

BSA discourages use of unofficial merit badge worksheets



Merit badges aren't easy to earn. They're meant to challenge the mind, to build character, and to educate through trial and error.

Unofficial merit badge worksheets hasten this process — but not always in a good way. These printable documents are meant to help Scouts complete requirements by filling in the blanks. Sure, they can be time-saving tools, but too often they're used in the wrong way.

That's why the BSA discourages — but doesn't ban — the use of these worksheets, which are available online.

What does that mean? Look for requirements with verbs like “discuss,” “show,” “tell,” “explain,” “demonstrate” or “identify.” Requirements like those aren't meant to be completed by filling in a blank on some worksheet, says Chris Hunt, team leader of the BSA's Content Management Team.



Merit badge worksheets are “permitted only for fulfilling requirements where something is to be done in writing,” he says. And merit badge counselors may never require the use of merit badge worksheets and may, if they choose, refuse to accept them, Hunt says.

This has been a rule in the *Guide to Advancement* for a couple of years, but it's worth clarifying. So here goes ...

What are merit badge worksheets?

Unofficial merit badge worksheets, sometimes called workbooks, are fill-in-the-blank documents for Scouts working on merit badges. Some counselors will print copies for Scouts and use them while teaching the merit badge.

These worksheets list every requirement, even those with verbs like the “discuss,” “show” or “tell,” and include blank spaces with each.

Why are they discouraged?

Unofficial merit badge worksheets emphasize speed over education.

Take the First Aid merit badge as an example. Requirement 3d says, “Show the steps that need to be taken for someone suffering from a severe cut on the leg and on the wrist.”

On one worksheet I found online, that requirement is listed with a big blank space, ostensibly for the Scout to write out the steps. That's not OK.

The Scout should “show” by literally showing these steps to his counselor — not writing them down. The reason's simple: Scouts learn better that way.

What does the *Guide to Advancement* say?

Here's the relevant section, 7.0.4.8 Unofficial Worksheets and Learning Aids, [2017 Guide to Advancement \(PDF\)](#) .

Worksheets 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.

What does the BSA say?

Hunt offers this further explanation and rationale. Please read the whole thing and ask your fellow merit badge counselors to do the same.

When merit badge requirements are developed, they are meant to challenge a Scout’s thought process, to cause him to learn and practice skills, to help him explore areas of interest and dispel misconceptions, and to bring about interaction with others — especially positive adult role models.

Worksheets are a shortcut. They present on paper what should be arrived at through thought and interaction — through asking questions and trial and error. They often tend to create or support an atmosphere of “get the merit badge finished as efficiently and quickly as possible,” when the objective should be a significant learning experience that builds character, citizenship, and physical or mental fitness.

Worksheets can prevent struggling with requirements, when it is the struggle that can lead to retention of lessons learned.

We don’t like worksheets, and we’re reasonably sure our founder would be horrified by their very existence. That said, we realize their use is extensive and that prohibiting them would be unrealistic. That’s why they are permitted only for fulfilling requirements where something is to be done in writing.

Worksheets must not be accepted in fulfillment of requirements that call for “showing,” “demonstrating,” “discussing,” or whatever else the written word does not fully accomplish.

Furthermore, Scouts must never be required to use worksheets. The decision to use them belongs to the Scout. Not one merit badge requirement says anything like, “Use a worksheet downloaded from the Internet to...”

Merit badge counselors may refuse to accept worksheets but they are not allowed to require their use.

For more information, refer to the [Guide to Advancement](#) , Page 2, “BSA policy on Unauthorized Changes to Advancement Program” and Page 53, topic 7.0.4.8, “Unofficial Worksheets and Learning Aids.”

Important postscript

Once again, unofficial merit badge worksheets only may be used for completing requirements when the requirement specifically instructs a Scout to *write* something.

That said, one set of worksheets online includes this disclaimer at the top:

The work space provided for each requirement should be used by the Scout to make notes for discussing the item with his counselor, not for providing the full and complete answers. Each Scout must do each requirement.

If Scouts use this space solely to make notes for a verbal discussion with their counselor, that’s fine. It’s only a problem if the Scout submits the written notes as a substitute for completing the requirement.

In a sense, taking notes on one of these merit badge worksheets should be no different from taking notes in a spiral notebook. A Scout wouldn’t turn in his notebook to fulfill a requirement, but he should be allowed to use those notes for a discussion with his counselor.

It’s an important distinction, all aimed at making earning a merit badge a challenging, rewarding experience for the Scout.

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