UNIT 6 REVIEWING AND REFEREEING

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6.0 AIMS

In this unit, we shall be continuing the discussion on the reviewing (evaluation) and refereeing of manuscripts submitted to a publisher that we touched upon in Course 1.

We have already told you about the issues involved in evaluation of a manuscript submitted to a prospective publisher, why a preliminary evaluation is done and by whom.

Now we shall go into some detail about the issue of pre-publication reviewing and refereeing of the manuscript to experts. Here the purpose is to both assess the contents and to suggest changes, if there is scope for improvement, in the submitted manuscript.

At the end of this unit, you will be able to explain the differences between the two processes, the advantages of spending some time over both reviewing and refereeing and the reasons for errors of judgement by the best intentioned reviewers and how publishers handle situations rising out of these.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Initially, when printing and publishing were performed by the same person (as you have already seen in the earlier unit on history of publishing), all the decisions were in the hands of the printer who bore both profits and losses. However, as the roles got compartmentalized, the publisher outsourced the job of printing to a printer (or even had his own printing outfit). In such a case, the publisher was the one who bore the losses or profits from the publishing of the book submitted to him.

In the case of a publisher who had the expertise, interest or time, he himself assessed the salability of the manuscript from various parameters such as market, timing, pricing etc. In the unit on “Acquisition and Evaluation” we have referred to the “marketing expert” who assesses market needs. Here we shall make a distinction between the
publisher's marketing expert and his subject or content expert (also called referee) as you will see in the Sections that follow.

In today's world of specializations, it is not necessary or desirable for the publisher to invest too much personal energy if he can possibly maintain an editorial department or a resource bank of freelance referees. Such experts help in evaluation of the manuscript and act as (often blind) reviewers. Such reviewing is usually double-blind—neither the author nor the reviewer of the aware are aware of the identity of the other, for the sake of impartiality and hence the reviewing process is fail-safe, hopefully.

6.2 DEFINITIONS OF ROLES

Publishing today is a specialized business. The Journal publisher will not be a Book publisher and neither will a newspaper or magazine publisher be likely to publish books.

We have already talked of the differences between book and newspaper publishing and you will recall that periodicity is one major difference. A (pre-publication) Book Reviewer is usually a person who is not retained in a regular capacity and is a subject expert called upon from time to time to assess a manuscript. Often, a paper or book reviewer is not paid for the job and does this out of goodwill. Such a reviewer is actually a referee. Refereed Journals are therefore journals that have subject experts on their panel to help them judge the quality of papers submitted for publication. Such experts are referees hence the term refereed journals.

A Publisher's Editor (who may also be a marketing expert) on the other hand, is a regular employee and his or her recommendations will involve advice to the publisher on other issues. He may not be able to judge the veracity or reliability of matter submitted for publication, but he will be able to guide the publisher as to the marketability or salability of the book. A Referee is a subject expert who knows what new insights the book offers, what gap in existing knowledge it fills, whether the conclusions are based on reliable data and so on. Often, a referee is a peer of the author.

### Activity 1

What is the difference between a referee and a publisher's editor?

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

6.3 EVALUATION FOR JOURNALS BY REFEREES/ REVIEWERS

While journal publishing is not our main focus, you must be able to appreciate the vital differences between book and journal publishing if you are in the field of publishing per se.

Refereeing (peer review) is the system of evaluation and feedback by which expert researchers assure the quality of each others' research findings
According to an Editor of a Refereed journal that publishes research findings:

"In reviewing manuscripts, referees are asked to comment on: 1) probable interest to readers, 2) contribution to the literature; 3) attention to relevant literature; 4) adequacy of research design and/or analysis; and 5) style and organization."

The Editors say they "expect referees to include substantive comments on content and how the paper should be revised for publication. Most reviews are thorough and intended to help the author improve the work. Some reviews are blunt; others so abbreviated as to be of little value. Every now and then, we receive an evaluation form without accompanying explanation - such reviews may save the reviewer’s conscience, but they do neither us nor the authors any good." (Matter from Donald D. Stull, stull@lark.cc.ukans.edu University of Kansas, Feb 3, 2009).

You can see from the above, that papers submitted to a Journal Editor are sent to a referee who is asked to comment on the five issues listed above. Here the role of a Referee is to help the Editor and the author both. Usually, the author of the paper is not told who the reviewer is so that the assessment is fair and the reviewer is not subject to any pressure—to accept or reject—and his evaluation is completely impartial.

The reviewer/referee too is not told who the author is, for more or less the same reason. Sometimes, the reviewing is done by peers and it becomes professionally uncomfortable for both parties if identities are revealed. (As distinct from the reviewer who looks at papers from the perspective of their being publishable, there is the book reviewer who looks at the published book. We shall discuss him elsewhere.)

Blind reviewing is recommended as the reviewer may get influenced by the identity of an eminent author, indirectly perhaps, and the loser in that case is the publisher, via his editor.

6.4 EVALUATION OF BOOKS: LITERARY AGENTS AND REFEREES

A Literary Agent is the author’s representative. A Referee is the publisher’s representative.

If an author submits a manuscript (unsolicited) to a publisher, several things can happen:

1) Outright rejection
2) Conditional acceptance
3) Outright acceptance.

However, in the west and now even in India, there are literary agents who can help the author.

6.4.1 Literary Agent

A Literary Agent is a person who can save the author much heartache by doing all the liaising for him and in return, gets a share of the profits. You will come across umpteen stories of how many publishers were approached by so-and-so author before a certain book was published. We do not need to repeat them here. Suffice it to say that if a work does not get published, it is as good as not having been written.
What Does A Literary Agent Do?
There is more to being a writer than stringing words together. Even great writers have to do more than write.

Unless you can persuade someone to publish the words you slave over, your writing will remain unknown and unread and writing will drain rather than fill your bank account.

That’s where a Literary Agent comes in. Your literary agent is the book-marketing expert who can sell your crafted words to jaded publishing professionals. He or she can turn a manuscript gathering dust in your desk drawer into a published book paying the bills. A reputable agent will go to work for you to make sure that your writing pays what it should.

An agent will give your work a much better chance of escaping the slush piles that threaten to overwhelm the office space of all successful publishers. Your job, which isn’t easy, is to produce writing that an agent can believe in. (http://www.writers.net/agents.htm)

In a sense, the literary agent does the work of evaluation of the book. But his evaluation has the risk of personal interest.

The publisher’s Editor, on the other hand, has the interest of the publishing house and is aware of the various concerns and other publishing commitments of the publisher and will therefore be more useful to the publisher. He may also be a marketing expert if the publishing house is a small one or a family-run business.

6.4.2 Referee or Reviewer
A (post-publication) Book Reviewer reviews a published book for the prospective buyer or reader. You must have seen book reviews in all features pages of periodicals and magazines. He comments on aspects of the book that a buyer would like to have information on so that he can decide to buy (or not buy) the book—the price, the readability, the uniqueness, the aesthetics etc.

A Book Referee is involved at the pre-publication stage and is consulted by the publisher. He will take into consideration issues like the

- time of year (publishers publish according to timings of book fairs, new academic sessions, political or cultural events that may influence buying patterns and decisions);
- type of book;
- nature of subject matter (whether specialized); and so on.

Ideally, a committed reviewer will help with constructive comments. Note that the term ‘referee’ is used for journals more than for books though, of course, the role of referee in both is the same.

Activity 2
How is a literary agent different from a book reviewer?

(Check your answer with the hint given at the end of the unit)
6.5 ROLE OF REFEREE

Reading a manuscript for a publisher is time consuming, difficult, dispiriting, usually poorly rewarded. Online refereeing is much in vogue and often not rewarded at all!

Sometimes, a referee will be rewarded with a copy of the book but usually this job is done out of goodwill. You will see, then, that referees will readily agree to read a book proposal than to read an entire manuscript. A Book Proposal is a summary of what the book is about, why the author thinks it should be published, a brief summary of the book or chapter outlines and the conclusion. No referee will spare time for a poorly presented proposal.

6.6 EVALUATION OF BOOKS: THE PUBLISHER’S EDITOR

Publishing editors have a variety of responsibilities and they belong to either book publishing or to newspaper publishing domains. These are not interchangeable publishing areas.

A publishing editor’s main responsibility is for the style and content of the publication. He is thus responsible for assessing the style and the content both and, if and when necessary, for performing necessary cosmetic or intrinsic changes.

In newspapers and magazines, the role of an editor is likely to be managerial, with responsibility for the entire content.

These editors are also responsible for making sure that the production process runs smoothly; schedules are maintained and there is regular interaction with the advertising and production departments.

In their evaluation, therefore, there is the managerial element as well. Since we have already dealt with the editor-author-publisher relationship, we shall not go into those details here.

6.7 THE PUBLISHER’S ADVISOR

Most publisher’s nowadays rely on advisors who may be designated by a variety of terms to guide them about a variety of issues with a view to maximising profits and minimising risks. Such issues could be:

- Editorial Acquisitions
- Marketing, Planning and Implementation
- Identifying and Accessing Niche Markets
- Cost Reduction Strategies
- Brand Development
- Distribution Options
- Working with Publicists
- Direct Marketing
- Goal Setting, and
- Strategic Alliances
6.8 THE PROCESS OF REFEREEING

An editor of a journal is usually an academic in his or her own right. Therefore any author submitting a paper for publication can expect to have it outright rejected without having been subjected to the peer-review process.

The reasons given for rejection could be:

- Journal does not publish papers in this field;
- The type of manuscript is not appropriate (a case study);
- Ethical problems (animal experimentation without clearance from Ethics Committee);
- Poor organization;
- Methodological weaknesses;
- Nothing new or unique that has not been published before;
- Author has not followed directions for submission.

(Note that most journals carry clear instructions about word length, format, procedure for quoting sources etc. and very rarely will the editors of such journals make the efforts of doing these jobs for the author. As editor of a refereed journal, the expert may not be able to spend effort to set the mechanical things right.

A Referee, therefore, will also not be expected to apply his energy to looking at submissions that are inappropriately done. So, then, what is the process of refereeing a paper that is appropriately presented?

6.8.1 Selection of Referee

The first step, naturally, is selection of a referee. The editor and referee(s) work in close collaboration thereafter.

The editor will thus select a referee who can guide him regarding

- Strengths and weaknesses of the manuscript
- Rejection, or
- Acceptance (including some comment on the need for revision before reconsideration if he feels the work has some potential), and
- Constructive advice for improvement in the manuscript.

6.8.2 Criteria for Selection of Referee

Usually three referees are chosen, especially for a multi-disciplinary work, so that there is ample subject expertise. The criteria for selection of referees could be:

- Recognized expertise in the field
- Previous experience in the style of working
- Promptness

Those who would not be selected could be

- Those who have a close relationship with the author and hence not likely to be objective
- Those who are working with the author on a similar manuscript
- Those who praise or criticize too much.
6.8.3 Referee’s Tasks

A referee is expected to submit a report within the given time frame, fill out a questionnaire that may be sent to the author giving specific suggestions that may indicate that, if followed, the manuscript will be accepted (the final decision being the purview of the editor, not the referee).

Given below is the format for reviewing of a paper. There may be minor differences in other formats but basically the content (of instructions to reviewers) is the same.

Dear,

Thank you for agreeing to be one of our reviewers. We are keen to ensure a high standard of papers and the paper that is being sent to you has been submitted after a first selection process based on the author(s) abstract.

In general the standard of papers forwarded to us after the vetting of abstracts is good, but occasionally some weaker papers are also accepted for review. We are eager to help authors who may not yet have achieved a suitable skill in writing academic papers to the necessary quality.

To this end we would be grateful if you would, wherever possible, provide constructive advice as to how they can make the paper more acceptable for presentation at a quality academic conference.

The XX committee would therefore be grateful if you would complete the table and rate the paper on the issues described below. As with all double-blind reviewing any comments you make will be passed to the authors on an anonymous basis.

As we strive to feedback comments to authors within xx weeks of their paper submission please try to complete the review within that time.

| Paper Title |
| Review Due |
| Please rate the following: |
| (5 excellent, 1 poor) |
| 1 Relevance to the Journal |
| 2 Contribution to academic debate |
| 3 Structure of the paper |
| 4 Standard of English |
| 5 Appropriateness of the research/study method |
| 6 Relevance and clarity of drawings, graphs and tables |
| 7 Appropriateness of abstract as a description of the paper |
| 8 Use and number of keywords/key phrases |
| 9 Discussion and conclusions |
| 10 Reference list, adequate and correctly cited |

Specific reviewer comments to be passed to the author(s). Please expand on any weak areas in the checklist and offer specific advice as to how the author(s) may improve the paper.

Should this paper be accepted for publication?

| Yes - no changes | Yes - with minor revisions | Yes - with major revisions | No |
| Please indicate if you think this paper is worthy of consideration.
6.8.4 Conflicting Reports

In the event of referee reports being radically conflicting, the editor has the final say in resolving the issue.

6.9 ROLE OF EDITOR

Since the editor has a larger, overall perspective, the referee does not have the final say in the rejection or publication of a manuscript. The editor will, obviously, have an easier job if all the referees concur. This will be possible if the ‘Instructions to Referees’ are clearly spelt out. The editors concerns are to the appropriateness of the subject, importance of the issues addressed, available space in that particular issue of the journal, ethical concerns (in the case of scientific journals in particular since these may involve animal experimentation) etc.

In the case of three referee reports being respectively accept/reject/accept with revisions, the editor is likely to accept the third suggestion.

Activity 3
Why does a publisher enlist the help of several referees?

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

6.10 SOME HINTS ON EVALUATION OF BOOKS AND ARTICLES

Some of the information required to assess a manuscript is common whether it is a book or a journal. As a publishing professional, you may keep in mind the following points on which you may ask your referee or subject expert to comment:

For books this could include:

- **Author:** One, two or more? Is the person an author, editor, or both? Is the author well-known or a first-time author? If the work has several authors or is a compilation or an edited work, are all contributors or authors listed? Is there an author listed at all?

- **Title:** Is there a title (for encyclopedia articles, the title may be the entry word)? Does the title tell you anything important about the work? Does it reflect the content?

- **Date:** When was the manuscript completed? Is it recent or does it seem to have been submitted to several publishers before? How might the date of publication be reflected in the content? Is the work current enough for your purposes?

- **Multiple submission:** Check that the author has not already committed to another publisher. He may be asked for this information.
• **Edition:** Has this work been published earlier by another publisher?

• **Purpose:** Is the purpose of the work clearly stated? Does the work live up to the stated purpose?

• **Readership:** Who is going to buy the book? Is this a general or an academic work? Is it written for a specific discipline or interdisciplinary in nature?

• **Format and Organization:** Does the arrangement make sense? Are there prefaces, introductions, chapters, headings, indexes, and suchlike which help you use the work? Are there keys for any abbreviations?

### 6.11 SUMMING UP

In this unit we have given you an idea of the process of evaluation of a manuscript by a publisher before he makes any commitment to publication. The idea is that a book must sell, a publisher must recover his money and make some profits too. To this end, he harnesses the services of a marketing person who can, by cross-checking against various parameters, say if the book can be published. The publisher then approaches subject experts who may not do any work on the manuscript but who again check against some different parameters, if the book (or paper, in the case of a Journal) is worth publishing. He may suggest changes if there is scope for improvement. In order to spread the risk, a publisher may consult two to three experts and then the process of working on the content can begin.

### 6.12 AIDS TO ANSWERS

**Activity 1**

A referee is a subject expert who is occasionally consulted. A marketing expert is usually a regular employee of the publisher.

**Activity 2**

A literary agent is the author’s consultant and liaison man. A book reviewer is the man employed by a publisher to help decide if the book is worth publishing and to make constructive suggestions. A post-publication reviewer helps a prospective buyer make up his mind.

**Activity 3**

Since referees are not full-time employees and are usually not paid, the risk of one or two referees backing out is there. Also, in the case of conflicting reports, the publisher can get several opinions.