

### Writing Comments

The 4-H Youth Development program is about education; even the judges serve as educators (see *The Oregon 4-H Judge: The Judge as an Educator*). Though judges are hired for their knowledge, experience and expertise, their ability to give feedback and communicate their reasons for the placement via the written word is just as important.

4-H uses the Danish Merit System of judging where exhibits are judged using both comparative and standard quality techniques (see *The Oregon 4-H Judge: Danish Merit System*). Standards determine if the exhibit is awarded a blue, red or white ribbon, but there can be scoring breakdowns within those categories. Criteria is used to guide the judging process and evaluation sheets give constructive criticism to the exhibitor. When the members are not present for the judging, all feedback must be given through written comments. These comments are the sole way to educate the member. Therefore, how the comments are written are of utmost importance. Comments must be an accurate reflection of the score given and must serve as a tool to help youth celebrate their accomplishments and be motivated to increase their skill level for their next project.

#### Tips for writing comments:

- Let members know you appreciate their exhibit and the skills they have used to create the exhibit.
- Due to the element of time, the comments understandably need to be brief and fairly basic. Therefore, concentrate on major points and use the smaller more insignificant points only as needed.
- Be specific. General sweeping comments are not taken seriously. Example: When talking about the hand sewing skills used to attach a hook and eye, write “tidy, evenly distributed stitches” instead of “nice job”.
- Write the comment in the correct location. Example: If talking about the closure, make sure the comment is in the box across from the criteria line referring to that skill.
- Ensure the comments justify the score given. If full points are given for a criteria area, there shouldn’t be any “improvement needed” comments; if few points are given, comment on what could be done to improve.
- Make skill improvement suggestions but **don’t overdo the negatives**. A rule of thumb is to give two positive comments for every “improvement needed”.
- Try to avoid negative critiques. Example: Instead of writing “sloppy measuring” write “be sure to use proper measuring techniques”.
- **Use language that is easily understood by the member and his/her parent.**
- If a clerk is writing for you, ensure they are accurately recording your comments. Comment sheets are a record of your evaluation of the exhibitor’s work and a reflection of your judging ability.



## The Oregon 4-H Judge

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### Common mistakes

- Not enough comments to justify the placing.
- Sweeping generalizations with no specific comments.
- Comments that are not understood by the member or parent/leader.
- Too many negative and not enough positive comments.
- Poorly worded comments can be taken as a “put-down”. Consider how the comment will be accepted by the member and their parent/leader.
- The comments and/or the location where they are written can send mixed messages.

Through their well written comments, judges are in a unique position to help members appreciate what they have learned and be motivated to improve their skills. Writing effective comments is a skill every 4-H judge needs to learn and use.

