

General Considerations For Cross Country Orienteering Courses, Design and Set Guidelines

Objective

Orienteering's slogan is that it is "the thinking sport;" doing well requires a combination of physical and mental skills. These skills are put to the test by the course setter, working in the framework of the given map and terrain. It is nearly impossible to set a course that does not offer a good physical test, providing that it is of the proper length; the challenge for the course setter is to offer mental test appropriate to the skill level of those for whom the course is intended.

Skill not Luck

You are setting the course for an orienteer, not a surveyor, so **the feature you use must be distinct**. You should avoid such control sites as "the middle of the marsh" (unless it is a very small marsh) or "the hillside" because they introduce too much of an element of luck into the competition. **The competitor should be able to orienteer directly to the control if he is skillful, and not have to count on finding it by using a systematic search** (he may end up doing that anyway, but he should not have to). Often a contour line will have a gradual bend in it that could be called a spur (or reentrant). Avoid this also; it may be hard out in the woods to tell just where the spur or reentrant is. Your features for control sites can be small, but they must be distinct.

In general, avoid dense areas for controls, especially if the terrain is somewhat vague. Again, it is a matter of what is fair; are you requiring skill or luck? Finding a control point (for example, a pit) in the middle of a large, flat, dense area places too great a premium on luck, even if the point itself (the pit, say) is distinct. Dense areas are okay if the terrain is well defined.

Start-Finish Location

Good terrain for White and Yellow courses, with plenty of linear features, often dictates where the Start will be. Most competitors like to have the Finish/Competition Center as close to the parking as possible. Move the Start to a higher elevation to reduce climb. Almost without exception, the ideal location for the White course, because of its length, dictates or constrains the Start area for all courses. The practice of having separate Start areas for one or more of the lower courses should be discouraged. Herding beginners and youngsters to a separate competitive area is very detrimental to development, both the individual's and the sports, as a whole. The mix of competitors of widely different ages and skill levels epitomizes the fun and vitality of orienteering. The course designer who would segregate competitors, for his own convenience, at once undermines and misunderstands much of the unique attractiveness of orienteering.

Avoidance of Doglegs

Leaving a control, there should not be a logical route that doubles back through the same area from which the control was approached. Why? Because competitor A may have competitor B just behind him, so that A reveals the location of the control as he is leaving it, thereby helping B. Since some competitors may be luckier than others it is at least potentially unfair. Doglegs may be obvious or not so obvious. For example, the best route to a control may be along the

base of a hill to a reentrant and then continue along the base of the hill. You have a dogleg, even though the straight lines you use to connect the points on the map do not show this. To avoid doglegs, you can put in a short leg — 100 to 300 meters long -- to move the competitor away from the previous control to the start of another long leg. A similar problem can occur if you use the same control on more than one course, if runners on one course leave the control in the direction from which the people on the other course are arriving. Avoid this as well. Under some conditions, it may be necessary to have a dogleg on a White course in order to have clarity. While not desirable, a dogleg on White is preferable to a course that is confusing or too difficult. Remember that the USOF minimum for Start time intervals is two minutes.

Avoidance of Dangerous Areas

Avoid including dangerous areas such as cliffs with poor visibility, sink holes, large areas of poison ivy or poison oak, or deep swamps. Remember, a White or Yellow runner may go into these areas accidentally, while a Red or Blue runner may be tempted to try a dangerous short cut.

Separation of Nearby Controls

Have no less than 100 meters distance between any two controls on different courses if the features are similar enough to be confused at all and no less than 75 meters between any two controls on different courses regardless of the feature.

Max Climb Over Optimum Route

Determine the "optimum route" that an orienteer would take on all of your courses. Measure its length in meters with the edge of a piece of paper or a string. Then count how many contour lines this route crosses going uphill. Multiply this number of contour lines by the contour interval in meters. This "climb" must not be over 4% of the optimum route distance. The 4% is an IOF maximum; it is better that your design is well under it. For example, a 6.7km Red course with an optimum distance of 7.5km should never have over 300 meters of climb. If it is, change your course so that there is less climb. Try a design that offers contouring along hillsides as the optimal route. A longer walk to get to a higher Start area can also help.

Duplicate Courses

If for some reason you are having duplicate courses, try to make them very similar in length, climb and number of controls. The first control must not be the same for any two courses.

Course Purpose

For the design of the less difficult courses, it is important to be mindful of three overriding considerations which distinguish these courses from the advanced courses, namely Brown, Green, Red, and Blue:

1. While as a general rule the advanced courses each should be designed to be as technically difficult as terrain and map permit (and of equal technical difficulty), each of the lower courses -- White, Yellow and Orange — must be designed to fit a distinct range of technical difficulty.

2. Because each of the lower courses is an A level, or championship, course for certain classes, the correct design of such courses is just as important as that of the advanced.
3. Because beginners and developing orienteers spend at least a season or two (usually longer) running the lower courses, it is especially important to the development and success of the sport that these courses be well-designed.

White Course -- 2 to 3 kilometers

Winning time 25-30 min.

The White course should be designed for people who may have no orienteering experience and have had perhaps 15 minutes of instruction before setting out. While it is the championship course for M-12 and F-12, **the major complaints about White courses have been that they were too difficult.**

A White course must be designed in a section of the map, which has an appropriate sequence of linear features, where the mapping is absolutely accurate and where, preferably, there is an interesting variety of topographic features. An ideal example would be a small lake, which can be circumnavigated without fear of losing one's way and with the expectation of a good trail system and interesting features. Usually the area of the map having the most trails is best for White course location.

1. **An Easy Start.** **Make the first two or three points particularly easy.** This allows the competitor to get familiar with the map and keeps him from getting discouraged from the very beginning. The first control should be as simple as possible — in fact; it can even be visible from the starting point.
2. **Linear Features.** Generally, the terrain you use for a White course should be "friendly," with lots of good handrails, no excessively rugged features, etc. **Keep every leg along well-marked trails or a similar linear feature** such as a road, a stonewall, a field edge, a stream or the like (trails are much preferred, however).
3. **Short Legs.** **Generally the legs should be kept fairly short -- certainly no more than 400 meters.** It is better to have six to eight short legs than three or four long ones. On the other hand, don't use twenty legs each 100 meters long.
4. **Large features for control points.** Make the difficulty of the control fit the course. **Use large, obvious features** — top of a big, distinct hill, rather than the backside of a three-meter knoll, a trail junction rather than a reentrant. Rarely, therefore, will a control be suitable for both the White course and the Orange course.
5. **Avoidance of vague and dense areas.** As with any course, **the features you choose for control sites must be distinct;** even large features can be vague, as for example the top of a large flat-topped hill. Also, if you pick precise spots, you will get fewer comments about controls being a little bit off. Never put a White control in a dense area.
6. **Very simple route choices.** It is not necessary to have a route choice on a White course, but sometimes it is nice to offer a little toward the end. The options should be rather simple. Remember, people on the White course may take routes that you would never dream of! A good example would be a leg having a long, safe route (e.g., along a trail) and a shortcut (through woods, along a stream, etc.), provided there is no danger of getting seriously lost. Such a design introduces some elementary navigation factors and adds challenge and variety. If necessary, a leg can be run through the woods guided by streamers, but this should be used only in exceptional circumstances where needed to optimize distance due to lack of linear features.
7. **No Use of Compass.** Avoid directions or features that require the use of a compass. **A White course should be able to be completed without having to use a compass.**

Yellow Course -- 3 to 5 kilometers

Winning time 35-40 min.

The Yellow course is designed for males or females who are 13 to 14 years old and for older orienteers who are relatively new to the sport. It offers the beginning orienteer an initial experience with the application of orienteering techniques, and the course designer should make an effort to involve as many fundamental skills as possible --compass, map reading, measure and pace:

1. **Basic Design.** Just as with White, it is critical that the Yellow course be set in an area having well-mapped, clear features. It is vital to appreciate that, in several senses, **the basic difference from White is that Yellow takes the runner from the trail into the woods.** For instance, on White the course can be navigated entirely along trails and prominent linear features, while Yellow should be navigated mainly off trails. **While trails can be used for a route on a Yellow leg, an off-trail route should also be available for the same leg.** The simplest design technique is to draw a line on the map where you want the competitors to go and place the controls along that line.
2. **Easy Start.** **Make the first two or three controls relatively easy** so that the competitor may become familiar with the map.
3. **Easy Course.** Yellow should still be an easy course. These competing considerations confine the technical difficulty for Yellow to a rather narrow range. This objective is accomplished by the **use of a handrail for much of each leg's length, with a catching feature near (25-50m) each control.** The best Yellow legs are along handrails such as streams, ridges, and vegetation boundaries or stonewall.
4. **Variety of lengths of legs.** Vary the lengths of the legs, but tend toward keeping them short. The **maximum length should be 600 meters.** Legs should be longer than White; **usually 200-400 meters is good for Yellow.**
5. **Large features for control points.** **Use large features within visual distance and rather obvious features,** such as a large boulder near a trail junction, on top of a hill, north side of pond. When a point feature is used, it should be within visual distance of a large feature.
6. **Route Choice.** As with White, again some challenge can be used by shortcuts through open woods, but only if the distance is relatively short (up to 200m, at most), and provided that a catching feature exists. And even in such cases, a longer "safe" route should also exist.
7. **Control placement.** **Put each control on or just after an obvious collecting feature. If the control is not on a collecting feature, put it within 100 meters of one, preferably just after it.**
8. **Catching Features.** If a control is not on a collecting feature, a catching feature must be within 100 meters after the control.
9. **Avoidance of Dense Areas.** **Never put a Yellow control inside of a dense area.**
10. **Limited Use of Compass.** **A Yellow course should be able to be completed with minimal the use of precision compass.** A leg where use of a compass could result in a faster route is appropriate, however, that leg should have a reasonable route where a compass is not required.
11. **Shared Controls.** **The practice of sharing a leg or control with White or Orange should be avoided,** especially if a large turnout is expected. Because each of the three lower courses has a discrete range of technical difficulty, overlaps invariably cause compromise with correct standards.

Orange Course — 4.5 to 7 Kilometers

Winning time 50-55 min.

1. **Moderately but not extremely difficult navigation.** The controls and best routes should invite the intermediate orienteer away from strong collecting features (roads, trails) that the beginners must rely on. However, the penalty for navigational errors should not be extreme. **An Orange control may be placed in an area of intricate small features, but only if there is at least one good attack point nearby (preferably several) to help the competitors find it, and also a catching feature nearby to which they can "bail out" if they become confused.**
2. **Route Choice.** Set a course that forces the orienteer to make decisions constantly. Make sure that the competitor must continue to pay attention and think in order to execute his choice properly — it should not be, for example, just a matter of choosing which one of two main roads to follow for one kilometer. The best

Orange legs require, and reward, constant navigation. Handrails should be more suitable than for Yellow -- e.g., a long, broad reentrant. Rather, the runner should pick off point markers (cliffs, boulders, knolls, marshes, etc.) as he proceeds along his chosen route. A trail -- or a road -- run should seldom be the best choice.

3. **Variety.** For variety, easy legs near Yellow in difficulty should be mixed with challenging legs near Red; in addition, a mix of short (200-300m) and longer (500-600m) legs is desirable. It is important that the whole course contains as much variety as feasible. This variety should also cover control features, direction, route choice and navigational problems.
4. **Control Features.** The control features should be fairly prominent, unless a good attack point and catching features are nearby. The Orange runner should be forced to use all of his orienteering skills in the overall course.
5. **The fastest time about 50 minutes.** Keep in mind that some very skillful -15-16A runners will be on Orange: so the course must not be too easy. A typical mistake is failure to reduce length due to climb, difficult footing (rocks) and slow run (fight).
6. **Precision Compass Measure and Pace.** Legs requiring nothing but precision compass and measure and pace should be limited to one or two.
7. **Difficult Controls.** Difficult controls may be used, but a good attack point should be within 50 to 200 meters.

Brown, Green, Red and Blue Courses

Winning times 45 to 50 minutes for Brown, 50 to 55 minutes for Green, 60 to 65 minutes for Red, and 75 to 80 minutes for Blue (USOF Rules)

The advanced courses should be set so that the very experienced orienteer is well challenged. The element of luck should be eliminated if possible. The Brown, Green, Red and Blue courses all should be of the same technical level -- difficult. General requirements are the same. However, special consideration, noted at the end of this section, is required for Brown and Green.

1. **Start.** Choose the Start for Brown, Green, Red and Blue courses with regard to proximity to a good White/Yellow course area with lots of trails and linear features. In hilly areas, place the Start at a high elevation to help minimize unnecessary climb.
2. **Course Length.** Try to keep your course length reasonable, especially on hilly courses or in thick vegetation, to meet these times. Use the USOF standard lengths as basic guidelines but always consider your anticipated competitor skills and condition. Try not to over set courses. Use previous course results and talk to previous competitors who have used this terrain to gauge length and climb.
3. **Control Feature Size.** If you put the control on too large a feature, it is usually very easy to find; therefore, the competitor does not need to use precision skills. Too big a feature might be the top of a large hill, the edge of a large clearing, a point along a trail or stream (if there are any confusing trails or streams, this could be okay), etc. In fact, having a control within 50-75 meters of a big feature is probably too easy as well. Use small features -- boulders, cliffs, small reentrants, spurs and knolls, small marshes, depressions, etc.
4. **Controls too close to attack points.** Placing a control soon after a collecting feature, for example, 100 meters after a road, will usually make it too easy to find even if the feature is small. Furthermore, the competitor will probably be able to run to the road without thinking, making the leg too easy. Instead, place the control some 200 meters before the road. That way the less skilled orienteer will have to cover the extra 400 meters if he must use the road to find his bearings. Collecting features are long features lying across the competitors directing of travel, such as roads, large trails, streams, ridges, clearings, large marshes, etc. Concentrate on this: if the competitor uses them to make his route or his navigation easier, make him travel farther out of his way. Don't make the direct route the easier route.
5. **Lost Kilometers.** This means any parts of a course that requires little or no thinking, merely physical effort. They are to be avoided as much as possible, as the preceding paragraphs have already indicated by implication.

If a control is on top of a large hill, the leg becomes a hill-climb event instead of an orienteering event. If the control is placed right after a big collecting feature, the competitor can turn off his mind until he reaches the feature. If the best route is along a trail for several hundred meters, again the leg becomes a racing event requiring little or no thinking.

6. **Handrails.** Try to avoid having the routes parallel to obvious linear features such as roads, trails, streams, fences or power lines. To prevent a parallel route from simplifying the leg significantly keep such features more nearly perpendicular to your route unless the linear feature network is complex.
7. **Catching Features.** Advanced courses should not have controls placed too close to catching features. Controls should not be located beyond a catching feature; rather, any catching feature should be at least 200 meters beyond a control.
8. **Climb.** Climb should not exceed 4%. See "Optimum Route" on the second page for computation method.
9. **Long Legs.** Include at least one leg in excess of 800 meters on each course.
10. **Route Choice.** Maximize route choice and navigation difficulties while minimizing the luck element and the lost/dead kilometers. The navigationally most difficult route should be faster for those with good woods running skills than the "easy way around."
11. **Variety.** A good course offers variety in both controls and routes. The larger the number and the greater variety of O-tests built into a course, the greater the chance that luck is eliminated and the orienteer with the best ability wins.
12. **Brown and Green Courses.** Some orienteers on these courses may have some vision problems and only limited leg strength. The climb should be closer to 3%, at most 4%. Tough and dangerous areas must be avoided. While it must be less demanding physically, the Brown and Green courses should require the maximum in orienteering skills. Vision is a major problem for the older orienteer. Try to keep controls out of areas that have much fine detail on the map. This tends to become a large blur and therefore promotes luck instead of skill.
13. **Long - O.** When setting Long-O courses, the emphasis should be on long legs with lots of good route choices. Legs of one to two kilometers are appropriate if they can avoid lost distance. The estimated winning times of Long Courses should not exceed 60 minutes for Brown, 75 minutes for Green, 100 minutes for Red and 145 minutes for Blue.

USOF Cross-Country Orienteering Course Setting Guidelines

Control Placement

It is fair, and often desirable, to block the view of the control by a mapped feature, especially where it is the control feature, such as a cliff, boulder, etc. But, be sure the feature is appropriately visible. It is hard to improve upon a control on the far side of a knoll, seen first as the runner reaches the crest or comes around the side. On the other hand, nothing is worse than a control hidden behind a log, bush or other unmapped obstruction, which punishes all but the lucky few who stumble upon it.

It is desirable to place controls from different courses at least 75 meters apart regardless of the control feature.

Hidden Controls

The only reason we hang a flag is to help competitors find the punch or marking device. A non-mapped feature for any course should never hide controls. It is extremely frustrating for the orienteer to navigate a leg properly only to lose time searching for a hidden control. Likewise it is just as frustrating to reach for a marker or punch and find that it is attached to something near the control flag not to the flag or stand on which the flag rests. We call that hidden in plain

sight. Remember, unless the clue information clearly implies otherwise, every control should be equally visible from all directions. **Despite the consideration that the feature, not the flag, should be seen first, do not hide flags, especially in pits.** Do not place the control against the side of the pit in the bottom because it may be hidden from the approach. If you use a pit place the control in the middle so that it is visible from all approaches.

White and Yellow

Controls should usually be visible from the trail or road used to navigate. If not locate the control at such a feature, but be sure it (the feature or even the control) can be seen from the trail. Make sure that there are no similar features nearby to confuse the competitor. **White Controls should be hung chest high. Yellow controls should be hung waist high.**

Orange

Orange controls should be hung just above the knee.

Brown, Green, Red and Blue

For all of these courses, the control feature should be seen first and then the control. Flags should be hung just below the knee. Make the competitor orienteer to the feature before he can see the control. If he is coming from the South, for example, place the control on the North side of the knoll or boulder.

The flag should always be fully open when hung, not folded on the ground. In no case should the control be hung with any part of the flag resting on the ground. Err on the side of visibility. If you have to build something to gain the placement you desire (such as laying a stick across a pit to hang the control on) do not hesitate to make a small construction out of available materials. It pays to have a good imagination.

Field Check (Vetting)

You must check the planned control locations out in the field. Many controls are unsuitable due to map problems. You will find that even on a good map: up to 10% of the controls selected "on paper" (by yourself or suggested by the course consultant) will have to be rejected (and alternates chosen) after checking them in the field due to unsuitability of the map, vegetation, etc. An alternate control can usually be found only a short distance away, so that the leg can remain intact.

White courses

For White Courses be sure to check the other courses to ensure that there are no nearby controls from them to confuse the White course runners.