

The BELS Letter

Board of Editors in the Life Sciences

Maintaining and promoting editorial proficiency in the life sciences



From the President

What does being a BELS member mean to you? As we seek to engage with our members and learn what makes your BELS membership meaningful, you'll soon see a member survey arrive in your inbox. Please take a few minutes to share your thoughts with us!

In addition, we're seeking testimonials from members. We'd love for you to share a few sentences about what BELS certification and membership means to you. Email your testimonial to us at info@bels.org.

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The BELS Letter

Karen Stanwood, ELS
(with Eevee)
Managing Editor



Alex Rudie
Publications Coordinator

From the President

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I also want to take a moment to congratulate Michael G. Baker, PhD, on his appointment as Editor-in-Chief for *AMWA Journal*. We're excited for him to bring his enthusiasm, energy, and vision to the journal.

We hope you enjoy the Ask the Editors, BELS Gallery, and Featured Members in this issue! Keep an eye out for another members-only event focusing on presenting yourself professionally online (so timely!) at the end of the month. Hope to see you there!

*Kristina Wasson-Blader, PhD, ELS
BELS President*



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Board of Editors in the Life Sciences



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Ask the Editors

Can you please help me solve an abbreviation conundrum? “Socioeconomic status (SES) is a SDoH that makes significant contributions to an individual's biological risk profile....” SDoH has previously been defined as social determinants of health (plural).

1. Which is correct: ‘a SdoH’ or ‘an SdoH’?
2. Can the abbreviation do ‘double duty,’ representing both the singular and plural forms of the term being abbreviated?

Eleanor Mayfield, ELS

As far as I know, the choice depends on how it will be spoken. It should be ‘an’ if it’s meant to be pronounced with an initial vowel sound (‘ess dee...’) and ‘a’ if it’s meant to be pronounced with an initial consonant sound (such as ‘a dee aitch ess [DHS] report...’).

Norman Grossblatt, ELS(D)

I can’t pronounce ‘SdoH’ without picturing Homer Simpson, so—without knowing for certain—I would guess that each letter is pronounced and ‘an’ would be appropriate.

Naomi L. Ruff, PhD, ELS

For 2+ years running, my colleague and I have kept a running list (tabular format) of ‘Abbreviations we HATE’ (with one column for snarky remarks about why we hate it), and I may add that one (with the Homer Simpson reference in the snarky column), although I’ve never run across SDoH before. The one we hate the very most

is WOCP (women of childbearing potential). Universally hated, especially because there’s no equivalent of that for MEN.

Here’s another example just for fun: RP2D—recommended Phase 2 dose or a rejected Star Wars droid?

If you’d like a copy of our current list for yourself, please e-mail me separately at sbowen@austin.rr.com.

Sherri Bowen, MA, ELS

Our style is to form the plural of an initialism or acronym by adding an ‘s,’ even if the plural form of the expanded term would not be formed by adding an ‘s’ (e.g., AGs for attorneys general). I don’t see this addressed directly by *The Chicago Manual of Style*, but section 7.15 (Plurals for Letters, Abbreviations, and Numerals) does list ‘BSs, MAs, PhDs’ as examples.

Leslie E. Parker, ELS

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Ask the Editors

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I agree with Norman about the logic of choosing between ‘a’ and ‘an.’ I think that does get pronounced ‘an ess dee oh aitch,’ so use ‘an.’

As for the pluralization conundrum: I was taught that you can use an abbreviation without an ‘s’ for a plural so long as it’s always plural, but if you have a mixture, you have to add the ‘s’ when it’s plural. I think that is fairly standard.

I edited a grant proposal not long ago in which ‘SDoH’ was used for the plural, but in the case you describe, I would use ‘SDoH’ to refer to a singular determinant and ‘SDoHs’ to refer to plural determinants. That said, if the plural only comes up occasionally (and assuming you’re not under really tight length constraints), could you use ‘determinant’ in just those cases, to avoid the ugliness?

Rebecca M. Barr, MS, ELS

It should be ‘an SDoH.’ The choice between ‘a’ and ‘an’ is guided by which one you would use if you read the abbreviated term aloud.

As for the double-duty question, for the sake of readability, it’s better to use the plural ‘s’ when you are using an abbreviation in the plural sense (eg, “This LVAD had an advantage over previous LVADs because of its bearingless rotor.”)

Stephen N. Palmer, PhD, ELS

Addendum: If you’re interested, my decision was to go with using SDoH for ‘social determinants of health’ (plural) and spelling out the singular form (social determinant of health), which was used less frequently in the paper.

Eleanor Mayfield, ELS

Have a Question for Ask the Editors?

Email your question or topic to info@bels.org, and we’ll crowdsource BELS members’ thoughts, opinions, and answers.

BELS Gallery



*“Is Kashmir studying
entomology or solving the
puzzles of the universe?
We may never know.”
~ Karen Stanwood, ELS*

Send your BELS Gallery photos to info@bels.org

BELS Featured Members



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MEMBER PROFILE

*Suzanne Pratt, DVM,
MS, DAVCP, ELS*

Principal

Suzanne Pratt Works LLC
www.suzanneprattworks.com

Year of ELS certification:
2015

Grammar pet peeve:
passive voice



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MEMBER PROFILE


Sherri Damlo, ELS

Senior Medical Editor II
MedThink SciCom

Year of ELS certification:
2019

Grammar pet peeve:
using 'that' instead of 'who'
when referring to people

BELS Featured Members



Kiranam

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MEMBER PROFILE

*Kiranam Chatti,
PhD, ELS*

Principal Research Scientist
Dr. Reddy's Institute of Life Sciences

Year of ELS certification:
2017

Grammar pet peeve:
unnecessarily long sentences



Mia

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MEMBER PROFILE

Mia C. DeFino, ELS

Medical and Science Writer
DeFino Consulting, LLC

Year of ELS certification:
2018

Grammar pet peeve:
authors not using the serial
comma, leading to unclear lists

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The Board of Editors in the Life Sciences (BELS) was founded in 1991 to evaluate the proficiency of manuscript editors in the life sciences and to award credentials similar to those obtainable in other professions.

Potential employers and clients of manuscript editors usually have no objective way to assess the proficiency of editors. For their part, editors are frustrated by the difficulty of demonstrating their ability. That is why both employers and editors so often resort to personal references or ad hoc tests, not always with satisfactory results. The need for an objective test of editorial skill has long been recognized.

To meet that need, BELS developed a process for testing and evaluating proficiency in editing in the life sciences. The Board administers two examinations—one for certification and one for diplomate status. The examinations, written by senior life-science editors assisted by testing experts, focus on the principles and practices of scientific editing in English.