



# Discover Orienteering, Discover Yourself: Your first event

Orienteering is an outdoor sport suitable for all ages and fitness levels; basically, it's like a scavenger hunt in which you use a detailed map to find checkpoints ("controls") that have been placed at locations marked on the map.

QOC offers (free) beginner instruction at all of our public events; just ask for it at the registration table. After instruction (and paying the course fee) you are encouraged to try out what you've learned on one of the available beginner courses. We do not offer "classroom instruction", because we strongly believe that having instruction at an event and then being able to immediately practice what you've learned is the most effective way to both learn - and have fun - orienteering.

Your first orienteering event will almost certainly be a voyage of discovery. Here are some tips for your first QOC event:

## What should I wear?

Orienteering is basically walking or running in the woods so wear whatever you'll find comfortable for that and appropriate for the weather. We generally recommend long pants to protect your legs from such things as thorns and insects. Long sleeves are also helpful, again depending on the weather and your preference. In cold weather, it is advisable to wear multiple thin layers of clothing so you can take layers off if you overheat. Rain gear may also be a good idea if there's any likelihood of precipitation in the forecast. A change of clothes for afterward is also usually a good idea, particularly in inclement weather.

## What kind of shoes are appropriate?

For beginner courses, any shoe you can comfortably walk or run in and don't mind possibly getting dirty. Hiking shoes or running shoes will be fine. Beyond the beginner courses, many people wear trail running shoes for more traction and some buy orienteering-specific shoes, which have aggressive cleats and usually also small metal studs in the soles.

## What other equipment should I bring?

A compass if you have one. It's used more on intermediate and advanced courses, but can come in handy on beginner courses too. If you don't have one, compasses are available to borrow at registration at no charge. A photo ID is required as security deposit and a \$15 charge will be assessed for any lost compass.

It's a good idea for each individual or group to carry a whistle, to be used only in an emergency. Whistles can usually be purchased at registration for \$1.00.

The vast majority of orienteers do not carry cellphones while out on a course but feel free to if you wish. Be warned, cellular coverage is spotty or non-existent on some of QOC's maps, while quite good on others.

Each individual or group should have a watch to ensure that they return to the finish by the required course closing time (more on this later).

All courses, including beginner courses, usually have at least one refreshment control with containers of water and cups. Feel free to carry your own water and snack, especially if you think you might be on the course for a long time.



## Finding the event

This website will usually have detailed directions to the event venue and a Google Maps link to the parking area. Once you get close to the venue, be on the lookout for orange and white orienteering signage to guide you to the parking area. Registration will normally be located within sight of the parking area.

## Can I orienteer as part of a group?

Yes - groups are always welcome and they can share one map, although if desired a map can be purchased for each member of the group. Some special considerations apply if you'll be bringing a large group to an event - see our [For Group Leaders](#) [1] webpage.

## What happens when I arrive at an event?

Park, find the registration table, sign the non-member waiver, and pay the map fee. The base fee is \$15.00 per "starting unit" (i.e. per person going out on their own, or per group orienteering together) for non-member adults, \$10 for non-member juniors, and \$2 per map for additional maps used by members of a group who will do their course together. Being a QOC club member and having your own [epunch](#) [2] (rather than borrowing one from us) each reduce the entry fee by \$5. Juniors (those under 21) also qualify for reduced entry fees. You may of course fill out a QOC membership form on the spot, in which case your map fees that day will be waived, or you can wait until you've done your course and join then, in which case your map fees count towards the cost of the membership. See also [General Event Information](#) [3].

General information regarding the terrain, courses, conduct of the event and special and unusual situations is explained in the Event Notes, also called Meet Director's or Course Setter's Notes. These will be posted at or near registration.

If you know for sure which course of the ones on offer you want to do, the registration crew will have printed controls descriptions available but you don't need them - they are typically printed on the map. If you don't know for sure which course is for you then read the following.

## What do all those course colors mean?

In the US, orienteering uses a standard system of color-coded courses as follows:

- White - suitable for absolute beginners. Course is on trails and/or fields and is typically 2-3km long.
- Yellow - for slightly more advanced beginners. Course is mostly on trails and fields with control points a short distance into the woods. There may be opportunities for those who feel able to take short cuts through the woods. Length is typically 2-3.5km.
- Orange - intermediate difficulty. Mix of on- trail and off-trail, generally relying on the more obvious mapped features. Length typically 3.5 - 4.5km.
- Brown - short advanced course. Off trail and reliant on the subtler features of the terrain. Length typically 3.5-4.5km with large/steep climbs deemphasized if the terrain allows.
- Green - an advanced course a bit longer than brown. Length typically 4.5-5.5km.
- Red - a longer advanced course. Length typically 6-8km.
- Blue - the longest advanced course, not always offered in smaller parks. Length typically 8-10km.

Distances are as the crow would fly between control points.

## Which course should I go on?

We recommend that first time orienteers go out on a White course; however, if you're confident of your ability with maps in general and in the outdoors, a yellow course might be appropriate for your first time orienteering. If in doubt, discuss it with the meet director, course setter or other available volunteers and/or take a look at the white and yellow course maps before deciding. If you feel as though both the white and yellow courses are too short, a simple solution is to show up at the meet early enough to start at or near the beginning of the start window. Then, if the first course you try turns out to be a breeze and you finish in less than an hour wanting more, you'll have plenty of time to have a drink, grab another map (at the reduced price of \$2) and head out on the next course up in difficulty before the start window closes.

## I've registered at the event and decided on a course. What now?

Almost all QOC events now use electronic punching ("epunching" - see next Q and A) exclusively. If it's not obvious, ask the registration crew to point you to the epunch timing crew. They'll be your next stop on the way to the start. On rare occasions, a QOC event may still involve mechanical punching, in which case the registration crew will have given you a paper control card and explained how to use it.

## What is Epunching?



QOC events almost invariably now feature electronic timing - instead of carrying a card which you mark using mechanical pin punches at each control to prove you were there, you carry an "e-card" (actually a small plastic stick that attached to a finger with an elastic band and with a lanyard to go around your wrist for added insurance against loss) that you can buy or borrow. This e-card is momentarily inserted into a hole in special boxes at each control point to collect the timing information--also called "punching the box". A successful "punch" is indicated by a beep and

flashing light on the box. More details, including purchase options, are described on our [Epunch webpage](#) [4].

## So how does epunching work?



First you must borrow (or buy) an e-card. Before starting your course, make sure to punch a "clear" box, then a "check" box (found at the results table and likely also at the start course start). You'll have to hold the punch in the clear box until it beeps and flashes, indicating that it has erased any old data that was on the punch, then in the check box until it beeps and flashes, confirming that the clear box really did its job. To complete the course, you need to first punch the Start box, then punch a box at every Control on your course, then finally the Finish box. After finishing, take the e-card back to the results crew. They'll direct you to insert the punch into a "download" box until it flashes and beeps indicating that it has read the information stored on the punch about what controls you visited. That information will now be in the results computer. The results crew will be able to confirm whether you found all the right controls or not and you will get a printout of your time and split times for each leg of the course. If you borrowed the epunch from us, turn it in at the epunch download area.

## What will happen at the results table?

There may be a line to register with the results crew. Once you get to the head of it, they will fix you up with an epunch, make sure you clear and check it, get your name and course entered in the computer and point you in the direction of the maps (if you weren't given your map at registration) and start. Maps are highly likely to be available pre-printed with your course but QOC may occasionally hold an event at which you'll be given a blank map and will then have to copy your course from a master map onto it. If so, copy carefully - an error in copying here could make you very lost later. Either way, once you've got your map with a course on it, you're ready to start your course. Except... you don't know how to orienteer, haven't the faintest idea how to read an orienteering map, etc. Into this breach steps...

## Beginner instruction

There will always be one or more volunteers at a QOC event whose job is to explain the basics of orienteering to beginners. Ask the results crew who that is at your event. If they don't know, ask the volunteers at registration. If they don't know, ask for the meet director - he or she has to know who is



doing beginner instruction since it was their job to recruit them. Whoever it is will take a few minutes to explain the orienteering map symbols, basic navigational techniques, how to use (and why it's often best not to rely to much on) a compass, etc. and answer any other questions you may have. You may, of course, do some research into orienteering map symbols and techniques in advance, in the Get Better section of the QOC web site or elsewhere on the web but this isn't necessary - a few minutes of beginner instruction should suffice to cover everything you'll need to know to complete a beginner level course.

While we wouldn't advise reading it and skipping beginner instruction, reading [Orienteering Technique for Beginners](#) [5] might be of some benefit.

### The start

You're ready to start once you have the following things:

- an epunch or punch card
- the map for your course, including a clue sheet
- a compass

It's helpful but not required to have:

- a whistle
- a watch or other timepiece

The meet notes should specify a safety bearing to follow or other instructions on what to do in the event you get hopelessly lost. The safety bearing or instructions should also be printed on your map but please familiarize yourself with them before starting.

You may want to let anyone else who has just started on the same course as you get at least out of sight before starting yourself. This generally won't involve waiting more than a minute or two.

Then, if you aren't already certain of it, check which way is north, punch the start box, turn over your map and start your course.

### During your course:

Having turned over the map, you should see the course marked on it in magenta. The start will be marked with a triangle. The start will be connected with a magenta line to the circle marking the location of the first control on your course, which will have a numeral 1 printed beside it on the map (be careful not to accidentally start doing your course in reverse order). You'll see many people run off immediately after starting but taking a few moments to study the map before deciding what route to take to the first control can be a wise investment. Relate the features shown on the map near the start to the terrain around you. Pick out which way to go to get to the first control. What is the feature you are looking for? Check your control descriptions so you'll know what to look for when you get close. If orienteering in a group with children, talk about all of this out loud and involve them in the process of deciding on routes and looking for the controls. Don't expect them to do everything their first time out or they will get frustrated, but do let them take part in the decision making or they're likely to get bored. Once you find the first control, remember to verify that the numerical control code on the epunch box and the control flag matches the code in the control descriptions for your course and punch. Repeat the process for the second and subsequent controls until you reach the finish and punch the finish box. Should any of the epunch boxes fail to beep and flash when you punch them, use the backup pin punch to punch anywhere on your map - this will prove you visited the control despite



any problem with the epunch record. Having finished, be sure to go download your epunch at the results table. Downloading is our proof that you came back from your course safely. If you fail to download, we may therefore end up searching the woods for you.

## Etiquette while orienteering

- As just discussed, always report to the finish by the announced course closure time whether or not you have found all the controls.
- Controls must be visited in the specified order, unless the event is a score-O.
- Try not to loiter at controls after punching. Lingering at controls can give away the location to other competitors, depriving them of some of the fun of finding the controls unassisted.
- Look at the map only once your time has started.
- Following or assisting others is not allowed, though it is permitted and expected to give aid anyone needing medical attention as well as to tell hopelessly lost orienteers their location on the map and directions to the finish on request.
- Groups must stay together throughout their course.
- Stay out of areas marked as out-of-bounds; this is usually indicated by purple cross-hatching.
- Slower runners should move aside on narrow paths to allow faster runners to pass.
- Be respectful of other park users, try not to make a lot of noise, and yield the right of way on trails if appropriate. Horses, in particular, may not react well to being closely approached by a running human so it is advisable to give them a wide berth or slow to a walk when passing them.

## Emergencies

The rules of orienteering require participants to stop and render assistance to other orienteers in distress. The standard emergency signal is three whistle blasts in close succession, repeated periodically until help arrives. If you hear that or hear or see any other signal liable to be a call for help, stop running your course and investigate.

If lost and unable to figure out your location on the map, follow the safety bearing or other instructions for navigating to safety given in the meet notes (they might, for example, be to head downhill until you reach a body of water then follow the shoreline one way or the other). Or, if you still have a rough idea of your current location, try following a compass bearing to some obvious feature like a major road. If you see another orienteer, ask them to show you where you are on the map and

If in distress, i.e. injured seriously enough to be unable to walk to the finish or hopelessly lost, use your whistle (or, lacking a whistle, your voice) to signal for help until it arrives. The signal is three sharp blasts in quick succession, repeated at frequent intervals until help arrives. If you find a control that isn't one of the ones marked on your map, it is advisable to stay there - eventually, after the course closure time, someone will come to pick up the control and you can accompany them back to the finish.

Most orienteering maps are of parks with well-defined boundaries defined by major roads, rivers, residential areas, and other features that it would be difficult to cross without knowing it. However, some maps have less distinct boundaries. If you think there's a chance you've walked off the edge of the map and you lack confidence in your ability to retrace your steps or plot a route to a major road or trail your best course of action may be to stay where you are, preferably on a road or trail if you've found one, make yourself as visible and wait for searchers to find you. Continuing to move, possibly further from the area the search will concentrate on, may be counterproductive.

## Hazards:

Aside from getting lost or seriously injured, there's thorny vegetation, of course, but it can usually be



avoided and scratches generally don't constitute a serious health risk. The Mid-Atlantic region has plenty of deer ticks, which may carry Lyme's disease; for a good description of local tick types, head to Fairfax County's [Common Ticks webpage](#) [6]. If you've been bitten by a tick, [this webpage](#) [7] from John Hopkins offers useful advice. Chiggers are also found in some of the areas we use. Long pants and long sleeves can help keep them away. Sprays with DEET and other types of repellents are also an effective precaution. It is always, except perhaps in the dead of winter, a good idea to check yourself very carefully when you are finished, both exposed areas of skin immediately after finishing and your whole body once you return home. Poison ivy may also be encountered on some of our maps but generally isn't a big problem unless you're particularly sensitive, in which case prophylaxis beforehand with Tecnu or similar products or washing as quickly after your course as possible with products designed to remove urushiol may be indicated.

### After you finish:

- Be sure to download at the results table, even if you didn't complete your course. As mentioned above, this is our proof that you aren't lost in the woods and in need of rescue...
- Don't forget to give back your borrowed epunch.
- Results may be displayed near the results table if you want to compare your time to that of others. If not, they should be online in the Results area within a day or two at most, quite likely that very evening.
- Help yourself to the snacks and drinks on offer.
- A change of clothing, possibly in conjunction with a check for ticks, may be in order.
- The meet equipment includes a first aid kit. If you need anything bandaged or otherwise seen to, just ask.
- One of the most enjoyable parts of orienteering is discussing it afterwards, what worked and what didn't, comparing splits for different route choices, etc.. It's also one of the best ways to improve your orienteering. So stick around if you have time and talk with other people who did your course or with the course setter, who is likely to be very interested in the feedback.
- Almost all QOC events are available on our club's installation of [Routegadget](#) [8], a software application that allows people to draw the routes they followed on the map and view animations of their routes compared to the ones others followed on the same course. This can also be very illuminating as to what routes are best and what kinds of errors we fall prey to.

### Videos:

While not made at QOC events (hence the erroneous claim in the first video as to which club is the oldest in the US - we know it's QOC!), the following videos give a decent idea of how an orienteering event looks and feels - [Orienteering](#) [9] and [Orienteering for Beginners](#) [10].

### Special event formats

The color coding system as described above refers to the usual cross-country or "classic" orienteering courses, in which each course consists of a series of checkpoints (usually referred to as controls) that must be found in a specified order. We sometimes offer other event formats, the most common of which is called score orienteering (score-O). In a Score O there are many controls, which may be assigned different points values based on the difficulty of finding them and how far they are from the start/finish location and which can be found in any order. Usually there is a time limit and the object is to find as many controls as possible within the time limit. Score-O events may involve a mass start or a longer start window. There are also other mass start formats which may be offered from time to time. QOC also occasionally offers events longer than the usual classic courses, or shorter events generally referred to as middle distance and sprint events. Middle distance courses are shorter than classic courses and are designed to offer greater technical difficulty and demand precise orienteering at high speed. Sprints are yet shorter, emphasize navigation and decision making at very high speed, and may



be held in forested terrain or in more urban parkland settings or built up areas, frequently university or college campuses. The details of any special format for an event will be spelled out in the meet announcement online. There will also normally be white, yellow and perhaps orange classic courses on offer in addition to any special format event, which might not be suitable for beginners. This will also be spelled out in the meet information posted online. Detailed meet information is usually only posted 3-5 days in advance.

### **Miscellaneous:**

Some QOC meets offer a streamer course, a form of orienteering suitable for very young children. If a streamer course will be offered at a particular meet, the meet information online will say so.

### **Summation:**

Hopefully that was some help. Don't worry if you haven't managed to memorize it all - you can always ask questions as necessary at the event. However, please send any suggestions for questions that you think ought to be answered here to us using the [Contact Us](#) [11] section of this web site. Thanks, and have fun orienteering!

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### **Links:**

[1] <http://qocweb.org/content/group-leaders>

[2] <https://qocweb.org/epunch>

[3] <https://www.qocweb.org/content/general-event-information>

[4] <http://qocweb.org/epunch>

[5] <https://qocweb.org/content/orienteering-technique-beginners>

[6] <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/hd/westnile/tickscommon.htm>

[7] <https://www.hopkinsrheumatology.org/specialty-clinics/lyme-disease-clinical-research-center/what-to-do-after-a-tick-bite/>

[8] <https://qocweb.org/content/route-gadget>

[9] [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drmwBZ\\_ntB8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drmwBZ_ntB8)

[10] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZOI9kKuA4I>

[11] <https://qocweb.org/contact>

[12] <https://www.qocweb.org/content/discover-orienteering-discover-yourself-your-first-event>