

The trees and the wood: the difference between quality assurance and peer review

Both peer review and quality assurance are important, but different

We previously done Masterclasses on both these topics.¹ But here's a quick summary of the differences, and where they might overlap.

- Quality assurance (QA) should be focused on the details and making sure the paper is error free.
- In peer review, your focus should be on concrete practical suggestions to improve both the analysis and the way it is presented.
- We suggest that they are done separately. It's hard to see the big picture when you are focused on the details, and vice versa.
- But remember to make sure you are clear with your reviewer about which task you are expecting them to do.

Table 1 overleaf outlines the key areas for focus in QA and peer review.

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¹ Peer review - https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_no_6_peer_review.pdf and Masterclass Brief 13 QA – practical ideas https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_13_qa_-_practical_ideas_1.pdf

Table 1 Peer review and QA – where to focus

Detail as well as the bigger picture

Item	QA	Peer review	Focus areas
Spelling, grammar	x		Focus on the detail, use spell checker at the end. If you have a style guide, for example, follow it.
Format, layout	x		Fit with template, proper page/paragraph breaks, review graphs, tables and diagrams.
Plain English	x		Minimise jargon and acronyms, make it easy to read at pace – even in technical papers. There are programmes/apps which can help.
Tone	x		As well as being in plain English, professional, but accessible and sharp. Use active language.
Numerical check	x		Do the numbers add up?
Executive Summary or Key points section	x	x	Does it boil down the essential issues? Does it lead into and support the recommendations? Make sure it leads with the advice....and is weighted towards the rationale (not the background).
Structure	x	x	Fit with template. Check heading structure and levels. Are any elements missing? Does the paper have a logical flow? Is it well supported by data and evidence? Do the arguments convince?
Active subheadings	x	x	Both the peer reviewer and the QAer can help with this. Are there enough active subheadings? Do they help tell the story?
Presentation	x	x	Are there other ways of presenting information, e.g. infographic, tables, diagrams etc.
Recommendations	x	x	Right format? Clearly worded? Action/decision focused? Also make sure the Executive Summary and the body of the paper is consistent with the recommendations.
Fit with plans and strategies		x	Does it explain the fit with existing plans and strategies, e.g. the Long Term Plan.
Risk analysis		x	Check that risks are highlighted, and mitigations discussed.
Best practice		x	Do you have any suggestions to improve the paper overall based on best practice examples you've seen before?

Source: NZIER