

# E: Navigating Advancement Requirements

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Advancement is a system of ranks, badges, and awards that recognize what a Scout has accomplished and creates incentives to strive and grow as a person. The system is intended to provide a structured sequence of tasks that provide experiences to learn, grow, and succeed.

This module is directed at parents, guardians, and unit leaders who want to help a Scout with a special need or disability succeed in advancement. Module V looks at advancement from the perspective of the district and council leaders entrusted to make approval decisions for alternative rank requirements and badges. This module does not replace the rules for advancement found in the *Guide to Advancement*<sup>[1]</sup> (BSA 33088), **which is the authoritative document**. Rather this module provides commentary and advice to assist you in using the *Guide to Advancement (2019)*. Since requirements change from time to time, you will need to look at the handbook for your program level to find the requirements that apply to your Scout(s). Some classes of disabilities have their own nuances and challenges related to advancement and you will find more specific “how to” information in Modules H to S of the Inclusion Toolbox.

## KEEPING THINGS IN PERSPECTIVE

Before we talk about details and forms and processes, we want to make some philosophical points.

**Advancement is a Method of Scouting, Not the Mission** – The mission of the BSA is to prepare young people to make ethical choices throughout their lifetime. Advancement is one of several methods for promoting the mission.

Handled well, advancement creates healthy peer pressure that benefits all the Scouts in a unit. There is a danger that we may set expectations too high and expect Scouts with special needs to go to extremes in order to advance. There is also a risk that we try to bend advancement requirements too far and take away the sense of accomplishment just to check off the boxes.

There are many wonderful Scouts who never become Eagle Scouts. When we laud and honor Eagle Scouts there is a danger that we diminish the accomplishments of other Scouts and fail to appreciate the good people they are becoming. When we look at Scouts with disabilities and try to create advancement opportunities for them, let's not lose sight of the possibility that they are already good enough, just like they are. Advancement needs to serve the Scout, not the other way around.

**What is Expected of Scouts With and Without Disabilities** – It is easy to lose track of what is expected from others when you are an advocate for someone with a disability. A Scout rank is a multi-faceted array of challenges, and any youth will find some tasks easier than others. If a Scout with a special need finds that a few requirements are really hard to complete, many requirements are doable but take an effort, and a few requirements are really easy; he or she is effectively “typical”. At the other extreme, a more reasonable alternative is needed for a requirement that a Scout could not possibly complete. We want it to be somewhat difficult for a Scout with a disability to earn a rank, like it is for everyone, but not unfairly difficult. It is important to remember that advancement is not meant to be easy for any Scout, and that is why only a very small percentage of Scouts achieve the rank of Eagle. There are no guarantees that every individual will be able to become an Eagle Scout.

**Achievable Challenge** – Alternative advancement requirements bring the challenge within the capability of the Scout, but the Scout must still have the will to meet the challenge. No Scout is asked to attempt an advancement challenge beyond his or her capability if that capability can be objectively determined. A Scout is never set up for failure, but a Scout should expect to be challenged. Families and leaders should prepare Scouts to be challenged and encourage them to overcome.

**All in Good Time** – Think about what your Scout will be able to do later that he or she cannot do today? After Cub Scouting, advancement challenges are expected to be met over a period of years. Not everything is within the capability of an 11 year old Scout nor should it be. The process for approving alternatives requires the Scout to attempt to complete all the requirements he or she can before an alternative can be approved. The Scout does not have to attempt the impossible, but the Scout should attempt the requirements that might be possible. This may sound harsh to a parent of a child with a disability, but there is a sound reason for this. As parents, our protective instincts make us wary of pushing our children too hard, but at the same time we are continuously surprised when our children demonstrate new capabilities, especially when they have a disability. In Scouting, this means that we all have a bias to sell kids short. Having a rule that asks the Scout to try a requirement first, before we decide it cannot be done, counteracts the bias and

allows the Scout to achieve more than the adults initially thought possible.

**Comparable Challenge** – We want all Scouts that earn a rank to have been challenged in a way that is fair to everyone who earns that rank; past, present, and future. The honor that goes with the rank needs to be deserved, and it needs to mean the same thing over time. The challenge of advancement for Scouts with special needs is to be fair. As all parents know “fair” is not always “the same as for everyone else”. Even “challenge” is difficult to measure because it could mean different things in different circumstances, such as required strength/skill, level of effort, amount of time needed, or the quality of the product made. So if we assume the objective of alternative requirements is to make a rank about as hard for a Scout with a disability to earn as it is for a typical Scout, there will always be a devil in the details. That is why we entrust the responsibility for developing alternatives to responsible people rather than to a rulebook. It is also why the advocates for a Scout with a disability and those who must approve alternatives need to be considerate and treat each other according to the Scout Law.

**Having Fun** – There is an old saying that “Scouting is a game with a purpose.” A lot of the things we do in Scouting should be fun or exhilarating, whether or not they check boxes for advancement. In short, the “game” is important. A parent or guardian of a Scout with a disability may be afraid that their kid will be left behind or left out of something, and be biased in the “not fun” direction. While we want our kids to live up to their potential, we also want them to experience joy, excitement, adventure, and fun. Without fun in the mix, it is hard to stay motivated to do things that aren’t fun. That is true whether you have a disability or not. The journey of Scouting will include plenty of opportunities to learn something and grow up a little, but let’s never lose track of the fact that these are kids and they need to have fun too.

## **CUB SCOUT STANDARDS & ALTERNATIVES**

Cub Scout advancement is easily compatible with special needs and disabilities. The standard of performance is “Do Your Best”. The Scout’s “best” does not mean you have to be successful to get credit for completing a requirement, but the Scout does have to make a good faith effort. That leaves very few situations where a Cub Scout will need to have an alternative to a regular requirement. You only need alternatives when the regular requirement is impossible to even attempt. An example would be asking a Scout in a powered wheelchair to run.

In such situations, Cubmasters and pack committees may come up with an alternative requirement and they do not need higher level approval. Ideally, they would consult the family of the Scout in the process. Perhaps a minor modification is enough, or substituting a requirement from an elective. We hope to capture the spirit and level of challenge of the original requirement.

## **SCOUTS BSA, VENTURING, AND SEA SCOUTING PROGRAM STANDARDS**

Things are different once the Scout graduates to the older youth programs (Scouts BSA, Venturing, and Sea Scouting). At these levels, the Scout is expected to complete the requirement **exactly as it is written, no more and no less**. The key point of this is that the requirements are not different for Scouts with special needs or disabilities and we don't lower the standards of the requirement just so a particular Scout can complete it.

With that said, **the person who judges if the requirement has been completed has more latitude than it might first appear**. (Depending on the circumstances, this person could be a unit leader, assistant unit leader, den leader, merit badge counselor, parent, or a responsible older Scout.) Most rank and merit badge requirements are written in ways that allow some flexibility in how they must be performed by a person with a disability. For example, most merit badges don't explicitly require reading, writing, or speaking. Instead of saying "Write a list of the five most visible planets," or "Recite a list of the five most visible planets," the Astronomy merit badge requirement simply says "List the five most visible planets." The form and structure of the list is not part of the requirement. It could be verbal, handwritten, or typed. For that matter, few requirements are written in a way that they require the entire task to be done in one sitting, which benefits Scouts with an intellectual disability. **It is important not to read anything extra into a requirement just because that is how most Scouts do it.**

An **"accommodation" does not change a requirement** but does change the circumstances under which the requirement is completed. It is best explained with a few examples:

- Allowing a buddy or lifeguard to be nearby in the water for a swimming/water rescue requirement.
- Having a quiet space or special lighting to work by.
- Allowing the Scout to complete the requirement at a different time of day than usual.
- Allowing a requirement that is usually done on an overnight campout to be done indoors or at another type of event.
- Allowing a second person to serve as the eyes, ears, or hands of the Scout.
- Allowing the Scout to use notes or memory aids.
- Allowing the task to be broken into smaller steps that are done at different times.
- Allowing unconventional tools or materials to be used for the task.

Even with flexibility and accommodations, there are certain combinations of requirements and disabilities that are just incompatible. In these situations, we develop alternative requirements or alternative merit badges that replace the original requirements. **Alternatives are specifically tailored to the circumstances of one individual**. The alternatives are developed by a team consisting of the unit leadership, family, and health professionals, and then are reviewed and approved by the council advancement committee.

Another challenge we run into with advancement for Scouts with disabilities is timing. In general, **a Scout is expected to complete every requirement or merit badge possible** for a given rank **before an alternative** rank requirement

or merit badge **can be formally approved**. Further complicating matters is that in general **a Scout is not allowed to attempt to complete an alternative requirement or merit badge until after the alternative has been formally approved**. These procedural rules can be frustrating. They force the Scout, family, and leader to be strategic in planning the sequence of work to make sure the Scout has time to accomplish what he or she wants to.

## **STRATEGIC PLANNING WITH AN INDIVIDUAL SCOUT ADVANCEMENT PLAN (ISAP)**

The BSA has a planning form for families and leaders to use to jointly map out the future for a Scout with a disability. It is called the Individual Scout Advancement Plan (ISAP), and you can find it by searching for BSA Form 512-936. It is modeled on the individual education programs (IEPs) and 504 plans used in public schools for students with special needs. Unlike an IEP or 504 plan, the ISAP does not create legal rights or legal status. The ISAP can be updated as a Scout matures and moves through the Scouting program.

In Module F you will find a discussion of Joining Conferences, which will not be repeated here. Creating an ISAP will take more detailed discussion than is appropriate for a joining conference. In general, before preparing an ISAP the family will need some time to learn more about the Scouting program and the unit will need some time to understand the Scout.

Most of this section is focused on the Scouts BSA program, but before we continue we should briefly discuss **how to be intentional and planful in Cub Scouting**. If a Cub Scout has a known special need or disability, it is wise for the parent/guardian and den leader to meet at the beginning of the program or school year and review all of the rank requirements for that year (Lion, Tiger, Wolf, Bear, Webelos, or Arrow of Light). This is the time to identify the requirements that will take extra effort and those that are impossible. If there are any impossible requirements, then work together to come up with alternatives to submit to the pack committee for approval.

At the Scouts BSA level and up, **the first planning step is to figure out how to support what the Scout wants to do**. While few Scouts advance without family and leader encouragement, we don't want advancement to be driven by the parents, guardians, or leaders. Realistically, the Scout with a special need should set the goals and the rest of the adult team helps spot opportunities to make progress on those goals. It is perfectly fine if a Scout just wants to have fun, make friends, and go on outings instead of making effort to advance in rank. Even a Scout who is not trying to will get quite a few rank requirements completed just by being present when the opportunities are provided.<sup>[2]</sup>

The **second planning step is figuring out which Scouts need an ISAP**. Some Scouts arrive at a unit with an obvious disability, where some advancement requirements are very difficult or impossible, and you can start on an ISAP soon.

However, many Scouts have an invisible disability[3] that does not draw any immediate attention. A Scout leader should not try to diagnose any Scout, but a wise leader takes a long look at the performance of each new Scout after the first year. It is important to **figure out if a Scout is not performing well despite trying hard or because he or she is not really trying**. If a Scout has the will to succeed but is not being effective, it is time to start developing an ISAP.

Even though the ranks of Scout, Tenderfoot, Second Class, and First Class are presented in sequence, most Scouts work on requirements for all of these levels at the same time. Scout leaders often refer to this group of ranks as the “Trail to First Class”. The first round of planning is to go over these requirements and determine which ones need alternatives and which ones need accommodations. If the adult team can tell up front which are which, you can go ahead and apply for alternative requirements while the Scout works on what he or she can do. **Most of the time, you will not know all of the obstacles until the Scout makes an attempt on a requirement**. If there is doubt about whether a Scout can complete a task, he or she should be given a chance to complete the requirement as it is written. **Be careful that you do not force the Scout to fail**. Once the adult team knows what alternatives are needed, they develop them and submit them for approval. The actual process will be discussed a little later.

Scouts that need alternative requirements and merit badges often need to be efficient with their time and effort. This is very important with merit badges because **you cannot request alternative requirements for merit badge requirements. They are an all or nothing proposition**. The Scout and his or her supporting adults need to look at all of the requirements for a merit badge before starting work on it. If the Scout cannot complete all of them with reasonable flexibility and accommodations, the Scout will not be able to earn the badge even though the Scout may enjoy the activities of the badge and benefit from the socialization and participation.

*There is a risk of creating hard feelings when merit badge work is done in a group setting. If a Scout is encouraged to participate alongside other Scouts in a group setting, it can create an expectation that the Scout can complete the badge, even if there are requirements that are impossible for that particular Scout. When the rest of the group is presented with badges, but he or she is not, it can seem unfair to the Scout and the family. It is vital that the leaders and family are on the same page about whether or not the Scout is encouraged to participate and important that the family manage the expectations of the Scout.*

Currently (2021), an Eagle Scout must earn 13 merit badges out of an “Eagle-required” list of 17 merit badges, and an additional 8 badges of the Scout’s choosing, for a total of 21. Ten of the 13 badges are specific badges and the other three allow a choice between two or three related badges. These badge alternatives are built into the regular advancement requirements and don’t require special permission. **As the Scout finishes the First Class rank, it is time to make a plan for these “Eagle-required” badges**. A good target is to try to have all of the achievable Eagle-required badges completed by the time the Scout turns 16 years old. This leaves time to get alternative badges approved and to finish them before age 18.

When planning for the Eagle-required badges, we want to avoid false starts and wasted effort for the Scout while giving the Scout a chance to strive, succeed, and surprise the adults. Like before, the planning review needs to look at all of the requirements for all of the Eagle-required badges and determine which badges cannot be completed due to the Scout's disabilities. Some borderline requirements may have to be attempted in order to be sure. **Alternative merit badges need to be selected to provide similar challenge and learning experiences** to the originals. There is a special form (BSA 512-730) for requesting alternative merit badges for the Eagle rank. This form includes lists of possible alternative badges to consider for some of the badges. The exact badge to pick will depend on the individual and the details of his or her disabilities.

## GETTING ALTERNATIVES APPROVED FOR SCOUTS BSA

There are four types of special exceptions available to Scouts with disabilities. They are:

- Substituting alternative requirements for regular requirements for the Scout through First Class ranks
- Substituting merit badges for badges on the Eagle-required list
- Getting to remain in Scouts BSA indefinitely (and continue to work on advancement)
- Getting to register as a Scout when you are already too old to ordinarily register

The people reviewing the applications for exceptions have difficult work because they have to assess the necessity of the exceptions and protect the advancement system from abuses. It creates problems when the reviewers receive requests at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour. It forces the reviewers to act quickly and denies them chances to ask follow-up questions and gather more information before making a decision.

For all of the exceptions, a packet of documents will need to be assembled to support the request. The council advancement committee can give you specific requirements for your situation. These documents typically include:

- **A completed request form.** Some types of requests do not have an official form, so this is not always required. Requests need to spell out the specific alternatives requirements or badges that are being requested. There are no general waivers to be granted for these.
- **A letter from a parent, guardian, or Scout petitioning the Scout council for the exception.** The letter needs to describe the disability in some detail so the reviewer understands the nature and severity of the disability, and how long the disability may last.
- **A supporting letter from the unit leader that endorses the request for an exception.** This is a place for the unit leader to put the Scout's disabilities into a Scouting context and further explain how the Scout's

disabilities interfere with advancement tasks.

- **A letter of explanation from the Scout directly (when possible).** It is good for the Scout to be his or her own advocate in this process, and it is good for the reviewer to get the Scout's perspective on the disabilities in his or her own words.
- **A completed medical form,** or more precisely, the BSA Annual Health and Medical Record form. Parts A, B, and C need to be completed just as if the Scout was going to summer camp. This establishes that the Scout is healthy enough to participate in Scouting and is primarily used in this process for people who remain or become Scouts at an advanced age. There is not enough detail on this form to explain a disability.
- **A written statement from a qualified health professional.** This is not always a medical doctor. Depending on the nature of the disability, the appropriate professional might be a physician, neurologist, psychiatrist, psychologist, speech therapist, special education diagnostician, or special education administrator. The statement needs to explain the disability and the Scout's capabilities and limitations. It needs to explain whether the limitations are permanent, or if not, how long they can be expected to prevent the Scout from fulfilling the typical requirements. The health professional should be shown what alternatives are being requested, to assure that there is no medical/health obstacle to completing the alternatives if they are approved by BSA.
- **Copies of existing plans for treatment or accommodations are not mandatory, but can help** the reviewers get a better picture of the Scout. For example, an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 plan from the Scout's school can provide extra information. Diagnostic test results, treatment summaries, and reports from health professionals can help. **It is important to recognize that these documents are generally confidential** in one way or another. It is the parent or guardian's choice whether or not to disclose them and these documents should not be copied, distributed, or permanently archived by anyone in the review process. They are to be returned once the review is complete.

**Rank Requirements** – Alternatives for rank requirements are only available for the ranks up to and including First Class. There is not an official application form for alternative rank requirements, so an ISAP or written letter can be used for this purpose. This request is submitted to the council advancement committee. The committee may want to talk to the Scout, the family, and/or the unit leader. The BSA Annual Health and Medical Record form is not typically required for this kind of request.

**Merit Badges** – BSA 512-730 is the official form for requesting alternative merit badges for the Eagle rank. It is submitted to the district advancement committee and forwarded to the council advancement committee. The BSA Annual Health and Medical Record form is not typically required for this kind of request. Merit badges are substituted on a badge-for-badge basis. There is no provision to earn part of an

Eagle-required badge and part of another badge to make a whole badge. There is no provision to modify or replace single requirements within a merit badge.

The Scout should request all of the alternative badges that will be needed at one time. While a Scout should earn as many of the Eagle-required badges as possible before making a request, there is an exception for situations where the need for an alternative is obvious. In that situation, you wait until the Scout is working on the Star rank to make the first request for the obvious needs, and then if needed make a second request later, after maximum progress has been made.

A Scout is not allowed to use a merit badge that has already been earned as a substitute for an Eagle-required merit badge. If a Scout anticipates needing alternative badges, but needs to wait until the maximum number of Eagle-required badges are completed before making a request, the Scout needs to be careful about earning merit badges that might make good alternatives. You may want to put off working on your first choice for an alternative badge until you have received approval for the alternative badges, even if you could complete the badge earlier.

**Staying in Scouting Past the Program Age Range, or Registering an Adult as a Scout** – These are actually the same process. A person that wants to be a Scout but has a permanent and severe disability can be granted a special status that allows him or her to join Scouting and participate indefinitely on a youth basis, regardless of calendar age. In Scoutspeak this is called Registration Beyond the Age of Eligibility or RBAE. A Scout that enjoyed the program while younger than 18 can continue on as a physical adult, and a person that is physically an adult can become a Scout even if he or she was never a Scout when younger.

In order to qualify, the combined effect of the disabilities has to be great enough that the person can only advance at much slower rate than other Scouts. A person with more than one type of disability can qualify for this special status based on the combined effects of all the disabilities, even if each of the individual disabilities is not that severe. With this special status, there are no longer time limits on advancement. As a practical matter, such people usually live in some kind of supported situation (living with family or at a group home). The Scout unit they join may be a special program of a group home or support agency that is tailored to their needs.

BSA 512-935 is the official form for requesting Registration Beyond the Age of Eligibility. It is submitted to the council Scout executive<sup>[4]</sup> rather than the council advancement committee. In addition to the usual documents, either a completed “youth” application form or proof of current BSA membership needs to be attached to the request. RBAE status can be requested before the Scout ages out under the regular rules so that there is no interruption in membership.

## **GETTING EXCEPTIONS APPROVED – SEA SCOUTS AND VENTURING**

A Scout registered as a Venturer or a Sea Scout may work on Scouts BSA advancement as long as he or she meets the age requirements for Scouts BSA or has

been granted RBAE status. The procedure for approving exceptions is the same as described in the section above.

Like with other Scouting programs, Venture crew Advisors and Sea Scout Skippers have a degree of flexibility that is built into the regular advancement requirements that may be enough to accommodate a disability. In situations where Venture and Sea Scout advancement requirements cannot be met because of a disability, it is possible to apply for alternative requirements. The process for this is the **same process used** to apply for alternative requirements for the First Class and under ranks **in Scouts BSA**.

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[1] Rules related to special needs and disabilities are located primarily in Section 10 of the *Guide to Advancement*.

[2] The unofficial term for this is “stealth advancement” where leaders keep track even though the Scout does not.

[3] An invisible disability or special need is a difference that doesn’t change the way the person looks or moves, but does make learning, organizing, or demonstrating knowledge for requirements extra hard.

[4] The council executive board is responsible for reviewing RBAE applications, but they can delegate that responsibility to another council committee. Most often that is the council advancement committee, but not always. That is why the instructions are to send the application to the council Scout executive.