**5 Common Mistakes on the BJCP Tasting Exam**

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One of the unspoken truths about the BJCP Tasting Exam is that it isn’t just a test of your brewing knowledge; it is also a test of your ability to *quickly* *communicate* that knowledge. Too often, as a grader, I find myself having to mark down exams which were obviously written by smart, talented brewers because the examinee didn’t know what to say on the tasting exam and how to say it.

This document summarizes five common mistakes on the exam which are committed by otherwise well-prepared examinees. Take this advice to heart and you will be able to communicate your brewing knowledge effectively on the exam. DON’T MAKE THESE MISTAKES!

**1) Reciting the Guidelines, Rather Than Tasting the Beer**

***\* DESCRIBE THE BEER IN FRONT OF YOU!* Remember this, even if you forget everything else!**

*\* Don’t assume that the beer is (or isn’t) “to style.”* It’s a common trick on the exam for one or more of the beers to be in the wrong sub-style (e.g., English IPA entered as American IPA). And, even a beer which is supposed to be a “classic example” might have faults.

*\* Only make judgments about the beer after you’ve fully analyzed it* - at the end of a particular scoring section or in the Overall Impression section.

*\* Don’t go into a lot of detail about how the beer fits the style.* Keep your analysis of Aroma, Appearance, Flavor and Mouthfeel faults brief. If you must comment on a fault in those sections of the scoresheet, all that is needed is a short remark, such as “lacks body,” too dark,” or “too bitter” following your description of a particular element.

You also don’t need to point out aspects of the beer which are “to style.” If you wish to reassure the brewer, point out a particularly pleasant sensation, or remark on an unusual but acceptable element in the beer (e.g., American aroma hops in an English IPA), just write a brief comment after your description of that element, such as “Good,” “OK,” or “Delicious!”

**2) Incomplete Scoresheets**

*\* 20% of your grade is based on Completeness.* It directly affects your Perception, Descriptive Ability and Feedback scores. This makes it the most important part of the exam.

*\* ADD YOUR SCORES CORRECTLY!* Assign a score to each section of the scoresheet and make sure you add them up correctly. If necessary, it’s legitimate to use a simple four-function calculator to add your scores. This is a big fault, because incorrectly added scores cause lots of grief for contest organizers, since they have to deal with brewers who are sure their beer would have won except for the scoring error. Math mistakes are also a sure way to make you look like an idiot, undermining your credibility as a judge.

*\* Write something about EVERY keyword listed* for the Aroma, Appearance, Flavor, Mouthfeel, and Overall Impression descriptors. (Keywords are the descriptors listed in 8-point type below the various sections of the scoresheet.) If necessary, check them off as you go.

*\* If you don't detect a particular sensation, say so!* For example, if you don't detect "Other palate sensations" write, "No other palate sensations." But, only mention missing elements which are relevant to the beer. For example, writing “No DMS” is meaningless for an English Barleywine, since that style isn’t prone to producing DMS. But, writing “No diacetyl” is a valid observation, since it points the absence of an element which is acceptable for that style.

*\* Remember that hops contribute both bitterness and flavor.* So always mention both in your flavor description.

*\* Remember that beer is a grain based beverage.* So always mention malt character (or its absence) in aroma, flavor and, if applicable, mouthfeel.

*\* If you detect a particular characteristic in the aroma, mention whether it carries through to the flavor and, if applicable, the mouthfeel.* For example, if you get diacetyl in the beer’s aroma, you should also mention whether you got it in the flavor and/or as a mouthfeel slickness.

*\* Remember, head has color, texture and retention.* So, always write something along the lines of “X-textured, Y-colored head with Z retention.” (e.g., “high, rocky, off-white head, lingers well.”)

*\* Fill out all the checkboxes as appropriate.* You should always fill in the Stylistic Accuracy, Technical Merit and Intangibles checkboxes at the bottom of the sheet. If you detect a particular descriptor in your description of the beer, check it off on the Descriptor Definitions, even if it’s not a fault. If you wish, you can write a brief comment next to the descriptor checkbox and/or circle the appropriate characteristic. For example, you could check off “phenolic” for the expected clove-like aroma in a hefeweizen, circle “clove-like” and then scribble “- OK” next to it.

**3) Making Assumptions About the Beer**

*\* Don’t write anything which implies that you know exactly how the beer was made or what ingredients were used to make it* (e.g., “extract tang,” “noble hops,” “haze from dry-hopping,” “lots of age”).

*\* Don’t assume characteristics which “should” be in a beer of a particular style are actually present.*

*\* Don’t go hunting for faults.* Don’t try to “game the exam” by assuming that certain beers must be flawed or not to style. If you detect one fault, it’s legitimate to try to find other, related faults, such as looking for chill haze if you detect astringency in mouthfeel or looking for acetaldehyde if you detect diacetyl. But, don’t assume that just because you detect one fault that the other faults are present.

*\* If you must make assumptions, at least qualify them.* For example, it is legitimate to write, “reminiscent of English hops” or “appearance of aging.” It’s better to precisely describe the sensations, however.

**4) Vague Descriptions**

*\* Describe each sensation as precisely as you can.* Try to describe its location, intensity and precise character. For example, “Initial moderate bread and graham-cracker notes. . .” would be a very good way to describe the malt aroma of a well-made German pilsner. If you “flash” on a memory of some food, material or location, mention it if appropriate to do so. It’s always great if you can add a bit of “evocative language” to your scoresheet, such as writing “campfire in a pine forest” to describe the flavor of a smoke beer dry hopped with American hops which give piney and woody notes.

*\* Avoid “categorical” or vague descriptors, such as “English hops,” “German malt” or “fruity esters.”* Remember, you’re describing a specific beer, not reciting the guidelines. You need to be more specific than the guidelines are. Also remember that different ingredients in the same category can have different aromas and flavors. For example, Fuggles and Goldings hops smell and taste different from each other, even though they’re both English aroma hops. It is legitimate to describe very distinctive brewing ingredients which taste more like themselves than anything else, such as Pilsner, Munich or Vienna malt; just don’t make assumptions about ingredients! For example, “bready Pils-like malt notes” would be a fine way to describe the flavor of a Munich Helles.

*\* Don’t Editorialize.* Your words inherently express your opinions; you don’t need to amplify that fact. Avoid statements like, “I would have liked . . .,” “I feel . . ,” or “I don’t like . . .” since they make your judgments sound less objective. Don’t lecture the brewer on how the beer doesn’t hit the style. Your descriptions, score and feedback tell the story better. Instead, briefly hit the beer’s major faults and merits in the Overall Impression section.

*\* Finish and Aftertaste are actually part of Flavor.* Don’t mention mouthfeel descriptors when describing flavor, or vice-versa. For characteristics which can be present in both flavor and mouthfeel, be sure to make the differences are clear to the graders, so that they know that you know the difference. For example, you might describe “alcohol flavor” in the flavor section, and “smooth alcohol warmth” in the mouthfeel section. Or, if a beer has harsh lingering bitterness and astringency which crosses from flavor into mouthfeel, write, “Harsh lingering bitter aftertaste” in the Flavor section, but “harsh astringency develops late” in the Mouthfeel section.

**5) Weak Feedback**

*\* Feedback is 20% of your score.* For brewers, it’s the second most important part of the scoresheet after the overall score. They might ignore your brilliant prose, but they will always look at the score and check out your suggestions to improve the beer. This is the point on the scoresheet where you can either come across as a homebrewing god or as a pretentious idiot. Don’t blow it.

*\* Always give a brief statement of your degree of appreciation* of the beer, which matches the beer’s overall score. Example: If you give the beer a 27, you should write something like “Decent” or “Pretty good.” But, for a beer you score at 39, you should write something like “Very good!” or “Delicious!” For a flawed beer, try to find something to praise first before delivering criticism. For example, “Potentially good recipe, but serious sanitation flaws” or “Tasty beer, but misses the style on several points.”

*\* You need to give at least TWO points of detailed, useful feedback.*

*\* Feedback should address faults detected in Aroma, Appearance, Flavor and Mouthfeel.*  It’s not fair to the brewer to just list a fault in the Overall Impression section unless it’s an overall fault with the beer, like low carbonation or oxidation.

At the very least, an experienced brewer (or grader) should be able to read between the lines in your description of Aroma, Appearance, Flavor and Mouthfeel and realize why you came to your troubleshooting conclusions. For example, “dull malt, no esters” in aroma, plus, “paper and light sherry notes” in flavor is a legitimate description of oxidation that you mention in overall impression.

*\* Mention the most severe faults first, then less important ones.* For example, for a badly infected and astringent beer which is too dark for style, hit the need for sanitation first, then solutions for the astringency, and finally the color problem.

*\* Give at least one method of correcting each fault you describe.*

*\* Be precise and technical.* For example, don’t just write, “boil your wort longer” if you meant to write, “Use a full, rolling, open wort boil of at least 60 minutes to drive off DMS.”

*\* Make conditional statements if your advice isn’t applicable to all situations.* Brilliant advice on mashing is useless if the brewer made the beer from a kit. Wisdom on using more Munich malt in an Oktoberfest isn’t applicable if the brewer already used 100% Munich malt. If necessary, use conditional terms or “weasel words” to hedge your bets. For example, good advice on controlling astringency might be, “If you mash/steep your grains, keep sparge/steeping water temperature below 170 °F.”

*\* If a beer is miscategorized, it’s legitimate feedback to suggest that it be entered in a different category,* but only if it would actually be a good example of that style. For example, a sour blonde ale probably isn’t going to make a great Berlinerweisse. On the other hand, an otherwise good English Pale Ale with mild spicy and gingery phenols might just make a great Belgian Pale Ale.

*\* Unless you give the beer a perfect score, you should always provide some feedback.* Since it takes a good judge to give great feedback on great beer, the graders will be lenient if you can’t be as technical as you’d like, but you’ve still got to try to give those two suggestions to improve the beer. For example, for a Tripel which scores at a 46, legitimate feedback might be, “Could finish slightly drier - tweaks to malt bill or mashing schedule (if mashing) might help. Possibly use, or slightly boost, candi sugar additions.”