

5 Common Mistakes on the Tasting Exam

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).

- 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.*

* *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. All that is needed is short comments, such as "lacks body," "too dark," or "too bitter" following your description.

- You don't need to point out aspects of the beer which are "to style." If you wish to reassure the brewer, or point out a particularly pleasant sensation, however, just write a brief comment after your description, 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.

* *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."

- Only mention missing sensations if they're 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 hop flavor" is a valid observation, since it points out a major flaw for that style.

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

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. 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, "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. Example: “Initial moderate graham-cracker notes. . .” would be a good way to describe the malt aroma of a well-made German pilsner.

* *Avoid “categorical” or vague descriptors, such as “English hops,” “Pils malt” or “fruity esters.”*

- Remember, you’re describing a specific beer, not reciting the guidelines. You need to be more specific than they are.

- Different ingredients in the same category can have different aromas and flavors. For example, Fuggles and Goldings hops smell and taste different, even though they’re both English hops.

* *Avoid editorializing.*

- Avoid statements like “I would have liked . . .,” “I feel . . .,” or “I don’t like . . .” These statements 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.

* *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 clear to the graders. For example, you might describe “alcohol flavor” in the flavor section, and “smooth alcohol warmth” 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.

* *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.

* *Mention the most severe faults first, then less important ones.*

* *Give at least one method of correcting each fault.*

* *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.* For example, “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.*

* *Unless you give the beer a perfect score, you should always provide some feedback.*