



**AHDB**

# A guide to stock judging

Know what you're looking at!



**5th Edition**

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This guide was originally devised by Clive Brown, AHDB Beef & Lamb, with assistance from John Heal of MLCSL and was updated by Clive Brown and Katie Thorley, AHDB Beef & Lamb.



# Introduction

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Some consider placing four animals or carcasses in order as an art form. However, good stock judging results from sound observation and an understanding of an animal's make-up.

It also depends on being able to explain your choices simply and clearly.

These guidelines are produced by AHDB, together with the National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs. They set out what to look for and explain why it matters.

Good stock judging skills are increasingly important to gain the best returns for your livestock. You need to know and select the most appropriate animals for your end market. A good eye, sound observation and rational choice will all help to ensure better returns.

“ For decades, Young Farmers and others have competed in stock judging ”



**Clive Brown**  
Head of Knowledge Exchange  
Beef & Lamb, AHDB

# *Basis of judging*

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## Preparing to judge

Ensure you have a white coat. Wear it at all times and keep it buttoned up. Be smart; look the part. Have a working pen or pencil (pencils work better in an abattoir).

## Before you start

Establish what has to be judged. Are you judging animals for breeding, finished or finished potential?

Establish how long you have to judge the class.

Read the judging card to establish the criteria against which you will be judged.

## Stand back

Have a good look at the group from a distance. Understand the animal you have to judge; its general appearance, type, etc. First impressions are often the best. Make a judgement by eye and confirm by careful handling. When judging livestock for slaughter refer to carcase quality and killing-out percentages.

## Giving reasons

- Establish how long you have to judge – usually two minutes are allowed
- Memorise your reasons as much as possible
- Picturing the animals will help
- Stand up straight and look the judge in the eye
- Speak clearly and slowly enough for the judge to follow
- Describe the stock fully, refer to any distinguishing features (e.g. white face). As you deliver your reasons, compare as much as possible, going from front to back or back to front, using the same style for all animals in the class, with emphasis on the important areas. This means that you are less likely to get confused and allows the judge to follow your reasons
- Use as much of the time you are allocated as possible. Taking too long will incur penalties and not taking long enough means you could have used more of the time allowed to explain your reasons more thoroughly
- Thank the judge when you have finished, whether you have enjoyed the experience or not. Judges rarely remember when you thank them, but they always remember if you don't!



## Example of a presentation

Starting

“Mr or Madam Judge.

These are my reasons for placing this class of ...  
in the following order.”

(Always check that your order matches your card.)

List your reasons

Finishing

“Those, Mr or Madam Judge, are the reasons why  
I have placed this class in the order a, b, x, and y.”

Do not say your name, age, club or county. Competitors should remain anonymous and the organising steward may give you a competitor number.



# Dairy cows

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## Before you start

**Stand back** and have a good look at the group from a distance. Get a general impression of the animals you have to judge, noting their appearance, type, distinguishing features, etc.

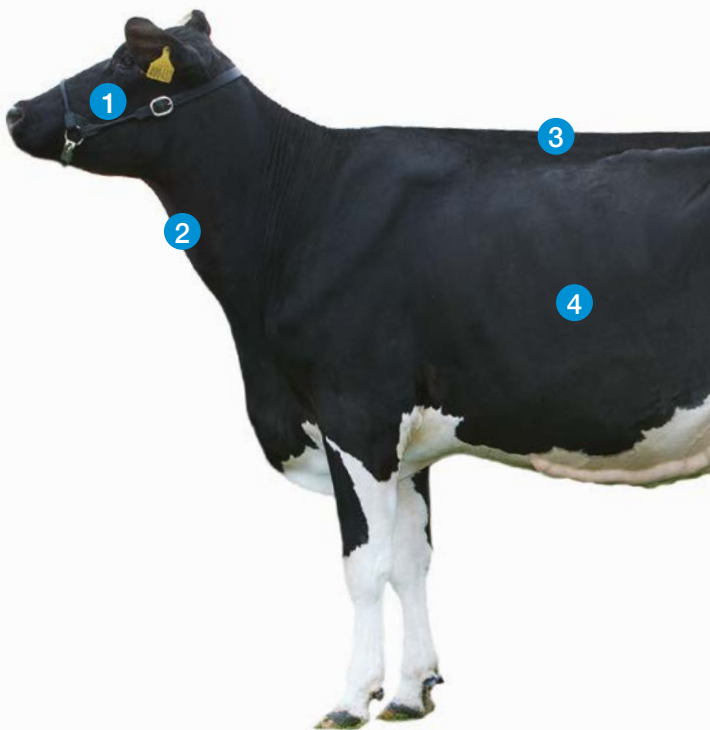
**Be methodical:** start at the head and work your way to the rear, inspecting all the important dairy characteristics.

## What to look for

For dairy, the cow should:

- Be fine throughout
- Have fine and supple skin
- Show longevity and angularity with 'dairy triangles'

Stature is important. Barrel or rib-cage length and width is very important, giving her excellent body capacity; a well-balanced, capacious udder; and she should stand and walk well on all four legs.



## 1. Head

- ✓ Long, feminine head
- ✓ Bright eyes
- ✓ Broad muzzle

## 2. Neck

- ✓ Blends to finely set, angular-shaped shoulder
- ✗ U-shaped

## 3. Topline

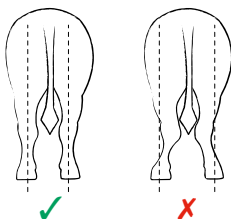
- ✓ Level
- ✗ Weak over loin
- ✗ High tail head

## 4. Body capacity

- ✓ Plenty of length and depth for forage conversion
- ✓ Plenty of width and well-sprung ribs

## 5. Hindquarter

- ✓ Plenty of length from hook bone to pin bone
- ✓ Plenty of width between pin bones



## 6. Udder

- ✓ Fore attachment must be strong and carried well forward, blending into a deep, capacious body
- ✓ Pink, fine-textured skin
- ✓ Plenty of width to rear with strong attachment
- ✓ Prominent milk vein
- ✓ Even length teats in the centre of even quarters
- ✗ Pendulous and fleshy

## 7. Legs and feet

- ✓ Stands and walks well on four well-shaped legs
- ✓ Up on pasterns
- ✓ Plenty of heel depth
- ✗ Closed-hocked or sickle-hocked
- ✗ Overgrown clees will make them overstretch
- ✗ Lameness on parade
- ✗ Down-at-heel



# Finished beef

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## Before you start

**Stand back** and have a good look at the group from a distance. Get a general impression of the animals you have to judge, noting their appearance, type, distinguishing features, etc.

**Be methodical:** start at one end and work your way to the other end, inspecting and handling as you go. Remember: you should always handle the loin on the left hand side because the kidney hangs loose on this side.

## What to look for

Always look for length, width and depth of fleshing throughout.

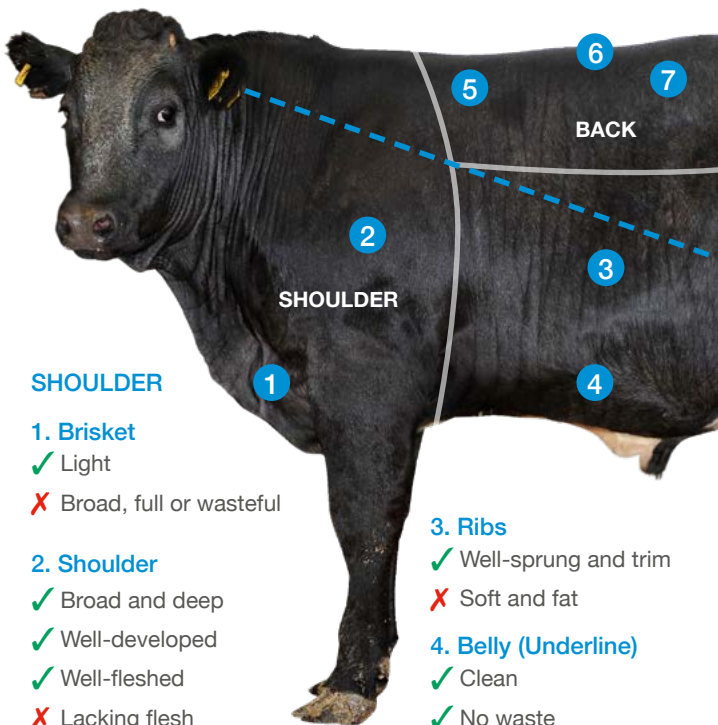
### Above and below the dotted line:

#### As much as possible above the line

- Good quality, expensive cuts

#### As little as possible below the line

- Lower quality, cheaper cuts



## SHOULDER

### 1. Brisket

✓ Light

✗ Broad, full or wasteful

### 2. Shoulder

✓ Broad and deep

✓ Well-developed

✓ Well-fleshed

✗ Lacking flesh

✗ Narrow

### 3. Ribs

✓ Well-sprung and trim

✗ Soft and fat

### 4. Belly (Underline)

✓ Clean

✓ No waste

✓ Parallel with top line



## BACK

### 5. Chine

- ✓ Full-fleshed
- ✗ Weak, lacking flesh

### 6. Topline

- ✓ Long
- ✓ Wide
- ✗ Short
- ✗ Narrow

### 7. Loin

- ✓ Long and deep
- ✓ Full
- ✗ Lacking flesh
- ✗ Narrow

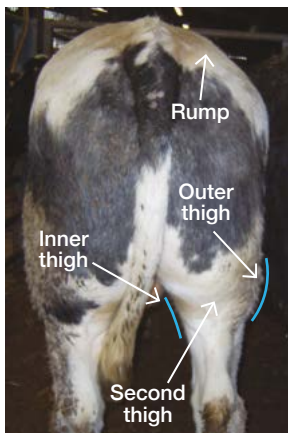
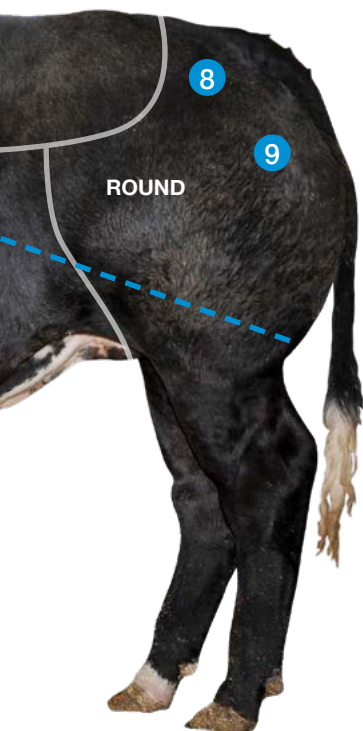
## ROUND

### 8. Rump

- ✓ Well-rounded
- ✓ Broad
- ✗ Shallow and concave
- ✗ Pin bones prominent

### 9. Hindquarters

- ✓ Well-fleshed in first and second thighs
- ✓ Muscle development carried well down to the hocks
- ✗ Flat and shallow
- ✗ Narrow, lacking width
- ✗ Lacking muscle development



## Finish

Should carry an even degree of finish, i.e. the fatter the animal, the softer to the touch it becomes.

# Beef carcass

## Before you start

**Stand back** and have a good look at the group from a distance. Get a general impression of the carcasses you have to judge, noting their appearance, type, etc. Identify whether they are heifer, steer or bull carcasses.

**Be methodical** and start at:

- **Round** (second thigh, top piece and rump)
- **Back** (loin and fore rib)
- **Shoulder**

## What to look for

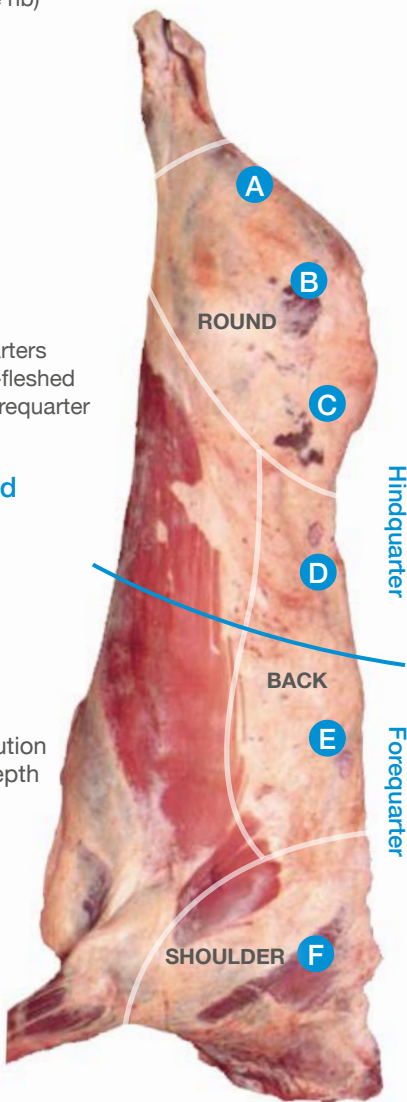
- A. Second thigh
- B. Top piece
- C. Rump
- D. Loin
- E. Fore rib
- F. Shoulder

Proportion of hindquarters to forequarters – well-fleshed hindquarter to light forequarter is preferable.

## Colour, quality and texture of fat

- ✓ White/creamy
- ✓ Firm
- ✗ Yellow
- ✗ Oily

**Amount of fat over brisket:** even distribution with no excessive depth requiring trimming.



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## Conformation

### ROUND (A, B and C)

#### Shape of round

✓ Well-rounded, convex in profile, fullness of flesh through the second thigh, top piece and rump

✗ Narrow, concave in profile

### BACK (D and E)

#### Thickness of back

In proportion to the size of the carcass, should be broad and thick.

#### Depth and area of eye muscle

Deep and broad loin with fleshing carried well around the ribs.

### SHOULDER (F)

#### Thickness of shoulder area

Look for a neat, compact shape that blends well with the forequarter.

#### Shape of forequarter

Compact and well-fleshed, while still being well balanced in proportion to the hindquarters.

## Fat

#### Distribution of fat throughout carcass

There should be a light cover of fat, evenly distributed, with no patchiness or internal or external fat deposits that require trimming.

#### Amount of fat over eye muscle

Even distribution, thin layer (4–8 mm) covering the external surface, with light intramuscular deposits.

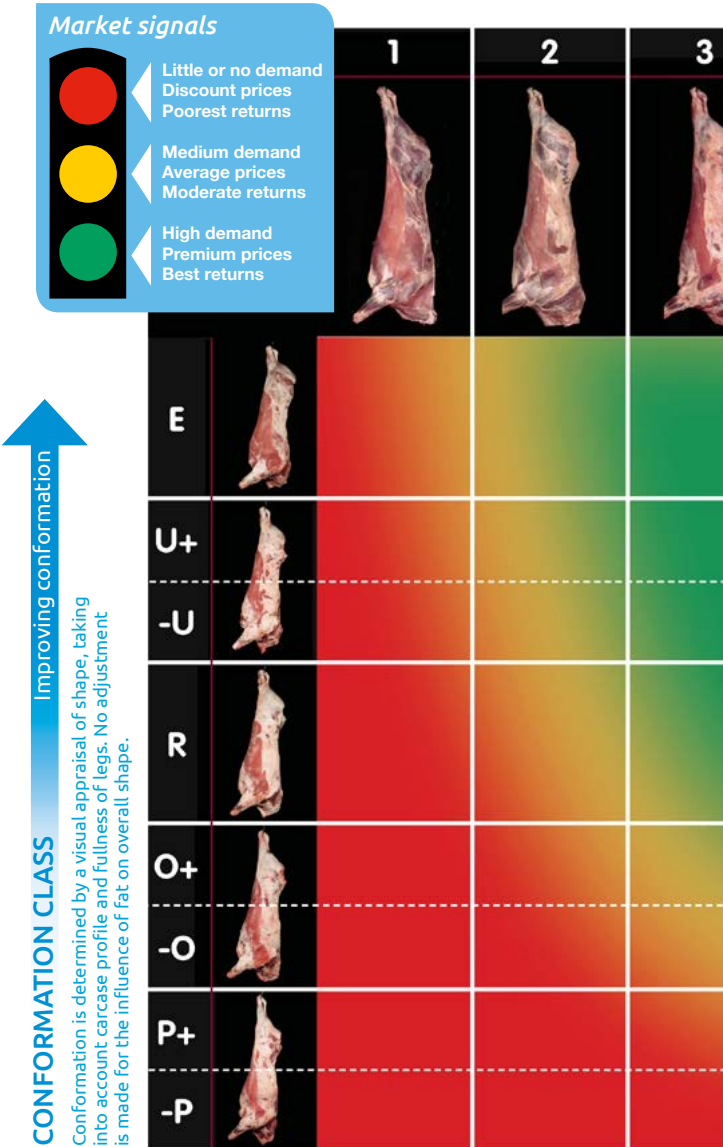


Amount of fat over eye muscle: ideal (left), too fat (right)

# Beef market requirements

Carcase assessment addresses conformation and fat. Fat cover is scored on a 1–5 scale. Conformation is assessed from E–P.

Combining scores for conformation and fat determines the markets for which the beef is best suited.

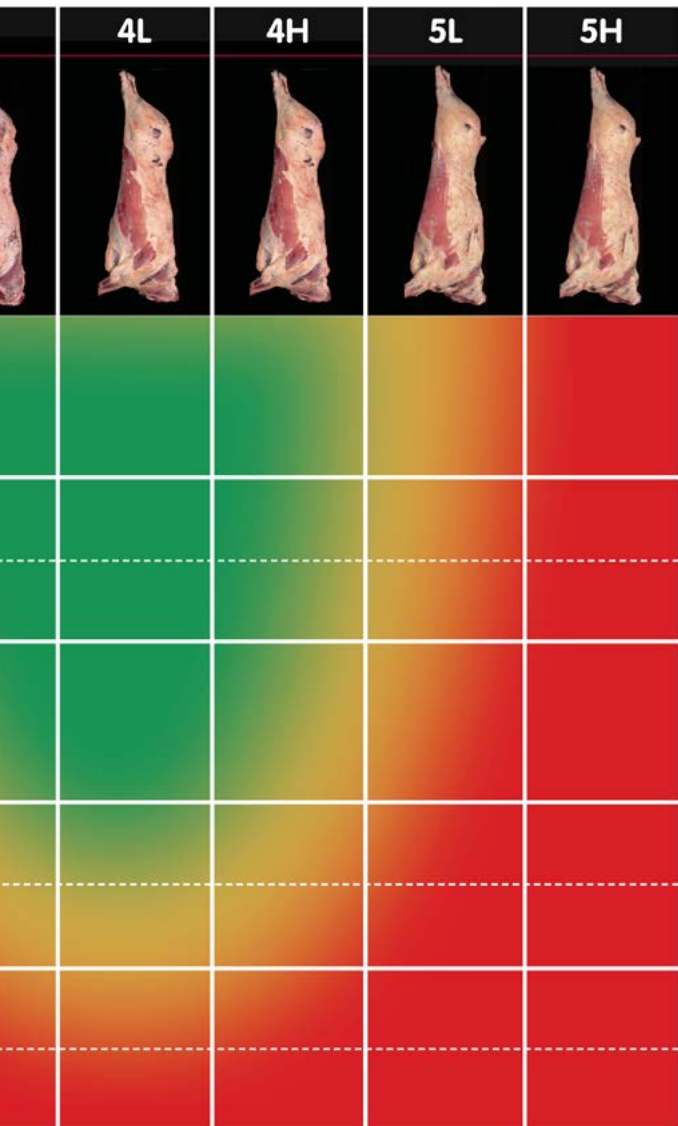


Some abattoirs use the 15 point grid. It divides each conformation and fat class into three, e.g. +, =, -.

FAT CLASS

Increasing fatness

Fat is determined by visual assessment of external fat cover. There are five main classes. Classes 4 and 5 are subdivided into L (leaner) and H (fatter)



# Breeding ewes

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## Before you start

**Stand back** and have a good look at the group from a distance. Get a general impression of the ewes you have to judge, noting appearance, type, etc. Pay close attention to distinguishing marks, colour of wool, face, etc.

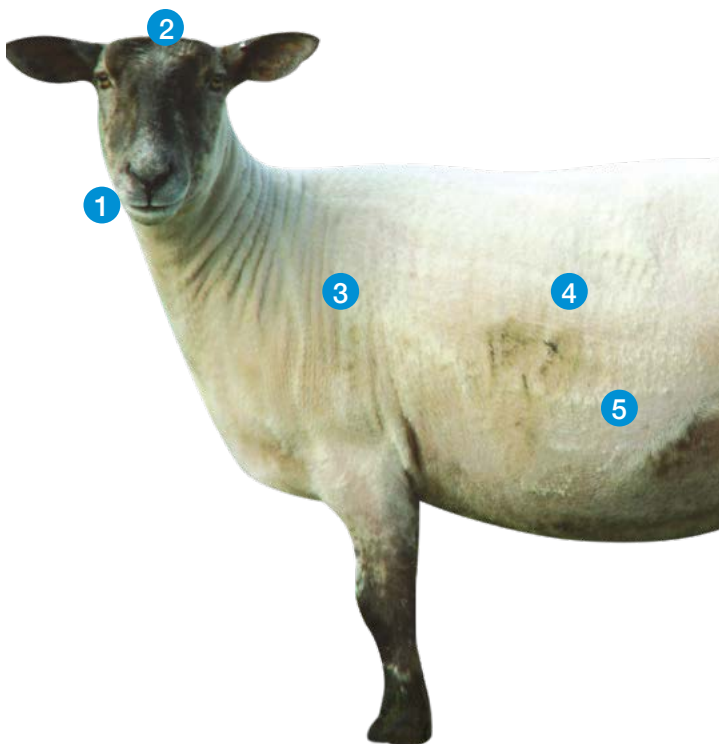
**Remember:** wool can mask a great deal about the animal, so handle animals at the key points.

## What to look for

The ewe needs to be healthy with length, width and depth of body; she needs to eat, walk and feed two lambs.

**Be methodical** and start at:

- **Teeth** – eating is essential
- **Feet** – needs to be able to walk to find food
- **Udder** – to rear two lambs





## 1. Mouth

- ✓ Clean mouth with no signs of wear and no gaps:  
2 broad teeth = 1 yr old  
4 broad teeth = 2 yrs old  
6 broad teeth = 3 yrs old  
8 broad teeth = 4 yrs old or older
- Sheep up to 12 months old will have a full set of milk teeth. In older sheep, the teeth will start to wear down, have gaps and fall out.
- ✗ A broken mouth with signs of wear, gaps or missing teeth indicates an old ewe

## 2. The head

- ✓ Bright, bold eyes
- ✗ Short, broad head

## 3. Shoulders

- ✓ Wide, well-covered shoulders
- ✗ Narrow, lacking flesh

## 4. The body

- ✓ Good length, width and depth
- ✗ Short
- ✗ Narrow and lacking depth

## 5. Wool

- ✓ Even growth of staple in fleece
- ✗ Open fleece

## 6. Legs

- ✓ Strong-boned, placed on each corner of ewe

- ✗ Bad legs

## 7. Udder

- ✓ Sound, supple udder and two well-placed teats
- ✗ Swollen quarters, hard lumps or sores
- ✗ Excessively large teats

## 8. Feet

- ✓ Deep heel with short clees
- ✗ Well up on pasterns
- ✗ Lamé feet
- ✗ Down on pasterns



# Finished lamb

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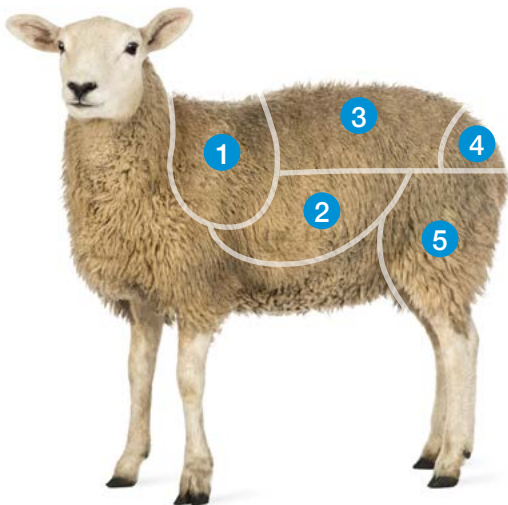
## Before you start

**Stand back** and have a good look at the group from a distance. Get a general impression of the lambs you have to judge, noting their appearance, type, etc.

Pay close attention to distinguishing marks, colour of wool, face, etc.

**Be methodical** and start at one end and work your way up to the other end, inspecting and handling as you go.

**Remember:** wool can mask a great deal about the animal, so handle animals at the key points.



### 1. The shoulder

- ✓ Neat and compact
- ✓ Eye muscle development extended well forward
- ✗ Narrow and lacking flesh



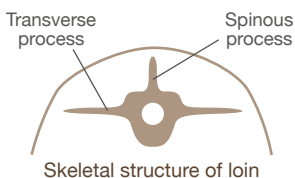
### 2. The ribs

- ✓ Light covering, individual ribs easily detected
- ✗ Not too lean (bare)
- ✗ Not too fat (individual ribs undetectable)



### 3. The loin

- ✓ Spinous and transverse processes felt as corrugations with light pressure
- ✓ Good width and fullness of eye muscle



### 4. The tail (dock)

- ✓ Individual bones easy to detect with light pressure
- ✗ Not too lean (narrow and bones bare)
- ✗ Not too fat (broad, soft and individual bones undetectable)



### 5. The legs

- ✓ Broad and well-filled to the shank

# Lamb carcasse

## Before you start

**Stand back** and have a good look at the group from a distance. Get a general impression of the carcasses you have to judge, noting their appearance, type, etc.

**Be methodical** and start at:

- Hind legs
- Chump
- Loin
- Shoulder

## What to look for

- A. Leg
- B. Chump
- C. Loin
- D. Shoulder



Lean meat should not be too dark with a fine-grained texture: ideal (top), too fat (bottom)



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## Conformation

### A. Hind legs

- ✓ Short-boned
- ✓ Broad and well-filled to the shank
- ✗ V-shaped

### B. Chump

- ✓ Well-developed
- ✓ Full and broad

### C. Loin

- ✓ Good width and fullness of eye muscle

### D. Shoulder

- ✓ Well-extended eye muscle
- ✓ Neat and compact

## Fat

Depth of fat over legs and loin should be in correct proportion. Fat on breasts to be in correct proportion.

**Ribs** – light with high lean to fat ratio.

**Dock** – broad dock indicates excess fat.



# Lamb market requirements

Carcase assessment addresses conformation and fat. Fat cover is scored on a 1–5 scale. Conformation is assessed from E–P.

Combining scores for conformation and fat determines the markets for which the lamb is best suited.

## FAT CLASS

Fat is determined by visual assessment of external fat cover. There are five main classes.

CONFORMATION CLASS

Improving conformation

Conformation is determined by a visual appraisal of shape, taking into account carcass profile and fullness of legs. No adjustment is made for the influence of fat on overall shape.

		1	2	3L
E				
U				
R				
O				
P				



### Market signals



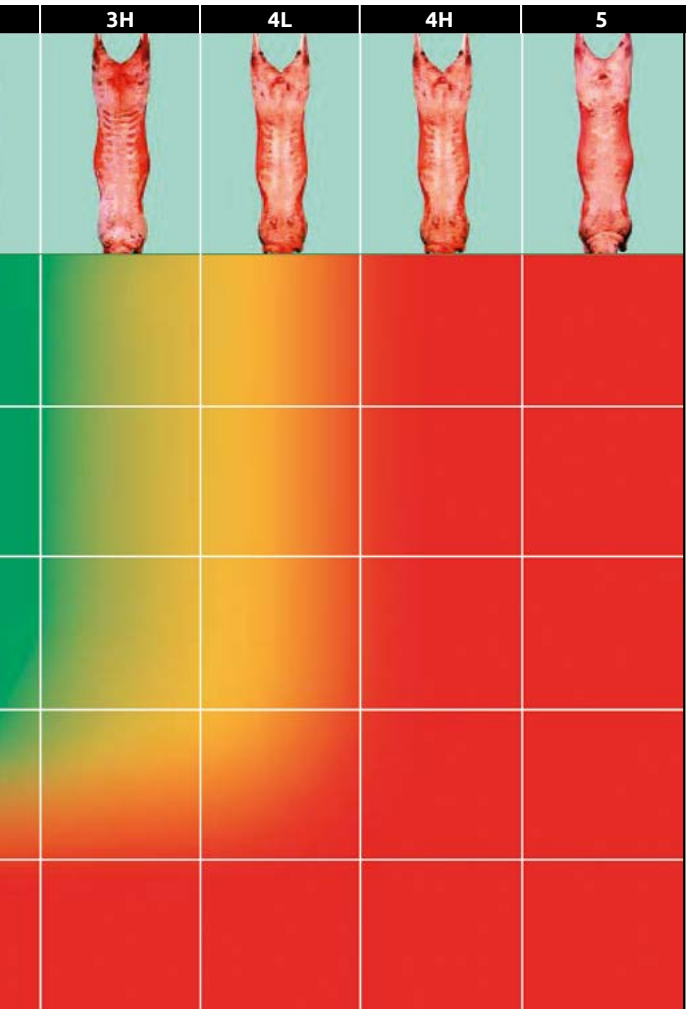
Little or no demand  
Discount prices  
Poorest returns

Medium demand  
Average prices  
Moderate returns

High demand  
Premium prices  
Best returns

Increasing fatness

Classes 4 and 5 are subdivided  
into L (leaner) and H (fatter)



# Finished pigs

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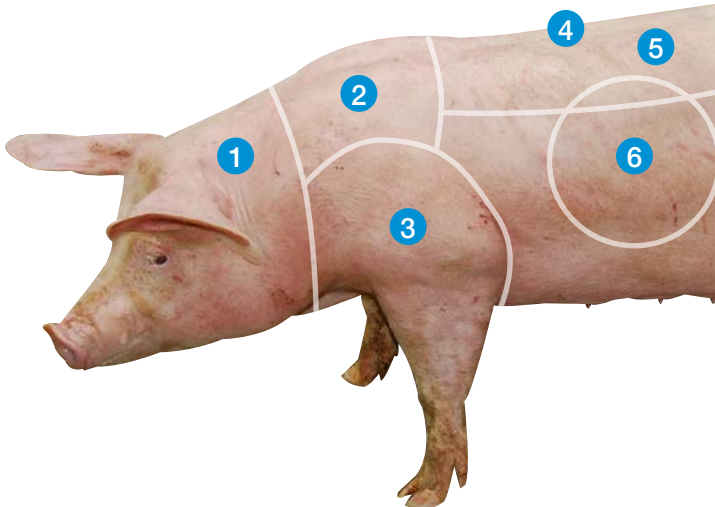
## Before you start

**Stand back** and have a good look at the group from a distance. Get a general impression of the pigs you have to judge, noting their appearance, type, etc. Pay close attention to distinguishing marks, face, etc.

## What to look for

You are looking for a ‘brick on legs’ that is capable of producing top quality meat for the consumer and that will provide a profit for the butcher. Pay more attention to the most expensive cuts, i.e. hams and loins and less attention to the ‘cheap’ cuts, i.e. the shoulder and neck.

**Overall, look for a pig that is well balanced and appears healthy.**



### 1. Head

- ✓ Light jaw
- ✗ Heavy jaw

### 2. Neck

- ✓ Short and neat

### 3. Shoulder

- ✓ Broad
- ✓ Neat and compact
- ✗ Too wide
- ✗ Soft to touch (fat)
- ✗ Unbalanced

### 4. Topline

- ✓ Long
- ✓ Wide
- ✓ Slightly arched back
- ✗ Short
- ✗ Narrow
- ✗ Dipped back

### 5. Loin

- ✓ Long
- ✓ Deep
- ✓ Full and firm
- ✗ Narrow
- ✗ Short
- ✗ Shallow
- ✗ Soft to touch (fat)

### 6. Spring of rib

- ✓ Deep
- ✓ Full
- ✓ Wide
- ✓ Well-sprung
- ✗ Flat

### 7. Ham/leg

- ✓ Well-rounded
- ✓ Firm
- ✓ Good fleshing development to the hocks
- ✗ Soft to touch (fat)
- ✗ Lacking fleshing



# Pig carcass

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## Before you start

**Stand back** and have a good look at the group from a distance. Get a general impression of the carcasses you have to judge, noting their appearance, type etc.

**Be methodical** and start at:

- Leg/ham
- Chump
- Loin
- Shoulder

## What to look for

A. Leg/ham

B. Chump

C. Loin

D. Shoulder



Pork loin/eye muscle (C). Should have approx. 10–12 mm of fat coverage (specifications vary). The eye should be well-rounded and approaching the size of the diameter of a tennis ball



	Weight ranges*	
	Deadweight (kg)	Liveweight (kg)
Pork	Up to 55	Up to 75
Cutter	55–65	75–90
Bacon	65–85	90–115

\*Weights are approximate and serve as a guide only

## Conformation

### Overall

- ✓ High proportion of meat to fat
- ✓ Firm, white fat
- ✗ Low proportion of meat to fat
- ✗ Yellow fat
- ✗ Bruised appearance

### A. Leg/ham

For pork pigs, refer to the 'leg', as in a leg of pork.  
For bacon pigs, refer to the 'ham'.

- ✓ Well-rounded with meat, not fat
- ✗ Sloping
- ✗ Round with fat, not meat

### B. Chump

- ✓ Convex
- ✗ Concave

### C. Loin

- ✓ Long
- ✓ Deep
- ✓ Full
- ✗ Narrow
- ✗ Short
- ✗ Shallow

### D. Shoulder

- ✓ Neat and compact
- ✗ Heavy
- ✗ Flat

# Useful words and phrases

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Delivering your reasons for placing animals or carcasses in a particular order is almost as important as the order itself.

Remember, you are required to give both descriptions of what you have seen and comparisons between the animals or carcasses you are asked to judge.

Here are some useful expressions that will help you to give accurate answers that are both descriptive and comparative, meaning you can gain extra points without going over time.

## Descriptive

Bright, bold and alert	Convex/concave
Balanced	Capacity
Compact	Converter of forage – dairy
Wide/width	Fleshy*
Deep/depth	Meaty*
Proportioned	Muscle development*
Strong	Volume of saleable meat*
Tremendous	Killing out percentage*
Prime	Percent of high priced cuts*
Superb	Highest proportion of lean to fat*
Sound	Suitable for today's market*
Outstanding	Fat cover*
Scope	Fat colour*
Fullness	Area or depth of eye muscle*
Rounded	

## Comparative

Greater	Stronger
Thicker	Shorter
Wider	Narrower
Deeper	Meatier
Better proportioned	

\*Particularly suited to describing a 'meat animal' when you can refer to its likely carcass qualities.



## Further information

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The manuals below explain how to select animals for slaughter and outline the market requirements for the beef and lamb market.

*Marketing prime beef cattle for Better Returns*

*Marketing prime lamb for Better Returns*

*Understanding cattle and carcasses for Better Returns*

*Understanding lambs and carcasses for Better Returns*

Call 024 7647 8834 or email **brp@ahdb.org.uk** to request free hard copies.

The factsheets below explain how to select animals for slaughter and outline the market requirements for the pork market.

*Improve your marketing return*

*Factors affecting killing-out percentage*

Call 024 7647 8793 or email **pork.kt@ahdb.org.uk** to request free hard copies.

All are available to download at **ahdb.org.uk**



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