

BELS NEWSLETTER STAFF

Grace Darling, MS, ELS
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Susan E. Aiello, DVM, ELS
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Kendall W. Sterling, ELS
News Reporter

ISSUE
NO.1
SPRING
1993



Certification for Manuscript Editors in the Life Sciences: The BELS Program

by Karen F. Phillips, ELS

Professional manuscript editors in the life sciences now have something in common with professional practitioners in fields that range in diversity from clinical medicine and accounting to translation and insurance-policy writing, and even to massage and electrolysis. What is that something? Board certification.

Until 1991, manuscript editors had no objective way to demonstrate their proficiency. Likewise, prospective employers and clients had no way to assess the quality of an editor's abilities. Neither personal references nor ad hoc tests were always satisfactory.

Now, however, there is the certification program of the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences (BELS). After nearly a decade of thought, research, planning, and development, the first certification examination was administered in May 1991 to 23 candidates. The examination has been given four times since then.¹ As a result, BELS has grown from the 10 founding editors (now serving as the Executive Council) to a total of 47¹ Board-certified editors in the life sciences.

What is the background of BELS? In the early 1980s, several experienced manuscript editors in the life sciences discovered they had some shared concerns about their profession. The profession was growing rapidly, and editing was increasingly becoming an accepted aspect of the scientific effort. With the growth of the profession, though, came an increasing need for qualified editors. But as less-experienced people were entering the profession, experienced editors began to be concerned about the quality of the editing services being offered. What could they do to help establish and ensure a standard of high quality for their rapidly expanding profession?

As a result of many discussions, the idea of a credential was born. If a certification program was carefully designed, they thought, then scientists who needed the services of an editor, yet who could not evaluate the quality of an

1993 BELS Examination Schedule

Sites and dates of future examinations for BELS certification are as follows:

- May 8 _____ Sheraton Harbor Island Hotel, San Diego, CA
- June 5 _____ Sheraton at Market Center Hotel, Dallas, TX
- June 5 _____ Red Lion Downtown Hotel, Portland, OR
- June 5 _____ Holiday Inn at 5520 Wisconsin Ave, Chevy Chase, MD
- October 27 _____ Days Inn Downtown, Atlanta, GA

The first four dates are Saturdays, the last one is a Wednesday. In every case the test will begin at 9:00 A.M. and may take up to 3 hours. Please urge all your colleagues who might qualify to seek certification in BELS. As our numbers rise, so will our profile in other organizations, until BELS certification comes to be recognized as the standard of professional competence everyone should aspire to.

editor's skills themselves, could have confidence in a Board-certified editor's established level of ability.

The individual editors in this early group were all very experienced. Cumulatively, they had edited thousands of manuscripts in the life sciences. They were also all active in national and international professional associations in scientific editing, writing, and publishing. Further, they were all members of the Council of Biology Editors (CBE), an organization whose members include not only manuscript editors but also editors-in-chief and managing editors of many of the leading journals in the life sciences.

The group's ideas about certification soon gained support from the directors of CBE, who asked them to form a task force to investigate the idea. The task force evolved into a committee, and the committee got to work. They learned how other professions handle certification, and they investigated the feasibility of such a program for editors. How should the program be developed? What would it cost? How would it work?

The committee spent the next several years researching, holding meetings, and consulting with testing experts, administrators of certification programs in other professions, and attorneys. Plans became increasingly detailed. Eventually, they created and pilot-tested a certification examination. The initial group of concerned manuscript editors probably didn't envision their efforts culminating in incorporation as an independent entity, as BELS now exists. But it is indeed up and running!

What is the certification program like? The Board administers two levels of testing: certification and diplomate. (Note: the diplomate-level examination

is still in the final phases of development.) The certification examination is a 3-hour, multiple-choice test of scientific editing in English. In format, it resembles the standard tests used in many professions to certify practitioners. It tests such editorial skills and knowledge as the following:

- ensuring clarity and internal consistency in form, logic, usage, and organization;
- editing tables and illustrations;
- using units of measure and scientific terms;
- detecting and correcting errors in punctuation, grammar, word choice, syntax, stylistic consistency, and numeric content and data;
- adhering to a publisher's instructions; and
- understanding the principles and ethics of scientific inquiry, writing, and publishing in the life sciences.

The certification examinations are given in various locations, often in conjunction with meetings of professional organizations that scientific editors are likely to attend.²

“A manuscript editor’s responsibilities include not only such matters as grammar, punctuation, and syntax, but also logic, organization, consistency, and persuasiveness of the message.”

For the purposes of the BELS certification program, a manuscript editor is defined as an editor who is concerned not only with the form but also with the intellectual content of a manuscript. A manuscript editor's responsibilities include not only such matters as grammar, punctuation, and syntax, but also logic, organization, consistency, and persuasiveness of the message. These editors are distinguished from editors in other scientific and technical disciplines (e.g., electrical engineering, geology) by their experience in editing material in the life sciences—particularly biology and its related fields, including the many branches of medicine. The certification program includes all relevant fields from anatomy to zoology.

Even if editors have experience in other fields, they have a reasonable chance of earning certification, if their experience has included editing materials published in journals, newsletters, textbooks, or reference books in any scientific or related field.

Who is eligible to take the certification examination? Candidates must have a bachelor's degree or equivalent from an accredited academic institution. They must also have at least 2 years of experience as a manuscript editor in the life sciences. BELS may grant, at its discretion, certain exceptions to those requirements. Applicants may request that experience substitute for education or that education substitute for experience. All substitutions must be directly relevant to scientific editing, however, and all requests are considered individually. Details are available from BELS.

Candidates who pass the certification examination are design-

ated Editors in the Life Sciences and may use ELS after their names. To be eligible for diplomate status, candidates must have passed the certification examination and be able to document at least 6 years of editorial experience. One requirement of the diplomate-level status will be a review of a portfolio of materials edited by the candidate; other requirements are still being developed, but that part of the program is expected to roll out soon. Diplomate editors will be able to use ELS(D) after their names.

To obtain further information or to apply for an examination, write to the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences, P.O. Box 824, Highlands, NC 28741-0824 U.S.A.

Karen Phillips is Chair of the BELS Subcommittee on Public and Member Relations. She is a Board-certified Editor in the Life Sciences, having passed the first BELS examination given in May 1991. She has been employed in the pharmaceuticals industry since 1972 and has been a manuscript editor since 1983.

¹ Editor's Note: As of this writing, the certification examination has been offered six times and BELS has 53 members.

² Editor's Note: See dates and places of future examinations elsewhere in this newsletter.

New Members

We welcome the following new members to the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences:

Miriam Bloom, PhD
SciWrite
4433 Wedgwood St
Jackson MS 39211

Sheryl R Bowen
PO Box 164154
Austin TX 78716

Jerry D Eastman
1214 Bomar
Houston TX 77006

Mitchell H Jarosz
English Dept
Delta College
University Center MI 48710-0002

Pamela Paradis Powell
Baylor College of Medicine
2701 North Blvd #25
Houston TX 77098

Mary G Royer, MS
1 Deer Run Rd - RD 2
Ithaca NY 14850

Announcements

The BELS certification program is now officially endorsed by the European Association of Science Editors and the International Federation of Science Editors. The Society for Technical Communication and the American Medical Writers Association have offered us space in their newsletters for announcing test dates and meetings of our organization.

Congratulations to Pamela Paradis Powell, ELS, on her appointment as acting editor of the *AMWA Journal* for 1993.

Claudette Reed Upton, ELS, is the new managing editor of the *BC Medical Journal*. We wish her a 30-hour day while she wraps up her freelance assignments.

Selected Readings in Plastic Surgery, edited by Grace Darling, ELS, received a Merit Award from the Lone Star Chapter of the Society of Technical Communication in the category of whole periodicals. Grace was also recognized with an Award of Excellence for her editorial work in the scientific or professional article category with her entry, "A Graphic Record in Rhinoplasty."

Future Meetings

May 8	BELS Second Annual Meeting, 7:00 PM, Harbor Island Travelodge Hotel, San Diego, CA
May 8 - 11	Council of Biology Editors 37th Annual Meeting, Sheraton Harbor Island Hotel, San Diego, CA
June 6 - 9	Society for Technical Communications 40th Annual Conference, Loew's Anatole Hotel, Dallas, TX
June 16 - 19	Society for Scholarly Publishing 15th Annual Meeting, Hyatt Regency Crystal City, Arlington, VA
July 18 - 23	International Federation of Science Editors 7th Conference, Santa Maria Imbaro, Italy
August 1 - 5	American Institute of Biological Sciences Annual Meeting, Iowa State University, Ames, IA
Sept 9 - 11	Second International Congress on Peer Review in Biomedical Publication, Fairmont Hotel, Chicago, IL
Oct 27 - 30	American Medical Writers Association 53rd Annual Conference, Colony Square Hotel, Atlanta, GA

The BELS Newsletter

This is the first issue of the BELS newsletter, but unless you help us it may be the last. To begin with, we need a name for the newsletter, something a little snazzier than "BELS Newsletter." Everyone is invited to submit suggestions for a catchy, Madison-avenue sort of name; the entries will be judged by our panel of experts (don't ask) and the winner will receive public recognition and perhaps a modest prize. I also welcome your comments, criticisms, and whatever else you are willing to send regarding this, your newsletter. We hope to publish the next issue in a

few months, but our continued existence will depend heavily on your contributions. None of us has ever done anything like it before, and although we have lots of ideas, we are very short on copy. Please send news, whether personal or professional, to Kendall Sterling at 2605 Mallards Crossing, Richmond, Virginia 23233, and send me quizzes, diagrams, columns, reports, word games, advice,

and especially good editing jokes. The format of this newsletter and future publication schedule are flexible and will be adjusted according to the response we get from you.

Grace Darling ELS
411 N Washington, Ste 6900
Dallas TX 75246

"Before you start writing a newsletter, figure out what you want it to accomplish, or you may travel reluctantly down the road of new baby announcements."

Michon M. Scott, INTERCOM, July/August 1992

