

10 STEPS TO JUDGING SUCCESS

Step 1: Understand County Fairs, the Judging Process

Every summer 71 Wisconsin counties play host to 76 county and district fairs (five counties host two fairs). The annual fair season starts in mid-July and ends in mid-September.

“Fairs bring producers and consumers together and unite rural and urban people in an educational and entertaining community activity,” says the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) in its county fair annual report. A fair is a unique opportunity for young people to showcase their exhibits. It gives them a chance to apply some of the things they’ve learned in their youth group projects, learn life skills like planning and organizing, measure their progress and skills, meet people, share ideas, and gain some personal satisfaction.

According to DATCP, about 50,000 K-12 youth show their exhibits at Wisconsin county fairs each year. 4-H is the predominant organized youth group at a county fair, especially in the non-animal projects. Other youth exhibiting their work include: Future Farmers of America (FFA), Home Economics Related Organization (FHA-HERO), Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA), Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, various church youth groups, various animal breed groups and other youth organizations with adult leadership and an education program approved by the local fair.

Why do youth show at a fair? It’s not for the money. The amount of premium money that youth earn for an exhibit in the non-animal areas is small, hardly enough to pay for materials, certainly not enough to pay for all the time and effort they put into a project. Youth who exhibit in the non-animal project areas aren’t going to get rich at a county fair. They exhibit because they want to show the public what they’ve accomplished and they want to see how much they’ve learned.

The 4-H philosophy is “learn by doing.” 4-H believes that young people learn best if they are involved in an experience, not just watching or listening to others. 4-H’ers get involved through their projects. They show their project work at the county fair.

When you judge youth exhibits, your responsibility is to:

- Help youth improve their project skills
- Help them recognize their own efforts and accomplishments
- Help them develop standards for future self-evaluation
- Encourage them to continue in the project
- Advise them on what they might learn next.

Judging is a vital part of the county fair educational process. As a judge you’re part of a teaching team of volunteer leaders, parents and Extension staff. You’re helping support and reinforce the learning that occurs during the project year.

Once you start judging, you’ll learn that every county fair is unique. The judging conditions, the number of exhibits and exhibitors, the number and types of county fair classes and lots all vary a great deal from county to county. But the types of judging at county fairs fall into two general categories. You’ll either be judging exhibits *with* the exhibitors present or *without*. Generally when exhibitors are not present it’s called Danish judging, though there are exceptions. When exhibitors are present it’s either individual (“face to face”) or group conference judging.

Danish Judging

Under the Danish judging system, you will judge an entire lot at a time. You are limited in how many of each placing (first, second, third or fourth) or ribbon (blue, red, white or pink) you can give. A blue shows exceptional effort, red excellent effort, white good effort and pink adequate effort. You’ll give approximately 25% blues, 25% reds, 25% whites and 25% pinks under this system. Look at Appendix C for the exact breakdown. When the county fair says a lot is to be judged Danish, you *must* follow these guidelines for the distribution of awards (ribbons and premiums).

The pluses of judging Danish are many. You get to see the whole lot at one time. By seeing all the exhibits in a lot, you can compare the overall quality of work in this lot before making your placings.

Danish also gives you some flexibility as a judge. You always have the option of not awarding blues if you think the exhibits in a lot don’t merit that placing

based on your criteria and standards. You could, for example, give just four reds, two whites and one pink in a lot of seven exhibits if you think that's deserved. If you think there aren't any blues or reds in the lot, you could even give six whites and one pink. (See Appendix C for help if you're not sure how this is figured out.)

If you're lucky, the county fair will encourage exhibitors and the public to listen to you judge. If there is an audience, verbalize your placings (it's called, "giving oral reasons") to the listeners. This is a teachable moment, so teach!

The minuses of the Danish System are that you will know nothing about the exhibitors. You won't know their names, where they live or their grade in school. You won't know how much help the exhibitors had or what they were thinking when making their exhibits. You will make decisions based solely on the exhibits in front of you.

The Danish System doesn't work very well for very large lots, so sometimes you have to adapt. If 16 or more exhibits are entered in any junior fair lot, you may divide the lot randomly into two or more approximately equal groups and judge each group as a lot. To save time, you may not want to divide a lot unless it has more than 30 or 40 exhibits. It's usually faster to judge one large lot than several smaller lots. If time is a factor, don't divide the larger lots.

Individual Conference Judging

At some county fairs you'll be judging exhibits with individual exhibitors present. It's called individual conference, face-to-face or interview judging, depending upon the county. You'll be sitting at a table as each exhibitor comes to you with all of his or her entries. You'll then have about a five-minute semi-private conversation with the exhibitor, evaluating his or her work and placing each entry.

The pluses of this type of judging are many. You'll get to meet the exhibitors, find out how much they know, how much help they have received, what kinds of resources they have access to, why they took the project, why they entered these exhibits, what are their favorite subjects, and much more.

You also have lots of flexibility in placing your exhibits in individual conference judging. Judges are not required to follow the Danish formula of so many blue, red, white and pink ribbons. You'll probably give more blues and reds than you would in Danish judging because youth can tell you what they know and what they learned.

Group Conference Judging

The very best judging situation for teaching is a combination of face-to-face and Danish judging. Generally it's called group conference judging, where you judge and place the whole lot at one time (like Danish), but all the exhibitors are present for the judging (like face-to-face). It combines the best of both judging systems, but not many fairs do group conference judging because it is hard to coordinate. Exhibitors on fair entry day are usually very busy. They are often entered in several different project areas. Conference judging time in one department may conflict with conference judging time in another. Most counties choose individual conferences so exhibitors have more flexibility with the judging schedules.

If you have questions or are unclear about the judging system used in the county that you'll be judging, ask the department superintendent before you start.

Step 2: Become Registered to Judge

Nearly 40 departments need judges at a county fair. More than half of these departments are non-animal related. Before you can judge a department, you must register with the Wisconsin Dept. of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP), Marketing Division, P.O. Box 8911, Madison, WI 53708, (608) 224-5129. Also find it on the DATCP web site at www.datcp.state.wi.us/mktg/business/marketing/fairs. You'll want the "Application for Registration as a Registered Judge for Wisconsin Fairs." You'll have to name the departments you wish to judge. Indicate if these departments are to be "major" or "minor." Major means you feel fully competent to judge the department, minor means you could judge a minor show or small class in that department. You'll also need to list your experience in these departments and give three references that will attest to your qualifications as a fair judge.

If your application is accepted (they almost always are), you'll get your Fair Judge License from DATCP within a couple of weeks. The card lists your Judge's License Number and the departments that you're registered to judge. Take your card with you on your judging assignments, because sometimes you'll be required to show it before judging.

Don't feel that you have to know everything in a topic to be a very capable and effective county fair judge. Our surveys of Wisconsin registered judges show that judges come from many walks of life with an array of backgrounds and experiences, such as:

- Attended past judge's training; observed and learned from judges at county fairs and other contests; entered Open Class at county fair several times
- 4-H project member and leader; merit badge counselor in Boy Scouts
- Judged at county fairs; served as secondary judge at county fairs; served as county fair department superintendent or assistant
- Self-taught; read many magazines and books on these topics; observed and studied professional exhibitors; have entered many exhibits at the county fair; life-time hobby
- Taken classes at high school/technical school/college; attended professional or personal development seminars in these topics
- Teacher; have college degree in the field.

In addition, county Extension staff members like to see evidence that you've worked with youth before they hire you as a judge. This information doesn't show up on your judge's card, but it's one of the questions you may be asked by the county. It's good information to add to your judge's résumé. Following is a summary of experiences working with youth that were listed by judges on our surveys. Any of these will help convince local officials that you're ready to judge (teach) in their county:

- Leader, advisor, coach, chaperone or counselor for a youth group, such as 4-H, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, church youth groups, Junior Achievement, FFA, youth conservation corps, youth sports teams, Big Brothers, Big Sisters, Junior Holstein Association, Boys Club, YMCA, YWCA or Campfire Girls
- School teacher, assistant teacher, substitute teacher, after-school teacher, school principal, volunteer teacher's aide, school librarian, volunteer instructor for school field days, elementary school volunteer parent
- County 4-H program staff member, summer 4-H assistant, Boy Scout camp director, instructor at summer camp, worker at youth homes, children's theater director.

There are no age barriers for judges. Technically you can be in high school and judge county fairs. In fact, the State 4-H Program is encouraging young people to register and start out as co-judges or judge's assistants at county fairs.

Step 3: Study the 4-H Project Literature

Read the current 4-H project literature (see the State 4-H web site for the latest information on project literature). Most counties use the 4-H project literature recommended by the State 4-H Office. Review what is in each manual at each level of the project. The county may use other or additional project resources. Try to stay up to date because curriculum changes periodically. Get a set of the current 4-H curriculum from your county Extension office. You might want to take key project materials with you when you judge.

Step 4: Study the County Fair Book

The fair book is your key source of county fair information. It will give you all the specifics you need to know about the classes and lots that you will be judging at the fair. Study it carefully, then take it with you when you judge.

Step 5: Establish Criteria and Standards

Criteria are the common categories used to evaluate a class. For example, one of the criteria for a photo exhibit is good composition.

Standards describe the "ideal" conditions for each criteria. Standards are meant to be flexible, not absolute, guidelines used in the evaluation process. For example, your standards for the composition criteria might say that the photo should have a simple, uncluttered background.

Once you've evaluated an exhibit against your set of criteria and standards, you place the exhibit (and tell the exhibitor why, if it's face-to-face or group conference judging). Placings indicate how close the exhibit comes to the standards that you've established. Your placings should also take into account the grade, developmental ability, experience and resources of the exhibitor, if known. An older, more experienced 4-H'er should be expected to meet more of the standards to get a blue rating than a younger, less experienced 4-H'er who has a similar exhibit.

Merit Awards

At the end of a day's judging, you'll no doubt be asked to select exhibits for "Best of Show," State Fair, and other awards of excellence. Discuss the selection of merit awards with the superintendent *before* you start judging. Then throughout the day set aside merit award possibilities. At the end of the day, bring them all together and select your merit awards.

It's nice if you can spread the awards around among various individuals in all the grade groups. In other words, try not to give all the top awards to the advanced exhibitors. Try to recognize the good work of the beginners and intermediates who entered this year.

**Step 6:
Practice Your Teaching, Communication Skills**

Whenever you make written or verbal comments on a youngster's exhibit, it's important to think about the impact on exhibitors and parents. Even well-meaning, constructive criticism can hurt, so always be gentle and tactful in your comments. Youth learn more through compliments than criticism. Compliments encourage them to continue learning; criticism might just crush their enthusiasm.

Most junior county fairs today feature face-to-face judging. You'll either be judging one individual at a time, or a group of exhibitors. When working with youth in face-to-face settings:

- Use a pleasant tone of voice.
- Use words that youth will understand.
- Give youth time to think before you expect a response to your questions. Restate questions if necessary.
- Avoid questions that can be answered with just yes or no. Ask open-ended questions that start with who, what, when, where, why or how.
- "Sandwich" helpful criticism or a suggestion for improvement between two sincere compliments. Never use degrading words or phrases that will discourage youth from continuing in the project.

**Step 7:
Market Your Judging Skills**

Once you've registered with DATCP and prepared yourself to judge, you're ready to market yourself to county fairs. To build your résumé, get as much experience as you can. Watch veteran judges at work. Volunteer to assist judges and superintendents at county fairs and other exhibit shows. These experiences will help you compete with the judges certified to judge each department at a Wisconsin county fair.

Send your judging profile or résumé to the county Extension offices and county fair secretaries that you're interested in judging. DATCP prints a brochure each year that lists all Wisconsin county and district fairs, including sites, dates and phone numbers to call. Make your contacts early. Most counties line up their judges months in advance.

Smaller county fairs are a good place to land your first judging jobs. They need judges that can evaluate several areas because the number of exhibitors in a department is relatively small. It doesn't pay for these counties to hire judges who can judge only one department. So if you're looking for judging jobs, it pays to be registered in several departments, willing to travel and willing to judge in emergencies (contracted judge cancels out).

If a county wants you to judge, you'll receive an invitation or "intent to judge" form in the mail. Check your schedule. If it's a county fair you want to judge, sign the form and return it immediately. Don't keep the county fair waiting. You'll soon get a formal contract to sign.

Before you sign any contract, ask yourself why *you* want to judge. A judge has to really care about young people. A judge has to really want to teach. A judge has to really want youth to feel good about what they've done with their projects. Appendix A gives you a list of things that a county will expect from you when you judge a fair. If that sounds like something you want to do, sign the contract.

**Step 8:
Gather Your Judging Supplies**

Once you've landed an assignment, gather the supplies you'll need for judging. These will vary with the departments you judge.

County Fair Book – Study the county's fair book. Look at the general exhibit requirements at the beginning of the book. Then look carefully at the requirements for the classes and lots in your department. If you don't receive a copy of the fair book at least a week before judging, contact the county fair secretary or county Extension office for a copy. Projects, fair entry requirements, classes and lots vary greatly from county to county. To be fair to exhibitors and your employers, you've got to do your homework. Get a copy of the county fair book, study the premium list and put it in your judging supply box.

Reference Books and Other Tools – Take along any reference books or tools that will aid you in your judging. For photo judges that usually means an "L" or cropping tool and a set of photos clearly showing the basic rules of composition.

**Step 9:
Judge Your Best**

Make sure you are well rested before you judge. When judging day arrives, report to the junior fair secretary *30 minutes* before your scheduled judging time. Seek out the county Extension staff or junior fair department superintendent. Check out the judging site. Let the superintendent know if you have any concerns about the layout. Be reasonable in your requests for any changes because judging day is hectic. Staff and volunteers want to be helpful, but they can't drop everything to get what you want.

Start the judging on time. After you have been judging for a half-hour or so, you may want to suggest some minor adjustments in the flow of exhibits or youth. Talk to the superintendent. If any problems arise, be calm and professional. Remind yourself that county fairs are complex and things can go wrong. It helps to insert some humor from time to time to break any tension. Then work hard and do your best.

**Step 10:
Evaluate Your Judging**

When the day is done, you'll need to complete and sign the judge's sheet. Before you leave the judging area, thank the superintendent, recording secretary and any assistants for their help. Give feedback to the superintendent about the day. What could the fair do differently next time to make your job as judge easier or better, or to make it better for exhibitors? What changes would you suggest to the county fair premium list? Offer to make written comments and suggestions if the county fair would like them.

Usually you will then be directed by the superintendent to go to the junior fair secretary's office to sign a form verifying what you judged and for how long. Be prepared to give your travel mileage to the fairgrounds and your judge's card.

If your judging day was a success, you can count on being asked back for a second or third year. Counties like to rotate judges every two or three years to expose exhibitors to new ideas and judging styles.

Remember to evaluate your judging. Ask the county to assess your judging, too. Then, based on your feedback, make adjustments in your future judging efforts. Finally, send the county a thank you note and offer your services again next year.

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