

WHAT JUDGES LOOK FOR

Having been a Science fair judge for almost 20 years and having participated in deliberations with other judges, I have gained some idea what judges look for in selecting winners. Here are a few, not necessarily in order of importance.

AN INTERESTING TOPIC

This means one that arouses curiosity or relates to a question that has been in either the scientific or popular news. It makes visitors (including judges) say, "Hey! I wonder what this project found out. Think, "If this topic were the headline of an article, would people feel compelled to read it?"

RELEVANCE

Does the project shed light on something of concern to the community, such as the environment, energy resources, health, etc? Relevance is not absolutely necessary, but it can help.

PERSISTENCE

Is this a project that represents a sustained, ongoing effort, or is it something the student rushed together because, "I've got a science project due next week."

SCIENTIFIC METHODS

A good project sets out a clear question or hypothesis and then pursues the answer systematically. Sometimes the conclusions refute the initial hypothesis or are otherwise surprising to the investigator. A good scientist is willing to accept the conclusions and change his or her position accordingly.

INGENUITY

Most students don't have access to the fancy apparatus and resources of professional and university labs. I am always impressed when someone improvises a home-made technique or adapts surplus equipment so that meets the need, even if it isn't so good as some fancy "black box."

NOTEBOOKS

A well maintained notebook reflects a conscientious effort. A good scientist makes daily notebook entries, recording what was done, the results, and any thoughts or ideas related to the project. It should include sketches of apparatus, and it reports not only what worked, but what didn't work, and why.

REPORTS

The reports or writeup should tell clearly the goal or purpose, how it was pursued, the results, and conclusions. It should be honest about any inaccuracies or uncertainties of the results. After all, not even professional research is absolutely definitive. Ideally it should suggest further work to resolve any remaining problems.

CRAFTSMANSHIP

Especially in engineering projects, judges are impressed by competent construction techniques. Even if it is not possible to bring the apparatus to the Fair, the drawings, photos, etc. should reflect this attention to quality.

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