Definition of Done vs acceptance criteria: what is the difference?

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Acceptance criteria describe when one particular story does what it should. The Definition of Done is a shared quality standard that every item must meet before it counts as finished. A story is complete only when it satisfies both.

TL;DR The short version

- Acceptance criteria say when one story does what it should; the Definition of Done is the quality bar every item must meet.
- A story is complete only when it satisfies both, so an item can meet its criteria and still not be done.
- Avoid untestable criteria like 'fast and user-friendly' and a Definition of Done that is just a coverage number or that nobody remembers.

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What are acceptance criteria?

They are specific to a single backlog item. They state the behaviour the user should see, ideally with examples, such as “a refund requested on day 30 is accepted; on day 31 it is refused”.

What is the Definition of Done?

It is the team’s common checklist of quality conditions, such as code reviewed, tests passing, security checks run and documentation updated. In Scrum, only work that meets it is part of the Increment.

How do the two differ?

Acceptance criteria belong to one item, while the Definition of Done applies to all of them. Criteria describe behaviour and the Definition of Done describes quality. The Product Owner shapes criteria with the team, and the team owns its Definition of Done.

Can an item meet its acceptance criteria and still not be done?

Yes. A story can work as described and still be untested, unreviewed or undocumented. It is not finished until the Definition of Done is also met.

What goes wrong in practice?

Teams treat a coverage percentage as the whole Definition of Done, write criteria like “fast and user-friendly” that cannot be tested, or keep a Definition of Done that nobody can recall. Each of these lets unfinished work be counted as finished.

Related credential: Agile Delivery Practitioner. Explore the exam facts and syllabus.

Sources and further reading

1. Schwaber and Sutherland. The Scrum Guide (2020). scrumguides.org.

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