



For Whom the BELS Tolls

By Deborah E. Bowman, MFA, ELS
 Managing Editor
GIE: Gastrointestinal Endoscopy

I like to challenge myself. That's why, when I saw the flyer for the BELS (Board of Editors in the Life Sciences) exam at an ISMTE conference, I was intrigued. I didn't do anything about it right away, but I did save the flyer and looked at it from time to time. Hmm...passing the test gives an editor a certification that allows her to put ELS after her name. Cool! But, I asked myself, how would it help me?

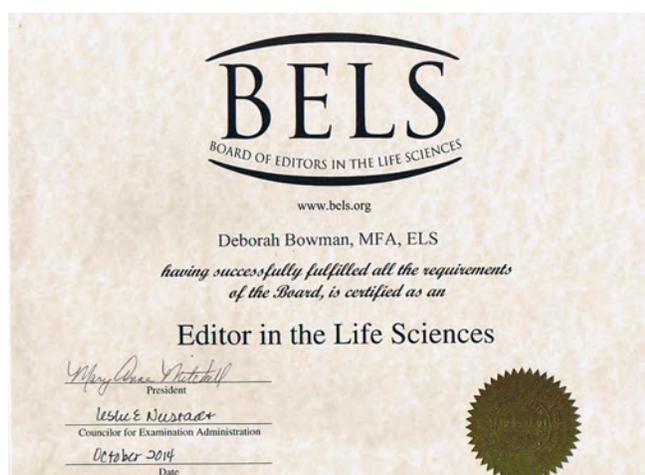
The BELS website gave three reasons to work toward certification. First, to give editors in the life sciences a way to demonstrate their editorial proficiency. I already have a great job as Managing Editor and was not planning to look for another, so that didn't seem to apply. Second, to provide employers a way to identify top editors. Again, not looking for another job. Third, to establish a standard of proficiency for editing in the life sciences. That one struck a chord. I have learned, from talking to people at ISMTE conferences, that "Managing and Technical Editors" means different things to different people, different societies, and different journal offices. If passing this test proves that a person passes a standard of proficiency set by BELS, then I knew I wanted to do that, to prove it to myself and to others.

My Society requires us to set goals each year. In early 2014, it occurred to me that passing the BELS test would be a good goal, so I visited the BELS website with more serious intent (www.bels.org). I soon realized that this was not going to be easy. They require you to apply and be approved for candidacy, to begin with. To be eligible, you have to have a bachelor's degree from an accredited academic institution and have at least two years of experience as a manuscript editor. They define a manuscript editor as someone who is concerned with the expression of the content as well as the form of a manuscript.

If I had been designing the "BELS reasons for certification," I would have added a fourth reason, based on what I hoped to accomplish: to learn more about scholarly publishing along the way. I checked the dates of the exams, which are given all over the world, and saw that one was scheduled to be given in Memphis, Tennessee, in October 2014. Once you are approved to take the test, you have two years to take it, but I wanted to pass before the end of the year to achieve my 2014 goal, so October became my target date.

To apply, you have to send BELS a completed registration form, a copy of your diploma(s), your resume or CV, and three letters of recommendation from people who can verify your employment, along with a registration fee. I gathered everything and sent it in, and soon received notification that I had been approved for candidacy.

At that point, the question became "How do I prepare for this test?" The BELS website offers a study guide, which includes 21 sample questions. These helped me understand the many directions my preparation should take. The questions on the actual exam, I learned, would test my knowledge on grammar, punctuation, mechanics, usage, syntax, organization of sentences, internal consistency, numbers (yes, there was some math!),



bibliographic references, tables and illustrations, units of measure and scientific terms, publishing, and publishing ethics.

I felt a little overwhelmed by the wide variety of topics, but the guide made it clear that the best way to prepare is to have done the day-to-day work of a Managing Editor for a period of time. It is true—I felt confident in many of the subjects, but knew I needed to brush up on other areas. The study guide lists some books that can help, and I added a review of some American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) courses I had taken (statistics, ethics, medical terminology). It was a year of learning!

Just a couple of weeks before the test, I read a blog post by a woman who had taken the test earlier in the year. She said her biggest surprise was how hard the exam was. Nerves! I drove to Memphis from St. Louis with trepidation and showed up for the exam early. I spent the minutes before the exam exchanging nervous remarks with others who appeared to be just as anxious.

The test was hard, just as reported. The questions did indeed cover a wide variety of subjects,

and the difference between the correct and the almost-correct answer was often difficult to ascertain. We were told that we would receive the results in six weeks, but I actually got mine in the mail in about four weeks. It was a wonderful and exciting moment when I read the words that said I had passed, and I quickly set about adding “ELS” after my name everywhere. But the biggest surprise for me in this whole process was a feeling I got right after completing the exam, before I even knew whether I had passed. Almost immediately I realized I was feeling a burst of self-confidence. Even though the questions were hard, I never felt lost, and this was the test that determined “editorial proficiency.” In fact, I was glad that the test was hard; what would it have proven otherwise? I had always felt that I was good at my job, but to have this confirmation was surprisingly gratifying. Best of all, the feeling has lasted.

So I would add a fifth reason to the BELS list for why someone should take the exam: to gain self-confidence. Goal accomplished.

Save the Date!



8th Annual ISMTE European Conference
 October 13, 2015
 Park Inn Hotel London Heathrow
 Heathrow, Middlesex, United Kingdom
 COPE to have a half day meeting on October 12



8th Annual North American ISMTE Conference
 August 20-21, 2015
 Sheraton Inner Harbor Hotel
 Baltimore, Maryland, USA
 COPE to have a full day meeting on August 19