably identify many substances. SEM-EDS provides elemental information, not definitive molecular identification of a polymer.

Major challenges in analytical method selection

Challenge	Why it matters	Example
Very low analyte concentrations	The method may not be sufficiently sensitive	Trace PFAS in drinking water
Complex sample matrices	Interferences may bias the signal	Organic matter in wastewater affecting LC-MS/MS
Similar chemical properties	Compounds may be difficult to separate	Closely related pesticide residues
Inadequate selectivity	Other substances may produce a similar response	UV-Vis measurement in colored wastewater
Incompatible sample preparation	Preparation can cause analyte loss or change the measured fraction	Volatile compounds lost during inappropriate evaporation
Insufficient calibration range	Results may be outside the validated working range	Metal concentration exceeding the ICP-OES calibration range
High cost or limited equipment	The preferred method may be impractical	HRMS unavailable for routine monitoring
Unvalidated method or matrix	Performance in one sample type may not transfer to another	Applying a clean-water method directly to saline industrial wastewater
Regulatory requirements	A technically capable method may not meet compliance requirements	Using an unapproved method where a specified method is mandatory

Common mistakes
-Choosing an instrument before defining the objective
Determine whether the task is screening, identification, quantification, or regulatory compliance.
-Selecting a method with inadequate sensitivity
Check that the method's reporting or quantification limit is appropriate for the concentration of concern.
-Assuming detection means reliable quantification
A detected signal may be below the validated quantification limit.
-Ignoring matrix effects
Validate performance in representative samples and use suitable matrix-effect controls.
-Using a method outside its intended scope
Check the target analytes, sample matrix, preparation procedure, and limitations.
-Confusing screening with confirmation
A screening result may require confirmation using a more selective technique or independent evidence.
-Ignoring quality-control requirements
Use appropriate blanks, calibration checks, spikes, and replicates.

-Assuming the most expensive method is always best
Choose the method that meets the required data quality with suitable cost, time, and practical performance.

Quality Assurance and Quality Control (QA/QC)

Quality Assurance (QA) and Quality Control (QC) are essential components of environmental analysis that ensure analytical results are reliable, accurate enough for their intended purpose, traceable, and scientifically defensible.
Environmental samples are often complex, and their measured concentrations may be affected by contamination, sampling variability, analyte degradation, extraction losses, instrument drift, calibration errors, and matrix interference. QA/QC provides a systematic approach to preventing, detecting, evaluating, and correcting these problems.

Although the terms are closely related, they have different roles:
Quality Assurance (QA)
QA is preventive and system-oriented.
It establishes the procedures, responsibilities, training, documentation, sampling plans, validated methods, and quality requirements needed to produce reliable environmental data.
Example: Developing a documented sampling and analysis plan for monitoring lead in groundwater before fieldwork begins.

Quality Control (QC)
QC is operational and performance-oriented.
It uses measurements, checks, reference materials, blanks, duplicates, and other controls to evaluate whether the sampling and analytical procedures are performing acceptably.
Example: Analyzing a method blank and a spiked groundwater sample alongside samples being tested for lead.

Why is QA/QC important in environmental analysis?

-Reliability: Helps establish confidence in reported concentrations.
-Contamination detection: Identifies contamination introduced during sampling, transport, preparation, or analysis.
-Accuracy and precision: Evaluates bias and the consistency of repeated measurements.
-Method performance: Confirms that extraction, calibration, and instrumental measurements meet specified criteria.
-Regulatory compliance: Supports defensible decisions about environmental standards and pollution control.
-Traceability: Maintains records linking results to samples, methods, instruments, and analytical batches.
-Environmental decision-making: Reduces the risk of incorrect conclusions about contamination, exposure, and remediation.
For example, if a laboratory reports a high lead concentration in groundwater, decision-makers need evidence that the result is not caused by contaminated sampling equipment, a faulty calibration, or an analytical blank problem.
A high-quality analytical result must be supported by more than an instrument reading: it requires documented evidence of sample integrity and acceptable analytical performance.

1. Blanks: detecting contamination

A blank contains no intentional addition of the target analyte. It helps identify contamination introduced during collection, transport, preparation, or measurement.

-Field blank: Checks contamination associated with field handling and exposure.

-Equipment blank: Checks contamination remaining on sampling equipment.

-Trip blank: Travels with samples to help detect contamination during transport, especially for VOC investigations.

-Method blank: Passes through the laboratory preparation and analysis procedure without the environmental sample.

Real example: A method blank shows detectable lead. The laboratory investigates the reagents, vessels, digestion procedure, and other potential sources before accepting results from the associated batch.

2. Duplicate and replicate samples: assessing precision

-Field duplicates: Two samples collected from the same location under the project's duplicate-sampling procedure. They reflect sampling variability as well as analytical variability.

-Laboratory duplicates: Separate portions of a sample processed and analyzed independently. They assess laboratory preparation and measurement precision.

Real example: Two field samples from a river yield different metal concentrations. The difference may reflect spatial heterogeneity, sampling variability, or analytical imprecision; additional QC evidence is needed to distinguish these causes.

3. Spiked samples: evaluating recovery and matrix effects

A known amount of an analyte is added to a sample before the relevant analytical steps. The additional amount recovered indicates how well the procedure measures that analyte in the sample matrix.

-Matrix spike: Evaluates method performance in an actual sample matrix.

-Matrix spike duplicate: A second spiked portion used to assess precision as well as recovery.

-Surrogate standard: A suitable compound added to samples, commonly in organic analysis, to monitor preparation and analytical performance.

Real example: A pesticide spike added to soil shows low recovery. The analyst investigates extraction efficiency, matrix interference, degradation, and instrument performance before deciding whether the result is acceptable.

4. Calibration and calibration verification

Calibration establishes the relationship between instrument response and analyte concentration using standards of known concentration. Calibration verification checks whether the relationship remains suitable during analysis.

Real example: During ICP-MS analysis of groundwater, a continuing calibration check falls outside the method's acceptance limits. The analyst investigates drift, recalibrates when appropriate, and assesses the results generated since the last acceptable check according to the method and laboratory SOP.

5. Laboratory control samples and reference materials

A laboratory control sample (LCS) contains a known amount of the analyte in a suitable clean reference matrix. A certified reference material (CRM) has one or more property values established through a recognized characterization process.

Real example: A laboratory analyzes a control sample containing a known concentration of cadmium. If the result is outside the established acceptance limits, the laboratory investigates the preparation and measurement process before reporting the batch.

Main challenges in QA/QC

Challenge	Why it matters	Appropriate response
Contaminated blanks	Can make low-level results unreliable	Investigate contamination sources and determine which results are affected
Poor spike recovery	May indicate extraction loss, matrix effects, or analytical problems	Review sample preparation, matrix effects, and instrument performance
High duplicate variability	May reflect heterogeneous samples or inconsistent procedures	Review sampling representativeness, homogenization, and analytical precision
Calibration drift	Can bias results over time	Check instrument stability and follow recalibration and affected-result assessment procedures
Matrix interference	Can suppress or enhance the analytical response	Use appropriate matrix-matched calibration, internal standards, standard addition, or other validated controls
Incorrect QC acceptance limits	Can lead to inappropriate acceptance or rejection	Use method-specific or project-approved criteria
Inadequate documentation	Makes results difficult to trace and defend	Maintain complete sample records, instrument logs, QC results, and corrective-action records
Pressure to accept failed results	Can lead to unsupported environmental conclusions	Document failures, investigate, and qualify or withhold affected data as appropriate

Common QA/QC mistakes

-Running samples without a method blank
Contamination introduced during preparation and analysis may remain undetected.
-Using calibration standards as the only QC measure
Calibration alone does not establish extraction recovery, sample-matrix performance, or contamination control.
-Assuming a good calibration curve guarantees accuracy
A high correlation coefficient does not prove that the calibration model is appropriate or that results are unbiased.
-Ignoring failed QC results
A failure requires investigation and an assessment of the associated samples; it should not be dismissed.
-Using a clean laboratory control sample to rule out matrix effects
An acceptable LCS result does not demonstrate that the method performs equally well in every environmental matrix.
-Applying the same acceptance limits to every method
QC criteria depend on the method, analyte, concentration, matrix, and intended use.
-Correcting results without justification
Blank subtraction, recovery correction, or other data adjustments must be permitted, documented, and scientifically justified.
-Failing to document corrective actions
Without a traceable record, it is difficult to demonstrate how a QC failure was resolved.

Analytical Method Validation

Analytical method validation is the systematic process of demonstrating, using experimental evidence, that an analytical method is suitable for its intended purpose and produces reliable results for a specified analyte in a particular environmental matrix.
In environmental analysis, validation helps answer a fundamental question:
Can we trust the reported concentration of a pollutant in this specific environmental sample, measured using this analytical method?

For example, a method that measures lead in clean laboratory water may not perform equally well in wastewater, seawater, or a soil extract. These samples contain different interfering substances and may require different sample preparation procedures, calibration approaches, and validation evidence.
Method validation is therefore not simply checking whether an instrument produces a signal. It evaluates the performance of the entire analytical procedure, including sample preparation, extraction, cleanup, instrumental measurement, calibration, and data processing.

Why is method validation important?

1. Ensure accurate and reliable measurements
Validation establishes whether the method can measure pollutant concentrations with acceptable accuracy and precision.
Example: Confirming that a method accurately measures nitrate in river water despite the presence of other dissolved substances.

2. Demonstrate suitability for the environmental matrix
A method suitable for groundwater may require additional validation before it is applied to industrial wastewater or soil extracts.
Example: Testing whether dissolved organic matter suppresses pharmaceutical signals during LC-MS/MS analysis.

3. Confirm performance at environmentally relevant concentrations
Validation demonstrates that the method can reliably detect and quantify pollutants near the concentrations expected in real samples.
Example: Establishing that a method can quantify a pesticide at 0.05 µg/L when this concentration is relevant to the monitoring objective.

4. Support environmental decisions and regulatory compliance
Validated results provide stronger evidence for assessing pollution, evaluating treatment systems, comparing sites, and determining whether applicable environmental criteria are met.
Example: Determining whether lead in groundwater exceeds an applicable regulatory limit using a method with adequate sensitivity and verified performance.

Main performance characteristics evaluated during method validation

The validation parameters depend on the purpose of the analysis, the analyte, the sample matrix, the required concentration range, and any applicable regulatory or standard-method requirements. Common characteristics include selectivity, working range, detection and quantification limits, precision, trueness/recovery, robustness, and measurement uncertainty.

1. Selectivity and specificity
The ability to measure or identify the target analyte in the presence of other sample components.
Environmental example: In GC-MS analysis of benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene, and xylenes (BTEX), demonstrate that the target compounds can be distinguished from other volatile organic compounds in groundwater.
What to evaluate: Potential interferences, chromatographic separation, retention behavior, and appropriate identification criteria.

2. Working range and calibration model
The concentration interval over which the method provides acceptable results for its intended use. The calibration relationship must be appropriate across this range.

Environmental example: Validate a nitrate method over 0.1–10 mg/L for the intended water samples, if these concentrations cover the monitoring requirements.
What to evaluate: Calibration standards, residuals, bias across the range, and performance near the lower and upper limits. A high (R^2) alone does not prove that the method is valid.

3. Limit of detection (LOD) and limit of quantification (LOQ)
-LOD: Lowest analyte level that can be detected according to the adopted statistical or method-specific criteria.
-LOQ: Lowest level that can be quantified with acceptable performance for the intended application.
Environmental example: A method may detect a pesticide at 0.01 µg/L but reliably quantify it only at 0.04 µg/L. These values are illustrative; they must be experimentally established for the method and matrix.
What to evaluate: Blank variability, low-level samples, background interference, and acceptable precision and bias near the claimed LOQ.

4. Trueness, bias, and recovery
Trueness concerns agreement between the average result and an accepted reference value. Recovery experiments can help assess bias introduced by sample preparation and analysis.
Environmental example: Spike a soil sample with a known quantity of a pesticide and determine how much is recovered after extraction, cleanup, and GC-MS analysis.

5. Precision
The closeness of agreement among repeated measurements under specified conditions.
-Repeatability: Same method, laboratory, analyst/equipment conditions, and short time interval.
-Intermediate precision: Variation within the same laboratory over a longer period or under changed conditions.
Environmental example: Analyze replicate wastewater samples for lead and assess the variability of the results.

6. Robustness
The ability of a method to maintain acceptable performance when small, deliberate changes are introduced into operating conditions.
Environmental example: Examine whether small changes in SPE loading flow rate, extraction time, mobile-phase composition, or column temperature materially affect pharmaceutical recovery and separation.

7. Measurement uncertainty
An estimate of the range of values reasonably attributable to the measured quantity, considering relevant sources of uncertainty.
Environmental example: When reporting a metal concentration in groundwater, consider calibration, sample preparation, repeatability, recovery, and other relevant contributions to uncertainty.

Common mistakes

Mistake	Why it is problematic	Better practice
Using (R^2) alone to claim validation	High (R^2) does not demonstrate accuracy, selectivity, or acceptable low-level performance	Evaluate residuals, bias, precision, range, and matrix effects

Reporting an instrumental detection limit as the method LOD	Sample preparation and matrix effects may increase the actual detection limit	Assess detection capability using the complete method
Validating only clean solvent or reagent water	Real environmental matrices may behave differently	Include representative matrices and matrix spikes
Testing recovery at only one concentration	Performance can vary with analyte level	Test suitable low, middle, and high levels, as justified by the method
Ignoring blank contamination	Background contamination can bias trace-level results	Investigate sources and demonstrate acceptable blank performance
Treating precision as accuracy	Repeated measurements can be consistently wrong	Evaluate both precision and trueness/bias
Choosing acceptance limits after seeing results	Criteria may be biased toward accepting poor performance	Define acceptance criteria before the study
Reporting an unverified LOQ	The method may not quantify reliably at that concentration	Test samples near the claimed LOQ
Applying one validated method to every matrix	Performance may not transfer across water, soil, sediment, and air	Define and justify the validated scope
Failing to document limitations	Users may apply the method outside its demonstrated capability	State matrices, analytes, ranges, restrictions, and relevant uncertainty

Data Interpretation, Statistical Analysis, Uncertainty, and Reporting

The final step transforms analytical measurements into reliable environmental information that can support scientific conclusions and environmental decisions.
A laboratory may successfully collect a sample, extract the pollutants, use a validated method, and obtain an instrumental result. However, the work is not complete until the data are checked, analyzed, interpreted in context, and reported with appropriate limitations and uncertainty.
According to Eurachem guidance, measurement uncertainty can arise throughout the analytical process, including sampling, sample preparation, calibration, measurement, and data processing. It is important to consider these contributions when judging whether a result is fit for its intended purpose.

Why is this final step important?

A. Convert raw results into meaningful information
Instrument responses must be converted into concentrations, corrected for applicable dilution factors, checked against QC results, and expressed in suitable units.
Example: Converting an ICP-MS response into a lead concentration in µg/L of the original groundwater sample.

B. Distinguish real environmental patterns from random variation
Statistical analysis helps determine whether differences between locations, times, or treatments are meaningful relative to observed variability.
Example: Comparing nitrate concentrations upstream and downstream of a wastewater discharge.

C. Explain the reliability of the measurements
Measurement uncertainty communicates how well the reported result is known and helps evaluate whether the data are adequate for the intended decision.
Example: Interpreting a lead result close to an applicable regulatory limit.

D. Support environmental management

Well-interpreted results help identify pollution hotspots, assess treatment performance, prioritize additional sampling, and inform risk assessment and remediation.
Example: Determining whether an apparent reduction in wastewater pollutant concentrations is consistent with effective treatment.

Data processing and statistical analysis

Data processing converts raw measurements into scientifically usable results. Statistical analysis helps summarize variability, compare groups, evaluate patterns, and determine how strongly the data support a conclusion.

Essential data-processing steps

1. Review instrument output, calibration, blanks, and quality-control results.
2. Convert instrument responses into concentrations using the validated calibration model.
3. Apply appropriate dilution, extraction-volume, sample-mass, and moisture corrections.
4. Apply blank corrections or recovery corrections only when justified by the applicable method.
5. Convert units consistently, such as µg/L, mg/L, µg/kg, or µg/m³.
6. Identify missing data, outliers, transcription errors, and results outside the validated range.
7. Calculate descriptive statistics and conduct appropriate comparisons.
8. Retain raw data, calculation records, and all corrections for traceability.

Important statistical tools

Tool	What it tells us	Environmental example
Mean	Average concentration	Average nitrate in a set of river samples
Median	Middle value; useful for skewed data	Typical concentration when a few samples have very high pesticide levels
Standard deviation (SD)	Absolute spread of measurements	Variation among replicate measurements of lead
Relative standard deviation (RSD)	Spread relative to the mean	Comparing precision for analytes at different concentration levels
Minimum and maximum	Observed concentration range	Identifying the highest measured contaminant concentration
Confidence interval	Uncertainty in an estimated statistical quantity, under the specified model	Estimating a mean concentration across a sampling population
Correlation and regression	Association between variables	Examining whether nitrate increases with conductivity
Trend analysis	Change over time	Evaluating whether $PM_{2.5}$ concentrations decline after a control measure
Spatial analysis	Geographic patterns	Mapping metal concentrations around an industrial site

Measurement uncertainty: what does it mean?

Measurement uncertainty describes the dispersion of values that could reasonably be attributed to the quantity being measured, based on the information available. It expresses how well the measurand, the specific quantity intended to be measured is known.

For an environmental laboratory, uncertainty may include contributions from sample collection, sample preparation, extraction, calibration, instrumental measurement, and data processing.

Error versus uncertainty

-Error is the difference between a measured result and a reference or true value, when that value is known or defined.

-Uncertainty characterizes the range of values reasonably associated with the result.
-Precision describes the closeness of agreement among repeated measurements.
-Accuracy is a general concept describing closeness to the true or accepted value; it is not itself a numerical uncertainty estimate.
A method may be precise but biased. Repeating a biased measurement many times does not automatically remove that bias.

Why uncertainty matters
-It prevents overinterpretation of small differences.
-It helps assess whether a result is adequate for its intended use.
-It supports decisions near regulatory or project limits.
-It identifies the stages of analysis that most affect reliability.
-It helps compare results between laboratories or monitoring periods.

Sources of measurement uncertainty

Uncertainty can arise from both fieldwork and laboratory work. Sampling variability can be especially important when the objective is to estimate conditions across an entire river, soil area, aquifer, or air-monitoring region, not just the contents of one bottle or filter.

A. Sampling and field sources
-Sampling design and spatial variability
A single sample may not represent the whole site. Contaminant concentrations may vary with depth, distance, flow, wind, or local hotspots.
Example: A soil sample collected between two contaminated patches may underestimate site contamination.
-Collection and handling
Differences in collection technique, sample containers, preservation, transport temperature, holding time, or contamination can affect the result.
Example: Loss of benzene from a groundwater sample due to headspace or poor sealing.

B. Sample preparation and laboratory sources
-Preparation and extraction
Incomplete digestion, inconsistent homogenization, variable extraction recovery, filtration, evaporation, and dilution contribute to uncertainty.
Example: A pesticide is incompletely extracted from organic-rich soil.
-Calibration and reference standards
Uncertainty can arise from standard purity, standard-solution preparation, balance and volumetric equipment, calibration-model fitting, and reference-material values.
Example: An inaccurately prepared calibration standard biases every sample quantified from that calibration.
-Instrument and analyst effects
Instrument drift, detector noise, matrix interference, integration choices, analyst-to-analyst differences, and environmental conditions can affect results.
Example: A small baseline change alters the integrated peak area of a low-concentration analyte.

C. Data processing and interpretation sources
-Calculations and data handling
Rounding, unit conversion, dilution-factor mistakes, transcription errors, inappropriate statistical assumptions, and incorrect treatment of nondetects can change conclusions.
Example: Reporting a diluted sample concentration without applying its dilution factor.

Random and systematic effects

-Random effects cause results to vary unpredictably, such as short-term instrumental noise or repeatability variation.
-Systematic effects tend to shift results in a consistent direction, such as a biased calibration standard or incomplete recovery.
Both may influence the reported result. Replicate measurements help characterize random variation, while reference materials, recovery studies, calibration checks, and other quality controls help evaluate systematic effects.

Data quality: how do we know whether the results are fit for purpose?

Data quality refers to the extent to which analytical results are sufficiently reliable, representative, complete, and suitable for the environmental question being investigated.

High-quality data are not necessarily the data with the most decimal places or the most sophisticated instrument. They are data that meet the requirements of the intended decision.

Major data-quality indicators

Indicator	Key question	Example
Accuracy / trueness	Is the result sufficiently close to an accepted reference value?	Lead recovery in a certified reference material
Precision	Are repeated measurements sufficiently consistent?	Replicate nitrate measurements
Representativeness	Do the samples reflect the site, time, and conditions of interest?	Sampling a river during different flow conditions
Completeness	Were enough planned samples successfully collected and analyzed?	18 of 20 planned samples produce valid results
Comparability	Can results be meaningfully compared across locations, laboratories, or periods?	Consistent methods and units for annual groundwater monitoring
Sensitivity	Can the method detect and quantify concentrations relevant to the project?	LOQ below the target concentration
Traceability	Can results be traced through standards, procedures, records, and calculations?	Documented calibration standards and sample identifiers
Timeliness	Are results available when required for the decision?	Rapid analysis following an accidental discharge

These dimensions are related but distinct. For example, a laboratory can produce precise measurements from a sample that is not representative of the environmental site. Likewise, a complete dataset may still be unreliable if QC criteria have failed.

Main challenges and common mistakes

Challenge or mistake	Why it matters	Recommended practice
Treating all numerical results as valid	QC failures can undermine data reliability	Review QC and document data validation decisions before interpretation
Ignoring sampling variability	A few samples may not represent the whole site	Use a representative sampling design and assess sampling uncertainty where relevant
Comparing incompatible datasets	Different methods, units, sample fractions, or seasons can produce misleading comparisons	Harmonize methods and document differences

Confusing detection with risk	Presence alone does not establish exposure or unacceptable risk	Consider concentration, exposure pathway, toxicity, and applicable criteria
Treating nondetects as zero	Can bias means, trends, and statistical comparisons	Use a method appropriate to censored data and the study objective
Overinterpreting small differences	Observed differences may be explained by variability or uncertainty	Use appropriate statistics, study design, and uncertainty information
Ignoring uncertainty near limits	Can produce inappropriate compliance decisions	Follow the applicable decision rule
Confusing correlation with causation	Two variables may co-vary because of a third factor	Evaluate alternative explanations and use suitable study designs
Excessive rounding	Can obscure meaningful differences or create false precision	Retain suitable significant digits and round only at the reporting stage
Reporting only favorable results	Can bias environmental conclusions	Document missing data, exclusions, QC failures, and limitations transparently