



Merit Badge Counselor Guide

In the Scouting program, boys who advance beyond the First Class rank on their way to Eagle earn merit badges, which generally are focused on specific areas of life and help the young men learn their strengths, develop skills and explore careers. Thousands of people, who are former Scouts or just want to be involved in the Scouting program, volunteer as merit badge counselors.

Yet this is kind of the invisible part of the local Scouting effort because merit badge counselors may not be wearing uniforms and generally just volunteer a few hours a month to help the boys earn their awards.

There are more than 100 merit badges available for Scouts. Some life first aid, citizenship and family life are required as a baseline set for the Eagle award, but the vast majority are voluntary and specialized and available to a Scout based on his interest. Many are focused on careers or hobbies. Adults who have expertise or interest in one of these areas can volunteer to serve as a merit badge counselor and work with the boys to help them earn the badge and certify that the requirements have been met.

Merit Badge Counselor Requirements

In order to serve as a merit badge counselor an individual must:

- ☐ Be 18 years old.
- ☐ Be qualified to counsel the respective merit badges. Some merit badges, such as rifle, shotgun shooting and Scuba Diving require special certification (See page 4)
- ☐ Be properly registered as an adult merit badge counselor on the District (not Unit) charter.
- ☐ Have completed Youth Protection Training within the last two years. YPT must be renewed at least every two years
- ☐ Have good rapport with Scout-age youths.
- ☐ Be an individual of good character.

Merit badge counselors are adult leaders and as a result must [register with the BSA](#) (Code "42" is used as the position code for merit badge counselors). Once they complete an application, they are subject to a background check to ensure that they have no background that would disqualify them from working with boys. Once they are approved and registered, there is a short orientation and counselors need to complete the online [Youth Protection Training](#).



Becoming An Awesome Merit Badge Counselor

Make sure you have the time. When you apply through your local BSA council to serve as a merit badge counselor, you are usually asked about whether you want to serve as a counselor only for your local troop or for others as well. If you volunteer on a broader level, you will obviously have more boys to work with. But if your time is more limited, then you may want to volunteer only for your troop.

Volunteer for more than one merit badge. If you have expertise in a variety of areas, you might want to consider being a counselor for more than one merit badge. You could pick a profession (chemistry for example) and then one related to a hobby (Geocaching).

Follow youth protection guidelines. The boys are instructed not to meet with merit badge counselors alone, and that is good counsel for the counselor as well. If a boy does contact you and want to meet, make sure he brings another boy or a parent or scout leader along.

Get the merit badge book. Every merit badge has a booklet that helps boys and counselors learn and understand the requirements. Every counselor should either buy a book so they have it and can use it in working with the boys, or make sure that the book is readily available from the Troop 213 "library". If a book is not part of the inventory that we keep, speak to the Scoutmaster about the Troop buying the book to support your planned offering to the scouts.

Get to know the Merit Badge Resource Center. One of the most important resources for a boy and for counselors is the [Merit Badge Resource Center](#). At this center, for each merit badge there is a downloadable worksheet and a list of web links associated with the merit badge requirements. Ask the participating scouts to download the worksheet before meeting (but make it a habit to do so yourself, with extra copies in case they are needed) so that you can go through it together. It is an excellent tool.

Be a teacher, not just a checklist completer. Being a counselor let you share your passion for the subject with the boy. Take opportunities as you are reviewing the merit badge requirements to communicate why you think the topic is important and how it can change the boy's life. Offer some supplemental information and resources that will help the boy learn more about the subject.

Volunteer for a merit badge "University". Many councils and districts hold merit badge universities where boys can register and then spend Saturdays working on a few merit badges at a time. These are fun events and you get to teach a couple of dozen boys at a time and then help them pass the requirements. There is a lot of energy at these events and you can influence a lot of boys at one time.



Keep to the requirements. Merit badge counselors are taught not to modify the merit badge requirements or make it easier or harder for the boys than the requirements outline. Consistency is one of the keys to scouting advancement, and the Eagle needs to mean the same across the country. So be careful and particular.

Make it fun. Merit badges can be drudgery for the boys or they can be an exciting new adventure. Work hard to make it fun for the boys and help them have a positive experience. And when they complete the merit badge, have a fun way to celebrate.

Keep good records. Each boy should bring a merit badge card (blue card) from his scout leader that you will use for signing off on the requirements. One section of the card is a counselor's record and when you sign off the requirements, you should keep your counselor's record with the boy's name and the date the badge was completed. Sometimes records get lost at the troop level or even at the council level, so having your backup records and keeping them where you can find them is really important.

Serving as a Boy Scout merit badge counselor is a very rewarding way to contribute to the growth and development of boys and to the Scouting program. Making a little time to serve in this way will bring great personal satisfaction to you and an opportunity to boys to learn what they need to be great men later in life.

Merit Badge Advancement Policies can be found in Chapter 7 of the [Guide to Advancement](#).



Special Merit Badge Qualification Requirements

From *The Guide to Advancement Handbook*

In addition to the standard requirements and approvals for being a merit badge counselor, selected merit badges have specific skills requirement in order to serve as a counselor in those areas.

General Supervision Requirements

- **Swimming and watercraft activities** must be conducted in accordance with BSA Safe Swim Defense or BSA Safety Afloat, respectively, and be supervised by mature and conscientious adults at least 21 years old and trained in the program applicable. Counselors for merit badges involving swimming or the use of watercraft must be so trained, or use others who are.
- **CPR instruction**, wherever it is required, must be taught by instructors currently trained by a nationally certified provider. Several such providers are mentioned in the [Guide to Safe Scouting](#).

The following merit badges have special qualifications or certifications for either the merit badge counselor or the supervisor of certain activities that may be involved. Counselors and advancement administrators should consult the merit badge pamphlets for details and to maintain awareness of changes and updates as pamphlets are revised.

Canoeing. Canoeing merit badge counselors must have either BSA Aquatics Instructor or Canoeing Instructor certification from the American Canoe Association, American Red Cross, or equivalent; OR local councils may approve individuals previously certified as such, or trained by an instructor so qualified.

Climbing. All climbing, belaying, and rappelling exercises and activities must be supervised by a qualified rock climbing instructor who is a mature and conscientious adult at least 21 years old, and who is trained in BSA Climb On Safely and understands the risks inherent to these activities. Training as BSA climbing director or instructor is highly recommended. Someone with certification in First Aid/CPR/AED from the American Red Cross (or equivalent) must be present at these activities.

Lifesaving. Demonstrations or activities in or on the water must be supervised by an adult at least 21 years old with certification in Red Cross First Aid/CPR/AED or equivalent, and also as BSA Lifeguard or Aquatics Instructor or equivalent.

Rifle Shooting. The merit badge counselor must take responsibility to assure that all instruction involving any handling of firearms or live ammunition must be supervised by a certified BSA National Camping



School (NCS) shooting sports director, or National Rifle Association (NRA) Rifle Shooting Instructor or Coach. That involving muzzleloaders must be supervised by an NCS shooting sports director or NRA/National Muzzleloader Rifle Association (NMLRA)–certified muzzleloader firearms instructor. Shooting must be supervised by an NRA-certified Range Safety Officer (RSO). If instruction and shooting are to occur at the same time, both the RSO and qualified instructor must be present. The supervisor and instructor may not be the same person. Note that commercial shooting ranges may provide RSOs. See the [Guide to Safe Scouting](#) and the BSA [National Shooting Sports Manual, No. 30931](#), for further details on shooting sports.

Rowing. Rowing merit badge counselors must have either BSA Aquatics Instructor certification or equivalent; OR local councils may approve individuals previously certified as such, or trained by an instructor so qualified.

Scuba Diving. All phases of scuba instruction—classroom, pool, and open-water training—are limited to instructors trained and sanctioned by one of the following agencies: Professional Association of Diving Instructors, National Association of Underwater Instructors, Scuba Schools International, International Diving Educators Association, Professional Diving Instructors Corporation, or Scuba Diving International, or be a member of the World Recreational Scuba Training Council.

Shotgun Shooting. The merit badge counselor must take responsibility to assure that all instruction involving any handling of firearms or live ammunition must be supervised by a certified NCS shooting sports director or NRA Shotgun Instructor or Coach. That involving muzzle-loading shotguns must be supervised by an NCS shooting sports director or NRA/NMLRA certified muzzle-loading shotgun instructor. Shooting must be supervised by an NRA-certified Range Safety Officer. If instruction and shooting are to occur at the same time, both the RSO and qualified instructor must be present. They may not be the same person. Note that commercial shooting ranges may provide RSOs. See the [Guide to Safe Scouting](#) and the [BSA National Shooting Sports Manual, No. 30931](#), for further details on shooting sports.

Snow Sports. Activities in the field must be supervised by a mature and conscientious adult 21 years or older who is committed to compliance with BSA Winter Sports Safety as defined in the [Guide to Safe Scouting](#). Swimming. Demonstrations or activities in or on the water must be conducted according to BSA Safe Swim Defense and BSA Safety Afloat.

Whitewater. Whitewater merit badge counselors must be designated by the local council, and certified as whitewater canoeing or kayaking instructors by the American Canoe Association or have equivalent certification, training, or expertise.

All certifications listed above must be current.



Common Myths About Merit Badges

A Scout must complete a merit badge within one year.

False. A Scout can continue to work on any merit badge until he reaches age 18.

At least two Scouts must work together on a merit badge. This is called the "Buddy System". **False.** A Scout must present himself to a counselor with a buddy being present; however, his buddy can be a friend or relative, male or female, adult or youth.

A Scout can only work on "X" number of merit badges at one time.

False. He can work on as many as he desires beginning the day he joins the troop.

A parent cannot be their son's merit badge counselor.

False. While one of the purposes of earning a merit badge is to expose the Scout to association with other adults, it is possible for a parent to counsel their son (as long as he/she is a registered counselor for that badge).

Similar tasks performed for one merit badge or rank advancement cannot be used for another.

False. As long as the Scout has completed the task as stated in the requirements, he has completed the task. It doesn't matter if the task also counted for a different requirement in another merit badge or rank. If there is an exception to this guideline, the requirement will specifically state it.

A Scout should have a signed blue merit badge application from his Scoutmaster prior to meeting with a merit badge counselor.

True. The Scoutmaster should provide a list of valid counselors that have committed to working with the Scouts of his troop. The Scoutmaster must sign the application prior to this meeting. What do you do if a Scout shows up without a signature on his blue card? Ask him where he got the card. If the Scout indicates the unit leader knew of his desire to begin working on the badge, but forgot to sign—or if there are other compelling extenuating circumstances—you may proceed with the initial session and ask him to get his unit leader's signature prior to the next meeting.

Merit badge counselors have a lot of leeway as to deciding if a requirement has truly been completed.

True. No tasks should be added to or deleted from the national requirements, however, the counselor must show discretion when accepting or rejecting a Scout's task completion.



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Merit badge counselors are subject to the decisions of the troop committee or Scoutmaster when in doubt concerning a requirement.

False. If a merit badge counselor has a question concerning his understandings of a merit badge requirement, he should contact the council advancement chairman. No unit has the authority to change or modify any requirement for any reason.

If the unit advancement coordinator suspects that the counselor did not follow the guidelines and approved an application, the merit badge can be withheld.

False, for the most part. If a registered merit badge counselor approves a merit badge, it must be awarded. There is no unit review process for merit badges. If a counselor is suspected of not following the guidelines, the council advancement chairman should be notified immediately. Merit badge counselors serve at the council level, even if they only work with Scouts from a single unit. If it is known that it is impossible that a Scout could possibly complete a requirement, but it was signed off, there is a process the unit leader can follow for recourse. See the Guide to Advancement 7.0.4.7 Limited Recourse for Unearned Merit Badges.



Review of Proper Merit Badge Counseling Procedures

1. NOTE: Merit Badge Applications (aka Blue Cards) must be used in this process, units, districts, and local councils do not have the authority to implement a different system for merit badge approval and documentation.
2. The Scout selects a merit badge he is interested in.
3. The Scout meets with the Scoutmaster (or his designee; i.e. assistant Scoutmaster for 11 year old Scouts) who by signing shows that the Scout and the unit leader have had the discussion about the badge and that the leader has recommended at least one registered merit badge counselor. The unit leader's signature is required on the application before the Scout begins working with the merit badge counselor. This does not mean the young man must wait for the signature to begin work on the merit badge itself. For example, past campouts count for the Camping merit badge, and coins and stamps already collected count for those badges.
4. A name and contact information of a registered merit badge counselor is to be provided to the Scout by the Scoutmaster when the Scoutmaster signs the blue card. There is a place on the card to put it. The Scoutmaster must make certain that the recommended counselor is properly registered and current with YPT. This is accomplished by consulting the official merit badge counselor list maintained by council.
5. The Scout contacts the merit badge counselor. The counselor will tell him what is expected of the Scout.
6. The Scout (with a buddy) meets with the merit badge counselor to set forth a plan to accomplish fulfilling ALL of the requirements of the merit badge. On his first visit, the Scout should bring a merit badge application (blue card) signed by his unit leader.
7. The Scout begins work on the merit badge. It is possible that some work will have been completed by the Scout prior to meeting with the counselor. Any prior work should be discussed with the counselor. This would include work done through uncompleted merit badges from summer camp, merit badges started at a merit badge "university", or work done independently by the Scout in advance of meeting with a counselor.
8. The number of meetings that the Scout (with a buddy) meets with the MB counselor depends on the plan decided upon when the Scout first meets with the counselor.
9. Any review session might be approached by the Scout with some apprehension. He is familiar with final exams in school and may see this meeting with you as another such experience. You can help by putting him at ease. Talk with him rather than grill or examine him; there is a big difference, yet you can still find out what he knows. Express honest enthusiasm for the things he has done, particularly if projects are involved. Your approval will give the Scout confidence.
10. When he meets with you, he should bring with him the projects required for completion. If these cannot be transported, he should present satisfactory evidence, such as a photograph of the



project or adult verification. Counselors agree not to assume prerequisites have been completed without some level of evidence that the work has been done. Pictures and letters from other merit badge counselors or unit leaders are the best form of prerequisite documentation. Your responsibility, in addition to coaching, is to satisfy yourself that the requirements have been met. Question the Scout and, if you have any doubts, contact the adult who signed the statement.

11. To pass a merit badge requirement, the Scout is required to do *exactly* what the requirement says to do, no more, no less.
12. Worksheets [like you get from meritbadge.org] and other materials that may be of assistance in earning merit badges are available from a variety of places including unofficial sources on the Internet and even troop libraries. Use of these aids is permissible as long as the materials can be correlated with the current requirements that Scouts must fulfill. Completing "worksheets" may suffice where a requirement calls for something in writing, but this would not work for a requirement where the Scout must discuss, tell, show, or demonstrate, etc. Note that Scouts shall not be required to use these learning aids in order to complete a merit badge.
13. It is acceptable—and sometimes desirable—for merit badges to be taught in group settings. This often occurs at camp and merit badge midways, fairs, clinics, or similar events, and even online through webinars. These can be efficient methods, and interactive group discussions can support learning. Group instruction can also be attractive to "guest experts" assisting registered and approved counselors. Slide shows, skits, demonstrations, panels, and various other techniques can also be employed, but as any teacher can attest, not everyone will learn all the material. Because of the importance of individual attention and personal learning in the merit badge program, group instruction should be focused on those scenarios where the benefits are compelling. There must be attention to each individual's projects and his fulfillment of all requirements. We must know that every Scout—actually and personally—completed them. If, for example, a requirement uses words like "show," "demonstrate," or "discuss," then every Scout must do that. It is unacceptable to award badges on the basis of sitting in classrooms watching demonstrations, or remaining silent during discussions.
14. Upon completion of ALL the requirements, the counselor signs the blue card indicating satisfactory completion of ALL requirements. The counselor cannot increase or decrease the stated merit badge requirements. A counselor may initial on the blue card completion of individual requirements. In case there is a change in merit badge counselors prior to completion of all requirements the initialed items qualify for completion of that item and do not have to be further reviewed by a new counselor.
15. The counselor should retain his copy of the blue card for one year in case there are any questions.
16. The Scout turns the other two sections of the completed blue card into the Scoutmaster who has another conference with the Scout to determine how good of an experience the Scout had with



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the counselor. The Scoutmaster signs the applicant's section of the blue card indicating that the unit has received an approved merit badge application from the merit badge counselor and returns the applicant's section to the Scout at this time. This assures there is a copy in the hands of the Scout in case the unit loses the record. The unit copy is then given to the unit advancement chairmen who then processes the forms to purchase the badge and ensures that it is awarded at the next Court of Honor.

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