

Proper Treatment of Degrees, Licenses and Credentials

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There is variability and inconsistency within the NATA concerning the use of abbreviations to signify degrees, licenses and credentials.

Some people are using credentials improperly, probably because of naiveté, which reflects badly on the individual and the profession. Other differences are a matter of personal preference.

The question of proper presentation of credentials, degrees and licenses first arose when the *Journal of Athletic Training* needed a policy for handling the issue with authors. At the time, Knight was editor of the *Journal* and was on the American College of Sports Medicine's Credentials Committee, charged with recommending how the ACSM's credential should be written.

Drawing on that experience and on accepted usage in academia, we offer the following guidelines in the hope of eliminating some ambiguity concerning how to properly treat degrees, licenses and credentials.

First, the differences in these terms must be explained.

"Degree" has many meanings and stems from a multitude of languages. Its use in education originated in Old French and means a step or rank. It is a rank given by a college or university to a student who has completed a required course of study or to a distinguished person as an honor.

"License" is from the Latin word *licentia*, meaning "to be permitted." A license signifies that permission has been granted by a competent authority (usually a state government) to engage in a business or occupation or in an activity that otherwise is unlawful.

"Credential" comes from the Latin word *credere*, which means "to believe or put trust in." It often is used as a noun to refer to that which gives credit, that which entitles to credit, confidence, etc. It is a letter or certificate given to a person to show that he has a right to confidence or to the exercise of a certain position or authority. Credential is from the same

root as "credible," which means one is believable, entitled to belief or trust, trustworthy, reliable. The term is used by a credentialing agency (such as the NATA BOC) to indicate that the holder of the credential has passed a course of study and/or examination indicating they have met established standards of knowledge and skill.

Degrees, licenses and credentials are used extensively in the medical profession to help identify a person's training and authority. The common practice is to abbreviate them following your name. Do you indicate all degrees and credentials you have earned? Do you use them with or without periods? Following are recommendations for using credentials.

Academic degrees should be listed first, and licenses then should be written before credentials. For example, write MS, ATC, not ATC, MS. Some people are proud of their profession and want to promote it by listing its credential first. Doing so has the opposite effect among those who understand protocol, however, because it signifies that the person has not been properly educated.

Use only the highest academic degree, unless they are in totally different fields. For instance, a person with a bachelor's in health or physical education who obtains a master's in physical education should not use MS, BS. One who has earned an MS in clinical psychology and a PhD in epidemiology, however, could use both initials, PhD, MS. The higher degree should always be first.

ABD is not an academic degree, license or credential and should not be used. Some graduate schools classify students who have completed all doctoral degree requirements except the dissertation as ABD: All But Dissertation. Graduate schools also classify students as full-time or part-time students. Would anyone not think it silly if a person signed a letter "Joseph Brown, FTS?"

Abbreviate degrees, licenses and credentials without the periods (*AMA Manual of Style*, section 11.1), unless specified otherwise by the granting agency.

List degrees first, licenses next and credentials last: Jane Snow, PhD, LAT, ATC. Many athletic trainers who are both licensed and certified have used ATC/L or LATC. The former, however, implies that certification is more important than licensure, which is not the case. Licensure provides a legal right to practice, while certification simply states that a professional body has deemed that your knowledge and skills have exceeded a minimal standard.

In addition, appending the ATC credential by /L is not correct. Many states have inappropriately allowed LAT to

align their license to the ATC, but this modifies a registered mark. If both the license and credential are used, they should be listed separately.

If more than one credential is used, list them in the order of difficulty of obtaining them. For instance, ATC should be written before EMT, because the ATC credential requires a college degree and two to three years of clinical experience whereas the EMT certification has no degree requirement and less than 200 clock hours of course work and clinical experience combined.

When credentials are of similar difficulty, list them in chronological order. This would be the case for someone with both PT and ATC credentials, because both require a degree and have similar requirements for number of courses and

hours of clinical experience.

Proper treatment of degrees, licenses and credentials is important to our credibility as individuals and as a profession. Take this opportunity to review the guidelines and make sure all business cards, letterhead and other items listing your name and background are correct. ■■

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