

# The BELS Letter

Board of Editors in the Life Sciences

Maintaining and promoting editorial proficiency in the life sciences



## From the President

Happy fall, y'all! Whether or not the leaves have started changing where you're located, fall is in the air. School is back in session, and events like the CSE fall symposium and the AMWA annual meeting are gearing up. Our next members-only event, 'Work-Life Balance: Setting Boundaries and Maintaining Sanity,' will be held September 23. We hope to see you there for an open discussion about real-life challenges and strategies for success!

On May 4, 1991, in Denver, Colorado, 23 candidates sat for the first ELS exam.

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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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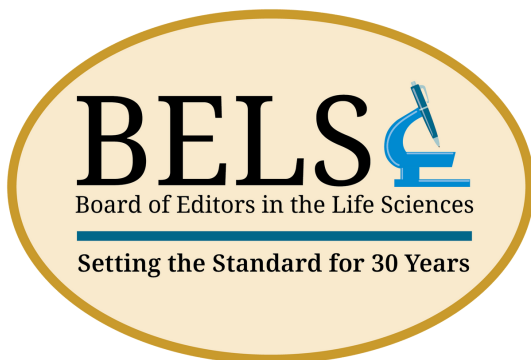
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The 14 who passed were then allowed to use the ELS credential after their names. To date, more than 1,600 people in 21 countries have passed the exam. In addition to using the ELS credential after their names, those who are certified may use the BELS-Certified Editor badge in their communications. Check out our recently updated [policy](#) regarding how to use the badge in electronic signatures and other digital media.



Finally, to celebrate the 30th anniversary of BELS, we're sending members a token of our appreciation. Watch for a package in your postal mail and keep an eye on your email for details about upcoming BELS initiatives.

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



# Ask the Editors

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I'm editing a paper in which the authors refer to "minoritized communities." The website [newdiscourses.com](http://newdiscourses.com) defines a "minoritized group" as "A social group that is devalued in society and given less access to its resources." In a Twitter thread that I came across, several people said that reviewers had objected to their use of "minoritized" in a paper. Many people weighed in, suggesting "marginalized," "oppressed," or "stigmatized" as alternatives. I'd like to hear other BELS members' thoughts about/experience with the term "minoritized": Do you use it? Have you encountered objections from reviewers to its use? If you don't use it, what do you use instead?

*Eleanor Mayfield, ELS*

I had never heard of the word "minoritized" before. Although I usually am fascinated with newly coined words, especially in science, I find this word merely confounds meaning. If the authors are eager to use the word to further promote its use, I would treat it much like an abbreviation or acronym, with an explanation, definition, or synonym followed by "minoritized" in parentheses at first use. My preferred synonym is "marginalized." Overall, however, "minoritized," to me, just seems like jargon, that, although trendy, does not convey meaning.

*Amy Redmon-Norwood, MA, ELS*

Like Amy, I have never encountered this term. I agree that this word doesn't convey meaning: a group doesn't become a minority just because they are treated badly, although they could be marginalized or stigmatized or underrepresented.

*Naomi L. Ruff, PhD, ELS*

I agree with the consensus. "Marginalized" is the word for this: A group can be treated inequitably without being smaller in group size (ie, minority). For instance, there are more women than men, and treating a group inequitably, as Naomi points out, does not cause a group to become a minority.

*Catherine E. Forrest, ELS*

I wouldn't choose to use it either. Certainly not without explaining what it means and which groups of people are being identified. But last week, JAMA published "[Updated Guidance on the Reporting of Race and Ethnicity in Medical and Science Journals](#)," and here's what they say about it: "The term minoritized may be acceptable as an adjective provided that the noun(s) that it is modifying is included (eg, 'racial and ethnic minoritized group'). Groups that have been historically marginalized could be suitable in certain contexts if the rationale for

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this designation is provided and the categories of those included are defined or described at first mention.”

*Leslie E. Parker, ELS*

Echoing Amy and Naomi, I had never come across the term “minoritized” before. In my view, it is misleading because, demographically speaking, a marginalized or stigmatized group does not necessarily represent the minority. Amanda also enumerates great points. Besides the other alternative terms, I would also consider “disadvantaged.”

*Ana Clara da C. P. Langley, MSc, ELS*

This is a “thought about,” not an “experience with,” so probably of limited use, but here’s my two cents. I would object to it for these reasons: (1) it is imprecise (as long as it means anything other than literally “made into a minority,” which is not the intention here and wouldn’t make sense anyway); (2) it is inaccurate in that it suggests only minorities are “devalued in society and given less access to its resources” (eg, think about the majority population in settler colonies and in many slave societies, and about women); (3) it is potentially derogatory (arguably subtly normalizing, if not condoning,

the practice of treating people who do not match a majority characteristic as somehow meriting inferior treatment); and (4) it is unnecessary (eg, there are already other words—more precise, more evocative, and better known words—for the same concept; introducing this one serves no obvious purpose, and there should be a compelling purpose for introducing a new term). I imagine there might be a few specialized situations, possibly informal ones, where this term might be helpful and effective, but ideally, that would be obvious from the context, or at a minimum, the author could explain it in a brief and reader-friendly way.

To me, point #1 above is the most important. I think we should always be reluctant to give up precision without a really compelling reason. Also, “be precise” is one of the first pieces of advice usually given in discussions about sensitive language and for good reason: It makes people think more carefully about what they’re saying. All that said, of course, it also goes without saying that the editor should raise this issue with the author tactfully and be prepared to learn something new (not to imply the original poster would ever do otherwise!).

*Amanda A. Morgan, ELS*

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If an author uses “minoritized,” I stet. There are nuances in the use of such terms, and minoritized does not mean the same thing as marginalized in many disciplines. I’ve mainly seen it in papers that pertain to education research, and I’d consider it a term of art in that setting. As I understand it, when a group is minoritized (or, for that matter, majoritized), there’s a specific element of power, or lack thereof, feeding into that description. It’s especially important for me to defer to others on this usage, because as of yet, I have never been a member of a population specifically described as minoritized. As in everything, it’s important to call people what they want to be called. If a group thinks and writes of themselves as minoritized and I am not a member of that group, who am I to say otherwise? This [reference](#) was helpful to me.

*Melissa D. Hellman, ELS*

Some thoughts in response to Melissa D. Hellman's thoughtful post.

*M.H.: If an author uses “minoritized,” I stet. There are nuances in the use of such terms, and minoritized does not mean the same thing as marginalized in many disciplines.*

*A.M.: That is great if the word is being used in a nuanced way (and, of course,*

*if it’s explained, or obvious from the context, or well understood by most target readers), but buzzwords are not always created, or subsequently used, in a nuanced way. The fact that a word CAN have a nuanced meaning doesn’t let me off the hook from ensuring that it’s used effectively in a given document.*

*M.H.: As in everything, it’s important to call people what they want to be called. If a group thinks and writes of themselves as minoritized and I am not a member of that group, who am I to say otherwise?*

*A.M.: I’d say there are few things in editing (or in life) that are universal absolutes. Many people who follow the “call people what they want to be called” rule treat it, rather, as a good idea that’s applicable much of the time, as one tool in a toolbox. In this case, “as in everything” can be a particularly slippery slope. There are many groups calling themselves many things right now and claiming many experiences. I bet we could each, in our minds, identify at least one group (maybe a different one for each of us!) that makes claims about itself to which we would not give that automatic validation. Also, and I think this is important, not just a technicality, the “call people what they want” advice is usually applied to*

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nouns (common and proper), not verbs (or in this case a verb-based participle). A noun expresses identity, which an individual should arguably be in complete control of. Verbs, on the other hand, express a much wider range of claims, which we do in fact have the right to expect will be backed up with evidence and logic (not just accepted in the same way we accept “You can call me Mrs. Olsen” or “say Inuit, not Eskimo”). So, they shouldn’t get quite the same hall pass as nouns.

I would also say, in response to the “who am I?” question: I’m an editor, and I’m hired to help ensure that the text is clear and effective and meets project standards. If there are questions I’m not qualified to ask, based on my nonmembership in a given group, then I’m not the right editor for the job. We don’t make the final call, but we do have to be able to query. The question here would not be “do you have the right to call yourself that?” but “will your meaning be clear, and will your readers and publisher feel that you have backed up your claim?”

*M.H.: I’ve mainly seen it in papers that pertain to education research, and I’d consider it a term of art in that setting.*

A.M.: That’s very good to know (as well as Leslie Parker’s quote from *JAMA*). How would we ever keep up with this evolving field if we didn’t have this kind of sharing? Aside from the more substantive pluses and minuses, it’s always good to know when a particular ship has sailed.

*Amanda A. Morgan, ELS*

I will add on to what Amanda said: Someone referring to themselves as “minoritized” would also be a different situation than an author writing about a “minoritized” population or community. I do not believe we know from the original message whether the author is a part of the community about which they are writing or not, which would make a difference in how I approached my query (if it were me).

*Catherine E. Forrest, ELS*

This is not an area of my expertise, but Google Scholar gives some insight into the trends of the usage of “minoritized communities.” I could not find this expression in scientific papers published between 1930 and 1993. The first one was by Smith in 1994. Its usage increased in the following years: 9 papers in 1995–1999; 43 in 2000–

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2004; 145 in 2005–2009; 260 in 2010–2014; and 1,200 in 2015–2019. In 2020, 697 papers included the expression, and this year already there are 687. (By the end of 2021, the number of papers using “minoritized communities” in this one year will most likely be greater than the total in 2015–2019.) In the next 5 years, we’ll probably have thousands of such papers.

“Minoritized languages” seems to have appeared 10 years earlier (initially written with double quotes around “minoritized”), and “minoritized” appeared in 1957: “It is these youth—minoritized youth from low-income households—who are participants in the settings we have chosen...”.

In the case of languages, Wikipedia explains rather clearly that “the defining characteristic of minoritization is the existence of a power imbalance between it and the dominant language.” I would perceive “minoritized communities” in exactly the same way, with an emphasis on “power imbalance,” so I would have no problem with it as a reader.

*Alexandra V. Andreeva, PhD, ELS*

Thanks to everyone who weighed in on this. My client was amenable to changing “minoritized” to “stigmatized.”

*Eleanor Mayfield, ELS*

## BELS Featured Members



BELS  
Board of Editors in the Life Sciences

### MEMBER PROFILE

*Kelly Schrank, ELS*

Head Bookworm

Bookworm Editing Services

<https://headbookworm.com>

Year of ELS certification:

2013

Grammar pet peeve:

lack of serial commas



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### MEMBER PROFILE

*Laurie Brown  
LaRusso, MS, ELS*

Principal and Owner

Chestnut Medical Communications

Year of ELS certification:

2001

Grammar pet peeve:

capitalization of medical terms  
that are not eponymous



## BELS Featured Members



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*Kristi Boehm, MS, ELS*

Associate Director  
Genmab

Year of ELS certification:  
2012

Grammar pet peeve:  
use of 'she/he' in place of the  
singular pronoun 'they'



**BELS**  
Board of Editors in the Life Sciences  
**MEMBER PROFILE**

*Barbara Gastel,  
MD, ELS(H)*

Professor  
Texas A&M University

Year of ELS certification:  
2006

Grammar pet peeve:  
Rigidity at the expense of  
communication

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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.