

JUDGE RESOURCES | 2026

JUDGE WELCOME GUIDE

Everything you need before judging day.

For STEM professionals volunteering as science fair judges



WELCOME

Dear Judge,

Thank you for volunteering your time and expertise. Judges are the heart of every science fair. For many students, you will be the first working STEM professional who ever asks about their ideas and takes their answers seriously. That conversation can shape how a student sees science, and how a student sees themselves, for years.

This guide walks you through what judging involves, what your day will look like, and how to leave every student better than you found them. Judging takes 3 to 5 hours. Any STEM background is welcome, and corporate volunteer hours apply.

WHAT IS SCIENCE FAIR JUDGING?

Judges review student research projects, interview each student about their work, and score projects against a weighted rubric. You are not grading a paper. You are having a conversation with a young researcher about what they did, why they did it, and what they learned. Scores determine awards and advancement to district and state competition.

THE FAIRGAME MISSION

Science fairs without barriers.

FairGame Initiative brings competitive STEM opportunities to schools across Ohio and beyond, completely free. Students in under-resourced and rural schools do not lack intelligence or curiosity. They lack infrastructure, knowledge, and connections. Your time as a judge closes part of that gap directly.

YOUR JUDGING DAY

Exact times vary by event. Your confirmation email lists the schedule, location, and parking details for your fair.

1

ARRIVAL AND CHECK-IN

Arrive at the posted time, sign in at the judge table, and pick up your badge, rubric packet, and project assignments.

2

JUDGE ORIENTATION

A 30 minute walkthrough of the rubric, your assigned projects, and how scoring works.

3

PROJECT VIEWING

30 to 60 minutes to review display boards and lab notebooks before students arrive.

4

STUDENT INTERVIEWS

2 to 3 hours of conversations with students at their boards. Plan on 10 to 15 minutes per project.

5

SCORING AND DELIBERATION

30 to 60 minutes to finalize scores with your judging team and resolve ties.

6

AWARDS CEREMONY

Optional, about 1 hour. Students love seeing their judges in the audience.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD JUDGE

Ask open-ended questions

Questions that start with how or why invite students to show their thinking.

Encourage students

Name something specific the student did well before you probe weak spots.

Focus on understanding, not perfection

A flawed experiment a student fully understands beats a polished project a parent built.

Be enthusiastic and supportive

Your energy tells students their work matters.

Maintain objectivity

Score against the rubric, not against the fanciest equipment or the most confident speaker.

QUESTIONS STUDENTS OFTEN ASK YOU

- How did you get into your career? Keep it short, honest, and encouraging.
- Is my project good? Point to a genuine strength, then one concrete next step.
- Did I win? Scores are confidential until awards. Say results come at the ceremony.

GIVING CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

Every student deserves to walk away knowing one thing they did well and one thing to try next. Use this pattern:

1. Start specific and positive

"I liked how you controlled your variables across all three trials."

2. Ask before you advise

"What would you change if you ran this again?"

3. Offer one next step

"A larger sample size would make this result much stronger."

THANK YOU

Your hours make competition possible for schools that could not otherwise offer it. Questions before your event? Reach out any time.

fairgameinitiative@outlook.com

fairgameinitiative.org/volunteer.html