The BELS Letter

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Of slinga-galoons and lockadorians

By Stephen R. Kepple, ELS(D)

As a high school baseball game entered its late innings, a fan concluded that his team had no hope unless the manager removed the pitcher, a gangly fellow who had thrown a passel of wild pitches. So the fan tipped his head back and bellowed, "Yank that slinga-galoon outta there!" He didn't know where "slinga-galoon" came from (and he didn't ask). The sound simply bubbled up from the linguistic unconscious. But it seemed to capture beautifully what he meant by it: a poorly performing hurler who ought to be benched. No other "word" would do.

Now, what if a reporter for the high school newspaper heard and was impressed by that colorful, chance expression and proceeded to use it in his write-up of the game? And what if the students and family members who read the story started using it themselves? From this node of infection, the word could spread across the United States and even the English-speaking world. As "slinga-galoon" was disseminated, it could take on new meanings and new spellings. Ultimately it could reach the dictionary, by which time it might be spelled "slingaloon" and be defined as an awkward person who does damage in his bumblings.

The far more likely fate of a neologism is that it dies at birth, or at least never penetrates society beyond a high school's hallways. Neologisms (new words or phrases, or existing words or phrases used in new ways) remind me of genes, bits of communicative protoplasm that circulate randomly, recombine endlessly, and produce everything from new species to nothing at all. As in evolution, the forces driving neologisms are chance and need.

Language cannot live without neologisms, and it could be argued that every word in English was once one of them. Neologisms both create language and adapt it to changing times—in particular, to the new realities and demands set in motion by new technologies. Alternatively, neologisms can bastardize a language. And, quite apart from the unintentional confusion they may sow, neologisms can be purposely wielded to obfuscate—that tragic trick which George Orwell exposed so brilliantly.

Young people have always been heavy minters of new words, presumably as part of their general rebellion. Certain generations, like those of the Roaring Twenties, the 1950s Beat Generation, and the 1960s Flower Children, are especially noted for their injection of distinctive and often exciting new blood into the language. Today's young people, though, seem engaged on a crusade—aided by the computer and its techno-offspring—to reinvent English. They collect and trade new words with the avidity of stamp dealers.

Other hefty sources of neologisms are the popular media and Uncle Sam, whose pronouncements and whose powers of rapid dissemination may generate

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How do you get an ELS(D)?

By Elizabeth L. Hess, ELS(D)

The BELS Web site has a rather mysterious description of the diplomate program. It does, precisely and accurately say what it's about and what the exam involves, but it leaves much unsaid as well. As a science editor who undertook the program several years ago and now serves as a reviewer for candidate portfolios, I've been asked to shed some light on the process.

What the program is and whom it's for

The diplomate program evaluates the abilities of more experienced Board-certified editors by means of a formal review of edited manuscripts in a portfolio submitted by the candidate. The diplomate program is designed for editors who have had extensive experience in scientific communication in English and are highly proficient. Editors who successfully complete the diplomate process may use the designation ELS(D) after their names.

The procedure comprises two steps by you: applying for candidacy and, once the application is accepted, submitting a portfolio of edited material along with a statement of circumstances surrounding the editing and two short essays.

Requesting the candidacy application

The first step is to contact the BELS registrar to request the candidacy application. This application helps the Board determine whether you may have the skill and experience needed to pass the exam. To be eligible to take the exam, the candidate must have been a BELS-certified editor for at least two years and must document at least six years of editorial experience. Documentation can take the form of letters from current and former employers or, for freelancers, evidence that you have been in this business for at least six years. Submitting the candidacy application costs $50.

Once your candidacy is accepted

Once your candidacy is accepted, you will receive a six-page description of what the portfolio should consist of and the nine areas the reviewers will evaluate. The portfolio will consist of a statement by you of the circumstances of editing, edited material, and two essays. A $150 payment must be included when you submit the portfolio. This fee helps cover the costs of processing the portfolio.

Nine areas assessed in review of portfolios

- Logic, flow of ideas, and scientific soundness
- Style, readability, and clarity
- Organization and structure
- Editorial skill, sensitivity, and realism
- Editor's interaction with the author
- Sentence and paragraph structure and syntax
- Spelling, usage, and diction
- Data, numbers, and correlations
- Tables, graphs, and other illustrations

Parts of the diplomate exam

Statement of circumstances

Your statement of circumstances will help the portfolio reviewers assess whether the level of edit is appropriate and feasible under the conditions described. For example, do you and authors actively communicate with each other, or do you remain anonymous and pass your work through a manager? What are your time constraints (are you required to edit X pages per hour, or do you have five working days to return a manuscript regardless of its length)? Have the manuscripts you edit already been accepted for publication? Do you follow a well-known style manual (AMA, Chicago), or has the company you work for developed its own quirky style?

This statement should be brief. If the house style is unique, a few examples of the odder style points will suffice.

Portfolio

Your portfolio, which will consist of work you have already completed for your employer or clients, is limited to 30 pages of edited material. Both hard-copy edits and online edits (with both the original text and

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the edited text visible) are acceptable.

You must ensure that your submitted material addresses each of the nine evaluation areas—one or two examples of each area will be sufficient. You don't need to highlight these examples; the reviewers will know them when they see them. Continuous material (such as most of a manuscript, if not the whole manuscript) makes it easier for reviewers to get an overall feel for a candidate's skills and reasoning. However, an edited manuscript won't necessarily illustrate well all nine components. A few pages, figures, or tables from another manuscript or two are acceptable and, in fact, encouraged if they highlight skills not exemplified elsewhere.

It is courteous to ask authors (or the work manager if you don't have direct access to the authors) for permission to use their work (edited by you) in the portfolio. Regardless, please take the time to remove identifying marks (the author's or your name and affiliation) from the portfolio material.

The two essays

For the two 500- to 1000-word essays, the registrar will provide a list of about 20 editing-relevant topics to choose from. Each essay counts for 10% of the total possible portfolio score. We are not looking for great literature here, and your opinion will not be evaluated (there are no right or wrong answers), but your ability to logically and convincingly argue or discuss a point in literate prose will be assessed.

Preparing for the diplomate exam

There is no test to study for, and except for the two essays and a brief explanation of the situation in which the portfolio work was performed, there is no new material to prepare. However, putting it together will be time-consuming in that you'll be going through your archives to pick out the material that both addresses the nine areas that will be evaluated and exemplifies your work. Once you've selected which material to use, you will need to ensure that the editing is clear after photocopying (for hard-copy edits, pencil marks and marginal notes must be legible; for online edits, different-colored inks must be distinguishable) and that all identifying marks have been removed. Finally, it takes time to make copies and assemble the parts.

The reviewers and scoring

The three volunteer reviewers of your portfolio all hold diplomate status. The candidate's identity will be unknown to them, and the registrar (who is not a reviewer) will ensure that no reviewer assesses a portfolio from a candidate who works at the same organization as the reviewer does. Likewise, the identity of the reviewers will not be revealed to the candidate.

The reviewers are given thorough directions and guidance, including the same nine evaluation areas, on reviewing the candidate's submission. They are as objective as possible, and they recognize that there is often more than one right way to fix a problem. But great editing is something of an art, so there is also room for subjectivity.

Although the reviewers can communicate with each other over individual points in a candidate's submission, they separately evaluate the portfolio and assign their own scores to each of the nine categories and the two essays. The registrar averages the overall score from each reviewer. You will be notified only whether your portfolio passed or failed, and you will not be given the overall score or the score breakdown.

What happens if you don't pass?

If you don't pass, you may submit a modified portfolio for re-evaluation. If any item on the score sheet has a value lower than half the possible score, the reviewer who assigned that score will state why. You may also appeal an unfavorable decision by the reviewers.

What happens if you pass?

You will be entitled to use "ELS(D)" after your name!

To apply

Contact Nathalie A. Turner, ELS, at salsaphile1@yahoo.com.

Elizabeth L. Hess of Houston, Texas, has been an ELS diplomate since 2002.

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and spread neologisms like weeds. Newer or more actively advancing scientific fields, such as computer science and astronomy, also collect blue ribbons for new-word generation (fresh ideas and applications demand a virgin language of bits, bytes, muons, and quarks). Older or stodgier disciplines, it follows, see slower organic growth of their specific lexicons, but even they may enjoy an influx of new terminology derived from other fields and popular culture.

Too many of this century's neologisms strike me as silly, crass, or absurdly specialized. I found several Web sites that list neologisms in unofficial dictionaries of them. Examples of included terms are "lockadorian" (a person who obsessively checks to see if car doors are locked), "foffarty" (being unable to find the right moment to leave), "kumalafustone" (a continuous irritating sound), and "fleem" (to achieve a state of bliss by placing one's face into the hair of a beloved one and inhaling). There are of course thousands more, especially abbreviated terms ("lol") used in e-mail and text messaging.

One must ask how many neologisms a language can absorb and at what rate. If only a narrow segment of the population understands and uses new terminology, or if that lexicon actually consists of multiple "dialects" scattered across geographic regions and media devices, it is more a specialized tool—or entertainment—than true evolution of language. Only a thin fraction of today's neologisms is likely to prove useful enough to stick around (a good example of one is "Spanglish").

As major gatekeepers of the language, editors frequently sit in judgment over neologisms. Deciding whether (and how) to accept into the published land a novel term or phrase is an important editorial duty, since publications are looked to as authoritative, unifying sources.

Before opting to allow a neologism instead of substituting more familiar words, an editor may pass through up to four stages. The first is outright rejection: The word is found to be thoroughly alien and therefore unlikely to be known to readers, and the context in which it is used does not demand an entirely new term; existing language can and should handle the job. The second stage is a more open ear: The editor has encountered the word more than once or finds evidence that it has been used a few times elsewhere, and its meaning appears to be consistent among the instances of use. This suggests that the word is gaining weight but is still probably unwise to allow; it remains slang. The third stage is provisional acceptance: The word has a clearly established following and can be permitted, but only with an accompanying definition. The fourth stage is unqualified acceptance: The word may not yet have made it into the dictionary, but people are complaining that the dictionary's usage board is out of touch.

How does an editor determine the level of use of a neologism? Through an alchemic combination of personal and professional experience, number of "hits" on computerized search engines, and consultation with others, especially the author. As with so many things in manuscript editing, the final decision depends heavily on the editor's judgment, not rules.

A publisher may ask its editors to disallow a neologism long after it finds common use. For example, a think tank might ban a neologism because it has become too politically touchy ("weapons of mass destruction"). Or a scientific publisher might find a neologism permanently unacceptable on technical grounds ("titrate" used in the sense of "adjust the dosage of").

For their part, authors should consider carefully whether a neologism contributes to communication or may leave readers scratching their heads (or, worse, moving on to the next sentence without trying to figure out the puzzle). Of course, writers need to pay careful attention to each and every word they put to paper or screen—not just neologisms—with an eye to reception at the other end.

I must admit to a silly, 21st-century fondness for "slinga-galoon." Could it be worth a seat in the ballpark, if not Webster's?

Stephen R. Kepple of Mineral, Virginia, submitted this essay as part of his successful application to become an ELS diplomate.

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New BELS members include the following:

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Proctors needed for future BELS exams

You want to contribute to BELS, but you don't have much spare time. We have an easy answer for you: become a proctor. Exams are offered in various locations throughout the year, so chances are good that one of our upcoming sites will be convenient for you.

Our proctor handbook describes the entire process and provides the script to read. Exams are usually scheduled for 1–4 PM; thus, the proctors need to be on site from noon until about 4:30 PM.

If you're a new proctor, we'll pair you with an experienced proctor for the exam. Also, before and during each exam, one or more experienced proctors will be available by phone for any questions.

If you have any questions or would like to volunteer, please contact Leslie Neistadt at lneistadt@hughston.com.

Upcoming exams include:

• **March 11 (Saturday), 1–4 PM**
Berkeley, California
American Medical Writers Association, Northern California Chapter meeting

• **March 18 (Saturday), 1–4 PM**
Princeton, New Jersey

• **March 26 (Sunday), 1–4 PM**
Mason, Ohio
American Medical Writers Association, Ohio Valley Chapter meeting

• **May 20 (Saturday), 1–4 PM**
Tampa, Florida
Council of Science Editors meeting

Nota bene (n.b.)

Karen G. Stanwood, ELS, of SLACK Incorporated, Thorofare, New Jersey, has been promoted to Executive Editor of the *Journal of Nursing Education* and the *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services*.

She has worked at SLACK for 10 years on several peer-reviewed nursing and medical journals, with increasing levels of editorial responsibility. Her most recent position was as the Managing Editor of these two publications.

—New members—

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The BELS Letter
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