

# Best Practices for Approving Merit Badge Counselors

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The 130 or so merit badges available to Scouts BSA members allow them to explore a wide range of topics, customize their advancement according to their interests and abilities, and interact with adult role models with expertise and enthusiasm for each topic. Recruiting and approving merit badge counselors is thus an important responsibility, which formally rests with the council advancement committee: “Council advancement committees have the responsibility to implement an approval procedure that assures merit badge counselors have the necessary skills and education to offer quality experiences in the badges they counsel.” (GTA 7.0.1.4).

Advice and policies for such approvals are detailed in the current *Guide To Advancement*, and other BSA publications offer additional insights and ideas. The following notes highlight that guidance, and offer ideas and considerations for fulfilling this important function.

## **Counselor Approval Overview**

Councils must establish a two-step process, first for approving Scouting volunteers for the merit badge counselor position, and then approving them for individual badges based on their expertise and experience. Large councils may have over 1,000 merit badge counselors on their rolls, with additions and deletions occurring through the year as Scouters move, resign, etc. While council staff manage background checks and approval of all volunteers, council or district level advancement volunteers can be used to review the subject matter expertise of potential merit badge counselors. These advancement volunteers can also recruit additional volunteers for specific subject areas.

For their part, each merit badge counselor agrees to follow the requirements of the merit badge, making no additions or deletions, and ensuring that each Scout “actually and personally” completed each requirement (GTA 7.0.3.2).



## **Approval Policies**

### **Approving Counselors - General**

[BSA Merit Badge Counselor Information](#) (Form 34405) is one way of capturing information about potential counselors. This form offers an 80-character field to “list qualification(s) that... could include college degrees, formal training, certifications, positions held, and specific life experiences.” Some councils may encourage volunteers to provide more information for use by the evaluators, especially when specific certifications are required.

### **Approving Counselors for Specific Badges**

Local councils may require special qualifications and certifications for certain merit badges, in addition to those required by BSA (see below). These qualifications provide counselors with credibility because Scouts perceive them to be role models. A well-qualified merit badge counselor can enhance a youth’s interest and understanding through effective communication and sharing a true passion, which leads to a better understanding of the subject, more productive discussions, and real learning. A bond of mutual respect often develops when a Scout feels confident to offer their thoughts and opinions through meaningful conversations with a merit badge counselor. Thus, a Scout grows in social skills and self-reliance as a result of interacting with a qualified adult.

*GTA* topic 7.0.1.1 lists specific certifications that are required by adults supervising specific merit badge activities. A Council may choose to require the counselors for those badges to hold those certifications themselves, and to provide proof with their application, but procedures to manage verification must be implemented. Alternatively, counselors with interest but lacking certification could be approved to provide Scouting supervision and merit badge approvals while working with certified experts who provide actual instruction. For example, certified staff at a climbing gym could be used to instruct and supervise the appropriate Climbing merit badge activities, while an approved climbing merit badge counselor would have to verify completion and sign the blue card.

There are numerous different badges and a wide variety of life experiences that might prepare a volunteer to provide excellent counseling experiences. Not all Nuclear Science merit badge counselors will be MIT or Cal Tech faculty members – in fact, a high school science teacher might be better prepared to engage and motivate a middle or high school student on that subject. Those who approve merit badge counselors will need to make reasoned judgments and consider the popularity and subject matter of each badge. For example, almost any experienced parent will have life experiences that could be of value for the Eagle-required Family Life merit badge. In addition, most units will have existing leaders who can step up as counselors for the Camping and Cooking merit badges, both of which are central to the unit’s activities. On the other hand, seeking counselors for the Electricity, Forestry, or Engineering merit badges might require seek-

ing out non-unit volunteers with professional qualifications and experiences for these or other more unusual topics. In such cases, professional societies, trade associations, service clubs, local companies, and hobby groups can be excellent sources of expert volunteers and recruits.

### **Approving Number of Merit Badges per Individual Counselor**

The Merit Badge Counselor Information form has spaces for only 8 merit badge options, which may create confusion. Some councils place a limit on the number of merit badges that an individual is allowed to counsel. The *GTA* (topic 7.0.1.4) specifically permits councils to adopt such policies “as long as Scouts’ choices, especially in small or remote units, are not so limited as to serve as a barrier to advancement.” What factors should be considered in establishing a limit, if any, beyond the concern about limiting choices? One reason could be to prevent a single volunteer from counseling an inappropriately large number of badges for one individual or small group of Scouts, thus depriving them of the opportunity to work with a variety of adults. Fortunately, this does not occur often, and it is more likely that a volunteer signing up to counsel a large number of badges is new to the program and does so out of an overabundance of enthusiasm, which can be tempered by some guidance and a positive discussion about balancing their volunteer time. Having a council choose to have a policy restricting the number of badges that one merit badge counselor can counsel allows the merit badge counselor application reviewer some support in redirecting these volunteers to focus on their top interests and the needs of their unit. In this regard, the job of approving counselors is parallel to that of Scout leaders highlighted in F. Darnall Daley, Jr.’s [Guardian at the Gate](#): “The treasure is not behind the gate but in front of it...Your duty is not to prevent boys from passing through but to make sure as many boys as possible do pass through.” A volunteer applying to be a merit badge counselor is a similar treasure, and the approver’s role is to guide the volunteer to provide the best possible experience for the Scouts they counsel. A request for a large number of badges is an indication to attend more closely to the application and reach out for coaching and understanding.





## BSA RESOURCES ON APPROVING MERIT BADGE COUNSELORS

- [A Guide for Merit Badge Counseling](#), No. 512-065
- [Merit Badge Counselor Information](#), No. 34405
- [Merit Badge Group Instruction Guide](#), No. 512-066
- [Merit Badge List](#)
- [Reporting Merit Badge Counseling Concerns](#), No. 512-800

## [GUIDE TO ADVANCEMENT](#) REFERENCES (GTA 2021, 2022 PRINTING)

### 7.0.0.3 The Scout, the Unit Leader, and the Merit Badge Counselor

Universal to all the merit badges, however, are the methods of advancement, personal growth, and adult association.

The National Council does not limit the number of merit badges a youth may earn from one counselor, though a unit leader is permitted to do so as long as the same limit applies to all Scouts in the unit. Ideally, Scouts should work with a variety of adults. In so doing, they may gain insight and learn from examples offered by a variety of perspectives and approaches to life.

Counselors may work with and pass any member, including their own children, wards, or relatives. Nevertheless, we often teach young people the importance of broadening their horizons. Scouts meeting with counselors beyond their families and beyond even their own units are doing that. They will benefit from the perspectives of many “teachers” and will learn more as a result. They should be encouraged to reach out.

### 7.0.1.1 Supervisory Qualifications and Certifications

Several badges involve activities for which the Boy Scouts of America has implemented strategies to improve safety, enhance the Scouts’ experiences, and manage risk. These activities often require supervision with specialized qualifications and certifications. Merit badge counselors who do not meet the specific requirements may use the services of helpers who do. Additional details can be found in the presentation listed below, and also in the *Guide to Safe Scouting* and the merit badge pamphlets.

### 7.0.1.4 Approving Badges To Be Counseled

Council advancement committees have the responsibility to implement an approval procedure that assures merit badge counselors have the necessary skills and education to offer quality experiences in the badges they counsel. The intent is for Scouts to learn from those with an appropriate level of expertise.



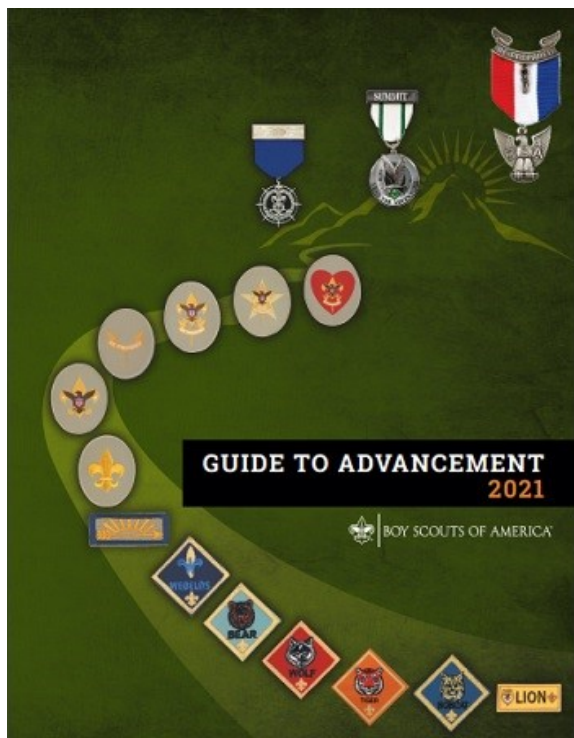
## DOWNLOADABLE ADVANCEMENT EDUCATIONAL PRESENTATIONS

### The Merit Badge Program

This presentation, for unit leaders, merit badge counselors, advancement administrators, and parents, addresses the merit badge program and its benefits to Scouting. It includes the procedures for earning merit badges, merit badge counselor qualifications, the process of counseling, necessary counselor certifications, and limitations, and administration of the merit badge counselor program. It is intended as an instructor-led presentation to counselors of any experience level and takes 45 to 60 minutes; up to an hour and a half with questions and answers. [Download PowerPoint Presentation](#)

### The Essentials of Merit Badge Counseling

This PowerPoint presentation with speaker notes covers the required procedures for merit badge counseling, clarifies the role of counselors in the BSA advancement program, and discusses the appropriate approaches to use in working with Scouts. It is intended as an instructor-led presentation to counselors of any experience level and takes 60 to 90 minutes to complete. [Download PowerPoint Presentation](#)



[Guide To Advancement](#)



# Merit Badges

## Merit Badge Quiz—Test Yourself Today

"How well do you know your merit badge facts from myths? Take the following 12- question quiz and see just how well-informed you are. When you're done, feel free to use it as an activity at a district round table or other Scouter activity." Answers are found on the following page.

TRUE or FALSE:

1. T F A merit badge counselor may be a counselor for only up to six merit badges.
2. T F A merit badge counselor may not coach their child or close relative (i.e, niece or nephew) unless they are part of a group of Scouts all working on the same merit badge.
3. T F A merit badge counselor who works only with a single unit needs only the unit committee's approval before being approved by the Scout Executive.
4. T F Persons serving as merit badge counselors must be registered as a merit badge counselor with the Boy Scouts of America.
5. T F A Scout may earn no more than five merit badges from the same merit badge counselor.
6. T F Once a Scouter is approved as a merit badge counselor, they are approved for life and never have to be reapproved.
7. T F A Scout must complete all the requirements for a merit badge within 12 months or they must start over.
8. T F A merit badge counselor may require the Scout to work beyond the specific requirements of the merit badge so the Scout may discover more about the subject and continue the learning process.
9. T F Due to the BSA policies related to Youth Protection and two-deep leadership, a merit badge counselor must have another adult present during all merit badge counseling sessions.
10. T F If the weather, locale, or some other condition makes meeting all of the conditions of the merit badge requirements impractical, the merit badge counselor may substitute requirements for those stated for the merit badge.
11. T F Merit badge counselors must be at least 18 years old.
12. T F If the requirements for a merit badge differ between the merit badge pamphlet and the current edition of *Scouts BSA Requirements*, the requirements in the *Scouts BSA Requirements* book supersede all others.

## Merit Badge Quiz Answers

1. **False.** A counselor may be approved for as many badges as he or she is qualified to offer. Note that the National Council does not limit the number of merit badges an individual may be approved to counsel. It is permissible, however, for councils to do so—as long as Scouts’ choices, especially in small or remote units, are not so limited as to serve as a barrier to advancement. (*Guide to Advancement* (GTA) 7.0.1.4)
2. **False.** Counselors may work with and pass any member, including their own children, wards, or relatives. Nevertheless, we often teach young people the importance of broadening their horizons. Scouts meeting with counselors beyond their families and beyond even their units are doing that. They will benefit from the perspectives of many “teachers” and will learn more as a result. They should be encouraged to reach out. (GTA Section 7.0.0.3)
3. **False.** Scoutmasters, or anyone else, wishing to counsel and sign off on merit badges must also qualify and register in the position of merit badge counselor and be approved for the badges they counsel according to council procedures. (GTA 7.0.1.4)
4. **True.** Even volunteers who serve in multiple positions must fill out another form and show registration as a merit badge counselor. (GTA 7.0.1.4)
5. **False.** The National Council does not limit the number of merit badges a youth may earn from one counselor, though a unit leader is permitted to do so as long as the same limit applies to all Scouts in the unit. Ideally, Scouts should work with a variety of adults. (GTA 7.0.0.3)
6. **False.** Counselor approvals are for one year only. The council advancement committee annually coordinates counselor reregistration. (GTA 7.0.1.5)
7. **False.** Partials have no expiration except the Scout’s 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. (GTA 7.0.3.3)
8. **False.** No additions or deletions are permitted. The requirements are to be completed exactly as written. However, a counselor may share additional information or resources in the hope of encouraging the Scout to challenge themselves. (GTA 7.0.4.7)
9. **\*True.** However, the parent or legal guardian of the Scout may serve as the second adult. This parent or legal guardian does not have to be a registered leader.
10. **False.** No additions or deletions are permitted. The requirements are to be completed exactly as written. (GTA 7.0.4.7)
11. **True.** (GTA 7.0.1.3)
12. **True.** The *Scouts BSA Requirements book* is revised annually and reflects any changes that have been made, whereas the merit badge pamphlets are not revised annually and may be outdated.

\*Please note that the *Guide To Safe Scouting* declares that the parent in this situation is not required to be a registered leader.