

William O. Ware Lodge of Research
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THE RIGHT STUFF

GUARDING THE WEST GATES SO THAT ONLY THE WORTHY MAY PASS

Jerry Johnston, Lexington Lodge No. 1

As Masons we often hear the phrase “*guard the West Gate*”, which alludes to the doorthat a candidate enters prior to being initiated, and instructs the Brethren to ensure that the candidate is worthy and well-qualified before admitting him – or, like the title of the 1983 film about astronauts training to be selected for America’s nascent space program, that he has “*the right stuff*”.

The singular use of the word “Gate” implies that there is only one gate, and that once passed through membership in the Lodge is assured. However, it is important to understand that there are in fact several gates – some less obvious than others – that the Lodge can and should use to ensure that only men worthy of being Freemasons are allowed to pass through.

Before reviewing those gates, we first need to define what sort of man we would allow to pass through. While this definition may vary a little based on the personality of the particular lodge, it does provide a set of core criteria upon which to base the concept of an ideal candidate.

The first three qualifications are required by the Grand Lodge of Kentucky:

- Must believe in a Supreme Being;
- Must be a man at least 18 years of age; and
- Must “come under the tongue of good report” (meaning well recommended).

A pretty low bar to be sure, but by doing this the Grand Lodge provides a lot of leeway for subordinate lodges to determine the best qualifications for membership into their respective lodge.

Additional qualifications of an ideal candidate to be considered:

- The candidate should be an “*established man*”, that is he should have a steady source of income, and not be entering into period of transition in his life. Examples of a period of transition would be entering military service, graduating from college and likely moving, imminent birth of child, and so on – anything that would likely detract from his ability to commit to the work required.
- The candidate should be seeking knowledge and self-improvement, and be receptive to receiving such from Freemasonry. He should not consider himself to be the “*smartest man in the room*”.
- The candidate should be at least somewhat philosophical and of an inquisitive mind. A reader of something more than the common and superficial.

- The candidate must get along well with others of differing backgrounds, viewpoints, political ideologies, and religious beliefs. We should look for more than mere tolerance, but rather a man who would be willing to call those who hold such viewpoints and beliefs a Brother.
- The candidate must be a man of good character. Since he is required to submit three references on his petition, those people should be contacted to find out what they have to say. The candidate's social media should be reviewed, to see if there are any posts that might contrast or support what the candidate appears to be. Most lodges conduct a background check, which will tell if the person in question has any criminal convictions. A single DUI from twenty years ago is very different from a string of misdemeanors five years ago, the latter likely being more relevant.
- The candidate should have a willingness *and ability* to commit to the work required to complete the three degree classes. Many men like the idea of being a Freemason, but lack either the time or the willingness to perform the work required to become one. Freemasonry may be right for them, but not *right now*.
- The candidate should have the level of maturity required to absorb and understand the degrees and studies.
- The candidate should hold a valid interest in Freemasonry, and not come seeking business contacts, religious salvation, or nonsensical occult interest.
- The candidate should have the financial wherewithal to pay annual dues, degree fees, festive board fees, and the occasional contribution to a Lodge charitable cause.
- The candidate should fit the culture of the lodge - not only be suitable for Freemasonry in general, but the lodge in particular.

Now that we have a model of the ideal candidate for Freemasonry, we can use these criteria as the prospect moves through the gates. Each gate should act as a filter, to separate the wheat from the chaff.

The First Gate

This is the initial contact a prospect has with the Lodge. It could be in person, via email/website/phone, social media, or simply dropping by for dinner. The Brother who receives initial contact should apply a rough filter to see if there is a valid interest in Freemasonry, and that the bare minimum criteria are met. There is no need to apply all of the above criteria as those can be applied at subsequent gates. In addition, the man making contact may have yet to see the value Freemasonry and the lodge can provide.

A lodge should review its online presence with a critical eye - what impression would it give a potential prospect? Is it kept up to date, or is the officer list and calendar from 2015? For a Traditional Observance or Heritage Observance lodge, does the web site give the impression of such?

The Second Gate

This gate would be the in-person visits by the prospect at lodge dinners, social gatherings, perhaps a lunch invitation by one or more of the members. At this gate you can begin to form

impressions of the prospect – and he of the Lodge - and gauge his true interest in the Craft. Attendance at multiple dinners, perhaps over several months, should be the norm. This gives the prospect the opportunity to evaluate the lodge, and for the lodge to evaluate the prospect. By meeting with as many members as possible over this time period it allows the Brothers to put a name to a face when it comes time to cast a ballot on his petition. The questions to consider here are: “Is this a man you would be willing to call a Brother?”, and “How well would this man represent the Craft?”

The Third Gate

This would be a more formal, planned meeting (orientation) with one or more prospects prior to them submitting a petition. This is not the investigation – that comes later. This is really an informational session for the prospect to determine if this particular lodge’s culture and style of Freemasonry is right for them, and to determine if they have the interest and commitment to the degrees and educational program. Ideally two to four members of the lodge would be present, including officers and instructors. Prospects should be instructed beforehand to bring a list of questions. Attending orientation should be required of a prospect before submitting a petition for membership, as the orientation could be the first real taste of the expectations and level of commitment required.

The Fourth Gate

Any petition for membership requires the signature of two Master Masons who are members of the lodge. This is more than a cursory sign-off. The Brothers who sign a petition are vouching that the man in question would be good for Freemasonry in general and their lodge in particular, that they would be willing to call this man “Brother”, and that he would represent the Craft in a favorable light. At least one or more one-on-one conversations with the prospect would be required to determine this.

The Fifth Gate

This gate is comprised of the investigation committee. Any questions regarding a candidate’s suitability for membership can be asked privately during the investigation, and of course any information shared is held in strictest confidence. A standardized question list should be available to members of the investigation committee, to ensure that all pertinent questions are asked, and that inappropriate questions are not. The investigation committee should contact provided references, review social media, and be informed of the outcome of a background check, prior to meeting with the candidate.

Ultimately, these questions must be answered in the affirmative:

- The candidate believes in a Supreme Being.
- The candidate is of good character and of sound mind, and is an “established man”.
- The candidate is seeking membership in the Craft for the right reasons.
- The candidate is suitable for Freemasonry in general, and this lodge in particular.
- The candidate would represent the Craft in a favorable light.
- The candidate has the time, commitment, and maturity to receive the Three Degrees of Masonry and perform the work required to attain a suitable proficiency.

- The candidate would be able to meet his financial obligations to the Lodge.

While ideally members voting on the petition will have met the candidate and made their own determination, many often rely on the investigation committee's report before casting their white or black ball. This is the final step to determine the suitability of a candidate, so it must be undertaken with utmost diligence.

The Sixth Gate

The sixth and final gate is the ballot box. A candidate for the Three Degrees of Masonry must be passed by unanimous ballot, each Brother present voting for the good of the Craft. Hopefully - since by this time the candidate will have been to several dinners, an orientation night, had two members sign his petition, and three more perform the investigation – most of the Brothers will have formed an opinion and will be able to find the candidate worthy.

Conclusion

When fully utilizing these “West Gates” it should be easier to determine early in the process whether a prospect is worthy to receive the Three Degrees of Masonry. There is nothing to gain by getting a prospect in front of an investigation committee who is not fully committed to the work, does not have a grasp of the basics of Freemasonry, or is too busy to dedicate a portion of his time to become proficient in the work required.

By the same token, it is not fair to a candidate to be initiated into Freemasonry only to find he does not have the time available to dedicate to the work required, or that more is expected of him than he is prepared to give.

Bringing men into the Lodge who are worthy and well-qualified, and truly prepared to receive Masonic Light will benefit both the Craft and the new Brothers.