

# BELS *Letter*

Published by the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences

## Editor

*Ann Morcos, ELS*

## Contributors

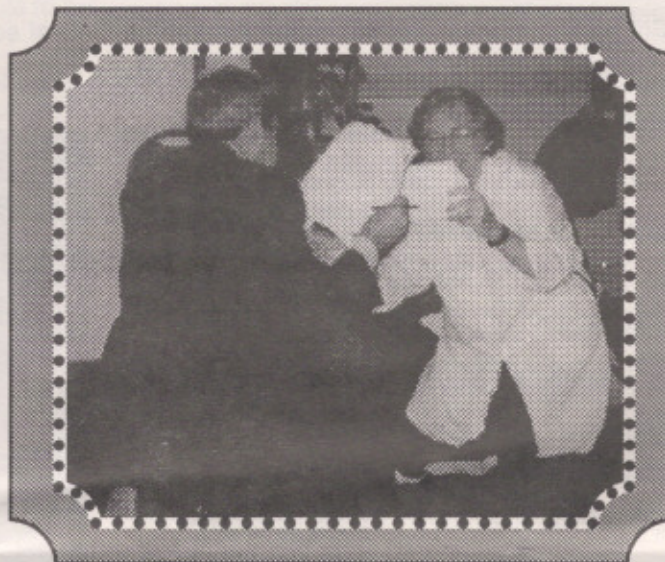
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*Paul Franklin Stregevsky*



Issue 21

Summer 2000

## *Well--You Really Just Had To Be There!*

**BELS** people were very busy in San Antonio: we held an unprecedented number of meetings and accomplished much. What follows is a quick rundown. My fervent thanks to the people who made all this possible.

We tested 13 people Saturday afternoon; our head proctor was Kim Berman.

We recognized our 48 new members from the past year at our annual meeting and banquet and were delighted to be able to welcome 2 of them in person. We also installed incoming officers (Flo Witte, president-elect, and Nancy Taylor, treasurer), thanked outgoing officers, heard annual reports, discussed issues relating to the diplomate examination, and laughed at the hilarious performance of a troupe of BELS players under the direction (almost) of Norman Grossblatt. The skit was about medical editing. (Okay, so you did have to be there; trust me, it was funny.) (See above photo of Miriam Bloom and Norman Grossblatt.)

Our hospitality room was open all day Sunday at the Adam's Mark, site of the CSE meeting. Visitors

could ask about the certification exam, talk with Jan Jerrells about the use of our Web site (Jan had her laptop running, so hands-on coaching was available), and just visit with one another. Our corporate co-sponsor was SLACK Incorporated, a strong supporter of certification for editors. Jennifer Kilpatrick and Shirley Strunk were the BELS members representing SLACK. Greeters for BELS included Kim Berman, Karen Phillips, Leslie Neistadt, Norman Grossblatt, Patti Raley, Sally Edwards, and Sharon Naron. Visitors expressed gratitude for the opportunity to meet BELS members and talk informally about the exam. Next year, we hope to be able to attract potential employers and clients, as well as potential test candidates and BELS members. (Karen Phillips in the photo below is answering a visitor's questions about the certification exam.)



Sunday evening about 20 BELS members gathered to "take" a test consisting of drafts for new questions to add to the certification exam. (Photo in right column.) After completing the timed test, par-

ticipants discussed the ranking of the questions (as easy, moderate, or difficult) and examined them for flaws. Later, on Tuesday evening, Karen Phillips, chair of the Certification Examination Committee, met with her committee (Walter Pagel, Chris Wogan, Leslie Neistadt, Sally Edwards) to do the final editing and ranking of the questions that survived the Sunday night validation process.



Monday evening Norman Grossblatt met with the Diplomate Development Committee to address the diplomate exam process; the need to simplify it had emerged clearly in the discussion on Saturday night. The committee designed a process that streamlines the clerical burden associated with the preparation of the portfolio, which is the first of two parts to the exam. (See p 4 for a description of the revised process.) The committee included Miriam Bloom, Martha Brookes, Susan Eastwood, Walter Pagel, Shirley Peterson, and me.

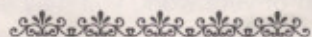
Tuesday evening the Executive Council met to conduct the main business of the year (see p 3-4 for a summary of actions taken).

None of this would have been possible without

the very hard behind-the-scenes work of Julie Newman, who made all the arrangements with airlines, hotels, and shuttle companies, and Susan Aiello, who prepared the meeting packet and its mailing and then handled all your reservations.

To all BELS members who were not able to be with us in San Antonio, I must say that we missed you, and we hope that you can make it to Washington, DC, next year, when we will celebrate the 10th anniversary of BELS. It promises to be a gala occasion, one not to be missed.

❁Bobbie Reitt, ELS(D), President❁



## *Annual Executive Council Meeting Highlights*

**T**he Executive Council, in its meeting on May 9, 2000:

- ❖ Reviewed income and expenses from 1999-2000 and estimated income and expenses for the coming year; decided that because the cost of giving examinations and providing member services each totaled less than income from fees and dues, respectively, neither fees nor dues need to be raised.
- ❖ Decided that all printed materials relating to the certification and diplomate testing programs need to be revised and new editions printed.
- ❖ Set the schedule of tests through the end of 2003 (see p. 10).

❖ Set advertising rates for the newsletter and Web site, as follows:

BELS Letter \$125 for an insert (up to 1 full page, 1 or 2 sides), \$100 for a full page, \$75 for half a page, \$50 for a quarter of a page; inserts must be provided printed in the appropriate number of copies; ads for insertion on the page must be camera-ready. The BELS Web site \$25 per month for up to 100 words; \$30 per month for 101-150 words; \$35 per month for 151-200 words, etc.

❖ Decided not to sell the printed directory of members; labels (containing only the mailing addresses of active members) will be sold for one-time use for \$150.

❖ Reviewed procedures for maintaining contact information for all members and decided to make no change (to update their contact information, members submit the change-of-address form from the BELS Web site or mail information to the current secretary).

❖ Decided to issue the print directory once a year (early summer) and to include the test schedule. Updated contact information will continue to be posted throughout the year on the Web site.

❖ Decided to drop the names of inactive members from member listings in print and on the Web immediately after the close of each annual dues drive and to reinstate the names of those who resume active status only at the time of the dues drive of the following year.

❖ Instructed Web site manager Jan Jerrells to explore the use of a paid service to assist in the technical maintenance of the Web site and to report her recommendations back to the EC.

- Established a proctoring group under the leadership of Kim Berman, who will serve as a member of the Examination Administration Committee under the direction of Shirley Peterson, the registrar. The proctoring group will organize a training session for proctors at the annual meeting in May each year and will revise the handbook for BELS proctors.
- Discussed new methods for producing certification examination test sets for each sitting of the exam, including the means to incorporate new questions and retire selected old questions.
- Scheduled a review of the bylaws for the 2001-2002 year.
- Appointed Susan Eastwood as the official liaison from BELS to the Council of Science Editors (a reciprocal appointment: Susan serves now as the liaison from CSE to BELS).
- Instructed the outgoing treasurer, Flo Witte, to arrange for an audit of the books, which is required every 2 years under the current bylaws.
- Decided to have a hospitality room again next year, in the light of the success of the hospitality room this year, and to explore the possibility of having similar receptions at the national AMWA meetings, as well. Carol Kakalec Kohn agreed to arrange the CSE hospitality room for May 2001, including finding a sponsor, and to explore ways to reach larger numbers of employers and clients of certified editors.
- Designated the 2001 annual meeting as a special observance of the 10th anniversary of BELS.

## *Diplomate Exam Procedure Changes*

**T**he Executive Council has announced some changes in the procedure for becoming a Diplomate Editor in the Life Sciences.

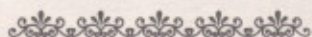
The main aim of the changes is to simplify the requirements for the portfolio part of the diplomate examination.

Here is a summary of the most important changes:

- Instead of having to submit material that you edited as part of your work, you may select material that is already published and edit it expressly for submission in the portfolio.
- You will no longer have to submit several versions of the portfolio manuscript. You will now have to submit only one--the one that shows all your editing marks--provided that it is fully legible and permits the examiners to readily see what you did.
- The portfolio manuscript need not have been intended for publication when you received it and need not have been published since you edited it.

For details of the changes in the requirements or for a revised guide to preparing a portfolio, write to Grace Darling, ELS(D), Diplomate Registrar, at [darlingg@airmail.net](mailto:darlingg@airmail.net) or 411 N Washington #6900, Dallas TX 75246.

✿ Norman Grosblatt, ELS(D) ✿



## A LOOK AT . . . *Census and Sensibilities*

By Paul Franklin Stregevsky

**A**PRIL IS THE CRUELEST MONTH: First your census form, then the 1040. Sometimes you just don't want to answer another question. So read this page instead.

How many people were living or staying in this house, apartment, or mobile home on April 1, 2000?

So asks Question 1 of the U.S. Census 2000 form. That's easy: five. But wait--there are two blocks for my answer. Am I supposed to put the 5 in the left block, or the right? If the right, should I leave the left block blank or put in a 0? If I guess wrong, the computer may think I mean 50. Or zero.

Perhaps Question 2 will be less tricky. House number. Easy: 13. But there are 10 blocks . . . . And we haven't even gotten to race yet.

I know what I think they want. The question is: What do they think I think they want?

This is no trivial matter. If even 1 percent of respondents fill in the wrong block on one question, that could mean as many as 1.2 million wrong answers. The point of this national exercise in block lettering is information, but how can I provide it if I don't precisely understand the question?

The census bureaucrats probably can't imagine that any nonmoron would have problems with Questions 1 and 2. They can't imagine someone who finds ambiguity in the simplest of statements.

They can't, in short, imagine me--a technical writer.

I design and write instructions for installing, using, and troubleshooting high-end telephone switching systems. It's my job to turn engineering gobbledegook into directions that can't be misunderstood, even by me. If some technician is using my prose to guide his live upgrade of a multiplexer in Illinois, and suddenly 10,000 Chicagoans' phones go silent, it's my fault. That's why my bible is a book that shows how to write foolproof procedures for nuclear power operators--a manual commissioned by the government after Three Mile Island. That's also why I have lived since college by the maxim: "Write not so that you can be understood, but so that you cannot be misunderstood."

In my perfect world, everyone would be as easily befuddled as I. My dad certainly was. To his dying day, he would short-circuit each time my mother asked him to "turn up the air conditioning." Was he supposed to turn the dial from 70 to 72, or to 68?

Our apparently congenital affliction has brought untold grief into my marital life, too. "Put this bowl over there," my first wife, Susan, would say, nodding vaguely northeast. I'd stare blankly "over there," then ask, "Do you mean on the table, or on the counter?"

One crisp autumn day, I was standing in front of our apartment and she called from within: "Is it cold outside?" I responded sensibly: "That depends. There's a lot of radiant heat. But there's

not much convective heat." To my astonishment, she asked again. So I clarified: "If you stand in the sun and wear a wind breaker, you'll feel warm. In the shade without a wind breaker, you'll feel cold." When she asked a third time, I lost all patience. "Look," I called tersely, "It's about 70 degrees in the sun, 60 in the shade, and the wind is blowing at eight miles an hour. Is it cold? You decide."

At lunch one day, Susan asked me to pour some juice into her tapered champagne glass. "How much?" I asked. "About half full," she replied. Here we go. "Half full by volume, or half full by height?"



Before long, my dear wife had had enough. Now, I'm someone else's headache.

You see, I've literally made a career of combating ambiguity—a crusade, however, that cost me a job in 1991. I was a corporate writer then at a safety institute funded by the nuclear power industry. One Tuesday, as the institute's annual report neared completion, all writers were asked to review the galley proofs for "obvious problems."

Danger, Will Robinson. To someone like me, all ambiguity is obvious. Let's see. . . . "New control rooms require fewer workers." Uh-oh. Could that be read to mean, "The new control rooms are so small we need to cut the staffing"? I pointed this out to the editor. She found nothing wrong with the sentence, but everything wrong with my presumption that I knew better. By Friday, I was a depleted uranium nugget looking for work.

Yet despite what one editor, one ex-wife, and one current wife may think, I am far from alone in my befuddlement. "You Can't Miss It"—my thesis master's degree in technical and professional communication—explored how drivers deal with confusing directions. "Go half a mile," you're assured, "then turn left at Center Street." You drive half a mile and come to Center Boulevard. Do you turn? Or do you drive on, hoping that Center Street is just around the bend?

That was one of a dozen questions I posed to my interview subjects—and I found that once people get behind the wheel, a lot of them share my fear of ambiguity. "This guy tells me 'Look for a big church,' " said one thirtyish woman. "How big?" Nearly all of us become anxious as we try to follow hasty directions shouted at us through a rolled-down car window. "I thought I was the only one," several participants confessed.

The once-unchallengeable College Board has conceded that some of its questions may unwittingly allow two correct answers. After you take the SAT, you can now receive the answers and challenge what the board calls correct. The kids who

win these challenges are my teen idols. They make the board bump up the SAT scores of all those savants who answered an ambiguous question by selecting "Either B or C." I'd go further, stripping points from every automaton who answered just plain "B."

Letterman and Leno had a field day when President Clinton told Paula Jones's lawyers "it depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' means," but I understood. Maybe he wasn't evading: He was getting in touch with his inner technical writer. Look up the root of is, the verb be, and you'll find eight meanings. If "To be, or not to be" is the question, Bill and I can give you 16 answers. Normal people may believe that, unlike me, they arrive at a correct understanding by quickly filtering out irrelevant meanings. When you test them, however, the truth emerges: Other meanings just don't occur to them. For example, I've always had problems remembering which way to adjust my clock every spring and fall, because I don't get the mnemonic "Spring forward, fall back." This morning, should 2 a.m. have become 3 a.m. or 1 a.m.? Friends can't imagine my confusion. "Forward means forward," they say.

Oh yeah? Suppose you have a 2 p.m. department meeting at work. That morning, the boss's secretary calls and says, "The boss can't make the two o'clock. He's moved the meeting an hour forward."

So when is the meeting? Three o'clock? One o'clock? Would you bet your next promotion on it?

While you're sorting out which way forward is, I'll get back to my census form. It may be late, but

it will be correct. I'm up to Question 4.

*Paul Franklin Stregevsky lists himself as Person 1 at his home in Poolesville, Md.*

(This article first appeared in *The Washington Post* Outlook Section, Sunday, April 2, 2000 and is reprinted here with permission from Paul Franklin Stregevsky. Thanks to Norman Grosblatt for this submission.)

### *From the Editor*

I was delighted at the number and diversity of submissions I received about humor as it affects the editing life. However, with all of the important information from the conference that needed to be passed on to you, I could not include all of the humorous submissions in this issue. Some will have to wait until later.

Paul Franklin Stregevsky's article, suggested by Norman Grossblatt, deals with how the mind of an editor works. Obsessive did you say? Good heavens, no! Not Obsessive! But yes, obsessive. Obsession is a quality that I think we all share. In fact, obsession may be the very thing that makes a good editor.

Susan Eastwood shares two of her most memorable experiences with authors and how she tactfully handled sticky situations. Who else but Susan could use gentle understatement to smooth out messes and win friends for life while doing it?

Alas, you will have to wait until the next *BELS Letter*, where humor will be continued.

❁ Ann Morcos, ELS ❁

## *How Unintentional Humor Can Improve the Author-Editor Relationship*

I'd been working with an MD-PhD from the Middle East for some time, and although he clearly regarded my work highly, he was distant and condescending. In fact, I would call our relationship a little strained. In one paper, in his results section, he concluded a paragraph with the sentence, "All of the above results are based on urinary output." So I said to him, "Omar [his name was not Omar], are you sure you want to conclude this aspect of the results with exactly this sentence?" He said to me, "Of course! I would not have written it if I did not want to say exactly what I have said." I said to him, "It is probably similar in [your language]—that what you say may be what you want to say, but can be read differently—it is not always exactly read to say what you meant. I mean. . .well, would you read that paragraph and the sentence in context again?" So Omar read the paragraph, and then the sentence, and then the previous sentence and again the sentence in question. Then he looked at me oddly, a little aghast—I neglected to mention that I don't project the image of a person with a bawdy sense of humor. Then he looked at the sentence, and again at me. . .the sentence. . .me, and then he laughed very loudly! We revised the sentence, and from that point on he was one of my biggest fans—as I was one of his.

The sentence I most regret having to condemn

in any paper I recall: "We are searching for the cure for cancer—the evanescent silver bullet—the crutch with which we sustain our failures." This was written by a doctor who knew full well what he meant to say. I'm glad that—after realizing that a silver bullet is a lot of things to a lot of people (including a can of Coors beer to some) but it is not evanescent, and after getting that crutch to sustain his efforts—he did get to say it in another context.

✿ Susan Eastwood, ELS(D) ✿



✓ Further to Kathleen Lyle's article in the Spring Issue—An error occurred in the article regarding the use of "man" and "Caucasian". Kathleen meant to indicate two separate usages that she found unacceptable ("man" and "Caucasian"), not that "man" was being used rather than "human" in the definition of "Caucasian". Sorry, Kathleen, for the error.

A brief update on the project: to Kathleen's surprise, the authors are all quite happy about changing man to humans, which was not always the case with senior British academics. They had a bit more argument about the units of pressure, but settled on mm Hg, which will not please the SI purists. Inconsistencies in place names that survived 2 previous editions (not edited by Kathleen!)—names in the Himalayas that have been differently transliterated (Karakoram/Karakorum) and varying altitudes for the same location—will need to be dealt with.



**New BELS Members**  
**San Antonio, 6 May 2000**

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Jessica Ancker</b><br>3054 E Overlook Rd<br>Cleveland Heights, OH 44118<br>anckerj@ccf.org | 216-445-6534 (day)<br>216-321-8140 (eve)<br>216-444-9385 (fax) |
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# BELS Examination Schedule

## 2000

| Date            | City & Association | Registration Deadline |
|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| 7 November 2000 | Miami, FL, AMWA    | 24 October            |

## 2001

|                   |                              |             |
|-------------------|------------------------------|-------------|
| February 2001     | San Francisco, CA, AAWS/NASW | TBA         |
| 5 May 2001        | Washington, DC, CSE          | 21 April    |
| 15 September 2001 | Chicago, IL                  | 1 September |
| 23 October 2001   | Norfolk, VA, AMWA            | 9 October   |

## 2002

|                 |                     |            |
|-----------------|---------------------|------------|
| 23 March 2002   | Memphis, TN         | 9 March    |
| 23 March 2002   | Princeton, NJ       | 9 March    |
| 4 May 2002      | San Diego, CSE      | 20 April   |
| 29 October 2002 | San Diego, CA, AMWA | 15 October |

## 2003

|                       |                     |          |
|-----------------------|---------------------|----------|
| 3 May 2003            | Pittsburg, PA, CSE  | 19 April |
| June 2003             | Bath, England, EASE | TBA      |
| October-November 2003 | TBA, AMWA           | TBA      |

For more information, write Registrar, BELS, PO Box 8133, Radnor, PA 19087-8133

BELS Letter

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