

The value of a fresh set of eyes: using peer review to improve policy quality

We've written several masterclasses on peer review and quality assurance (QA).

- Peer review¹
- QA²
- The differences between peer review and QA³
- Turbo peer review.⁴

But, from reading papers and talking to authors and managers, we know it's still a challenge to have a top-class peer review process as a regular feature. The usual explanation is lack of time.

So we thought it was worth re-iterating some of the key benefits of getting a fresh set of eyes to review papers and how best to fit it in, given the time pressures on all of us.

A fresh set of eyes

It's one of the most important elements of robust peer review. A fresh set of eyes can see issues, gaps, mistakes and clouded arguments that you may have missed or had not thought of. It can provide practical suggestions for improvement.

As well as picking up mistakes or errors, the key benefits are:

- **A more objective perspective** – they aren't immersed in the detail or have been party to different stakeholder

interests. They should be able to cut through to the essentials of the issue and the advice. This may mean they see other ways of looking at it that don't get caught up with the same assumptions.

- **A broader perspective** – they can help connect to other issues (e.g. ones they've worked on that you haven't).
- **Fresh ideas** – other people will have different knowledge and experience and will be able to bring them to bear on your problem.
- **Innovation** – “*Originality is simply a fresh set of eyes*” Thomas W Higginson – a US politician, abolitionist and reformer of the late 1800s.

Using a fresh set of eyes for review is common across many different sectors and jurisdictions

Examples are:

- literary editing
- academia
- customer service improvement – including the use of 'mystery' shoppers
- it's been systematised in the health sector⁵ to improve quality, effectiveness and redesign services
- management consulting.

¹ Masterclass No. 6 Peer review
https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_no_6_peer_review.pdf

² Masterclass No.13 QA practical ideas
https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_13_qa_-_practical_ideas_1.pdf

³ Masterclass No. 21 Peer review vs QA
<https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20>

<https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/Brief%2021%20LG%20Peer%20review%20vs%20QA%20-%202022.pdf>

⁴ Masterclass No. 24 Turbo peer review
https://f.hubspotusercontent30.net/hubfs/20712581/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_24_lg_turbo_peer_review_.pdf

⁵ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/qsir-fresh-eyes.pdf>

No doubt there are others, too.

Choose your fresh set of eyes carefully

Don't pick the person sitting next to you that you've discussed the ins and outs of the issue over the time you've been working on it. Or even another member of the project team.

Pick someone who knows a little of the context but not the detail. That's where the benefits of a fresh perspective will lie.

It's often helpful to get someone who thinks about issues differently from the way you do. This can help broaden perspectives rather than running the risk of groupthink (a major enemy of robust advice).

Using thinking tools to get different perspectives

We know it's been around for a while, but the Edward de Bono, six hats approach⁶ is useful for getting different perspectives. You can ask a reviewer to look at your work from a particular perspective or several different perspectives.

This type of method can also be used to get other perspectives on a piece of work as part of peer review. Of course, ideally, this should have been built into the wider process and not just left until the end.

Don't rely on the sign-out process to give a fresh perspective

Most of these people will be looking at it from a certain viewpoint, e.g. a legal perspective, financial, or a particular branch of science, so their views tend to be narrow.

Don't rely on your sign-out manager either. They may be able to provide a fresh set of eyes. But on the other hand, they may have been deeply involved with the project, and the discussions throughout it, and they may not be able to distance themselves enough to provide a fresh perspective.

Also, they will likely be under time pressure and focused on completion.

Ideally, any paper should have had a decent peer review before the sign-out process.

Sometimes, you can view your own paper with a fresh set of eyes by leaving it for a while

Many literary authors use the technique of finishing a draft of a book, then putting it aside for a while, and coming back to it for review. This gives them the ability to bring fresh perspectives to their work.

However, this is not often all that practical, given the time constraints in the policy process.

You may be able to work this into your own way of working by leaving a draft over a weekend and coming to it fresh on Monday morning. Or, for tighter timeframes, an interlude doing something completely different, e.g. a meeting on another topic, getting some fresh air, or, in a time-honoured way – going out for coffee.

Or by using some of the thinking techniques mentioned above.

It's really worth making time for this step in the process

We know it's hard to find time for this sort of review. There are deadline pressures, and other people have a lot on their plate.

But plan for it – work it into your timelines for getting it done.

Arrange it early with the person doing the review so that they can put it in their diary.

It doesn't have to take long – see our masterclass on Turbo peer review referenced above.

Even just an hour can give great value.

⁶ Edward de Bono was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Economics. The hats surfaced in an article: "[Thinking hats](#)

[on, please: In the first of three essays this week on".](#) *The Independent*. 2 May 1994.

Completing this sort of review should be part of the standard process for developing policy advice.

It needs to be supported and encouraged by managers, senior/chief advisors, and the organisation as a whole. This means encouraging authors/teams to plan for it early and making staff available to do reviews.

It can be more regulated and systematised. For example, this requirement can be included in sign-out sheets and made part of standard staff performance expectations.

However you do it, the approach should reflect your team/organisational culture and fit in with the rest of the advice production process. That way, it will bed in naturally.

It needs to be part of ‘the way things are done’.

To finish

A quote from Greta Thunberg on the power of seeing things from a fresh perspective:

“Being young is a great advantage, since we see the world from a new perspective and we are not afraid to make radical changes.”⁷

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<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019>

[/sep/26/greta-thunberg-teenager-on-a-global-mission-to-make-a-difference](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/sep/26/greta-thunberg-teenager-on-a-global-mission-to-make-a-difference)