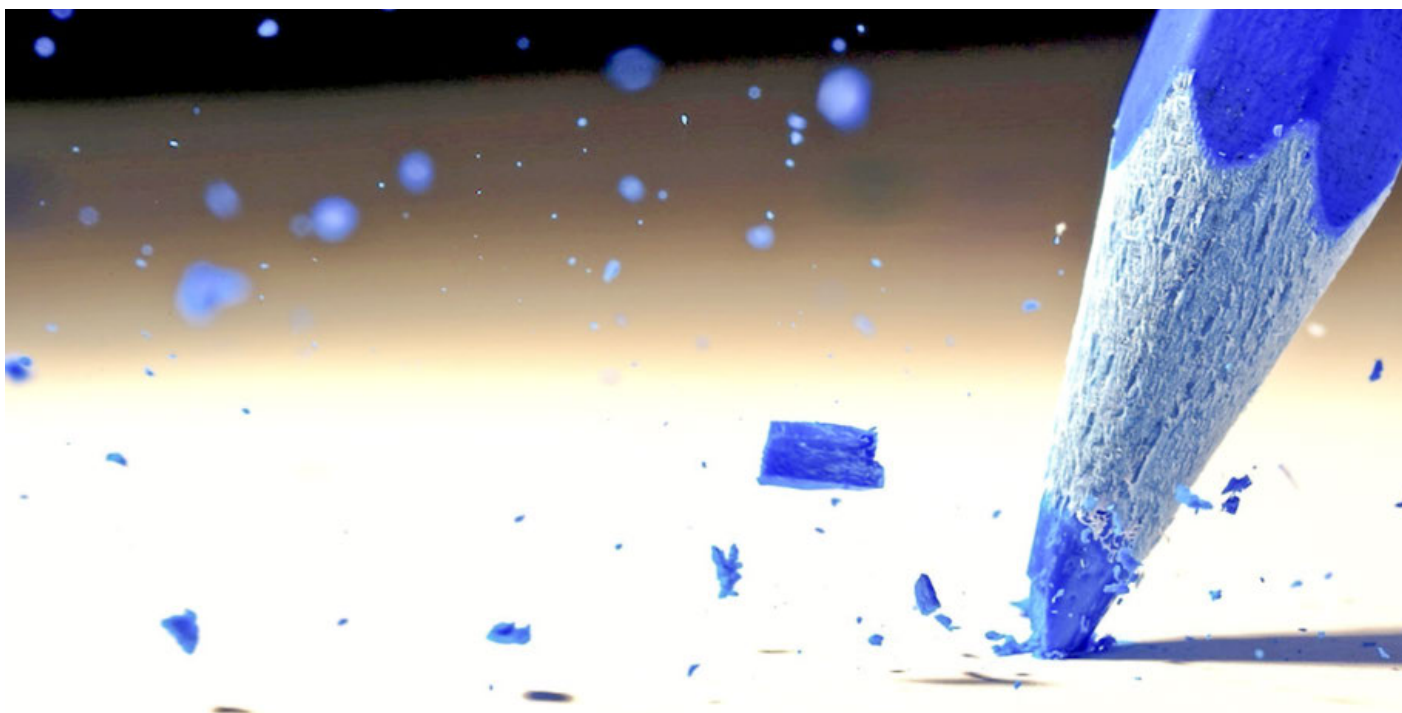


# Go certified – get ready for the BELS exam



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## Abstract

If you are a manuscript editor, you can earn a certification through the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences (BELS), attesting your editorial proficiency. Such objective evidence is desirable for many writers and editors in the life sciences – especially for those of us who don't have a degree in linguistics or communication, or who like taking on a personal challenge, or who just love taking home a trophy. In this article, I describe seven steps that I think are essential to preparing for – and passing – the BELS certification exam.

How do you like the idea of benchmarking your editing skills? Of having a certification that demonstrates your competence to prospective clients or employers? Of taking on a personal challenge, perhaps, proving to yourself that you're really as good an editor as you think you are? That idea could become reality through the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences (BELS)

The US-based board works to maintain and promote a standard of editorial proficiency in the life sciences, offering certification exams across the world – in Europe usually once a year. For the past two years, the European BELS exam was held in conjunction with the EMWA spring conference. Attending the conference in Birmingham last year, I jumped at the chance of sitting the exam, finally ticking it off my bucket list.<sup>1</sup> I found the effort worthwhile – a thrill, actually – and I recommend it to anyone who is serious about editing.

When *Medical Writing* invited me to write an article on how to prepare for the exam, though, my first thought was, “well, that will hardly be a feature-length article – a tweet would be more apt.” I didn't prepare much in the lead-up to the exam, apart from testing myself on the 22 sample test questions provided in the BELS Certification

Study Guide.<sup>2</sup> According to this guide, “your daily work as an editor is the best preparation”. This was indeed true for me, meaning that I had, in fact, subconsciously prepared for the exam for years. I had prepared for it since the day I took my first course in writing and editing. I had prepared for it since the day I started obsessing about good writing, gathering and reading books about it, reading anything I could find about it. I had prepared for it since the day I got serious about science writing and editing. Reflecting on this perennial preparation, I have formulated “The 7 Steps” to getting ready for the exam.

*See fact box about BELS*

## 1. Be eligible

First things first – or actually, the last thing first... because when you get to this part, you ought to have all the other parts down pat already. Before you can register for the exam, you need to apply to BELS and be deemed eligible. This means having a bachelor's degree or equivalent and at least 2 years of experience as a manuscript editor in the life sciences, or a PhD and at least 1 year of experience. Along with your diploma, your application to BELS must include letters from employers or clients describing and verifying

your work as a manuscript editor. BELS defines the latter as someone concerned not only with the form but also the intellectual content of a manuscript.<sup>2</sup>

Is a medical writer a manuscript editor in the life sciences? My manager wrote the following in support of my application to BELS:

*All documents are created as a team effort with the medical writer as the lead writer, editor, and project manager. The job, therefore, contains both original writing based on data and input from other contributors as well as editing and critical revision of text written by the other contributors. The medical writer is responsible for the totality of the document, ensuring consistency, a clear story flow, precise communication of key messages and compliance with guidelines and style guides... [The medical writer] therefore fully meets the BELS definition of an editor.*

**The medical writer therefore fully meets the BELS definition of an editor.**

## 2. Obsess and read about good writing

Some time ago, one of my colleagues – a brand new medical writer – asked if I would give him feedback on a quality check he had done for me; it was his first “real” task at the company. In one of his comments to the document, he had written “Let me know if this is too much and I need to control my OCD”. He had indeed done a very good, thorough job – getting down to the “incredibly nitty-gritty”, as he put it. But what struck me and delighted me more than his eagle eye was the obsession with good writing that I sensed between the lines of his comments. I sensed his thirst for learning all the tricks of his

new trade. So, I lent him my copy of *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White,<sup>3</sup> which I thought might be right up his alley. Scarcely an hour later, he stopped by my office to return the book, beaming. After reading White’s witty introduction – that timeless piece of beauty – he was sold on the book and had promptly ordered his own copy.

My new colleague half-jokingly wondered if he needed to curb his “OCD” when checking my document, but I thought his degree of obsession was perfectly healthy for a professional wordsmith. To excel at something, I think you *need* to obsess about it – in a healthy way, though, not compulsively. When you obsess about something, you naturally want to find out all you can about it; it’s almost as if “it” finds you. When you obsess about good writing – a necessity for a good editor – certain texts will find you, just as Strunk and White’s legendary little book<sup>3</sup> found my colleague.

To my mind, an essential and early step in preparing to become a certified editor is to kindle your obsession and seek out your favourite “writing bibles”, your sources of inspiration and guidance. Note the plural – sources – because you need different perspectives to avoid becoming too prescriptivist. In the BELS Certification Study Guide,<sup>2</sup> you will find a list of useful reference books, including *The Elements of Style*.<sup>3</sup> Joining some kind of language forum, for example a LinkedIn group such as Grammar Geeks, can also be helpful.

## 3. Know your bones

Apart from teaching you about good writing, obsessing and reading about it will familiarise you with the conventions and terms of grammar and syntax that an editor is expected to know. Just as a car mechanic knows the names of car parts, or a pharmacist the names of drugs, or an orthopaedic surgeon the names of bones. To be sure, you can be an excellent writer without knowing the names of common syntactic problems. But to be a certified editor, a text surgeon, so to speak, you should know your “bones”.

Among other things, the BELS exam will test your ability to recognise, for instance, a restrictive clause, a prepositional phrase, or a dangling modifier. It will test your ability to diagnose problems of grammar, punctuation, and syntax. So knowing your bones will help you cruise through the “editing 101” questions of the exam, leaving you more time for the meatier, far more intricate questions. A text surgeon, of course, must not only identify the bones but also fix any fractures, including complex ones.

A note on language: The BELS exam tests your proficiency in standard American English.

So if your preferred brand of English is British, Australian, or something else, make sure you can easily circumnavigate the different variants. As a manuscript editor in the life sciences, you probably need to handle British and American English at any rate.

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## 4. Beware who does what to whom

Although it covers some typical style problems dealt with in copyediting, the bulk of the BELS exam is devoted to substantive editing. A typical question or set of questions relates to a technically dense passage that contains grammatical and syntactic problems. You are then asked which one of the multiple edits best solves the problem while retaining the author’s original intention. And this is where it can get really tricky, especially when only tiny nuances separate the multiple-choice answers

As I see it, most of these problems have one thing in common: ambiguity around “who is doing what to whom”. Not in a human relationships kind of way (my exam, at least, was devoid of any sauciness or savagery), but in terms of

### Fact box

#### What is BELS?

- 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.
- BELS offers certification exams worldwide. The exam is a three-hour multiple-choice test of scientific editing in standard American English.
- Editors who pass the exam may use the credentials “ELS” (Editor in the Life Sciences) after their names.
- BELS has more than 1,000 board-certified editors in more than 20 countries.
- Find out more at the BELS website (bels.org)

what is the subject and what is the object in a sentence

For an editor, this may be simple enough to work out in a simple sentence. But in a garbled sentence, especially one full of complex scientific information, identifying the subject(s) and object(s) will certainly spice up the editor's job. If you misinterpret the author's intention, you're in danger of warping or omitting important information from your revision. And that's the kind of "danger" that lurks in the multiple choices of the BELS exam.

How to arm yourself for that challenge? I think I can only echo the advice that "your daily work as an editor is the best preparation."<sup>2</sup> Untangling a garbled passage will always be challenging, but the more you do it, the better you become at deciphering the author's meaning. Something that honed my editing skills was working with journal manuscripts written by scientists with low English proficiency, which required heavy editing and much detective work. In your real job as an editor, of course, you would clarify any doubts and ambiguities with the

Most of these problems have one thing in common: ambiguity around who is doing what to whom.

writer. When sitting the BELS exam, you can only rely on your discipline of mind, your sense of language, and your command of syntax.

In my book, the ultimate purpose of syntax and grammar is to make it crystal clear who does what to whom. Life, you might argue, is also all about who is doing what to whom. Can we deduce from these two notions that the ultimate purpose of life is editing? I hope you say "no", because the BELS exam will also test your sense of logic.

### 5. Brush up on the science basics

BELS is not just about editing, it is about scientific editing, specifically in the life sciences.

The certification exam therefore covers a few science basics. It will test your knowledge of scientific terms and units of measurement, your skill in interpreting numbers and

If your mathematical muscles have softened from lack of exercise, consider toning up with some numerical reasoning tests.

graphs, and your ability to do simple maths. For instance, some questions require you to calculate percentages, or at least make quick, educated guestimates – a bit like those found in numerical aptitude tests.

None of it is "rocket science", and anyone with a background in any life science should be able to answer these questions. But as in an aptitude test, you will be under time pressure. So, you need to keep your wits about you, pay attention to details, and stick to your sense of logic. If your mathematical muscles have softened from lack of exercise, consider toning them up with some numerical reasoning tests. On the internet, you can find many free aptitude tests as well as test books for purchase.

I would also recommend brushing up your basic undergraduate knowledge of different units of measurement, including units of radioactivity, electricity, heat, and light. Look over the SI base units and derived units, along with common non-SI units. If you have binned your old school books, don't worry – use Wikipedia.

Also, revisit common types of





graphs. If it's been a while since you dabbled in logarithmic plot types, re-acquaint yourself with them. Again, consult your favourite scientific oracle, whether it's a textbook, Wikipedia, or some other online source.

The scientific material in the exam questions may come from any life science field, from botany to biomedicine. You don't need to be a subject matter expert to solve the editorial challenges, but a good, broad foundation in science will help. The more familiar you are with the scientific terms and concepts in any text to be edited, the quicker you can get to the heart of the syntactic, logical, or numerical problem.

## 6. Heed the publishing principles

If you have been around academic publishing for a while, the exam questions on bibliographic references should give you no trouble at all, as long as you keep your editorial eagle eye wide open. In my experience, those questions were fun little "spot the difference" games, with differences and errors in citation style rather than differences between two pictures.

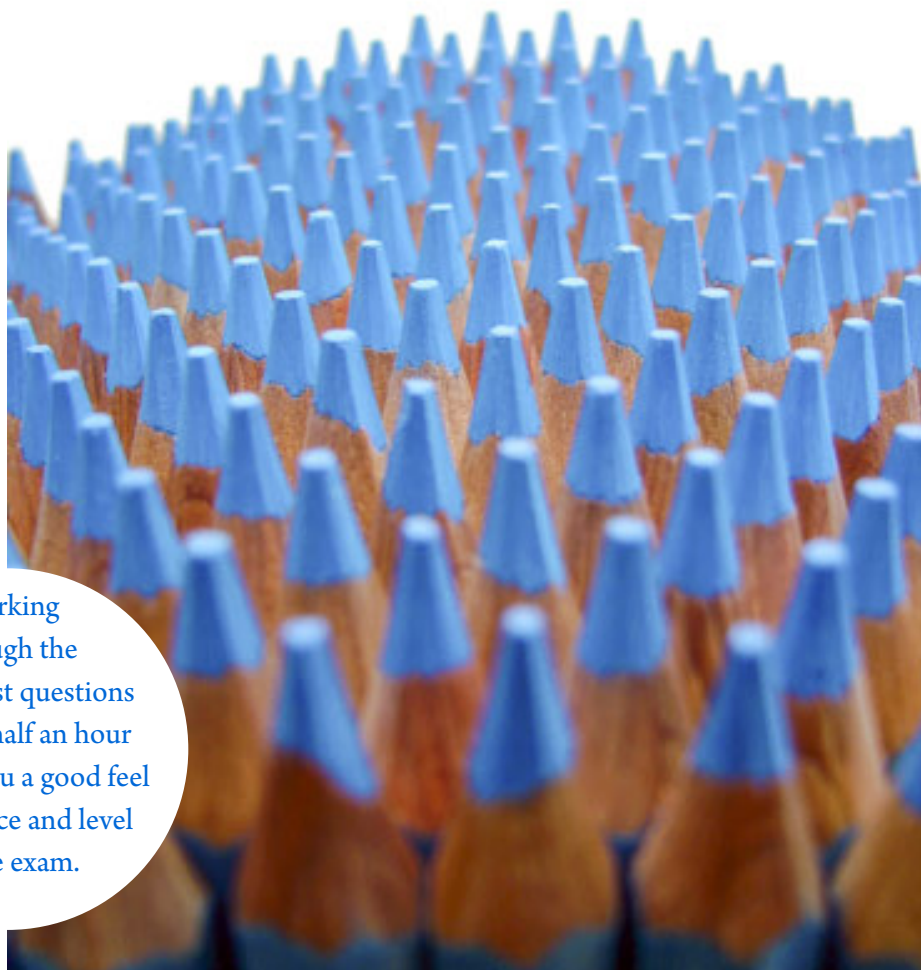
Other questions will test your knowledge of publishing conventions, including use of copyrighted material, author-editor interactions, and ethical principles in scientific publishing. Some experience with publishing in a scientific journal, either as an author or an editor, along with your good sense will make these questions manageable. If you are not so familiar with publishing principles, I suggest looking up the editorial policy of one or more major journals and study topics such as copyright and licensing, conflict of interest, prior publication, confidentiality, and research integrity.

## 7. Try out the sample test

And now to the second most fun part: the BELS Certification Study Guide<sup>2</sup> has 22 sample test questions, which I think represent the exam fairly well. The sample questions amount to about a fifth of the number given in the actual exam, so working through them in about half an hour will give you a good feel for the pace and level of the exam.

If you get most of the sample questions right, consider yourself ready to sit the exam – which is, of course, the most fun part. Compared with

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the sample test, the exam is more of everything: more of the easy stuff, more of the tricky stuff, more verve, more nerves, more at stake, sweeter reward. Happy prepping, happy testing, and good luck!

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## Disclaimers

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and are not necessarily shared by her employer, BELS, or EMWA.

## Conflicts of interest

The author is a supporting member of BELS but is not in any way promoting the organisation nor the exam.

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