

# How to Judge Beer

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## Introduction

This guide has two purposes. First, it is intended to help you become a better beer judge by teaching you how to judge beer and how to fill out scoresheets in BJCP sanctioned competitions. Second, it is intended to help you apply your judging experience to get a Recognized or better score (60% or better) on the BJCP Tasting Exam.

Much of the work in this guide is adapted from previous works by Steve Antoch, Scott Bickham, Al Boyce, Mark Emiley, Peter Garafolo, Randy Mosher, Kevin Pratt, Gordon Strong, David Teckham, and others. See the References section for details.

Special thanks to Kevin Pratt for reviewing earlier versions

### Glassware

The shape of your drinking vessel, and the type of material it's made from, can affect your sensory perceptions.

Glasses shaped like a truncated inverted cone, like the typical 12 oz. "shaker" beer glass used in bars, or the 4 oz. hard plastic taster cups used to judge most homebrew competitions, aren't the best vessels for beer-tasting.

The ideal glass to use when tasting beer *on your own* is a stemmed 2-6 oz. "tulip" glass, or a similar glass such as a wine glass, brandy snifter or fancy Belgian "bollecke" glass. These help head formation and retention as well as concentrating aromas.

When judging beer in competition, you should use whatever glasses the competition organizers offer you, so that all beers are judged in a uniform fashion.

\* Soft plastic cups might have a thin layer of oily mold release compound on them which can seriously damage head formation and retention. Avoid using them for beer tasting.

\* Unusually shaped glasses, glasses made from colored glass or plastic, or glasses with thick walls (e.g., jiggers or beer mugs), might affect your perception of color.

\* Ceramic and metal vessels have several problems. First, they're opaque which makes it impossible to perceive beer color or to properly assess head formation and retention. Second, some are made using metals or glazes which aren't food safe. Over time they can leach dangerous heavy metal compounds into your drink. If beer is left standing in a metal mug for an excessive length of time (i.e., overnight), it can sometimes impart metallic off-flavors.

\* Glasses (or beer bottles) which have been washed with dishwashing detergent or dish soap might retain residual surfactant agents which also kill head formation and retention. Glasses used for tasting beer should be cleaned with commercial beer glass cleaning agents or carefully rinsed and cleaned in a sink and then heat sanitized in a dishwasher using just hot water.

\* When taking the BJCP tasting exam, ask the proctor if it is OK to bring in your own glassware. Just make sure that your glasses are clean before you bring them in! If you must use the same glass for different beer samples, make sure it is carefully rinsed between beers. *Warning:* This could be considered to be cheating!

of this guide.

## What Isn't In This Guide

While I've written this manual for novice judges, it assumes some familiarity with the BJCP, its style guidelines and its competition procedures. Before you read this guide, you should have read (or at least skimmed) the following documents:

*BJCP Judge Procedures Manual*  
(<http://www.bjcp.org/judgeprocman.php>)

*BJCP Sanctioned Competition Handbook*  
(<http://www.bjcp.org/docs/SCPCompHdbk.pdf>)

*Judge Instructions*  
([http://www.bjcp.org/docs/SCP\\_JudgeInstructions.pdf](http://www.bjcp.org/docs/SCP_JudgeInstructions.pdf))

*Judge Procedures Manual*  
(<http://www.bjcp.org/judgeprocman.php>)

*BJCP Membership Guide/First Time Judge Packet*  
([http://www.bjcp.org/docs/First\\_Time\\_Judge\\_Packet.pdf](http://www.bjcp.org/docs/First_Time_Judge_Packet.pdf))

You should also have a passing familiarity with the style guidelines:

*BJCP Style Guidelines*  
([http://www.bjcp.org/docs/2008\\_Guidelines.pdf](http://www.bjcp.org/docs/2008_Guidelines.pdf))

Finally, you should have a basic familiarity with the beer scoresheet, beer-tasting terminology and common off-flavors and aromas. These resources are a starting point:

*Beer Fault List* ([http://www.bjcp.org/docs/Beer\\_faults.pdf](http://www.bjcp.org/docs/Beer_faults.pdf))  
*BJCP Beer Checklist*  
([http://www.bjcp.org/docs/Beer\\_checklist.pdf](http://www.bjcp.org/docs/Beer_checklist.pdf))

*BJCP Beer Scoresheet*  
([http://www.bjcp.org/docs/SCP\\_BeerScoreSheet.pdf](http://www.bjcp.org/docs/SCP_BeerScoreSheet.pdf))

*BJCP Exam Interim Study Guide*  
(<http://www.bjcp.org/study.php>)

*Instructions for Checklist Scoresheet Version*  
([http://www.bjcp.org/docs/Checklist\\_instructions.pdf](http://www.bjcp.org/docs/Checklist_instructions.pdf))

## Part I - How to Taste Beer

The method I describe below is a good method of assessing a beer sample when judging in competition, although each judge will have their own method.

### 1. Prepare Your Scoresheet

Fill in the scoresheet header, including information about the beer and yourself.

*Hint:* Prepare a sheet of Avery 5160-type labels with your personal information on them. This saves you the trouble of having to fill out each form by hand and is easier for the entrant to read. A sign of a well-run homebrew competition is that it will have sheets of labels prepared for each judge.

### 2. Inspect the Bottle

Look for any obvious problems with the contents, and comment on them as necessary. Possible issues include:

\* **Bottle Appearance.** A dusty or dirty bottle, or one where the label isn't completely removed, might be an indicator of problems with sanitation or process control.

\* **Condensation and bottle temperature.** Condensation indicates a very cold bottle which might need time to warm before it is at proper serving temperature. *Don't make the mistake of judging the beer while it is at refrigerator temperature!* Subtle aromas, flavors and mouthfeel sensations become more noticeable if the beer has warmed to at least 50 °F.

\* **Foreign Objects in the Bottle.** This is your chance to notice anything in the bottle that shouldn't be there before you sample the contents. While almost no brewer will deliberately enter a bottle of bad beer in competition, mistakes can happen. Most commonly, I encounter things such as bits of hop cones and flakes of trub, but I've also encountered beer which contained fragments of broken glass in the bottle, and bottles of cider which had golf ball-sized globules of coagulated pectin in them. Other judges have encountered far worse.

\* **Excessive headspace.** The beer doesn't completely rise into the neck. In a 12 oz. bottle, this is about 3" below the cap. This is usually harmless, but could be a possible cause of oxidation or poor carbonation. Note that homebrewers typically overfill their bottles, so what would be considered a "normal fill" for homebrew would be considered an "overfill" for a commercial beer; commercial beer bottles are filled to just above the bottle's shoulder.

\* **Insufficient headspace.** The beer level is very close to the cap, usually within about 2" of the cap for a 12 oz. bottle. This is usually harmless, and is commonly encountered when brewers dispense their beer into bottles from a keg and "cap on foam" to minimize oxidation. In a bottle-conditioned beer, insufficient headspace might be a possible cause of poor carbonation. Contact with an unlined bottle cap might be responsible for metallic off-flavors.

\* **Rings at the fill line.** This is a possible sign of bacterial infection, but is more typically just residual hop or malt residue. Fruit beers might also have a harmless ring at the neck due to pectin or tannins.

\* **Rust on cap.** This is a sign improper storage. It is a possible cause of metallic off-flavors, oxidation, and/or loss of carbonation. It might also indicate that the beer has been aged for a long time.

\* **Sediment.** Most homebrew will have a thin layer of sediment on the bottom of the bottle. The presence of sediment is harmless, but could indicate age or an infection problem. Sediment might also cause off-flavors due to yeast autolysis. A thin layer of tightly packed sediment is usually harmless. Excessive or loose sediment might indicate a problem.

\* **DO NOT MAKE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE BEER BASED ON BOTTLE INSPECTION ALONE.** Only use your observations of bottle appearance to confirm or reject origins of potential faults you find in Aroma, Appearance, Flavor and Mouthfeel. It is also legitimate to use observations of bottle appearance as basis for feedback in the Overall Impression section of the scoresheet.

\* **DO NOT TAKE OFF POINTS FOR PROBLEMS WITH BOTTLE APPEARANCE.** If the beer itself has problems, save your score reductions for the other sections of the scoresheet.

### 3. Observe the Bottle as It is Opened

This is a continuation of your bottle inspection.

## Keeping your Senses Fresh

When judging big flight of beers, particularly strong, sour or hoppy beers, your palate might become fatigued, making it difficult to make fine flavor distinctions. When judging any beer, your nose quickly becomes habituated to certain aromas, making it harder to detect them later. The following techniques can help.

\* **Refresh your sense of smell by smelling something with a different, but relatively neutral aroma.** A simple trick is to sniff the inside of your elbow. Your body odor and/or the aroma of your shirt fabric will help renew your sense of smell. Avoid smelling anything that's got a strong aroma of its own, and/or which is reminiscent of beer ingredients (i.e. crackers, coffee beans).

\* **Sip water between each beer sample.** Water is the best fluid for removing residual flavors from your mouth, and the bigger and more strongly flavored the beer, the more water you should be drinking. At the very least, have one large mouthful of water for every beer you sample. Better yet, match every beer sample with a similarly sized drink of water.

\* **Chew on a piece of bread or a cracker between beers.** This helps eliminate strong malty, sour, alcoholic or hoppy aromas. When judging hoppy beers, where hop resins coat the inside of your mouth, scrape the bread or cracker crumbs around the inside of your mouth, using them as a scraper or sponge to help remove hop resins.

\* **Take frequent breaks.** Give your palate and nose time to recover.

\* **Stay sober.** Intoxication reduces the acuity of all your senses. While it's difficult to avoid becoming slightly intoxicated if you're stuck judging a huge flight of strong beers, you should be drinking to evaluate the beer, not to get drunk. Limit sample sizes to no more than 2 ounces. Refrain from finishing beer samples once you've judged them, even if they're wonderful. (*Hint: Make a note of great beers in the flight you're judging, quickly recap them and set them aside. If the rest of the bottle isn't needed for mini-BoS or the Best of Show round, you can enjoy them once you've finished judging.*)

\* Listen for the hiss of escaping gas as the bottle is uncapped. A hiss, or lack of it, is a good indicator of carbonation levels.

\* Observe any gushing. If the beer gushes, note the texture, intensity and duration of the foam. (A long, slow gush, with a finely-beaded foam is often a sign of a lactobacillus infection.)

\* Once you've poured the beer, quickly recap it and set it aside. Not only will this help preserve aromas and carbonation if you need to pour yourself another sample or send the beer on to mini-Best of Show, it reduces the risk of spills.

### 4. Observe the Beer as It is Poured Into the Glass

Pour 1-3 oz. into the glass. If possible, pour "straight down the middle" to maximize head production and to encourage aroma development, although beers with high levels of carbonation and good head formation might need to be poured down the side of the glass to avoid excessive foam.

\* Notice the level of head formation, volume and retention.

\* Note that a very small sample beer might seem lighter or clearer, or seem to have a lower head, than normal.

\* If you can't complete steps 3 & 4, swirl the beer in the glass a bit to rouse the head and get it to off-gas a bit.

## 5. Smell the Beer

Each judge has his own method of smelling beer aroma. Regardless of method, the idea is to get the beer aroma deep into your nasal passages, both through your nose and through your sinuses. *Choose one method and use it consistently*, so you perceive all beers in the flight using the same methods. This is one method:

A. Quickly but carefully pick up the beer glass and bring it

### ***When to Ask For a Second Bottle?***

Most competitions require brewers to submit at least two bottles, so that if the beer goes on to Best of Show, the BoS panel has a fresh bottle to taste.

Despite the fact that most beers don't advance to BoS, you should get in the habit of judging beer using as small a sample as possible (i.e., 1-2 oz.). This helps keep your palate fresh and your senses at their peak. You should also take small samples when you know that a beer might go on to mini-BoS.

That said, it is acceptable to ask to open the second bottle during the first round of judging if:

\* The first bottle is obviously unfit to drink (e.g., due to extreme infection or the presence of foreign objects in the bottle).

\* You break or spill the first bottle before you've had a chance to taste the beer. If all judges on the panel have already had at least one sample, and the beer is "competitive" (i.e., likely to advance to BoS) avoid calling for the second bottle and judge using the samples you have. If necessary, redistribute the beer you've already poured.

\* If rough handling has roused sediment in the bottle, for a style where haze is unacceptable (or for a beer where the brewer has stated that the beer is intended to be served without rousing the sediment, even when it's permissible for the style). In this case, you should set the first bottle aside without opening it. Let it sit until the end of the flight and see if the sediment has fallen out of suspension. If so, judge the first bottle. If not, judge the second bottle instead and send the first bottle to BoS.

\* If the beer is obviously not to style. Sometimes competition volunteers mislabel bottles, and sometimes brewers grab the wrong bottle when preparing beers for competition.

- First ask if the other bottle has a similar appearance to the bottle you're judging. If not, and if the second bottle is closer to the proper appearance for the style, judge it instead. This is easy if you get a beer that looks and tastes like Porter and you're judging Pilsners, harder if you're judging Belgian Strong Ales.

- If both bottles look similar, check with the Registrar first to determine if the beer was entered in the right category. If so, you're within your rights to judge the first bottle and let the brewer suffer the consequences. Otherwise, immediately cap the first bottle, give it back to the cellarmaster and notify the judge director of the problem. If he's lucky, another team of judges will be judging beers in the proper category and they can sample the first bottle as well. Otherwise, a future judge panel will need to judge the second bottle.

to your mouth. Note any initial, fleeting aromas.

B. Push the lip of the glass halfway into your mouth with the glass upright, so that your nose is just over the beer inside the glass and is almost touching the far side of the glass.

C. Cup your off hand over the top of the glass, so that your upper mouth and nose are covered, to trap as much aroma as possible.

D. Inhale through both your mouth and your nose so that aromas get into all your nasal passages. Take several short, quick sniffs. Notice the aromas.

E. Sniff again, inhaling slowly, for 5-10 seconds and notice the aromas again.

F. Exhale through your nose so that aromas in your mouth get into your nasal passages. Notice the aromas again.

G. Try to focus on one aroma or type of aroma (e.g., hop character) at a time. Tease out prominent aromas first, and then hunt for subtle characteristics.

H. If possible, cover the sample with a coaster or folded piece of paper, and let it sit for a few minutes. Sample it again once it has warmed up. Determine if the aroma has changed as a result.

I. Repeat steps B through H as necessary.

## 6. Hold the Beer Up to a Light and Observe It Again

If you don't have a strong light source handy, try shining a pocket flashlight through the beer. Putting the flashlight lens against the bottom of the cup and letting the light shine up through the beer gives a good indicator of suspended sediment as well as clarity and highlights in the beer.

A. Assess color and clarity.

B. Notice any highlights.

C. Gently swirl the glass again and observe any viscosity or "legs" as the beer runs back into the glass.

D. Notice head retention, texture and color.

E. Let the sample sit for a few minutes. Note changes to head retention, clarity, etc. as the beer warms and settles.

## 7. Taste the Beer

This is the most important part of the process, and every judge will have their own method of tasting beer. As with smelling beer, *Choose one method and use it consistently*, so you perceive all beers in the flight using the same methods. This is one method:

A. Take an initial sip which just passes your lips and assess it. Assess any initial fleeting flavors.

B. Take a deeper sip which coats your mouth. Assess flavors which take a moment to develop.

C. Swirl the sample around in your mouth and hold it there for a few seconds. Assess flavors which take a while to develop or identify.

D. Swallow the sample. Assess flavors which only become apparent in the aftertaste.

E. Take further small sips, assessing different elements with each sip.

F. Try to focus on one flavor or type of flavor (e.g., hop bitterness or hop flavor) at a time. Tease out prominent aromas first, and then hunt for subtle characteristics.

G. If possible, cover the sample with a coaster or folded piece of paper, and let it sit for a few minutes. Sample it again once it has warmed up. Determine if the flavor has changed as a result.

H. Repeat steps A-G as necessary.

## 8. Write Down Your Perceptions

A. Write down initial sensory perceptions as you assess the beer.

B. Tick off any check boxes for sensory descriptors as you encounter them.

C. Write more complete descriptions for each section once you've completed your tasting.

D. Complete your perceptions when you resample the beer.

E. Based on your perception of aroma, appearance, flavor and mouthfeel, describe Overall Impression.

F. Use the Overall Impression section to give feedback.

## 9. Discuss Your Perceptions

When all judges on the panel have finished writing their scoresheet, discuss your findings with them.

\* If you've got personal weaknesses, say so up front, before you start judging, so the other judges know what to expect. (e.g., "I'm sensitive to phenols." "I don't particularly care for Cascade hops.")

\* Be diplomatic. If you have a difference of opinion, try to explain your side of the argument as quickly and precisely as you can.

\* Be polite. Often you'll be paired with a judge you don't know well. Even if you're judging with old friends, hunger, fatigue, alcohol and time pressure can make things tense. Keep your comments and tone "politically correct" and "safe for work." If you screw up, or if you think you're rubbing the other judge the wrong way, apologize immediately.

\* Refrain from audibly praising or criticizing the beer until the discussion period.

\* If you've detected a characteristic, or a potential problem, that the other judge hasn't found, try to explain your findings as precisely as you can.

\* If another judge detects something you missed, listen carefully to what they've said and resample the beer to try to find it. Note that everyone's sense of smell and taste is slightly different, so you (or the other judge) might be more or less sensitive to certain flavor or aroma compounds, or you might perceive the same compound in different ways.

\* Work as a team. The goal is to give the brewer good feedback on their beer, not to impress the other judges with your knowledge, impose your opinions on them, or be a "rubber stamp" for the other judge's opinions.

\* Adjust your scores if necessary, based on the other judge's scores. Technically, all scores for a beer must be within 7 points of each other, but many judges like much tighter groupings, with all scores falling within 3 to 5 points of each other. If you must adjust your score, it's better to add or subtract a few points from multiple areas than to radically change your scoring in one area, like overall impression.

\* If you can't agree on a score with the other judges, "agree to disagree" and quickly move on. If you're the low-scoring judge, bring your score up a few points. If you're the high-scoring judge, bring your score down a few points.

## Offering Criticism

The downside of being a beer judge is that you have to taste a lot of bad beer. While it's tempting to write exactly what you think of a badly flawed beer and score it accordingly, the ability to say nice things about a beer which, literally stinks is a vital judging skill.

\* **Follow the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.** More succinctly; don't be a jerk. Give the sort of score and feedback you'd want to receive yourself - honest, accurate, complete and useful, but as non-judgmental as possible. Remember, almost no brewer will deliberately send a bad beer to a competition. And, even if they know it's bad, they probably want to know *why* it's bad. It's your job to tell them how to fix their problem.

\* **Be constructive and supportive.** Don't just list faults, give suggestions for how the brewer could make the beer better the next time he brews it. The better you understand the style and the processes involved, and the better you are at diagnosing problems based on off-characteristics, the better your feedback will be.

\* **Be diplomatic.** Accentuate the positive: even if the beer is terrible, try to find something nice to say about it. Don't let the sarcasm, dark humor or rude comments go beyond the judging table. (Even then, try to avoid it; the brewer might be in the room.) Never use negative non-technical terms, like "bad" or "nasty." As a rule of thumb, if you wouldn't put your criticism in a report for a paying client or an email to an uptight boss, don't put it on the scoresheet. If necessary, use the passive voice, "weasel words" and technical terms to soften the blow (although, normally, it's better to use the active voice and get directly to the point). For example, instead of writing "This beer smells like ass!" write, "Unfortunately, an intense indole aroma made it difficult to fully appreciate this beer's merits. . ."

\* **Don't make it personal.** Avoid using the personal pronoun "I" in your comments, since it can seem imperious or condescending. (e.g., "I liked the aroma, but I didn't like the flavor.") Be careful how you use the personal pronoun "you," since it could be interpreted as a personal attack. Don't make statements which could be taken as accusatory, belittling, condescending or demanding (e.g., "Did you forget to boil your wort?", "If you're only brewing from a kit . . .", "Increase your hop bitterness").

\* **Don't make too many assumptions.** You don't know how the beer was made, how it was packaged or how old it is. Don't use terms which imply that certain ingredients or techniques were used (i.e., "extract twang," "age," "English hops," "Pilsner malt").

While you want to be as specific in your feedback as possible, try to make it applicable to more than one situation. For example, if you offer advice on a malt-related issue, make sure it's equally useful to extract and all-grain brewers. Or, if you offer advice on a carbonation issue, make sure it's equally valid for a brewer who bottle conditions his beer are for one who force carbonates.

## Part II - How to Evaluate Beer

In theory, writing great scoresheets, and doing well on the tasting exam, is simple. Just perceive the beer, describe it, determine how well it fits the style requirements, assign a score, and correctly fill out the scoresheet. As always, the devil is in the details:

### 1. Perceive the Beer

\* Analyze the beer's aroma, appearance, flavor and mouthfeel in a non-judgmental fashion. The How to Taste Beer section, above, describes one method of doing this.

### 2. Describe the Beer

\* *Judge the beer in front of you.* That is, use your senses of sight, smell and taste to evaluate the beer.

- Don't make assumptions about what the beer "should" (or "shouldn't") be like.

- Make no judgments until you've fully evaluated the beer. While the sample beers are supposed to obey the rules listed for beers on the exam, anything can happen.

\* *Only describe what you detect.* Don't say that you perceived something you didn't.

\* *Omit nothing.* If you detect something, write it down. Don't say that you didn't detect something when you actually did.

\* Describe faults as you detect them. Mention faults in the Aroma, Appearance, Flavor or Mouthfeel sections, rather than just describing them in the Overall Impression section.

\* *Describe each component of aroma, appearance, flavor and mouthfeel* (See How to Fill Out the Scoresheet, below).

\* *Use clear, descriptive language.*

### Other Palate Sensations?

This keyword is a grab-bag for any other physical sensations you might feel in your mouth other than body/viscosity, texture, astringency, warmth and carbonation. Examples include:

**Cooling:** Due to menthol found in mint and similar plants. Very rare, and only found in herb/spice beers.

**Flinty/Powdery:** A slightly "dusty" or "mineral-like" sensation on the inside of the mouth, reminiscent of rock or chalk dust, talcum powder or some brands of mineral water. Imparts a drier, more lingering finish and aftertaste. Caused by high levels of minerals in the brewing water, particularly carbonates and sulfates.

**Gritty:** Actual particulate matter in the beer, typically due to bits of trub getting into the beer during packaging.

**Heat/Burning:** Due to capsaicin or similar peppery spices, which causes more lingering burning sensations than alcohol warmth. Obviously, only found in spiced beers.

**Oily/Slick:** Slick, mouth-coating sensation imparted by oils and fats. Diacetyl can also impart the sensation of oiliness or slickness in the mouthfeel, generally at levels where it can also be easily smelled and tasted.

**Resinous:** A waxy or slightly "rough" sensation imparted by hop resins or similar waxy or resinous compounds physically coating the inside of the mouth. Associated with highly hopped beers, especially those made using high-sulfate water.

### What Are Finish and Aftertaste?

Finish and Aftertaste are a bit confusing because they have elements that overlap between flavor and mouthfeel.

Finish describes the perceptions of flavor which aren't immediately detectable when you taste the beer, but develop towards the end of your sip, while Aftertaste describes flavor perceptions which linger in the mouth after you swallow.

Finish also describes the degree of residual sweetness in the beer, ranging from "very dry" (almost no residual sugar or starches) to "very sweet" (lots of residual fermentable sugars).

Beers with a moderate sweetness are higher in starches which are converted to simpler sugars by amylase enzymes in saliva. So, as you hold them in your mouth, your perception of their sweetness increases. Beers with a lingering dryness have any malt sweetness countered by some combination of hop bitter, acidic sourness, alcohol flavor or other things.

Finish can also describe the pleasantness of the flavors which develop in your mouth. Typical words used to describe this aspect are things like, "smooth," "pleasant," "rough," "harsh," or "complex."

Aftertaste is described in much the same way as finish, but can also be described in terms of duration (e.g., "brief," "lingering," or even "no aftertaste") and can sometimes include physical (i.e., mouthfeel) sensations, such as astringency, oiliness or mouth-coating resins.

\* Identify and quantify what you perceive. Pay attention to the relative intensity of perceptions.

\* Don't use vague words like "nice" or "good."

\* Don't use negative, excessively judgmental terms like "nasty."

\* If you're uncertain about something, say so.

### 3. Decide How Well the Beer Fits the Style

\* *Understand all the beer styles covered by the BJCP style guidelines.*

\* *Identify and describe stylistic merits and faults.*

- Describe serious faults first.

\* *Identify and describe technical faults.*

- Describe serious faults first.

### 4. Assign a Score

Every judge has their own method of determining and assigning scores. Choose one and stick with it. The exact method doesn't matter as long as it allows you to work quickly and accurately. See Peter Garofolo's, "How to Judge Beer" and the *Interim Study Guide* for detailed discussion of various approaches to scoring.

\* *Most beers you judge should have a score of 20-40.* Avoid more extreme scores unless you have strong justification for doing so.

\* 13 is the minimum "courtesy score." It is rarely assigned and should be reserved for truly undrinkable beers.

\* A score of 14-19 is unusual and should be reserved for badly-flawed beers which are nearly undrinkable.

\* A score of 40-45 is extremely unusual and should be reserved for exceptional beers.

\* A score of 46-50 is almost unheard of and should be reserved for unsurpassable, one-in-a-lifetime beers.

\* Beers which are truly out of style (e.g., a Light American Lager entered as a Russian Imperial Stout) are capped at a maximum score of 29.

\* Typically, most homebrewed beers score in a range from 27-35. Most professionally-brewed beers score in the range from 33-38.

\* Calibrate your scoring by judging with high ranking judges (National or better rank).

\* Tasting beers reviewed in *Zymurgy* magazine's Commercial Calibration column is another good way to calibrate your scoring.

\* Be aware of scoring biases.

- As you go along, review the scores you gave to previous beers in the flight. Look for upward or downward trends.

- Avoid "falling in love" or hating a beer and giving it too high or low a score as a result.

- Avoid "halo effect" scoring, i.e., giving the next beer you taste after tasting a great beer as higher score than it deserves.

- Avoid "rebound effect" scoring, i.e., giving the next beer you taste after tasting a terrible beer a higher (or lower) score than it deserves. This is sometimes a problem when you've got a flight of mediocre beers and you're looking for at least one beer you can reasonably send on to Best of Show or to the next round of a multi-round competition.

## 5. Fill Out the Scoresheet

This is the hard part. What to write on the scoresheet, and how to write it, separates the Apprentice judges from the Masters. This is why it's covered in its own section.

## Part III - How to Score Beer

This is the proper method of filling out the beer judging scoresheet, both when judging competitions and taking the tasting exam. If you use this method consistently, you will always give at least Recognized-level criticism for the Aroma, Appearance, Flavor and Mouthfeel sections. With practice, it is easy to give Certified to National level feedback. Master level feedback takes much more work.

A properly completed scoresheet will be accurate, consistent, complete, legible and professional in tone.

### 1. Make the Scoresheet Look Good

\* *Write legibly.* If the brewer (or graders) can't read your writing, your comments are useless.

- If possible, print rather than using cursive writing.

- Make sure your writing is clear. Faint, smudged, crabbed or tiny writing is hard to read.

\* *Write as much as possible in the space provided.* Skimpy or incomplete feedback is infuriating to the brewer and will get you a low grade on the exam.

\* *Complete the entire scoresheet.*

- Fill out the Category, Subcategory and Entry number information at the top of the sheet.

- Fill in all the check boxes at the bottom of the sheet.

- Check any stylistic descriptors that apply.

\* *Assign scores to each section.*

## Fractional Points

While it is technically legal to do so, many judges consider it to be bad practice to use fractional points when assigning scores. But, a minority of judges, especially judges who have been around long enough to remember when beer was judged on a 20-point scale, see nothing wrong with assigning fractional scores.

**Arguments Against Fractional Points:** The arguments against assigning fractional scores are as follows:

1. By using half or quarter points, you're essentially turning a 50 point scale into a 100 or 200 point scale, which negates the whole idea of having a 50 point scale.

2. Assigning fractional points places more emphasis on the score and less emphasis on your descriptive and troubleshooting abilities, which are key to writing a great scoresheet.

3. Assigning fractional points implies that your judging skills are so good that you need a more finely calibrated scale, which could be seen as pretentious.

4. Fractional scores can make it harder to calculate averaged scores and might confuse registrars and stewards who aren't used to seeing fractional points, causing them to make math or data entry errors. They might also mess up data entry programs.

**Arguments In Favor of Fractional Points:** The arguments in favor of using fractional points are:

1. They give you a broader range of scoring options for areas of the scoresheet which carry little value, notably the Appearance and Mouthfeel sections.

2. They allow you to avoid ties when assigning personal scores to beers within a flight.

**Best Practices:** If you're tempted to use a fraction, consider rounding your score up or down by a full point instead. Also, if you do assign fractional points, you'd better have the judging ability to back up your score!

As a courtesy to competition officials, stewards and judges, if you assign a fractional score, try to use fractions which add, subtract and divide easily (e.g., 0.5 rather than 13/17ths). Write fractions as a decimal (e.g., 0.5) rather than a numerator over a denominator (e.g., 1/2). Finally, keep your fractions consistent (i.e., just use half points or quarter points), and consider assigning fractions to multiple areas of the scoresheet so that your final score comes out as a whole number.

- Make sure your scores correspond to your descriptions (e.g., don't praise a beer and then give it a low score).

- Make sure that your scores add up correctly (use a calculator if needed).

### 2. Comment On Each Keyword

There are 19 different sensory aspects to each beer. You should know, and comment on, them all. If you forget a keyword, they're listed on the scoresheet under the relevant sensory characteristic.

*Note that the scoresheet doesn't list all sensory descriptors, just the most important ones.* Descriptors listed on the scoresheet are capitalized in the list below. Other important sensory descriptors are listed in parentheses.

## ***Flavor vs. Mouthfeel***

It is sometimes tricky to figure out which sensations are due to mouthfeel and which are due to flavor. Sadly, the BJCP Style Guidelines sometimes muddle things, too. They will occasionally describe mouthfeel sensations as flavors and vice-versa.

\* You will lose points on the tasting exam for using mouthfeel descriptors in the flavor section and vice-versa.

\* Remember that mouthfeel just covers the *physical* sensations of how the beer interacts with your mouth: viscosity, texture (creaminess), carbonation, alcohol/solvent heat, chemical numbing or burning and physical heat or coolness.

\* Be careful to clarify when necessary (e.g., “black pepper flavor from alcohol” or “peppery heat in mouthfeel from alcohol.”)

\* For the exam, it is important that you address both finish and aftertaste.

\* If you must mention characteristics covered by mouthfeel when describing finish and aftertaste in the flavor section, be sure to mention them again - in the same terms - in the Mouthfeel section.

**A. Aroma:** MALT, HOPS, ESTERS, and OTHER AROMATICS (Other yeast & microflora notes, aromas from added ingredients, and aromas associated with mishandling or age).

I. Ideally, you can write with one hand while sniffing the beer with the other, so you can describe aromas in a somewhat “stream of consciousness” fashion.

II. Write down initial aromas first while they’re still fresh in your mind.

III. Comment on each aspect of aroma.

IV. Focus on important elements first. (E.g., when judging a porter, focus on toasty, lightly roasted and chocolate malt notes first, base malt and hop aroma characteristics second.)

V. Note any off-characteristics.

VI. If relevant, mention the absence of expected characteristics (see Describe Each Keyword, below).

VII. Try to identify and describe the exact ingredients used. But, unless you’re absolutely certain what ingredients went into a beer, refrain from describing them (e.g., unless you’ve brewed with Wyeast 1056 hundreds of times, under a variety of conditions, don’t mention it by name. Instead, say something like “neutral yeast character,” or “very faint fruity esters.”)

VIII. Comment on how well the aspects of aroma meet the style. If you detect flaws, describe them.

**B. Appearance:** COLOR, CLARITY, HEAD RETENTION, HEAD COLOR, and HEAD TEXTURE. (Head formation, Effervescence, Color highlights, Solid matter in the beer.)

I. Comment on color. Be specific. The BJCP style guidelines list colors as follows, based on SRM value: Straw, Yellow, Gold, Deep amber/Light Copper, Copper, Deep Copper/Light Brown, Dark Brown, Very Dark Brown, Black, Black Opaque. Certain styles, especially highly hopped beers, can have an orange or reddish tint.

II. Clarity can be opaque, cloudy/turbid, hazy, slightly hazy, clear or brilliant/sparkling.

III. Head color can be white, off-white/cream, tan or light brown.

IV. Head formation can be high (e.g., thick, moussy), low (e.g., thin, lacking, minimal), someplace in between (e.g., moderate or completely lacking).

V. Head retention is how quickly the head collapses. In a full pint, the head on a beer with a good head stand shouldn’t lose more than 50% of its initial volume after a minute. When judging small samples, you must estimate persistence.

VI. Describe other characteristics of the head, such as bubble size and texture.

VII. Comment on how well the aspects of appearance meet the style. If you detect flaws, describe them.

**C. Flavor:** MALT, HOPS (bitterness & flavor), FERMENTATION CHARACTERISTICS (i.e., yeast & microflora notes), BALANCE (i.e., malty/sweet vs. hoppy/dry/sour), FINISH/AFTERTASTE, and OTHER FLAVOR CHARACTERISTICS (e.g., Other flavors from added ingredients, Flavors associated with process faults, mishandling or age).

I. Since flavor tends to “follow the nose,” in many cases you can basically restate what you wrote for aroma.

II. Ideally, you can write with one hand while tasting the beer with the other, so you can describe flavors in a somewhat “stream of consciousness” fashion.

III. Write down initial flavors first while they’re still fresh in your mind. Then mention flavors encountered in the “middle” of the beer. Finally, describe flavors encountered in the finish and aftertaste. Alternately, write while holding a sample of beer in your mouth.

IV. Comment on each aspect of flavor.

V. Focus on important elements first. (E.g., when judging a Lambic, focus on the sourness and microflora-derived complexity first, base malt character second.)

VI. Note any off-characteristics.

VI. If relevant, mention the absence of expected characteristics (see Describe Each Keyword, below).

VIII. Try to identify and describe the exact ingredients

## ***What is Creaminess?***

Creaminess is actually one way in which a beer’s texture and viscosity can be perceived. Possible mouth textures are:

**Cloying:** Extremely high levels of unfermented sugars which increase viscosity, but without proteins or starches which make the texture seem creamy. Perceptions of cloyingness are enhanced by low carbonation and low levels of hop bitterness.

**Creamy:** Slightly fuller body, higher viscosity and a mouth texture reminiscent of milk or cream, imparted by suspended starch or proteins, higher levels of unfermented sugars, and/or the presence of diacetyl at very low levels. Very fine head texture and lack of carbon dioxide “bite”, particularly associated with nitrogen-dispensed beers, can also impart a creamy texture.

**Crisp:** Slightly thinner-seeming body and little to no lingering sweetness or bitterness in aftertaste. Enhanced by higher levels of hop bitterness (but not astringency), cold temperatures, high carbonation levels and low levels of residual proteins, starches and unfermented sugars.

**Fluffy/Soft:** Similar to creamy, but more like puff pastry, farina or oatmeal. Generally associated with beers with high levels of proteins, such as those made using oats, rye or wheat.

### ***How Flavor, Aroma and Mouthfeel Interact***

While they use different senses, practically flavors mouthfeels and aromas interact with each other. While flavor technically covers just sensations you can detect with your taste buds (sweet, sour, salty, bitter, umami/"meaty", and fat), your sense of smell influences the way your brain perceives tastes, allowing you to detect "flavors" which are actually combinations of smell and taste.

Likewise, mouthfeel can also affect your perceptions of flavor. In particular, oily, numbing or burning mouthfeels can mask or accentuate flavors. Alcohol is a good example; it can intensify perceptions of sweetness, spiciness and fruitiness. Conversely, malt sweetness and hop bitterness can mask low levels of alcohol.

Finally, certain compounds might only be tangible to one sense at a particular concentration, only being detectable by other senses at higher thresholds. For example, alcohol can be detected as a flavor in water at only 2-3%, but it only becomes obvious in aroma at about 5-6% and only becomes obvious in mouthfeel at 6% or above. Another example is diacetyl, which is first detectable as a slickness in mouthfeel, then as a buttery flavor, and finally as a buttery aroma as concentration rises.

This means you must be aware of how your body interprets various sensory faults. If a fault can appear in different or overlapping categories (e.g., aroma and flavor, flavor and mouthfeel) be careful to separate your perceptions.

used. But, unless you're absolutely certain what ingredients went into a beer, refrain from describing them (e.g., unless you've brewed with Wyeast 1056 hundreds of times, under a variety of conditions, don't mention it by name. Instead, say something like "neutral yeast character," or "very faint fruity esters.")

IX. Comment on how well the aspects of flavor meet the style. If you detect flaws, describe them.

**D. Mouthfeel:** BODY, CARBONATION (expressed as prickling or biting sensations), WARMTH (e.g., smooth or burning), CREAMINESS (AKA Viscosity), ASTRINGENCY (physical drying, puckering), and OTHER PALATE SENSATIONS (e.g., harshness, slickness, resinous, numbing, chemical or physical heat or cold).

I. It is generally not necessary to taste the beer while writing about mouthfeel, since most mouthfeel characteristics appear in the finish and linger in the mouth.

II. Focus on important elements first. (E.g., when judging a Bock, focus on body first, carbonation levels and astringency second.)

III. Assess the beer's body. Body can range from thin (e.g., watery), to medium, to very full (e.g., chewy, cloying, thick, rich).

IV. Assess carbonation levels based on feelings of effervescence and "prickliness" in mouthfeel. Carbon dioxide

levels can be none (i.e., lacking, flat), very low (i.e., petillant, subdued), moderate, high or very high.

V. Note other characteristics.

VI. Note any off-characteristics.

VII. When it's likely to be a problem for the style, mention the presence or absence of solventy alcohol or grain or hop-derived astringency. (Solventy alcohols are a common problem in beers above 6% ABV, especially ales. Astringency is a common problem in beers with high levels of hops or dark malt.)

VIII. Remember that flaws in aroma and flavor might carry over into mouthfeel. For example, if you picked up diacetyl in aroma or flavor, it might also appear as slickness in mouthfeel.

IX. Comment on how well the aspects of mouthfeel meet the style. If you detect flaws, describe them.

### ***3. Describe Each Keyword***

\* **Note every characteristic you detect in the beer - no matter how slight.**

\* **Ideally, for every keyword you should write at least four words.** Practically, you might not have time or space, but you should always write at least two words for each descriptor.

**A. When (Optional):** We have initial perceptions of aromas and flavors which "blossom" into fuller perceptions and then "fade" into the finish. You should describe when you detected a particular detected the sensation. Options are at the beginning ("fleeting" or "initially"), in the middle ("develops into . . .") or the end ("lingering," "in the aftertaste," "in the finish").

**B. Where (Optional):** To some extent, the scoresheet describes "where" for you, since it's divided into aroma, appearance, flavor and mouthfeel sections. But, in some cases, you might wish to tell where you detected a sensation (e.g., on "the tip of the tongue," "at the back of the throat," "deep in the nose").

**C. How Much:** You must describe how prominent a sensation is, and possibly how it interacts with other sensations.

**I. Typical descriptors** of quantity are *none* (no, absent, lacking), *very low* (subtle, barely detectable, hints), *low* (mild, gentle), *medium-low*, *medium* (balanced middling, moderate), *medium-high*, *high* (intense, strong, cloying, prominent, dominant, masks . . ., etc.) and *very high* (overwhelming, massive, etc.).

**II. Don't mistake precision for quantity.** Don't use terms such as "distinctive" when you mean "intense." For example, 120 IBU is "intense" but not distinctive in a Double IPA. Fresh, grapefruit-like citrusy notes from dry hopping with Amarillo hops might not be intense, but they are distinctive.

**D. What:** What you perceive. This is the most important part of assessing each keyword.

**I. Use evocative terms**, if possible, which combine multiple sensory sensations into a single, readily identifiable concept, like "dried fruit," "plum pudding," "battered toast," "grapefruit marmalade," "sewer gas," "fresh grass clippings."

**II. Use multiple descriptors as necessary**, If you can't describe what you sense in a single elegant term, such as, "figs and plums," "bready and biscuity," or "floral and spicy."



**III. It is often alright to use single descriptive words** (e.g., “clean” yeast character, “crisp” finish.)

**IV. You might need to describe what ISN'T present in the beer**, especially when describing a keyword. (e.g., “No hop aroma” or “No yeasty esters.”)

\* Just listing every sensation that *isn't* in the beer, even if it's irrelevant, isn't good or useful feedback. For example, it's meaningless to say “no banana esters from yeast” when describing a doppelbock.

\* Noting an absence IS good feedback when:

- The beer is lacking something expected for the style (e.g., “no esters from yeast” when describing a Belgian ale).

- You are describing a fault which is particularly common in that style (e.g., “Smooth, no solventy harshness,” for a Belgian Golden Strong).

- You are comparing the absence to something else (e.g., “No DMS, but subtle rotten egg - hydrogen sulfide - notes”).

#### **4. Be Precise**

Don't use a vague term when you can use more precise terms. For example, not “dark” but “dark brown with ruby highlights,” or “head pours full and gradually dissipates” instead of “good head.”

\* *Mention anything you think is important about the beer.* Don't just limit yourself to describing aspects of the beer covered by keywords. You're allowed to go beyond the usual 19 sensory descriptors!

#### **5. Write an Overall Impression**

The Overall Impression section of the scoresheet is the most subjective scoring area, and the area which is of most use to the brewer. You should always use the Overall Impression section to describe how much you liked the beer and to give feedback.

**A. Be as positive and encouraging as possible.** If you didn't like the beer, be polite about it. See Offering Criticism for more detail.

##### **B. Briefly describe your level of appreciation.**

I. Make sure your “enjoyment word” and subsequent comments roughly match the score you gave the beer. Otherwise, you'll seem inconsistent at best, backbiting or sarcastic at worst. For example, don't write “Great beer!” if you've only given it a score of 20, and don't write about the beer's serious technical faults if you've just given it a score of 40.

II. Use the scoring ranges as an idea of the sort of praise you should give. (i.e., write “Outstanding” for a beer with a score of 45-50, “Excellent” for one with a score of 38-44, “Very Good” for 30-37, “Good” for 21-29).

III. For a seriously flawed beer (score of 13-19) don't say that the beer is bad. Try to find something good to say about the beer (e.g., “Pleasant color. . .”) and then briefly and politely describe the most serious flaws (“. . . but difficult to drink due to intense vinegary and vegetal flavor).

##### **C. Was the beer to style?**

I. *If not, explain how*; preferably in the relevant section of the scoresheet (Aroma, Appearance, Flavor, Mouthfeel).

### **Evocative Language**

Especially for the exam, you should try to use as many colorful, descriptive words as you can while still being concise and precise. The more you write, the more likely that some of your perceptions will match the proctors'. The more evocative and precise your descriptions are, the more impressed the graders will be.

While descriptive writing is a learned skill, you don't need to be a poet or a beer writer to do it, nor do you need to descend to the absurd phraseology used by some wine writers. Here are some tips to help even the most tongue-tied and literal-minded better express themselves.

**1. Use Metaphors.** Try to evoke memories or scenes, or tie multiple sensations into a single whole: For example, “a pine forest in winter” or “battered cornbread by a hickory campfire,” “Christmas pudding,” “fresh-baked biscuits soaked in honey,” “Chloraseptic™.”

**2. Use synonyms.** Don't reuse the same term, or don't use a common word when a fancier word will do. For example, instead of “big” use words like “massive,” “intense” or “enormous.”

**3. Be Precise.** For example, don't say “citrusy” when you actually mean “tangerine zest.”

**4. Convey a Sense of Energy, Time and Motion.** This example is a bit too florid, and verges on being Dadaist, but it gets the point across: “Massive grapefruit and cedar aroma hop assault quickly collapses as delicate apple and pear yeast esters emerge, supported by transient sugar-cookie malt notes.”

**5. Use Similar Adjectives to Build a Theme.** For example, a big, chewy stout might be described as “solid chocolate and roast flavors over a strong base malt framework.”

II. Pointing out style flaws in the AAFM sections leaves more space for feedback in the Overall Impression section.

##### **D. Did the beer have technical faults?**

I. If so, clearly and politely explain the flaws you detected.

II. Pointing out technical flaws in the AAFM sections leaves more space for feedback in the Overall Impression section.

III. Use the Overall Impression section to suggest remedies for faults described in the Aroma, Appearance, Flavor and Mouthfeel sections. DON'T use the Overall Impression section to describe faults not listed elsewhere.

**E. Provide 2-3 constructive, useful suggestions for how the brewer could improve the beer by altering recipe, ingredients and/or brewing process.**

I. *The lower the score and the more seriously flawed the beer, the more suggestions you should give.*

II. *Always try to give at least two suggestions for improvement, even for a world-class beer* (i.e., one with a score of 40+). Realistically, however, it is difficult to offer really useful suggestions which will improve a beer which is already great, unless you're a great brewer yourself.

## Why Bother With Descriptions?

Providing a good description of a beer is difficult and time-consuming, so why do it? Why not just give the beer a score, a brief description and some feedback?

\* **You're the reporter on the scene.** Your descriptions give the brewer a "snapshot" of what a particular beer was like at that moment in time. Well-written scoresheets help the brewer keep track of how a particular batch of beer is developing, or how one batch compares to a previous batch.

If you're proctoring the BJCP tasting exam, it's critical that you fully describe each beer so that the graders get a good sense of what the beers on the exam were like.

\* **You're the troubleshooter.** In competition, the beer might have changed between the time the brewer entered it and the time you judge it. Good descriptions give the brewer a sense of what went wrong in the meantime.

\* **You're the teacher.** If a beer has faults, good descriptions help the brewer understand what faults you detected and why you gave the score and feedback you did.

III. *Address the most serious faults first.* (When judging, however, you can team with the other judge to cover different faults, so your comments don't completely overlap.)

IV. *Suggest Appropriate Fixes.* For example, if you detect the presence of lactic acid in an American pale ale, your feedback should address sanitation issues, not water chemistry. Again, focus on the most serious faults first.

V. *There's no rule that says you have to limit feedback to just the Overall Impression section.* For example, often there's not much to write about stylistically in the Appearance section, so it's a good place to give feedback for correcting appearance related faults like haze or incorrect color.

VI. *Recipe and process suggestions should demonstrate your understanding of how the style is made.* For example, "Consider adding a half pound of white sugar in a 5 gallon batch to lighten body" is good feedback for a too-cloying Belgian Tripel, while "Try dry hopping with Fuggles hops to get the herbal, earthy hop aroma expected for the style" is good feedback for an English IPA.

VII. *Be as precise and technical as space and knowledge allows.*

- Describe exact amounts, ingredients and process changes.
- Answer the "unasked questions": *What, Where, How Much, and Why?*
- Use technical terms.
- Make sure your feedback is clear.
- Make sure your feedback is applicable to multiple situations.

VIII. *Suggest the best, or most likely, fix first.* For example, if a beer has both a diacetyl and acetaldehyde problem but is otherwise drinkable, it's probably a problem with incomplete fermentation rather than a sign of a bacterial infection.

*Exception:* For good beer (score 32+) with subtle problems, or a very good or great beer (score 35+) which is faultless but has slight recipe or process problems, you *might* be able to assume that the brewer knows the basics and is looking for more advanced feedback.

IX. *If necessary, give multiple approaches to fix the problem.* For example, astringency can come from a variety of sources, don't list just one.

### F. Don't make assumptions about the beer.

I. *Making assumptions almost guarantees that you'll look like an idiot.* Murphy's Law dictates that the beer you thought was all grain was actually made from a kit, or that the beer you thought was at least 3 years old was only bottled 4 months ago.

II. *Don't Guess About What You Can't Detect.* Unless you detect it in the beer, don't speculate about it. For example, while you might be able to make shrewd guesses about ingredients, and possibly processes such as mashing technique or fermentation temperature, you still can't know for sure.

Avoid making suggestions or deductions about exact ingredients (i.e., all-grain vs. a kit beer), processes (e.g., mashing schedules, boil times), aging or packaging techniques.

III. *Use precise technical terms rather than making implied assumptions.* For example, describe "oxidation," not age, or "solventy stale notes," not "extract tang."

IV. *When giving feedback, give conditional suggestions and try to make them applicable to multiple situations.* A good format is "If you X, then consider Y". For example, "If you mash, partial mash, or steep your grains, consider lowering your mashing/steeping temperature."

## 5. Fill in Scores and Check Boxes

Make sure you fill these out correctly!

A. **Check off sensory descriptor boxes** as you encounter a particular sensation.

B. **Be aware of your personal biases** when you give scores and calibrate accordingly.

I. Do you tend to score higher or lower than other judges?

## Fault Categories

When judging a beer, it's useful to mentally categorize faults when determining how well it fits the style guidelines, troubleshooting and offering feedback.

**Stylistic Faults:** These are faults which make the beer "not to style" according to the BJCP competition guidelines. While the beer might be wonderful, if it doesn't follow the rules for that style as listed in the BJCP competitions, it's "not as advertised" and must be marked down accordingly. For example, an Oktoberfest-style beer with moderate levels of citrusy, piney Cascade hops might be a terrific beer, but it's not an Oktoberfest according to the BJCP competition guidelines.

**Technical Faults:** These are actual problems with the beer, which make the beer less pleasant to drink. Technical faults might be due to actual off-flavors, or lack of desirable characteristics. For example, nobody wants to drink a beer with a moldy aroma or a metallic aftertaste.

**Fault Origins:** Both stylistic and technical faults can be traced to problems with recipe design, ingredient selection, brewing process or packaging and storage. Stylistic faults are usually due to ingredient or recipe problems. Technical faults are usually due to lack of control over the brewing process or due to packaging and storage problems.

II. Do you dislike a particular style, so that you naturally tend to judge it lower?

III. Are you particularly sensitive or insensitive to a particular off-flavor?

IV. How does the beer compare to well-made examples of “calibration beers” or “commercial examples” you’ve tried? (e.g., a perfect clone of Bud Light probably merits a 40-45, even if you hate Lite American Lager).

**C. Assign a score to each section.** Make sure the score matches your comments for that section. For example, don’t praise a beer’s aroma and then give that section a low score.

**I. Aroma.** A beer that hits the style on all aspects of aroma should score in the upper end of the range, with perfect scores being reserved for beers with outstanding aroma. A beer that hits most of the marks for the style should score 6-9 points here, while a beer which misses the style on most aspects should score a 4-5. Only beers which have serious aroma flaws should be scored in the 0-3 point range.

**II. Appearance.** A beer that meets all appearance requirements should get full marks for style. A beer which fails on one or more counts gets 2 of 3 points. A beer which fails on most counts (e.g., an amber-colored stout with no head) gets 1 of 3 points.

**III. Flavor.** This section carries the most points. A beer that hits the style on all aspects of flavor should score in the upper end of the range, with perfect or near perfect scores being reserved for beers with outstanding flavor, balance and finish. A beer that hits most of the marks for the style should score 11-15 points here, while a beer which misses the style on most aspects should score a 7-10. Only beers which have serious flavor flaws should be scored lower than a 7 (and be aware of the need to assign a minimum courtesy score of at least 13). Flavor is a good place to adjust your score in order to achieve consensus with other judges.

**IV. Mouthfeel.** A beer that meets nearly all mouthfeel requirements should 4 points here, with a score of 5 being reserved for beers with perfect or near perfect mouthfeel characteristics. A beer which fails on one or more counts gets 2-3 points, while a beer which is badly flawed should get 1-2 points. Only beers which have extremely serious mouthfeel faults (e.g., undrinkable due to metallic aftertaste) should get 0 points.

**V. Overall Impression.** This section carries the second most points. While Overall Impression is a good place for “subjective scoring” where you can mark down a beer which is technically to style but which you didn’t like, or praise a beer which isn’t a good example of the style but is otherwise wonderful, your score should roughly align with your scores for Aroma, Appearance, Flavor and Mouthfeel, and the check boxes for Stylistic Accuracy, Technical Merit and Intangibles.

A beer that hits the style on all aspects of style should score in the upper end of the range, with perfect or near perfect scores being reserved for outstanding beers with intangible characteristics that set them above the rest. A beer that hits most of the marks for the style should score 6-7 points here, while a beer which misses the style on most aspects should score a 4-5. Only beers which have serious aroma flaws should be scored lower than a 4 (and be aware of the need to assign a minimum courtesy score of 13). Overall Impression is a good place to adjust your score in order to achieve consensus with other judges.

\* *Correctly add the scores.*

## **Mediocre vs. Great Feedback**

Here are three examples of how to turn not particularly helpful feedback into specific suggestions a brewer can use.

### **Process Problems**

For a Sweet Stout with an astringency problem:

*Not so Good:* “Don’t boil your grains.”

*Great:* “Astringency is likely caused by problems with your mashing/steeping process. Try these remedies: \* Recirculate or filter runoff so grain husks aren’t carried into boil. \* Keep temperature < 170 °F when mashing/steeping. \* Keep mash/steeping and sparge liquor between 5.2 & 5.8 pH. \* If mashing, don’t collect sparge runoff below 1.008 S.G., if necessary, reduce sparge volume.

### **Style Problems**

For a somewhat flawed American Pale Ale:

*Not So Good:* “Add more hops.”

*Great:* “Hop bitterness a bit high for APA, but not enough flavor and aroma hops. \* Reduce bittering levels by 10-15 IBU (lower alpha varieties, or shorter boil time to decrease alpha acid utilization). \* Increase late hopping - for a 5 gal. batch bump up flavor & aroma hops by ½ - 1 oz ( or move existing additions closer to end of boil.) \* Experiment with hopback and/or dry hopping to further increase hop aroma.

### **Recipe Design**

For a decent, but uninspired, Dark Mild with no obvious process flaws.

*Not So Good:* “Needs more dark malt.”

*Great:* “For a 5 gallon batch, add 2-4 oz. of Special B™ and 2-4 oz. of Belgian Biscuit malt to steep or at the end of mashing. Special B adds body and sweet, dark fruit notes, while Biscuit gives body and bready, light toast notes. Both will improve aroma & flavor profile, giving a richer finish and fuller mouthfeel.”

\* *Fill out the checkboxes for Stylistic Accuracy, Technical Merit and Intangibles at the bottom of the sheet.* They should roughly match the overall score, but a beer which is technically flawed or not to style can have a high score for intangibles.

\* *Optional: Circle the appropriate scoring range at the bottom left hand corner of the sheet.*

\* *Optional: Tick off each keyword on the scoresheet as you assess it. This keeps you from forgetting anything and shows the exam graders that you noticed it.*

\* *Tick off any off-characteristic descriptors on the left-hand side of the sheet.*

## **Part IV - Unusual Judging Situations**

Like anything else, Murphy’s Law applies to beer judging. Not every competition is well run and not every judging session goes according to plan. This section covers some of the more typical situations you might encounter.

### **1. Stewarding**

Before you start judging in competitions, you should steward at least one judging session to familiarize yourself with the process. Consider it to be “basic training.” Even after you are an experienced judge, there might be situations where you might wish to be a steward. There might be too many judges or you might not be able to judge for some reason (e.g., entries in the competition, problems with your sense of smell or taste, health issues). If you take the job seriously and listen to the judges as they work you can learn a lot.

### **How to be a Good Steward**

**A. Check In.** Introduce yourself to the competition director, the head steward (if any) and the cellarmaster before competition begins. Listen to any instructions they give you.

**B. Help Set Up.** You might be asked to set up the judging area, or the judging tables.

**C. Introduce Yourself to the Judges.** Introduce yourself to the judges you’ll be assisting. Give them any instructions you’ve been told to give. Tell them if you’re assigned to help more than one judging team.

**D. Fill in Flight-Related Paperwork** if the head judge asks you to do so. Some head judges will perform this task themselves.

**E. Prepare the Beer For Judging.** When you get the beer from the cellarmaster, make sure that you’ve got the correct entries for the flight.

- \* Double check the entries against the pull sheet to make sure they’re all there.

- \* Make sure the beer is in the proper order for judging.
  - If the judges are using queued judging, bring them the next available entry as listed on the master pull sheet for the category.

- Otherwise, arrange the beers in the order listed on the pull sheet, or the order in which the judges intend to judge it.

- \* Make sure that the bottles are fit to judge.
  - Make sure that there’s nothing on the bottle which could identify the brewer.
  - Make sure that the entry number, style and substyle and special information labels are present and legible.

- Make sure the beer is at the proper serving temperature for judging, as decided by the head judge. Cold beer might need to be warmed; remove it from the carrier and let it sit, or place it in a bath of warm (70-100 °F) water for a few minutes. Warm beer might need to be cooled.

**F. Preserve Beer After It Has Been Opened.** Recap each entry and remove it from the table once the judges are finished with it. Make sure that the beers you set aside won’t be knocked over, cleared away or otherwise mistreated.

- \* Make a note of which beers might be mini-BoS (or Best of Show) candidates. Recap those beers immediately and set them aside in a safe place. If possible, keep the beers cool. (But ask the judges before you put beers back into the cooler.)

**G. Check Completed Scoresheets** for math errors (use a calculator if necessary), completeness (all sections filled in or checked off) and quality of feedback (spelling errors, inappropriate or incomplete comments). If there is a problem, politely bring it to the judge’s attention and let them make corrections.

**H. Stay Quiet and Unobtrusive.** Don’t distract the judges, especially when they’re concentrating on analyzing an entry or writing scoresheets. During this time, unless you have something important to say, stay in the background and speak only when

## **Good Words for Describing Beer**

Use the words and phrases below as a starting point in learning to precisely and evocatively describe beer. Time spent with a thesaurus, or reading the works of beer writers such as Michael Jackson or Roger Protz, will yield many more:

### **1. Appearance:**

- \* *Head*: tall, massive, thick, solid, wispy.

- \* *Clarity*: Brilliant, jewel-like, murky.

- \* *Bubbles*: Lacy, moussy, tiny.

- \* *Color*: Straw, gold, amber, mahogany.

- \* *Viscosity*: highlights, tints, clinging, etc.

### **2. Aroma and Flavor:**

- *Baked goods*: bread, biscuits, graham crackers.

- *Fruits*: apples, plums, raisins, pineapple.

- *Candies*: Toffee, marshmallows, bubble gum.

- *Herbs & spices*: clove, ginger, black pepper.

- *Flowers & plants*: rose, cut grass, straw.

### **3. Mouthfeel**

- *Texture*: watery, chewy, meaty, solid.

- *Pain*: stinging, biting, numbing, harsh, brutal.

- *Pleasure*: soothing, warming, comforting.

- *Viscosity*: Oily, sticky, syrup, watery.

spoken to. Wait until the judges have finished judging an entry to perform routine tasks. Unless the head judge invites you to ask questions, save them until judging is finished.

**I. Try to Anticipate the Judges’ Needs.** A steward’s job is sometimes very much like being a waiter, especially if you’re serving more than one team of judges.

- \* Stay close and look for judges who need your assistance.

- \* Deal with spills immediately. Move electronics, papers and anything else which might be damaged out of the way, *then* contain the spill and mop it up. Clean up residual stickiness and dry the area. Replace sodden forms and other supplies as needed.

- \* Fill water pitchers, empty dump buckets as needed. If the judging hall is hot, the judges are judging a big flight of hoppy or highly alcoholic beers, or when multiple judges are sharing the same pitcher, you might need to refill the water pitcher several times during the flight. Dump buckets generally only need to be emptied between flights.

- \* Fetch other supplies (e.g., pencils, scoresheets, crackers) as requested.

- \* Clear away glasses, bottles and trash. But ask before your glasses or bottles, the judges might not be done with them.

- \* Quietly deal with other distractions if asked to do so by the judges.

**J. When the Judges are Finished.** Don’t assume your job is done just because the judges have finished judging the flight!

- \* Ask the head judge(s) if there is anything else they need. If so, stay close and assist as necessary.

- \* If there is a mini-BoS, make sure that the judges have the beers they need from your flight and make sure that the mini-BoS table has all the supplies the judges will need.

- \* If you’ve been asked to do so by the judge director or the competition director, collect the paperwork from the judges and take it to the appropriate person (usually the judge director or registrar).

\* Otherwise, go back to the head steward, cellarmaster or competition organizer and tell them that you've finished the flight.

## 2. Bad Environments

Ideally, you will be judging while sitting at a table in a well-lit, quiet, odor-free, distraction-free room. When this isn't possible, you have to adapt.

**A. Bad Lighting:** Bring a flashlight or carry the beer sample to the nearest light to get a sense of its appearance. A small flashlight should be part of every beer judge's kit, and well-equipped competitions should have a few flashlights on hand, even if they have ideal judging conditions.

**B. Sunlight and Fluorescent Lights:** Direct sunlight can quickly make beer lightstruck. I've had glasses of IPA or Pilsner go skunky after as little as 10 minutes of exposure to direct summer sun. While not as much of a threat as sunlight, many types fluorescent lights can also cause beer to become lightstruck. Cover your beer until you're ready to judge it, then immediately put the remains of the bottle back under cover. Put a coaster on top of the glass or use your hand to shield your glass from sunlight. Sample the beer quickly before it has a chance to go bad.

**C. Noise and Other Distractions:** Noise interferes with your concentration and your ability to talk with other judges. If possible, politely ask a steward or one of the contest organizers to deal with the problem. If not, earplugs or covering your ears, helps.

Conversely, it's common courtesy to not make noise while other judges are still working. Keep your voice down while conversing with other judges. If you finish judging early, take your conversation outside the judging hall, or at least as far away from the judging area as possible.

While seldom a problem, visual distractions (e.g., glare, blinking lights, people running around) should be dealt with in the same way. Politely ask someone to deal with the problem. If not, shield your eyes.

**D. Odors:** Sometimes the judging area will have pervasive odors; here's how to deal with them.

**I. Food Aromas.** This is a common problem if you're judging in a restaurant or bar, or if the judging hall is also a dining hall and the competition organizers are preparing lunch or dinner. Fortunately, unless the aromas are intense, you will quickly become habituated to them. If not, try to keep your sense of smell clear using the tips listed under Keeping Your Senses Fresh.

Just be aware that food aromas might affect your perception of sweet, fruity and bready aromas and flavors, and your perception of malt body, especially if you're hungry. Check your scores for scoring bias as the flight progresses.

**II. Air Fresheners and Other Environmental Contaminants.** These aromas are seldom a problem in the judging area, but they can be very distracting when they are present.

\* Solvents and certain air fresheners can slightly numb your sense of smell. Varnish, paint, new carpet (and the glue used to attach it), scented candles and similar products can all produce distracting odors, but they aren't quite as harmful to your sense of smell.

Unfortunately, there usually isn't much you can do about these scents until they dissipate or you become habituated to them. At most, try to get as much ventilation in the judging area as possible.

## *The Care and Feeding of Stewards*

Stewards are usually novice homebrewers or friends and family of people involved with the competition. Occasionally, though, they will be experienced brewers or even judges who can't judge for some reason (i.e., too many judges).

If you are lucky enough to have a steward assisting you, here are tips for making the experience better for both of you.

- \* Introduce yourself.

- \* Be friendly.

- \* Be polite.

- \* Thank them for their assistance.

- \* If possible, ask your steward to sample beer with you.

- \* If you can't share beer with your steward, explain why you can't and apologize (even if it's not your fault).

- \* Try to learn about the steward's brewing and beer tasting background. If time allows, and if your steward shows interest, try to involve them in the judging process.

- If they're a would-be judge, treat them as novice judge (except that they should never fill out scoresheets and should only offer their comments if asked to do so by the lead judge).

- If they're a novice brewer, explain the basics of beer judging. Try to explain the (likely) processes and ingredients which make a particular beer notably good or bad.

- If they're not a beer drinker, or not a brewer, try to find some way to engage their interest. While many stewards in this category are content to stay out of the way and do as they're told, many others are potential beer geeks just waiting to be converted. Someone who "doesn't like beer" and only volunteered to be a steward so she could spend more time with her boyfriend, might just discover that she actually has a very good sense of smell and taste and really likes drinking and brewing hefeweizens!

Some products might interfere with your ability to detect aroma faults.

- Varnishes or solvents can be mistaken for solventy alcohol notes.

- Latex paint can be mistaken for acetaldehyde.

- Smoke or cleaning supplies can be mistaken for phenols.

- Perfumes or scents can be mistaken for esters or essential oils.

**III. Hygiene Products, Cosmetics and Perfumes.** A common problem I've encountered is scented soaps and air fresheners in bathrooms. Be sure to thoroughly rinse your hands after you wash them or else residual soap scent on your hands can interfere with your sense of smell when you bring the tasting cup up to your nose.

Scented shampoos and similar products aren't as much of a problem. Even so, it's good sense, and common courtesy to other judges, to use minimally scented shampoos, and to avoid wearing cologne, aftershave or perfume before you judge.

Likewise, body odors can be distracting to other judges. Be sure to bathe and brush your teeth before judging, and try to refrain from smoking until after you're done.

Don't wear lipstick or lip balm while judging, since the oils and waxes on your lips can damage head formation and retention in the beer sample.

**E. Food and Drink.** Avoid extremely hot, peppery, alcoholic, or strongly-flavored food and drink before you judge.

\* Food that's hot enough to burn your tongue damages your taste buds for up to several weeks afterwards.

\* Peppery foods can affect your sense of smell and taste for several hours afterwards.

\* Extremely greasy foods can interfere with your perception of body and aftertaste for several hours afterwards.

\* Distilled alcohol can dull your senses of taste and smell.

\* Avoid eating just before you judge. Better to do so a couple of hours before you start.

\* If you must eat before you judge, eat relatively bland foods with few lingering aftertastes. For example, go for orange juice and plain bagels rather than coffee and doughnuts.

\* If possible, brush your teeth, tongue and gums before you judge, especially if you've recently eaten. Avoid using mouthwashes or strongly-flavored toothpastes. Just use water and baking soda and rinse your mouth thoroughly afterwards.

\* Avoid judging when you're extremely hungry. Not only is it a bad idea to drink on an empty stomach (food helps to slow down absorption of alcohol), the fact that you're hungry alters your perception and appreciation of body, aromas and flavor. Unless you can correct for your scoring biases, you'll tend to score maltier, sweeter, stronger beers higher than you would normally.

**F. Heat and Cold.** Judging areas can be excessively hot or cold. As the room fills up and the day goes on, the temperature can go from "too cold" to "too hot."

\* Dress in layers you can easily remove or put on.

\* Season and local temperatures can affect your appreciation of certain beer styles. When it's hot, most people go for crisper, bitterer, lighter-bodied beers, like Pilsners, Blonde Ales and Witbier. When it's cold, maltier, fuller-bodied, stronger beers, like Oktoberfests, Porters and Old Ales, are more popular. Unless you're aware of your bias, you might score otherwise identical flights of Bocks lower on a hot day in July and higher on a cold day in February.

\* Hot conditions can make it difficult to keep entries in good shape once they've been removed from the refrigerator. To keep the flight from getting too warm, just bring out one or two entries at a time. For beer which will advance to mini-BoS it's even more important to cap it immediately and return it to the cooler.

### 3. Massive Flights and Insufficient Time

These two problems are related, and arise either due to catastrophe (i.e., a snowstorm on the day of the competition which prevents out-of-town judges from traveling) or poor logistics on the part of the contest organizers.

**A. Massive Flights.** Ideally, you will never have to judge more than 7-8 beers in a single flight. Sometimes, though, flights will be bigger. Flights of 9-12 are big, but not unreasonable; flights of 13 or more are a sign of poor organization by the contest organizers.

**YOU CAN LEGITIMATELY REFUSE TO JUDGE A FLIGHT OF 13 OR MORE BEERS.** Ask that the flight be split, with another team of judges handling the other half, or ask to be put on another flight.

If you do get talked into judging a big flight, here's what to do:

\* Keep your sample sizes small.

\* Take frequent breaks.

\* Regularly and carefully refresh your palate, especially if you are judging a flight of strong, strongly-flavored or hoppy beers.

\* Only bring out part of the flight at a time to keep the rest of the beers in the flight from becoming too warm.

\* Judge beers in the category in order of sub-style, so that you judge similar beers at the same time.

\* Cap beer immediately after pouring and set it aside. If it looks to be "competitive" (i.e., a score of 33+, or otherwise likely to be in the top third of the flight) put it back in the cooler.

\* Be very aware of scoring bias. Look for upward or downward trends to your scoring as the flight progresses.

\* Hold your own "mini-BoS" where you revisit competitive beers from earlier in the flight against competitive beers from later in the flight. This is important when you must choose winners from beers entered in different sub-categories.

\* If you are sufficiently drunk or fatigued at the end of the flight, don't judge in the next session, or take a break to give yourself time to recover.

**B. Insufficient Time:** With a big flight, or a badly run competition, you might not have sufficient time to properly judge all the beers in your flight.

\* Mentally calculate the time needed to judge the flight before you start. As a rule of thumb, assume 10-15 minutes per beer in the flight. **IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE YOU WILL HAVE SUFFICIENT TIME TO PROPERLY JUDGE ALL THE BEERS IN THE FLIGHT, YOU CAN LEGITIMATELY REFUSE TO JUDGE IT.**

\* Avoid the temptation to avoid fully filling out the scoresheet. Regardless of how little time you have, the brewer deserves your full feedback.

\* Have an *experienced* steward assigned to your flight to help with opening, capping and clearing bottles, and to check your scoresheets as you finish them. He can also serve as time keeper if you don't have a watch or clock handy.

\* Just work with one other judge; a panel of 3 or more judges slows things down.

\* Don't pour samples for the steward (or have him pour his own samples).

\* Save time by minimizing conversation during the consensus period of judging. State your score and briefly describe the beer's faults and merits. Wait for the other judge to do the same. If everyone is more or less in agreement as to sensory characteristics and scoring range, move on.

\* Don't bother revising scores to get within some unofficial scoring range. As long as all the judges on the panel are within 7 points (or the scoring range requested by the contest organizer), that's good enough, even if you normally like a tighter point spread.

\* Keep a watch on the table, judge where you can see the clock or have someone serve as time-keeper.

### 4. Scoring Restrictions

In some competitions, the organizers will have scoring rules which are slightly different from those given in the BJCP Judges Handbook or the Contest Organizers Handbook. To avoid surprises, you should ask the contest organizer or judge director if there are any scoring restrictions before you start judging. Well-organized contest organizers will tell you about them before you sit down to judge.

**A. Elevated Minimum Courtesy Score:** Some contest organizers ask that judges assign a minimum courtesy score

higher than 13, or ask the judge director for permission to assign scores below a certain threshold. Generally, this isn't a problem, since the typical range for elevated courtesy scores is 15-19 and few beers score below a 20. to not score beer below a minimum threshold, or ask the permission of the judge director before they assign an extremely low score.

**B. High Score Wins:** While it is a legitimate practice to assign a medal to a lower scoring beer, some competitions forbid it. In these cases, the winning beers are decided solely on their scores. Be aware of this restriction before you start judging, or be prepared to tweak your scores after you've judged the flight.

**C. No Ties:** While it is legitimate practice for judges to arbitrarily determine winners in the event of a tie some contest organizers don't like it. Mostly this is due to misplaced concerns over fairness, but, practically, ties might make extra work for the registrar since ties can cause problems for some competition

### ***The Well-Equipped Judge***

While well-run competitions will have everything needed for judging, I find it handy to carry a personal beer judging kit which I carry in an old camera bag. It usually includes:

- \* Water bottle filled with dechlorinated water.
- \* Binder, computer or cell phone containing:
  - BJCP Color Guide.
  - BJCP Judging Procedures Handbook.
  - BJCP Style Guidelines.
  - Off-flavor checklists and other handy beer judging information.
- \* File folder containing
  - Beer, Cider and Mead scoresheets.
  - Entry Cover Sheets.
  - Flight Summary Sheets.
  - Preprinted name labels.
  - Scratch paper.
- \* Clipboard - keeps scoresheets in order at the table and allows you to quickly get your paperwork out of the way if there's a spill.
- \* Cheap four-function calculator (or equivalent).
- \* "Cap-Lifter" style bottle opener which completely covers the cap so it doesn't bend. (A regular "cross bar" type opener and a coin placed on top of the cap works just as well.)
- \* Corkscrew. I use a "waiters knife" which also incorporates a tiny knife.
- \* Mechanical pencils and extra leads or pencils.
- \* Eraser.
- \* Pocket LED flashlight (easier on batteries and brighter than the old incandescent varieties).
- \* Partial roll of paper towels.
- \* Coasters.
- \* Ear plugs.
- \* Reusable plastic wine bottle stoppers.
- \* Small package of baking soda. This can serve as toothpaste, mouthwash, antacid and stain remover. It's also useful for detecting mousiness in cider.
- \* Toothbrush.
- \* Antacid/Acid Inhibitor.
- \* Sleeve or small box of unflavored, unsalted crackers.
- \* Small brandy-snifter type tasting glass (for sampling beer at venues other than competitions).

management software.

In such cases, the judges on the panel will need to adjust their scores so that there are no ties between the top three beers. The simplest way to do this is for the head judge to just tweak the *overall* scores assigned to the winning beers on the flight summary sheet. After all, there is no rule that says that the overall score must be the average of the individual judges' scores.

Next simplest is to just be aware of the "no ties" rule and do a quick review of the scores on the flight summary sheet just before the judging panel finishes their work. If you detect a tie, and the competition organizer insists that the assigned overall score for each entry must be the average of individual scores, one or two judges will need to slightly alter their scores.

In the event that the two of the three beers are tied, one judge should adjust his score by 1 point. This will create a fractional difference in overall scores, which is enough to break a tie. In the rare situation where all three beers are tied, one judge should adjust his score for the third place beer down by a point, while another judge should adjust his score for the first place beer up a point. Again, this creates enough difference to break the tie.

*Note:* It is considered to be bad practice to alter another judge's scoresheets. If you must alter the *individual* score a beer received, alter the scores you assigned, not the other judges' scores.

It is legitimate for a head judge to unilaterally alter assigned scores on the flight summary sheet after judging has ended, but only to break ties, and only if the other judges have agreed on the order of the winning beers in the flight. Even then, the head judge should only alter assigned scores up or down by the amount needed to break the tie and no further.

In any case, if alterations to individual scores mean that the judges' scores are more than 7 points away from each other, the head judge should inform the judge director about the problem.

**D. Minimum Advancement/Award Threshold:** In some competitions, notably the 1<sup>st</sup> round of the National Homebrew Competition (NHC), any beer which wins in its category must have a minimum score to advance to the next round. For example, in the NHC, a minimum score of 29 is required to advance.

Similarly, in some competitions, such as state fair competitions, the winning beers must have a certain score in order to win a medal or to advance to BoS. For example, the BJCP Contest Organizers Handbook suggests that a minimum score of 21 should be required to win a medal.

Again, this isn't usually a problem, since the winning beers in the flight are likely to meet the minimum scoring threshold. If none of the beers in a flight is good enough, you will either need to inflate the winning scores so they meet the required threshold, or defend your decision to not assign higher scores to the competition organizer.

Don't be afraid to inflate your scores, unless you strongly believe that certain beers aren't worthy of advancement or recognition. Remember, flawed beers will quickly be weeded out by the Best-of-Show panel or the 2<sup>nd</sup> Round NHC judges!

**E. Narrower Point Spread:** Some competitions require judges to achieve a closer scoring consensus than the official 7 point spread. Typically, scoring ranges are narrowed to 3-5 points. As long as you know about this rule in advance, it isn't a problem, although it can slow down judging as judges struggle to achieve consensus.

## 5. Queued Judging

When judging big flights of beer, the normal practice is to split flights in the same category between multiple teams of judges, then determine the winners using a Mini-Best of Show round. Queued judging saves contest organizers the trouble of dividing up the various flights. Instead, a team of stewards brings each team of judges the next beer in the category, and judges keep judging beers until none are left.

This works well because it allows faster judges to judge more beer, and keeps slower judges from holding up the show as the other teams of judges wait for them to finish. The only problem is that it requires a higher level of skill and organization on the part of the cellar master and the stewards, and it requires everyone to pay more attention to record keeping, since beers in the flight aren't judged in order. It can also be difficult when judging specialty beers, since judges have no control over how the flight will be judged. Even so, when queued judging works, it can save a lot of time. Practically, it's the only way to handle a large number of beers.

Queued judging is described in these documents:

*Queued Judging Detailed Instructions for Organizers*  
([http://www.bjcp.org/docs/Queued\\_Judging\\_organizer.pdf](http://www.bjcp.org/docs/Queued_Judging_organizer.pdf))

*Queued Judging Overview*  
([http://www.bjcp.org/docs/Queued\\_Judging\\_quickref.pdf](http://www.bjcp.org/docs/Queued_Judging_quickref.pdf))

*Queued Judging Detailed Instructions for Judges and Stewards*  
([http://www.bjcp.org/docs/Queued\\_Judging\\_judges.pdf](http://www.bjcp.org/docs/Queued_Judging_judges.pdf))

\* When using queued judging, be very careful that the entry number on the scoresheet matches the entry number on the bottle and that the information on the bottle matches the information on the pull sheet. Beers are presented out of order, there are a lot of them, and it's difficult to go back and fix things if you get your information wrong at the start.

\* When using queued judging, when you're finished judging, don't stray too far from the table if you're one of the Mini-BoS judges! If the stewards have to hunt you down and bring you back to the table, you've defeated the whole purpose of queued judging - which is to save time.

## 6. How to Be a Good Head Judge

Once you've taken the BJCP exam, there's a good chance that you will eventually be the head judge on a flight. In some cases, you might be the only BJCP-ranked judge on the panel, making you head judge by default! Even if you're an inexperienced judge and you're paired with a high-ranking judge, your partner might be happy to delegate head judge responsibilities to you.

At minimum the head judge must make sure that all the Flight Summary Sheets are filled out correctly and that all the paperwork for the flight is in order. A good head judge will do more than that:

**A. Take Charge.** You're (sort of) expected to be a leader, so (gently) lead. You set the tone and pace of the judging.

**B. Avoid Surprises.** Find out if there is anything unusual with the flight. If there are competition-specific rules, a time limit, a mini-BoS, two or more categories "telescoped" into one, or other problems with the flight, it's up to you to find out.

**C. Get the Other Judges Up to Speed.**

\* Tell the other judges what you've found out about competition rules and time limits.

## *How to be a Good Novice Judge*

Even if you have a lot of brewing experience, you've probably got a lot to learn about beer judging. Even if you're a professional brewer, for the first few competitions try to follow these rules.

\* Don't be afraid to ask questions.

\* Don't volunteer to judge any category which you don't feel qualified to judge. If you suddenly get switched to another category, you're not familiar with, speak up.

\* If you really are a novice, if you know the Category you're going to be judging in advance, but you're not familiar with all the substyles in that category, read up on them and perhaps sample some good commercial examples beforehand.

\* Skim the Judging Procedures Manual and the introduction to the BJCP Style Guidelines prior to the competition. Pay special attention to BJCP judging and scoring conventions.

\* Carefully review the appropriate sections of the BJCP style guidelines. Even if you're familiar with other style guidelines, BJCP categories and criteria for certain beer styles, are sometimes different.

\* Until you've taken the BJCP exam, check off the "Non-BJCP" box under "Judge Qualifications and BJCP Rank." If you're also a Professional Brewer check that box, too.

\* Pay attention to what the head judge says, especially regarding local competition rules and BJCP scoring conventions.

\* If possible, judge a "calibration beer" (provided by the contest organizers) before you start judging for real. This will give you practice filling out the scoresheet and aligning your scores with the other judge's scores.

\* Consult the style guidelines as you judge.

\* If you don't understand something, or don't detect a particular problem with a beer, speak up. (e.g., "What's diacetyl supposed to taste like?" or "I'm not getting that smoky aroma, can you describe it for me?")

\* If you detect something "wrong" about a beer, but can't describe it, say so. (e.g., "I can't put my finger on it, but there's something wrong with the flavor.") The other judges might be able help you to describe exactly what you're detecting.

\* Try to keep up. It shouldn't take you more than 10 minutes to judge and discuss each beer in the flight.

\* If the other judges are going too fast, say so. Judging is a learned skill. It's better to go slowly when you start out rather than rushing and doing a bad job.

\* Don't assume that the other judges know everything. Even National judges will have some gaps in their knowledge and sometimes even Masters slip up. If you know something as a dead certain fact, don't let lack of rank and judging experience keep you from speaking out.

\* If you have a non-BJCP judge on your panel, ask them what their experience is. Briefly tell them what to expect.

\* If you have an inexperienced judge on your panel, try to mentor them if you have time. If you don't have time, say so, but make yourself available for questions after you're done judging the flight.

**E. Supervise the Other Judges.**



\* Before you start judging, look at the flight summary sheet and decide how you will judge the flight. This isn't usually a problem with categories 1-16D, 17-19, 24 and 28, but it's often necessary if you're judging sub-style 16E (Belgian Specialty), Categories 20-23, 25-26 or 29, or if you are judging a combined flight consisting of several categories (e.g., a "lager" flight consisting of Categories 1-5).

- When the pull sheet for a category is divided among multiple teams of judges, and queued judging isn't used, you might need to hold a quick "war council" with all the judges for the category to decide how to divide things up.

- Consult with the other judges on your panel to get their opinions, but if there is no consensus, the final decision is yours.

- Once you've made your decision, tell the other judges, and your steward how you intend to proceed, and mark up the scoresheet as necessary.

- Make sure that judging proceeds as planned.

#### **D. Get Your Steward Up to Speed.**

\* Find out if you've got a steward, and if so, how many other judges they'll be working with.

\* Ask your steward if they have any stewarding experience. If you've got a novice steward, ask them if they know what's expected of them. If they don't know, briefly and politely explain their duties.

\* Ask your steward what their brewing and beer tasting experience is. Ask them if they're interested in learning to be a beer judge.

\* If you have the time, and sufficient beer, ask your steward if they'd like to sample beer with you. Otherwise, explain why you can't.

\* If you intend to delegate responsibility for figuring out scores in the Flight Summary Sheet, or determination of the winning beers, to your steward, say so up front.

\* Supervise your steward.

- Make sure they're serving the right beer.

- Make sure that the beer isn't being served too cold.

- Periodically check to see if they're doing their job right. Usually, this means nothing more than glancing at the growing stack of paperwork. If you see a problem, politely explain what it is and how they should correct it.

\* Keep track of time.

\* If the other judges still appear to be filling in their scoresheets when you're done filling in yours, ask them if they need more time. If so, give them a couple more minutes, then ask again. On the other hand, they might be waiting on you!

\* If another judge doesn't appear to be filling out the scoresheet properly, politely call attention to it. ("It doesn't look like you had a lot to say on this one, do you need more time to write more?")

\* Open discussion during the consensus portion of judging.

\* Once the judges have reached consensus, politely shut down conversation and move on to the next beer. (e.g., "Our scores are within three points of each other and I think we've covered all the problems here. Let's move on.")

\* Coordinate feedback with the other judges so that multiple judges don't just discuss one aspect of a badly flawed beer. (e.g., "I'll discuss the lactic infection. You discuss the oxidation issues.")

\* Keep the judging on track. It's easy to get distracted or to start swapping stories with the other judges. If you've got lots of time, there's no harm in quiet table talk as long as it doesn't

distract other judges, but don't let it get out of hand. If you're under time pressure, shut down irrelevant discussion quickly. (e.g., "We're under time pressure, so we need to focus. Let's get back to this entry.") Save the chatter for when you're done.

\* Settle disagreements quickly. If there are large scoring discrepancies be the first to compromise. If that isn't possible, then be the first to "agree to disagree" and let wide but acceptable scoring variances stand (e.g., 7 points when you prefer to be within 3 points), or the first to call in another judge as a tie-breaker.

#### **F. Handle the Post-Flight Duties.**

\* Make sure that the paperwork for each beer in the flight is in order.

\* Make sure that information on each entry cover sheet is correct.

\* Scan the scoresheets for any glaring errors (e.g., lack of feedback, inappropriate comments, grossly incorrect scores).

\* Make sure the information on the Flight Summary Sheet is correct and sign your name on it.

\* Determine the winners in the flight.

\* Determine which beers (if any) will advance to mini-BoS.

\* Determine which judge on the panel (if any) will handle mini-BoS duties.

\* Tell the head judge (or the steward) that your panel has finished judging.

\* Make sure that the judge director gets all the paperwork from your flight.

\* Stick around the judging area so the steward (or competition officials) can find you if they need you. If that's not possible, delegate someone to do so.

## **5. Mini-Best of Show**

When it is necessary to split flights of beer in the same category between multiple teams of judges, the top beers in each flight are judged in a "mini-Best of Show" (mini-BoS) round to determine the winners.

\* The Mini-BoS Guidelines (<http://www.bjcp.org/docs/MiniBOS.pdf>) covers the basics of the Mini-BoS process. You should read it before you judge in a mini-BoS.

\* If you are judging in a competition where just two bottles are entered per entry, be very careful to keep beer you judge in the first round in good shape as it goes into the mini-BoS. Ideally you will have at least half a bottle of beer to send to the mini-BoS.

- Sample as little of the beer as possible (1-2 oz. per judge).

- Cap the beer immediately after samples are poured. (Hint: Either use a bottle opener which doesn't bend or dent the cap, or place a coin on top of the bottle cap before you open it to keep the cap from being damaged. Alternately, recap the bottle using a new bottle cap or a removable plastic wine bottle stopper. Well run competitions will have some method of recapping bottles.)

- Be careful not to rouse sediment in the beer.

- Don't share beer with your steward.

- Put the beer back into the cooler.

- If you have the technology, and you want to be really fancy, you can try blowing a bit of carbon dioxide into the bottle to keep it from being oxidized.

\* Unless the competition directors tell you otherwise, if there are just two flights involved in the mini-BoS, you should send the top three beers in your flight to mini-BoS. If there are more than two flights in the mini-BoS, each team should send just the top two beers.

\* Only send the very best beers in your flight to mini-BoS. Sending a flawed beer to mini-BoS is a waste of time for everyone, since it will be quickly eliminated. If you have no good beers in your flight, or just one or two, say so. There's no law that says you have to send along your full quotient.

\* Typically, only two or three judges are needed to judge the mini-BoS.

- These are usually senior judges involved in judging the various flights (typically Certified or National), but there are exceptions.

- If you are a lower ranked or unranked judge, don't be offended if you aren't asked to sit on the mini-BoS panel.

- Many judges are happy to delegate responsibility for the mini-BoS to another judge. So, mini-BoS panels are a good place for ambitious lower-ranked judges to gain additional judging experience.

- Even if you can't judge in the mini-BoS ask if you can sit in and watch. You might also be able to sample the losing beers as they come off the table.

\* If you are a mini-BoS judge, one of your jobs is to act as an honest witness for the best beers from your flight. If a beer's character has altered from the first time you judged it, tell the other judges. As beers warm and lose carbonation, subtle flaws might show up, delicate flavors might vanish and balance might change as carbon dioxide drops, making the beer seem sweeter and less aggressively hoppy.

\* Try to judge the various mini-BoS beers with as small a sample as possible. You'll have very little beer to work with and you don't want to drink from the bottom of the bottle because of the risk of disturbing sediment which might alter the beer's flavor and appearance.

\* The method of determining the top three beers in the Mini-BoS might be spelled out by the competition organizers, or it might be left up to the judges.

- The standard method is to blind-taste all the beers sent to mini-BoS and choose the top three, regardless of initial ranking. Use the techniques listed for Best of Show, below.

- Another method is to judge the top beers against each other. The winner of that round gets first place in the category. The beers that are left are then tasted against the second place beers and the winner of that flight gets second place. Finally, the remaining beers are tasted and the best beers in that group get third place and honorable mention.

\* Be aware that the score a beer achieved in the first round of judging doesn't matter in mini-BoS. You should only judge the beers against each other, not their scores.

\* If the contest organizer imposes Scoring Restrictions (especially Minimum Advancement/Award Threshold rules), you might need to adjust your initial score, or get another team of judges to adjust their scores, so that the winning beers in the mini-BoS have the highest scores of all the flights.

\* Remember to check the "This beer advanced to a mini-BOS round" checkbox on the cover sheet.

## 7. Best of Show

At the end of most competitions, the first place beers in each category are sent to the Best of Show round where senior

judges (generally National and above) judge them to determine the Best of Show Winners.

**A. How to Be a Good BoS Panelist:** The BoS panel is as much a test of your people and communications skills as your beer judging expertise.

\* It's usually late in the day, when people are hungry, tired and grumpy.

\* The BoS panel might be working against a time deadline set by the venue or the competition director.

\* The idea is to choose the winners as quickly as possible:

- Don't show off!

- Don't dither! Keep talk to a minimum. If you can't say something succinctly, don't say it.

- You need to know the BJCP style guidelines extremely well; there won't be time to refer to them once discussion starts.

- Don't turn the panel into a crusade for your favorite beer style. Even if you hate a particular style, you should be a good enough judge to recognize a good example of the style as for being good for what it is, and judge it accordingly.

- If you won't get your way, don't take it personally. It's only beer, and it's not even your beer at that.

\* Don't be offended if you aren't chosen for the BoS panel.

- The size of the panel is limited by the number of entries in the competition.

- If you have entries in the competition, you can't be on the BoS panel.

- You might be outranked. At big competitions the entire BoS panel might be composed of Master or better judges. If you want to be on a BoS panel, try smaller competitions where promising lower ranked judges, or judges who are prepping to take the BJCP exam, might be chosen.

**B. Setup:** Typically, judges mark circles on pieces of paper: one for every beer in the BoS round. Well-organized competitions often have specially marked sheets for the BoS panel.

\* An experienced team of stewards pours the BoS beers and delivers them to the table as quickly as possible, while announcing the entry number, category and sub-style.

\* The BoS panel scribbles down the entry information with one hand while sniffing and tasting the entry with their other hand. This continues until all the BoS beers are served.

\* Once all the beers have been served, the BoS panel takes a few minutes more to further review the beers and make more notes.

**C. Elimination Rounds:** After everyone has had a chance to quickly evaluate the beers, one of the judges will start the BoS elimination rounds. There are roughly three phases to the BoS elimination rounds:

I. Beers which are obviously flawed get knocked out of contention. At this level, even small flaws can be fatal.

II. Beers which have subtle problems, typically minor style problems or oxidation issues, get eliminated.

III. Beers which have very slight, often barely tangible flaws, get removed.

IV. Usually the senior judge present will act as unofficial chairman and moderator.

V. One way of eliminating beers is to go in a "round robin" fashion starting with the senior judge.

\* The speaker proposes one beer to be eliminated and briefly gives reasons why it should be removed. If possible, list only the most prominent faults. (e.g., "I'd like to eliminate the

Oktoberfest. It has a diacetyl problem.” Or, “The American Stout isn’t to style.”)

\* Other judges can defend the beer. If anyone defends the beer in the first rounds, it is retained. At this level, no explanation is necessary. (i.e., “I’d like to keep the Stout.”)

\* The next judge on the panel then takes his turn until everyone has had their say.

VI. Once approximately half to two thirds of the beers have been eliminated, it takes a majority vote to eliminate a beer.

\* At this level, it’s permissible for judges to be a bit more verbose when attacking or defending a beer. (i.e., “I think the American Stout doesn’t have enough hop flavor and aroma, and not enough dark roast character for the style. I also am getting slight solventy stale oxidative notes.”)

**D. Determining the Top Four:** Once there are only 3-5 beers left on the table, judges should try to achieve consensus when determining Honorable Mention, and 3<sup>rd</sup> through 1<sup>st</sup> Best of Show Beers

\* A majority vote can be used if consensus is impossible.

\* A good way to determine the top three is to have each judge rank their top five beers, then use “instant run-off” voting to determine the winners. For example, if your favorite beer isn’t the winner, your votes still count toward it being the second place winner, and so on.

\* At this level, it’s acceptable to look at the guidelines to refresh your memory about fine points of a particular style (but it’s better form if you know the guidelines well enough that you don’t have to look things up).

## 8. Asking For Help

Sometimes, you’ll encounter a situation you can’t handle on your own. If that’s the case, the right thing to do is call on the competition organizers for help.

**A. Competition Director.** The competition director is responsible for the overall function of the competition. He is responsible for recruiting other competition officials and organizing the competition. During the competition, he will be very busy and possibly very stressed out. If possible, direct your questions to one of his deputies. *When to go to the Competition Director.*

\* If you have concerns about the performance or behavior of one of the competition officials.

\* If you have concerns about the competition venue or the competition itself.

**B. Head Judge.** The head judge is responsible for recruiting judges, assigning them to flights and handling other judging duties. Since they can usually serve as a judge, they are likely to be found someplace near the judging hall. *When to go to the Head Judge:*

\* If you are unable to judge a particular flight.

\* If you have a question about competition scoring conventions.

\* If you have concerns about the quality of another judge’s scoresheets or behavior.

\* If you cannot resolve a scoring dispute with another judge and need a “tie breaker” or superior authority.

\* If you’re unsure who should be head judge for a flight.

\* If you’re unsure who should serve on a mini-BoS panel.

**C. Head Steward.** This isn’t a required position, but many large competitions have someone to organize and supervise the stewards. *When to go to the Head Steward:*

\* If you’re not sure if a steward has been assigned to your judging team.

\* If you have concerns about a steward’s performance or behavior.

**D. Cellarmaster.** This is another “unofficial” position, but a vital one for any large competition. The cellarmaster is responsible for making sure that the entries in the competition meet the competition bottle rules, that they are properly labeled, stored properly and properly organized for the judges. Before beers are served, the cellarmaster or one of his assistants should determine that the entry numbers on the beer bottles correspond to the “pull sheet” or “flight sheet” provided by the Registrar.

Generally, the steward acts as a liaison between the judges and the cellarmaster. *When to go to the Cellarmaster:*

\* When the bottles served don’t meet the competition guidelines (e.g., not properly anonymized, or are all missing category or identifier numbers).

\* When the bottles served are all in bad condition (e.g., served extremely warm or badly shaken).

\* When an entry number or category information is obscured or missing from a number of bottles.

\* If you have no steward, you will need to go to the cellarmaster to solve most problems regarding bottles and flight sheets.

**E. Registrar.** The registrar is responsible for making sure all the beers entered into the competition are properly registered. He also serves as the “firewall” between the entrants and the judges, since only the registrar knows the identities of all the brewers who have entered the competition, and only the registrar knows which brewer brewed a particular beer. Until the competition ends, the registrar must keep this data secret from other competition officials. Likewise, judges shouldn’t ask to look at the registrar’s data.

During the competition, the registrar is responsible for producing anonymized “pull sheets” or “flight sheets” which list just the entry’s category, substyle and entry number, plus any additional data required for the style. They are also responsible for entering the score assigned to each beer, and listing the winning entries in each category and in the Best of Show round. *When to go to the Registrar:*

\* If you’re not certain that a beer has been entered in the correct category (i.e., the beer is completely out of style).

\* When a pull sheet is incorrect or incomplete.

\* When an entry number or category information is obscured or missing from a single bottle (or a few bottles) and the steward hasn’t been able to fix the problem.

\* When required data for a Category is missing (e.g., no special ingredients or other information listed for Specialty beers).

\* If you approach the registrar, stand so that you can’t see their computer screen or entry information.

\* When you ask questions of the registrar, phrase them so that the registrar can answer them while still protecting the entrant’s anonymity. (i.e., Don’t ask, “Did Fred accidentally enter his English Pale Ale as a Brown Porter?”, but, “Did the entrant intend for this beer to be entered in category 10B?”)

**F. Steward.** If you’re assigned a steward, they’re the first person you should turn to for help. *When to go to your Steward:*

\* Fetching supplies.

\* Cleaning up spills.

\* Preparing beers for judging (i.e., making sure that bottles and flight sheet data match, that the bottles are arranged in flight sheet order, and that the bottles are at serving temperature).

\* Identifying or tracking down competition officials.

\* Asking simple questions of competition officials.

\* Solving minor bottle and flight sheet problems which would otherwise require the Cellarmaster's attention:

- Flight sheet and bottles pulled don't match.

- Bottles not in flight sheet order.

- Required information missing from one (or a few)

bottles.

- One, or a few, bottles in the flight don't meet condition.

- One, or a few, bottles in the flight aren't in proper condition for judging (e.g., too cold or badly shaken).

## Part V - Practice Makes Perfect

Beer judging is a learned skill, and there is no substitute for practical experience. The following tips will improve your beer judging skills:

### 1. Judge as Many Competitions as Possible

All the private practice in the world can't substitute for actually judging in competition.

\* Choose competitions you know to be well organized, or which feature beer styles you're interested in judging.

\* Ask to be paired with a National level or better judge and treat the experience as a tutoring session. Most senior judges are glass to act as mentors.

- Obviously, this trick doesn't work all the time, especially if you have limited time, or a big flight to judge.

\* Ask to be paired with a judge who you know to be extremely knowledgeable about the style you're judging. In such cases, reputation counts as much as rank. For example, an unranked judge who regularly brews award-winning Berlinerweisse might know tricks that a National-level judge who never brews that style does not. That said, most senior level judges are also great brewers, with a lot of brewing experience.

\* Ask to judge categories that you don't normally drink or brew.

\* Discuss your perceptions with the other judges on the panel. This will give you a sense of customary scoring ranges, as well as your sensitivities and "blind spots" regarding various flavors, aromas and mouthfeel sensations.

\* If possible, judge, or at least sit in on, as many mini-BoS sessions as you can.

\* If possible, watch the Best of Show round at the end of the competition.

- Listen to the BoS panelists' comments and try to taste eliminated beers as they come off the table.

- If possible, also try to sample the Best of Show winners. This will give you a good sense of the subtleties which separate merely good beer from great beer.

\* Between judging sessions, if they aren't busy ask questions of senior judges.

- If you have questions about a beer in a flight you're judging, save it (if possible) and have a senior judge taste it later and give you feedback. This is especially useful if you are judging a style which you don't know particularly well, or if you encounter an off-characteristic in beer which you can't identify or adequately describe.

### 2. Judge Beer, Don't Just Taste It

When you taste beer mentally score and evaluate it as you would in competition.

\* If possible, taste with the BJCP guidelines, a beer scoresheet and a trouble-shooting guide in hand.

\* Tick off the stylistic descriptors in your head as you evaluate the beer.

\* Try to guess what ingredients went into the beer and how it might have been made.

\* If you don't fill out a scoresheet, mentally evaluating the beer should take less than a minute and require no more than 2-3 sips to for a complete evaluation.

### 3. Critically Evaluate Your Own Beer

When drinking your own homebrew, try to assess how ingredients, process, age and other factors affect the beer. Think about how changes in process and ingredients affect the finished beer.

\* Try to notice how age affects the beer.

\* When you rebrew a recipe, try to notice how age, ingredient changes and other factors affect the beer.

\* Keep careful brewing and tasting notes.

### 4. Practice, Practice, Practice!

\* Taste BJCP-listed commercial examples of various beer styles.

\* Seek out top-rated commercial examples of various beer styles. Look for beers which have won in competitions which use style guidelines similar to those used by the BJCP (i.e., Great American Beer Festival or World Beer Cup). To a lesser extent, look for beers which have been highly rated by respected beer writers in books, magazines and web sites. Popular ratings on sites such as Beer Advocate or RateBeer are less reliable.

\* Arrange informal beer tasting sessions with other BJCP judges, or other people in your area who are prepping to take the BJCP exam. But remember, the purpose of these sessions should be to critically evaluate beer, not to get drunk!

\* Read the Commercial Calibration column in Zymurgy. If possible, taste the beer under consideration while reading. The Commercial Calibration is a great source for scoring and descriptive feedback.

\* Join online forums, such as the BJCP member forum or the AHA forums, where senior BJCP judges post and ask questions.

\* Make a habit of actively using your sense of smell and taste. If you can reasonably and safely do so, smell (or even taste) things you wouldn't normally. Try to describe your perceptions. This will help enlarge your sensory vocabulary.

\* Practice writing beer scoresheets. With practice, you should be able to accurately and fully fill out a scoresheet in about 5 minutes. Keep your scoresheets and critique them. Look for areas where your comments could be improved.

## Part VI - The BJCP Tasting Exam

Once you've judged a few competitions, you should think about taking the BJCP Exam.

Currently, the tasting portion of the BJCP exam takes about an hour and consists of tasting and judging four sample beers.

The first time you take the exam you must take both the tasting and the written portions together. If you wish to retake the exam, you can retake just the written or the tasting portions.

Under the new system, you will need to pass an on-line qualifier exam before you can take the tasting exam. If you pass that test, you can take an expanded version of the current tasting exam, where you will taste 6 beers. This test will probably last 90 minutes.

\* There are 100 possible points on the tasting section of the current exam, but it only accounts for 30% of your overall score.

\* Under the new exam format, you grade on the exam determines whether you get Apprentice, Recognized or Certified rank.

\* Under the new exam format, you must achieve at least an 80% on the tasting exam in order to take the written exam required to achieve National or higher rank.

\* You start the current exam with four blank scoresheets (six scoresheets under the new exam).

\* Currently, at some point during the exam (usually around the 1 or 2 hour mark if you're taking the full exam, in the last hour of the exam if you, or anyone else in the room, is retaking the tasting portion of the exam) a proctor will come around with a beer and announce the style to which you will judge the beer.

## 1. How the Tasting Exam Differs From Judging

\* *You are under a time limit.* You have a maximum of 15 minutes to judge and describe each beer.

\* *There is no consensus judging.* You will have no idea how closely you scored compared to the proctors or other examinees, nor will you have any idea how closely your perceptions matched theirs.

\* *Beers in the flight can be from different categories.*

- The proctor will tell you the beer's category and substyle. You must determine how well it hits the style, and what its faults are, if any.

\* *You will not have access to the BJCP Style Guidelines when judging beers on the exam.* You must know them.

- A good sensory memory, honed by sampling world-class examples of various beer styles is more valuable than memorizing the BJCP style guidelines verbatim.

\* *Your scoresheets will not describe the sensory descriptors on the left-hand side of the sheet.* You must know how they smell, look, taste and feel, as well as knowing their causes and controls.

- A good sensory memory, honed by sampling flawed beers, and a good understanding of how off-characteristics develop, is far more valuable than merely memorizing off-flavor descriptions.

\* *Beers will be served from a common pitcher.* This means you don't have to open bottles or write observations about bottle condition. It also deprives you of clues about the beer's origins. For example, the beers served from the exam could be pulled directly from a draught system.

\* *For the exam, DO NOT write down any identifying information, except for the exam ID number, on your scoresheet.*

## Time Management

It is important that you complete each of the four scoresheets. To do this, you must carefully budget your time.

\* Keep a watch on your desk to time yourself.

\* When time is up, move on to the next beer.

\* If you have time at the end of the exam, you can go back to your scoresheets and fill in details.

\* Even if you're busy with another portion of the exam, at least try to smell and observe each sample beer when it's first served. You can miss subtle, volatile aromas if you wait.

\* You can put a folded piece of paper or a coaster on top of beer samples to hold in volatile aromas until you get around to judging them. This also works for partially-consumed beer samples you wish to revisit.

- You should still write down identifying characteristics about the beer, however.

\* *Make it easy read photocopies of your scoresheets.*

- Write clearly and firmly.

- Erase thoroughly.

- Leave margins of at least 1/4".

\* *Try to use all the space available to you on the scoresheet.* Some graders interpret excessive "white space" as a sign of insufficient feedback and mark down for it. Anyhow, if you're fully describing each sensory aspect of the beer, you will probably need all that space!

## 2. The Exam Beers

The following facts USUALLY apply to the beers you will be judging:

\* *Three random beers of the six will be flawed.*

- One will be badly flawed (a score of 13-20).

- Two will have minor problems (a score of 27-34).

\* *One beer will be a good example (a score of 38-45).*

\* One of the beers will have a perceptible aroma or flavor component (whether or not that characteristic is appropriate to the style).

\* *The flawed beers will always have noticeable flaws.*

- There will be no beers with just subtle threshold-based flaws like slight staleness.

- The badly flawed beer might have multiple problems.

- A flawed beer might be miscategorized rather than having any real problems. This means you might get a golden beer and be asked to judge it as a stout, or vice versa!

\* *Beers will be drawn from Styles 1-19, except for Belgian Specialty Beer (sub-style 16E), and including Classic Rauchbier (sub-style 22A).* There should be no beers from categories 20-21, 22B or 22C, or 23.

\* *All the beers will be judged according to different styles.*

- All the beers will be of different styles.

- Flawed beers can be flawed homebrewed or commercial examples, blended or doctored samples of homebrew or commercial beer, or good examples of beer entered in the wrong category.

- Examiners are encouraged to use flawed homebrews rather than doctored beers.

- If there are no good homebrewed examples available, examiners can use up to two classic commercial examples of beer.

- Where beers are blended, one of the beers will be a very good or great example of its style (i.e., 38+ score).

\* *Multiple bottles of each sample beer will be blended in a pitcher.*

- Each sample should be served at optimum temperature for the style.

- Each sample should be served as soon after blending as possible.

- Each participant should get a 3-4 oz. sample of each beer.

\* **DESPITE ALL THIS, ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN!**  
There might be two great beers, or four terrible ones, or anything else in between.

### 3. How the Tasting Section is Graded

There are five segments of the tasting exam, each worth 20 points, for a total of 100. Graders grade your scoresheets according to the following criteria:

**1. Score (20% of Score):** How close was your score for the beers to the consensus proctor scores?

\* The graders take the absolute difference between your score and the proctors' score for each beer, and then compare them on a score matrix. The scores for each beer in the flight are averaged to get your overall Scoring Accuracy score.

\* The scoring matrix is as follows:

Variance from Consensus	Points/Beer
0	20
1.5	19
2.5	18
3.5	17
4.5	16
5.5	15
6	14
6.5	13
7	12
8	11
9	10
10+	9

\* The lowest score you can get on this section is a 9!

\* Realistically, the lowest possible score is more likely to be 11-12 points, since no beer will be ever judged below a score of 13 and very few beers will achieve a score greater than 45, giving an actual maximum point spread of 32 points.

#### **Potential Faults**

Per the BJCP Exam Proctoring Guidelines, sample beers might have any of these potential faults: a) acetaldehyde (green apple); b) astringent (puckering); c) d) diacetyl (buttery); e) DMS (cooked vegetable); f) esters (fruitiness); g) higher alcohols (solventy); h) lightstruck (skunky); i) miscategorized (grossly incorrect body, alcohol content, color or other style characteristics); j) oxidized (cardboard) or k) sour (lactic or acetic).

\* There is an element of luck here, but this is actually the easiest portion of the tasting portion to do well on.

**2. Perceptions (20% of Score):** How well did you perceive the beer?

\* Did you detect the same characteristics in the beer as the proctors, the exam organizer and the rest of the examinees?

\* Did you completely and clearly describe the sensations you detected?

\* Did you concisely note major faults in Aroma, Appearance, Flavor and Mouthfeel?

\* There is an element of luck here, but you can "improve your luck" with training.

**3. Descriptive Ability (20% of Score):** Did you completely describe the beer?

\* Did you address all 19 of the sensory descriptor keywords listed on the scoresheet?

\* Were your descriptions clear, complete, vivid, grammatically correct and free of misspellings?

\* Was your handwriting legible?

\* There is no element of luck here. Your score is entirely based on your own efforts.

**4. Feedback (20% of Score):** How good was your feedback?

\* Did you briefly describe what you liked (or didn't like) about the beer?

- Did your level of praise (or criticism) roughly match the score you gave the beer?

\* Did you address the most important flaws first?

\* If you offered criticism, was it polite and constructive?

- Even (or especially) if the beer was terrible, did you say something positive and encouraging?

\* Did you give the brewer at least two stylistic or technical suggestions to improve their beer?

- Were your suggestions for improvement detailed, technically correct, and free of assumptions about ingredients and techniques?

\* There is a bit of luck here, since if you screwed up your perceptions of the beer, your feedback will be off base, but the graders generally give at least partial credit if your feedback addressed faults you described in your description of the beer. You can greatly improve your score by understanding brewing ingredients, processes and troubleshooting.

**5. Completeness (20% of Score):** How complete, legible and accurate was your scoresheet?

\* Did you finish filling out all the scoresheets?

\* Did you use all the space available on the score sheets?

\* Was each section jam-packed with useful information?

\* Did you comment on all the sensory descriptor keywords? (Remember, hops have both bitterness and flavor.)

\* Did you fill out the style grid?

\* Did you check the appropriate boxes on the descriptor checklist?

\* Did you fill out all the scoring sections?

\* Did you total your score accurately?

\* There is no element of luck here. Your score is entirely based on your own efforts.

\* Completeness is critical for getting a good score on the exam, since it directly impacts the graders' perceptions of your Perceptions, Descriptive Ability and Feedback.

## 4. Gaming the Exam

Since the typical requirements for the six exam beers are listed, and since the typical scoring ranges are well known, it's tempting to "game" the exam. Some strategies work better than others.

**Extreme Scoring:** Since one of the beers is supposed to be badly flawed (13-20) and one of the beers is supposed to be great (38-45), it's tempting to assign a score of 13 to the "bad" beer and a score of 45 to the "great" beer.

The problem with this rationale is that the "bad" beer might not be that bad (e.g., a score of 20-25) and the "great" beer might not be that great (e.g., a score of 35-38). This is especially true for the "bad" beer, since a score of 13 is a "courtesy score" only assigned to beer which is utterly undrinkable. More typically, you'll get a beer which is in the 20-25 point range.

There's also no guarantee that you won't get a good beer which is out of style, which merits a score of 29 (the maximum score you can give a beer which is "out of style.")

**Bottom Line:** While there will be a good beer in the flight and a badly flawed one, don't assume that they'll be extremely good or bad. Judge the beer in front of you and make up your own mind how it should score.

**Making Stuff Up:** When judging a beer for the exam, it's tempting to write down more than you detect, both to fill up blank space on the score sheet and to hedge your bets by adding sensory descriptors which "should be there" on the chance that the proctors might mention them. For example, if you get slickness in mouthfeel from diacetyl, but don't detect it in aroma and flavor, you might alter your aroma and flavor perceptions to describe "buttery, butterscotch diacetyl notes."

Likewise, if you get a beer which you think is a great example of a particular style, you might be tempted to describe characteristics which aren't in the beer which you think "should" be there according to the guidelines.

This is a risky strategy, since "off" flavors and aromas can manifest differently to different people and can differ in perception thresholds and character depending on a number of different factors.

Also, the style guidelines allow for ranges of variation for most styles of beer, so characteristics which *can* be in a great example of a particular style aren't necessarily present in *all* great examples. Furthermore, there's no guarantee that the beer you're judging is actually a great example of the style!

Finally, remember that your perceptions will be compared to not just the proctors' perceptions, but also those of other people taking the exam.

**Bottom Line:** Don't do it. Judge the beer in front of you. The graders will generally be able to tell if you're making stuff up and they won't be impressed. The exception *might* be if you're supremely confident in your tasting skills, you know that you're insensitive to a particular off-characteristic (e.g., diacetyl) and you know exactly how it "should" manifest to most people. Even then, it's a gamble.

**Rote Answers:** While it's difficult to prepare or memorize pre-made, "canned answers" on the tasting exam, some people are stupid enough to try. Don't waste your time trying to memorize stock answers in advance, spend your time actually learning the material you need to know.

Don't assume that just following the suggestions in this guide, or any other guide, will get you a master level score. There is no substitute for your own practice and experience.

## *Common Mistakes on the Tasting Exam*

\* **Incomplete Assessment.** Most people who take the exam don't describe every aspect of Aroma, Appearance, Flavor and Mouthfeel, and don't make best use of the Overall Impression section of the scoresheet.

- Don't forget that hops have Bitterness, Flavor and Aroma! Mention each aspect!

\* **Vague, imprecise language.** Many people who take the exam don't understand what they need to write, or the terms they need to use, to write a great scoresheet.

- Don't use trite, unhelpful terms like "nice," "good," "hoppy," "fruity," "OK" or "appropriate to style."

- Use precise words and phrases (e.g., "dark amber," "pineapple esters").

- Use evocative language (e.g. "pungent citrusy, piney hops", not "hoppy").

- Don't use a non-technical term when a technical term will serve as well (e.g., "lightstruck" instead of "skunked," acetaldehyde" instead of "green apple").

- Don't forget to talk about the absence of a characteristic, but don't go overboard unless it's germane to the style (e.g., "no phenolic notes" would be extraneous to judging a Pilsner, but "No floral hop aroma" would be an objective, telling statement).

\* **Too many assumptions about the beers.** See How to Describe Beer.

- Don't assume that a beer is (or isn't) "to style" or technically flawed until you've fully described and analyzed it.

- Don't make assumptions about precise ingredients or recipe (e.g., "English ale yeast," "Biscuit malt"), and don't make any assumptions at all about brewing or packaging techniques (e.g., "dry hopping," "lots of age").

- Instead, use technical terms (e.g., "oxidation," "grassy" hops) and evocative language ("crackery Pils-like malt").

\* **Imperfect understanding of beer styles.** You won't have the style guidelines in front of you when you take the exam! Study them thoroughly in advance!

\* **Insufficient feedback.** If you detect a fault, you should briefly mention it in the relevant portion of the scoresheet. Then, give precise instructions for a possible remedy for the problem in the Overall Impression section.

\* **Scoring and comments aren't aligned.** If you find faults in a beer, don't give it a high score. If you like a beer and it's got no faults, don't give it a low score. Likewise, if you detect faults in appearance or aroma, don't give the beer high marks in that area.

\* **Lots of blank space.** Some graders mark down if you don't use all the space allocated on the scoresheet. But, if you're properly describing the beer and giving good feedback, this won't be a problem!

\* **Describing faults, but not fixing them.** Don't spend a lot of time describing how the beer misses the style. Instead, briefly note faults (e.g., "Too low." "Lacks complexity") as you detect them in Aroma, Appearance, Flavor and Mouthfeel. Then, in Overall Impression, give detailed advice for correcting them.

Likewise, don't assume that just ticking off location, intensity and character for every sensory descriptor will

automatically get you a high score. Unless you have Master-level experience and technical knowledge to back it up, it's impossible to write a master-level scoresheets. And, if you really are a Master-level taster, you'll have your own style so you won't need this guide.

*Bottom Line:* Rote memorization is a recipe for disaster on the tasting exam. You either know your stuff or you don't. Even if you (sort of) know your stuff, following someone else's study guide won't take you any farther than a National level (80%) score. If you want to go higher, nothing can substitute for experience.

**Safe Scoring:** Since 29 is the midpoint between the two scoring extremes of 13 and 45, it is technically the "safest" score to assign a beer. Practically, however, if you just assign each beer a score of 29, you will be far outside the proctors' scoring range for both the high and the low scoring beers in the flight. There's also no guarantee that the beers in the flight will follow the published rules.

*Bottom Line:* Use a score of 29 as a median, but judge the beers and make up your own mind. After all, that's why you're taking the exam.

**Second-Guessing the Proctors:** If you've had a chance to judge beer with the exam proctors before you take the exam, you might get a sense of their quirks. For example, they might have a tendency to score high or low compared to other judges, or they might be unusually sensitive (or insensitive) to various off-flavors.

This strategy only works if you have a lot of experience judging with all the proctors and have judged a variety of different styles of beer with them. Also, any judge experienced enough to be an exam proctor will know how to compensate for personal sensitivities and will have minimal scoring biases. Finally, your perceptions of the beer won't be compared to just one proctor's perceptions, but also to the other proctor's perceptions, those of the exam administrator, and those of the other people taking the exam.

*Bottom Line:* Second guessing the proctors might work if you've spent a lot of time judging with both of them and you know their quirks extremely well. Otherwise, don't bet on it.

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