UNIT 5 ACQUISITION AND COMMISSIONING

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5.0 AIMS

In this unit you will be introduced to the process of acquisition of manuscripts for publication. Publishers need manuscripts to publish, as authors want publishers to publish them. You would come to know that a book or book idea might come from many sources. The unit will discuss the various sources from where manuscripts and book ideas come to the publishing house. Search of manuscripts and initiating projects that will result into books that meet the needs of a publishing house, is the responsibility of the editorial department of a publishing house.

The unit will unfold the process of acquiring the manuscript the role that commissioning editor plays in the whole process. After going through the unit you would be able to describe:

- The sources of supply of manuscripts to a publishing house;
- How book ideas can be converted into books;
- Who are literary agents;
- What role they play in the process of acquisition;
- What are solicited and unsolicited manuscripts;
- What is the meaning of commissioning of manuscript;
- Who is a commissioning editor, what role does he play in the process of acquisition; his job and responsibilities;
- What is the process of commissioning and review of a publishing proposal; and
When is the time to convey acceptance to the author and signing the contract.

The success of a publishing house depends on what to publish and where to get it. One should remember that most publishing failures are due to wrong editorial decisions. Understanding the need and process of acquisition and commissioning, therefore, is of utmost importance for a publishing house. This unit will provide an overview of various aspects of acquisition and commissioning work in the editorial department of a publishing house.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The flow of manuscripts into a publishing house is its livelihood, very vital for the growth and development of the company. A search for manuscripts and initiating projects that will result into books and meet the needs of the publishing house, is the responsibility of the editorial department. Its job is to seek out, buy and edit books that the company would like to publish. Building up of a saleable list is the essence of successful publishing.

In the words of Datus C. Smith “The publisher who sits waiting for authors and translators to bring in manuscripts is going to publish an undistinguished list of books and have small profit. On the other hand, the publisher who wants to give good service both to the public interest and to its firm’s profit goes out and gets manuscripts.”

There are many ways by which a book project can be developed into a book. The idea can come to the editor from within the publishing house or outside it. Editors search for writing talent, whenever they find it; they get in touch with promising new writers. The editors must keep an open door to all who come to them with new ideas. These book ideas may come from many places. Some of the sources identified by publishers from where manuscripts and book proposals come to editors are discussed in the following sections.

5.2 SOURCES OF MANUSCRIPTS

The editorial department deals with the acquisition of the manuscript and developing it to make it more readable and saleable. Submission by an author is not the only route for supply of manuscripts into a publishing house. The editor may conceive an idea and find an author to translate the idea into a written book or it may come to the editor’s desk directly from the author, his agent, a professional contact, through a friend or any other means and its merit and salability are satisfied by the evaluation procedure before conveying yes or no to the author. Some of the routes through which a manuscript can be acquired by an editor are as follows:

- Ideas from within the publishing house;
- Discovery of author/book idea by reading/attending conferences;
- Literary scouts;
- Literary agents; or
- Unsolicited manuscripts.

Activity 1
Mention some of the sources through which a manuscript can be acquired by a publisher.

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(Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit)
5.2.1 Ideas from Within the Publishing House

The acquisition of publishable manuscripts is the sole responsibility of the editorial department but the idea can originate from any other functionary of the publishing house. People working in the production and sales department are also fully conversant with the publishing programme of the company. They are aware of the area of experimentation and field of activity of the publishing house. These men come into contact with professors, librarians, book reviewers and authors in the process of their work of producing and promoting the books. In the process they may come to know of a prospective writer who has either written or can write the kind of books needed by the publishing house or the type of ideas the editors are on the look out. These prospective authors are introduced to the editors of the publishing house who welcome such suggestions and may sometimes succeed in finalising a proposal.

5.2.2 Discovery of Author or Book Idea by Reading / Attending Conferences

An ideal editor is said to be a superman, with world of events as well as literatures at his fingertips. "Editors read widely and with catholicity of taste. They must, if they are to keep their jobs. Else they will be taken over by their competitors". The editor of school or college textbooks acquires knowledge of the educational system by being part of the system or by studying and reading about it. Editors read other publishers' catalogues to find out what is new in the market and what competition the new manuscript will have to face. They follow not only creative writing but also critical writers, watch closely the publications of their own trade, attend conferences/seminars to contact established authors and explore possibilities of the potential authors and manuscripts.

5.2.3 Literary Scouts

A direct personal recommendation to an editor is a common way for an author to be introduced to an editor for possible publication of a manuscript. Editors sometimes depend upon outsiders, generally a university professor, teacher, librarian, bookseller or scholar to keep watch on what is being written in their respective specialised fields. This is both common and an important manner of acquiring manuscripts.

A literary scout is one who researches for publishable literary property on behalf of a publishing house and is usually compensated by the publisher if a recommended property such as book idea of a manuscript is contracted.

A large number of scholarly and university level textbooks are received by this method. Some scouts work for more than one publisher and often become responsible for authors leaving publishers. They do not exist in large number but, nevertheless, are important sources for acquisition of manuscripts by publishing houses.

5.2.4 Literary Agents

Another way an editor hears about a publishing proposal is through literary agents. These agents are the most recognised sources of such communication in U.K. and America; there literary agents have become an important factor in publishing. In Europe and America, "An author who does not employ an agent these days is rare, and the publisher who does not advise an author to use agent is even rarer". The institution of literary agents has taken solid roots in the West but it is not as important a factor in India, though there are some operating in the Indian publishing arena.

Literary agents are men or women, who either alone or as members of firms, place the manuscripts of their client authors with publishers because, they know what the publishers are buying and who is publishing what. They have an intimate knowledge of the lists of various publishing houses. Literary agents receive a commission, usually 10
per cent but sometime 15 per cent—of all receipts and they negotiate the terms of publishing contract on behalf of authors.

They are a twentieth century phenomenon whose business depends upon personal contact, on the ability to attract author customers to them and to sell their wares to publishing trade, filmmakers and broadcasters.

Initially, publishers resisted the advent of literary agents as middlemen between authors and publishers and who could disturb the ‘cozy intimacy’ between them. The hostility has now become less pronounced when publishers have realised that they intend to do a wonderful job of screening material and stopping such bad manuscripts from reaching the editor’s desk by submitting only what appears to have some kind of reasonable chance of acceptance.

The literary agents’ role is immensely complex and played on many different levels. They are a link between the author and his publisher and a literary agent must satisfy both equally.

They have three basic functions:

**Editorial:** They help authors define and refine their own ideas and revise manuscripts after submission.

**Placing:** Literary agents try to fix the most suitable publisher and try to sell subsidiary rights at profitable terms.

**Selling:** By trying to get best possible terms for the author while signing the contract.

They sometimes perform “such disparate services as midwife, middlemen and auctioneers”, says Thomas Weyr. “As midwives they are often instrumental in delivering a book from the author and later to the publisher. As middlemen, they negotiate with editors for sale of books, and they auction books if the property can be best handled in a bidding situation.”

Though literary agents are totally identified with the authors, their relationship with publishers and their editors is friendly. They often have to educate authors in publishing problems. A middleman’s dialogue goes both ways. You cannot force a book down a publisher’s throat. Good agents, who have a highly developed ability to evaluate all forms of literary propositions can earn for their authors sums that the authors could seldom expect to obtain for themselves.

### 5.2.5 Unsolicited Manuscripts

A large number of manuscripts are received by publishing houses unsolicited, also called ‘over the transom’. These are called unsolicited because they arrive at publisher’s office at author’s own initiative and unexpectedly and without being asked by the publishing house to do so. These manuscripts are neither commissioned by publishers nor recommended by their editor.

It may seem astonishing that there are so many unsolicited manuscripts and that only a few of them see the light of the day. The reason is not far to seek. Although, authors may do a lot of labour on writing the manuscript, they do little research in finding out who would be interested in that kind of manuscript.

Another reason for mass rejection of unsolicited manuscripts is that many unknown beginners try to start with the largest and most prestigious publishing house. The numbers of unsolicited manuscripts are swelled by the simple fact that many authors indulge in multiple submissions and send copies of the manuscripts to a large number of publishing houses simultaneously.
Some publishers reject manuscripts with great speed. For most publishers the standard reason for turning down an unsolicited manuscript is 'it does not fall within our list.' There are other reasons too. Few authors would realize that each manuscript received by publishers whether rejected, as the majorities, are bound to be — or accepted, cost the publisher some money. Publishers are choosy and they have to, because they know that most authors are known failures and they make their living out of a few successes.

The general accusation that publishers reject a manuscript without reading it cannot be accepted wholly. Because it is rare that a publisher will refuse to consider a manuscript that sounds at all possible.

The point that publishers as a class are not interested in works of new authors is not to be accepted without reservation. Unsolicited manuscripts pour in all the time even though a few pompous publishers actually refuse to accept work that has not been invited or commissioned. But if everybody adopted this prissy attitude, there would have been no *Gone with the Wind*, the classic example of a best seller that literally came to its publisher through the post.

**Activity 2**

1. Who are literary agents? 2. What are their three functions?

(Check your answers with those given at the end of the unit)

### 5.3 COMMISSIONING OF A MANUSCRIPT

Publishers directly influence the content of what is written. The most pervasive and direct way the publisher can influence this is to conceive of a work and commission an author to write it. The essence of successful publishing is 'what to publish' and 'where to get it from'. The publishers must be aware of what authors are writing and what readers want and need. When works for which the potential market exists are not being produced, the publishers may commission them. This probably occurs most frequently where publishing is highly developed but it can be especially important where traditions of authorship are not firmly established.

It appears to be increasingly common for works to have their genesis in the publisher's rather than the author's mind. Publishers call themselves 'Shapers of Culture' and 'Gatekeepers of Ideas'. They operate as sluice gates; they are gatekeepers in as much as they are empowered to make decisions on what to 'let in' and what to 'keep out'. They function as arbiters of taste and culture. There is considerable interaction between editors and authors and this interaction often shapes the nature of what is published.

**Activity 3**

What are unsolicited manuscripts and why they are generally rejected?

(Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit)
5.3.1 Commissioning Editor

A commissioning editor is responsible for building up a publisher’s book list. The commissioning editor finds suitable authors for new books and for new editions of existing titles. He/she negotiates a contract with the author or the author’s agent and monitors the progress of the book from commissioning to publication, working with other editorial/production staff.

Commissioning editors need to keep abreast of market trends in their area of publishing. For this they have to do considerable research by consulting colleagues in marketing departments, attending book fairs and monitoring other publishers’ lists. Knowing the trends in the book market is an important part of the commissioning editor’s job. It is the commissioning editor who has to decide what is likely to be profitable this year, and what could be difficult to sell the next. He decides on the scrt of book titles he will publish and often draws up an annual publishing plan. He usually has to discuss his plans with other senior staff and prove that his ideas are likely to be profitable.

This is a senior position in editorial department for an editor with substantial editorial experience. The commissioning editor should have a talent for spotting great writers and great writing. Commissioning editors identify and assess the publishing market, develop and support projects and authors, maintain a publishing programme and contribute to marketing and sales activities.

In book publishing, a commissioning editor is essentially an important player. It is the job of the commissioning editor to advise the publishing house on which books to publish. Usually the actual decision of whether or not to contract a book is taken by a senior manager rather than the editor.

5.3.2 Qualities of a Commissioning Editor

As an editor, you will need a good eye for detail and must be accurate and thorough in your work. You must also be able to work to deadlines and remain calm under pressure. With the introduction of computers in word processing it is common for authors to submit their work on soft copy to be edited on a computer screen. Computer literacy is an advantage. A good editor should have:

- Strong linguistic competence;
- A sound editorial background involving acquisitions and/or manuscript development;
- A history of successful project management including goal setting, managing budgets, benchmarking and meeting critical schedules;
- Exceptional written and verbal communication skills;
- Strong general computer skills with knowledge of Word, Excel, Power Point, other related programmes, and the Internet;
- A high level of stamina with the capacity to work under pressure and successfully manage many projects simultaneously;
- Good problem solving skills, judgment, resourcefulness, and flexibility;
- Excellent interpersonal skills to enable one to build consensus and work effectively in a team environment;
- The ability to build author relationships and effectively negotiate contracts; and
- Be creative and able to come up with ideas for books that will sell.
5.3.3 Responsibilities of Commissioning Editor

The roles of commissioning editors vary between companies. Usually they are also responsible for ensuring that authors under contract deliver typescripts to specification and on time. They thus have an author management role. They usually have the responsibility for ensuring that typescripts are of sufficient quality. In some (usually small) companies commissioning editors are also responsible for overseeing the copy editing, typesetting, proof reading, and design of books, although in other companies this responsibility is assumed by other staff e.g. Editors, Copy Editors, and Production Editors. Often commissioning editors are also responsible for managing books that have already been published, for example by ensuring that stock levels are adequate and advising on when a book needs to be reprinted.

Commissioning editors are involved with a book at every stage of its production. They are the key link between the manuscript and the published work. To develop their publisher’s book list, commissioning editors research their field to learn about trends and gaps in the market.

5.3.4 Job Description

Typical responsibilities of commissioning editors include:
- Selecting new authors and titles that will sell well (known as list development);
- Monitoring the performance of titles already published;
- Review and evaluation of manuscripts;
- Supervise presentation of manuscripts to the publishers and advise on the potential of the submitted material;
- Negotiate with authors on issues of royalty, publication date, size and style of publication and other clauses of the contract;
- Have an overall responsibility of the publishing project from evaluation to actual printing;
- Working with authors to make necessary changes in content, style and length of the manuscript;
- Handling multiple projects at different levels of development simultaneously; and
- Dealing with administration, finance, budgets and strategy.

Activity 4
Mention at least five qualities of a commissioning editor.

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<th>Quality 1</th>
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<tr>
<td>Quality 2</td>
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<td>Quality 4</td>
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<td>Quality 5</td>
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(Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit)

5.4 COMMISSIONING PROCESS

For a salable publishing list and to maintain a high standards of publications, all commissioned books undergo a rigorous process of assessment and peer review which can be termed as the commissioning process. The commissioning editor may follow may more than one way to search a publishable and profitable manuscript. He may think pro-actively by thinking of ideas for books and then finding authors to write them. He may react to a book proposal or collaboratively formulate ideas in discussion with authors.
No matter which way a potential proposal comes into view, a procedure is generally followed by publishing houses. The process may slightly vary from house to house but in essence will remain the same - to judge the real potential of the proposal before jumping to a decision to accept or reject the proposal. The proposal has to undergo a system of checks and balances. The system may include submission of a publishing proposal on a prescribed format of the publisher.

Activity 5
Mention at least four responsibilities of a commissioning editor.

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(Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit)

5.4.1 Book Publishing Proposal

Some publishers insist that a publishing proposal should be submitted in a specified format to facilitate the process. The proposal form is a sort of self-analysis of the book project by the author himself. The information provided in the prescribed format not only helps the commissioning editor to get interested in the proposal, but can also help a great deal in the successful marketing of the book. The format of a book proposal form may differ from publisher to publisher; the information asked from the author is more or less the same.

The author is asked to supply information about himself, his status and the position he is holding. Information about his complete address and communication details is needed. The author also supplies information about the book, subject, coverage, market, and competitive titles. Information is also sought about whether it is a text book, or research publication. The author is asked about the status of the manuscript and probable date of completion; whether the book contains any special materials; what is the length of the manuscript and any other additional information, which can help in assessing the proposal. The format of a sample book proposal form can be like this:

Book Publishing Proposal

Proposed Title of the Work

1) About The Author
   Name of the Author (With complete Address and Contact Numbers)
   Office Address/ Position Held

2) About The Book
   Title with sub title, if any
   Status of the manuscript
   Estimated completion date

3) Details
   Brief synopsis
   Table of contents
Length of the manuscript (approximate)
Illustrations or other special materials

4) **Subject matter**
   Coverage, main features, how it is different from other titles

5) **Market**
   Main readership of the book
   Which discipline it will fall into
   Level of appeal (target audience)

6) **Referees**
   Names and addresses of people whom author thinks as suitably qualified to
   comment on the proposal

7) **Additional information**
   Any additional information that can be helpful in assessing the work
   Date by which the author is supposed to send in information.

### 5.4.2 Author’s Questionnaire

Along with the book publishing proposal, sometimes authors are also asked to send another piece of information called 'Author's Questionnaire'. Some of the questions asked may not apply to the book publishing proposal, but can be of great help in preparing promotional material after the proposal is accepted.

An author may be asked to supply information about other books he has written and the names of the journals in which author has contributed. He may be asked to write a few paragraphs on how he came to write this book, including any interesting experiences researching it, countries traveled, membership of professional organizations, prizes or honours received or any other such information which the publisher thinks can help in promoting the book, if accepted.

### 5.4.3 Review of Publishing Proposal

The commissioning editor assesses each book proposal for publishable qualities. The proposal is examined to find out:

- Whether it contains anything of intrinsic merit that can be converted into a book;
- Whether the submitted proposal suits the publisher’s list;
- Originality of ideas, coherence and presentation of arguments;
- Whether the product is easily marketable; and
- Whether it can be produced at a price which is affordable.

As each publishing decision is an economic decision, the publisher wants to be doubly sure before committing himself to a book proposal. The proposal is, therefore, sent for external review. The editor will aim to ask the best experts/academics in the field to review submissions. On average, the review process for a book proposal takes about six to eight weeks.

When reports are received back by the editor these are sent to the author for their comments and feedback. This is an important process of the review process as it gives the author a chance to defend or agree with any criticisms or suggestions made, and, if necessary, make revisions to the original submission. It is general policy to protect the identity of reviewers and authors by making all reports anonymous. Because if the
anonymity is broken, the recommendations can be influenced to the disadvantage of the publisher.

Generally at least two positive reports are required for every work commissioned. If the reports are negative or lukewarm, or if the commissioning editor is still unsure of the submission, then more reports may be sought. If all the reports are negative, or if the commissioning editor decides not to contract the book, then the submission would be declined for publication at this stage.

**Activity 6**

What kind of information is asked for by the publisher in a Book Publishing Proposal?

(Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit)

### 5.4.4 Editorial Review

After the review reports are with the commissioning editor and they are positive, it is time to move further. In the meantime, the editor, with the help of the production and promotion department, would have completed the research on market and competition and working out of provisional costing to make sure that the proposal is financially viable. Once the commissioning editor is satisfied that the work can be contracted and terms can be negotiated with the author, the proposal is put before the Editorial Board.

The Editorial Board or panel, consisting of senior editors, considers the merits of the manuscript based on its subject matter, quality of contents, and its market potential. A manuscript with sufficient merit is recommended back to the commissioning editor to make an offer of publication to the author. The role of the Commissioning Editor is to liaise with the Authors to ensure that they are completely satisfied with the resulting publication. If the Board declines to publish the work, then it can either be resubmitted with more information by the editor at a future meeting or completely declined for publication.

### 5.4.5 Signing of Contract

The review process can take from just a few weeks to three or four months, or even more depending on the availability of the reviewers, how long the reviewer takes and the number of reports required. Once the reports and the author's response are in, the commissioning editor will decide whether a contract will be offered. Once the commissioning editor gets a go-ahead from the editorial board, it is time to invite the author for discussing the contract. The commissioning editor will elaborate and negotiate the terms from publisher's perspective giving due considerations to the authors' rights. The terms are negotiated with the author and the author is asked to submit the final manuscript.
Activity 7

Why is editorial review done?

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(Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit)

5.4.6 Submission of Final Manuscript

Once the contract is signed, the author is asked to write the book and submit the manuscript before or on the agreed delivery date. The commissioning editor will be in touch regularly to check on the author's progress and will be there to answer any questions or queries the author may have. The commissioning editor will, from this point onwards, remain in constant touch with the author to provide any help or clarification, should the author require these.

The signing of the contract does not bind the publisher if the final submitted material lacks the promise shown in the specimen chapters. If there are substantial changes from the original draft, the manuscript may be reviewed again.

One positive report is needed at this stage, although if the book is in a series then a report by one of the series editors is also required. Once the report is in, it is forwarded to the author and any changes are discussed with the commissioning editor. If substantial changes are required then the manuscript is likely to be reviewed again once the revisions have been made. If only minor changes are to be made, the manuscript is revised accordingly by the author and then passed over to the production department.

5.5 SUMMING UP

In this unit we have discussed the various sources from where manuscripts are acquired by a publishing house. Searching for manuscripts and initiating projects that will result in books that meet the needs of a publishing house is the responsibility of the editorial department of a publishing house. Submission by an author is not the only route for supply of manuscripts into a publishing house. Manuscripts can be acquired by an editor as follows:

- Ideas from within the publishing house.
- Discovery of author / book idea by reading/attending conferences
- Literary scouts
- Literary agents
- Unsolicited manuscripts
- A commissioning editor is responsible for building up a publisher's book list.

You have learnt how:

- The commissioning editor commissions manuscripts.
- What procedure is generally followed;
- What are the qualities of a good commissioning editor;
- What is a book publishing proposal;
• What is the importance of the author’s questionnaire;
• How book proposal is reviewed;
• When can an agreement with author can be signed; and
• What options are left with the commissioning editor if promised manuscript is not supplied by the author.

We should remember that an editor’s job does not finish after acquiring one manuscript, he must begin to dream of the next book!

5.6 AIDS TO ANSWERS

Activity 1
Ideas from within the publishing house
Discovery of author / book idea by reading/attending conferences
Literary scouts
Literary agents
Unsolicited manuscripts
Commissioning of Manuscripts

Activity 2
1) Literary agents are men or women, who either alone or as members of firms, place the manuscripts of their client authors with publishers, because, they know what the publishers are buying and who is publishing what.

2) Editorial; Placing; and Selling

Activity 3
A large number of manuscripts are received by publishing houses unsolicited, also called ‘over the transom’. These are called unsolicited because they arrive at publisher’s office at the author’s own initiative and unexpectedly and without being asked by the publishing house to do so.

The reason for mass rejection of unsolicited manuscripts is that many unknown beginners try to start with the largest and most prestigious publishing house.

Activity 4
1) Strong linguistic competence.
2) A sound editorial background involving acquisitions and/or manuscript development would be an asset.
3) Exceptional written and verbal communication skills.
4) Strong general computer skills with knowledge of Word, Excel, Power Point, and other related programmes, and the Internet.
5) A high level of stamina with the capacity to work under pressure and successfully manage many projects simultaneously.

Activity 5
1) Selecting new authors and titles that will sell well;
2) Review and evaluation of manuscripts;
3) Supervise presentation of manuscripts to the publishers and advise on the potential of the submitted material;
4) Negotiate with authors on issues of royalty, publication date size and style of publication and other clauses of the contract.
Activity 6
1. About the Author 2. About the Book 3. Brief synopsis 4. Subject matter
5. Market 6. Referees

Activity 7
The Editorial Board or panel consisting of senior editors considers the merits of the manuscript based on its subject matter, quality of contents and its market potential.