Quality Control of Policy Research at CSOs
A Comprehensive Approach

Raymond J Struyk

2021

Situation Today

- What's the fuss? We all have QC programs.
- Many exist more on paper than in reality.
- Stringent standards sometimes adopted for all products are too costly and too time consuming. Result: official processes are not followed. "Work arounds" are being employed, with standards compromised.
- Needed: a realistic system, that is enforced
- Comprehensive coverage

Coverage

1. Written products: reports, policy briefs, draft journal articles
2. Presentations
3. Text placed on your website, e.g., program descriptions, report summaries

Quick check. What happens at your institute?

Take 5 minutes to sketch out step-by-step how the review process, if any, worked for you or your team's *most recent draft report* or other document for a client. **Consider:**

--Is there written guidance on the process at your institute? Was it followed?

--Was there any review? If so, who/how did it start?

--Who appointed the reviewer? Someone in your group? Outside?

--In what form were the reviewer's comments provided?

--Comments quality? Verbal/written? Missing literature references provided?

--Did your supervisor check that the review was done?

Components of any QC System

The system is documented in a written statement covering:

1. the range of products subject to review;
2. the usual intensity of the review, perhaps varying for different author/product combinations;
3. the person responsible for designating reviewers and review intensity for each product to be reviewed;
4. key criteria to be used in the reviews;
5. form in which comments are to be provided;
6. process for resolving possible disputes between the reviewer and the author(s).

1. What written products get reviewed?

- Reports to clients
- Papers for conferences
- Papers being submitted to journals??
- Books proposed for publication??

- Articles for the popular press
- Documents for press conferences
- Policy papers and memos prepared for government officials, MPs, int'l donors
- Blog posts—in-house blogs, others

2. Who are the reviewers?

- Key qualification is the expertise to do the review
    - Methodological knowledge (statistical technique used)
    - Policy/sector knowledge
- In-house staff is generally preferred but technical qualifications come first

3. Who Selects the Reviewer?

- Assuming your analysts are organized in teams, the selector is the Team Leader.
- If the Team Leader is one of the investigators or researchers are not in teams, then the Vice-President for Research, if one, or the Executive Director.
- For extremely important projects the Executive Director may want to add an external reviewer in any case.

4. Review Prompts for Policy Research Reports

You need to download to your computer the Word folder of in-class documents for this workshop.

Download the folder: in-class charts

Open the file: **Guidelines for Reviewing Policy Research Reports**

We will use the other files later.

4. Review Prompts of Reminders for Policy Research Reports

Part 1: Problem Definition & Analysis

1. Issue definition
    1. Well-defined; policy importance clear?
    2. Stated hypothesis that is subject to analysis
    3. All relevant aspects included?
2. Literature review—domestic, international sources
3. Right information and data assembled?
4. Analytic methods appropriate
5. Report well-organized, clearly written

Scoring not recommended for QC reviews.

Review Prompts for Policy Research Reports—Part 2: Conclusions

1. Based squarely on paper's findings?

2. If government program recommended

    a. Cost estimate

    b. Administrative feasibility, cost discussed

3. Reasonable range of options considered, not just one idea

4. Full policy implications of analysis drawn out and realistic ideas for improvement given

5. Where appropriate, ideas for additional analysis, data collection?

Written products: What should reviewers look for beyond technical proficiency?

- Consistency with TOR
  - Reviewers should ask for a copy of the TOR if it is not initially provided
- <u>Policy Brief</u>: sufficient discussion of the underlying research for reader to understand what was done?

5. Form in which comments are provided

Short summary of the product's quality and promise: 1-2 paragraphs.

Be specific in your actual comments. "The introduction could be clearer" does not help.

Comment balloons and tracked changes are preferred.

Provide references to literature missed by the author if the reviewer has it handy (not just say that "Bicher's work is a good example")

6. Dispute resolution

- Who should resolve?
    - May depend on whether the dispute is over a technical issue or a policy issue; external expert may be needed
    - Obvious candidate for policy issues is head of the organization in small CSOs; department head in larger CSOs
- Keep discussion strictly professional
    - Collegial, not adversarial
    - Avoid winners and losers
- Should be simple written guidance on how an ignored reviewer can bring the issue to

Example from the Urban Institute

A case important for the Institute's reputation involving very respected analysts.

7. Enforcement

- No ignorance:
    - Where new or revised policy is being developed, discuss draft & final policy statement with staff
    - Existing system: Every "new hire" analyst is given the specific location of the policy & procedures and told to read them for certain

- Team leaders: Track products/events
    - Tracking triggers reviews; helps ensure adequate time for reviews
    - Gives information on missed reviews; could be used in annual assessments.
    - For documents that are not deliverables, researchers must inform team leaders on the schedule when they make a commitment.

- Performance on QC is part of performance review

Go to the file

"Urban Institute Release Form"

in the In Class Charts folder you downloaded earlier.

Administering a QC System for written products-1

Critical. Incidence of weak systems is high and it is caused by a combination of unrealistic review guidelines and poor oversight.

- To be successful need a system that can hold managers responsible, which means their formally vouching (signing off) for an appropriate review being done for each product from their group. Great example is: Urban Institute Review and Release Form.

- Ensuring compliance: find a critical point that at least written products must pass through: acceptance for website posting; preparation of letter transmitting reports.

- Must be clear on who decides on the intensity of each review.

Administering a QC System for written products-2

Use a standard form. Good places for a "check box" indicating the review done

- on the form sending a product to communications for posting on a website
- on a form that sends reports to your contracts office or executive director for transmission to a client or an external audience.

- Include in the manager's annual performance appraisal the review of quality control issue products from her group.

You will know what will work in your institute.

Special Case of Consultants' Reports to the Institute: Getting good products

1. The Terms of Reference are critical
2. Structure the contract with a significant final payment payable only on acceptance of the final product
3. Most important be certain the consultant understands the assignment; go over TOR together; review draft of early product to ensure common understanding. Be open to questions
4. Subject draft report to rigorous review; having a presentation is often a good idea (also informs other team members of the results).
5. Another strong review of the final product.

Presentations

Common Problems

1. Most CSO analysts under invest in preparing presentations.
2. There is insufficient tailoring of content depending on the background and probable interest of the audience.
3. They seldom do a practice presentation to get advice and only self-identify rough spots.
4. The results are often bland, poorly delivered talks.

Some Basic Steps in Adjusting Content for Your Audience

- Organize it depending on audience's orientation—more technical or more policy oriented.

- Focus: decide which elements are of the greatest interest for this audience. Do not deliver too much information or too many details.

- Handle politically sensitive observations and conclusions carefully: avoid overstatement. Be ready to provide additional information to justify your comments.

- For policy-oriented presentations to knowledgeable, important people, rehearse with experts external to your institute after internal trial presentation, if you can. (I admit this is hard to organize.)

Managers' Responsibilities

- They should have a system in place to notify them about each upcoming presentation 10 days in advance.

- Working with the presenter and other team members decide on the degree of preparation needed.

- At a minimum a practice in front of a few staff. More depending on importance.

- Monitor that the plan is carried out. Consequences if it is not, especially if he results is a poor performance.

Preparation Examples from the Urban Institute in Washington

1. Presentations to the Institute's Board of Directors. Fully rehearsed. Reflects on senior management.
2. A presentation to senior advisers to President Reagan on results of an evaluation of his domestic initiatives.
3. "Testifying" to Congressional committees on specific policy issues under consideration.
4. Preping for a presentation to a client working group on progress to date for an ongoing project.

Website Content

Illustrative Reviewer Designations
for Communications-Group Drafted Content

Content type	Reviewer
Descriptions of projects, project findings and related policy development; press releases	Lead researcher; editor
Other content, e.g., event invitations, descriptions of the CSO ("About Us" content) posted on website, etc.	Originator's superior in the communications group or senior management on exceptional basis

QC Summary for your institute for written products, p.1

Go to the in-class chart, "Current Practices Review Chart".

Join the Zoom room to which you are assigned: 10 Zoom rooms are for the 20 participants that from institutes with 2 participants; 2 additional Zoom rooms are for the other 10 participants.

Complete the table by

(1) putting an "x" in the box in the appropriate column for each query for the current practice at your organization

(2) Placing an "o" in the column you think would be the best practice for your organization based on what we have discussed.

QC Summary for your institute, p.2

For those in groups, with people from multiple CSOs, try to agree on a best solution but you can enter more than one "best."

You have 15 minutes to complete

2-3 groups will be asked to discuss your preferred choices.

Current Practices Review Chart

Type of Product	Product not used/ made	Covered in policy[a]	How often is this type reviewed?			Who is the usual reviewer?		External expert
			Always	Sometimes	Never	Within the Institute		
						Same team	outside	
Reports to clients								
Conference presentations (Power Point)								
Papers for conference distribution								
Papers being submitted to journals								
Books proposed for publication								
Articles for the popular press								
Hand outs for press conferences								
Policy memos prepared for government officials, MPs, international donors								
Other:								

Conclusions

- QC is a necessity, not a frill
- Establish a formal system
- Design a system to fit your needs
- Credibility of system with the staff requires
  - Consistency
    - All the products in the designated categories
    - All researchers
  - Objectivity and fairness of reviews

Հարցերի դիմել/ For questions please apply:

Ռեյ Սթրայք/RayStruyk, PhD: struyk33@hotmail.com,

Արմեն Վարոսյան/Armen Varosyan avarosyan@urbanfoundation.am,
+37493707039

Հաջորդ աշխատաժողով/Next Workshop - Աշխատաժողով 6 - Workshop 6

3-5-ը մարտ/March, ժամը 16:00-19:00/4pm– 7pm

Բանախոս՝ Դոկտոր Ռեյմոնդ Սթրայք - Speaker: Ray Struyk, Ph.D

Օժանդակ նյութեր և ձևաթղթեր /Supporting materials and forms:

https://urbanfoundation.am/language/hy/international-technical-assistance-for-data-program-armenia-2/