

BELS: The First 10 Years

**Norman Grossblatt
and Barbara B Reitt**

Editor's note: In 1991 the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences (BELS) was officially founded and gave its first test. To mark the end of BELS's first decade, Science Editor invited the leadership of BELS to prepare an article on the board's first 10 years. We thank Norman Grossblatt and Barbara (Bobbie) Reitt for this informative and engaging article, congratulate BELS on its achievements during its first decade, and look forward to its continuing contributions to science editing.

Around 20 years ago, annual meetings and other gatherings of members of the Council of Biology Editors (CBE) and the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) found small groups of author's editors thinking and talking about how their profession was growing. CBE named an Author's Editors Task Force (which grew into the Author's Editors Committee) to try to determine the representation and professional characteristics of author's

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editors in CBE; the task force found that many members considered themselves author's editors. Among them were a group of about a dozen senior editors in the life sciences who found common cause in the belief that the profession was growing too fast. They all knew editors whose work was not of high quality, they had heard scientists' complaints about poor editorial work, and they were concerned about the absence of recognized standards in their profession. Not only were there no recognized standards; there was no formal, academic degree-related process for training manuscript editors.

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A Call for a Credential

The group of CBE members believed that the manuscript-editing profession needed a credential, as almost every other profession had. A well-conceived credential might yield at least three important benefits: It could help to establish a baseline of professional standards in editing; it could be a marker of the proficiency of editors for scientists who needed editorial service and lacked the expertise to evaluate editorial work themselves; and for editors, it could be a confirmation of their skills.

AMWA named a small committee to look into the possibility of certifying editors. For various reasons, including

the potential legal risks associated with denying certification to candidates and the fact that most AMWA members were not editors, AMWA soon terminated the committee.

The directors of CBE, in the middle 1980s, also put together a group to look into the subject. What was at first a task force became a subcommittee of the Author's Editors Committee and then a committee itself—the Certification Program Development Committee, which was co-chaired by John Gilbert and Norman Grossblatt and had as members Martha Brookes, Gillian Brown, Gil Croome, Susan Eastwood, Carol Kakalec Kohn, Walter Pagel, Frances Porcher, Barbara (Bobbie) Reitt, Barbara Reschke, Martha Tacker, and Christy Wright. The charge of the committee was to find out how other professions established and awarded credentials, whether a CBE-related program to certify manuscript editors in the life sciences was warranted, and, if so, what such a program should look like and how it should be run.

CBE supported the activities of the committee for a number of years. The committee members talked to representatives of other credentialing bodies about how they created examinations and how they administered their programs. They learned how others established eligibility for credentials, how they wrote and validated test questions, and how they handled disgruntled test-takers. Committee members also consulted with attorneys on antitrust law and restraint of trade. They were instructed in the creation of written examinations by a testing expert. As they assembled all this information, they wrote more and more detailed descriptions of how a certification program would work.

By the late 1980s, the committee had met (at each CBE meeting and at some AMWA meetings) to consider the voluminous material on the structure and admin-

istration of a credentialing program (drafted mostly by Eastwood). The committee decided that two levels of credentials would be appropriate. One level would be referred to as *certification*; to be eligible for examination and certification as an Editor in the Life Sciences, or ELS, an applicant would have to document the receipt of a bachelor's degree and at least 2 years of relevant experience. The second would be *diplomate* status; to be eligible for examination and designation as a Diplomate Editor in the Life Sciences, or ELS(D), a certified editor would have to document at least 6 years of relevant experience and meet other stringent criteria.

Development of a Test

On the strong advice of a testing expert, the committee decided that the certification test would be in multiple-choice format. Editorial proficiency cannot actually be tested with multiple-choice questions, but such questions have two advantages over essay questions for certification at this level: They can be tailored to cover a very large number of editorial topics that warrant testing, and they can be scored completely objectively. A subcommittee led by Pagel had prepared more than 150 possible questions and sent them to the other members of the committee to be used as a self-test. Those members answered and graded the difficulty of the questions. The subcommittee then weeded out many questions and rewrote others. In a long meeting in New Orleans, the subcommittee submitted the remaining questions to vigorous editing. Among other things, any question about whose correct and unambiguous answer or wording the subcommittee's seven members were not unanimous was discarded. After a day and a half, 107 questions were left; they would constitute the certification examination.

The committee agreed that the diplomate examination would be different. To acquire diplomate status, a candidate would submit a portfolio of edited material for review and then sit for a written examination that included on-the-spot editing and rewriting. The details of such an examination were left for later develop-



Barbara ("Bobbie") Reitt, Frances Porcher, Gil Croome, Martha Brookes, Norman Grossblatt, Walter Pagel, Gillian Brown, Susan Eastwood, Martha Tacker, and Carol Kakalec Kohn at the 1993 AMWA meeting.

ment because eligible candidates would not be available until the certification program had existed for some time.

By 1990 the committee had created a full-length multiple-choice examination and had administered it twice for validation. A total of about 100 editors had each contributed several hours of their own time and probably suffered a good deal of stress in taking the examination (in Rochester, Minnesota, and in Ottawa, Ontario) even though they knew that no certification would result. Without that "testing of the test", it would have been impossible to develop what was to become the certification program of the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences, or BELS.

The Emergence of BELS

Then on 8 May 1990, at the annual meeting of CBE in Orlando, the CBE Board of Directors disbanded the committee, mainly because its work was expensive and because of the fear that CBE might be sued by a candidate who took and failed the certification examination. The committee had been informed of the board's decision 3 days earlier, and at the author's editors breakfast on 6 May, attended by some 55 CBE members, Grossblatt asked for a show of hands to indicate members' interest in the project. The attendees were almost unanimous in their belief in the importance of an editorial credential and in

their own intention to take a certification examination if one were offered.

Nine of the committee members were attending the annual meeting. In light of the interest in certification shown by CBE members and considering that they themselves had spent hundreds of hours on this project, they decided to continue it on their own. (They were eventually joined in the effort by one of the other four members.) Sitting next to the pool at the annual-meeting hotel for 3 hours, they worked out a plan to form BELS and administer its first examination in May 1991. For seed money, each of the 10 would contribute as much money as a future candidate would have to pay to obtain both credentials (\$300, later increased to \$325); it was assumed (with confidence and hope that turned out to be justified) that registration fees and dues would keep the program afloat thereafter. They gave assignments to each other. For example, Grossblatt would consult with an attorney on incorporation and other legal matters; Pagel would lead the effort to create a "duplicate" of the committee's examination (which the CBE Board of Directors did not want to relinquish) by writing new questions that addressed the same points as and imitated the wording of the original questions and to get the examination ready to administer; Reitt would work out procedures for registering candidates and administering the examination; Eastwood

BELS continued

and Brookes would develop the diplomate portion of the program further; Tacker would develop a tentative budget for BELS; Brown would draft a study guide for candidates; and Reitt and Croome would produce a brochure to introduce the program to potential candidates.

Between May 1990 and January 1991, a number of legal discussions took place. The fear of being sued was laid to rest by the discovery that the little existing case law on BELS-like endeavors indicated that being careful, honest, and above all fair would preclude charges of restraint of trade and antitrust actions. BELS would award credentials that indicated a finding of proficiency, not licenses to practice the profession of editing (only states can license people). Consultation with attorneys and conversations with representatives of other credential-awarding organizations had made it clear that being open about its procedures and requirements and being scrupulously even-handed in the treatment of applicants and candidates would protect BELS against suits brought by unhappy candidates.

The BELS attorney also helped to draw up articles of incorporation and bylaws, and on 23 January 1991, BELS was incorporated in Maryland. What remained was to finish preparing the examination for the target date of 4 May 1991, prepare and distribute information about the new board's existence and procedures to potential test-takers, procure a place to hold the examination, and worry.

The First Test—and the Next 50

The first test administered by the newly incorporated board was given on 4 May 1991 at the CBE annual meeting in Denver. Of the 23 editors who sat for the examination, 14 passed, thus becoming the first members of BELS besides the 10 founders. This test drew the highest number of appeals of any BELS test given—four. The issue was the time allowed for taking the test. The appeals process set up during test development was put into motion, test timing was adjusted, and when the second test was given, at the AMWA annual meeting in Toronto

that fall, the issue had become moot. Nine people took and passed the second test, bringing membership at the end of the first year to a total of 33.

Every year since, BELS has offered at least two tests, one at the CBE (or CSE) annual meeting in the spring and one at the AMWA annual conference in the fall. These annual meetings typically draw the largest numbers of candidates to the test, but BELS continues to offer tests at other venues too. Meetings of editorial professionals, such as the triennial meetings

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of the European Association of Science Editors (EASE), are favorite test sites, as are locales where large numbers of editors are employed, such as Washington, DC, and the New York-Philadelphia-northern New Jersey area.

To date, BELS has sponsored 51 sittings of the certification examination and a total of 470 tests have been given—a number larger than the total number of people who have taken the test, in that some take the test two or three times before passing. (For example, in 1997, when a total of 247 tests had been given, 14 people had taken the test twice and two had taken it a third time; of these, nine passed on the second try and one on the third.)

Statistics suggest only a small part of the effort of those giving or taking the test. Anxiety inevitably afflicts the candidates, but test proctors have known moments of high anxiety, too. Test materials that fail to arrive in time at the exam site, a test

room that turns out to be next door to a hilarious college-fraternity reunion, a freak May snowstorm that traps proctors 125 miles from a test site—these and other crises have taught BELS how hard it is to run a smooth testing program. Each new emergency generates new precautionary procedures. The proctor's handbook is now 12 pages long, and growing.

BELS founders sought instruction in writing a good examination, but they had to learn on the fly how to administer a registration and testing process. At first, Reitt ran the three-step registration process manually, using a computer only for boilerplate forms and letters. Gradually, as “secretary for certification examination administration” (since shortened to the more forthright title “registrar”), she devised more computer-dependent procedures. Now, the efficiencies made possible by fax, e-mail, and the BELS Web site have been incorporated into the registration procedures. Traffic can get heavy, especially in the last 6 weeks before each test. Hundreds of names and addresses fill the database of those who have expressed an interest in taking the test; a smaller number reside in the database of those who have established candidacy (that is, eligibility to sit for an exam). This list must be culled regularly because candidacy lasts 3 years and must be renewed by the candidate. Separate databases are maintained for registrants for specific examination sittings.

The communications between the BELS registrar and candidates are voluminous, and they seem to travel by every medium except (possibly) dogsled. Both BELS registrars to date—Reitt (until 1997) and Shirley Peterson—have handled BELS business through their home offices. Most of the work of BELS is done by members who volunteer their time. Because the BELS constituency is worldwide, faxes and phone calls can come in at almost any hour; the advent of e-mail has made life a lot easier for both the BELS registrar and the candidates.

Beyond Testing

With the first group of newly certified members, the founding members were

confronted with issues that they had given scant attention while still focused on creating a testing program. They and the newcomers were now members of an organization that (in truth) still had to be invented. Certificates and a letter of congratulations were needed, obviously—but what else? Should certified editors have a lapel pin to wear? Would there be a newsletter? Meetings? A directory of members? Eventually, those questions were all answered in the affirmative. The overarching question was—and still is—this: What, besides the satisfaction of having passed a difficult examination (and it is universally agreed that it is a difficult examination), could BELS offer to professional colleagues who were considering whether to take the test?

Grossblatt, as director of BELS (the title is now “president”), decided that BELS members should get together once a year to welcome and congratulate those who had passed the test during the preceding year. Thus was born the BELS annual meeting. It was held for the first time in Pittsburgh in May 1992, when nearly all the founding members and many of the newcomers met before dinner one evening during the CBE meeting. From a room high above the city, they admired the great view (and their own achievements), enjoyed wine and appetizers, and wondered aloud what else they might do to promote the cause of professional certification in their field.

A directory of members seemed essential. Karen Phillips, who was already doing the job of promoting the certification idea to potential candidates, assumed the

additional responsibility of issuing a membership directory. The first edition was word-processed and photocopied; now, with membership topping 300, the directory is too long for informal production. It now includes the complete bylaws and a geographic index of members, and it is printed and bound for annual publication. An electronic counterpart appears on the BELS Web site (www.bels.org), which was created by Patti Wolf and is managed by Jan Jerrells.

As the number of BELS members grew rapidly, it became clear that Phillips’s responsibility for both public relations and member relations had to be split. Thus, in 1995, Phillips was succeeded by two members. Miriam Bloom was the first to hold the new office of chair for member relations; among other tasks, she started and maintained an informal listserv via e-mail for members. Bloom was succeeded in 1998 by Carol Cadmus, who was in turn succeeded in 1999 by Susan Aiello. David Orr became chair for public relations and was succeeded in 1999 by Julliana Newman.

Soon after becoming a member in 1991, Grace Darling began talking to Grossblatt about how good it would be to have a BELS newsletter, volunteering to organize the effort. The first issue appeared in the early spring of 1993; Darling was the editor, Aiello handled the design and layout, Kendall Sterling served as “news reporter”, and Karen Klein did the proofreading. The front-page article was by Phillips—a reprinting of the writeup she had been sending out to professional publications describing BELS’s purpose and history.

Issue 1 of the *BELS Newsletter* (renamed the *BELS Letter* in 1994) was mailed to 53 members and an assortment of organizations and publications constituting a short courtesy list. Issue 21, for summer 2000, featured the many BELS-sponsored events in San Antonio in May, including a popular hospitality room at the CSE meeting and a not-so-popular but necessary question-validation session in which BELS members “took” a test consisting of new questions slated for inclusion in future examinations.

Looking Ahead

As the first 10 years of BELS come to a close, most of the founders have receded into the background, and more and more newer members are taking positions of responsibility. This has created a new, almost welcome problem: educating junior members in what has gone before, how BELS got to where it is, and how to keep it moving—while letting them take the reins.

BELS has been heartened by the growing interest in editor certification among journals and publishers. Increasing numbers of employers of editors in the life sciences write, call, or e-mail BELS through the Web site to ask for information about the BELS program, either because they are interested in sending employees to take the examination or because they wish to obtain contact information about editors who are certified. The credential is coming of age. 