

Tips for Preparing for State Fair Judging

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Competition is part of life. Humans must be prepared to compete in order to meet our most basic human needs as well as to achieve our loftiest goals and ambitions. Success in obtaining and keeping jobs, mates, acceptance, recognition, and other needs and wants often depends on success in some form of competition. This is why the development of knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations related to competition is part of OSU Extension's 4-H youth development efforts, and why Ohio 4-H offers competitive opportunities for youth age 9 and older who are developmentally ready for such experiences.

Youth participate in 4-H competitions for many reasons: to have fun...to learn new things...to meet other kids who are interested in similar things...to satisfy parents and grandparents...to make new friends...to be recognized...to earn club honor points...to keep advisors happy...to show off accomplishments in a socially acceptable way...to take part in the county fair...to be part of a 4-H "showcase" event where the public can learn what 4-H is doing...to have projects and records evaluated by a respected adult...to compare personal achievements with others' accomplishments...and to win! Participating in 4-H competitions is a way to achieve all these goals, and different people compete for different reasons. Here are some tips if one of your reasons for taking part in 4-H competitions is to win.

★ Tip 1 - Do an outstanding job with your project(s) and other 4-H experiences

Meet and exceed expectations in all five components of your project(s):

- Learn all of the subject matter content in your project book, and do something "extra" to learn even more about topics that interest you...Go to the library and on-line to review other publications about your topic...Think up questions related to your project content that aren't answered within the project book, and do extra reading and research to answer those questions...do an experiment to learn or verify something related to your project content, and publish your results...etc.
- Select and do extra "learn by doing" experiences in a way that builds on what you are supposed to learn in your project(s)...For example, rather than just "going to 4-H camp" do a workshop or service during camp to share what you've learned in your project(s). ie - If you are taking a photography project, take pictures of every first-year camper to be included in a camp finale power point presentation, slide show, scrapbook, or camp exhibit. Or if you are taking a beef project, develop a funny but factual "top ten" list of "reasons campers should eat beef" to read during camp announcements before a hamburger meal.
- Do creative leadership experiences related to your project content. For example, if you are taking a clothing project, organize a "selecting the best colors for you" workshop for younger members before they shop for fabric, or for your high school homeroom class before prom.
- Do unique service projects related to your project content. For example, rather than just "visiting a nursing home", volunteer to keep hummingbird feeders filled all summer outside the windows of each resident's room if you are taking a bird project...or visit with residents to compile genealogy fan charts for them to share with their great grand-children if you are taking a genealogy or family life project. Work with others in your club to make sure each of you can shine in your own niche.
- Do something special to learn about potential careers in your project area. Instead of just "shadowing" one professional in a field related to your project, visit with professionals in several fields related to your project and do something useful for them while you're there.

★ Tip 2 - Learn what to expect in competition, and prepare to do your best

- Learn by watching. Prepare for your competition by watching and learning from others in similar competitions. Observe competitors in your project at other fairs or in earlier classes. Ask previous achievement winners for advice and permission to review their record books.
- Learn the objective of the awards for which you are competing, the criteria by which you will be judged, and the rules and procedures of the contest. Focus what you do in the competition around the objectives and judging criteria, and do everything within the rules.
- Practice, learn from critiques, and practice more.

★ Tip 3 - Be a good sport.

Good sportsmanship involves:

- knowing the difference between right and wrong, and always doing what is right
- behaving respectfully and respectably - being courteous to everyone
- being trustworthy and never cheating - know the rules and scrupulously adhere to them.
- caring - about yourself and your program along with your fellow club members, opponents, officials, supporters, spectators and others
- being responsible, fair, having a good attitude, and being a good citizen of your sports community - doing your part

★ Tip 4 - Perform to win.

Tara Lipinski shocked the experts and became the star of the 1998 Winter Olympics when she out-performed reigning world champion Michelle Kwan, and won the gold medal for figure skating. Sportscasters who were there summed it up this way, "Tara performed to win; Michelle performed not to lose." It's often like that in competition. Doing an excellent job in all the judging criteria and not making any mistakes may be enough to get you into the list of finalists. But winning often requires more. Be "the best of the best"... "the shining star".

★ Tip 5 - Do your own work (before, during and after the competition).

Even if rules permit parents or others to complete your registration materials, help you set up and tear down exhibits, show your animals, etc., it's better if they don't.

★ **Tip 6 - Don't cause problems.**

Be on time. Don't ask for special favors that can't reasonably be given to everyone. Respect time limits (if the judge only has 10 minutes to spend with each participant, don't monopolize the conversation with an 11 minute answer to her first question). If the instructions on an application say "type with no less than 10 pt font", don't use 9 pt font or write it with a colored gel pen...and if something is "due on June 15" make sure it arrives at the destination before then.

★ **Tip 7 - Shine in Interview Judging Competitions**

- Greet the judge cordially, say thank you at the end, and be pleasant in between.
- Act and look knowledgeable, skilled, positive and interested.
- Know and be able to explain everything you did in your project and why you did it.
- Know everything you are supposed to learn in your project and more.
Nutrition contest finalists can correctly interpret and use the food guide pyramid...winners can explain what vitamin C does, why the body needs it every day, and why orange juice needs to be stored in a covered container.
- Be prepared and effectively use the "interview sandwich" format. Most judges begin interviews with "soft bread" comments such as "tell me what you did in your project" to set you at ease, then move on to "meaty" questions to figure out which competitors know the most and did the best in their projects, and close with another "soft bread" question such as "are you going to take another project in this area?" or praise for things you did well. Use this format to your advantage. Explain not only what you did to meet project requirements at the beginning of the interview, but also the how you exceeded them. Answer the "meaty" questions as well as you can, and admit it if there is something you do not know. Interviews should be conversations - don't monopolize the conversation, but don't be too short in your responses either. Answer questions completely, but not excessively. Use your time effectively and respect the judge's cues when it's time to move on.
- Focus what you say and present in the interview on demonstrating that you meet and exceed all the judging criteria. Don't distract the judge with a lot of extraneous information or go off on tangents.
- Try to relax, smile, and enjoy your interview. After all, where else can you find adults who are as interested in what you have to say, as 4-H judges are on judging day?

★ **Tip 8 - Write applications & written records in a way that captures & holds judges' attention in a positive way.**

- Applications and records should be written "newspaper style" (rather than "mystery novel style"). List your most important experiences and your most recent information first.
- Know the objectives of the award for which you are applying and write to them. Submit a separate application specifically targeting each award for which you apply.
- If written materials are accepted in several categories for the same or similar award, apply in less competitive categories as well as in your main category. Anyone can win if there's not a second entry.
- List information concisely (rather than within a lot of narrative prose).
- When asked to provide a story, a narrative account, or an essay, make sure it's well constructed. Capture the reader's attention with a strong opening highlighting your most important accomplishments and contributions, provide enough information in the middle to drive your points home, and end with a memorable closing. Grammar, spelling, and punctuation should be perfect. Paragraphs should have strong introductory sentences, enough supporting information to illustrate your points, and strong wrap-ups or transitions at the end.
- Avoid over-use of the word "I". Acknowledge others' contributions. Cite sources. Ask at least one friend and one adult to read your application before you turn it in to make sure you don't come across as too conceited or too tentative, and to make sure it's written as well as possible.

★ **Tip 9 - Perform exceptionally in the show ring**

- Do your own work, and let others see you doing it.
- Both you and your project exhibit should be well groomed.
- Demonstrate that you not only meet the judging criteria, but exceed them. For example, egg skillathon finalists can line up four eggs in order by grade...winners can accurately grade single eggs without having any others around for comparison and tell you why egg grades are important.
- Be nice to everybody - fellow competitors, the spectators, the officials, and everyone else. Offer to help others whenever and where ever needed, and do a good job if your offer is accepted.

★ **Tip 10 - "Stand out from the crowd in a good way" and "Own the room"**

- From the time you enter or arrive until well after the competition is over, establish yourself as someone everyone hopes will be the winner.
- Be friendly. Say "Hi!" to everybody, and get acquainted with people you do not already know. If somebody asks you something about your project, answer them.
- Follow the directions & established procedures, and set up your own exhibit/entry when where you are supposed to.
- Read all the information about the program ahead of time so that you can help others who may not have read their packets, and so that you don't have to ask a lot of unnecessary questions yourself. But if you do have questions, ask.
- Use your best manners. Say "please", "thank you" and "you're welcome" whenever appropriate. Write thank you notes to the award sponsors, the program organizers, and others who helped provide the opportunity for you.
- Help clean up after programs and events, and volunteer to help with other jobs for which the organizers may want assistance.
- Seek out ideas to make your best better in the future.