

International
EDITION

BOOK PUBLISHING

a Practical Guide



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Chapter 11

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Manuscript Acquisition and Assessment in Book Publishing

INTRODUCTION

The enterprise of publishing depends solely on manuscripts which is its raw materials. Just as the proverbial cock emanates from the egg, all books emanate from manuscripts. Every manuscript is a potential good book, depending on the expertise of the editor who handles it. Since there cannot be books without manuscripts, every publishing house should particularly be serious and careful about sourcing and acquiring manuscripts.

The task of acquiring and assessing manuscripts is the responsibility of the development editor who midwifes all publishing processes and activities. While it is the responsibility of the editor to get manuscripts, it must be noted that his acquisition drive is guided by the in-house publishing policy, which spells out clearly the company's scope and 'mix' of subjects areas of interest in publishing; (Areo, A. 1995).

The paramount aim at the back of the mind of an editor who is hunting for manuscript is to publish good books at a reasonable profit margin so that he can remain in business to continue to publish more. He must be conscious therefore that






the manuscripts he acquires, if published must be able to:
Offset the production cost which covers acquisition fees and expenses (if any); origination (typesetting, formatting, editing, cover design, illustrations, etc); and the printing (filming, digital separation, plating, paper, printing and finishing). It must also

- pay its own fair share of the company's running cost.
- pay royalty to the author(s); and.
- contribute an appreciable profit margin to the working capital of the company.

Manuscript acquisition is the sole responsibility of 'mature' editors i.e editors with years of experience or senior editors. This task does not exempt veterans like Managing Editor, Editorial Managers, or even Publishing Manager. In most cases, the Publishing Director may have to be accompanied by any of his reliable Editors to seek for manuscripts in cases where top government officials or influential personalities like king, chief, minister, etc are involved. What is important is that this assignment should not be left in the hands of 'baby' or 'green' editors who do not have the technical acumen or wherewithal of the business. Some companies designate him as Commissioning Editor or Sponsoring Editor while others simply call him Development editor. Notable companies such as Macmillan Nigeria Publishers Limited (MNPL) Heinemann Educational Books (HEB), CSS Bookshops Limited (CSS), Evans Brothers Nigeria (Publishers) Limited (Evans) and University Press PLC (UPPLC) among others adopt the titles of Editor while Longman Publishers PLC adopts the title of Publisher for its editorial officers. Also in big publishing companies, editors

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are classified according to their disciplines e.g Humanities editors, Science Editor, Mathematics Editor, English Editor, Yoruba Editor (or Language Editor for all Languages), Social Science Editor, Children's Editor (for children's books),etc. Today, availability of manuscripts is not a problem as there are several manuscripts gathering dusts on the shelves of both authors and publishers. There are indeed many manuscripts for publishers to choose from. The situation will remain so because:

- * It is practically impossible for every manuscript (poor or good) to get published.
- * Quite a number of them are substandard, poorly written, shallow in depth and cannot meet the stiff competition posed by better ones.
- * Most writers have over-rated ideas about the literary qualities of their manuscripts.
- * Publishers are often incapacitated by financial insufficiency.
- * Inadequacy of manpower prevents publishers from handling all the raw materials in their possession.

Sourcing Manuscripts

Publishing is an intricate profession which follows a systematic processes involving different professionals. The business of publishing is in stages and sourcing manuscripts is the very first stage. It should be noted that manuscripts come from various sources. Generally, publishers obtain their manuscripts largely through the following sources: Editorial Travels and Tours, bookfair, tertiary institutions, research institutes, topical problem, great and notable events, public debates, workshops, seminar and conferences.

Editorial Travels and Tours

Publishers travel far and wide visiting bookshops to see the fast selling titles; visit teachers, lecturers and researchers to discuss existing books on different subjects and disciplines, dwelling on their strengths and weaknesses. They also visit educational administrators to know latest policy and developments in governmental circles; make trips to examination bodies and curriculum development agencies to obtain latest information and relevant documents.

Famous Bookshops like CSS Bookshops Limited, Lagos, University bookshops on campuses like University of Ibadan, University of Lagos, Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, etc; Nigerian Baptist Bookstore, Oduote Bookshops, and host of others are ready sources of publishing ideas. Educational administrations at the Ministry of Education at both state and federal levels who are the policy initiators are always ahead in the happenings and developments in pre-primary, primary, postprimary and tertiary levels of education. Such information can be useful to publishers. For instance, the change from 6-5-4 system of education to 6-3-3-4, sent many publishers to the drawing board to replan and repackage their books to meet up the new system. The new Universal Basic Education (UBE) of nine continuous years just introduced has made publishers to scramble and scamper for policy facts from the Ministry of Education to guide them in their activities. They also scramble for interpretation of the curriculum of examination bodies, notably West African Examinations Council, (WAEC), National Examinations Council (NECO), National Board for Technical Education, (NABTEC), Joint Admissions and

Matriculation Board (JAMB) and educational regulatory bodies such as the Nigeria Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) and so on.

Book Fairs

Serious minded and proactive publishers make attendance at annual fairs a ritual. Fairs are book meeting place which attract publishers, authors, booksellers, printers, copyright experts, educationists, governmental agencies, non-governmental organisations, scholars, researchers, and players in the book industry, both locally and internationally, for book business activities. Reputable international book fairs include the Nigerian International Book Fair (NIBF) organised by the Nigeria International book Fair Trust (NIBFT) annually, London Book Fair, Frankfurt Book Fair, and Zimbabwe Book Fair. Apart from seeing the latest publications on display, it creates a veritable opportunity for marketing collaborations, reprint negotiation, and translation permission among publisher. It is another potent source of manuscripts.

Tertiary Institutions

Universities, Polytechnics, and Colleges of Education, Schools and Colleges are centres of academic activities. They provide publishing houses with manuscripts, which emanate from the research and academic activities of lecturers and sometimes, students. So, tertiary institutions are potential sources of manuscripts generation for publishing industry.

Research Institutes

These are centres for diligent researchers on different subjects and disciplines. Expectedly, the reports of research

findings must be published. So publishers see research institutes as potential manuscript providers.

Topical Problems

Topical problems like the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) have generated a lot of publications. Books of different sizes and qualities in different languages have been written on these infections. In the same vein, books have been written on the scourge of malaria in the past, before cures were found. Even at present, government and non-governmental agencies publish books on harmful effects of malaria. The tsunami disaster, hurricane Arizona, etc have all given birth to books.

Great and Notable Events

Notable events are documented for posterity and further reference. The Nigerian civil war, the national independence of 1960, the June 12, 1993 annulment, the 2005 All Africa Games hosted by Nigeria, etc have extensively been written about. Publishers are aware of this and as such, do not allow such unique opportunities to pass them by.

Public Debates

Controversial issues and public debates are also capable of generating manuscripts. In Nigeria, the great International Monetary Fund (IMF) debates of the 1980s generated many books in a bid to sensitise the public to the merits and demerits of obtaining the loan. Another example is the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of General Ibrahim Babangida (rtd) and other governmental policies. Publishers who are creative, look out for such issues and generate manuscripts from them.

Workshops, Seminars and Conferences

A lot of publications are generated from workshops, seminars and conferences. Books of reading, conference proceedings and journals are usually generated through such intellectual gatherings. Publishers are quick to compile and package workshop presentations into books especially if such ideas are popular, current and marketable.

All these are no doubt wonderful opportunities for publishers to increase their stocklist. However, the publisher as a businessman assesses every opportunity from the business point of view and as such first considers the financial implication before taking any decision.

Types of Manuscripts

Basically there are two types of manuscript acquisition. These are unsolicited and solicited manuscripts. Unsolicited Manuscripts are manuscripts that are not sought by the publishers. Here you have a writer or an institution running after a publishing house with their manuscripts to be published. In this instance, the writer voluntarily submits his manuscripts to the publishing company for publication. Areo (1995) expatiates that unsolicited manuscripts are those which come into the office through the post, through the educational representative; or brought into the office personally by an enthusiastic; anxious; but equally nervous author.

Every thriving publishing company is bombarded with an average of three to five manuscripts per week or at most a fortnight. Different manuscripts, at times, come in multiple from the same author. At Macmillan Nigeria Publishers Limited, Ibadan for instance, between 1997 and 2004 an average of three manuscripts came in weekly from budding authors, who are teachers, pastors, self-employed,

unemployed and enthusiastic and over zealous students. Many of them, about 90% of course, ended up being rejected there and then because of poor standard and quality, message-crises and undefined target-audience.

At CSS, the patronage is even higher. The higher level of patronage is obviously due to the religious undertone of the ownership of the company. CSS Bookshops Limited is owned by the Anglican Communion and the erroneous feeling is that the CSS Press, which is the publishing and printing arm of the religious institution, is a charity home. At least, an average of five manuscripts come in weekly besides authors - published and prospective - who come in one after the other for series of enquires. This was my experience there between 2005 and 2008.

Unsolicited manuscripts are very common in fictional writings particularly prose, and inspirational books. Curriculum based manuscripts, which are for academic institutions are by far less. Whichever way one looks at it, unsolicited manuscript hardly gets published. Adapting a popular proverb, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for an unsolicited manuscript to get published. The chances of an unsolicited manuscripts making it to press is very slim.

Areo (1995) attests to this that in Britain, only about 2 per cent of unsolicited manuscripts succeed in getting published while the proportion is reported to be much lower in the United States of America. In Nigeria, there is no gain saying that the percentage is very much lower if not nil. For instance, in eight years at Macmillan Nigeria Publishes Limited, (1997-2004), I can't remember any unsolicited manuscript that sailed through Publishing while, less than five were able to make it in three years (2005 - 2008) at CSS.

Generally, the area where unsolicited manuscripts record minimal success in getting published is fiction. Even in Europe and America, an unpublished fiction writer needs an aggressive and very effective literary agent and of course best of luck to get his/her work published. Areo (1995:50) remarks thus:







In Nigeria, the very few areas where unsolicited manuscripts succeed in getting published are questions and answers, revision series, notes and commentaries on literature texts, with publisher whose publishing policy accommodates such.

Solicited Manuscripts are the manuscripts that publishers request directly from authors. For instance, a publishing house may want to be part of an author's fame and as such ask him to send any manuscript for publication e.g Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ben Okri, etc. In another vein, a publishing house may commission authors to write on a special area for the company. This happens frequently with school textbooks for pre-primary, primary, secondary, at times, post secondary course books.

Writing workshops are often organised to ensure quick and timely completion and delivery. A writing workshop is a guided writing arrangement whereby selected writers are camped in a comfortably secluded area for a period of time to write manuscripts on chosen subject. A Writing workshop normally runs for a day to one or two weeks depending on the scope and intensity of the manuscripts. A session of workshop may not be sufficient to complete the book(s). In that case, the writers may be asked to complete the remaining parts individually in their respective stations. However, a time limit

must be given for submission. Alternatively, another session of workshop may be held at a later date. Whatever method is adopted, a Review Workshop is held as a follow up to critique and ratify the manuscript already generated. Thus, finishing touches will be put to the manuscripts.

Solicited manuscripts are otherwise called "commissioned manuscripts." Records have shown that most of the renowned and successful textbooks are products of commissioned projects. Commissioned authors are specialists and professionals who are veterans in their fields. Such authors are drafted from the following:






- * classroom teachers who are indeed familiar with education updates in their fields.
- * brilliant lecturers in tertiary institutions who are scholars of repute in specific areas of expertise.
- * curriculum developers.
- * officials of the ministry of education such as education officers, staff of inspectorate division, and educational agencies
- * experienced examiners who are known to publishers. retired editors, freelance editors or editorial or publishing consultants.
- * Retired officials of examination bodies.

The selected authors are usually given briefs on the assignment at hand. The contract terms will also be fully stated indicating dates and duration of the workshop, venue of the workshop and honouraria. Usually, the company will be responsible for the accommodation, feeding and transportation of the authors.

It should be noted that it is not compulsory for commissioned authors to generate manuscripts under a

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workshop arrangement. Whatever the writing arrangement is, after commissioning the author(s), the next stage is for him or her to develop the manuscript. In order to do this effectively, the author is provided with some materials to aid his assignment. These materials include:

- * copies of the competing titles which are already in the market. This will give the author to examine strenght and weaknesses of the rival titles. It is on these that authors will capitalise to generate their own manuscripts
- * copies of the current curriculum or syllabus on the subject.
- * relevant reference materials like books, journals, examiners reports, examination question papers and marking guides .
- * Also, publisher will provide writing materials: papers, pencils, biros, eraser, ruler, razor blade or sharpener and other forms of logistics.
- * The house style guideline of the company will be given to author so as to maintain consistencies in style such as arrangement of text, sequence of exercise/question, etc.

At the opening session of the workshop, the team leader who is either chosen by the authors or appointed by the publisher, will come out with a work plan. This is usually backed with time-table for effective commitment. Also, the author-publisher-contract form will be signed at this stage. If there is a convincing reason to pay advance royalty to the author(s), the arrangements will be made at this stage.



Manuscript Assessment



Solicited or commissioned manuscripts require serious evaluation. The publisher may decide to carry out evaluation at the initial stage of the manuscript entry when one of the chapters must have been written before the subsequent chapters are generated. Depending on the level of trust on competence and capability of the author, the publisher may decide to allow the entire manuscript done before carrying out an evaluation. Whatever the approach, it is mandatory for an evaluation of the manuscript to take place. External assessor who is a very competent person on the field is usually appointed for the evaluation.

The Process of Manuscript Assessment

The moment a manuscript comes in, its journey to acceptance or rejection begins. In publishing houses where unsolicited manuscripts are not accepted, little or no assessment takes place before the manuscript is rejected. In houses where unsolicited manuscripts are patronized, the manuscript are received and the following procedures which vary from one publishing house to the other follow.









The moment a publishing house receives a manuscript, the first step is to issue an acknowledgement to the author. A copy will also be kept in the file for office use. The essence of the acknowledgement letter is to register that the author's manuscript is in the company's possession. The first reading of a new manuscript is usually done by an Assistant Editor or where there is none, a 'Young' Editor but certainly not the senior editor. This officer reads and writes a brief report based on:

- * The significance of the work
- * The quality of the writing

- * Relevance of the subject matter
- * Recommendations for further assessment or outright rejection.

Obviously, the report of the assessing editor will determine the next step. In a situation where the report is favourable, the manuscript is passed to the superior officer. This could be the editor in-charge of the discipline to which the manuscript belongs - Science Editor, Humanities Editor, English, Social Science Editor, etc.




Here, the editor will pay particular attention to the language, compliance with curriculum, the existing competing titles etc. Dessauer (1974) gives a lot of questions which the second reader's report must address:

- * Are there other books on the subject?
- * How are those titles doing in the market?
- * Is there any title on the subject being expected soon?
- * Is there any title on the subject now out of print?
- * How well did it sell and why is it not reprinted?
- * Is the contribution of the current work good enough to assure them of demand?
- * Can sufficient copies be sold profitably?
- * Are there cultural considerations that strongly recommend the publication of such a book at the time?









If answers to most of these questions are positive, then the manuscript is likely to sail through. If the Editor (in-charge) recommends that the manuscript be accepted for publication, the next step would be evaluation meeting. However, it is the practice in some houses to send the manuscript out to the external assessor for deeper scrutiny.


Most publishing houses would take final decision on a manuscript after the second reader's report has been weighed and the project considered feasible. Some companies take a step further by writing the sales/marketing to assess the chances of success for the work. If the pros and cons have been considered and the verdict is positive, then a letter of acceptance is issued to the author(s) thus indicating that both parties are in business.

Manuscript may be accepted for publication on three terms.

- * Outright sponsorship by the company
- * Joint sponsorship by the company and author
- * Sponsorship by the author.

Meanwhile, in a publishing house where manuscript is sent for external assessment, the manuscript is usually sent without the preliminary pages which can give away the identity of the writer. Just as the writer(s) is/are (is) are anonymous to the assessor, so is the assessor expected to be anonymous to the author. This is normally cancelled to eliminate bias report or undue influence. Also, guidelines are given to the assessor on what to report on which include:.

- * Logicality.
- * Treatment of the subject.
- * Legal, moral and copyright issues.
- * Relevance and appropriateness of illustrations and diagrams.
- * Adequacy of examples, exercises or questions.
- * Justification section for bibliography/reference, glossary, etc
- * Simplicity and fluency of expression.
- * Target audience/users and recommended level of education.

- * Chances of the book in the market among the competing books.

All these and some other issues are expected to be the scale on which the assessor's evaluation report will be based. When the assessor report is given, further editorial and origination work continues. As a matter of fact, full editing succeeds evaluation.

Conclusion

It could be seen from this chapter that manuscript acquisition and assessment are no child's play. No wonder then that serious publishers are very careful about the manuscripts they acquire.

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