

Merit Badge Group Instruction Guide

A Guide for Units, Districts, and Councils



Introduction

This document is designed to help Scouting volunteers and approved community organizations apply the characteristics of a high-quality merit badge program when planning any merit badge event where group instruction will take place. A careful reading of section 7 of the *Guide to Advancement*, No. 33088, will provide further information and will support compliance with BSA merit badge policies and safety guidelines. Additional resources, such as information on how to be an effective merit badge counselor, are available online at www.scouting.org/advancement, and through local district and council advancement committees.

Per topic 7.0.3.2 of the *Guide to Advancement*, it is acceptable to provide group instruction for merit badges, but “group instruction should be focused on those scenarios where the benefits are compelling.” The term “group” is left open-ended in the *Guide to Advancement*, as merit badges, resources, circumstances, and counselor experience can lend themselves to a wide range of instructional scenarios. In some cases, a group may be as small as three or four Scouts, while in other cases, groups may be larger. Regardless of group size, each Scout must still “actually and personally” fulfill each requirement. This guidance makes clear that the focus must be on the quality of each Scout’s counseling experience, and not on the number of Scouts who can take a class or complete a badge.

In instances where group instruction is necessary or attractive as part of the learning process, care must be taken to ensure that each Scout still receives personal counseling to support his individual efforts. Simply taking notes, completing a workbook, or listening during a group instruction session does not constitute completing a requirement. To award merit badges in such a manner takes away from the Scout’s opportunity for learning and personal growth as he explores the merit badge topic.

It is important to note that outside organizations and businesses are not allowed to present classes, events, or similar activities that are largely for the purpose of offering merit badges—even if no fee is involved—without approval from the local council. See the *Guide to Advancement*, topic 7.0.4.9, for details.

Planning a Merit Badge Event

Below are several points that event organizers should consider carefully while planning a high-quality merit badge event. Volunteers are encouraged to think critically about each topic, and consider which approach would provide the highest quality of experience to the Scouts.

- **Event Planning.** Carefully consider the purpose of the event, which merit badges will be offered, and whether they lend themselves to group instruction. Assess the benefits for Scouts of offering selected badges at the event instead of through direct counseling. Factors to consider in determining which badges to offer may include strong interest from the Scouts in a subject area, access to counselors who may otherwise be difficult to source, availability of special resources that enhance the learning experience, or simply badges needed by Scouts to continue their Scouting journey.
- **Facilities and Materials.** Assess what facilities, special materials, or resources are needed and available to support instruction of the selected badges. Understand how many Scouts the facilities and resources can appropriately support for each badge.
- **Securing Experienced Counselors.** Group instruction is best done by experienced counselors who are comfortable in such a setting. Experience is valuable in determining which requirements to address, estimating how much time is required for instruction, and managing individual testing. **The only persons authorized to sign off on a merit badge are adult members of the BSA who are registered as merit badge counselors (registration code 42), current in Youth Protection training, and approved for that specific badge.** Additional experts or support volunteers may serve as instructors under the direction of the merit badge counselor to facilitate greater personal attention to each Scout, if needed. Offering the national BSA advancement education presentation, “The Essentials of Merit Badge Counseling,” to all volunteers staffing the event is highly recommended before group merit badge functions. See www.scouting.org/advancement.

- **Council Approval and Costs.** Local council advancement committees have the responsibility to review plans and budgets to ensure compliance with local and national policies before authorizing an event to be held within the council's jurisdiction. Topic 7.0.4.10 of the *Guide to Advancement* states that local councils and districts may also include in the fee a reasonable contribution to the council's actual overhead and administrative costs resulting from the event. However, the events themselves—whether Scouting- or community-sponsored—should not be fundraisers.
- **Registration.** Web-based registration may be convenient to use, but care must be taken to ensure that personal information concerning a youth is well protected. Before a Web-based registration application is used, the local Scout executive should review the licensing agreement and grant approval after reasonably ensuring the protection of personal identification data.
- **Setting Expectations in Advance.** Merit badges are intended to encourage the Scout's own initiative in selecting topics to pursue as he advances. Merit badge events may provide a means to support those interests through access to counselors and resources, but they do not guarantee the badge can be completed on-site. For each merit badge, consult with the selected counselors to determine which requirements should be completed before, during, or after the event. **For many badges—perhaps even most of them—partial completion is not only acceptable but expected from a merit badge event.** Communicate these expectations to participants, parents, counselors, and leaders prior to registration, and provide a means for the Scouts electing to finish the badge to contact counselors after the event as they complete additional requirements.
- **Smaller Groups Are Preferred.** Class sizes should be set appropriately to ensure each Scout receives high-quality, personal instruction and benefits from the counselor's unique knowledge. This suggests that **most classes should be small**—perhaps no larger than a patrol in size. For larger groups, qualified instructors assigned to smaller groups should assist the merit badge counselor in order to ensure Scouts receive individual attention. Instructors should be knowledgeable about the merit badge subject, but they do not necessarily need to be registered as merit badge counselors.
- **Differentiate Between Instruction and Completing Requirements.** Some events present opportunities for Scouts to learn skills without being able to actually and personally demonstrate or discuss a requirement. In these cases, the requirement must not be marked as completed. Clarify this before the event, and provide instructions for Scouts to complete the requirements with a properly registered merit badge counselor after the event.
- **Make Certain Each Scout Personally Completes Each Requirement.** Group instruction does not mean group testing. **Each Scout must complete each requirement as written, without exception.** For example, if the requirement says to discuss or demonstrate, then each Scout must individually discuss or demonstrate whatever is required. It is not acceptable for the Scout to listen to someone else discuss or demonstrate the subject. There are no exceptions due to lack of facilities, materials, appropriate weather, or time. "Group tasks" do not fulfill requirements except in those cases where a group is needed to perform a specific task as stated in the requirement. While Scouts are welcome and encouraged to explore topics beyond the merit badge requirements, the requirements as written are the only factors to be evaluated in determining whether to award the badge.
- **Notes and Worksheets.** At the counselor's discretion, Scouts may use worksheets for note-taking, but shall not be required to use them. Worksheets may be used by a Scout to refresh his memory while being tested for specific requirements. However, **completing a worksheet does not constitute completing a requirement.**
- **Record Keeping.** A signed Application for Merit Badge, No. 34124, commonly known as a "blue card," is provided to a Scout before the event by his Scoutmaster, per the process described in topics 7.0.0.2 and 7.0.0.3 of the *Guide to Advancement*. The Application for Merit Badge is the only BSA-recognized record of a Scout's work toward completing a merit badge.
- **Event Guide.** Organizers should publish an event guide at the time that registration is opened. Information should include classes offered, prerequisites for the classes, requirements that will NOT be covered, items needed or supplied by the participant, fees to cover the event, and unique fees for specific merit badges.

Evaluating the Event

After the event, use feedback to identify opportunities for improvement.

- Collect feedback from the Scouts about their satisfaction with the event and the quality of their experiences. Did they have enough time to learn the material presented? Do they understand how to follow up on partial completions?
- Speak to the merit badge counselors about their experience. Do they believe the event was effective? What changes would they recommend to improve the quality of instruction for the Scouts?
- Ask unit leaders to provide their thoughts on the quality of the event. Do they believe the Scouts received quality instruction? Are they satisfied that each Scout completed the requirements signed off on the blue cards? Did the event help them in supporting a quality Scouting program in their unit?
- It is recommended that the form Reporting Merit Badge Counseling Concerns, *Guide to Advancement*, topic 11.1.0.0, be distributed to unit volunteers, along with advancement committee contact information. Unit leaders can use the form to report any concerns about merit badge instruction, whether at the event, through individual counseling, at summer camp, or through any other avenue by which Scouts pursue merit badges.

The event organizers should use this feedback as well as their personal observations to discuss subjects such as the following:

- What worked? What didn't work?
- Which merit badges should be offered in the future? Which badges should not be offered?
- Were the class sizes appropriate for each badge? Were prerequisites well defined in advance?
- Were the merit badge counselors and instructors well prepared? Did they accomplish the expected outcomes for each badge offered?
- Did each Scout perform the requirements that were signed off? Were there any concerns about the quality of work or Scouts receiving credit for work they did not personally complete?
- Were follow-up instructions for partial completions provided to participants, and were the instructions reasonable for completing the badges if Scouts elect to do so?
- How can council and district advancement committees better assist in planning, developing, and implementing the merit badge program at future events?

Again, the foremost concern is with the quality of the experience for each individual Scout. An event that provides access to excellent instruction and plenty of personal learning should be considered a success, even if few merit badges are completed; Scouts can choose to follow up after the event to work on unfinished requirements. However, the event itself might just be the inspiration needed for a Scout to take that first step toward a new skill, hobby, lifelong interest, or even a career.

The *Guide to Advancement* and other educational materials may be viewed online or downloaded at www.scouting.org/advancement.

