

Intel ISEF 2008 Student Handbook

Science Research and the Process of Science

Research is a process by which people discover or create new knowledge about the world in which they live. The ISEF and Affiliated Fairs are research (data) driven. Students design research projects that provide quantitative data through experimentation followed by analysis and application of that data. Projects that are demonstrations, 'library' research or informational projects, 'explanation' models or kit building are not appropriate for research based science fairs.

Questioning is probably the most important part of a scientific investigation and is often followed by an "if...then" statement. Students are encouraged to design 'controlled' experiments, ones that allow them to set up a standard and then change only one variable at a time to see how that variable might affect the original condition tested as the standard. Thus, questioning usually leads to experiments or observations.

Good scientists, both young and old, frequently use a process to study what they see in the world. This process has been referred as the 'Scientific Method' or more recently as the 'Inquiry Cycle'. The following stages listed below will help you produce a good scientific experiment:

- 1) Be curious, choose a limited subject, ask a question; identify or originate/define a problem. It is important that this question be a 'testable' question – one in which data is taken and used to find the answer. A testable question can further be identified as one in which one or more variables can be identified and tested to see the impact of that variable on the original set of conditions. The question should not merely be an 'information' question where the answer is obtainable through literature research.
- 2) Review published materials related to your problem or question. This is called background research.
- 3) Evaluate possible solutions and guess why you think it will happen (hypothesis).
- 4) Experimental design (procedure). In designing the experiment, it is critical that only one variable – a condition that may effect the results of the experiment – is changed at a time. This makes the experiment a 'controlled' experiment.
- 5) Challenge and test your hypothesis through your procedure of experimentation (data collection) and analysis of your data. Use graphs to help see patterns in the data.
- 6) Draw conclusions based on empirical evidence from the experiment.
- 7) Prepare your report and exhibit.

8) Review and discuss the findings with peer group/ professional scientists

9) New question(s) may arise from your discussions.

This sets the stage for another research project as new questions are raised from others and the process repeats itself. The hypothesis often changes during the course of the experiment. Supporting or not supporting your hypothesis is secondary to what is learned and discovered during the research.

Non Inquiry Based Research

Not all areas of study are best served by scientific method based research. Because engineers, inventors, mathematicians, theoretical physicists, and computer programmers have different objectives than those of other scientists, they follow a different process in their work. The process that they use to answer a question or solve a problem is different depending on their area of study. Each one uses their own criteria to arrive at a solution.

Engineering Projects

"Scientists try to understand how nature works; engineers create things that never were." An engineering project should state the engineering goals, the development process and the evaluation of improvements. Engineering projects may include the following:

- 1) Define a need or "How can I make this better?"
- 2) Develop or establish design criteria (could be more than one)
- 3) Do background research and search the literature to see what has already been done or what products already exist that fill a similar need. What make them good and what makes them weak?
- 4) Prepare preliminary designs and a materials list. Consider costs, manufacturing and user requirements.
- 5) Build and test a prototype of your best design. Consider reliability, repair and servicing.
- 6) Retest and redesign as necessary. Product testing.
- 7) Present results

Computer Science Projects

These often involve creating and writing new algorithms to solve a problem or improve on an existing algorithm. Simulations, models or 'virtual reality' are other areas on which to conduct research.

Mathematics Projects

These involve proofs, solving equations, etc. Math is the language of science and is used to explain existing phenomena or prove new concepts and ideas.

Theoretical Projects

These projects may involve a thought experiment, development of new theories and explanations, concept formation or designing a mathematical model.

Getting Started

- 1) **Pick your topic:** This is perhaps the most difficult part. Get an idea of what you want to study or learn about. Ideas should come from things in your area of interest. A hobby might lead you to a good topic. What is going on in the world that you would like to know more about? Most importantly, pick a question or problem that is not too broad and that can be answered through scientific investigation.
- 2) **Research your topic:** Go to the library or internet to learn more about your topic. Always ask Why or What if.... Look for unexplained or unexpected results. Also, talk to professionals in the field.
- 3) **Organize:** Organize everything you have learned about your topic. At this point, you should narrow your thinking by focusing on a particular idea.
- 4) **Make a time table:** Choose a topic that not only interests you, but can be done in the amount of time you have. Identify your 'testable question'. Develop a time line to manage your time efficiently. You will need time to fill out the necessary forms and to review the Research Plan with your sponsor. Certain projects will require more time because they need prior Scientific Review Committee (SRC) or Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Allow plenty of time to experiment and collect data. You will also need time to write a paper and put together a display or 'board'.
- 5) **Plan Your Experiment:** Give careful thought to experimental design. Once you have a feasible project idea, write a research plan. This plan should explain how you will do your experiments and exactly what will be involved. Remember you must design your experiment so that it is a 'controlled' experiment. This is one in which only one variable is changed at a time. The results are then compared to the 'standard' data you take originally before you change that one variable. Thus, you have designed an investigation with adequate control and limited variables to investigate a question. Also, in your experimental design, make sure you include sufficient numbers in both control (if applicable) and experimental groups to be statistically valid. The experimental design should also include a list of materials. Once finished with the experimental design (called 'procedure') all students are required to fill out the appropriate forms.
- 6) **Consult with Your Adult Sponsor and get Approvals:** You are required to discuss your research plan with an Adult Sponsor and obtain a signature of approval. In reviewing your research plan, you should determine if additional forms and prior approval are needed.
- 7) **Conduct your experiment:** During experimentation, keep detailed notes of each and every experiment, measurement and observation in a log book. Do not rely on memory. Besides, judges love logbooks! Use data tables or charts to record your quantitative data.
- 8) **Analyze Your Results:** When you complete your experiments, examine and organize your findings. Use appropriate graphs to make 'pictures' of your data. Identify patterns from the graphs. This will help you answer your

testable question. Did your experiments give you the expected results? Why or why not? Was your experiment performed with the exact same steps each time? Are there other explanations that you had not considered or observed? Were there experimental errors in your data taking, experimental design or observations? Remember, that understanding errors is a key skill scientists must develop. In addition, reporting that a suspected variable did not change the results can be valuable information. That is just as much a 'discovery' as if there was some change due to the variable. In addition, statistically analyze your data using the statistics that you can understand and explain their meaning.

9) **Draw Conclusions:** Did the variable(s) tested cause a change when compared to the standard you are using? What patterns do you see from your graph analysis that exist between your variables? Which variables are important? Did you collect enough data? Do you need to conduct more experimentation? Keep an open mind – never alter results to fit a theory. If your results do not support your hypothesis, that's ok and in some cases good! Try to explain why you obtained different results than your literature research predicted for you. Were there sources of error that may have caused these differences? If so, identify them. Even if the results do differ, you still have accomplished successful scientific research because you have taken a question and attempted to discover the answer through quantitative testing. This is the way knowledge is obtained in the world of science. Think of practical applications that can be made from this research. How could this project be used in the real world? Finally, explain how you would improve the experiment and what would you do differently.

Elements of a Successful Project

1) Project Data Book:

A project data book is your most treasured piece of work. Accurate and detailed notes make a logical and winning project. Good notes show consistency and thoroughness to the judges and will help you when writing your research paper. Data tables are also helpful. They may be a little 'messy' but be sure the quantitative data recorded is accurate and that units are included in the data tables. Make sure you date each entry.

2) Research Paper:

A research paper should be prepared and available along with the project data book and any necessary forms or relevant written materials. A research paper helps organize data as well as thoughts. A good paper includes the following sections.

- a) **Title Page and Table of Contents:** The title page and table of contents allows the reader to follow the organization of the paper quickly.
- b) **Introduction:** The introduction sets the scene for your report. The introduction includes the purpose, your hypothesis, problem or engineering goals, an

4) Visual Display:

You want to attract and inform. Make it easy for interested spectators and judges to assess your study and the results you have obtained. You want to ‘catch the eye’ of the judges and convince them that the research is of sufficient quality to deserve closer scrutiny. Most displays or boards have three sections and are free standing. For the most part, the displays are put on a table. Most judges get a chance to look at the board before the interviews. Make the most of your space using clear and concise displays. You never get a second chance to make a first impression! Please be sure to reference the Display and Safety Rules on page 6 of the International Rules and Guidelines; this information is also available on the Science Service website at www.sciserv.org.

Helpful hints for display:

- a) **Current Year:** Make sure the board reflects the current year’s work only. Prior year’s data books are permitted at your project.
- b) **Good Title:** Your title is an extremely important attention-grabber. A good title should simply and accurately present your research and depict the nature of the project. The title should make the casual observer want to know more.
- c) **Take Photographs:** Many projects involve elements that may not be safely exhibited at the Fair, but are an important part of the project. You might want to take photographs of important parts/phases of your experiment to use in your display. Photograph or other visual images of human test subjects must have informed consent (Human Subject Form 4. Please see page 7 of the International Rules). Credit must be given for all photographs.
- d) **Be Organized:** Make sure your display follows a sequence and is logically presented and easy to read. Reach out to the ‘skim-reader’. A glance should permit anyone (particularly the judges) to locate quickly the title, abstract, experiments, results and conclusions. When you arrange your display, imagine that you are seeing it for the first time. Highlight your results using key graphs that show the relationships of the two variables tested. Use the graphs to give a ‘picture’ of the data for your viewers. These graphs will provide an easier method of viewing the data rather than just seeing the recorded quantitative data.
- e) **Eye-Catching:** Make your display stand out. Use neat, colorful headings, charts and graphs to present your project. Pay special attention to the labeling of graphs, charts, diagrams, photographs, and tables to ensure that each has a title and appropriate label describing what is being demonstrated. Anyone should be able to understand the visuals without further explanation.
- f) **Correctly Presented and Well-Constructed:** Be sure to adhere to the size limitations and safety rules when preparing your display. Display all required forms for your project. Make sure your display is sturdy, as it will need to remain intact for quite a while. You must also consider the

weight of the project for shipping. It can be very costly to ship a heavy board. Keep your materials light, but strong.

Please Note: The judges are judging your research, not the display. So don’t spend an excessive amount of time or money on the board. You are being judged on the science not the show!

5) Judging

Judges evaluate and focus on 1) what the student did in the current year; 2) how well a student followed the scientific, engineering, computer programming or mathematical methodologies; 3) the detail and accuracy of research as documented in the data book; and 4) whether experimental procedures were used in the best possible way.

Judges look for well thought-out research. They look at how significant your project is in it’s field; how thorough you were, and how much of the experiment thought and design is your own work.

Initially, judges get their information from your board, abstract and research paper to learn what the project is about, but it is the **Interview** that will be the final determination of your work. Judges applaud those students who can speak freely and confidently about their work. They are not interested in memorized speeches or presentations – they simply want to **talk** with you about your research to see if you have a good grasp of your project from start to finish. It is important to start the interview off right. Greet the judges and introduce yourself. You want to make a good first impression. Appearance, good manners, appropriate attire, and enthusiasm for what you are doing will impress the judges.

Judges often ask questions to test your insight into your projects such as: “How did you come up with this idea?” “What was your role?”, “What didn’t you do?”, “What further plans do you have to continue research?” and “What are the practical applications of your project?” Remember that the judges need to see if you understand the basic principles of science behind your project or topic area. They want to determine if you have correctly measured and analyzed the data. They want to know if you can determine possible sources of error in your project and how you might apply your findings to the ‘real’ world. Finally, the judges seek to encourage you in your scientific efforts and your future goals/career in science. Relax, smile and enjoy your time to learn from them and accept their accolades for your fine work.

Intel ISEF Judging Criteria (points)		
	Individual	Team
Creative Ability	30	25
Scientific Thought and Engineering Goals	30	25
Thoroughness	15	12
Skill	15	12
Clarity	10	10
Teamwork	---	16