

Hiking and Backpacking

This standard applies to Mountaineers sponsored trips on established hiking routes longer than 2 miles round trip. It does not apply to outings in city and suburban settings. This standard applies to any committee sponsoring a hike or backpack trip as part of a course or not, including but not limited to: Hiking, Backpacking, Climbing, Lodges, Photography, Naturalists, Retired Rovers, Singles, or other such committee dedicated to hiking activities.

TRIPS

Hiking and Backpacking trips are restricted to maintained and unmaintained trails with the following exceptions:

- Travel may proceed on snow-covered trails unless the route exposes the party to terrain where a slip is likely to result in an uncontrolled slide.
- Parties may make off-trail excursions as long as the route does not expose any party member to terrain that is unreasonably hazardous for them to cross given their skills and experience.

DIFFICULTY RATINGS

The difficulty of a hike or backpack route will be rated using this scale as a general guide, and the rating must be entered on the activity listing with the specific distance and elevation gain communicated to participants in pre-trip communications.

- Easy (E) Up to 8 miles round trip with less than 1200 feet of elevation gain
- Moderate (M) Up to 12 miles round trip, with 1200-2500 feet of elevation gain
- Strenuous (S) Up to 14 miles round trip, with 2500-3500 feet of elevation gain
- Very Strenuous (VS) Over 14 miles round trip or with over 3500 feet of elevation gain

LEADER RATING

In addition to the route difficulty, a ***Leader Rating*** must be specified for each activity. This provides the leader with a way to modify the baseline route difficulty based on specifics of how they will lead the trip or for whether it is a hike or a backpack. The following are examples of criteria a leader may consider in setting the **Leader Rating**.

- For beginners: Average pace under 1 mph¹ and no technical challenges or special skills needed
- Easy Average pace 1-1.5mph and no technical challenges or special skills needed
- Moderate Average pace 1.5-2mph OR an easy route with an overnight pack, or some route challenges (e.g. rough trail, log crossings, steep terrain)
- Challenging Average pace >2mph OR a moderate route with an overnight pack, OR significant route challenges or skills requirements (e.g. fixed ropes, very rugged terrain, steep scree descents, snow or ice crossings; snow camping, bear canister requirement, carrying water to a dry camp)

¹ Counting rest breaks but not counting lunch.

It is recommended that the leader clearly specify the distance and elevation gain for the route as well as their planned pace, any special technical challenges and special gear, skills and conditioning requirements of the trip in the trip posting within the activity summary and/or the leaders' notes.

PARTY SIZE

The minimum party size for a hike or backpack is 3 and the maximum party size is 12 unless other party limits apply.

LEADER MINIMUM QUALIFICATIONS

Leaders must be Mountaineers members, at least 18 years old, with an up to date waiver on file. New hike or backpack leaders are strongly encouraged to go on a minimum of 3 activities with The Mountaineers, preferably with different leaders, before becoming a hike or backpack leader themselves. Individual committees have the discretion to require more or fewer activities based on the applicant's experience and skills.

Leaders must be approved to lead hikes or backpacks by a Mountaineers branch hike, backpack or combined hike-backpack committee, and entered on their committee's leader list. Once approved by one branch committee to lead hikes or backpacks, the leader is qualified to lead hikes / backpacks for any branch but must request to the committee chair to be added to another branch's leader list.

Leaders must demonstrate basic competency in each of the following key elements before being approved to lead a Mountaineers hike or backpack. Under each key element, bullets highlight examples of the skills, behaviors, or knowledge factors expected of a Mountaineers hike or backpack leader within that element.

KEY ELEMENT 1: Group Leadership – examples of expected competencies

- Planning and organization
- Screening of participants (as appropriate)
- Communication (clear and effective)
- Ensures that all party members are accounted for periodically and at the trip conclusion
- Respectful, caring, considerate
- Sound judgment and decision making skills
- Establishes trust
- Focuses on group well-being and success as a whole
- Adapts as required / situational leadership
- Teaches / coaches and also learns from others

KEY ELEMENT 2: Technical Skill – examples of expected competencies

- Has experience and physical abilities commensurate with the trip being led
- Practices Minimum Impact Procedures / Leave No Trace 7 Principles
- Practices good Trail Etiquette
- Knowledge and use of 10 Essentials

KEY ELEMENT 3: Navigation– examples of expected competencies

- Effectively navigates trail routes with map and compass and any other appropriate tools to “stay found” (altimeter, watch, GPS)

KEY ELEMENT 4: Mountain Safety Skills– examples of expected competencies

- Shows good understanding of major summer and winter backcountry hazards and how to assess the level of risk
- Shows good understanding of methods to prevent, mitigate or manage major risk factors

KEY ELEMENT 5: First Aid and Emergency Preparedness – examples of expected competencies

- Able to handle common first aid situations likely to be experienced on a hike
- Know the “7 steps of Emergency Response” as described in Freedom of the Hills, or an equivalent emergency management process
- Exhibits a good understanding of how to handle emergency situations such as Late return/after dark/lost hiker/off route/lost
- Demonstrates problem solving and leadership skills relating to medical emergencies or unexpected weather and trail conditions
- Knows how to communicate /summon help

KEY ELEMENT 6: Knowledge of Standards and Policies– examples of expected competencies

- Familiar with applicable Mountaineers standards or procedures such as carpools; liability; waivers, postings and closings; ratings
- Knows Incident reporting expectations
- Familiar with maximum group size, permitting, camping, food storage, and other applicable land management agency regulations

PROCESS TO QUALIFY AS A MOUNTAINEERS HIKE OR BACKPACK LEADER

Sponsoring committees must have a documented and transparent process, available to any interested member, by which a prospective leader can qualify as a Mountaineers hike or backpack leader. Committees are responsible to verify that prospective leaders are competent in the key elements listed above using a structured, objective method. The following are examples of avenues that could be used:

- Data from application form and/or activity /course history
- Other leader badges (e.g. Climb or kayak leader or other)
- Documented completion of classes (Red Cross First Aid, Wilderness First Aid, “Staying Found” or Wilderness Navigation or equivalent external class)
- Hike Leader seminar or equivalent
 - Take home test following leader seminar or as a “equivalency” in lieu of seminar
 - Structured interview with Committee Chair or designate to validate knowledge
- Mentored hike in which the mentor evaluates against the standards to the degree possible

Committees have flexibility to use different combinations of the above methods appropriate to individual leader candidates, maintaining flexibility to recognize experience and training from another activity or from outside the club where it directly applies to the key leader competency requirements.

However, the committee must maintain a mechanism to document their evaluation of a leader candidate against the key criteria so that any outside party can understand the objective method used to qualify the person.

It is strongly recommended that each hike or backpack leader attend a hike or backpack leader seminar including an overview of the minimum standard and all the key leader criteria and expectations, even if they have led other activities for the Mountaineers. Because hikes have no pre-requisites, hike and backpack leaders often have to face much greater challenges in screening participants, ensuring basic preparedness, providing first aid and navigation expertise for the group, and managing safety and pace during the activity than leaders of many other activities that have significant pre-requisites for participation.

PARTICIPANT QUALIFICATIONS

Unless specified by the leader there is no prerequisite for signing up for a hike or backpack.

Participants are responsible for signing up only for trips that are within their capabilities, wearing suitable clothing / bringing suitable equipment as specified by the leader, and carrying the ten essentials.

RELATED CLUBWIDE MINIMUM STANDARDS

General Standards for All Club Activities

Comparable Standards

UIAA Standards for Voluntary Leaders and Instructors, October 2006

- Activity Standard 1: Mountain Walking and Trekking
- Leadership Requirements and Guidelines; Appalachian Mountain Club, March 15, 2015

BADGE CRITERIA

Backpacking Skills Badges

Anyone desiring a Backpacking Skills badge needs to submit a request for the badge in writing to their branch's backpacking chair, along with all of their pre-requisite experience – unless the badge is directly awarded from a backpacking course or clinic. That chair then has the lead responsibility to review the applicant's information, follow up as needed, and make the decision to grant the appropriate badge, assuring that the qualifications are met.

Basic Backpacking Skills²

Grant this badge if the student can demonstrate that they've attended a lecture or series of lectures/seminars that have delivered the following information at an introductory level:

- Fundamentals: Choosing the type of backpack trip that suits your style, experience and conditioning (basecamp trips, through-hikes, short vs. longer, relaxed vs. intense, etc), pack

² This assumes that the student already knows the fundamentals of the Ten Essentials, hiking safety, Leave No Trace and trail etiquette, wilderness travel and hazards.

weight (base weight and total weight), balancing trail and camp comfort, knowing the weight of your gear and bringing only what you need for the conditions (using a checklist)

- Planning a backpacking trip: Finding info on expected weather and trail conditions, choosing camps, locating water, pacing, daily distance, gear and clothing for the trail:
 1. Choosing and packing a backpack
 2. Footwear: Boots, hiking shoes, trail runners – how to choose based on the trip
 3. Choosing the right clothing; layering concepts
 4. Wet, cold or hot weather considerations
 - Staying comfortable while backpacking in wet weather: rain jacket or poncho, pants or skirt; pack cover, pack liner concepts; gaiters; keeping your gear dry
 5. Hydration, carrying water, purifying water
 6. Food: Backpack food options, basics of how to obtain and/or prepare your backpack food, how much food to carry, calorie density, how to package and carry food
 7. Mealtime: Stove and fuel options, fuel efficiency, pots, dishes and utensils, etc.
 8. Food storage: Various options and their pros and cons
 9. Sleep system: Shelter options and how to decide, basic sleeping bag/quilt options and how to decide, sleeping pad options and how to decide, night-time clothing; how to consider your whole sleep system and the expected conditions to pack what you need
 10. Misc: Light, camp/water shoes, gaiters, first aid gear for backpacking
- Awareness of permits and rules: What permits are needed, bringing your dog, rules for locating camps, food storage requirements and use of fire
- Etiquette and Leave No Trace related to backcountry hiking and camping – choosing a camp, keeping a clean camp, leaving no trace behind, disposal of garbage and waste, trail and camp behavior, interacting with wildlife, use of fire

Advanced Backpacking Skills

Requires the basic skills badge or equivalent as a prerequisite

Grant this badge if:

1. The student has planned and participated in at least 3 successful backpacking trips within the previous 2 calendar years, of which at least one is two nights or more.
 - Car camping does not count (do trips need to be at least a few miles into the backcountry or do we care as long as they set up a camp?)
 - Trips may be Mountaineers or private trips (but The Mountaineers do not take responsibility for members' private trips).

- May NOT be a trip with an outfitter or guide service in which the food and gear and route planning is done by someone else.
2. The student has completed a field navigation class and an outdoor-oriented first aid class within the past 3 years, or can clearly demonstrate these competencies from other sources.
- Navigation could include the Mountaineers Wilderness Navigation, “Staying Found” or equivalent – if person only can show classroom or eLearning training, needs to show practical field experience applying the principles.
 - First aid could include the Mountaineers WFA or MOFA class or “Trail Emergency Preparedness” or equivalent– if person only can show classroom or eLearning training, needs to demonstrate good understanding of the principles as they apply to a backcountry emergency.