

Judging: Positives and Pitfalls

Interviewing students about their History Day projects is usually the most engaging part of evaluation—both for judges and students. Presentation skills are a critical part of History Day learning, yet students are often anxious about the interview. Judges should keep in mind that for most students, the interview is the culmination of their History Day experience, because most will not advance to the next level. Students invest a lot of emotional energy into the interview, and into trying to interpret judges' actions. Be a positive judge, not a pitfall for students!

And remember, History Day is an educational program. Contests are fun, but ultimately, judge feedback helps students become better historians and learners. Everybody wins when students are excited about learning.

Everyone wants students to have a good judging experience, so here are some elements of positive judging:

- **The Encourager:** A great History Day judge introduces him- or herself, asks thoughtful questions, smiles, and lets the students talk. If it's a group project, judges should make sure that each student has a chance to answer questions.
- **The Inquirer:** Memorable History Day judges ask memorable questions that show they've looked carefully at the project, are interested in the topic, and most importantly are interested in what students have to say about it. Open-ended questions are students' favorites, because they allow students to expand, describe, analyze, even emote about their project. Along the same lines, asking a variety of questions allows students to talk about different aspects of their project, and gives them opportunities to bring up new and interesting information.
- **The Novelist:** Students live for judge evaluation forms. Detailed, constructive comments that provide ideas on project strengths as well as areas for improvement are among the most important feedback students receive, and facilitate learning. Comments that demonstrate thoughtful consideration of the research and project are as good as gold to History Day students.
- **The Team Player:** Excellent History Day judges know that it's often difficult to pick the top few projects, but they also understand that not every student will advance to the next level of competition. So they work with the other judges on their team to reach consensus about which projects are moving on, which aren't, and why. When they fill out evaluation forms, they check with their fellow judges to make sure that all the ratings are about the same, so that students don't receive wildly different ratings (which

is confusing and disheartening). And they consult about comments, so that students receive a broad range of comments that aren't unnecessarily repetitive.

Sometimes, though, judges inadvertently undermine the process by falling into one or more of these common interview pitfalls:

- **The Wanderer:** If a student's project is about Pickett's Charge, don't ask them questions about Manassas. Students *are* experts on their chosen topic, but it doesn't mean they are experts about everything. Asking a student questions about something unrelated to his or her project is both unfair and discouraging, and it wastes precious interview minutes.
- **The Lecturer:** A judge may be one of the foremost experts on a student's topic—but that doesn't give them license to lecture the student about the topic and point out errors, missed analysis, and suggest different conclusions. Please remember that students work for months on their projects, and that they are *students*, not graduate students or professors.
- **The Dominator:** Judges serve on two- or three-person teams, and it's important that each judge ask at least one question. One judge may be particularly enthusiastic about a project, but try to look at the interview from the student's point of view. If only one judge talks, students are likely to feel overlooked or that the other judges didn't like their project. Think of the interview as a conversation, with all parties taking part.
- **The Gusher:** Judges sometimes are so effusive in their praise for a project that students leave the interview convinced they've won. Be careful to give neutral praise ("Congratulations on completing a History Day project!"), and try to make sure each student receives the same praise.
- **The Accuser:** Judges sometimes come across projects that for one reason or another, set off alarm bells. Maybe the project is so professional that it's hard to believe a student did it. Maybe different parts of the narrative seem to be written by different people. Maybe students are having a hard time answering basic questions. Instead of confronting students with suspicions, judges should complete the interview, asking questions that try to address their concerns, and then report any misgivings to contest headquarters. Please do not accuse students directly of cheating, plagiarizing, or otherwise taking shortcuts. This is a matter for the state coordinator and the student's coach to address.
- **The Blurter:** Each year, the state office hears about judges who make inappropriate comments to students. Saying something about students' gender, ethnicity, culture, and appearance is completely unacceptable. Please, please, please think before you speak. How might a student interpret your comment? How about their parents or teacher?

How would you feel if the same thing was said to you? Be thoughtful and deliberate in your interactions with students, and keep your focus on the research project.

History Day judges are wonderful volunteers who care deeply about students' educational experience and genuinely admire their capabilities. This list is a reminder of things to avoid when interviewing students—who are, after all, the focus of History Day.