

Slaughter Cattle Grades and Standards



Quality Grades of Slaughter Steers, Heifers, and Cows

1. **Prime.** Slaughter steers and heifers 30 to 42 months of age possessing the minimum qualifications for Prime have a fat covering over the crops, back, ribs, loin, and rump that tends to be thick. The brisket, flanks, and cod or udder appear full and distended and the muscling is very firm. The fat covering tends to be smooth with only slight indications of patchiness. Steers and heifers under 30 months of age have a moderately thick but smooth covering of fat which extends over the back, ribs, loin, and rump. The brisket, flanks, and cod or udder show a marked fullness and the muscling is firm.
 - a. Cattle qualifying for the minimum of the Prime grade will differ considerably in cutability because of varying combinations of muscling and degree of fatness.
 - b. Cows are not eligible for the Prime grade.
2. **Choice.** Slaughter steers, heifers, and cows 30 to 42 months of age possessing the minimum qualifications for Choice have a fat covering over the crops, back, loin, rump, and ribs that tends to be moderately thick. The brisket, flanks, and cod or udder show a marked fullness and the muscling is firm. Cattle under 30 months of age carry a slightly thick fat covering over the top. The brisket, flanks, and cod or udder appear moderately full and the muscling is moderately firm.
 - a. Cattle qualifying for the minimum of the Choice grade will differ considerably in cutability because of varying combinations of muscling and degree of fatness.
3. **Select.** The Select grade is limited to steers, heifers, and cows with a maximum age limitation of approximately 30 months. Slaughter cattle possessing the minimum qualifications for Select have a thin fat covering which is largely restricted to the back and loin. The brisket, flanks, twist, and cod or udder are slightly full and the muscling is slightly firm.
 - a. Cattle qualifying for the minimum of the Select grade will differ considerably in cutability because of varying combinations of muscling and degree of fatness.
4. **Standard.** Slaughter steers, heifers, and cows 30 to 42 months of age possessing the minimum qualifications for Standard have a fat covering primarily over the back, loin, and ribs which tends to be very thin. Cattle under 30 months of age have a very thin covering of fat which is largely restricted to the back, loin, and upper ribs.
 - a. Cattle qualifying for the minimum of this grade vary relatively little in their degree of fatness. Therefore, the range in cutability among cattle that qualify for this grade is somewhat less than in the higher grades.
5. **Commercial.** The Commercial grade is limited to steers, heifers, and cows over approximately 42 months of age. Slaughter cattle possessing the minimum qualifications for Commercial and which slightly exceed the minimum maturity for the Commercial grade have a slightly thick fat covering over the back, ribs, loin, and rump and the muscling is moderately firm. Very mature cattle usually have at least a moderately thick fat covering over the back, ribs, loin, and rump and considerable patchiness frequently is evident about the tail-head. The brisket, flanks, and cod or udder appear to be moderately full and the muscling is firm.
 - a. Cattle qualifying for the minimum of the Commercial grade will differ considerably in cutability because of widely varying combinations of muscling and degree of fatness.
6. **Utility.** The minimum degree of finish required for slaughter steers, heifers, and cows to qualify for the Utility grade varies throughout the range of maturity permitted in this grade from a very thin covering of fat for cattle under 30 months of age to a slightly thick fat covering, generally restricted to the back, loin, and rump for the very mature cattle in this grade. In such mature cattle, the crops are slightly thin and the brisket, flanks, and cod or udder indicate very slight fullness.
 - a. Cattle qualifying for the minimum of the Utility grade vary somewhat in cutability especially among older animals.
7. **Cutter.** In slaughter cattle in the Cutter grade, the degree of finish ranges from practically none in cattle under 30 months of age to very mature cattle which have only a very thin covering of fat.
 - a. The range in cutability among cattle that qualify for the minimum of this grade will be narrow because of very small variations in fatness and muscling.
8. **Canner.** Canner grade cattle are those which are inferior to the minimum specified for the Cutter grade.

Yield Grades of Slaughter Cattle

1. **Yield Grade 1** slaughter cattle produce carcasses with very high yields of boneless retail cuts. Cattle with characteristics qualifying them for the lower limits of Yield Grade 1 (near the borderline between Yield Grade 1 and Yield Grade 2) will differ considerably in appearance because of inherent differences in the development of their muscling and skeletal systems and related differences in fatness.
 - a. Very thickly muscled cattle typical of the minimum of this grade have a high proportion of lean to bone. They are moderately wide and the width through the shoulders and rounds is greater than through the back. The top is well-rounded with no evidence of flatness, and the back and loin are thick and full. The rounds are deep, thick, and full and the width through the middle part of the rounds is greater than through the back. The shoulders are slightly prominent and the forearms are thick and full. These cattle have only a thin covering of fat over the back and rump. The flanks are slightly shallow and the brisket and cod or udder have little evidence of fullness. Slaughter cattle of this description producing 600-pound carcasses usually have about 0.3 of an inch of fat over the ribeye and about 13.0 square inches of ribeye area.
 - b. Because of the relatively low proportion of lean to bone, practically no thinly muscled cattle produce carcasses with an exceptionally high yield of boneless retail cuts. Therefore, it is unlikely that thinly muscled cattle will qualify for Yield Grade 1.
2. **Yield Grade 2** slaughter cattle produce carcasses with high yields of boneless retail cuts. Cattle with characteristics qualifying them for the lower limits of Yield Grade 2 (near the borderline between Yield Grade 2 and Yield Grade 3) will differ considerably in appearance because of differences in the development of their muscling and skeletal systems and related differences in fatness.
 - a. Very thickly muscled cattle typical of the minimum of this grade have a high proportion of lean to bone. They are wide through the back and loin and have slightly greater width through the shoulders and rounds than through the back. The top is well-rounded with little evidence of flatness and the back and loin are thick and full. The rounds are thick, full, and deep and the thickness through the middle part of the rounds is greater than that over the top. The shoulders are slightly prominent and the forearms are thick and full. There is a slightly thick covering of fat over the back and rump and the flanks are slightly deep. The brisket and cod or udder are slightly full. Slaughter cattle of this description producing 600-pound carcasses usually have about 0.6 of an inch of fat over the ribeye and about 12.5 square inches of ribeye area.
 - b. Thinly muscled cattle typical of the minimum of this grade have a relatively low proportion of lean to bone.
 - c. Cattle qualifying for the minimum of Yield Grade 1 will differ widely in quality grade as a result of variations in distribution of finish and firmness of muscling.
3. **Yield Grade 3** slaughter cattle produce carcasses with intermediate yields of boneless retail cuts. Cattle with characteristics qualifying them for the lower limits of Yield Grade 3 (near the borderline between Yield Grades 3 and 4) will differ considerably in appearance because of inherent differences in the development of their muscling and skeletal systems and related differences in fatness.
 - a. Very thickly muscled cattle typical of the minimum of this grade have a high proportion of lean to bone.
 - b. Thinly muscled cattle typical of the minimum of this grade have a relatively low proportion of lean to bone.
 - c. Cattle qualifying for the minimum of Yield Grade 3 will differ greatly in quality grade as a result of wide variations in distribution of finish and firmness of muscling.
4. **Yield Grade 4** slaughter cattle produce carcasses with moderately low yields of boneless retail cuts. Cattle with characteristics qualifying them for the lower limits of Yield Grade 4 (near the borderline between Yield Grades 4 and 5) will differ considerably in appearance because of inherent differences in the development of their muscling and skeletal systems and related differences in fatness.
 - a. Very thickly muscled cattle typical of the minimum of this grade have a high proportion of lean to bone.
 - b. Thinly muscled cattle typical of the minimum of this grade have a relatively low ratio of lean to bone.
 - c. Cattle qualifying for the minimum of Yield Grade 4 will differ somewhat in quality grade as a result of variations in distribution of the finish and firmness of muscling.
5. **Yield Grade 5** slaughter cattle produce carcasses with low yields of boneless retail cuts. Cattle of this grade consist of those not meeting the minimum requirements for Yield Grade 4 because of either more fat or less muscle or a combination of these characteristics.
 - a. Because of the high degree of finish required for cattle of this grade, the range in quality grades will be somewhat small. Practically all cattle of this grade will qualify for either the Prime or Choice grade.

SLAUGHTER STEERS

U.S. QUALITY GRADES



PRIME



CHOICE



SELECT



STANDARD



UTILITY

U.S. YIELD GRADES



YIELD GRADE 1



YIELD GRADE 2



YIELD GRADE 3



YIELD GRADE 4



YIELD GRADE 5

In accordance with Federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, the USDA, its Agencies, offices, and employees, and institutions participating in or administering USDA programs are prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from a public assistance program, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity, in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA (not all bases apply to all programs). Remedies and complaint filing deadlines vary by program or incident.

Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, American Sign Language, etc.) should contact the responsible Agency or USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English.

To file a program discrimination complaint, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, AD-3027, found online at [How to File a Program Discrimination Complaint](#) and at any USDA office or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call (866) 632-9992. Submit your completed form or letter to USDA by: (1) mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410; (2) fax: (202) 690-7442; or (3) email: program.intake@usda.gov.

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.