



# HOW TO DEFINE BUSINESS TERMS IN PLAIN ENGLISH: *A PRIMER*

*Creating Definitions Using ConceptSpeak™*

By Ronald G. Ross



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## ABOUT THIS PRIMER

There's a high premium on knowing how to craft great **definitions**. Every business analyst should know how. That skill is the focus of this Primer. By the way, terms in this Primer in **this font** are defined in the Primer's **Glossary**.

There are various schools of thought about how to define terms, some arising from professional terminologists and academia. But those approaches are often relatively arcane and not well-suited to everyday business practice.

So **ConceptSpeak™**, the BRS approach, stays with common dictionary practices. They are perfectly adequate for your needs. By 'dictionary' I mean natural language dictionaries of course, *not* any kind of dictionary arising from IT (e.g., data dictionaries).

Definitions with subtle IT or 'data' bias are an anathema to effective communication with business partners. Good business definitions are oriented to what words mean *when used by real business people talking directly about real business things*.

If you want to talk about how data is retained or exchanged, do a **data model**. A good data model has definitions too of course, but they subtly relate to fields and data types, not directly to things in the real world. That bias throws them off-center for business communication. This implicit mindset is often hard for those with a data or IT background to unlearn. *But not impossible!* If you fall into this category, this Primer will teach you how.

The business counterpart to a data model is a **concept model**. How to create a concept model is well beyond the scope of this Primer, but if you are doing a concept model, the style of definitions described in this Primer will suit you perfectly.

This Primer is organized as a set of guidelines, each with one or more examples. Each guideline can be understood on its own, but the overall set is mutually supportive and comprehensively interlocking. Master this set of guidelines and your definitions are guaranteed world-class.

### BASIC CRITERIA FOR GREAT BUSINESS DEFINITIONS

To get you started, here are some basic criteria for great business definitions:

- It should be easy to give examples for the thing defined, but there should be *no* counterexamples.
- Each definition should communicate the essence of what a thing is, not what it does, how it's used, or why it's important.
- The definition of a thing should focus on its unique characteristics.
- Each thing you define should be distinguishable from every other thing you define using the definition alone.
- Each definition should be concise and as short as possible without loss of meaning. A definition should be *readable*.

One thing may surprise you about great business definitions. The very first noun in each definition is absolutely key. These first words are the secret sauce of excellent definitions. That's where we'll pick up with the guidelines.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....1**

**ABOUT THIS PRIMER .....3**  
 Basic Criteria for Great Business Definitions ..... 3

**TABLE OF CONTENTS .....4**

**1. SETTING UP A DEFINITION PROPERLY .....5**  
 Guideline 1.1 The definition for a term should start with a noun. .... 5  
 Guideline 1.2 The kick-off word of a definition should not be the term being defined. .... 5  
 Guideline 1.3 A definition should not be simply a synonym of the term defined. .... 6  
 Guideline 1.4 The kick-off word of a definition and the concept being defined should align. .... 6

**2. AVOIDING PLURALS IN SETTING UP A DEFINITION .....9**  
 Guideline 2.1 The term being defined should be given in the singular form. .... 9  
 Guideline 2.2 The kick-off word of a definition should be given in the singular form. .... 9

**3. CAPTURING THE ESSENCE OF A CONCEPT .....11**  
 Guideline 3.1 The definition of a term should express the essence of the concept, not its purpose, function, or use. .... 11  
 Guideline 3.2 A definition should be clear about whether the concept being defined is an individual or a general concept. .... 11

**4. ENSURING THE INTERNAL QUALITY OF DEFINITIONS.....13**  
 Guideline 4.1 A definition should not comprise multiple sentences. .... 13  
 Guideline 4.2 A definition should not embed business rules. .... 13  
 Guideline 4.3 A definition should provide a clear antecedent for each embedded pronoun. .... 14  
 Guideline 4.4 A definition should provide a clear antecedent for each definite article after the kick-off word. .... 14

**5. ALIGNING MULTIPLE DEFINITIONS.....15**  
 Guideline 5.1 The definition of a qualified term should not depart in kind from the meaning of the term that has been qualified. .... 15  
 Guideline 5.2 The definition of a qualified term should not repeat (or conflict with) text in the definition of the underlying term. .... 15  
 Guideline 5.3 A definition of a term, or some significant part of that definition, should not be repeated in the definition of another term. .... 16  
 Guideline 5.4 The definition of a compound term should not depart in meaning from that of the underlying terms taken collectively. .... 17  
 Guideline 5.5 A set of definitions should not be circular. .... 17

**6. CONTEXT .....19**  
 Guideline 6.1 An entry whose meaning cannot be standardized for the entire scope of a vocabulary should be disambiguated by context. .... 19

**GLOSSARY.....21**

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR: RONALD G. ROSS .....25**

**ABOUT BUSINESS RULE SOLUTIONS .....26**

# 1. SETTING UP A DEFINITION PROPERLY

**GUIDELINE 1.1** THE DEFINITION FOR A TERM SHOULD START WITH A NOUN.

**Discussion:** A definition should express what a thing *is*, not what it does. So the first significant word in a definition should be a noun or noun phrase rather than a verb. This noun or noun phrase is called the **kick-off word**.

**Example: *governance process***

Poor definition: *identifies decision makers and the process and information required for a decision to be made and describes how approvals and prioritization decisions are made*

This definition is built around two verbs, *identifies* and *describes*, which express something about what the concept does, not what it is. The concept being defined, *governance process*, is first and foremost a process. So the concept should be defined with that starting point.

Revised definition: *a process by which appropriate decision makers use relevant information to make decisions regarding a change or solution, including means for obtaining approvals and priorities*

This revised definition expresses what a governance process *is* by including an appropriate noun, *process*, to initiate the definition.

**GUIDELINE 1.2** THE KICK-OFF WORD OF A DEFINITION SHOULD NOT BE THE TERM BEING DEFINED.

**Discussion:** The first word in a definition should be some noun other than the term being defined.

**Example: *developer***

Poor definition: *a developer is responsible for the engineering of solutions*

That a developer is a developer is a tautology. Saying so adds nothing.

Revised definition: *a professional responsible for the engineering of solutions*

The revised definition indicates that a developer is a professional. Understanding of the concept has been enhanced.

**Example: *indicator***

Poor definition: *An indicator identifies a specific numerical measurement that indicates progress toward achieving an objective.*

This definition is given as a complete sentence with the term being defined, *indicator*, as the kick-off word. Repeating the term in the definition is unnecessary and merely makes the definition wordier. Definitions should be given as phrases, not sentences. The basic idea is that the phrase could be substituted for the term in any business communication you write with no change in meaning.

Revised definition: *a numerical measurement that gauges progress toward achieving an objective*

The revised definition is given as a phrase rather than a sentence. It does not embed the term being defined, *indicator*. In any business communication you write, instead of *indicator* you should be able to say “numerical measurement that gauges progress toward achieving an objective” and mean *exactly* the same thing.

Note also that the verb *indicates* in the original definition was changed to *gauges* in the revised version. A verb form of the term being defined generally should not be used in a definition for that term.

**GUIDELINE 1.3** A DEFINITION SHOULD NOT BE SIMPLY A SYNONYM OF THE TERM DEFINED.

**Discussion:** A **synonym** of a term means exactly the same thing as the term itself. It provides no additional understanding.

**Example: *evaluation***

Poor definition: *an assessment*

*Evaluation* and *assessment* mean the same thing. Identifying a synonym does not provide a definition.

Revised definition: *the result of assessing, judging, appraising, or interpreting something*

The revised definition brings clarity to the underlying concept. For example, it indicates that, for intended usage under this **vocabulary**, an evaluation is a result, not an act.

It can be useful to capture accepted synonym(s) of a term. A synonym is included as its own

**entry** in a vocabulary, as follows. The term that follows “see” should be the term preferred for usage — in this example, *evaluation*.

**assessment:** see *evaluation*

**GUIDELINE 1.4** THE KICK-OFF WORD OF A DEFINITION AND THE CONCEPT BEING DEFINED SHOULD ALIGN.

**Discussion:** The initial noun or noun phrase in the definition of a **concept** should simply represent a more general (broader) concept or class of things than the concept being defined. The rest of the text in the definition after the kick-off word should indicate how the concept being defined is:

- distinguished from that more general concept or class, or
- is a special case or variation of that more general concept or class.

**Example: *analyst***

Poor definition: *a generic name for a role with the responsibility for gathering and assimilating data or requirements*

The first noun in this definition is *name*. A flesh-and-blood analyst, the thing being defined, cannot possibly be a name. *Analyst* and *name* are two distinct concepts; *name* is not a more general or broader concept or class of things than *analyst*. The terms do not align.

Revised definition: *a professional responsible for gathering and assimilating data or requirements*

The first noun in this revised definition is *professional*. *Analyst* and *professional* align. An analyst is simply one variation of *professional*.



**Example: *walkthrough***

Poor definition: *a type of peer review in which participants review a proposed solution by stepping through its workings together*

The kick-off word in this definition is *type*. A real-world walkthrough cannot possibly be a type. *Walkthrough* and *type* are two distinct concepts; *type* is not a more general or broader concept than *walkthrough*. The terms do not align.

Revised definition: *a peer review in which participants review a proposed solution by stepping through its workings together*

The first (compound) noun in this revised definition is *peer review*. *Walkthrough* and *peer review* align. A walkthrough is a variation of peer review. *Peer review* is a more general or broader concept or class than *walkthrough*. The rest of the text in the definition expresses how a walkthrough is a special case or variation of a peer review.

**Example: *goal***

Proposed definition: *qualitative statement of a state an organization is seeking to establish and maintain*

The kick-off word in this definition is *statement*. *Goal* and *statement* are two distinct concepts; *statement* is not a more general or broader concept than *goal*. The terms do not align. A goal might be *expressed* by a statement, but that is not what a goal *is*.

Revised definition: *a state an organization is seeking to establish and maintain, usually expressed qualitatively rather than quantitatively*

The first noun in the revised definition is *state*. *Goal* and *state* align. A goal is a desired state. *State* is a more general or broader concept than *goal*. The rest of the text in the definition expresses how a goal is a special case of a state.

**Example: *actor***

Poor definition: *a human or nonhuman role that plays a part in a process*

Assume *human* and *nonhuman* are being used in this definition as adjectives — that is, as modifiers of *role*. The kick-off word is therefore *role*. *Actor* and *role* are two distinct concepts; *role* is not a more general or broader concept than *goal*. The terms do not align. A role might be *played* by an actor, but that is something an actor *does*, not what an actor *is*.

Revised definition: *a human, device, or system that plays a part in a process*

Instead of a single first noun, this revised definition lists three: *human, device, and system*. If no single term is evident that covers all relevant variations of the more general or broader concept or class appropriate for the definition, a short list such as this one is acceptable.

**Example: *methodology***

Poor definition: *a framework that determines which tasks and techniques can be used to solve a problem*

The kick-off word in this definition is *framework*. *Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary* (MWUD) yields no definition of *methodology* that supports it being a kind of framework. *Methodology* and *framework* are two distinct concepts; *framework* is not a more general or broader concept or class than *methodology*. The terms do not align.

MWUD does offer the following definition (1a) for *methodology*: *a body of methods, procedures, working concepts, rules, and postulates employed by a science, art, or discipline*. Therefore a better definition of *methodology* might be the following.

Revised definition: *a body of methods, techniques, procedures, working concepts, and rules that can be used to solve a problem*

The beginning noun phrase in this revised definition is *body of methods, techniques, procedures, working concepts, and rules*. A noun phrase such as this one is acceptable in initiating a definition. A methodology is a variation of the concept that whole noun phrase represents.



## 2. AVOIDING PLURALS IN SETTING UP A DEFINITION

**GUIDELINE 2.1** THE TERM BEING DEFINED SHOULD BE GIVEN IN THE SINGULAR FORM.

**Discussion:** A term designates a concept. A definition essentially expresses what each and every **instance** (example or case) of that concept is. Ambiguity can therefore arise when the term is given in the plural form. Does the definition apply to only some of the instances or to all of them? Such ambiguity can be avoided if the term being defined is given in the singular form.

### Example

Poor **entry**:

**experiments**: acts or operations carried out under controlled conditions to test, establish, or illustrate the workability of a solution

The term defined in the entry above is given in the plural form. These questions arise:

- Does the entry refer to a particular kind or group of experiments, or to each and every experiment of any kind or group?
- Are the experiments only those that relate to the workability of a particular solution, or to any experiment apart from what solution it might be addressing?

Revised entry:

**experiment**: an act or operation carried out under controlled conditions to test, establish, or illustrate the workability of a solution

This revised entry gives the term in the singular form. It removes doubt about the applicability

and scope of the definition. The meaning the definition expresses is what must be true about each and every instance of the concept *experiment*.

### Example

Poor entry:

**actor(s)**: humans, devices, and systems that play a part in a process

The term defined in this entry is given in a parenthetical plural form. It should be given in the singular form. No “s” or “(s)” is needed or desirable. So the entry should simply be:

Revised entry:

**actor**: a human, device, or system that plays a part in a process

**GUIDELINE 2.2** THE KICK-OFF WORD OF A DEFINITION SHOULD BE GIVEN IN THE SINGULAR FORM.

**Discussion:** Just as the term being defined should be given in the singular form, the first significant word in its definition should be given in the singular form as well. Since a definition expresses what each and every instance of the concept is, the kick-off word should be expressed such that it could be used to reference any given instance.

### Example: *constraint*

Poor definition: *limitations imposed on a solution by circumstances or available means*

The kick-off word in this definition, *limitations*, is given in the plural form, which suggests one

constraint is many limitations. Something is lost in the meaning. A constraint might *produce* many limitations, but that possible fact does not express what any given constraint *is*. A *particular* constraint is just one thing.

Revised definition: *a limitation imposed on a solution by circumstances or available means*

A definition should always express what a thing is. This revised definition expresses that a constraint is first and foremost a limitation.

**Example: *initiative***

Poor definition: *specific projects, programs, or actions undertaken to satisfy business requirements*

This definition includes three kick-off words separated by an *or* (which is acceptable). However, each of the words appears in the plural form, which suggests a given constraint could be many projects, programs, or actions. An initiative, however, should just be one of those three things.

Revised definition: *a project, program, or action undertaken to satisfy business requirements*

The revised definition expresses that a constraint is one of: a project, a program, or an action. The word *specific* has also been replaced by the article *a*. Already implicit in the definition is that an initiative is one 'specific' thing.

**Example: *context***

Poor definition: *the circumstances that form the setting for an event or interaction*

There could be many contexts. Each of those contexts is one particular thing. The kick-off word of the definition should adhere closely to that unitary sense. *Circumstances* in the plural form does not.

Revised definition: *a set of circumstances that form the setting for an event or interaction*

The word *set* has been inserted into the definition to form the new kick-off word phrase *set of circumstances*. *Set* gives the unitary sense appropriate for the definition.

### 3. CAPTURING THE ESSENCE OF A CONCEPT

**GUIDELINE 3.1** THE DEFINITION OF A TERM SHOULD EXPRESS THE ESSENCE OF THE CONCEPT, NOT ITS PURPOSE, FUNCTION, OR USE.

**Discussion:** Things can have multiple purposes, functions, or uses, and those things may vary in different contexts or over time. The core essence of a concept, in contrast, varies little or not at all viewed from different perspectives or at different times. Effective business communication requires focusing on core meaning.

**Example: *business requirement***

Poor definition: *a need or demand required of a solution by some stakeholder(s) which will serve as a bridge to system design*

The phrase *which will serve as a bridge to system design* in this definition explains one purpose of a business requirement. That purpose may be paramount to some people, but perhaps not to others. For example, business requirements might be used by business staff to prepare for training of workers or new hires. The business staff might not care about, or might even disagree with, the expressed rationale.

Explanation of purpose, function, or use should be removed from definitions. If worth retaining for future reference, it can be given as separate **note(s)** for the term's **entry**. That way the definition itself can serve equally well for multiple audiences, each with different ideas or insights about the relevance of the concept.

Revised entry:

***business requirement:*** *a need or demand required of a solution by some stakeholder(s) in the business*

**Note:** *Business requirements serve often serve as a bridge to system design.*

**GUIDELINE 3.2** A DEFINITION SHOULD BE CLEAR ABOUT WHETHER THE CONCEPT BEING DEFINED IS AN INDIVIDUAL OR A GENERAL CONCEPT.

**Discussion:** Definitions are often required for individual things, especially when the individual is abstract or intangible rather than a particular person or place. Special caution should be exercised for words that can be taken in the sense of either **individual** or **general concept**.

**Example: *observation***

Poor definition: *assessing a work environment as a means to elicit requirements*

The intended meaning of *observation* could be either of the following:

- a particular method of eliciting requirements.
- a particular act or instance of using that method to elicit requirements.

Which is meant? The former meaning views *observation* as one particular *method* of eliciting requirements. As such it designates an individual, one particular thing. In the following definition note use of *the*, rather than *a*, to correctly indicate the thing is

one particular individual (of the general concept *method*).

Revised definition 1: *the method of eliciting requirements that is based on direct viewing of a work environment*

The second meaning above views *observation* as an act where the given method is actually applied, presumably one act among many others of the same kind. In the following definition note use of *an*, rather than *the*, to correctly indicate the definition refers to any of many individuals. The kick-off word has also been changed from *method* to *act* or *instance*.

Revised definition 2: *an act or instance of eliciting requirements that is based on direct viewing of a work environment*

## 4. ENSURING THE INTERNAL QUALITY OF DEFINITIONS

**GUIDELINE 4.1** A DEFINITION SHOULD NOT COMPRISE MULTIPLE SENTENCES.

**Discussion:** A definition that involves multiple sentences is almost always a poor one. Such expansive text generally focuses on positioning, differentiating, or motivating the concept being defined, rather than just expressing its essence. The additional text is better handled as notes.

**Example: *transition requirement***

Poor definition: *a requirement that an organization must support to enable migration from current state to future state. Unlike other requirements, transition requirements represent temporary needs, rather than more permanent ones.*

The add-on sentence in this definition merely differentiates transition requirements from other kinds of requirements. The initial phrase already does that job (or should). The sentence should be treated as a separate note, as follows.

Revised definition: *a requirement that an organization must support to enable migration from current state to future state*

Note: *Unlike other requirements, transition requirements represent temporary needs, rather than more permanent ones.*

**Example: *process***

Poor definition: *a set of activities whose sequence is designed to produce some desired result. A process takes raw materials or inputs and transforms them into finished goods or outputs, thereby creating or adding value. A process is guided by policies, rules, standards, guidelines, and work instructions as appropriate.*

This definition includes two add-on sentences and is quite long. There are two possibilities:

- Some part(s) of the two follow-on sentences are needed in the kick-off phrase to fully differentiate the concept being defined from all others. In that case those essential part(s) should be included as part of the definitional phrase itself.
- The add-on sentences merely elaborate the meaning of the lead-in phrase. In that case the sentences should be included in one or more separate note(s) for the term's entry as follows.

Revised definition: *a set of activities whose sequence is designed to produce some desired result*

Note: *A process takes raw materials or inputs and transforms them into finished goods or outputs, thereby creating or adding value.*

Note: *A process is guided by policies, rules, standards, guidelines, and work instructions as appropriate.*

**GUIDELINE 4.2** A DEFINITION SHOULD NOT EMBED BUSINESS RULES.

**Discussion:** Definitions should focus on the core essence of what something is. They should not prescribe any **business rule** — or even hint at doing so. Rules can change. To ensure continuity of business understanding over time, but additionally optimize agility, the best approach is to carefully segregate definitions and rules. For this reason keywords suggesting rules (e.g., *must*) should be carefully avoided in crafting definitions.

**Example: *transition requirement***

Poor definition: *a requirement that an organization must support to enable migration from current state to future state*

In English, the word *must* always suggests some rule(s). Obligations and necessities should be expressed and managed separately from definitions. The focus of every definition should simply be on core meaning.

Revised definition: *a requirement that enables migration from current state to future state*

In the revised definition the word *must*, as well as the implied obligation on an organization, has been removed. The definition simply expresses what the concept *is*.

**GUIDELINE 4.3** A DEFINITION SHOULD PROVIDE A CLEAR ANTECEDENT FOR EACH EMBEDDED PRONOUN.

**Discussion:** Ambiguity readily occurs when a pronoun in a definition lacks a clear antecedent. Each pronoun, if any, should be clearly resolved.

**Example: *context***

Poor definition: *a set of circumstances that form the setting for an event and that provide the basis by which it can be fully understood and analyzed*

This definition includes the pronoun *it*. Its antecedent might be any of *set (of circumstances)*, *setting*, *event*, or even *basis*. Different people could read distinct meanings based on resolution of the pronoun's antecedent. At the very least, careful readers will stumble over the unresolved reference.

Revised definition: *a set of circumstances that form the setting for an event and that provide the basis by which the event can be fully understood and analyzed*

The revised definition resolves the ambiguity by substituting *the event* for *it*.

**GUIDELINE 4.4** A DEFINITION SHOULD PROVIDE A CLEAR ANTECEDENT FOR EACH DEFINITE ARTICLE AFTER THE KICK-OFF WORD.

**Discussion:** Confusion or ambiguity can occur when a noun or noun phrase representing a general concept (not an individual thing) is preceded by the **definite article** (*the*) whose reference is unclear. Each such reference in a definition, if any, should be clearly resolved.

**Example: *stakeholder***

Poor definition: *a person or organization with an interest or concern in the initiative*

This definition includes the word *initiative*, which is preceded by the definite article *the*. The *the* suggests one of the following:

- Initiative has already appeared in the definition, and this additional use is referencing that same instance. A quick scan of the definition, however, shows no such prior use.
- The initiative is an individual thing. If it is an individual, however, why hasn't its name been used to clarify which initiative is meant?
- Neither of the above is the case and use of the definite article is simply inappropriate. Assuming this to be the case, the definition should read as follows.

Revised definition: *a person or organization with an interest or concern in an initiative*

The revised definition resolves the ambiguity by substituting the indefinite article *an* for the definite article *the*.

## 5. ALIGNING MULTIPLE DEFINITIONS

**GUIDELINE 5.1** THE DEFINITION OF A QUALIFIED TERM SHOULD NOT DEPART IN KIND FROM THE MEANING OF THE TERM THAT HAS BEEN QUALIFIED.

**Discussion:** Suppose a term has been defined; now a qualified version of that same term is being defined. The qualified term should never be defined as something fundamentally different in kind from the term that has been qualified. Otherwise, misunderstanding and miscommunication almost always result.

**Example: *capability, organizational capability***

Definition (*capability*): *an ability that enables something to achieve some goal(s) or objective(s)*

Poor definition (*organizational capability*): *a function internal to an organization comprising people, processes, technologies, information, and knowledge that enables the achievement of business goals and objectives*

The former definition defines a capability as an ability. The latter definition defines an organizational capability as a function. A function, however, is not an ability. The definitions show a fundamental mismatch *in kind* between the concepts being defined.

Revised definition (*organizational capability*): *a capability internal to an organization comprising people, processes, technologies, information, and knowledge that enables the achievement of business goals and objectives*

In the revised definition *capability* has been substituted for *function*. The meaning of the business concept *organizational capability*

now aligns naturally and intuitively with the meaning of the broader business concept, *capability*. *Organizational capability* is simply a special kind of *capability*, perhaps one of many.

Note that this revised definition includes the phrase *that enables the achievement of business goals and objectives*, which seems simply to echo what the definition of *capability* already says. That observation leads to the next guideline.

**GUIDELINE 5.2** THE DEFINITION OF A QUALIFIED TERM SHOULD NOT REPEAT (OR CONFLICT WITH) TEXT IN THE DEFINITION OF THE UNDERLYING TERM.

**Discussion:** Suppose a term has been defined; now a qualified version of that same term is being defined. The two terms are appropriately aligned in kind; that is, the kick-off word of the definition for the latter term is the former term itself. In that case there is no need to repeat text in the definition of the qualified term that already appears in the definition of the underlying term. That meaning applies intrinsically. Repeating it opens the door to divergence.

**Example: *capability, organizational capability***

Definition (*capability*): *an ability that enables something to achieve some goal(s) or objective(s)*

Poor definition (*organizational capability*): *a capability internal to an organization that comprises people, processes, technologies, information, and knowledge and that enables the achievement of business goals and objectives*



The definition of the qualified term *organizational capability* properly uses the kick-off word *capability*. The definition of *capability* includes the phrase *enables something to achieve some goal(s) or objective(s)*. The sense of that phrase is repeated in the definition of the qualified term. Assuming there is no subtle difference in meaning imposed by the word *business* in that definition (an important assumption that should be validated carefully) the corresponding phrase in the definition of the qualified term is redundant. The phrase should be removed.

Revised definition (*organizational capability*): *a capability internal to an organization that comprises people, processes, technologies, information, and knowledge*

The careful reader will note this revised definition remains somewhat ambiguous. What does the phrase *that comprises people, processes, technologies, information, and knowledge* actually modify? Does it modify *capability* or *organization*? The target noun for every modifying phrase should be crystal clear.

Revised definition (*organizational capability*): *a capability that is internal to an organization and that comprises people, processes, technologies, information, and knowledge*

This second revised definition features insertion of an *and* before the phrase *that comprises people, processes, technologies, information, and knowledge*. Now the definition is clear that the target noun is *capability*, not *organization*. In addition, to balance the definition structurally and further

clarify what is being modified, *that is* has been inserted before the phrase *internal to an organization*.

**GUIDELINE 5.3** A DEFINITION OF A TERM, OR SOME SIGNIFICANT PART OF THAT DEFINITION, SHOULD NOT BE REPEATED IN THE DEFINITION OF ANOTHER TERM.

**Discussion:** The meaning of each term in a **vocabulary** should be single-sourced — in other words, specified in one and only one place. Repetition of text expressing the same meaning in different definitions opens the door to unintended or undetected divergence in that meaning and to unnecessary and counterproductive questioning of the corresponding definitions.

**Example: *process, process model***

Definition (*process*): *a set of activities whose sequence is designed to produce some desired result*

Poor definition (*process model*): *a representation, usually visual, of the sequential flow among a set of activities*

The definition of *process* includes the core notion *set of activities (having) sequence*. This same notion is repeated in the definition of *process model*. Assuming there is no subtle difference in meaning imposed by the word *flow* in the latter definition (an important assumption that should be validated carefully) the corresponding phrase in the definition of *process model* is redundant. It should be removed. Such repetition is undesirable because it opens the door to divergence of the definitions. The difference in wording might also be taken as indicating something different is meant than simply *process*.

Revised definition (*process model*): *a representation, usually visual, of a process*

The phrase *the sequential flow among a set of activities* has been replaced by the term *process* in this definition of *process model*.

The meaning of that phrase is already expressed in the definition of *process*. To highlight the appearance of defined terms in definitional text, special notation such as capitalization and/or colored font can be useful.

Definition with colored term (*process model*): *a representation, usually visual, of a **process***

**GUIDELINE 5.4** THE DEFINITION OF A COMPOUND TERM SHOULD NOT DEPART IN MEANING FROM THAT OF THE UNDERLYING TERMS TAKEN COLLECTIVELY.

**Discussion:** Suppose two or more terms have been defined; now another term is being defined that is simply those same terms taken together. The meaning of such a **compound term** should not depart from the collective meaning of the two or more compounded terms individually. Otherwise, misunderstanding and miscommunication can result. Also, the definitions of the two or more compounded terms should not be repeated for the compound term. To do so invites divergence.

**Example:** *process, model, process model*

Definition (*process*): *a set of activities whose sequence is designed to produce some desired result*

Definition (*model*): *a representation and simplification of reality created to provide insight or understanding for some audience*

Poor definition (*process model*): *a representation, usually visual, of a **process***

If *model* is defined, and *process* is defined, is a process model really something more than those two terms taken together? The fact that *process model* has been defined with words beyond just *process* and *model* suggests it might.

Assuming there is no subtle difference in meaning imposed by the phrase *usually visual* in the definition of *process model* (an important assumption that should be validated carefully) the term *model* can be substituted in that definition. Indicating that a process model is a representation is redundant. According to the definition of *model* all models are representations.

Revised definition (*process model*):  
*a **model** of a **process***

Note: *A process model is usually visual.*

This revised definition simply references the two compounded terms *model* and *process*. The meaning of the concept *process model* now aligns naturally and intuitively with the meanings of the underlying concepts, *process* and *model*. The additional phrase *usually visual* has been included as a note.

**GUIDELINE 5.5** A SET OF DEFINITIONS SHOULD NOT BE CIRCULAR.

**Discussion:** A set of two definitions is **circular** if both definitions embed the term for the other concept. A set of three or more definitions is circular if each definition embeds the term for the next. There is no good starting point for understanding such a set of concepts. Circular sets of definitions always embody one or more faulty assumptions.

**Example: *business requirement, initiative, stakeholder***

Definition in a circular set (*business requirement*): *a need or demand required of a solution by some stakeholder(s)*

Definition in a circular set (*initiative*): *specific projects, programs, or actions undertaken to satisfy business requirements*

Definition in a circular set (*stakeholder*): *a person or organization with an interest or concern in an initiative*

These three definitions are circular. The definition of *business requirement* references *stakeholder*, whose definition in turn references *initiative*, whose definition — coming full circle — references *business requirement*. Circularities cause confusion and are simply unnecessary. A **business vocabulary** includes only a tiny fraction of the words in a natural language like English, so circularities can be easily avoided.

Resolving circularities requires careful analysis of the definitions involved. If you had to start from scratch, which concept is most basic? Conceptually, where would you start in building up the sum of the knowledge that the business vocabulary represents?

The suspect definition in the circularity above is the one for *business requirement*. Maybe no stakeholder wants to own or be seen as originator of some business requirement. Does that fact make the business requirement *not* a business requirement? *No*. And if not *business requirement* what would you call such a thing?

So the phrase *by some stakeholder(s)* should be removed from the definition of *business requirement*.

revised definition (*business requirement*): *a need or demand required of a solution*

This definition captures the essence of the concept. It also breaks the circularity among the three original definitions.

Definitions of concepts such as *initiative* and *stakeholder* that reference other terms should ultimately trace back to *seed concepts*. A **seed concept** is one whose meaning depends on no other concept defined within the vocabulary that includes it. Its definition therefore embeds no other terms included within that vocabulary. All words in the definition of a seed concept take their meanings from definitions in a common natural-language dictionary. Seed concepts are fundamental building blocks of business vocabularies.

## 6. CONTEXT

**GUIDELINE 6.1** AN ENTRY WHOSE MEANING CANNOT BE STANDARDIZED FOR THE ENTIRE SCOPE OF A VOCABULARY SHOULD BE DISAMBIGUATED BY CONTEXT.

**Discussion:** A fundamental goal for a business vocabulary is to standardize meaning such that every term can be used without ambiguity in any business communication. Therefore, each term should have one and only one meaning.

Achieving that goal, unfortunately, is not always possible. The scope of intended usage for a vocabulary may include some audience for which a particular term has a deeply ingrained and well-justified meaning that unavoidably clashes with the meaning for some other audience — or possibly even that same audience. As the scope of the vocabulary grows wider, the more likely such clashes become.

Where standardizing the meaning of an entry proves pragmatically unachievable, the entry should be disambiguated by **context**.

**Example: *work product***

Definition likely to clash: *a diagram, document, or collection of notes created by business analysts in business modeling or requirements development*

This definition defines *work product* for an audience of business analysts. But operational business areas also have work products for conducting day-to-day work — e.g., bills of lading, blueprints, estimates, price quotes, schematics, etc.

The definition above is therefore likely to clash with understanding of *work product* by a business audience. Even if no business audience per se is within the scope of vocabulary usage, the definition could cause confusion within the business analyst audience itself. Day-to-day work products used by some targeted business area are often examined as a routine part of business analysis activity.

The preferred solution is to rename *work product* for business analysts' own activities using appropriate qualification — e.g., *business analysis work product*.

That solution, however, may be deemed too disruptive. In such case the entry should be qualified by context, as follows:

***work product* [business analysis]**

*a diagram, document, or collection of notes created by business analysts in business modeling or requirements development*

This revised entry includes a second term in brackets, *business analysis*, to ensure the context of the definition is clear. This second term should itself also have a definition in the business vocabulary.

**Example: *product***

Definition likely to clash: *a solution created by business analysts for some business need(s), usually but not always ultimately including software*

This definition defines *product* for an audience of business analysts. But in day-to-day work, operational business areas also support products — the value-add goods or services requested by third parties. The definition above is therefore likely to clash.

The preferred solution is to rename *product* for business analysts' own activities using appropriate qualification — e.g., *business analysis product*.

That solution, however, may be deemed too disruptive. In such case the entry should be qualified by context, as follows:

***product [business analysis]***

*a solution created by business analysts for some business need(s), usually but not always ultimately including software*

This revised entry includes a second term in brackets, *business analysis*, to ensure the context of the definition is clear.

The careful reader may have noticed that the two disambiguated definitions in the examples presented in this section (for *work product [business analysis]* and *product [business analysis]*, respectively) violate guidelines presented in Section 5. The definition of the qualified term, *work product [business analysis]*, does not build on the definition of the unqualified term, *product [business analysis]*.

This anomaly can be eliminated by using the latter term as the kick-off word in the definition of the former term.

***product [business analysis]***

*a product [business analysis] in the form of a diagram, document, or collection of notes created in business modeling or requirements development*

This revised definition for *work product [business analysis]* features the new kick-off word *product [business analysis]*. The phrase *by business analysts* has also been removed from the definition since it already appears in the definition of broader concept, *product [business analysis]*. The revised definition assumes a *work product [business analysis]* has the sense of *solution ... for some business need(s)*, the essence of the meaning of *product [business analysis]*. This assumption, of course, should be validated carefully.

# GLOSSARY

Term	Definition	Example(s) <sup>1</sup>	Note(s)	Dictionary Basis <sup>2</sup>
<b>business rule</b>	a criterion that guides conduct or action or that shapes an operational business decision	1. A customer must not place more than three rush orders charged to its credit account. 2. A customer must be considered a preferred customer if the customer places more than five orders over \$1,000 in a calendar year.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A <b>business rule</b> that guides conduct or action is called a <i>behavioral rule</i>. See example 1 at left.</li> <li>• A <b>business rule</b> that shapes an operational business decision is called a <i>definitional</i> (or <i>decision</i>) <i>rule</i>. See example 2 at left.</li> </ul>	
<b>business vocabulary</b>	a <b>vocabulary</b> used by a business, government or industry, possibly but not necessarily for a special area of knowledge			
<b>circular definitions</b>	a set of two or more <b>definitions</b> each of which embeds the <b>term</b> for another <b>concept</b> defined in the set	The following three <b>definitions</b> are <b>circular</b> . <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>business requirement</i>: a need or demand required of a solution by some <u>stakeholder(s)</u></li> <li>• <i>initiative</i>: specific projects, programs, or actions undertaken to satisfy <u>business requirements</u></li> <li>• <i>stakeholder</i>: a person or organization with an interest or concern in an <u>initiative</u></li> </ul> The <b>definition</b> of <i>business requirement</i> references <i>stakeholder</i> , whose <b>definition</b> in turn references <i>initiative</i> , whose <b>definition</b> , coming full circle, references <i>business requirement</i> .	<b>Circular definitions</b> in a <b>business vocabulary</b> cause confusion and are simply unnecessary. Resolving them requires careful analysis of the <b>definitions</b> involved: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you had to start from scratch, which <b>concept</b> is most basic?</li> <li>• Conceptually, where would you start in building up the sum of the knowledge that the <b>business vocabulary</b> represents?</li> </ul>	

<sup>1</sup> Examples designated “A” and “B” pertain to aspects of the same problem in multiple entries.

<sup>2</sup> Each dictionary basis appearing in this column is from *Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary*.

Term	Definition	Example(s) <sup>1</sup>	Note(s)	Dictionary Basis <sup>2</sup>
<b>compound term</b>	a <b>term</b> consisting of two or more other <b>terms</b>	Assuming <i>process</i> and <i>model</i> are defined <b>terms</b> , <i>process model</i> is a <b>compound term</b> .	The meaning of a <b>compound term</b> should not depart from the collective meaning of the two or more compounded <b>terms</b> individually. Otherwise, misunderstanding and miscommunication can result.	
<b>concept</b>	something conceived in the mind : THOUGHT, IDEA, NOTION:			(taken directly from MWUD)
<b>concept model</b>	a blueprint for the semantics represented by a <b>business vocabulary</b>		Contrast with <b>data model</b> .	
<b>ConceptSpeak™</b>	the Business Rule Solutions, LLC (BRS) set of conventions, guidelines, and techniques for defining <b>terms</b> , designing a <b>concept model</b> , and developing a structured <b>business vocabulary</b>			
<b>context</b>	some thing that provides boundaries for the meaning of the <b>term</b> representing a <b>concept</b>	Suppose <i>work product [business analysis]</i> is defined as <i>a diagram, document, or collection of notes created by business analysts in business modeling or requirements development</i> . The term <i>business analysis</i> corresponds to the thing that establishes the context within which this definition is correctly understood.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The <b>term</b> establishing the <b>context</b> for another <b>term</b> should be included in brackets after the latter <b>term</b>.</li> <li>• A term establishing context for another term should always have a definition in the same business vocabulary.</li> <li>• Acks to Sjir Nijssen for <b>definition</b>.</li> </ul>	
<b>data model</b>	a blueprint that identifies business entities and relationships to be represented as data in a system or database design		Contrast with <b>concept model</b> .	
<b>definite article</b>	the word <i>the</i> in English	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>the</i> in “<i>the Eiffel Tower</i>”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contrast with the indefinite article <i>a</i>, as in <i>a tower</i>.</li> <li>• Contrast with <b>definite modifier</b>.</li> </ul>	



Term	Definition	Example(s) <sup>1</sup>	Note(s)	Dictionary Basis <sup>2</sup>
<b>definite modifier</b>	a modifier specifically designating an <b>individual</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>the</i> in “the Eiffel Tower”</li> <li>• <i>this</i> in “this card”</li> <li>• <i>that</i> in “that house”</li> <li>• <i>my</i> in “my father”</li> <li>• <i>Paul's</i> in “Paul's absence”</li> </ul>	Contrast with <b>definite article</b> .	<i>[definite 1, adjective] 3a : of a grammatical modifier : typically designating an identified or immediately identifiable person or thing</i>
<b>definition</b>	a word or phrase expressing the essential nature of a person or thing or class of persons or of things : an answer to the question *what is x?* or *what is an x?*	Refer to any of the <b>definitions</b> in this Glossary.		<i>(taken directly from MWUD 2)</i>
<b>entry</b>	a set of one or more textual passages, possibly along with information in other media, that serve to define and explain a <b>concept</b>	<p>The following text, which includes a <b>definition</b> and two <b>notes</b>, represents a single <b>entry</b> in a <b>business vocabulary</b> for the <b>concept process</b>.</p> <p><i>process: a set of activities whose sequence is designed to produce some desired result</i></p> <p><i>Note: A process takes raw materials or inputs and transforms them into finished goods or outputs, thereby creating or adding value.</i></p> <p><i>Note: A process is guided by policies, rules, standards, guidelines, and work instructions as appropriate.</i></p>	An <b>entry</b> usually consists of text, but may include a graphic illustration, diagram, recording or information in other media as useful to communicate meaning.	
<b>general concept</b>	a <b>concept</b> that can correspond to potentially many <b>instances</b>	<p>A. <i>tower</i></p> <p>B. <i>nation</i></p> <p>C. <i>scientist</i></p> <p>D. <i>requirement technique</i></p>	Contrast with <b>individual</b> .	
<b>individual</b>	one particular thing	<p>A. the Eiffel Tower</p> <p>B. Canada</p> <p>C. Isaac Newton</p> <p>D. the requirements technique ‘use cases’</p>	Contrast with <b>general concept</b> .	<i>1 : a single or particular being or thing or group of beings or things</i>
<b>instance</b>	an example or a case	The real-life people named Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, and Marie Curie are <b>instances</b> of the <b>concept scientist</b> .	A value of a field or data type in a stored database or file is not an <b>instance</b> as meant by this Primer.	<i>2b : something that is available or is offered as an illustrative case</i>

Term	Definition	Example(s) <sup>1</sup>	Note(s)	Dictionary Basis <sup>2</sup>
<b>kick-off word</b>	the first significant word or word phrase in a <b>definition</b>	In the following <b>definition</b> of <i>developer</i> the kick-off word is <i>professional</i> . <i>developer: a professional responsible for the engineering of solutions</i>	Articles like “a”, “an”, and “the” are not considered significant.	
<b>note</b>	a brief writing intended to assist the memory or to serve as the basis for a fuller statement	Refer to any of the <b>notes</b> in this Glossary.		<i>(taken directly from MWUD 3b1)</i>
<b>seed concept</b>	a <b>concept</b> whose <b>definition</b> embeds no other defined <b>terms</b>	In the <b>vocabulary</b> presented in this Glossary: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The <b>concept note</b> is a <b>seed concept</b>.</li> <li>The <b>concept kick-off word</b> is not a <b>seed concept</b>.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A <b>seed concept</b> is one whose meaning depends on no other <b>concept</b> defined within the <b>vocabulary</b> that includes it.</li> <li>All words in the <b>definition</b> of a <b>seed concept</b> take their meanings from <b>definitions</b> in a common natural-language dictionary.</li> <li><b>Seed concepts</b> are fundamental building blocks of <b>business vocabularies</b>.</li> </ul>	
<b>synonym</b>	a word having the same meaning as another word	“automobile”, “car”	A <b>synonym</b> can be included as its own <b>entry</b> in a <b>vocabulary</b> . The “see” <b>term</b> in the <b>synonym entry</b> should be the preferred <b>term</b> for usage.	<i>(taken directly from MWUD 1)</i>
<b>term</b>	the name given to a <b>general concept</b>	A. “tower” B. “nation” C. “scientist” D. “requirement technique”		<i>8a : a word or expression that has a precisely limited meaning in some uses or is peculiar to a science, art, profession, trade, or special subject</i>
<b>vocabulary</b>	a list or collection of words or of words and phrases usually alphabetically arranged and explained or defined	Refer to the collection of <b>terms</b> and their respective <b>entries</b> in this Glossary.		<i>(taken directly from MWUD 1)</i>

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**Ronald G. Ross** is Principal and Co-Founder of [Business Rule Solutions, LLC \(BRS\)](#), where he actively develops and applies the BRS methodology including [RuleSpeak<sup>®</sup>](#), [DecisionSpeak<sup>™</sup>](#), and [ConceptSpeak<sup>™</sup>](#). Ron consults to companies worldwide through BRS.

Ron is recognized internationally as the “father of business rules.” He is the author of ten professional books including the groundbreaking first book on business rules *The Business Rule Book* in 1994. His newest are:

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Ron serves as Executive Editor of [BRCommunity.com](#) and its flagship publication, *Business Rules Journal*. He is a sought-after speaker at conferences world-wide. More than 50,000 people have heard him speak; many more have attended his seminars and read his books.

Ron has served as Chair of the annual [International Business Rules & Decisions Forum](#) conference since 1997, now part of the [Building Business Capability](#) (BBC) conference. He is one of three members on the BBC Program Committee. He was a charter member of the [Business Rules Group \(BRG\)](#) in the 1980s, and an editor of its [Business Motivation Model](#) (BMM) standard and the [Business Rules Manifesto](#). He is active in OMG standards development, with core involvement in [SBVR](#) (*Semantics of Business Vocabulary and Business Rules*). He was also a contributor to the IIBA’s BABOK v3.

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## ABOUT BUSINESS RULE SOLUTIONS



**Business Rule Solutions, LLC** is the recognized world leader in the advancement of business rules. Co-Founders Ronald G. Ross and Gladys S.W. Lam are internationally acclaimed as the foremost experts and practitioners of related techniques and methodology.

Since its inception in 1996, BRS has helped pilot the worldwide growth of business rules. BRS offers groundbreaking methodology for business rules, decision engineering, reverse-engineering, and business vocabulary (concept models), including the popular RuleSpeak<sup>®</sup>, ConceptSpeak<sup>™</sup>, DecisionSpeak<sup>™</sup>, and TableSpeak<sup>™</sup>. BRS services include consulting, mentoring, training, workshops, publications, and presentations. For more information about BRS, visit <http://www.BRSolutions.com>.