

Common Mistakes – And How to Avoid Them

Every year, some provisional leaders get tripped on their way to a rating. Usually it's because of a simple, and avoidable mistake. Here are some of the most common mistakes plus sure-fire ways to avoid or solve them.

Common mistakes – “I,” “M” and “E” provisional trips

- **Expired Sierra Club membership:** You must be a current member to lead trips for the Sierra Club. No exceptions. If your membership is coming due around the time you expect to lead your provisional trips, renew early.
- **Expired first aid:** You must be current in Wilderness First Aid and CPR when you lead your provisional trips. Solution: Check your CPR card and the certificate for your most recent Wilderness First Aid class before you schedule your provisional trips. If the date is more than four years before any of your trip dates, you need to renew. You can submit a trip for publication while your first aid is expired, but you must renew before the trip date. Hint: Sign up early for Wilderness First Aid, as it fills quickly.
- **Missing paperwork, Part 1:** If the LTC administration chair doesn't have a record of your accomplishments, they didn't happen. Solution: Call, e-mail or mail the administration chair and make sure he has all of your classes, check-offs and evaluations on file. Do this before you schedule a provisional trip. Hint: Keep copies of everything that you submit to the administration chair; we do our best to keep track of paperwork, but with 100+ candidates in the pipeline at all times, it's easy to misplace something.
- **Missing paperwork, Part 1A:** Attention WTC leaders. LTC and WTC have two letters (and several people) in common, but they are not joined at the hip. Yes, we know WTC is very particular about its leaders being current in wilderness first aid and CPR. But it's not enough to tell WTC you're current. If you're planning provisional trips, you'd better tell the LTC administration chair you're current. If the admin chair doesn't know about your first aid records, they don't exist.
- **Inappropriate trips:** Your provisional trips should be at the upper range of the rating. Why? Because we want to make sure that you can safely lead the hardest possible trip at that rating. Right now you may want to lead easy trips exclusively; but if you decide later that you want to lead tougher trips, you'll already have experience.
 - **“I” provisional trips** must feature extensive cross-country travel, involving route-finding (taking the group on the safest, easiest route to a pre-identified location). The destination should not be visible from the trail. For that reason, several fine “I” trips like Cirque Peak are inappropriate for a provisional.
 - **“M” trips** must feature 3rd class rock or snow. On rock you should plan a trip where there is a real chance you will have to belay participants uphill. On snow you should plan a trip where ice axe and crampons are necessary.

- **“E” trips** must feature 4th class rock or steep, long snow climbs (crampons and ice axe for safety).
- **Uncooperative weather:** Murphy’s Law plays havoc with provisional trips. An ill-timed blizzard can turn an “I” provisional into an instant “E” trip. Too little snow can downgrade a planned “M” provisional into an “I” or even an “O.” Solution: Plan more than the required number of trips, and select times of year and routes that are less vulnerable to changes in weather. For example, north-facing chutes may offer wonderful snow climbs in August, while south-facing slopes may be snow-free in April. Also, arrange with your assistant leader to schedule “make-up” dates so you easily can reschedule if your original date is rained or snowed or, uh, blizzarded out.
- **Inappropriate evaluators:** Don’t pick your significant other or a close friend or relative. Picking an evaluator who will be easy on you is really missing the point of the exercise, to learn more about leading great outings. Ask an experienced leader – someone you have hiked with and whose style is compatible with your own. Many experienced leaders are happy to do an occasional evaluation.
- **Missing paperwork, Part 2:** If the LTC administration chair doesn’t have your self-evaluation and your evaluator’s report, and if your group or section outings chair doesn’t have your sign-in sheet, the trip didn’t happen. Every year, a few leaders who have done everything right get caught on this hurdle. And it’s such a small hurdle. Solution: Do your self-evaluation within a few days of returning from the peak and mail it to the administration chair. As for your evaluator, take him or her to a restaurant near the trailhead, offer to buy a beer or even a meal, whip out the provisional evaluation report and a pen, and leave the rest up to him or her. Hint: Drive your evaluator home; that will give him or her plenty of time to mull over your review.

Common mistakes – “M” and “E” provisional trips

- **Forgetting the Provisional Lead Committee.** The PLC consists of the LTC chair, vice chair, administration chair and technical chairs. Their job is to review your resume and determine if you have the necessary experience to lead the trip. Don’t rush them; submit your resume to the PLC (via e-mail or snail mail to the LTC chair) at least four weeks before the deadline for submitting your write-ups for publication. See “Model Resume.”
- **Forgetting the Mountaineering Oversight Committee.** The MOC is a national Sierra Club panel that approves all restricted (3rd and 4th class) Sierra Club-led trips. Notice that word “all.” If you hope to be an active “M” or “E” leader, then applying to the MOC will become about as automatic as reserving a wilderness permit. The MOC’s job is to ensure high safety standards on all Club-led mountaineering trips. Fill out the “Application for Mountaineering Outing Approval” (available by link from the LTC website) and submit it with your trip write-up and climbing resume to your outings coordinator. It won’t hurt if you send a copy to the LTC chair at the same time. Give the MOC at least four weeks prior to the publication deadline to review your trips.
- **Failing to screen applicants.** This is a Very Big Deal. Poorly conditioned or

lightly experienced participants can prevent you from reaching the summit and successfully completing your provisional trips. This is probably the single most common reason leaders blow provisional trips. Ask for climbing resumes from all participants well before the trip. Be sure to ask for medical forms too; they are required for all participants on restricted Sierra Club outings. Read the resumes and the medical forms well before the trip departure date. Ask questions. If you don't know a participant, call other leaders who have taken this participant on a demanding trip recently. Bottom line: If the participant lacks experience within the past couple of years on terrain similar to what you'll be crossing, don't take him or her. That doesn't mean he or she must have done a long ascent; it does mean that he or she has done enough similar climbing to be comfortable and confident on your trip.

- **Over-screening participants.** You can go too far when screening participants. A trip with two or three participants (you, your evaluator and somebody else) really isn't a fair test of your skills. This doesn't mean you should take anybody with a pulse; it does mean you should reach out for people with appropriate skills and conditioning. One easy way to do this is to cross-list your trip with at least two climbing sections.
- **Failing to tell participants where they stand:** If you leave would-be participants dangling in uncertainty for weeks, it won't hurt you with LTC – we probably won't hear about it – but it most definitely will hurt your reputation with the people who sign up for trips. Solution: Make it a point to read resumes as they arrive. If you're not going to make a decision for several weeks, tell applicants that. Try to tell them as quickly as possible whether they're on the trip, on the waiting list or not a good match. In that last case, be diplomatic. Don't make people wait for months, only to be told they can't go. Give them a chance to make other plans. Simple courtesy will enhance your reputation as a caring leader.
- **Missing paperwork, Part 3:** Leaders of restricted trips must send copies of the medical forms and signed waivers from each participant to the outings chair of the sponsoring entity within 30 days after the trip. The outings chair in turn will forward the paperwork to Club headquarters. This is a Very Big Deal. If you don't send in the paperwork, the Club won't let you lead another restricted outing. Which means that the rating you worked so hard to get won't be worth very much. Solution: The week before your trip, when you're making last-minute preparation, buy a large envelope, write the outings chair's address on the envelope and put it someplace obnoxious, where you can't possibly ignore it, like your computer keyboard. A day or two after you get back, make a copy of the paperwork, stuff it in the envelope and mail it.