

Using Digital Tools to Strengthen the Merit Badge Experience



SCOUTS
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How Merit Badge Counselors can Effectively use Digital Content

The introduction of new digital resources for earning merit badges is an exciting step forward in Scouting—but it's important to remember that these tools are meant to support the program, not replace its most essential parts.

At the core of the merit badge experience is one of the methods of Scouting, “Association with Adults,” between the Scout and the merit badge counselor—an adult who shares their time, experience, expertise, and mentorship. This personal interaction fosters growth, accountability, communication skills, and respect. No app or online resource can replace these values.

Simply put, the screen can't shake a Scout's hand, ask meaningful questions that confirm the Scout completed and understood the concepts, or guide them through thoughtful conversations. Adults are still the heart of the merit badge process—and the presence of new digital tools only makes it easier for that guidance to be better and more effective.

Let's embrace new ideas while keeping what makes Scouting meaningful: personal connections, character-building, and the power of adult mentorship and interactions in a young person's life.

Empowering Counselors with New Tools, Not Replacing Them

Merit badge counselors have always played an important role in guiding Scouts as they learn new skills, develop new interests, and grow as people. With new digital resources like videos, online checklists, games, and AI, some adults may worry that their role is becoming less important.

Actually, these tools are designed to *make counselors better mentors* by giving Scouts and counselors access to better, more engaging learning materials. For specific guidance on using technology in advancement, see the [Guide to Advancement](#) section 5.0.8.0. For guidance on online merit badge classes, see section 7.0.4.12. Additional resources for merit badge counselors may be found at <https://www.scouting.org/programs/scouts-bsa/advancement-and-awards/resources/>. All Safeguarding Youth (YPT) and Guide to Advancement policies still apply.

Here are some examples of how counselors can use these new tools:

Before the Meeting: Set Expectations and Help Scouts Prepare

Digital resources help Scouts arrive better prepared. Scouts can access the digital resources for the merit badge at <https://www.scouting.org/skills/merit-badges/>, and review them before meeting with the merit badge counselor. This makes the face-to-face time more productive, since Scouts know the basics, and meetings can focus on meaningful discussion and demonstration.

During the Meeting: Guide Deeper Understanding

Rather than reading requirements aloud or explaining basic concepts, counselors can use sessions to ask thoughtful questions, check what the Scout has learned, and offer personal stories or real-world examples. They can also review online materials or clear up any confusion from a Scout's independent research.

After the Meeting: Keep Scouts Engaged

Many Scouts are excited to explore badge-related topics in greater depth. The pamphlets have resource guides that allow them to delve deeper into topics. Counselors can point Scouts to books, online resources, and museums to explore—and stay available for feedback and encouragement.

Use Digital as a Bridge, not a Wall

Digital resources don't eliminate the need for adult interaction—they make it easier for counselors to customize the experience based on a Scout's interests or learning style and make it quicker to prepare for merit badge meetings or classes.

Some examples:



A knot-tying video can show and teach specific techniques and is often easier to follow than pictures or drawings. Scouts can pause, rewind, or zoom in to see details.



Videos can prepare Scouts for site visits (like visiting a vet clinic), but they don't substitute for visiting in person. From the Guide to Advancement 5.0.8.0: "When a requirement says to 'attend a meeting,' in-person participation is strongly recommended. While virtual participation may be convenient, in-person attendance allows for a much richer experience, with more socialization and more focus. Virtual attendance should be extremely rare, when special circumstances prevent in-person participation, and the merit badge counselor must approve the substitution in advance."



After reviewing an example video for a site visit, the counselor and Scout can discuss other contexts or examples relating to the requirement. The digital content can inform their discussion, and the actual in-person site visit will be more rewarding.



Videos do not substitute for actual outdoor activities like camping. Instead, they can show important concepts to prepare youth for the activity, such as how to pack a backpack.