

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. You will need to register with the Boy Scouts of America, through your BSA local council. This entails contacting the local council, then obtaining, completing, and turning in the "Adult Application." The council will then process the application. (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 olc.scouting.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.

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. However, you may not tack on new requirements or extra work. While you may guide and instruct a Scout on the subject matter, he must do the work himself.

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.

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.