Quality assurance – getting the basics right

"Quality assurance (QA) is any systematic process of determining whether a product or service meets specified requirements.

QA establishes and maintains set requirements for developing or manufacturing reliable products. A quality assurance system is meant to increase customer confidence and a company's credibility, while also improving work processes and efficiency…"

[Techtarget.com]

Not the peer review story

An earlier Masterclass[1] dealt with the various types of peer review and included a discussion of the different roles of the reviewer. One area that was mentioned but not developed there, was what we called "proofreading" or "simple quality assurance".

This Masterclass is devoted to *simple quality assurance*. We see it as encompassing the steps taken by the producers of the papers to ensure that the advice is provided free of any obvious and easily avoided presentation problems – such as typos and formatting defects.

Product standards – it's not rocket science

This is known as **zero defects**.

This standard is not a stretch target; it is readily and regularly achieved by many agencies we review. It should be fundamental for all shops, for all advice presentation.

One reason for setting such a target, is that in our experience, there is always a proportion of elected members (or other key audience members) who find simple and obvious typos and grammatical slips unacceptable. They say the presence of these "cracks in the flow" undermines their ability to smoothly read the content and take it in without a major effort.

Keeping this part of your audience happy is a vital part of the quality advice goal. Indeed, based on our soundings, any papers for your elected members will inevitably encounter at least one such reader. And who needs them to face an irritated or leg-pulling colleague, particularly if the item is contentious and requires the gathering of support.

But it turns out there is a more fundamental driver.

Because it must be credible, efficient policy advice depends on trust…

All advice to elected members must be authoritative – or have its weaknesses clearly flagged. Unless readers know otherwise, they monitor the likely quality of a piece of advice by using what is at hand: internal evidence. Typically, this approach consists of active reading; that is, critically evaluating the material in the paper as the content is scanned and absorbed. This means that spelling mistakes, minor errors in verb agreement, numerical fluffs, sudden changes in spacing or font size, and other obvious breaks in care and attention are picked up as the reader moves through the paper.

When there are more of these failures of production, the reader becomes increasingly prone to mistrust the substance of the paper, because it is difficult to see why the significant section – the advice – is more likely to have been given sufficient attention than these clear presentation glitches.

It is obvious to the reader that the checking process failed, but the reader is in the dark about the extent of that failure. It may include the key operating portions of the paper.

…which needs constant reinforcement

Trust is not a passive state. It is earned over time as a relationship unfolds and is likely to be reviewed regularly. Such reviews are most likely to follow unexpected let-downs. In the advising context, presentational failures – even for those with reasonable ability to tolerate, or at least rise above, such things – are negative indicators.

And negatives risk eroding the stock of trust held by advisees from previous favourable interactions.

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[1] Brief 6 *Thriving on peer review,* 2017.

The only strategy that improves advising efficiency is a trust-reinforcing one. The basic idea is simple, but successful execution can be demanding. It is to keep delivering on promises, and to seize opportunities to show that the interests of your elected members matter more than the comfort of the advising shop.[2]

That is, in ordinary language: to go out of your way to give the advisee what they want in the form they prefer.

Increased efficiency

Higher levels of trust not only improve the advice relationship, they build efficiency into it. This is because a greater level of trust allows elected members to accept the claims made in the paper. This avoids constant worry and/or costly and complicated procedures like requiring citations and or independent checking.[3]

Challenges in QA

As we have approached QA here it might be thought to be a process that is distinct from the rest of the advice production process – a bit like converting a word document to a pdf. (Perhaps the image that is in one's mind is giving the draft to a specific QA specialist.) But this is not best practice.

Sound QA from a shop means: all work, at all times, is carried out to match the zero defects standard. In practice, to reach this level, the whole shop must accept the idea, and then do the hard yards to carry through on its commitment.

One factor that is often overlooked is that for a document to be readily understood, it needs to be appropriately proofread. It must be sufficiently clear that the proofer can be sure they are not misunderstanding the phrasing, the word choices, or the point being made. Normally, this entails all advice being carefully planned out before drafting starts.

Beyond this, there are both conceptual and practical problems to be faced in successful QA execution.

The conceptual ones include:

- **Having authorities to use as the standards** the shop is to employ. Most shops will already have identified their preferred options[4] in those areas of drafting where there is no single agreed version. These include spelling ("program", for what, exactly?), use of te reo (this will be covered in an upcoming Masterclass), grammar (Oxford comma, anyone?) and indeed, presentation (to use, or not to use hyphens or apostrophes[5] and, if so, when?) in all these situations there is legitimate argument about the "right" choice. Shops with existing standards[6] should ensure they are well known and well used.

  Shops should make their own call about specific issues – we have no preference. But shops should choose readily available documents (such as, in-house spelling lists of technical terms) to reduce uncertainty and then stick firmly to them.

  Consistency is what is important. First, within each paper, to show the drafter has checked the piece carefully. Then, within the whole shop's output, as this builds a brand and signals professional attention to detail that should be a positive with your elected members.[7]

- **How to create shop support for the QA regime?** The key here is firm and consistent public commitment by all levels of the shop including at senior levels. Management is vital but in the end the team who do the work have to take responsibility.

- **Who owns and runs the QA system?** As implied in the previous point, while there will be an appropriate assignment of responsibility to ensure the system works, it starts with each advisor owning their contribution. And that includes taking it through the system. But they must receive strong support and assistance from their colleagues as the team produces advice. This applies even where another group plays a role as final QA; authors own their work and should have it error-free when it leaves them.

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[2] See Morris S (2001) "Political correctness." *Journal of Political Economy* 109: 231-265.

[3] Of course, because of the nature of politics, all claims in advice papers need to be valid – and, beyond that, able to be supported if questioned. Moreover, crucial steps in the key argument – especially any that might seem unlikely – should be documented. This is part of the evidence side of advising – see Brief 8 *Presenting evidence*.

[4] Different terms are used for these including "Style Guide", and they are often organised by the Communications Team.

[5] Hyphens and apostrophes are grammatical devices that divide the world into those who care and mostly can handle them and those who don't and sprinkle

them randomly. As argued here, the aim of a good shop is to ensure that the concerns of the reader, no matter how nuanced, are covered. All shops need a standard; with training in its requirements plus, possibly, an approved list of hyphenated words.

[6] There are some suggestions listed below under Resources for those shops without existing standards.

[7] In our experience, if an elected member is sufficiently interested to want to engage in a discussion over the best way to spell a particular term, or the apt use of a semi-colon, this is a strong signal that the shop is on the right track with an emphasis on QA. But also suggests the need for relentless follow through on an elected member's preferences, once they emerge.

Is it worth proofing drafts? Our experience suggests that rather than think about "proofing" at the draft stage, a more productive attitude is to build a culture where all drafts – beyond the "thinking out loud" state – are produced "as if they were to go to the audience". This engenders polish and accuracy in the process of production rather than trying to inject it later.

Practical issues are:

- **Should all proofing be done by a few particularly chosen individuals?** There are valid points here on both sides. Some advisors are very picky and so extremely effective at finding errors. Obviously, it would support zero defects were they to check all output. But this has the danger that drafters relax their guard as the "finicky reader" will see them through. Having all staff take their share of this vital step in the process is valuable to underline the whole-of-team responsibility. This is one of those tasks you can get better at by practice. It's a great set of skills to have up your sleeve, especially in peak times for fast responses when there is no one else available to help!

- **What stage of the process is the QA?** As discussed above, while an important final check comes at the end of the process, in a good shop, writers are honing their product at all stages. They are picking up and correcting all the slips they can find, whenever they are found. The more checks that are made the fewer typos get through.

- **Are post QA readthroughs worthwhile?** Given this is the output of the shop – yes. Proofing and the associated corrections can involve subtle changes in meaning, intent or tone. Marking up proofing changes (using available software) for final approval by the drafter helps them reread to make sure nothing has been "lost in translation". Some shops look to another final read by a non-involved analyst to ensure that the sense and style all work.

Hints and suggestions

Our philosophy sees QA as an ongoing process to ensure zero defects, as a basic part of the way a quality advice shop does its work. As such, it is more closely related to the culture than to the products of the organisation. Thus, the overall approach to it is that it should be a core part of "the way things are done around here". To achieve that, it has to be "natural" to the shop's idea of itself.

In our observation and experience, most culture-related changes in organisations are long-haul efforts, with persistence being at the heart of success.

Nevertheless, regularly adding a few tricks to the mix can work – especially if they all relate back to the overall goal. And even if they don't change the culture, they put a bit of variety into the work day.

What follows draws on ideas for better QA results we have seen shops use.

As foreshadowed, they are not magic bullets, but rather potential contributions to a cultural change.

Specific ideas

Training

One obvious step for all organisations is to undertake common training to raise minimum standards. Aside from the impact of the course content, the shared experience produces a shop-wide "reference set" or language and ideas that can be valuable for cultural reinforcement.

One example is Write Limited's very useful training. We have heard favourable feedback from clients who have used them.

Software

Another idea is to add to the assistance available to drafters by purchasing editorial software. This works by supplementing the aids and prompts, that are default options in the standard word processing packages. It also presents itself helpfully and is visually appealing.

One suggestion is Style Writer, which provides a "souped up" editing assistance function with a range of settings that can be tailored to shop choices. It should help writers find it easier to be both more accurate and more in line with the type of output sought by the advisor. It also allows for a large range of words to be checked so shops can build up their own vocabulary.

Spelling, punctuation and formatting

As discussed above with apostrophes and hyphens, spelling is a touchstone for some and optional for others. Shops seeking quality will ensure that their spelling is impeccable.

Further complexity in punctuation – such as the use of semicolons – is another bugbear for those who care. It is worth attention.

Similarly, the papers we review are surprisingly often let down by seemingly easily addressed formatting errors. Consistency in layout and aspects such as fonts and font sizes, is usually a matter of ensuring the format model (template) is flexible yet strong enough to withstand multiple rewrites by diverse hands.

Simple tricks can be helpful:

- Set the spell checker to mirror the shop standard (typically New Zealand English).
- Create "auto-corrects" for often misspelled technical jargon.
- Add in commonly used names and technical terms to the spell-checking dictionary – this option is usually part of the spell check function.
- Take extra care with Māori, Pacific and foreign language words and jargon terms to ensure they are correct.
- Establish checks (and thus corrections) for the way drafts can present badly:
  - Breaking a paragraph over a page.
  - Leaving a heading hanging.
  - Running a table over a page without repeating the title row.
  - Encroaching on headers and footers with content.
  - Omitting paragraph or page numbers.

Self help

Many writers find it difficult to review their own work. Their internal memory knows what they wrote or at least intended to put down. So, these are suggestions that seek to detach the author from the written material.

One technique we've heard about is to look at the words on the page a different way. That is instead of going from left to right and then starting the line below, to reverse things: go right to left from the bottom up.

(This would clearly avoid internal prompting but removes the context as a way of resolving ambiguity about the text.)

It may suit some people.

Finally, remember

The key point here is that zero defects is an achievable target, and that the best way to do it is to shift the culture so it becomes a group objective for the policy team.

Selected resources

Style guides:

- Govt.NZ style guide https://www.govt.nz/about/about-this-website/style-and-design/the-govt-nz-style-guide/#how-we-write
- Style Writer http://www.editorsoftware.com/index.html
- Write Limited – standard Style Guide - https://write.co.nz/shop/#Style

Writing

- Bibme – https://www.bibme.org/grammar-and-plagiarism/
- Grammarly - https://www.grammarly.com/
- Read Aloud function in Word. It can be found under the Review tab.

This paper was written by NZIER, May 2018.

For further information, please contact anyone from our policy advice team:

John Ballingall at john.ballingall@nzier.org.nz
Cathy Scott at cathy.scott@nzier.org.nz
John Yeabsley at john.yeabsley@nzier.org.nz

NZIER (04) 472 1880