

1

Introduction to Biological Assay

1.1: Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, a graduate student should be able to:

1. Define a biological assay and distinguish it from a general comparative experiment.
2. Identify the three structural components of every assay: stimulus, subject, and response.
3. Classify assays as direct or indirect, and indirect assays as quantitative (parallel-line, slope-ratio) or quantal.
4. Define relative potency and explain why it, rather than a simple difference of means, is the natural parameter of interest.
5. State the historical milestones that shaped modern bioassay theory.
6. Set up a basic bioassay computation in R and Python.

1.2: What is a Biological Assay?

A biological assay (bioassay) is a statistical procedure for comparing the strength (potency) of two or more preparations of a stimulus by observing the magnitude of a biological response that each preparation produces in a set of living subjects. The defining feature of a bioassay, which separates it from an ordinary comparative experiment, is that the object of inference is not simply “does treatment A differ from treatment B?” but rather

“on what multiple of dose is A equivalent to B?” That multiple is the **relative potency**. Three ingredients are present in every assay:

- **Stimulus**: the substance or treatment being compared — a drug, hormone, vitamin, vaccine, insecticide, or physical agent (e.g., radiation).
- **Subject**: the biological material that receives the stimulus — an animal, a plant, a tissue culture, a microbial colony, or a human participant.
- **Response**: the measured or observed change in the subject following exposure to the stimulus. Responses may be continuous (a hormone-induced increase in organ weight), a survival time, or quantal (dead/alive, cured/not cured).

A useful discipline for a beginning biostatistician is to ask, of any comparative experiment: is the underlying interest a scale-of-equivalent-dose question? If we are only asking “which treatment gives a bigger effect,” we are outside the bioassay framework, even if animals, tissues, or drugs are involved. If we are asking “how much of A equals a given amount of B,” we are inside it.

1.3: Standard and Test Preparations; Relative Potency

Almost every quantitative bioassay compares a **standard preparation** (S), whose potency is fixed by convention or by an international reference standard, against a **test preparation** (T), whose potency is unknown and is to be estimated relative to S. If

d_S and d_T denote doses of S and T that produce the same

$$\rho = \frac{d_S}{d_T}.$$

- If $\rho > 1$: a smaller dose of T matches a larger dose of S, so T is *more potent* than S.
- If $\rho < 1$: T is *less potent* than S.
- If $\rho = 1$: the two preparations are equipotent.

The task of an assay is to obtain a sample estimate R of ρ ,

together with a valid measure of precision — most often a **fiducial** or **confidence interval** obtained via Fieller's theorem (Chapter 3).

1.4: Classification of Bioassays

Biological	Assays
+-- Qualitative assays (no dose-response scale; e.g., presence/absence)	tests)
+-- Quantitative (dilution) assays	
+-- Direct assays	
	Dose needed for a specified response is measured
directly	on each subject
	(e.g., the "cat method" for digitalis: infuse until
the	heart stops)
+-- Indirect assays	
	Dose is fixed by the experimenter; response is
observed	
+-- Quantitative response	
	+-- Parallel-line assays (dosage = log
dose)	
	+-- Slope-ratio assays (dosage =
dose ^{lambda})	
+-- Quantal response	
	Probit / logit analysis; ED50, LD50
estimation	

1.4.1: Direct Assays

In a direct assay, the dose required to produce a specified end-point (e.g., death, onset of a muscular contraction) is observed directly for every subject; the dose itself is the random variable. The classic example is the “cat method” for digitalis-like drugs, discussed fully in Chapter 4.

1.4.2: Indirect Assays

In most modern bioassays, the dose is fixed by the investigator at several pre-selected levels, and the response — not the dose — is the random variable. A dose–response relationship is then used to infer the dose of the test preparation that would produce the same response as a given dose of the standard. Two linearizing dosage transformations dominate practice:

- $x = \log(\text{dose})$ leads to **parallel-line assays**.
- $x = (\text{dose})^\lambda$, for known $\lambda > 0$, leads to **slope-ratio assays**.

1.4.3: Quantal Assays

When the response is binary (all-or-nothing — e.g., death, cure, infection), we work with the proportion responding at each dose level and fit a sigmoid dose–response curve, typically via the **probit** or **logit** transformation (Chapter 8). The dose producing a response in 50% of subjects is the **median effective dose (ED50)**, or, when the endpoint is death, the **median lethal dose (LD50)**.

1.5: Historical Notes

- **Antiquity**: The earliest recorded bioassay-like reasoning is often (playfully) attributed to Noah’s dove-and-olive-leaf experiment (Genesis 8), where the “stimulus” was the depth of floodwater, the “subject” was the dove, and the “response” was whether it returned with a leaf — a crude quantal assay of water level.
- **Coal-mine canaries**: Canaries, more sensitive to methane than humans, served as a quantal bioassay for underground air quality until the mid-twentieth century.
- **Paul Ehrlich (late 19th century)**: Standardized diphtheria antitoxin by comparing its potency in test animals against a reference preparation, establishing quantitative pharmacological standardization as routine practice.

- **1920s–1930s:** Statisticians (notably J. W. Trevan on LD50, and Chester Bliss on the probit transformation) placed assay methodology on a rigorous statistical footing.
- **D. J. Finney (1947, 1952, 1964, 1978):** Statistical Method in Biological Assay unified parallel-line, slope-ratio, and quantal assay theory and remains the canonical reference; much of this textbook’s notation follows Finney’s conventions to ease cross-referencing.
- **R. A. Fisher and collaborators:** Contributed fiducial inference (used heavily via Fieller’s theorem) and the analysis-of-variance framework used throughout bioassay design.

1.6: The Role of Design

Because the parameters of interest in a bioassay are specific **contrasts** among treatment (dose) means — a preparation contrast, a combined-regression contrast, and a parallelism (or blank/intersection) contrast — rather than all possible pairwise comparisons, bioassay experiments are usually laid out in designs that let these particular contrasts be estimated free of block effects: randomized complete block designs when block size equals the number of dose combinations, and specialized incomplete block or cross-over designs otherwise. Chapters 10 and 11 develop this machinery.

1.7: Worked Examples

Example 1.1: Identifying the Assay Components

A pharmaceutical laboratory tests three doses of a candidate anticoagulant against three doses of warfarin (the standard) by measuring prothrombin time in rabbits.

Identify stimulus, subject, response, and state whether this is a direct or indirect assay.

Solution: Stimulus: the anticoagulant preparations (test and standard) at fixed doses. Subject: the rabbits. Response:

prothrombin time (a continuous, quantitative response) measured after dosing. Because dose is fixed by the experimenter and response is observed (rather than dose being the observed quantity), this is an **indirect, quantitative assay** — specifically a parallel-line assay once doses are log-transformed.

Example 1.2 — Relative Potency From Mean Effective Doses

Two insulin preparations are each administered to guinea pigs at doses selected so that both preparations produce, on average, a fall of 40 mg/dL in blood glucose. Preparation S required 0.36 units, while preparation T required 0.28 units.

Solution:

$$\rho = \frac{d_S}{d_T} = \frac{0.36}{0.28} = 1.286.$$

T is roughly 29% more potent than S.

Example 1.3: Direct vs. Indirect (Aphid Insecticide)

Explain, using Finney's aphid example, why an indirect assay is unavoidable for testing insecticide potency on aphids, whereas a direct assay is feasible for digitalis on cats.

Solution: For digitalis on cats, a trained technician can titrate the infusion rate and stop precisely at cardiac arrest, so the lethal dose is observed directly on each animal. For an insecticide sprayed on aphids, there is no way to administer a continuously increasing dose to a single insect and observe the exact dose at which it dies; the experimenter can only apply a fixed, discrete dose to a batch of insects and record the proportion that die. Hence the assay must be indirect and quantal, using probit or logit analysis to back out an ED50/LD50.

Example 1.4 : Qualitative vs Quantitative Assay

A public-health laboratory tests whether a water sample contains *E. coli* using a presence/absence culture test. Is this a bioassay in the statistical sense developed in this book?

Solution. No. Although a living organism (bacterial growth) is used as an indicator, there is no dose–response scale on which a potency ratio is estimated; the test is qualitative. It is a screening bioassay in the broad biological sense, but not a quantitative bioassay of the kind treated in this text.

Example 1.5 — Choosing a Dosage Metameter

A toxicologist has LD-type mortality data across doses 5, 10, 20, 40, 80 mg/kg (a geometric, doubling series). Which dosage metameter is natural, and why?

Solution: Because the doses are equally spaced on a *multiplicative* (geometric) scale, $x = \log(\text{dose})$ converts them to an arithmetic sequence ($\log 5, \log 10, \log 20, \log 40, \log 80$), which is the natural metameter for a parallel-line (or probit, for quantal data) analysis. Using raw dose would produce a badly non-linear and heteroscedastic regression.

Example 1.6: Recognizing a Slope-Ratio Setting

A vitamin bioassay uses doses of 1, 2, 3, 4 mL of a supplemented feed (an additive rather than multiplicative series), including a zero (blank) dose, and the response (weight gain) is believed to be proportional to the amount of vitamin administered rather than the log-amount. Which family of indirect assay is appropriate?

Solution: Since the response is taken to be linear in dose itself (with $\lambda = 1$) rather than in log dose, and a blank (zero) dose is deliberately included so the two regression lines can be checked for a common intercept, this is a **slope-ratio assay** (Chapter 7), not a parallel-line assay.

Example 1.7: R and Python as Computational Tools

Even at the introductory stage, it is useful to see how relative potency and its uncertainty will eventually be computed. Suppose seven cats are dosed with two tinctures (A, B) of a cardiac glycoside until death, and the (untransformed) mean tolerances are $\bar{x}_A = 1.68$, $\bar{x}_B = 1.99$ (units of 0.01 c.c./kg).

Treating B as standard, compute a preliminary potency estimate in R and Python.

R:

```
xA <-1.68# mean tolerance, test preparation A
xB <-1.99# mean tolerance, standard preparation B
R <- xB / xA
cat("Relative potency R =", round(R, 3), "\n")
```

Python:

```
xA =1.68# mean tolerance, test preparation A
xB =1.99# mean tolerance, standard preparation B
R = xB / xA
print(f"Relative potency R = {R:.3f}")
```

Both give $R = 1.18$, matching the fully worked Fieller's-theorem analysis of this same strophanthus data set carried out in Chapter 4.

1.8: Chapter Summary

- A bioassay compares potencies via a dose–response relationship, not merely mean responses.
- Every assay has stimulus, subject, response.
- Assays are direct (dose observed) or indirect (response observed at fixed doses); indirect assays are further split into parallel-line, slope-ratio, and quantal types according to the dosage metameter and the nature of the response.
- Relative potency $\rho = d_S/d_T$ is the fundamental parameter; its estimation and interval estimation (via Fieller's theorem) occupy most of the remaining chapters.
- Statistical bioassay methodology developed through contributions from Ehrlich, Trevan, Bliss, Fisher, and Finney.

1.9: Exercises

Exercise 1.1: A laboratory determines the dose of two muscle relaxants (S and T) required to produce a 50% reduction in twitch height in an isolated nerve–muscle preparation. The mean doses are $\bar{d}_S = 12.4 \mu g$ and $\bar{d}_T = 9.8 \mu g$. (a) Compute the relative potency of T with respect to S. (b) State, in one sentence, the practical interpretation of your answer for a clinician choosing a dose of T.

Exercise 1.2: Classify each of the following as (i) direct assay, (ii) indirect quantitative assay (state parallel-line or slope-ratio), or (iii) indirect quantal assay, giving a one-sentence justification in each case: (a) Doses of a growth hormone (0, 1, 2, 4 mg) are injected into rat pups and body-weight gain after two weeks is recorded. (b) A vasodilator is infused at an increasing rate into an isolated artery preparation until it visibly dilates, and the total infused volume at that moment is recorded for each of 15 preparations. (c) Increasing concentrations of a fungicide are applied to 20 spore samples per concentration, and the number of samples showing no germination is recorded. (d) Doses of vitamin C (5, 10, 15, 20 mg, plus a zero-dose control) are fed to guinea pigs and the amount of new dentine formed is measured, with the response assumed proportional to dose amount rather than log dose.

Exercise 1.3: Explain, in your own words and with a fresh example (not one used in this chapter), why a bioassay is described as estimating “a ratio of doses” rather than “a difference of responses.” Why does this distinction matter for the choice of statistical method (hint: think ahead to Fieller’s theorem in Chapter 3)?

Exercise 1.4: Two batches of an antibiotic preparation are compared using a microbial zone-of-inhibition assay at three log-doses. From the resulting parallel-line analysis a preparation contrast is estimated as $\hat{\Psi}_p = -0.42$ with combined regression $\hat{\Psi}_1 = 8.15$ on the log-dose (base e) scale, dose ratio c_1/c_2 between successive levels of 2 for both preparations. Using the relation $\log \hat{\rho} = (c_1 - c_2) - \hat{\Psi}_p/\hat{\Psi}_1$ style reasoning introduced in this chapter (full derivation in Chapter 6), reason qualitatively (no need to compute exactly yet) about whether the test batch is more or less potent than the standard, and justify your reasoning from the sign of $\hat{\Psi}_p$.

(Full worked solutions for all end-of-chapter exercises are collected in Appendix A.)