

# 4-H JUDGES' GUIDE

---

Participation in fair activities is an opportunity and a privilege for 4-H members. If they choose to participate, they're asking for a competent adult to give his or her opinion regarding the quality of their participation. Having asked for this opinion, they should learn from it.

As a judge, you're a teacher, an example, and an inspiration as well as a developer of young people. Members, their parents, leaders, and the general public are probably more alert and attentive during evaluation than at any other time during the 4-H experience. What you do and say may be more important than what everyone else has said and done during the year. Yours is an important responsibility

## Judging Guidelines

---

### Before Judging

- Attend scheduled judge's trainings when possible. These are announced through the county Extension office.
- Respond promptly to all invitations to judge and verify them by mail.
- Be sure you have a complete understanding of fees, expenses, time, location of activity, and the classes you will be judging.
- As soon as possible, obtain a list of the classes you are to judge. If you find classes have been added in which you do not feel competent, indicate this and ask that another judge be obtained. It may not always be practical to hire judges for all program areas. If you're placed in such a situation, ask for a leader or a local resource person to work with you.
- Become familiar with any special rules. Local standards and rules are the basis by which you evaluate the members and their exhibits. Judges must be flexible in adapting to local situations. Thoroughly review the requirements of all classes so they are fresh in your mind.
- Study project manuals and contest guides to keep up-to-date with program direction and changes.

### Day of Judging

- Be prompt. Arrive in time to visit with persons in charge. Get acquainted with the facilities and relax for a few minutes before your first class of exhibits or group of contestants.
- Be well groomed, rested, and give a good general appearance to the audience you will be working with.
- Dress suitably for the judging assignment. Some assignments may be outdoors where weather can be a factor.
- Clarify with management the basis for evaluation, i.e., merit system (blue, red, and white), individual placing system (1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc.). Ask if scores are required on each of the contestants in addition to the placing. Determine if comment sheets are to be used and returned to the contestants.
- Find out, if possible, the number of exhibits or contestants and the time available for judging each class.
- Suggest splitting large groups into smaller ones, if classes are too large to judge in a reasonable amount of time.
- Be sure the clerk understands your procedures. This is especially critical when you will be evaluating in a contest or show ring situation. If you are judging in a show ring, be sure the ringmaster understands your procedures and how to properly relay your requests and instructions to the announcer.
- Explain your procedure, what you will be looking for, and what you want exhibitors and contestants to do, when you are introduced to the participants/audience.

---

## **During Judging**

- Do not smoke or use alcohol or illegal drugs while judging or visiting with 4-H members, leaders, parents, or audience.
  - Be courteous, pleasant, and friendly, and have a sense of humor.
  - Help each contestant feel at ease. Give each person a chance to do his/her best.
  - Be tactful and concerned about the contestant's feelings. Be friendly and courteous with all contestants, but not overly familiar with any of them or their parents. Do not give help to one individual that you do not offer to the others.
  - Develop a procedure for examining each exhibit and/or contestant so that important items will not be overlooked.
  - Make your decisions quickly and firmly. Keep things moving. Take time, however, to examine each entry even though your first glance indicates that it belongs toward the bottom of the class.
  - Believe that the young person is more important than the exhibit. Spend a majority of time with those at the bottom of the class; they need your help. Give members the benefit of the doubt.
  - Offer compliments and feedback while keeping the members foremost in your mind. Be kind and positive when making critical comments. Those participants who have had problems especially need a boost; there is always something kind to be said.
- Always give good reasons. Give general comments for all contestants and the general audience to hear. Give suggestions to individual members quietly to avoid embarrassment.
  - Place the classes as you see them, not as you think the member or audience might expect you to place them. Keep in mind the capabilities of young people at different ages.
  - Establish and maintain a definite range between your top, middle, and low scoring exhibits and contestants if you're using a scoring system.
  - Examine all exhibits or contestants in animal classes, then place the animals so the audience has a good view.
  - Do not spend free time before judging, after judging, or during breaks in areas where contestants or parents may be preparing for participation in the 4-H activities.

## **After Judging**

- Check with the clerk and the person in charge of the area to make sure all forms are signed and all classes are completed.
- Discuss how you felt about the judging experience with the superintendent. Ask for feedback and determine how you might improve in the future.
- Leave a list of comments or suggestions for improvements with the Extension agent or the department chairperson.
- Do not take stories from one judging experience to another.

---

## **Conference Judging**

Most counties evaluate 4-H exhibits by a conference method. This means the 4-H member is present when the judge evaluates the exhibit. The member has a chance to visit with the judge and to learn what the judge believes to be good characteristics of the exhibit/contest and what can be improved. Several methods are used:

- Members are scheduled at a specific time to meet with the judge and bring their exhibit with them. The member is not told the final placing at that time.
- Members meet with the judge and are told at that time what the placing is.
  - The judge chooses whether or not he or she will give ribbon placings during the conference. Sometimes the judge will have a chance to see or evaluate the exhibits before the interview.
  - Clubs may visit with the judge as a group about their exhibits. Members may or may not receive their placings at that time.
  - The judge may evaluate the exhibits the first day, then give conferences on the second day.
  - The judge may judge the exhibits and then conduct a group discussion on the exhibits.

## Advantages

- The members meet the judge face-to-face. It is a better learning experience for the 4-H members to discuss the exhibit than to read the written comments.
- The member's "teachable" moment is high during this time. He or she is receptive to positive suggestions for improvement.
- The member discusses the pleasant times as well as the problems with the exhibit.
- The member knows why he or she was awarded a particular ribbon.

## Suggestions

- Take time at the beginning of the conference to get acquainted with the 4-H member.
- Offer to let the member write his or her own comments on the comment sheet.
- Begin by saying some good things about the member's exhibit. Ask the member if it was fun to make or use the exhibit.
- Be sensitive to the way each member takes suggestions.
- Ask the 4-H member to describe any problems they had and how they overcame them.

- Remember, the judge is just one adult giving the member an opinion about the exhibit. What their leader and family members think and what the member thinks are also important.
- Remember, the 4-H member is more important than the exhibit.
- Be honest and fair. Members usually know how good their exhibits are. They want your honest opinion. Perhaps it is harder to give a white ribbon in the interview, but the member doesn't like "soft" judges. Neither, however, do 4-H'ers like judges who "nit-pick," are "really tough," or expect adult standards from youth. Remember the 4-H goal of "Learning by Doing."
- Be friendly, smile, and be encouraging.
- Ask the 4-H member when you finish the conference, "If you were a judge, what ribbon would you have given your exhibit?" Experience has proven that most members will place it the same as a judge.
- Welcome parents and leaders to watch the conference if the 4-H member agrees and if the situation permits. However, parents and leaders should not talk during the conference.

---

## Presenting Reasons

---

A stranger stopped a child on the street and asked, "Why did they put the airport so far from town?" The child paused for a moment and then replied, "I don't really know. I guess they put it there because that's where all the planes land."

This was a simple justification for an answer in the child's mind. Almost everything we do has some justification, even though the soundness might be questioned. Judges need to use sound and logical reasoning for selecting winners and making placings. Since individual values differ, it is important to the exhibitor, and to the audience, to hear the judge's reasons.

Some judge's follow score card values, while others emphasize utility or durability. These are professional preferences or biases. Listing reasons for scoring give purpose and meaning to

4-H activities. 4-H programs are educational; the evaluation is as fascinating as any other activity.

You will probably be asked to give reasons to the public when judging livestock, horses, or other animal classes. In many other 4-H activities you may be asked to give general comments, but not to discuss each exhibit or contestant.

Reasons given by a judge are more important than the physical set-up of the activity. The manner in which the judge handles the class for the parents and leaders helps determine the show's success. The judge is the director of the performance taking place. The proficient judge is

a master in communicating desirable qualities and weaknesses in the exhibits to the participants and the observers.

## Ribbon Awards

It is important to end the judging with verbal comments that support prompt and thorough decisions. The judge's presentation of reasons must be positive and convincing. This explanation should include how one exhibit excels the other without much criticism.

Word choice is important in conveying positive ideas. For example, "I think that Exhibit A has better measurements than Exhibit B." The fact that the judge said "I think" leaves some doubt or uncertainty in the decision. Such phrases are vague and indecisive. One way to say the same thing would be, "Exhibit A has more uniform measurements." This is both positive and convincing.

Using words young people will understand and learn from can be difficult. The words "good" and "better" are overused and are of no real value because they do not tell "why" by themselves. Try to eliminate these words when giving your reasons.

A judge should be brief and logical; mention the most obvious advantage or characteristic plus one or two other points.

Be consistent and unwavering in your decisions; it will build audience confidence in your ability.

Remember the most important person is not necessarily the blue ribbon winner, but the one you can help the most. In summary:

- Be positive and convincing.
- Be confident and sincere.
- Be concise and definite.
- Do not hunt for things to say.
- Be brief, yet comparative.
- Be consistent.
- Emphasize the major differences strongly.

The modified merit system of judging is recommended and used at most Oregon 4-H experiences. In contests, the participants are usually scored or arranged in numerical rank order, then divided into blue, red, and white groups according to quality. Both comparative quality and standard quality are considered. Some classes may be all blues and others may have no blues. In most exhibit classes, the exhibits are grouped into blue, red, and white without a 1, 2, 3 ranking.

**Blue** is awarded to those contestants whose exhibits or performance is excellent, but well within the ability of most of the contestants.

**Red** is good quality, however there is room for improvement in the exhibit or performance.

**White** awards are for exhibits or performances which show need for considerable improvement and which are below the ability level of most participants.

All qualifying exhibits should receive at least a white award unless the exhibit is incomplete or does not meet the criteria for the class in which it is being exhibited.

In some shows the individual placing method of judging is used. This means lining up the exhibits in a 1, 2, 3 order and awarding ribbons as provided by the rules of the show.

Many shows ask the judge to select a champion or reserve champion. Champion and reserve champion exhibits should be of blue ribbon quality and be the first and second best exhibits in the class. If exhibits or contestants are so close you cannot separate the quality, the awarding of co-champions or co-reserve champions is recommended. On the other hand, if an exhibit class does not merit championship recognition, a champion ribbon should not be awarded.

Prepared by Duane P. Johnson,  
State 4-H leader, Oregon State University