

Merit Badge Counselor Orientation

Guide for Merit Badge Counselors

The merit badge counselor is a key player in the Boy Scout advancement program. Whatever your area of expertise or interest—whether it is a special craft or hobby (basketry, leatherwork, coin collecting), a profession (veterinary medicine, aviation, engineering), or perhaps a life skill (cooking, personal management, communications)—as a merit badge counselor, you can play a vital role in stirring a young man's curiosity about that particular topic. By serving as a merit badge counselor, you offer your time, knowledge, and other resources so that Scouts can explore a topic of interest.

If you are not yet a merit badge counselor, it is easy to become a volunteer. First, you will need to register with the Boy Scouts of America. This entails completing and turning in an "Adult Application." A membership coordinator in your troop will submit the application to the council office for processing. (Every applicant is screened.)

Upon approval to serve as a volunteer, individuals are expected to complete BSA Youth Protection training within 90 days of assuming a leadership position. This training can be done through the BSA's Online Learning Center at www.myscouting.org. The Boy Scouts of America seeks to create a safe environment for young people and adult leaders to enjoy the program and related activities. BSA Youth Protection training helps preserve that environment.

Understanding the Scouting Program

The Scouting program emphasizes helping young men develop character, citizenship, and mental and physical fitness. Among the handful of methods used to build on these aims of Scouting are adult association, leadership development, and advancement. Besides parents and relatives, schoolteachers, religious leaders, and possibly coaches, most Scout-age youth don't have much contact with many other adults or professionals. A Scout's association with his merit badge counselors provides an excellent way for him to grow and gain confidence through exposure to quality adults who serve as positive role models and mentors to him. Meeting people from business and community leaders to trained specialists and enthusiastic hobbyists, a Scout can experience a chance for personal growth and a positive life-altering experience while in pursuit of a merit badge.

The Boy Scouts of America at a Glance

Since its founding in 1910, the Boy Scouts of America has maintained its purpose and mission to prepare youth to become responsible, participating citizens and leaders. Throughout the years, the Scout Oath and Law have served as the guiding light for BSA youth members. To help carry out its mission, the BSA relies on more than 300 local councils. These service centers operate autonomously, sort of like franchises. Every local council has its own support staff and operates under the guidance of a Scout executive. To more efficiently serve its members, the local council is divided into districts, which are managed by district executives. The district executive serves as the grassroots contact between the local council and its volunteers.

A Merit Badge Counselor Is ...

As a merit badge counselor, your mission is to join fun with learning. You are both a teacher and mentor to the Scout as he works on a merit badge and learns by doing. By presenting opportunities for growth via engaging activities like designing a Web page (Computers), performing an ollie and a wheelie (Snowboarding), or fabricating rope (Pioneering), you can pique a young man's interest in the merit badge subject. Just think: Your hands-on

involvement could inspire a Scout to develop a lifelong hobby, pursue a particular career, or become an independent, self-supporting adult.

A Scout first expresses an interest in a particular merit badge by letting his unit leader know. To get him started, the leader may give him a signed Application for Merit Badge (blue card) along with the name and telephone number of a district/council approved merit badge counselor. The Scout then contacts the merit badge counselor and makes an appointment. The merit badge counselor sets a date and time to meet with the Scout and his buddy, and may suggest the Scout bring the merit badge pamphlet along with the blue card.

Most local councils (including summer camps) use the Application for Merit Badge, or blue card, although it is not required. This tool just makes the recordkeeping easier for the Scout, the merit badge counselor, and the unit leader. At summer camp, a Scout may receive partial credit for completion of a merit badge on the blue card, which goes to the Scoutmaster at week's end. Back home, the Scout would need to contact a merit badge counselor for assistance with completing the rest of the requirements.

At the first meeting, the Scout and his merit badge counselor review and start working on the requirements. In some cases, the Scout may share with the merit badge counselor the work he has started or accomplished. As the merit badge counselor, you and the Scout work out a tentative schedule for completing the requirements. You should consider both short-term and long-term goals, keeping other obligations (school, Scouting, sports, and so on) in mind, and set dates, times, and a location for future meetings. The number of meetings will depend on the difficulty of the requirements and the preparation and ability of the Scout.

Your duty is to be satisfied that each Scout who comes to you meets all the requirements for the merit badge you are coaching. You do this by helping Scouts overcome the different hurdles of the requirements and making them aware of the deeper aspects of the subject through their learning experience. You may tell about your own experiences to help positively reinforce the subject matter. While you may guide and instruct a Scout on the subject matter, he must do the work himself.

The merit badge counselor assesses the Scout's knowledge to ensure he has completed all the required work—no more, and no less. You may not add to, delete from, or modify the merit badge requirements in any way, although certain considerations can be made for Scouts with disabilities.

As each requirement is completed, you will test the Scout individually, with his buddy present. If you are using a blue card, update this card as the Scout completes each requirement. When the young man has completed all the requirements, you sign off on the blue card and the Scout returns the completed card to his unit leader.

Summer Camp Merit Badge Counselors

The same qualifications and rules for merit badge counselors apply to council summer camp merit badge programs. All merit badge counselors must be at least 18 years of age. Camp staff members under age 18 may assist with instruction but cannot serve in the role of the merit badge counselor.

Helpful Hints

Here are some simple tips that every merit badge counselor should keep in mind.

- Make the Scout feel welcome and relaxed.
- Stimulate the Scout's interest by showing him something related to the merit badge subject, but don't overwhelm him; remember, he is probably a beginner.

- Carefully review each requirement, start with easy skills or questions, and encourage practice.
- Insist that the Scout do exactly what the requirements specify. Many of the requirements involve hands-on activities that call for a Scout to show or demonstrate; make; list; discuss; or collect, identify, and label—and he must do just that.
- Don't make the requirement more difficult—or any easier—than stated. A Scout may undertake more activities on his own initiative, but he cannot be pushed to do so.
- During testing, the Scout might need help in a particular area or with a certain skill, and may need to be retested later to ensure the requirement has been fulfilled.
- Encourage self-evaluation and self-reflection, and establish an atmosphere that encourages the Scout to ask for help.
- Take a genuine interest in the Scout's projects, and encourage completion.

Frequently Asked Questions

Many of the same questions frequently arise from merit badge counselors, especially those who are new to the program. Here are the answers to some of those FAQs.

Question: Must individuals who are serving as a merit badge counselor register as a merit badge counselor with the Boy Scouts of America?

Answer: Yes, an Adult Application must be completed for each position in which the individual wants to serve. The application allows only one position per form. For instance, an individual who wants to serve only as a merit badge counselor will need to complete only one application. However, a Scoutmaster or assistant Scoutmaster who wants to serve as a merit badge counselor must complete two applications—one for the Scoutmaster position and one for the counselor position.

Question: Once the adult leader application has been submitted, how long does the approval process take?

Answer: The process usually takes from four to six weeks.

Question: What is the minimum age requirement for merit badge counselors?

Answer: An individual must be at least 18 years of age to serve as a merit badge counselor.

Question: Once a volunteer is registered and approved as a merit badge counselor, is that registration for life?

Answer: Approvals for merit badge counselors and all other adult volunteer positions are valid for one year only and must be renewed annually. Some districts may allow counselors to opt for automatic renewal. In accepting that option, the counselor has taken on the responsibility to notify the council if any information relating to the counselor's original application has changed.

Question: Can a merit badge counselor who works only with a single unit obtain only unit committee approval?

Answer: With no exceptions, all merit badge counselors must be approved by the local council's advancement committee.

Question: How many merit badges can a merit badge counselor support?

Answer: Merit badge counselors may be approved for as many badges as they are qualified. However, the local council's approving body may impose a limitation based upon the needs of the local council and individual districts.

Question: Can merit badge counselors coach their own sons or close relatives (for instance, a nephew)?

Answer: Yes, but only if the young man is part of a group of Scouts who are all working on the same merit badge. Approved counselors may coach any Boy Scout who contacts them through the proper procedures.

Question: Does that mean group instruction is allowed?

Answer: A merit badge counselor may make a presentation to a group of Scouts on a merit badge subject. However, unless the merit badge requirements specifically allow for a group project, each Scout still must complete the requirements individually, and the Scout must meet with a merit badge counselor (and his buddy) to complete the requirements.

Question: How many merit badges can a Scout earn by working with any single merit badge counselor?

Answer: A Scout may earn as many merit badges from a counselor as the counselor is qualified and approved to counsel. Again, the spirit of the program is to expose the Scout to a wide circle of adults to help broaden his perspective.

Question: How much time does a Scout have to complete all the requirements for a merit badge?

Answer: There is no time limit as long as the Scout completes all the necessary requirements by the time he reaches age 18.

Question: Can a merit badge counselor require a Scout to work beyond the specific requirements of the merit badge in order to challenge the Scout and allow him to discover more about the subject?

Answer: In fairness to all Scouts, additions, deletions, or other modifications to the requirements are not permitted. The requirements are to be completed exactly as written. However, a merit badge counselor may share additional information and resources that the Scout could use on his own to learn more and challenge himself.

Question: What happens when the weather, locale, or some other circumstance makes meeting all of the conditions of the merit badge requirements impractical? Can substitute requirements be created for those stated?

Answer: No additions, deletions, or alterations are permitted. The requirements are to be completed exactly as written.

Question: If the requirements for a merit badge on the required list for the Eagle Scout rank vary among the Boy Scout Handbook, the merit badge pamphlet, and the Boy Scout Requirements book (current edition), which resource takes precedence?

Answer: The current edition of the Boy Scout Requirements book lists the official set of requirements for rank advancement and for each individual merit badge.

Question: What is the buddy system, and why is it necessary?

Answer: The buddy system is a safety routine that calls for a Scout to be paired with a buddy whenever he participates in Scouting activities such as aquatics, cycling, or hiking, and when he meets with his merit badge counselor. It is a way for Scouts to look after one another, stay safe, and have more fun. During meetings with adult leaders, a Scout's buddy can be another Scout or friend, or a relative. Common sense dictates that two adult counselors alone with only one Scout should be avoided.

Question: What BSA Youth Protection guidelines and leadership practices should a merit badge counselor be aware of whenever meeting with a Scout?

Answer: Be sure to follow the buddy system. Whenever a merit badge counselor meets with a Scout, there must always be a third person present. This third person may be any other adult familiar to the Scout such as his parent or guardian, or the Scout's "buddy," such as a friend, sibling, or other relative. All adult volunteers are expected to complete BSA Youth Protection

training within 90 days of assuming a leadership position. This training can be done through the BSA's Online Learning Center at www.myscouting.org. BSA Youth Protection training helps preserve a safe environment for young people and adult leaders so that they can all enjoy the Scouting program.

Merit Badge Review

Each merit badge has a corresponding merit badge pamphlet, and the series is written with the 12-year-old Boy Scout in mind. In addition, the pamphlets are designed for a very broad audience of Scouts. The pamphlets are available from Scouting retailers, or may be ordered online at www.scoutstuff.org. To provide the Scouting experience to as many boys as possible, we consider the diversity of the Scouts we serve regarding region, economics, ethnicity, and social and religious background.

While the pamphlet is not required for the Scout to earn the merit badge, it helps the counselor to know what the Scout may be studying and the level of learning expected of the Scout. Many of the merit badge pamphlets contain suggested projects and other activities or demonstrations to help the Scout fulfill the requirements or to stimulate other ideas from the Scout and his merit badge counselor. Each book also contains a helpful resources section.

For official requirements, the current-year Boy Scout Requirements book takes precedence. However, once a Scout has started working on a merit badge, he may stay with the requirements in effect when he started. He will not be required to meet newly introduced changes unless the BSA's National Council places a specific timeline on the implementation of new requirements. It is the merit badge counselor's obligation to understand what the current requirements are and to have up-to-date resources available when coaching the scout on the topic.