

# Methodology for Assessing the State of the Practice for Domain X

**Spencer Smith**

McMaster University, Canada

[smiths@mcmaster.ca](mailto:smiths@mcmaster.ca)

**Jacques Carette**

McMaster University, Canada

[carette@mcmaster.ca](mailto:carette@mcmaster.ca)

**Olu Owojaiye**

McMaster University, Canada

[owojaiyo@mcmaster.ca](mailto:owojaiyo@mcmaster.ca)

**Peter Michalski**

McMaster University, Canada

[michap@mcmaster.ca](mailto:michap@mcmaster.ca)

**Ao Dong**

McMaster University, Canada

[donga9@mcmaster.ca](mailto:donga9@mcmaster.ca)

---

## Abstract

...

**2012 ACM Subject Classification** Author: Please fill in 1 or more \ccsdsc macro

**Keywords and phrases** Author: Please fill in \keywords macro

## Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Overview of Steps in Assessing Quality of the Domain Software</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>How to Identify the Domain</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>How to Identify Candidate Software</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>How to Initially Filter the Software List</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Domain Analysis</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>Empirical Measures</b>	<b>5</b>
8.1	Raw Data . . . . .	6
8.2	Processed Data . . . . .	6
<b>9</b>	<b>Measure Using Measurement Template</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>Analytic Hierarchy Process</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>11</b>	<b>Rank Short List</b>	<b>8</b>

<b>12 Quality Specific Measures</b>	<b>9</b>
12.1 Installability [owner —OO]	9
12.2 Correctness [owner —OO]	9
12.3 Verifiability/Testability [owner —OO]	9
12.4 Validatability [owner —OO]	9
12.5 Reliability [owner —OO]	9
12.6 Robustness [owner —PM]	9
12.7 Performance [owner —PM]	9
12.8 Usability [owner —JC]	9
12.9 Maintainability [owner —PM]	9
12.10 Reusability [owner —PM]	9
12.11 Portability [owner —PM]	9
12.12 Understandability [owner —JC]	9
12.13 Interoperability [owner —AD]	9
12.14 Visibility/Transparency [owner —AD]	9
12.15 Reproducibility [owner —SS]	9
12.16 Productivity [owner —AD]	9
12.17 Sustainability [owner —SS]	9
12.18 Completeness [owner —AD]	9
12.19 Consistency [owner —AD]	9
12.20 Modifiability [owner —JC]	9
12.21 Traceability [owner —JC]	9
12.22 Unambiguity [owner —SS]	9
12.23 Verifiability [owner —SS]	9
12.24 Abstract [owner —SS]	9
<b>13 Using Data to Rank Family Members</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>A Appendix</b>	<b>9</b>
A.1 Survey for the Selected Projects	9
A.1.1 Information about the developers and users	10
A.1.2 Information about the software	10
A.2 Empirical Measures Considerations - Raw Data	11
A.3 Empirical Measures Considerations - Processed Data	11
A.4 Empirical Measures Considerations - Tool Tests	11
A.4.1 git-stats	12
A.4.2 scc	12
A.4.3 git-of-theseus	12
A.4.4 hercules	12
A.4.5 git-repo-analysis	12
A.4.6 HubListener	12
A.4.7 gitinspector	13

## 1 Introduction

Purpose and scope of the document. [Needs to be filled in. Should reference the overall research proposal, and the “state of the practice” exercise in particular. Reference questions we are trying to answer. —SS]

Note the following formatting conventions of this document. Red text denotes a link to information within the document. Purple text denotes a link to supplementary information that is external to this document. Blue text denotes a URL link.[\[needs to be added to intro to explain convention —PM\]](#)

## 2 Research Questions

The following are research questions that we want to answer in order to assess the state of practice of research software in our chosen domain:

1. What artifacts do current software packages produce?
2. What tools are used by current software packages?
3. What principles, processes, and methodologies are used in the development of current software packages?
4. What are the pain points for developers working on SCS projects? What aspects of the existing processes, methodologies and tools do they consider could potentially be improved? What processes, methodologies and tools have they changed in order to reduce obstacles?
5. What are the attitudes and actions of research software developers toward:
  - a. sustainability?
  - b. usability?
  - c. modifiability?
6. For a given domain of research software, what current projects provide the best examples of high quality software and documentation?

## 3 Overview of Steps in Assessing Quality of the Domain Software

1. Start with the state of practice research questions. (Section 2) [\[To be updated based on feedback —PM\]](#)
2. Identify the domain. (Section 4) [\[In second review —PM\]](#)
3. *Domain Experts*: Create a top ten list of software packages in the domain. ([Meeting Agenda with Domain Experts](#))
4. Brief the Domain Experts on the overall objective, research proposal, research questions, measurement template, survey for short list projects, usability tests, performance benchmarks, maintainability experiments. ([Meeting Agenda with Domain Experts](#))
5. Identify broad list of candidate software packages in the domain. (Section 5)
6. Preliminary filter of software packages list. (Section 6) [\[To be edited based on feedback —PM\]](#)
7. *Domain Experts*: Review domain software list. ([Meeting Agenda with Domain Experts](#))
8. Domain Analysis. (Section 7)[\[To be edited - add intro —PM\]](#)
9. *Domain Experts*: Vet domain analysis. ([Meeting Agenda with Domain Experts](#))
10. Gather source code and documentation for each prospective software package.
11. Collect empirical measures. (Section 8)
12. Measure using measurement template. (Section 9) [\[To be edited based on feedback —PM\]](#)
13. Use AHP process to rank the software packages. (Section 10)
14. Identify a short list of top software packages, typically four to six, for deeper exploration according to the AHP rankings of the measurements.
15. *Domain Experts*: Vet AHP ranking and short list. ([Meeting Agenda with Domain Experts](#))

16. With short list:
  - a. Survey developers ([Questions to Developers](#))
  - b. Usability experiments ([User Experiments](#))
  - c. Performance benchmarks[[note: this is still in consideration —PM](#)]
  - d. Maintainability experiments[[note: these experiments need to be completed - to be discussed at next meeting —PM](#)]
17. Rank short list. (Section 11) [[To be completed —PM](#)]
18. Document answers for research questions.

[The domain expert is involved in multiple steps in the process. How best to get their feedback? The domain experts are busy and are unlikely to devote significant time to the project. We need to quickly get to the point. Maybe something around task based inspection? Directed interview? —SS]

## 4 How to Identify the Domain

A domain of research software must be identified. Research software is defined in this exercise as “software that is used to generate, process or analyze results that [are intended] to appear in a publication” [[Hettrick et al., 2014](#)]. The chosen domain must have the following properties:

1. The domain must fall within the research software scope.
2. The domain must be well understood.
3. There must be a community of people studying the domain.
4. A preliminary search, or discussion with experts, suggests that there will be numerous, at least about 15, candidate software packages to study.
5. The software packages must have open source options.

Some examples of domains that fit these criteria are seismology software, as well as mesh generators and processors. These are described in [[Smith et al., 2018](#)] and [[Smith et al., 2016b](#)], respectively.

## 5 How to Identify Candidate Software

The candidate software can be found through search engine queries targeting authoritative lists of software from the domain, such as lists on GitHub and swMATH, and by searching domain related publications. Domain experts are also asked for their suggestions and are asked to review the list. The candidate software should have the following properties:

1. Major function(s) must fall within the identified domain.
2. Must have viewable source code.
3. Ideally have a git repository or ability to gather empirical measures found in Section 8.
4. The software cannot be marked as incomplete or in an initial development phase.

## 6 How to Initially Filter the Software List

The initial list of candidate software packages should first be filtered to a manageable size. Our target is about 30 packages. We want the list to include packages that are not marked as incomplete and are at least somewhat organized and understandable. We also want the list to be a good representation of the software domain, with packages having enough in

common with respect to functionality that it makes sense to compare the software. The initial list of candidate software should be filtered using the following properties sequentially:

1. Scope: The functionality of the domain software should be increasingly specific.
2. Usage: The installation procedure should appear to be clear or easy to figure out.
3. Age: Ideally the latest release or source code commit should be relatively recent, such as within the last 5 years, unless the candidate software appears to be well recommended and currently in use.

Copies of both the initial and filtered lists should be kept for traceability purposes.

## 7 Domain Analysis

The domain analysis consists of a commonality analysis of the family of software packages. Its purpose is to show the relationships between these packages, and to facilitate an understanding of the informal specification and development of them. Weiss [1997] defines commonality analysis as an approach to defining a family by identifying commonalities, variabilities, and common terminology for the family. Commonalities are goals, theories, models, definitions and assumptions that are common between family members. Likewise, variabilities are goals, theories, models, definitions and assumptions that are different between family members. The final result of the domain analysis will be tables of commonalities, variabilities, and parameters of variation of a program family, which Parnas [1976] defines as “a set of programs whose common properties are so extensive that it is advantageous to study the common properties of the programs before analyzing individual members”. Smith et al. [2008] present a template for conducting a commonality analysis, which was referred to when conducting this work. Weiss [1998] describes another commonality analysis technique for deciding the members of a program family which readers are encouraged to be familiar with. Smith and Chen [2004] provide an example of a commonality analysis for mesh generating software. The steps to produce a commonality analysis are:

1. Write an Introduction
2. Write the Overview of Domain
3. List Commonalities
4. List Variabilities
5. List Parameters of Variation
6. Add Terminology, Definitions, Acronyms

A sample commonality analysis for Lattice Boltzmann Solvers can be found [here](#).

## 8 Empirical Measures

Some quality measurements rely on the gathering of raw and processed empirical data. We focus on data that is reasonably easy to collect, which we combine and analyze for this assessment. The measures that are collected relate to the research questions that we want to answer. For instance, we collect some of the data to see how large a project is. Other measures intend to ascertain a project’s popularity, or how active the project is. Section 8.1 will orient the reader as to what raw data is collected. Some of this data can be observed from Git repository metrics. The rest can be collected using freeware tools. GitStats is used to measure the number of binary files as well as the number of added and deleted lines in a repository. The tool is also used to measure the number of commits over different

intervals of time. [Sloc Cloc and Code \(scc\)](#) is used to measure the number of text based files as well as the number of total, code, comment, and blank lines in a repository. These tools were selected due to their installability, usability, and ability to gather the empirical measures listed below. A guide for installing and running them can be found [here](#). Section 8.2 introduces the required processed data, which is calculated using the raw data.

## 8.1 Raw Data

The following raw data measures are extracted from repositories:

- Number of stars.
- Number of forks.
- Number of people watching the repository.
- Number of open pull requests.
- Number of closed pull requests.
- Number of developers.
- Number of open issues.
- Number of closed issues.
- Initial release date.
- Last commit date.
- Programming languages used.
- Number of text-based files.
- Number of total lines in text-based files.
- Number of code lines in text-based files.
- Number of comment lines in text-based files.
- Number of blank lines in text-based files.
- Number of binary files.
- Number of total lines added to text-based files.
- Number of total lines deleted from text-based files.
- Number of total commits.
- Numbers of commits by year in the last 5 years. (Count from as early as possible if the project is younger than 5 years.)
- Numbers of commits by month in the last 12 months.

## 8.2 Processed Data

The following measures are calculated from the raw data:

- Status of software package (dead or alive). Alive is defined as the presence of repository commits or software package version releases in the last 18 months.
- Percentage of identified issues that are closed.
- Percentage of code that is comments.

	A	B	C	D
1	<b>Metrics &amp; Description</b>	<b>Possible Measurement Values</b>		
2	<b>Summary Information</b>	<b>* is used to indicate that a response of this type should be accompanied by explanatory text</b>	<b>{software package 1}</b>	<b>{software package 2}</b>
3	Software name?	(string)		
4	URL?	(URL)		
5	Affiliation (institution(s))	(string or (N/A))		
6	Software purpose	(string)		
7	Number of developers (all developers that have contributed at least one commit to the project) (use <a href="#">repo</a> commit logs)	(number)		
8	How is the project funded?	(unfunded, unclear, funded*) where * requires a string to say the source of funding		
9	Initial release date?	(date)		
10	Last commit date?	(date)		
11	Status? (alive is defined as presence of commits in the last 18 months)	((alive, dead, unclear))		
12	License?	((GNU GPL, BSD, MIT, terms of use, trial, none, unclear, other*)) * given via a string		
13	Platforms?	(set of (Windows, Linux, OS X, Android, other*)) * given via string		
14	Software Category? The concept category includes software that does not have an officially released version. Public software has a released version in the public domain. Private software has a released version available to authorized users only.	((concept, public, private))		
15	Development model?	((open source, freeware, commercial, unclear))		
16	Publications about the software? Refers to publications that have used or mentioned the software	(number or (unknown))		

**Figure 1** Top of Measurement Template

## 9 Measure Using Measurement Template

The [Measurement Template](#) is used to track measurements and quality scores for all of the software packages in the domain. For each software package, fill out one column of the template. This process can take between 2 to 5 hours for each package. Project developers can be contacted for help regarding installation, if necessary, but a cap of about 2 hours should be imposed on the entire installation process. For completing the template, please follow these steps:

[SS:"explain any tricky parts with interpreting the parameters of variation for measuring a particular indicator. A few example would help." —PM][Ask Ao for input —PM]

1. Gather the summary information into the top section of the document (Figure 1)
2. Using the GitStats tool that is described in Section 8 gather the measurements for the Repo Metrics - GitStats section found near the bottom of the document
3. Using the SCC tool that is also described in Section 8 gather the measurements for the Repo Metrics - SCC section found near the bottom of the document
4. If the software package is found on git, gather the measurements for the Repo Metrics - GitHub section found near the bottom of the document
5. Review installation documentation and attempt to install the software package on a virtual machine
6. Gather the measurements for installability
7. Gather the measurements for correctness and verifiability
8. Gather the measurements for surface reliability
9. Gather the measurements for surface robustness
10. Gather the measurements for surface usability
11. Gather the measurements for maintainability
12. Gather the measurements for reusability
13. Gather the measurements for surface understandability

14. Gather the measurements for visibility and transparency
15. Assign a score out of ten for each quality. The score can be measured using the [Measurement Template Impression Calculator](#). For each quality measurement, the file indicates the appropriate score to assign the measurement based on possible measurement values.

## 10 Analytic Hierarchy Process

The Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) is a decision-making technique that can be used when comparing multiple options by multiple criteria. In our work AHP is used for comparing and ranking the software packages of a domain using the quality scores that are gathered in the [Measurement Template](#). AHP performs a pairwise analysis between each of the quality options using a matrix which is then used to generate an overall score for each software package for the given criteria. [Smith et al. \[2016a\]](#) shows how AHP is applied to ranking software based on quality measures. We have developed a tool for conducting this process. The tool includes an AHP JAR script and a sensitivity analysis JAR script that is used to ensure that the software package rankings are appropriate with respect to the uncertainty of the quality scores. The README file of the tool is found [here](#). This file outlines the requirements for, and configuration and usage of, the JAR scripts. The JAR scripts, source code, and required libraries are located in the same folder as the README file.

## 11 Rank Short List

Rank using pairwise comparison of short list software packages with respect to usability survey results.

[SS: let's ask the people that do the usability/performance/maintainability experiments to do an AHP pair-wise comparison between the short-list software packages —PM]



## 12 Quality Specific Measures

- 12.1 **Installability** [owner —OO]
- 12.2 **Correctness** [owner —OO]
- 12.3 **Verifiability/Testability** [owner —OO]
- 12.4 **Validatability** [owner —OO]
- 12.5 **Reliability** [owner —OO]
- 12.6 **Robustness** [owner —PM]
- 12.7 **Performance** [owner —PM]
- 12.8 **Usability** [owner —JC]
- 12.9 **Maintainability** [owner —PM]
- 12.10 **Reusability** [owner —PM]
- 12.11 **Portability** [owner —PM]
- 12.12 **Understandability** [owner —JC]
- 12.13 **Interoperability** [owner —AD]
- 12.14 **Visibility/Transparency** [owner —AD]
- 12.15 **Reproducibility** [owner —SS]
- 12.16 **Productivity** [owner —AD]
- 12.17 **Sustainability** [owner —SS]
- 12.18 **Completeness** [owner —AD]
- 12.19 **Consistency** [owner —AD]
- 12.20 **Modifiability** [owner —JC]
- 12.21 **Traceability** [owner —JC]
- 12.22 **Unambiguity** [owner —SS]
- 12.23 **Verifiability** [owner —SS]
- 12.24 **Abstract** [owner —SS]

## 13 Using Data to Rank Family Members

Describe AHP process (or similar).

## A Appendix

### A.1 Survey for the Selected Projects

[Several questions are borrowed from Jegatheesan2016, and needed to be cited later. —AD]

### A.1.1 Information about the developers and users

1. Interviewees' current position/title? degrees?
2. Interviewees' contribution to/relationship with the software?
3. Length of time the interviewee has been involved with this software?
4. How large is the development group?
5. What is the typical background of a developer?
6. How large is the user group?
7. What is the typical background of a user?

### A.1.2 Information about the software

1. [General —AD] What is the most important software quality(ies) to your work? (set of selected qualities plus "else")
2. [General —AD] Are there any examples where the documentation helped? If yes, how it helped. (yes\*, no)
3. [General —AD] Is there any documentation you feel you should produce and do not? If yes, what is it and why? (yes\*, no)
4. [Completeness —AD] Do you address any of your quality concerns using documentation? If yes, what are the qualities and the documents. (yes\*, no)
5. [Visibility/Transparency —AD] Is there a certain type of development methodologies used during the development? ({Waterfall, Scrum, Kanban, else})
6. [Visibility/Transparency —AD] Is there a clearly defined development process? If yes, what is it. ({yes\*, no})
7. [Visibility/Transparency —AD] Are there any project management tools used during the development? If yes, what are they. ({yes\*, no})
8. [Visibility/Transparency —AD] Going forward, will your approach to documentation of requirements and design change? If not, why not. ({yes, no\*})
9. [Correctness and Verifiability —AD] During the process of development, what tools or techniques are used to build confidence of correctness? (string)
10. [Correctness and Verifiability —AD] Do you use any tools to support testing? If yes, what are they. (e.g. unit testing tools, regression testing suites) ({yes\*, no})
11. [Correctness and Verifiability —AD] Is there any document about the requirements specifications of the program? If yes, what is it. ({yes\*, no})
12. [Portability —AD] Do you think that portability has been achieved? If yes, how? ({yes\*, no})
13. [Maintainability —AD] How was maintainability considered in the design? (string)
14. [Maintainability —AD] What is the maintenance type? (set of {corrective, adaptive, perfective, unclear})
15. [Reusability —AD] How was reusability considered in the design? (string)
16. [Reusability —AD] Are any portions of the software used by another package? If yes, how they are used. (yes\*, no)
17. [Reproducibility —AD] Is reproducibility important to you? (yes\*, no)
18. [Reproducibility —AD] Do you use tools to help reproduce previous software results? If yes, what are they. (e.g. version control, configuration management) (yes\*, no)
19. [Completeness —AD] Is any of the following documents used during the development? (yes\*, no)

20. [General —AD] Will this experience influence how you develop software? Do you see yourself maintaining the same level of documentation, tool support as you go forward? (string)
- Module Guide
  - Module Interface Specification
  - Verification and Validation Plan
  - Verification and Validation Report

## A.2 Empirical Measures Considerations - Raw Data

Measures that can be extracted from on-line repos.

[Still at brainstorm stage. —AD]

- number of contributors
- number of watches
- number of stars
- number of forks
- number of clones
- number of commits
- number of total/code/document files
- lines of total/logical/comment code
- lines/pages of documents (can pdf be extracted?)
- number of total/open/closed/merged pull requests
- number of total/open/closed issues
- number of total/open/closed issues with assignees

Instead of only focus on the current status of the above numbers, we may find the time history of them to be more valuable. For example, the number of contributors over time, the number of lines of code over time, the number of open issues over time, etc.

## A.3 Empirical Measures Considerations - Processed Data

Metrics that can be calculated from the raw data.

[Still at brainstorm stage. —AD]

- percentage of total/open/closed issues with assignees - Visibility/Transparency
- lines of new code produced per person-month - Productivity
- lines/pages of new documents produced per person-month - Productivity
- number of issues closed per person-month - Productivity
- percentage of comment lines in the code - maintainability [Not Ao's qualities —AD]

In the above calculations, a month can be determined to be 30 days.

## A.4 Empirical Measures Considerations - Tool Tests

[This section is currently a note of unorganized contents. Most parts will be removed or relocated. —AD]

[This citation needs to be deleted later. It's here because my compiler doesn't work with 0 citations —AD] Emms [2019]

Most tests were done targeting to the repo of 3D Slicer [GitHub repo](#)

### A.4.1 git-stats

[GitHub repo](#)

Test results: <http://git-stats-slicer.ao9.io/> the results are output as webpages, so I hosted for you to check. Data can be downloaded as spreadsheets.

### A.4.2 scc

[GitHub repo](#)

### A.4.3 git-of-theseus

[GitHub repo](#)

Test results: It took about 100 minutes for one repo on a 8 core 16G ram Linux machine. It only outputs graphs.

### A.4.4 hercules

[GitHub repo](#)

Test results: this one seems to be promising, but the installation is complicated with various errors.

### A.4.5 git-repo-analysis

[GitHub repo](#)

### A.4.6 HubListener

[GitHub repo](#)

The data that HubListener can extract.

Raw:

- Number of Files
- Number of Lines
- Number of Logical Lines
- Number of Comments

Cyclomatic: [Intro](#)

- Cyclomatic Complexity

Halstead: [Intro](#)

- Halstead Effort
- Halstead Bugs
- Halstead Length
- Halstead Difficulty
- Halstead Time
- Halstead Vocabulary
- Halstead Volume

Test results: HubListener works well on the repo of itself, but it did not work well on some other repos.

### A.4.7 gitinspector

[GitHub repo](#)

Test results: it doesn't work well. Instead of creating output results, it prints the results directly in the console.

## References

- Steve Emms. 16 best free linux medical imaging software. <https://www.linuxlinks.com/medicalimaging/>, 2019. [Online; accessed 02-February-2020].
- Simon Hettrick, Mario Antonioletti, Leslie Carr, Neil Chue Hong, Stephen Crouch, David De Roure, Iain Emsley, Carole Goble, Alexander Hay, Devasena Inupakutika, et al. Uk research software survey 2014. 2014.
- David Lorge Parnas. On the design and development of program families. *IEEE Transactions on Software Engineering*, (1):1–9, 1976.
- W. Spencer Smith and Chien-Hsien Chen. Commonality and requirements analysis for mesh generating software. In F. Maurer and G. Ruhe, editors, *Proceedings of the Sixteenth International Conference on Software Engineering and Knowledge Engineering (SEKE 2004)*, pages 384–387, Banff, Alberta, 2004.
- W Spencer Smith, Jacques Carette, and John McCutchan. Commonality analysis of families of physical models for use in scientific computing. In *Proceedings of the First International Workshop on Software Engineering for Computational Science and Engineering (SECSE08)*, 2008.
- W. Spencer Smith, Adam Lazzarato, and Jacques Carette. State of practice for mesh generation software. *Advances in Engineering Software*, 100:53–71, October 2016a.
- W Spencer Smith, D Adam Lazzarato, and Jacques Carette. State of the practice for mesh generation and mesh processing software. *Advances in Engineering Software*, 100:53–71, 2016b.
- W. Spencer Smith, Zheng Zeng, and Jacques Carette. Seismology software: State of the practice. *Journal of Seismology*, 22(3):755–788, May 2018.
- David M Weiss. Defining families: The commonality analysis. *submitted to IEEE Transactions on Software Engineering*, 1997. URL <http://www.research.avayalabs.com/user/weiss/Publications.html>.
- David M Weiss. Commonality analysis: A systematic process for defining families. In *International Workshop on Architectural Reasoning for Embedded Systems*, pages 214–222. Springer, 1998. URL [citeseer.ist.psu.edu/13585.html](http://citeseer.ist.psu.edu/13585.html).