

Doing peer review when time is short – the Turbo Peer Review

Peer review helps to improve quality

We are strong advocates of the importance of peer review, and the significance of it in improving the quality of advice. See our earlier Masterclass on Peer Review.¹ We've also got a Masterclass coming on the differences between Quality Assurance,² and peer review.

When time is short it's false economy to skip the peer review step. It can lead to sub-standard work heading out the door. Which is not ideal in what is a critical piece of work – at the very least it is urgent, and it may also be important!

A lot of value can be added by quick focused peer review, just as the penultimate draft of the paper is completed. A fresh set of eyes on a piece of work you've been fully focused on over the last few days will be able to provide new perspectives. And, can look at the paper from the view point of the Minister, or other decision-maker. The reviewer is sure to see things that the author can't, because at that point the author will be fully wrapped up in the issue and the paper as drafted.

It can be hard to fit in when deadlines are tight

We often hear analysts and managers saying we just didn't have time to do it, because of the tight timeframes.

This doesn't have to take very long. An experienced peer reviewer can provide valuable input in an hour or less.

So, next time you are in this situation, try a Turbo Peer Review.

¹ https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_8_surviving_and_thriving_peer_review.pdf

² https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_24_qa_-_practical_ideas_1.pdf

There are four main phases to a Turbo Peer Review

1. Planning

Work out **when** peer review is needed – make sure you give yourself enough time to make changes to the paper following that peer review, ahead of the deadline. Also make sure you've timetabled in QA and the sign-out processes.

Think carefully about who the best peer reviewer for this job might be. Ideally it will be someone who is not directly involved (as having a fresh set of eyes is key), but who knows something about the topic, so they don't have to come up to speed.

Once you've got agreement from someone, book a time in their diary to do it.

It's best to give the peer reviewer a good idea of the brief at this point. If there is a commissioning sheet, or if you've developed one – that would be useful for your peer reviewer as a background. Otherwise a quick discussion on the brief you've been given will do. This is better than getting the draft cold – it will allow the peer reviewer to mull over the issue a bit ahead of seeing your paper.

2. Preparation

Make sure that you stick to the timeframe!

But if you absolutely can't, then let the peer reviewer know early and re-book a time.

Just before the peer review commences, spend 5–10 minutes discussing where you got to in the analysis and the paper. Things evolve once you get into it, and that might have an impact on the final product, and whether you can meet all aspects of the initial brief or not.

As well as the paper, you might want to give the peer reviewer important pieces of background information.

3. Peer review – key tasks

The first thing to do is to make sure that you, as the peer reviewer, are fully on top of the original brief. The most important question you have to ask in peer review is **‘does the paper do the job?’**. So, understanding the original brief, and whether it has evolved, is critical, before you get into the peer review.

As with all peer reviewing focus on concrete, practical suggestions. Avoid introducing any of your own pet issues, or suggesting additions of ‘nice to know’, but not essential material.

Don’t explicitly focus on QA – someone else is responsible for that. Focus on the issues and how they are dealt with. But by all means, mark any errors you trip over for someone else to fix.

Don’t re-write yourself. So, comments rather than tracked changes.

Put relatively more time into the:

- Recommendations.
- Executive Summary/Key points.

Think carefully about the needs of the audience. Is it written in a way that a busy Minister can read quickly? easily understand? and does it contain all the practical material for he/she to do their job?

You can use The Policy Project checklist for papers in development, it has a list of key questions that form a great basis for a Turbo Peer Review.³

Think about how to give feedback:

- Focus on the most important things, the things that will make the most difference – there might not be time to deal with everything.
- Give positive feedback too!
- Make sure your suggestions are practical and doable, in the timeframes.

Go through your feedback in person (or by phone, Zoom or in Teams) if you get the chance. This enables the author to tease out how they can best respond to your suggestions.

4. Updating the paper and giving feedback to the peer reviewer

Now is time to update the paper. Following the comments – and within the timeframes you have planned.

Do the most important things first. You may run out of time.

Remember to do a final spell check, and get a final QA of grammar, spelling and formatting done.

Brief whoever is signing out the paper about the feedback you received in the peer review process.

And, once the paper is out the door and been considered by the Minister, remember to give your peer reviewer feedback about what worked and what didn’t.

It’s also a good time to reflect on what went well and what didn’t, so you can build it in to your processes and practice next time you have to do a short turnaround paper. See Figure 1 for an overview of this process (overleaf).

This paper was written by at NZIER, March 2020.

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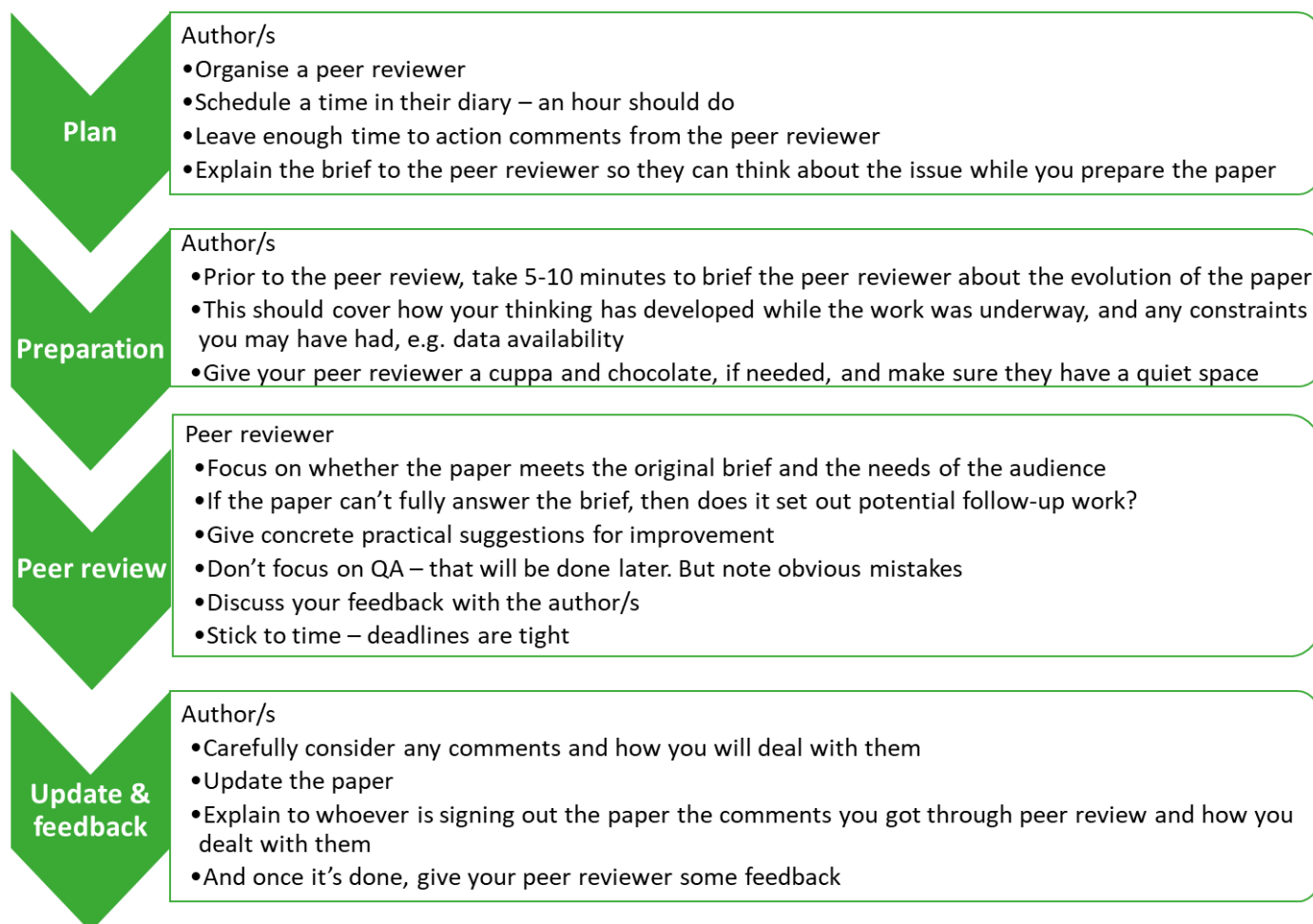
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³ <https://dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2019-06/Final%20Checklist%20for%20papers%20in%20development.pdf>

Figure 1 An overview of the Turbo Peer Review process



Source: NZIER