

The B E L S Letter

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Before we were editors

Reading reminds us of the importance of good writing

By **KIM BERMAN**

Before we were editors, we were writers. Before we were writers, we were readers. I'll admit it...I am a voracious reader. There are no 12-step programs for this condition, no vaccines or pills that will address the symptoms, and no hypnosis or exercise programs to help me through my need for a daily reading "fix." I have resigned myself to the fact that I will never have enough hours in the day to read or even enough shelf space to hold all the books I treasure. Everything that I read seems to further convince me of the importance of good writing to the reader.

I started out my postgraduate life as a bench scientist. I designed and implemented preclinical and clinical trials in the pharmaceutical and biomedical device industries, then wrote about the results when these studies were done. The need for coherent and concise writing in this area drove me to helping others get their point across.

The Board of Editors in the Life Sciences certifies editors, we don't try to build better writers; however, an improvement in writing skills is often a side effect of our work. We are often called into projects when authors are confused about how to write about their data, when journal editors are frustrated by the inability of authors to coherently discuss their study findings, or when publishers are drowning in inconsistencies in presentation by book chapter authors. We "wave our editorial wands" and address these problems, showing these individuals how to more effectively or more elegantly present scientific data to the reader.

When I accepted the presidency of BELS, I thought

about our organizational goals, how we hope to reach them, and what the membership can do to help us get there. After meeting with the Executive Council, talking with BELS editors, and reading comments in our online discussions, I see some things that we can implement to work toward those goals during my tenure as president. Over the next 2 years, I'd like for us to accomplish the following:

- *Revamp our Web site and newsletter*, with a design plan that presents a consistent public persona for BELS. We are looking into using our Web site as a clearinghouse for dues payment, annual meeting reservations, exam applications, and member information updates. Having members able to simply charge it, sign up for it, or update information with no need for a mass mailing to our members may make life a little easier for our secretary (Mary Ann Schmidt, ELS), our registrars (Leslie Neistadt, ELS, and Nathalie Bacon, ELS), and our treasurer (interim treasurer Ms. Schmidt).

- *Bring inactive BELS-certified editors back into active membership*. Norman Grossblatt, ELS(D) (our master of **all** BELS-related activities), and I will be soliciting help from the members in this search—looking for those who have been inactive, finding those with whom we've lost contact, and updating our records regarding changes of address and retirements.

- *Reach other life science specialty groups* to show them the value of BELS certification. We have a large contingent of members in the pharmaceutical and biotechnology specialties, but I'd like to see greater

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Editing in cyberspace

Meeting deadlines while working in a virtual office

By **CAROL KAKALEC KOHN**

Virtual: the “power of acting without agency of the material part.” Without the material part. No place to show up at 8 a.m., no I.D. badge, and no professional wardrobe required.

I have worked in a virtual editorial department for 4 years, a job I found through a posting on the BELS Web site. The company is NewsRx, an Atlanta, Georgia-based producer of medically related news information for online and print newsletters and for distribution through partnerships with major online information services. NewsRx is my first virtual experience, and as our editorial staff has increased, I began to draw on experiences gained in conventional office settings, determining what works and what doesn’t in the cyber realm.

The editorial staff

The NewsRx editorial department comprises five team editors, each working with three writer/editors, and one on-call substitute editor. None of the editors works in the Atlanta office; they do their work in their homes—at least I think they do. Each week, the department produces more than 1600 brief, easily read articles based on published research and press and Internet news.

The department works this way: each Friday, working files are electronically prepared by our IT staff in Atlanta according to subject area. The files are placed in individual editors’ folders on the FTP server late in the afternoon.

The working file is the basis for the editor’s work for the next week. Articles are edited for correctness and formatted according to house style. The completed file is submitted a week later to the team editor. The team editor reviews the files of the three members of his or her team and then forwards the edited files to a staff member, who combines the files from all five team editors and prepares the weekly database of articles.

These files are uploaded to the server, and the Atlanta-based information technology wizards pluck

Thanks to NewsRx

BELS is grateful to NewsRx for its generous financial support of our annual meeting and dinner. Thank you!

them down and prepare the articles for online and print publication. This happens every week, 52 weeks a year. For us, missing a deadline has dire consequences. We know that the person responsible for the next step in the process is somewhere drumming his or her fingers, not to mention the client at the end of the line.

Meeting deadlines

So what happens when someone “calls in sick” or wants to go away for a few days? Actually, it doesn’t usually cause us the same problem it could in an office setting, for a couple of reasons. First, the work is the same each week; there are no unexpected deadlines, we don’t have to worry about absent authors, and there aren’t myriad meetings and phone calls to interrupt. Then, editors have a full week plus two weekends to complete the file. So, if one has a minor illness, he or she can usually soldier on—in a bathrobe with a cup of tea, if necessary. And the rest of the department doesn’t have to worry about catching it!

Editors often work around vacations and trips by preparing extra articles the week before or by taking a laptop along. Because the work can be done at any time—day or night—one may still be able to enjoy the time away.

For anticipated and unanticipated situations, we e-mail our on-call editor, who is available to fill in as necessary. We’ve had emergencies that take an editor away without notice, but we’ve been fortunate to have

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BELS FOUNDERS—Five of the 12 founding members of BELS (all ELS diplomates) attended the annual meeting May 22 in Atlanta, Georgia. From left are Norman Grossblatt, Carol Kakalec Kohn, Frances H. Porcher, Martha M. Tacker, and Walter J. Pagel. Not present were Susan Eastwood, Gil C.R. Croome, Martha H. Brookes, Barbara B. Reitt, Gillian Fansler Brown, John R. Gilbert, and Christy Wright (deceased).

—Editing in cyberspace—

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other staff who are willing to pitch in to ensure we meet our overall weekly quota.

The right person

Not everyone is comfortable working without the “material part,” so how do you find the right person? In a conventional office you’d review the resume and schedule an interview. We do the same, except the interview is by phone, and there is rarely a face-to-face meeting.

There are applicants who fantasize about working at home—how wonderful it would be, how much freedom they would have. So, I’ve had to hone my intuition, learn to trust my instincts, and then watch a new editor’s

work closely in the early weeks and be ready to act if necessary. I need to sense whether an applicant sees this as a real job, one to be undertaken seriously and done professionally. While sloppy work, excuses, and complaints are warnings to any manager, I’ve found those clues become critical in a virtual department, especially if you have never met the employee face to face.

During the phone interview, I explain the work and the weekly process to the applicant. If I am interested, I always offer a brief working file to allow him or her to give the editing a try.

As director, I usually work with new editors through the first few cycles. This gives me a chance

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Getting down to business

By **MARY ANN SCHMIDT**

The BELS annual business meeting and banquet was held on Sunday, May 22, in the Baker Room of the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Atlanta, Georgia. Polyxeni Potter, ELS, did a splendid job of making the arrangements for the dinner, which was attended by 31 members and guests. NewsRx provided support for the banquet.

After dinner, outgoing President Walter J. Pagel, ELS(D), said that we, as members, should spread the word about BELS by letting others, especially employers, know about BELS and the benefits of certification and of hiring certified editors.

Mr. Pagel then introduced Kim Berman, ELS, as our new president. He also mentioned that David Galloway, ELS, was assuming editorship of *The BELS Letter*; Nathalie A. Bacon, ELS, has agreed to remain as registrar for the diplomate exam; and Mary Ann Schmidt, ELS, has been elected to serve another two years as secretary.

Ms. Bacon reported that, since July 2004, two portfolios were submitted for inspection by the diplomate examination committee. One failed, and the second is in review.

Bethany S. Thivierge, ELS, submitted the treasurer's report, saying that we are in sound condition financially. Our bank balance is approximately \$30,000, having increased by \$5,000, with total expenses of more than \$14,000.

Leslie E. Neistadt, ELS, certification exam registrar, said that 88 people took the certification exam in the past year and 60 (68%) passed. Seven people sat for the exam in Atlanta, and another 115 are eligible to take it. Upcoming exam sites include the American Medical Writers Association annual meeting in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Melbourne, Victoria, Australia; Washington, D.C.; Princeton, New Jersey; and Warsaw, Poland.

Susan E. Aiello, DVM, ELS, the chairman of the certification examination development committee, reported that 10 questions are coming up for review by the executive committee. If these pass muster, they can then be validated and incorporated into future exams. The committee is looking into a new process for question development, new strategies for question

development, and new questions in new areas. They have already performed an analysis of the pre-exam questionnaires and entered the information from all of them into a database, which can be sorted on examinees' names and scores.

Ms. Berman, as incoming president, celebrated Mr. Pagel's tenure as president and presented him with a gift certificate from an orchid company. (His passion is raising orchids.)

The dinner ended with a presentation by Carol Kakalec Kohn, ELS(D), editor-in-chief and editorial director of NewsRx and a founding member of BELS. Her topic, "Editing in Cyberspace: The Virtual Editorial Department," expounded on the perils and benefits of producing weekly online health news, working with many editors in several locations via electronic submissions and communication. (See article on page 2.)

Other highlights of the Executive Council meeting included the following:

- Ms. Neistadt asked for suggestions for places to hold future exams. Perhaps the Midwest (Chicago? Madison?).
- Ms. Berman will be the contact person for changes to the executive committee and will circulate changes to the Webmaster, secretary, and others as needed.
- We discussed expiration dates for elected and appointed members of the EC. These will be included in the next and subsequent issues of the membership directory.
- Discussion ensued about how to handle the office of nominations and elections. It was decided that the past president should chair this committee.
- The next agenda item concerned what to do about the member and public relations committee(s). Should it be one or two committees? We need to think about who would be a good person to handle this/these committee(s). Discussion ensued about perhaps appointing an assistant to the member relations committee chair (perhaps a newer member?) thereby teaming a newer member with an older member to

New *BELS Letter* editor needs your help

Beginning with this issue, *The BELS Letter* is in the care of a new editor.

David Galloway, ELS, has been appointed Councilor for *The BELS Letter*. Mr. Galloway is an associate scientific editor in the Department of Scientific Publications at The University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas. Before joining the M. D. Anderson staff in 2002, he spent 27 years in newspapers and news Web sites.

As Mr. Galloway takes the helm of *The BELS Letter*, he hopes for help from BELS members to keep the newsletter lively and useful. Several members already have made contributions, summarizing

discussion threads they started on the BELS listserv. (Watch for the first of those in the next issue.)

One new column that debuts in this issue is **Nota bene (n.b.)**, which appears on page 10. This is where we will share news about BELS editors, whether it is notice of a recent publication, a relocation, a retirement or anything else significant in the lives of our members. Please e-mail your news to BELSletter@sbcglobal.net

Another feature Mr. Galloway hopes to see in upcoming issues is what he is currently calling “case reports,” for lack of a better name. Have you run into a unique editorial problem that called for an interesting

or innovative solution? (Even if that solution has not yet been identified, it could be of interest to fellow BELS editors.)

However, Mr. Galloway wants to emphasize that his own ideas are not the ideas that will make *The BELS Letter* useful to you. He wants to hear from the members.

One member has submitted an essay he wrote for his ELS diplomate certification. (Watch for that in the next issue. Hint: It will make you think about how words are born.)

As editors, we learn things every day. Please share by e-mail to BELSletter@sbcglobal.net, or call Mr. Galloway at (281) 467-5557.

—Annual meeting—

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more or less break in the newer member.

- The Canadian Editorial Association approached Ms. Berman about setting up a French-language editing exam. She will contact folks in other organizations about possible interest in sponsoring exams.

- Ms. Kohn thought that our checks should be signed by two EC members and not just the treasurer. Ms. Berman will contact Shirley Peterson, ELS, about her experiences as treasurer and about the debit card. Ms. Schmidt will assume the day-to-day treasurer duties after the EC received Ms. Thivierge’s resignation from the office.

- Special awards will be awarded by the president at his or her discretion and should not be an automatic annual award.

- Ms. Schmidt will be responsible for assembling and mailing out new member packets to those who pass the certification exam. It was decided that she will also be responsible for including the BELS pins in these packets.

- Norman Grossblatt, ELS(D), brought up the topic of “lost members.” He suggested that a listing be compiled that could be divided among several volunteers of the yet-to-be-organized member relations committee so that they could do online searches to try to locate these folks.

- Suggestions made in the ensuing discussion about how to keep our supporting members interested and involved with BELS included: 1) a “tips” section in the members-only portion of the Web site; 2) an archive of the listserv messages (Mr. Grossblatt has all of the messages archived on his

computer if we need them). The archive would need a moderator or moderators, perhaps selected from the volunteers identified in a recent survey; and 3) links to various informative sites, perhaps including one to the Council of Science Editors style guide (if it exists on the Web) and the like.

- We talked about an administrative guide—a listing of the day-to-day duties and responsibilities for each elected officer and appointed chair. These descriptions could provide a reasonably good picture of what is involved with each office for potential future candidates or for emergency substitutes in those positions.

- A review of suggestions and requests for Web site maintenance, updating, etc., from Dawn McCarra Bass, ELS, was quickly voted on with a resounding “Yes!”

New members pass BELS examination

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—New members—

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New column makes its debut

A new column debuts in this issue of *The BELS Letter*.

Nota bene (n.b.) will present notable items of personal interest regarding our members. It will highlight promotions, awards, and publications that have brought you kudos, affiliation changes, relocation, retirement, or anything else you would like to crow about to

other BELS members.

To get this new venture moving, however, we need the news!

If you have anything new in your life that you would like to share with fellow BELS members, please send details to BELSLetter@sbcglobal.net. Also, if you know of a modest fellow member who would not sing his or her own praises (but you believe recognition is in order), please provide the details. We will contact the person to be sure he or she is comfortable with publication of the information before it is posted in the next issue of *The BELS Letter*.

Nota bene (n.b.)

Recently published articles by members:

Berman K. Acknowledging a biomedical communicator. *AMWA Journal*. 2005;20:16-18.

Erratum

MEMBERSHIP DIRECTORY

**Murray, Susan Gardner,
ELS (1997)**

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—New members—

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—Before we were editors—

From page 1

representation by members in the other life sciences. Suggestions of possible contacts can be directed to my attention (skberman@earthlink.net). Also, if any members know of a group of life science editors who would be interested in staging an examination, they should pass that information along to Leslie Neistadt.

Before we were editors, we were writers. Before we

were writers, we were readers. I heard someone once say that writing was “building a place with words,” but that editing took basic construction to the next step—editing was “feng shui for words,” creating the perfect environment that allowed the context to reach the audience. Keep this in mind when you pick up a manuscript, open a document for online editing, or look one last time at a book chapter before it goes to press.

We have the power to make words and ideas sing: Let’s use it!

—Editing in cyberspace—

From page 3

to assess the work and the attitude and to provide feedback and encouragement. It can be daunting for the editor at first, so we give him or her several cycles to ramp up to the agreed-upon article quota. Once we are both comfortable, the editor begins submitting weekly files directly to his or her team editor. The team editor provides quality control and oversight of the team.

Documents

We have developed several documents that help ensure consistency across all articles. In addition to our house guidelines, we have separate guides for editors who work on primarily abstract-based articles and for those whose articles are based on press information or Internet news. As far as possible, given the different areas covered, all editors refer to a common subject heading list—these headings are used down the line as search terms. As the science and information technology fields change, so must the terms and language we use. Therefore, the documents are regularly updated.

Now, in an office setting, I could call a staff meeting to distribute new information and discuss changes to existing guidelines. I don’t have that opportunity, so I put new or updated documents on the server and notify the staff by e-mail. Almost all communication is done electronically.

E-communication

E-mail is no longer a communication option; to do freelance work of any kind, one *must* be wired. We all know the drawbacks of this quick communication—the

unfinished message that gets sent too soon (glorious typos and all), the one that escaped without the mentioned attachment, the one you might not have sent at all had you taken time to count to 10. Communicating—not just in writing, but in writing that must be done and sent quickly—takes special attention. No one knows that better than we.

In the virtual department, where you never meet each other in person, it is particularly important to have this skill as keen as possible. The message must be clear, and direct—without ambiguity. Of course we always think our e-mails are clear and direct, until we get the reply—“Huh, you want me to do *what?*” Still, it is our main tool for communicating and maintaining relationships. This remote communication makes it impossible, though, to gauge an employee’s reaction from expressions and body language. Also, electronic interactions can often take longer than the 5-minute chat in the hall.

Virtual model

This model works well for NewsRx. Even with an editorial staff spread from Seattle to Orlando and now Nova Scotia, our turnover is low. In the past 6 months, we added a new team of four. Some of our editors have other clients and find that this type of consistent project fits in well with their schedules. We are proud to have five BELS editors in the department, and certification is always preferred when we hire.

Carol Kakalec Kohn, MS, ELS(D), is editor-in-chief and editorial director for NewsRx, based in Atlanta, Georgia.

The Letter

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No. 35

Inside this issue

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- Editing in cyberspace
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- New members

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