Application of qualifying variants for genomic analysis

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Abstract

Motivation:

Qualifying variants (QVs) are genomic alterations selected using defined criteria within genomic processing pipelines. Although essential for both genetic research and clinical diagnostics, QVs are typically regarded as simple filters rather than dynamic, multifaceted components that influence the entire analytical workflow. Existing best practices adhere to variant classification standards and standardised workflows, yet a unified framework to integrate and optimise QVs for advanced, multi-stage applications is lacking.

Results:

We propose a redefinition of QVs by outlining several common QV sets and demonstrating their roles within analysis pipelines. By introducing new terminology and a standard reference model, our framework enables systematic integration and standardisation of QVs, thereby enhancing reproducibility, interpretability, and interdisciplinary communication. A validation case study, implementing American College of Medical Genetics and Genomics (ACMG) criteria in a disease cohort demonstrates that our standardised approach achieves results identical to conventional methods while offering improved clarity and scalability.

Availability:

The source code and data are accessible at https://github.com/DylanLawless/qv2025lawless. The QV file used in this work is available from https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15105594 (qv_acmg_svnindel_criteria_20250225.yaml). The QV framework is available under the MIT licence, and the dataset will be maintained for at least two years following publication.

Acronyms

ACMG American College of Medical Genetics and Genomics	. 2
CNV Copy Number Variant	. 8
FAIR Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable	. 5
GWAS Genome Wide Association Study	. 4
IRI Internationalised Resource Identifier	. 7
MAF Minor Allele Frequency	.9
PPI Patient and Public Involvement	. 5
PRS Polygenic Risk Score	. 4
QC Quality Control	. 4
QV Qualifying variant	. 4
RDF Resource Description Framework	. 7
SF Secondary Findings	. 5
SHA-256 Secure Hash Algorithm 256	.7
SNV/INDEL Single Nucleotide Variant / Insertion Deletion	.8
SNOMED CT Systematized Nomenclature of Medicine-Clinical Terms	. 7
UUID Universally Unique Identifier	. 7
VEP Variant Effect Predictor	.9
WGS Whole Genome Sequencing	4

1 Introduction

Qualifying variant (QV)s are genomic alterations selected by specific criteria within genome processing pipelines, serving as dynamic elements essential for both research and clinical diagnostics. QVs are not merely static filters applied at a single step in an analysis pipeline; rather, they are dynamic, multifaceted elements that permeate the entire workflow, from initial data quality control to final result interpretation. This nuanced perspective underscores that QVs play an integral role in shaping the fidelity and reproducibility of genomic analyses, enabling the iterative refinement of data and facilitating the integration of diverse analytical strategies throughout the pipeline.

Often, QV selection adheres to established variant classification and reporting standards (1–5) and standardised workflows (6–8). However a unified framework for QVs is lacking, despite the recognised benefits of similar initiatives, such as Polygenic Risk Score (PRS) reporting standards (9; 10). For instance, tools like vcfexpress (11) enable flexible, rapid filtering and formatting of VCF files using user-defined expressions. By providing filtering criteria in a standardised QV format, our approach complements such tools. This role is particularly important for reproducibility across distributed computing environments (12). This approach integrates with workflow managers such as Snakemake (13) or Nextflow (14), streamlining genomic processing tasks.

The criteria for QV selection vary by application. For example, Genome Wide Association Study (GWAS) may focus on common variants, while clinical analyses usually target rare or known pathogenic variants. Previous studies have demonstrated the utility of QVs (15; 16), yet no standardised framework exists. Here, we detail four typical applications of QV sets:

- 1. **QV passing Quality Control (QC) only**: Generates large datasets (e.g. > 500,000 variants per subject) for GWAS or initial Whole Genome Sequencing (WGS) pre-processing.
- 2. **Flexible QV**: Balances between QC and false positives, yielding intermediate datasets (e.g. fewer than 100,000 variants per subject) for uses such as rare variant association testing.
- 3. **QV for rare disease**: Applies stringent filtering to produce smaller datasets (e.g. < 1,000 variants per subject), targeting known genes or single causal variants.

4. **Known disease panel QV set**: Focuses on well-established gene panels with pathogenic variants (e.g. the ACMG Secondary Findings (SF) set) for clinical reporting (17).

These examples illustrate a few common applications without providing an exhaustive classification of all possible QV uses. The careful selection and categorisation of QVs are thus critical for accurate reporting and reproducibility, sometimes even more so than the choice of the analysis pipeline itself (18).

As WGS becomes standard for large cohorts (19; 20), the integration of diverse QV protocols is critical for data cleaning and analysis. During sequencing analysis several layers can be responsible for triggering QV protocols, including pre-existing metadata, technical QC results, and post-calling annotations, highlighting the need for a clear, standardised vocabulary. Our framework offers structured, human- and machine-readable definitions that adhere to the principles for Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable (FAIR) (21), thereby promoting integration across databases (22; 24). We implement standard vocabularies, unique identifiers, and formats like YAML to support this integration.

In a clinical setting it is necessary to bridge the gap between technical detail and lay understanding. By explicitly documenting variant qualifying criteria and making QV data accessible, our framework builds trust and supports meaningful Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) (23). The QV file adapts by integrating the main criteria variables with a optionally dedicated fields for both technical description and PPI description. This approach captures the analysis intent defined by the QV set creator and embeds patient preferences from the start. For example, patient preferences recorded in the PPI description can be automatically incorporated into a genetic report without additional interpretation, ensuring clarity and consistency throughout the analysis. This transparency guarantees that both experts and laypersons receive information in a format suited to their needs, thereby improving diagnostic traceability and accelerating the translation of genetic research into clinical practice.



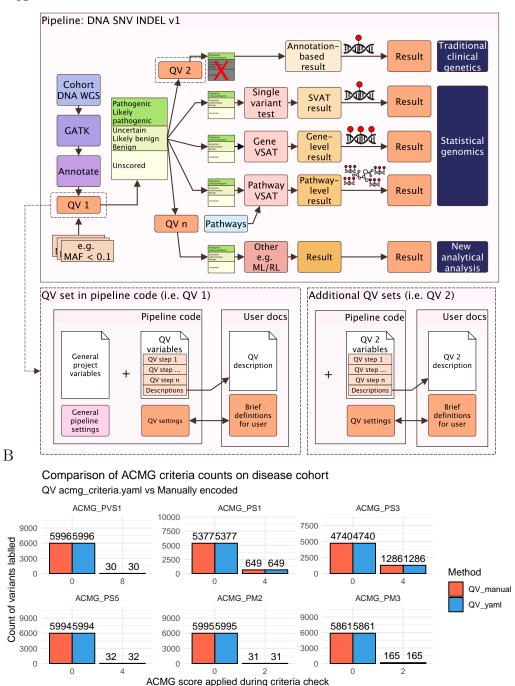


Figure 1: Summary of the QV application for a WGS pipeline. In panel (A), QV1 and QV2 are presented as sequentially piped protocol steps. In this example, QV2 differs from QV1 by retaining only likely/pathogenic variants (indicated by a red X). The QV file loaded by the analysis pipeline comprise a description field (optional) and a variables field (mandatory). The QV criteria may be spread throughout the pipeline. (B) Validation case study using an ACMG criteria subset, demonstrating a 100% match between manually encoded and standardised YAML-based methods (qv_files/acmg_criteria.yaml) for assigning pathogenicity scores.

2 Methods

2.1 Implementation

By introducing a new vocabulary and a standard reference model for QVs, we aim to clarify the concept and improve communication and methodological discussion across disciplines for more advanced tasks. Implementation configurations and roles within analysis pipelines include, for example: theoretical pipelining of QV sets, establishing public or standardised QV sets for specific analytical scenarios, and recognition that QVs are integral throughout the analysis pipeline rather than confined to a single end-stage

We introduce a simple framework for the effective use of QV protocols, comprising four components as illustrated in **Figure 1** (A):

- 1. Variables: The criteria variables sourced as part of the pipeline (see Box 2).
- 2a. Technical description: An optional narrative detailing each step within the overall QV set (see Box 2).
- **2b. PPI description**: An optional narrative providing a patient-focused interpretation of the protocol, incorporating preferences and priorities.
- 3. QV set ID: A unique identifier that links analysis records.
- 4. Source code: The implementation of the variables file within the pipeline code, for example through custom scripts or workflow managers.

We also propose the QV set ID as a unique identifier linking variant sets used in analyses. This facilitates integration into databases, by representing data in formats such as Resource Description Framework (RDF) schemas (24), and allows for features including Secure Hash Algorithm 256 (SHA-256) hash functions, Universally Unique Identifier (UUID)s, semantic combinations, Internationalised Resource Identifier (IRI) incorporation, registry-based allocation, and standard mapping such as Systematized Nomenclature of Medicine-Clinical Terms (SNOMED CT). The results can be used alongside other genomic-specific concepts spanning from sample processing to the sequencing run (22).

This framework efficiently manages QV-specific variables (e.g. allele frequency thresholds) separately from general pipeline settings, ensuring clarity and specificity.

Its versatile format supports applications across genomic analyses and by linking the QV set ID to both results and raw data sources in a database for downstream interpretation and reporting.

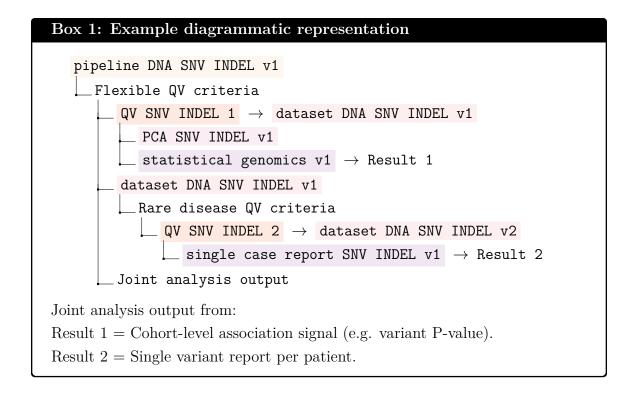
2.2 Example application of qualifying variants in WGS analysis

Multiple QV protocols can be combined to generate progressively filtered datasets tailored to specific analytical needs. Often, different QV sets are applied sequentially, with the final outcomes merged to address distinct objectives. For instance, a comprehensive analysis pipeline might integrate:

- QV SNV/INDEL Single Nucleotide Variant / Insertion Deletion (SNV/INDEL),
- QV CNV Copy Number Variant (CNV),
- QV structural variation,
- QV rare disease known, and
- QV statistical association QC.

The final analysis yields (1) a joint cohort disease association (e.g. variant P-values) and (2) individual single-case results (e.g. clinical genetics diagnosis for a patient) (25; 26). As an example, in **Figure 1** (A) we focus on a SNV/INDEL pipeline employing two QV sets: QV SNV INDEL 1 for flexible cohort-level filtering, and QV SNV INDEL 2 for stricter filtering in subsequent single-case analysis. The pipeline is illustrated in **Box 1**, and can be summarised as follows:

"A cohort of patient WGS data was analysed to identify genetic determinants for phenotype X. Initially, a flexible QV set was applied using the pipeline DNA SNV INDEL v1, which implements the QV SNV INDEL 1 criteria to produce the prepared dataset (dataset DNA SNV INDEL v1). This dataset was then analysed alongside other modules (e.g. PCA SNV INDEL v1 and statistical genomics v1) to derive a cohort-level association signal (Result 1). Next, the same prepared dataset was re-filtered with the stricter QV SNV INDEL 2 criteria to identify known causal variants for each patient, yielding the final dataset (dataset DNA SNV INDEL v2) and resulting in individual case reports (Result 2)."



2.3 Usage in a Validation Study

In the following validation study, we demonstrate that standardised QV criteria achieve a 100% match in criterion application when compared to the conventional manual approach. This analysis was performed on an in-house rare disease cohort of 940 individuals, which had been pre-processed for QC and filtered using a minimal QV test set. Initially, we implemented an ACMG variant classification protocol (1) manually. We then re-implemented the same protocol using the new standardised QV criteria in YAML format. Our findings confirm that both methods produce identical results.

We used genome-wide set of variants which was filtering to target rare variants (Minor Allele Frequency (MAF) < 0.01) restricted to known disease genes based on the Genomics England panel "Primary immunodeficiency or monogenic inflammatory bowel disease," retrieved using our PanelAppRex R repository (https://github.com/DylanLawless/PanelAppRex) (27). This provided us with 6026 candidate variants annotated with 376 information sources.

The annotation interpretation dataset was prepared in R using GuRu, our variant interpretation tool that consolidates all annotation sources and scores variants as candidate causal. The dataset was imported from gVCF format as output by Variant Effect Predictor (VEP).

We selected the first eight ACMG criteria for assigning pathogenicity scores to variants (1); six of these were relevant for this cohort. First, the analysis was performed manually by hard-coding each criterion in the pipeline script, reflecting a typical workflow. Second, the same criteria were imported from the QV YAML file for the new standardised approach. The outputs from both methods were captured and compared. The QV criteria were provided in YAML format in the file qv_files/acmg_criteria.yaml (see Box 2).

Additional details of the YAML criteria in this QV set include definitions for ACMG_PS1 (identifying previously established pathogenic amino acid changes), ACMG_PS3 (supporting functional studies with matching inheritance patterns), and ACMG_PS5 (covering compound heterozygosity with high-impact variants). The criteria for ACMG_PM2 and ACMG_PM3 assess variant frequency and in trans occurrences, respectively, while PS2 and PS4 were not applicable to this cohort.

Individual steps within the QV criteria can be further classified for organisational purposes using simple labels such as "QC" and "filter". For example, filtering thresholds (e.g. allele frequency > 0.1 in a cohort, < 0.1 in gnomAD) may be applied directly to exclude variants, while annotation-based criteria (e.g. QC flags) might not remove variants outright but instead inform downstream analyses that integrate multiple QV filters.

```
Box 2: qv_files/acmg_criteria.yaml
qv_set_id: acmg_sf_v3.2
acmg pvs1:
 description technical: >
   Null variants (IMPACT = HIGH) in genes where
    loss-of-function causes disease.
    Includes homozygous variants, dominant inheritance,
    and compound heterozygous cases.
    Compound heterozygosity is considered when both
   variants are HIGH impact. WARNING: Not phase checked.
 logic: "or"
  conditions:
    - condition:
        field: IMPACT
        value: "HIGH"
        operator: "=="
shasum -a 256 acmg_criteria.yaml | fold -w 32
d91fde41a5fff48631adecba38773d61
9ae8cd5cff9b9b42ef7f5efbd6bbfcdf
acmg_criteria.yaml
```

3 Results

3.1 Validation Case Study

We validated our QV protocol using ACMG-based criteria for a rare disease cohort of 940 individuals. We then conducted the variant classification using two approaches: a conventional manual method with hard-coded criteria, and our new YAML-based implementation As shown in **Figure 1** (B), the outputs from both methods were identical, demonstrating a 100% match. This confirms that our standardised, shareable QV criteria can be imported and applied programmatically with equivalent accuracy, providing a reproducible resource that is adaptable across different pipelines and programming environments. The final annotation results in this pipeline allow

for automated retrieval of top candidate pathogenic variants using ACMG scoring methods (1; 5).

4 Summary

This paper introduces a standardised framework for integrating qualifying variants into genomic analysis pipelines, enhancing reproducibility, interpretability and the seamless translation of research findings into clinical practice.

5 Funding

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7 Contributions

DL designed the work and contributed to the manuscript. AS, SB, VS, DH, SÖ, JA contributed to the manuscript. JF, SF, LJS supervised the work, manuscript, and applied for funding.

8 Competing interests

None declared.

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