

Thriving on peer review

Scope and objective of this paper

One of the most daunting tasks in preparing advice is subjecting yourself to critique from your colleagues. But it is one of the best ways to improve the quality of your advice.

This paper provides tips on how to ask for, and make the most of, peer review.

Peer review is one of the key processes by which professional standards are upheld and improved upon.

A spirit of collegiality

Peer review works best when there is a reciprocal expectation – a culture that supports continuous quality improvement.

Think of **peer review as a gift from a helpful colleague** – a gift to help your advice meet the professional standards you expect of yourself and your colleagues (and which the Minister demands, every time). Your shop's reputation depends on the performance of all its outputs, so helping each other improves the whole shop.

Set up your reviewers early

At the time your work is commissioned, identify who is best placed to provide peer review. **Involve the peer reviewers in the commissioning**, or brief them early so that they have the context. Deadlines move but book a meeting time to receive feedback, especially if time is short.

In a larger piece of work, several peer review stages are sensible: at the beginning to check scope; once you have framed your arguments and evidence; and then on the final paper.

Decide what kind of reviews you need

When briefing peer reviewers, be clear on your expectations. Depending on the scale and complexity of the job, you may want multiple reviewers. Work out if you want:

- A general review against your quality product standards.

- A review from a colleague who is familiar with the context and an on-going stream of advice.
- Technical/scientific peer review.
- Specific focus on particular aspects (e.g. have you selected the right framework?)
- A trusted wise colleague who knows little of the issues and can step back from the detail and give a reality check – is this whole piece working?

Several of these options may be appropriate on the same piece of work.

Peer review can be sourced internally or externally. **External peer review helps in situations where you expect intense scrutiny** and you want added confidence that your work is robust – on occasion it provides support to claims of quality, or meeting professional standards.

Keep roles well-defined

Consultation with stakeholders will help improve your advice and mitigate some risks, but it is not peer review.

Proofreading, or simple quality assurance, is important but can be a distraction to a peer reviewer. It's difficult to think about frameworks, risk, and being Minister-focused when you're getting irritated by typos and formatting glitches. **We recommend making proofreading a separate – final – task.**

The core expectations of a peer review

Whether you have in-house quality standards or not, peer review should cover as a minimum:

- Is the problem definition clear and scoped?
- Is the framework logical and fit for the purpose?
- Have the alternatives been assessed clearly?
- Have risks/mitigation been spelt out?
- Is there a good 'close' to the paper? (e.g. next steps, or recommendations)

Policy advice MASTERCLASS

- What more could be done/removed to sharpen the messaging?
- What's *not* there that should be? (we often focus only on what's in front of us).

Three **model peer review checklists** are appended to this note, each for a different type of review.

Make time for consideration

If you have asked for peer review, set aside time to consider it. Deadline pressures may be looming but keep an open mind about having to make changes. Remember that this is all about continuous improvement and avoiding costly and frustrating re-work after the fact.

Decide if you want to receive peer review comments face-to-face from reviewers. If they meet with you as a group, it allows you to interact and deal with any conflicting reviewer opinions.

Do not rely on your sign-out manager to provide last minute peer review. Managers focus best on whether you followed good process and the paper is fit for purpose. Managers will want to know how you handled peer review.

How to receive and process feedback

To get the most of the peer review process, be demanding of your peer reviewers. Listen with an open mind, make sure you understand the message and question them on alternative solutions.

Assess the value of the feedback and decide what to do with it. **You can accept it or reject it but make sure you have a good reason.** It helps to annotate your decision against written peer review so you can recount later how you handled the feedback.

Be prepared to explain your decisions to your colleagues and your manager. Often these are judgement calls rather than being utterly right and wrong.

Have a debrief with the peer reviewer after the paper has gone out and reflect on what worked well, what could have been done better, and tease out any differences in perspective. It's all part of a reciprocal improvement process.

How to give feedback

Helpful feedback is always referenced against the objective of the advice. Feedback covers whether

the author is on track, or needs to make adjustments.

Remember **you are reviewing the work not the person.** Start your critique with praise where you can. Own your feedback – it is your professional opinion. Helpful feedback is:

- Specific
- Tangible
- Positive
- Actionable
- User-friendly.

There are a number of feedback techniques you can deploy to be effective and maintain a spirit of collegiality – find what works for you, but formulas we have tried include:

- I heard..... I noticed..... I wondered.....
- I can see what you are doing here, but it might work better for the reader if.....
- If you..... then you.....
- The impact is..... the consequence is..... the alternative is.....
- Have you considered..... because it would.....
- A table [or other device] is a great idea to use here because it will.....

Use the technology

There's always a fine line between helping someone learn and improve by re-shaping papers themselves, and just providing the precise wording yourself to short-circuit the process and get the paper away.

Tracked changes and use of 'comment bubbles' allow you to be specific in your comments. When time is short they can be a quick way to consider and accept changes.

Cultivate your network

It takes practice to develop your skills in giving and receiving peer review. In the spirit of collegiality and professional development make sure you volunteer to be a peer reviewer. See it as an honour to be asked. **The golden rule applies – 'do as you would be done by'.**

Model Peer Review Checklist

Rapid appraisal

Commissioning author	
Subject:	
Date due back with author:	
Peer review criteria	Reviewer comments
Is the problem definition clear and scoped?	
Is the framework logical and fit for the purpose?	
Have the alternatives been assessed clearly?	
Have risks/mitigation been spelt out?	
Is there a good 'close' to the paper? (e.g. next steps)	
What more could be done to sharpen the messaging?	
What's not there that should be?	
General Comments	

Peer reviewer: _____

Date completed: ____/____/____

Model Peer Review Checklist

Standard appraisal

Commissioning author		
Subject:		
Date due back with author:		
Peer review criteria		
Customer focus and contextually aware		
Anticipation	Does the paper address the likely next steps and timeframes? Is all the necessary content to support next steps included (e.g. talking points)?	
Risk & mitigation	Has the paper included the key risks, and are mitigation steps provided?	
Purpose & context	Is the objective of the briefing stated clearly and early? Is there enough background to shape the discussion? Does the paper make linkages to wider matters, such as strategy, long term drivers, related objectives or other parts of the system?	
Credible and rigorous analysis		
Problem definition	Is there a clear problem definition? Is the scale and scope of the issue clear?	
Framework & options	What evidence or logical approach is there to support the analysis? Is there a clear framework that provides criteria for analysis? Are there clear reasons for options and to dismiss credible alternatives? What consultation/engagement/expert advice has been undertaken? Do the recommendations flow logically from the discussion?	
Data & evidence	Is the paper clear about the strengths, sensitivities, and limitations of evidence? Have the numbers been double checked for accuracy? Is there good use of examples or international comparisons to show mastery of the subject?	
Implementation	How much confidence is there that the advice can be implemented? What comments are included from those that would implement the advice?	
Presentation and communication		
Language	Is the paper in plain English with minimal jargon? Does the paper use short sentences and paragraphs to make the reading task easier? Does the paper need a proofread to reduce clutter, eliminate typos and fix grammatical errors, or other slips?	
Structure	Is the paper concise, and does it avoid duplication or unnecessary clutter? Is there good use of subheadings as signposts and do they tell a logical story? Is the Executive Summary actually that – not an introduction or context section?	
Format	Has the best medium been selected (report, poster, presentation, one-pager) to fit the situation? Are the tables and charts easy to understand and read?	

Peer reviewer: _____

Date completed: ____/____/____

Model Peer Review Checklist

Turbo appraisal

Commissioning author	
Subject:	
Date due back with author:	
Peer review criteria	Reviewer comments
<p>What's the point?</p> <p>Are you absolutely clear what the government wants to achieve here?</p>	
<p>What's it got to do with government?</p> <p>Is the case for government intervention and the exact role absolutely clear and compelling?</p>	
<p>Who made you the expert?</p> <p>Is your evidence up to date and will it withstand expert scrutiny?</p>	
<p>Is your advice predictable?</p> <p>Are you offering something Ministers can't figure out on their own?</p>	
<p>Will it work?</p> <p>How have you tested your advice with those that will implement it and those that may use it?</p>	
General comment	

Peer reviewer: _____

Date completed: ____/____/____

Based on *The Policy Tests*, UK Department for Education, 2012

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