

# BELS *Letter*

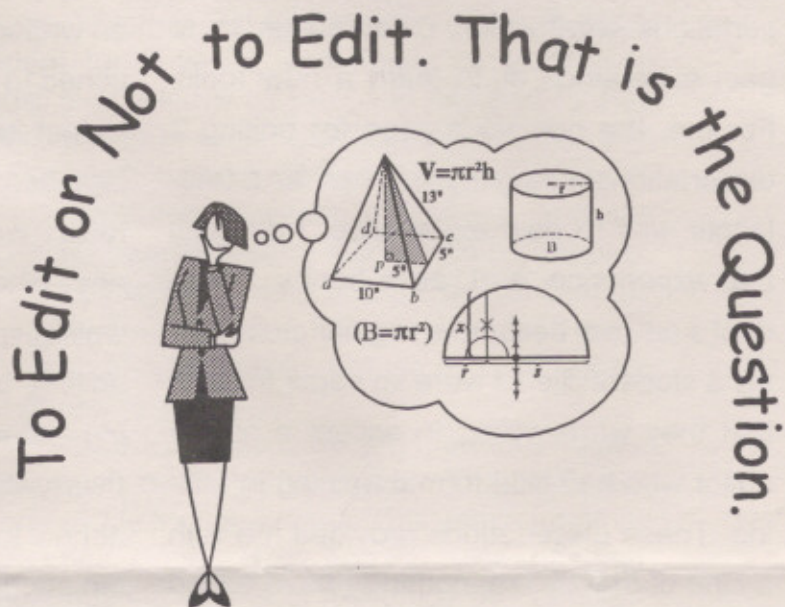
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**Editor**  
*Ann Morcos, ELS*

**Contributors**  
*Susan Aiello, ELS*  
*Jennifer Macke, ELS*  
*Bobbie Reitt, ELS(D)*

Issue 24

Spring 2001



**I**n January, I posted a message on the BELS listserve from a doctoral student who asked me to help her find an editor for her dissertation. I had declined to edit it myself because I was not familiar with the subject matter.

I was surprised at the commotion this message evoked. Responses came fast and furious with many and various opinions being expressed and experiences being shared.

Susan Eastwood's reply represents 1 point of view:

I have edited 2 theses in my career. . .but each time I went 'round with myself about the ethics of editing a document that is so evidently meant to represent the mind, reason, and expression of solely the person writing it. . .

Several editors, surprised that anyone had ethical misgivings about editing graduate theses, expressed other points of view. Sylvia van Roosmalen wrote:

I am surprised you feel that it may be unethical to edit theses. . .we cannot expect everybody to master the art of editing in addition to his or her own profession.

The purpose of this article is to present both the pros and cons of editing graduate dis-



sertations, to define those situations that may pose ethical questions, and to develop a list of recommendations that may help editors avoid unprofessional situations.

On the one hand, editors have a number of excellent reasons that make editing dissertations worthwhile. One reason is to gain experience or to learn a new topic. For me, the primary reason for editing 3 dissertations during my first year as a freelancer was to gain experience. I did gain that experience, and, as a bonus, 1 student's advisor became a regular customer. My 3 student clients were so eager for help that they were willing to accept a novice editor who had little formal training in editing. These dissertations provided me with a kind of trial by fire—nothing I have edited since has seemed quite so challenging. For a seasoned editor, editing a dissertation can provide valuable practice in editing a longer, often very challenging, document, or an opportunity to learn about an unfamiliar topic.

A second reason to accept such work is the possibility of contributing to a manuscript that will ultimately be published. A good job of editing may make the difference between a publishable thesis and one that will just become another ornament on the advisor's bookshelf.

A third reason in favor of editing dissertations, and perhaps the most compelling, is to have the opportunity to contribute to

the education of the student. Many graduate students do not receive any formal instruction in writing and desperately need guidance. Their advisor may not have the time or the writing ability to help them. Most students are very eager to learn tips on writing from the editor. One editor mentioned to me that he is willing to charge his lowest rate for editing theses, precisely because he values his role as an instructor as well as an editor. I had an experience where a student sent me some of her writing, not so much for the purpose of editing, but specifically to critique her writing and suggest how it could be improved. I was willing to do this, but was surprised at how long it took to provide a set of written suggestions with examples.

On the other hand, editors may avoid working on dissertations for several valid reasons. The first is financial. Many students must pay for editing out of their own pockets. Several editors, myself included, have been skimped in the payment. In my case, I received a prepayment for the work, but the student failed to pay the remainder of the bill after the job was done. Even if paid in full, editing a thesis is often done at a lower rate of pay than an experienced freelance editor could get for doing other kinds of work.

A second reason that some editors avoid editing dissertations is that the students who seek out an editor are often in such



dire need of assistance that the work is painfully difficult. And even after editing, the document may never be good enough to be considered well written. As Catherine Elverston wrote so succinctly "not only is it ill-paid work, but it generally is a horrible experience—those who need it, need it so badly."

A final reason why some editors eschew dissertations is that they see certain ethical problems in doing this kind of work. The most obvious ethical questions relate to academic integrity. The thesis is intended to represent the thoughts and ideas of the author. In fact, some may regard the thesis as a kind of test, where outside help may skew the results.

Claudette Upton summed this up nicely when she wrote:

The ability to express one's ideas clearly in written form, to logically develop an argument and present it in plain language—in short, to communicate knowledge effectively—is a big part, in my opinion, of what a student is (or should be) judged upon in terms of his or her thesis.

Catherine Elverston wrote:

'In my day', any work that was turned in had to be accompanied by a written, signed statement that help was 'neither given nor received' . . . . Since then, however, . . . editing a thesis or a doctoral dissertation has become an evolving necessity. . .

The second area where an ethical issue exists is in the level of editing being provided.

Annie Almstedt wrote:

I have edited theses of ESL writers. And I never had an ethical consideration about it; all I was doing was making their English 'less foreign sounding', and I never thought that was taking away or adding to the content of their thesis research. . .

Indeed, most would agree that editing simply to correct spelling and grammar is not unethical. But for many of us, our role as author's editor normally goes well beyond that. Even if I am asked to do only proofreading, can I, in good conscience, overlook errors in content? I may see areas where the student needs to cite a reference, or provide a better graphic presentation of his or her data, or even to correct or clarify information. Even if the thesis committee knows that I edited the work, will they assume that the student thought through all of this on his or her own? Although most of us would agree that nothing is wrong with correcting problems stemming from English as a second language, cases do exist in which the student specifically asks for deeper levels of editing, or in which editors point out mistakes that go beyond language problems. As Michael Altus suggests "it's reasonable to provide manuscript editing services for a student writing a thesis—as long as the aid



doesn't go too far. . . ." The problem for any editor working on a dissertation is defining what constitutes "too far".

A third ethical gray area centers on the issue of trust. We seem to agree that disclosure to the advisor and thesis committee is key. However, the actual communication is normally between the editor and the student. Even if the editor asks to be acknowledged and requests that the advisor be informed, how do we know that these agreements have been fulfilled? Normally, we do not see the final copy of the thesis, nor do we often speak directly with the advisor. To be truly ethical, do we need to do investigative work? Or should we never agree to edit a dissertation if we do not know the student or advisor personally?

A fourth ethical gray area, and the one that perplexes me the most, is the student-advisor conflict. I have been approached twice by students who asked for my help as an editor primarily because of serious conflicts they have had with their advisors. Although they had completed their thesis research, they were not getting the help they needed to finish and graduate. The unfortunate reality is that student-advisor conflicts are common and create an ethical quandary for the editor.

Based on the many comments sent to the listserve and to me directly, I assem-

bled the following set of recommendations regarding the editing of theses:

**1. Require full disclosure of your work.** Ask that your work be acknowledged in writing in the thesis, and insist that the thesis advisor be informed of your work. Thomas Gegeny suggested in a message to the listserve that it may be advisable to have an actual written contract signed by both the student and advisor. In ideal situations, the student's advisor may pay for the edit.

**2. Make firm arrangements regarding payment.** The editor should have the full contact information of the thesis advisor and, if applicable, the future postdoctoral advisor as well. If students know that you may contact their advisors, they will be unlikely to shortchange you.

Ann Morcos suggests:

It is best to charge by the hour because you have no way of knowing how bad (or good) a dissertation is until you get into it. If you charge a flat fee and the dissertation is really bad, you may end up making only \$5.00 an hour if it takes you a very long time and depending on the flat fee you quoted.

**3. Define the level of editing to be applied.** Make sure you and the student have a clear set of expectations regarding the depth of editing to be done. Avoid substantive editing, unless specifically mandated by the student's advisor.

**4. Treat the student's work respectful-**



ly. Sylvia van Roosmalen suggests that it is very important to treat the student's work with respect, no matter how it is written. The dissertation is the student's "baby". She suggests that editors give student writers as much explanation as possible for changes and give them choices of how changes should be made.

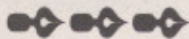
**5. Strive to be an instructor.** Claudette Upton wrote:

Perhaps if editors were hired to work WITH students, helping them to develop the necessary skills, rather than ON the manuscript, the ethical picture would be somewhat less murky.

Although adding instructive comments may add a few hours to the job, the student will get long-term benefit from the effort.

This list is by no means intended to be definitive or complete, but merely a starting point for thinking about this topic. On the balance, most BELS editors seem to feel that it is ethical to edit graduate dissertations, provided the arrangement is fully disclosed and avoids significant substantive editing.

✧ Jennifer Macke ✧



### *I Would Prefer Not to Do Some Things Again*

When I first started freelancing full time, I felt that I had to take every writing and editing job that came my way. Actually, I was afraid NOT to take every writing and editing job that came my way. But now that I have 1 and 1/2 successful years under my belt, I feel comfortable turning down jobs that don't appeal to me for whatever reason. But had I not taken every job in the past, I would not be able to share this experience with you.

Oddly, I had the same experience twice. I was hired by a highly respected journal to attend a conference and write a news article based on one of the conference ses-



sions. The article was to be 800 words, and I would be paid \$XXX. I wrote the 800-word article and turned it in by the deadline. The editorial board reviewed the article. The board decided that I should delete a paragraph making reference to a particular state and include material about a different state. I did this. The article was still 800 words. In the meantime, the editor sent the article back and forth to me with various edits that she reversed herself on with the next edit and then put back in on subsequent edits. Finally, she said the editorial board had decided that the information about the first state should be added back into the article. I asked if the information about the second state should be deleted. She said no. I brought to her attention the fact that the article would then be 1000 words, not 800, and was I going to be paid for turning in a 1000-word article. She said no. I couldn't help but feel that either they had played a game with me or that they were very disorganized and really didn't know what they were doing, which was hard to believe considering the reputation of this journal.

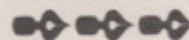
The second incident happened at another journal owned by a large publishing company that also had online versions of the 15 or so journals they published. I was hired to write a 1600 to 1800

word article that would be the feature story, for \$XXX. I wrote 1800 words and turned it in by the deadline. The editor said the article was good, but could I just expand a bit here and there. Well, what he wanted was a lot more than "a bit here and there". I told him that if I added all the additional information he wanted the article would be 3000 words and would I be paid for turning in a 3000-word article? He said no. I continued with the piece because I felt that the subject matter was important, but I couldn't help feeling that I had been had. I had written another article for this same journal earlier and had not had this experience. However, that article was posted on the Web site of a sister publication, but I was not paid for my article being published a second time.

Is the ploy the editors at both of these journals used common practice among journals? Perhaps it is called "mislead the writer" or "I know a way to get writing for cheap".

So what is my solution? Well, obviously, I would never accept work from either of these journals again. But, for my future writing jobs, I will write into the contract that I must be paid based on the final word count of the article after all the editors' required changes have been included, not the beginning word count requested.

Ann Morcos





## **BELS 10th Annual Meeting Itinerary Washington, DC, May 5-8, 2001 Events**

### **Saturday, May 5**

**Certification Examination**

Marriott at the Metro Center, 1-4 PM

**BELS Executive Council Meeting**

President's Suite, Grand Hyatt, 5 PM (informal)

### **Sunday, May 6**

**BELS Annual Meeting (\$50/person)**

THE BIG EVENT! Please join us for this special evening to wish BELS a happy 10th birthday. Thanks to Norman Grossblatt, we will dine in the fabulous Great Hall of the National Academy of Sciences. Dress is semiformal, so please plan accordingly. A fixed menu will be served, but we will notify the caterer if you have any specific dietary needs for health or religious reasons (please indicate on your registration form). We will meet in the lobby of the Grand Hyatt at 7 PM *sharp* for bus transportation (sponsored by BELS) to the National Academy of Sciences.

**BELS Hospitality Room**

President's Suite, Grand Hyatt, 9:00 AM-4:30 PM

Drop by to meet other BELS members and talk to other people attending the CSE meeting about our certification testing program. Brochures on our examinations will be available, and use of the BELS Web site will be demonstrated on a laptop. Light refreshments will be available. *If you can give 2 hours of your time to serve as a host, please let us know on the registration forms when you are available.*

### **Monday, May 7**

**Proctors' Meeting**

President's Suite, Grand Hyatt, 7:30 AM

Committee Chair: Kim Berman, Registrar: Leslie Neistadt

**BELS Diplomate Examination Development Committee**

President's Suite, Grand Hyatt, 3:30-5:00 PM

Committee Chair: Norman Grossblatt

**BELS Certification Examination Development Committee**

President's Suite, Grand Hyatt, 6-7 PM

Committee Chair: Karen Phillips

### **Tuesday, May 8**

**BELS Annual Executive Council Meeting**

President's Suite, Grand Hyatt, 5 PM

**If you have not received your meeting packet from BELS by April 6, call or E-mail Susan Aiello (908.284.2144; jabsea@earthlink.net).**



***BELS 10th Annual Meeting Itinerary  
Washington, DC, May 5-8, 2001  
Useful Information***

## **HOTELS**

*Grand Hyatt Washington (cite of the CSE annual meeting)*

1000 H Street NW

Telephone: 202.582.1234 or 800.233.1234

Fax: 202.637.4781

Rate: \$195/night (single), \$220/night(double) for reservations made before April 13, 2001.

The following less expensive hotels are within 7 blocks of the Grand Hyatt:

*Best Western Capitol Hill, 724 3rd Street, NW, 202.842.4466*

*Red Roof Inn, 500 H St NW, 202.289.5959*

*Center City Hotel, 1201 13th St. NW, 202.682.5300*

*Residence Inn, 1199 Vermont Ave NW (no telephone number; small suites)*

Note: A 14.5% tax applies to ALL hotel rooms in Washington, DC.



## **TRANSPORTATION**

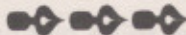
From *Baltimore Washington International Airport (BWI)*, a taxi to Washington, DC is approximately \$55 each way. A shuttle runs every half hour from BWI to DC and costs \$8.75 roundtrip. A shuttle bus service also runs and costs \$21 each way or \$35.00 roundtrip. Traveling from BWI to DC takes about 30 minutes.

From *Dulles Airport*, take the Washington Flyer (details below) or a taxi, which costs about \$43 each way.

From *Reagan National*, take the Metro (the Blue Line to Metro Center), a taxi (about \$13), or the Washington Flyer (see below).

The Washington Flyer is a shuttle available at Reagan National and Dulles Airports. The approximate cost of a 1-way trip from Reagan National is \$8 and from Dulles is \$16. Roundtrip tickets are also available. The Washington Flyer may be picked up curbside at both airports and departs regularly (pending full vans) at 24 minutes and 54 minutes past the hour M-F beginning at 5:54 AM and ending at 8:54 PM. On weekends, it departs hourly from 5:54 AM until 1:24 PM, when it begins departing every half hour.

 Susan Aiello 





*Extra*

## **Special Election For President**

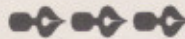
**F**lo Witte was elected last year to serve first as President-Elect of BELS for 1 year, then as President for 2 years, and finally as Immediate President for 1 year. As most of you know by now, Flo has had to step down because of competing demands on her travel time that have arisen with her new position in the dean's office at the University of Kentucky. Her new position will direct her attention more toward the education of authors, and she expects that she will be doing much less actual editing than in the recent past. Unfortunately for us, she is also unlikely to be coming to CSE or BELS meetings in the future, so her friends in BELS will have to find her at AMWA meetings instead. We are very sorry to lose her leadership, but we all wish her the very best in the new direction her career is taking.

In accordance with section 4.5 of the BELS Bylaws, we are therefore holding a special election to fill the vacancy left by Flo's resignation. The bad news about her resignation was followed quickly by good news: This year's nominating committee (Norman Grossblatt, chair; Bobbie Reitt, and Flo Witte) nominated Shirley Peterson to serve the remaining weeks of the office of President-Elect and then to complete the full terms of the offices of President and Immediate Past President.

Shirley brings to this job a long history of service to the organization. She was among those brave enough to take the test when just the survival of the certification idea was still a question and widespread acceptance was still a few years away. She served first as the assistant treasurer, processing members' dues and payments of candidates' fees, and she later took on the very important job of administering the tests. As registrar, she has arranged for test sites, recruited proctors and other members to develop proctor training, and handled the applications and registrations of candidates. As a result of having served in these two offices, Shirley has probably dealt with nearly all BELS members, and she certainly knows the inner workings of the organization.

Shirley is now working with the current president, Bobbie Reitt, to plan BELS meetings at CSE in May and the work of the Board for the coming 2 years. BELS enters its second decade under the direction of an energetic and highly committed member, and we are most fortunate.

~Bobbie Reitt~





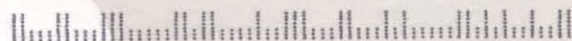
# BELS Examination Schedule

Date	City & Association	Registration Deadline
<b>2001</b>		
May 5, 2001	Washington, DC, CSE	April 21
September 15, 2001	Chicago, IL	September 1
October 23, 2001	Norfolk, VA, AMWA	October 9
<b>2002</b>		
March 23, 2002	Memphis, TN	March 9
March 23, 2002	Princeton, NJ	March 9
May 4, 2002	San Diego, CA, CSE	April 20
October 29, 2002	San Diego, CA, AMWA	October 15
<b>2003</b>		
May 3, 2003	Pittsburgh, PA, CSE	April 19
June 8, 2003	Bath, England, EASE	May 25
October-November 2003	TBA, AMWA	TBA

For more information, write to Registrar, BELS, PO Box 8133, Radnor, PA 19087-8133

BELS Letter

3723 Lilac Lane  
Metairie, LA 70001-1727





**BELS ELECTION BALLOT 2001**  
**(For use if you have not received the meeting packet from BELS.)**

**SPECIAL ELECTION**

Flo Witte, who was elected last year to serve as President-Elect for one year, followed by terms as President and Immediate Past President, has had to step down because of new career demands.

In accordance with section 4.5 of the BELS Bylaws, we are therefore holding a special election to fill the vacancy left by her resignation. This year's nominating committee (Norman Grossblatt [chair], Bobbie Reitt, and Flo Witte) has nominated **Shirley Peterson** to serve the remaining weeks of the office of President-Elect and then to complete the full terms of the offices of President and Immediate Past President.

*Please indicate your vote below:*

**SHIRLEY PETERSON**

Write-in candidate: \_\_\_\_\_

Write-in votes can be accepted only if the BELS candidate has agreed to serve if elected.

**REGULAR ELECTION**

Of the four elected offices on the BELS Executive Council (President, President-Elect or Immediate Past President, Secretary, and Treasurer), only the office of Secretary is up for election this year. The nominating committee (see above) has nominated **Mary Ann Schmidt** to serve a second consecutive term in this position.

*Please indicate your vote below:*

**MARY ANN SCHMIDT**

Write-in candidate: \_\_\_\_\_

Write-in votes can be accepted only if the BELS candidate has agreed to serve if elected.

**VOTING INSTRUCTIONS**

Please mark your votes and submit your ballot, sealed in an envelope. You may enclose it with your annual meeting registration in a larger envelope, or mail the smaller ballot separately to:

Susan Aiello, DVM, ELS  
WordsWorld Communications  
117 Klinesville Road  
Flemington, NJ 08822

Results of the election will be announced formally at the annual meeting on May 6, 2001 in Washington, D.C.



**BELS ANNUAL MEETING REGISTRATION FORM**  
**WASHINGTON, DC, MAY 5-8, 2001**  
(For use if you have not received the meeting packet from BELS.)

**BELS ANNUAL MEETING**

May 6 at the National Academy of Sciences  
Cost: \$50.00

- I will attend.  
 I would also like to register a guest.

Payment must be received in advance. Please return your check (in U.S. dollars) payable to BELS along with this form. (Non-U.S. members ONLY may pay by VISA or Master Card.)

Card number: \_\_\_\_\_ Exp: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

**BELS HOSPITALITY ROOM**

May 6 at the President's Suite at the Grand Hyatt, 9:a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

- I can help out as a Hospitality Room "host" for a few hours. Please indicate hours available: \_\_\_\_\_.

Schedules will be coordinated after the volunteer list has been compiled so that you do not miss any CSE activities you wish to attend.

**Please return this form by April 20 to:**

Susan Aiello, DVM, ELS  
WordsWorld Communications  
117 Klinesville Road  
Flemington, NJ 08822

Telephone: 908-284-2144  
FAX: 908-284-XXXX  
E-mail: jabsea@earthlink.net