NIU History Fair: Project Judge Feedback

We queried our database of History Fair project judges and asked them to share the criteria they look for when evaluating projects. We then compiled their feedback and picked the top four criteria. They are listed below, followed by more detailed explanations of each that were summarized from the judges’ comments.

1) Organization
2) Comprehension/Analysis of the topic
3) Quality and variety of sources
4) Visually Appealing

1) Organization

Almost every judge listed organization as one of their top criteria. They are looking for projects that pay close attention to detail and present their topics in a concise, straightforward manner. They should display a good blend of clarity and simplicity. One judge reported: “The efforts in the past that have caught my attention are those that had a smooth, logical flow from initial concept to conclusion.”

On several projects, judges found that they couldn’t understand or follow the topic because the student did not organize properly. As one judge explained, “I can tell when a student has put a lot of work into a project, but if the information is scattered all over the place, then I can’t understand what’s going on and all that hard work is wasted.” Another judge stated simply, “We shouldn’t have to hunt for the information.”
2) Comprehension/Analysis of the topic

Judges are looking for comprehension and analysis of the topic that shows that the student understood the sources and correctly evaluated their significance. Judges want to see that the student put together a tightly-focused project that draws reasonable and logical conclusions. One judge responded, “I want to see an analysis of the topic, its importance and impact, its connection to today. I’m looking for more than just a collection of facts.” Several judges agreed with this statement, saying they mark down projects if the work presents only “paraphrased information.” One judge explained, “Several well-executed, lovely-to-look-at projects did not receive a superior from me because, in the end, they were just book reports that recited facts.”

3) Quality and variety of sources

Several judges cited the research sources as being very important to them. Some judges look at the bibliography first, before they even begin judging the rest of the project. They are looking for two things: primary sources over secondary sources and quality over quantity.

Several judges acknowledged that the internet has grown into an invaluable source for research, but they still felt that a bibliography showing mostly websites indicates a lack of effort on the student’s part, which will hurt the overall score. One judge responded, “Try to show us that you’ve done some digging into your topic that involved something other than Google.” Another judge added, “A student who uses only the internet will never receive the same consideration as a student who uses books, interviews, field trips, or other sources for research.”

Judges also mentioned being particularly impressed whenever a student interviewed someone who offered first-hand experiences and knowledge about a topic.

4) Visually Appealing

First impressions matter. “We look at a lot of exhibits,” one judge said, “so a project with strong ‘eye appeal’ stops us and makes us take notice of the student’s hard work.” Another judge said, “We’re drawn to projects that have attractive displays. That doesn’t mean the display is the most important thing, but it is the first thing that grabs us and pulls us in.”
When students try to make their presentations visually appealing, judges warn against making it “too busy or cluttered,” as this can distract from the research. As one judge put it, “An attractive display must still be easy to read.”

Overall, judges agreed that no matter how visually appealing a project is, “it still has to do more than present pretty pictures.”

**Outside of the top four criteria, here is a brief summary of other details judges look for:**

Several judges mentioned that they are always on the lookout for something surprising or unique. This could include an entirely unique topic, or a new or interesting take on a common topic. They also want to see uniqueness in the presentation. This “uniqueness” is not always easy to define, but know that judges look at a lot of presentations every year, so they are always happy to see something they haven’t seen before. They like to learn, too!

Several judges mentioned another difficult-to-define characteristic of a superior project: “enthusiasm.” Judges can tell when a student was enthusiastic about his or her topic. One judge described it as an “overall feeling” they get when they can see that a lot of thought, research, and care went into a project. This “overall feeling” typically comes from projects that are more personal to the student, such as those that explored a person, place, or event from the student’s hometown (these topics stand out because they are usually more unique, as well).

Other judges mentioned that they look for the basics, like strong writing (including grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc.). They also look to make sure the project followed the directions (every year projects are marked down simply because they are missing something required, such as a bibliography).