

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

¹ Counting rest breaks but not counting lunch.

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)

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.

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 carpoools; 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