

# 18 Top Tips for achieving quality results from your refractometer

by Kevin Chapman  
Product Specialist - Bellingham + Stanley

The importance of good Quality Control (QC), whether in food, beverage, pharmaceutical or chemical manufacture, is to ensure finished product is consistent and meets the required (possibly regulated) specification.

Good QC has an impact on profits too. Most people define QC as quality control, but it can also be interpreted as quantity control, where quantity relates to the dilution or blend of, say, an expensive raw material such as concentrated apple pulp used to make juice. Over dilute and you're simply giving money away. Under dilute and you run the risk of breaching specification limits that may even result in a lost supply contract or an unhappy customer not coming back for more.

Refractometers are scientific instruments commonly used as a quantity control tool in the factory as well as a final quality control in the laboratory, the latter is to protect the customer. Investing in a good refractometer is therefore essential, but you may as well buy a random number generator if other contributory factors are not considered.

So here's what's needed to ensure reliable results when taking refractometric measurements, whether they be Brix, RI, Urea, or many of the other application specific scale derivatives that have evolved over the 150 years refractometers have been in use.



*Kevin Chapman has been working in the industry for 30 years and has gained a wealth of knowledge which he shares here. Here's how to achieve highly reliable results from your refractometer.*



*With many different models to choose from, start by listing your measurement needs before looking for the right instrument for the job in hand.*

## 1. Choose the right instrument for the job

There are many different models of refractometer to choose from and prices ranging from as low as \$80 right up to \$13,000. Start by writing down your measurement needs and the environment in which the reading is to be taken. This will help you determine the right instrument for the job in hand.

A simple, low cost handheld refractometer is fine for field testing before fruit harvest or for checking chemical dilution in the automotive industry. If you're mixing expensive raw materials or controlling a high speed bottling line in a beverage factory that needs tighter control to avoid even the smallest amount of waste, then a sophisticated instrument suitable for a factory environment that eliminates the factors affecting refractometric measurement should be chosen.

## 2. Understand the effects of temperature

Refractive index changes significantly with temperature making this is a very important consideration if you want to achieve reliable measurements. Sugar based foodstuffs including beverages, sauces, confectionery etc. are specified at 20 °C and have very similar temperature characteristics. They can be treated together but organics such as oils and aromas differ widely with temperature change and so must be considered independently.

Refractive index fluctuates significantly with temperature changes.

## 3. Speak to the experts

Instrument manufacturers are a great source of advice so be sure to speak with them. Once you've chosen your refractometer, think about in-country support by looking for a local supplier.

## 4. Think about the user

It's no benefit having the most sophisticated refractometer if you don't think about the people that are expected to use it. Proper consideration must be given to what the instrument is to achieve vs. the skill-set of the people expected to achieve it.

## 5. Clear operating procedures and proper training

No matter what the application, good operating procedures and proper training in the use of the instrument is essential if you are to get the best from your refractometer.

Look for a digital refractometer with operating assistance through on-screen prompts. These can help guide the operator to take precise measurements with very little training.

Password protection, some using RFID tags, ensures low-level operators will not be able to access sensitive configuration menus so that instrument integrity is protected throughout the working day.

If available, use the instrument's on-board audit trail that logs who has done what so that any unauthorised changes to the instrument can be easily traced.

## 6. Sample preparation is the key to good measurement

For handheld refractometers, this could simply be degassing soda from canned drinks using cups or the crushing of fruit in to a smooth juicy sample that doesn't include pips or fleshy pulp. For fibrous product like carrot, potato, turnip or swede, use a grater to break down the fibres and then squeeze the juice from a handful of the shreds before taking a measurement.

**Pro Tip:** Whilst in the field, make sure you take a representative sample and not just from the sunny side of the tree!

Other methods to be considered when reading more challenging samples in the lab or factory include:

- Degassing
- Blending
- Stirring
- Filtering
- Centrifuging
- Clarifying

### Quality Measurement

| Sample              | Instrument          | People   |
|---------------------|---------------------|--|
| Preparation<br>Type | Setup<br>Capability | Interpretation<br>Interaction (care)<br>Protocol |

This may sound simple but if neglected, your results will suffer!

## 7. Apply the right amount of sample

Too much and it will take longer to stabilize. Too little and the interface between the prism and sample will not refract properly. Use the presser, plate or flap if fitted.

## 8. Watch out for highly concentrated layers or “skins”

Make sure you stir sugar syrups properly and avoid the highly concentrated, unrepresentative skin that forms on the top.

## 9. Some like it hot!

Heat up viscous, semi-solid and solid samples like waxes, fats, edible oils & butter to take a reading. When measuring hot samples next to the production line, reduce stabilisation times by elevating the instrument's temperature to that of the sample. Then use temperature compensation to give the result as if it was at 20 °C. This technique also applies to refractometers measuring the total solids of instant coffee prior to freeze drying so that sediment doesn't form on the prism whilst waiting for equilibrium.

Remember to clean the prism & plate after every use to avoid cross-contamination.

## 10. Manage the effects of temperature

Optical handheld refractometers offer limited correction using a manual offset or bimetallic strip to compensate; adequate for the typical measurement offered from such an instrument. Better still, digital handheld refractometers use sugar compensation or for other nonsugar samples, high grade digital handhelds use application specific compensation to provide a more accurate result.

For convenience, laboratory or factory refractometers adopt electronic/mathematical temperature compensation for sugar based products but for ultimate performance, look for Peltier temperature controlled refractometers. These systems control the prism and surrounding plate so that the sample is controlled to the desired measurement temperature. Ideal for those non-sugar organics and inorganics.

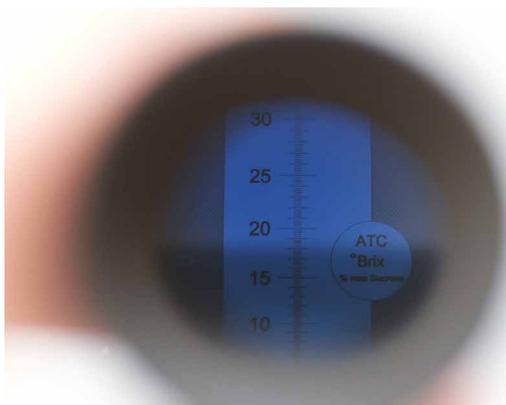
## 11. Wait for temperature stability to avoid moving targets

Always give the sample time to stabilise to the temperature of the instrument, otherwise the borderline and hence reading will literally be moving! Modern laboratory instruments offer stability checks so that the reading is only given after a set time or better still, when the instrument detects both sample and temperature readings have stabilized - SMART!

## 12. Keep it Clean

Remember to clean the prism and plate after each use and dry it properly. Cross-contamination between samples and cleaning materials will create erroneous results for the next user. This is critical when using reference materials to verify the instrument.

## 13. Sanity Check



If the reading isn't what you expected or the borderline doesn't look as sharp as it normally does for that sample on an optical handheld refractometer, start again!

For digital refractometers that feature a quality indicator, check to see if the number is correct for the sample being measured.

Some “Methods based” refractometers with limit function also allow you to set a threshold for each sample so that anything untoward shows up as an error message.

## 14. Treat handhelds with respect for continuously accurate results

Handheld refractometers require little maintenance, typically only requiring a zero calibration with water. For high range instruments that don't have a zero point, use a sugar sample or for optical instruments, a solid test plate. Some digital handheld refractometers also allow verification of the upper scale using a long-life, certified sample.

Keep them clean, remove sample from the prism once it has been read and keep it in a safe place; after all, a refractometer is a delicate, optical instrument.

## 15. Consider installation and training as a start-up package

For regulated environments such as within the pharmaceutical industry, get the instrument manufacturer, their local agent or even an independent validation contractor to perform a validation (IQ/OQ/PQ) using traceable standards prior to use. Configuration and start-up training can then be done in one go!

## 16. Verify performance regularly

Verify and if necessary calibrate the instrument on a regular basis. Typically, a ZERO verification should be performed daily. SPAN, a validation of the upper part of the scale or in the area where you normally take measurements, should be done weekly and only after a zero validation.

Verify & calibrate on a regular basis to ensure clean readings.

Always squeeze some sample to waste to ensure no crystals have formed in the nozzle. Only adjust the instrument if it falls out of specification and make sure samples are left long enough for the temperature to stabilise. Clean and dry carefully between each verification and if in doubt of the reading, do it again to ensure you don't calibrate in any errors! Always consult with the instrument instructions and the guidelines of the standard being used.

## 17. Schedule regular maintenance within your operating procedures

This may include cleaning, changing any consumables such as lamps, flow-through pipes or air filters. Some instruments allow you to program calibration and maintenance due dates, so be sure to use these features if they are available.

## 18. Preventative maintenance contracts are a good idea

Get your instrument checked out by the supplier or manufacturer on a yearly basis, especially if controlling critical or regulated product. Preventative maintenance not only ensures reliable use and extends the life of the instrument, it may also help to prevent a catastrophic breakdown that in the worst case may leave a production plant without proper control.

### For further information, please contact:

Bellingham + Stanley, a Xylem brand  
Xylem, 90 Horizon Drive, Suwanee, GA 30024, USA.  
sales.bs.us@xylem.com  
Phone: +1 678 804 5730

[www.bellinghamandstanley.com/usa](http://www.bellinghamandstanley.com/usa)