

The BELS Letter

Board of Editors in the Life Sciences

Maintaining and promoting editorial proficiency in the life sciences

From the President

Is it spring yet? As the snow melts and the weather starts to get warmer, BELS is also bursting with new ideas and initiatives. In February, the Board voted to make the Certification Maintenance task force an official committee, headed by BELS Past President, Tom Gegeny. We're excited to make the ELS designation even more meaningful and valuable to those who are certified.

In addition, Karen Stanwood, Chair of the Membership and Marketing committee, has some new member benefits in the works. Watch for more information about

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The BELS Letter

Karen Stanwood, ELS
(with Eevee)
Managing Editor



Alex Rudie
Publications Coordinator

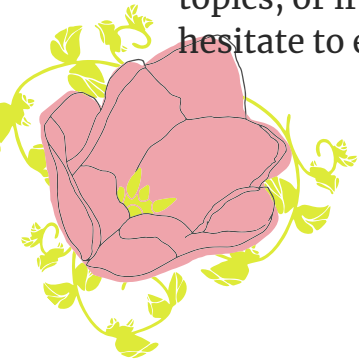
From the President

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those after the Board's strategic planning session in mid-March. We also welcomed a new group of certified editors during the January testing window (see page 10).

If you have ideas for member benefits or virtual event topics, or if you have other concerns or questions, don't hesitate to email us at info@bels.org. Happy Spring!

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



BELS 
Board of Editors in the Life Sciences



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Ask the Editors

I'm not sure if this has been discussed before, but a question came up in my workplace related to the use of 'they' with a singular verb, instead of 'his or her' (or other singular word) in a scientific paper. For instance, would it be appropriate to say, "If a patient wants a genetic test, they must first..."? The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 7th edition, says you can do it. The *American Medical Association Manual of Style*, 11th edition, says you can do it if it is awkward otherwise, or to preserve patient confidentiality. I'm wondering what you all think, assuming the journal doesn't follow a specific style guide.

Kerry Aradhya, MS, ELS

Unfortunately, the singular 'they' is considered acceptable or even preferable by more and more editors, news sources, publishers, and whatnot. Your example would be considered fine by such sources. But it's often easy to avoid the singular 'they.' Your example could be changed to, "a patient who wants a genetic test must first..." with no change in meaning.

Norman Grossblatt, ELS(D)

I refuse to go along with the continuing downward spiral of the English language by using 'they' when talking about a singular person. It's usually easy to avoid such dilemmas by rewriting the sentence to be plural. I would write Kerry's example sentence this way, "If patients want a genetic test, they must first...". Otherwise, I see absolutely nothing wrong with writing, "If a patient wants a genetic test, he or she must first...".

Michelle R. Rizzo, ELS

[Wikipedia](#) provides plenty of information on the rich history of singular 'they,' including multiple references. I would use it if I have a chance. However, the part of the original sentence makes me feel that a concise version without singular 'they,' 'he,' 'she,' 's(he),' or 'who' would be better for a scientific paper.

Alexandra V. Andreeva, PhD, ELS

I've been evolving on this. Using 'they' as singular used to drive me around the bend, and over probably 20 years of editing and copy editing, I rooted it out when found (including recasting sentence structure to avoid it). I think that was correct at the time because, back then, there was a consensus against using 'they/them/their' as plural, so it was a mark of inattention or ignorance that looked unprofessional, and it was my job to keep writers (and publishers) from looking unprofessional.

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Ask the Editors

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Now, though, as society has started to grasp the reality of varied and nonbinary gender, and with many people either not wishing to be identified as ‘he’ or ‘she’ or wanting to deemphasize gender, there is a strong rationale for using singular ‘they.’ So, I’ve started allowing it. I’ve actually started considering whether using ‘he or she’ is a bad idea and have stopped using it myself (although I don’t plan to start changing it when editing), because it presupposes that ‘he’ and ‘she’ are the only options. I used to use ‘s/he’ sometimes, and I’m on the fence about that. To my eye, it looks like it covers most of the options, but since I’m cisgendered, I’m not the best judge. I’ll be very interested in hearing the thinking of other people about this.

Rebecca M. Barr, MS, ELS

For me, singular ‘they’ is a closed issue. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces its usage back to 1375. (Here is an interesting [article](#) [and on a humorous note, I once saw the comment “singular ‘they’ predates singular ‘you’ —I don’t know whether it’s true, but I always laugh when I think about it]). More important, when I think of my friends and colleagues who are trans or nonbinary,

to deny singular ‘they’ would be to deny my friends’ understanding of themselves and the reality they live. So, to deny it would be unkind.

Virginia M. Mohlere, ELS

“Considerations of what makes for good English or bad English are to an uncomfortably large extent matters of prejudice and conditioning. Until the eighteenth century it was correct to say ‘you was’ if you were referring to one person. It sounds odd today, but the logic is impeccable. ‘Was’ is a singular verb and ‘were’ a plural one. Why should you take a plural verb when the sense is clearly singular? The answer—surprise, surprise—is that Robert Lowth didn’t like it. ‘I’m hurrying, are I not?’ is hopelessly ungrammatical, but ‘I’m hurrying, aren’t I?’—merely a contraction of the same words—is perfect English. ‘Many’ is almost always a plural (as in ‘Many people were there’), but not when it is followed by ‘a,’ as in ‘Many a man was there.’ There’s no inherent reason why these things should be so. They are not defensible in terms of grammar. They are because they are.” (Bill Bryson, *The Mother Tongue: English and How It Got That Way*)

Leslie E. Parker, ELS

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Ask the Editors

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Thank you all for your thoughts on this. I've also been editing for some time and haven't become accustomed to the use of 'they' in this context and, to be honest, wasn't entirely aware (until very recently) that it had become acceptable in some circles. I have always rearranged the sentence in some fashion to avoid its use but am realizing now that I should pause a little longer, especially if the decision comes down to 'they' versus 'he or she.' Thanks again. It's great to be part of a group who knows so much about these issues and likes to discuss them!

Kerry Aradhya, MS, 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



Gil Croome, MSc(F), ELS(D), shared his favorite mug (one of only 12, made for the BELS founders—how cool!!) and his Serious Red Editing Pencil. We would not want to be on the error end of that pencil! (Gil also apologized that Tigger D. Cat would not sit still for a photo. It's OK, Gil!)



Miriam Bloom, PhD, ELS(D), —rhymes with 'whom'—shows us her favorite mug. That owl definitely looks like it's silently correcting your grammar!

Send your BELS Gallery photos to info@bels.org

BELS Gallery

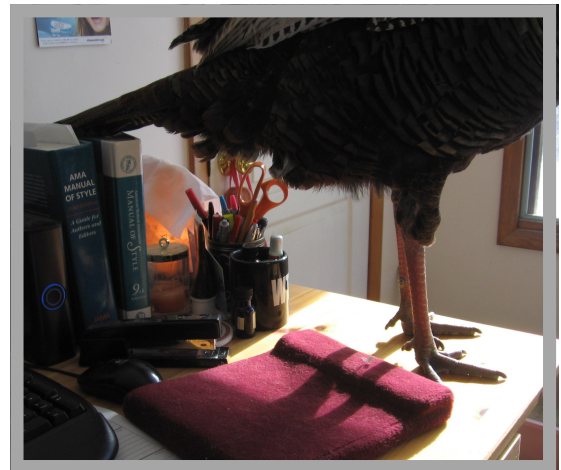


Mary K. Billingsley, ELS, has a furry colleague, Fritz, who is a master of multitasking. He provides love (and probably judgment) and doubles as paperweight.



"I got this mug on my very first business trip, when I was first working in publishing and going to conventions as an exhibitor. It has accompanied me to every workplace since, and I now have work colleagues who are younger than it! It's currently residing in my 'things from the office' box in my house, ready for the day when it can sit on a desk in a 'real' office space again!"

~ Stephanie Leveene, ELS



Everyone (and their pet) loves a good style manual! Here is Melissa L. Bogen's pet turkey, Connie, in 2011 by the AMA style manual.

BELS Featured Members



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MEMBER PROFILE

*Mary Y. Nishikawa,
MA, ELS*

Scientific Communications Professional
Lexaly Communications
inquiry@lexaly.jp

Year of ELS certification:
2013

Grammar pet peeve:
that vs. which



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MEMBER PROFILE


*Terry Alan
Anderson, ELS*

Writer/Editor
Alan Edits, LLC
www.alanedits.com

Year of ELS certification:
2017

Grammar pet peeve:
mixing up its/it's and
their/there/they're

BELS Featured Members



Annette


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MEMBER PROFILE

Annette Marie Staron-Wilson, ELS

Senior Medical Editor
McCann Health Managed Markets

Year of ELS certification:
2018

Grammar pet peeve:
when writers change content on a slide,
they often forget to change similar or
identical content in the slide's notes page



Joan

BELS
Board of Editors in the Life Sciences
MEMBER PROFILE

Joan A. Saunders, ELS

Medical Writer/Editor
Independent Contractor/Consultant

Year of ELS certification:
2001

Grammar pet peeve:
which vs. that

New Certified Editors

Mehdi Amirhosseini, PhD, ELS

Lisa Bolin, PhD, ELS

Amy Cannon, ELS

Zoe Hunter, ELS

Katie Hurst, BA, ELS

Catherine Jenkins, ELS

Kerry Kennedy, BA, ELS

Jessica Martin, PhD, ELS

Andrea Rahkola, BA, ELS

Stephanie Roulias, ELS

Allison Shenk, ELS

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Executive Director

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.