WVSEF Rules and Regulations 2026-2027

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Rule Categories

Important Notice: A Scientific Review Committee (SRC) must be convened at every level of competition (school, county, regional, state). The SRC is composed of a classroom teacher, an administrator, and a medical specialist, and is responsible for assuring that all research is completed ethically and adheres to the International Rules for Pre-College Science Research. In addition, WVSEF rules must be adhered to at every level of competition.

Levels of Authority (rules 1-4)

1. A fair committee should be considered in the event there is any way that a fair coordinator could be related to any participant or has a student participating in the fair. The fair coordinator must recuse themselves from decisions related to the project and defer to the fair committee.

2. When a school, county, and region identify the fair coordinator, that individual serves in the official capacity necessary to execute all rules and regulations. This includes, but is not limited to facilitating the fair, deeming projects as Failure to Qualify for projects not meeting established

rules, addressing parent/educator concerns, and making all other decisions pertaining to the fair. The fair coordinator also has the final decision on matters pertaining to their respective fairs when these are not covered in fair regulations.

3. Any challenge at a school, county, regional, and/or state level must be submitted in writing within one business day following the fair. Once the official results have been finalized on fair day, the fair director will only modify or overrule a judge's decision in the event of an obvious mathematical error in the scoring process.

4. The fair coordinator at each level of competition (school, county, regional, state) has sole and final responsibility and authority to resolve issues, concerns, conflicts, or disputes at that level of competition. State fair coordinators will not intervene in matters related to school, county, or regional fairs. For example, a county fair coordinator may not intervene in a dispute at a regional level fair. The final authority lies with the regional fair coordinator in that instance.

General Rules (rules 5-14)

5. Each project must include a physical display, oral presentation, and written abstract (in the approved format as specified in the document). A project that does not include all three required components shall be disqualified from the competition.

6. Projects that are demonstrations, library research, informational projects, or "explanation" models are not recommended or appropriate for WVSEF. Projects should be experimental or engineering projects.

7. Artificial Intelligence (AI) may be used as a resource but must be cited and given proper acknowledgment. A student is expected to do independent work, and all materials presented must be in the researcher's own words. A student may not use generative AI to write the research plan, abstract, poster or to create citations (it is known to hallucinate and falsify references). Please consult ISEF AI Guidance for more information.

8. Student, school, or county names must not appear on any part of the project other than on the required forms. Students also may not engage in self-promotion actions such as wearing clothing that identifies a school and giving away freebies/swag.

9. Students may ask others for help and direction, but they must do all the work themselves.

10. Projects may be done as individuals or in a small group of no more than three members. A student may enter only ONE project. For example, a student participating in a small group project may not enter a second project at the fair as an individual or a member of another small group.

11. Once a project competes as a group project at any level of competition, it must be entered as a group project in all subsequent levels of competition, even if other group members withdraw. Members of the group may not be changed or added to if a member is unable to attend a competition.

12. Projects may be modified or improved between each level of competition; however, the theme must be maintained. Example: More data may be collected, but the project's initial focus and procedure must remain the same.

13. Individuals and groups/teams in the same categories and at the same programmatic levels (elementary, middle school, high school) compete against each other.

14. Each project must represent the unique work of the students who develop it. The fair director may deem a project as Failure to Qualify if it is determined that the student(s) duplicated another student's work (i.e., two projects from the same school or county are nearly identical), committed plagiarism, or engaged in other egregious violations of generally accepted academic integrity standards.

Note: WVSEF adheres to the International Science and Engineering Fair (ISEF) Ethics Statement for research.

Registration (rules 14-20)

15. The school or county fair coordinator will determine the registration process for school and county fairs.

16. County fair coordinators are responsible for registering projects for regional fairs using the West Virginia State Science and Engineering Fair Online Registration System. Use of this system is mandatory. Detailed information on the Online Registration System will be provided to county and regional fair coordinators.

17. Regional fair coordinators are responsible for registering projects for the State Science and Engineering Fair using the WV State Science and Engineering Fair Online Registration System. Use of this system is mandatory. Detailed information on the Online Registration System will be provided to county and regional fair coordinators.

18. County coordinators are responsible for sending student paperwork to the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) after the regional winners are announced prior to the WVDE deadline.

19. At the State Science and Engineering Fair, students are not required to register or check in on the day of the fair if they have checked the website and know their project number. Upon arrival, students may proceed directly to their assigned project numbers and assemble their projects. Project numbers will be posted here one week before the fair date.

20. It is the responsibility of the fair coordinator (county or regional) to ensure the accuracy of registration information (student names, project titles, category selections) before submission.

Levels of Competition (rules 21-23)

21. There will be four levels of competition: school, county, regional, and state.

22. Counties may send only their first-place winners in each Division and Category to the regional fair--up to 12 total winners for Divisions I and II, and up to 22 total winners for Division III (bolded category titles). Regions may send only their first-place winners in each Division and Category to the State Fair in Charleston. Each region may also choose to send an additional 7 projects in Division III (grades 9-12) provided the projects have a score of 90 or above.
    a. The first-place winner is the highest scoring project in the Division/Category, scoring 90 or above. A project must score a minimum of 90 out of 100 points to move on as a first-place winner to the next level of competition. If no project scores 90 points or better in a certain category, then no project from that category will move on to the next level of competition.

23. If the first-place project at a regional fair is unable to attend the state fair, a second-place project may be substituted if:

a. The substitution is made BEFORE the regional fair coordinator submits project information to the State Science and Engineering Fair; AND
b. The second-place project scored 90 or above at the regional fair.
c. No substitutions may be made after project information has been submitted to the state.

Project Classifications (rules 24-29)

24. All projects are classified by the county coordinator at the time of the Regional Fair registration by division (grade level) and category (subject).

25. Divisions: Division I (Grades 3-5), Division II (Grades 6-8), and Division III (Grades 9-12). **Note: Thermo-Fisher Junior Innovators Challenge nominees (grades 6-8) are expected to have followed the International Rules for Pre-College Science Research just as researchers in the high school division.**

26. Categories:
    a. Elementary and middle school projects compete in one of the 12 WVSEF categories.
    b. High School projects compete in one of 22 ISEF categories.

27. Each region may submit ONE first-place project in each division/category for competition at the state fair. Each region may also choose to send an additional 7 projects in Division III (grades 9-12) provided the projects have a score of 90 or above. These additional projects will need to be marked as first place winners by the regional fair coordinator in the West Virginia State Science and Engineering Fair Online Registration System.

28. Projects in a specific division/category will compete only against other projects of the same division/category. For example, a project classified as Division I, Animal Science, will only compete against other Division I, Animal Science projects.

29. A project must be placed in the correct category by the originating teacher. Once a project has competed and won in a category at a lower level of competition, it cannot be changed without the originating teacher, parent, and student's permission. If a category classification is questioned, the issue needs to be addressed directly to the local level fair coordinator and teacher.

Project Displays (rules 30-36)

30. Project displays may be a traditional physical display with artifacts and/or a multimedia presentation. Division III (grades 9-12) must use a physical display or poster. For additional Division III (grades 9-12) regulations, consult the Society for Science Display and Safety Rules. Note: Proper graphic citation for every image is mandatory. The student must reference any tool used to create a graphic and disclose the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), including the purpose and how it was used.

31. The display area must be no larger than 30 inches or 76 centimeters from front to back, 48 inches or 122 centimeters wide, and 108 inches or 274 centimeters tall, from the floor. No part of the physical or digital display may extend beyond the established size limitations. Any project exceeding the maximum established dimensions will be disqualified from the competition.

32. The display must be assembled on tables provided by the West Virginia State Science and Engineering Fair. Students are NOT permitted to bring their own tables.

33. The space under the table directly beneath the project may be used for storage.

34. Items may hang from the front of the table (tablecloths, charts).

35. Display items may NOT be placed in the aisle, even during the oral presentation.

36. Items of value should not be left unattended with the project display. This includes computers, tablets, DVD players, MP3 players, digital photo frames, and any objects that might be easily pilfered. Such items should always remain in the student's possession. Judges will allow students to return these items to the project display immediately prior to the oral presentation.

Electronic Devices (rules 37-41)

37. Electronic devices (personal laptops, tablets, DVD players, MP3 players, cell phones, digital cameras, handheld gaming equipment, or audio recorders) may be incorporated into the physical display and/or oral presentation. A digital display such as a laptop may be used exclusively as a physical display or presentation for Division I and Division II projects. Electronic devices should not be left with the project display. Such items should always remain in the student's possession.

38. Computers and other electronic devices must be provided by the student.

39. Sound may be played at the time of the oral presentation ONLY. Volume must be limited so it does not interfere with other students' presentations.

40. Electrical outlets will NOT be provided for project displays in Division I (grades 3-5) or Division II (grades 6-8). All electronic devices must be battery-operated. For Division III (grades 9-12) projects requesting electricity for demonstration purposes, access to electricity will be provided. Electricity will not be provided for display or decorative purposes.

41. An internet connection may be used as part of a project display ONLY if the student provides a means of connecting (laptop, air card, or phone with cellular connectivity). At the State level of competition, use of the Charleston Coliseum and Convention Center's internet connection (wireless or wired) will not be authorized under any circumstance.

Written Abstracts and Other Documentation (rules 42-45)

42. Each project must have a written abstract in the approved format (see abstract templates). A physical copy of the abstract must always remain in the display area with other required forms in a lab notebook (binder or folder).

43. The official WVSEF abstract for Divisions I and II projects must be used and can either be neatly handwritten or typed as specified on the document and must include the required information. Division III abstracts must be typed on the official ISEF abstract form.

44. Abstracts must be self-explanatory. Only the identifiable information listed on the abstract may appear on the display.

45. Student researchers must have a Research Plan that includes:
    a. Rationale
    b. Research Question/Hypothesis(es), Engineering Goal(s), Expected Outcomes
    c. List of Materials
    d. Procedures
    e. Risk and Safety
    f. Data Analysis
    g. Bibliography

Oral Presentation (rules 46 – 51)

46. All projects will include an oral presentation. Participants should notify fair officials IMMEDIATELY if they are denied the opportunity to deliver their complete oral presentation.

47. Oral presentations for individual and group projects should be at least 5 minutes, but they may not exceed 10 minutes in length. The question-and-answer period is not included in the oral presentation time limit.

48. Each student participant in a small group project must have a speaking part in the oral presentation.

49. Each student should be prepared to respond to questions from the judges. If a student does not understand a judge's question, it is the student's responsibility to ask for clarification.

50. If a member of the small group has an acceptable excuse for being unable to attend, the other members of the group may represent the project.

51. Oral presentations may not be pre-recorded or delivered virtually. Students must attend the fair to present their projects.

Judging and Awards (rules 52-63)

52. Each project at the state-level competition will be assigned a judging time and project number. At least one week prior to the fair date, project numbers will be posted at the State Science and Engineering Fair website. Judging times will NOT be provided prior to the fair date. Requests for time changes or for specific judging times will NOT be honored.

53. First-, second-, and third-place awards may be given to the three highest-scoring projects in each Division and Category that meet minimum score requirements. A project must score a minimum of 90 out of 100 points to be identified as a first-place winner, 80 or above to be identified as a second-place winner, and 70 or above to be identified as a third-place winner. Because of the minimum score requirements, it is possible for a category to have no winning projects.

54. Honorable mention awards may be granted upon the judges' recommendation and are not dependent upon the score. An honorable mention award is not considered a fourth-place award. Judges are not required to award honorable mentions.

55. Ties for first-, second- or third-place awards are not permitted at the school, county, regional, or state level.

56. At the State Science and Engineering Fair, winning projects will be identified with a ribbon or sticker prior to public viewing. Only those students whose projects are identified with a ribbon or sticker are required to remain for the awards ceremony. Students unable to attend the awards ceremony must identify someone to receive their award. Awards will NOT be mailed.

57. Access to the project display room is limited to fair officials, judges, and students during the scheduled judging period. Parents and teachers may not accompany students into the project display area during the scheduled judging period.

58. Projects may not be removed until after public viewing. Students who are unable to retrieve their projects following the public viewing and awards ceremony must identify someone to do so. Anything left at the fair will be discarded at the conclusion of the event.

59. Projects (topics) that win first place at the state level will not be eligible to compete in school, county, regional, or state fairs in subsequent years.

60. Issues or concerns regarding fairness, rules, judging, or awards must be addressed in written form with the fair coordinator immediately and include the complainant's contact information, as anonymous submissions will not be addressed. It is often impossible to resolve such matters after a category has closed, and judges have been dismissed.

    Please note that judges are matched to projects based on qualifications and experience, and results are final, pending no mathematical error is discovered. If a project was judged in compliance with WVSEF rules, which are based on ISEF rules, WVSEF staff will not alter scores or overturn a judge's decisions. In cases of irregularities, each situation will be considered individually to provide a fair resolution. WVSEF staff take all allegations regarding misconduct seriously and work hard to ensure scientific integrity to the best of our ability.

61. At the state level, student copies of scorecards will be provided ONLY to county fair coordinators within two weeks. State fair officials will not release scorecards directly to students or parents.

62. Due to potential conflicts, immediate relatives (parents, grandparents, siblings, guardians) and teachers of fair participants are not eligible to serve as judges. Failure to disclose such a conflict to fair officials may result in disqualification of the project and may disqualify the judge from participating in future events.

63. Judges are prohibited from taking photographs of student participants and may only take photographs of project displays for scoring purposes when no students are present in the project room.

Nonpublic School and Homeschool Students (rules 64-67)

64. Nonpublic school and homeschool students may participate in the State Science and Engineering Fair under the guidelines established in this section.

65. Homeschool and microschool students must contact the public school they would attend and participate in beginning at the school level.

66. Non-public school students may choose one of the following three options:
    1) Students may contact the local public school they would attend to participate beginning at the school level.
    2) Nonpublic schools may host their own school fair and send one project (best of show) from each division, as defined in the Project Classifications section of the fair rules and regulations, directly to the regional fair.
    3) Nonpublic schools may host their own school fair and send projects to the county fair at the discretion of the county fair coordinator who determines local participation rules.

67. Nonpublic schools cannot send projects directly to the regional fair and projects to the county fair. Nonpublic schools must choose between regional or county competitions. Only one option is permitted. If the nonpublic school hosts a school fair, the school fair must comply with all rules and regulations established for the West Virginia State Science and Engineering Fair.

Safety Considerations (rule 68)

68. **The following are safety considerations at all levels of competition (school, county, regional, state):**
    a. Research determined to be Biosafety Level 2 (BSL-2) must be conducted in a laboratory rated BSL-2 or above and follow BSL-2 safety conditions throughout the study.
    b. Insect and arthropod vector-borne pathogens such as Malaria, Lyme, etc. are considered BSL-2 studies.
    c. Some chemicals and devices are considered hazardous substances. These can impact the environment. Some activities are considered hazardous activities. Hazardous activities are those that involve a level of risk above and beyond that encountered in the student's everyday life. Both are regulated by local, state, country, or international law. The student researcher must minimize the impact of an experiment on the environment and on self.
    d. Projects using chemicals with a Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals (GHS) safety rating of 1, 2 or 3 or National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) safety rating of 3 or 4 must be conducted in a school or laboratory setting. Projects conducted with chemicals outside these ratings may be conducted in a home setting under the following conditions: a). Projects in a home setting must follow standard lab practices for chemical handling, safety, ventilation, and specific disposal procedures used as outlined in the Safety Data Sheets (SDS); b). Any cookware, utensils, and/or equipment used during the experimentation cannot be reused for food preparation; and c). Be conducted with a Direct Supervisor with proper training and knowledge of the chemicals being used.
    e. Disposal procedures shall be described in sufficient detail to ensure compliance with Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Guidelines as outlined in the appropriate Safety Data Sheets. Examples include minimal quantities of chemicals that will require subsequent disposal; ensuring that all disposal is done in an environmentally safe manner. Proper chemical, sharps and other hazardous materials disposal must follow local, state, and federal guidelines.

    Note: Please consult the International Rules for Pre-College Science Research for specific safety considerations regarding Human Participants; Vertebrate Animals; Potentially Hazardous Biological Agents (PHBAs); Tissue and Body Fluids; and Hazardous Chemicals, Activities or Devices.

Display Rules and Prohibited Items (rule 69)

69. **The following are prohibited at displays at all levels of competition (school, county, regional, and state):** Note: In the case in which a Finalist's Project includes an item that is prohibited from display, please consider taking photographs and/or documenting the significance of the prohibited item through video.
    a. Living organisms, including plants
    b. Glass
    c. Soil, sand, rock, cement and/or waste samples, even if permanently encased in a slab of acrylic
    d. Taxidermy specimens or parts
    e. Preserved vertebrate or invertebrate animals
    f. Human or animal food
    g. Human/animal tissues and parts or body fluids (blood, urine)
    h. Plant materials (living, dead, or preserved) that are in their raw, unprocessed, or non-manufactured state
    i. All chemicals including water. No *liquids* can be utilized in Project Display.
    j. All hazardous substances or devices (poisons, drugs, firearms, weapons, ammunition, reloading devices, grease/oil and sublimating solids such as dry ice)

k. Items that may have contained or been in contact with hazardous chemicals (Exception: Item may be permitted if professionally cleaned, and documentation for such cleaning is available). Filters (including microbial) may not be displayed unless the Display and Safety Committee can reasonably determine whether the device was cleaned or was never used (please include receipts in your notebooks and/or logbooks).
l. Sharp items (syringes, needles, pipettes, knives)
m. Flames and highly flammable materials
n. Batteries with open-top cells or wet cells
o. Drones or any flight-capable apparatus unless the propulsion power source removed
p. 3D Printers unless the power source is removed
q. Inadequately insulated apparatus capable of producing dangerous temperatures
r. Any apparatus with belts, pulleys, chains, or moving parts with tension or pinch points that are not appropriately shielded
s. Any display items that are deemed distracting (sounds, lights, odors)
t. Class IV Lasers (All use of lower-class lasers must be under the direct supervision of a qualified adult.)
u. Any apparatus or project material deemed unsafe by the Scientific Review Committee, the Display and Safety Committee, or the Society Electrical Regulations lab note
v. Any item prohibited by county or West Virginia Board of Education Policies
w. Any item that the fair coordinator deems unsafe or inappropriate for public display
x. Any item that is self-promotion or advertises external endorsements.

Prohibited Research (rules 70-73)

70. The following types of research are PROHIBITED in ALL Divisions with NO exceptions:
    a. All studies involving the use of prions or commercially available purified prion-like proteins are prohibited. This includes studies working with amyloid-b (Ab), tau, a-synuclein, transactive response DNA-binding protein of 43 kDa, and amyloid fibrils, and Huntingtin protein. Studies involving plasmids that contain genes encoding prion-like proteins are also prohibited.
    b. Fraudulent or unethical research (fabrication or falsification of data, plagiarism, inappropriate use of AI)
    c. Illegal or unsafe research that violates federal, state, or local laws
    d. Research involving environmental and species harm
    e. Human participant research without proper approval and oversight
    f. Animal research without proper approval and oversight and that involves pain, and/or the withholding of food or water
    g. Unauthorized use of intellectual property
    h. High-risk activities without mitigation

71. The following types of research are PROHIBITED in all Elementary School (grades 3-5) Science Fair Projects with NO exceptions:
    a. Biological Agents projects that use or study microorganisms, including mold, bacteria, viruses, fungi, and parasites, including those grown in Petri dishes
    b. Studies involving the collection and examination of body fluids, including blood
    c. Animal studies that are not observational in nature and that involve animals other than those that are privately owned
    d. Hazardous chemicals or reagents, DEA-controlled substances, tobacco, alcohol, prescription drugs, firearms, or explosives
    e. Radioactive substances or equipment that emits any form of ionizing radiation

72. The following types of research are PROHIBITED in Middle School (grades 6-8) Science Fair Projects with NO exceptions:

a. Vertebrate Animal Research involving pain, and/or withholding of food or water
b. Hazardous chemicals or reagents, DEA-controlled substances, tobacco, alcohol, prescription drugs, firearms, or explosives
c. Biological Agents experiments done at home that use or study microorganisms, including bacteria, viruses, fungi, and parasites
d. Radioactive substances or equipment that emits any form of ionizing radiation

73. The following types of research are discouraged in Elementary and Middle School but can be permitted with advanced permission. Students must have their projects approved by the school administrator BEFORE starting their research (check if a project requires pre-approval)!
    a. Vertebrate Animal Research (See Rule #75)
        i. Required Form: Research Form
    b. Human Participant Studies (See Rule #76)
        i. Required Forms: Research Form and Human Consent Form

    **Divisions II and III must use the ISEF-related forms for any Vertebrate Animal Research or Human Participant Studies. Find those forms here. Additional forms may be necessary—see the ISEF Rules Wizard.

Laser Research (rule 74)

Laser/Laser Pointer Regulations: Any Class 1, Class 2, Class 3A, or Class 3R lasers are allowed to be used under adult supervision. No other lasers may be used or displayed.

a. Laser beams may not pass through magnifying optics such as microscopes and telescopes.
b. Lasers must be labeled by the manufacturer so that power output can be inspected. Lasers without labels will not be permitted.
c. Handheld lasers are NOT permitted.
d. Lasers will be confiscated with no warning if not used in a safe manner. All studies involving the use of prions or prion-like proteins are prohibited. This includes studies working with amyloid-b (Ab), tau, a-synuclein, transactive response DNA-binding protein of 43 kDa, and amyloid fibrils.

Vertebrate Animal/Animal Behavior Studies (rule 75)

a. Vertebrate Animal/Animal Behavior Studies must be approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to experimentation and be followed by a veterinarian to ensure the safety of the student and animal. Elementary vertebrate animal studies MUST be of an observational nature and not be done with any animals other than privately owned animals.
b. Behavioral observations are exempt from SRC Review if ALL the following conditions are met:
    I. There is no interaction with animals being observed.
    II. There is no manipulation of the animal(s) environment.
    III. The study meets all federal and state agricultural, fish, game, and wildlife laws and regulations.
c. Students are prohibited from fishing with barbed hooks, live bait, or from performing electrofishing. Cephalopods are to be treated as vertebrate animals

NOTE: A project is not considered a vertebrate animal study if tissue is obtained from an animal that was euthanized for a purpose other than the student's project. (See Tissue and Body Fluid Rules.) If you wish to do an animal research project, please use invertebrates!

Human Participants Studies (rule 76)

a. Human participant studies of any kind (including surveys, testing of inventions, Apps, prototypes, testing on parents/guardians and/or family members) require Institutional

Review Board (IRB) approval prior to experimentation to ensure the safety of the student and participants.

b. All guidelines for human participant research must be followed, and forms submitted to the students' teachers and administrators BEFORE experimentation begins.
c. Human Participants may be used only if all experimentation is conducted under adult supervision, and student researchers have notified parents of the conditions of the experiment and provided opportunities for participants to opt out. All human participant studies involving minors (students under 18 years of age) must receive assent from the student participant **and** written parental permission from a legal guardian prior to assent. If the study includes a survey, the survey must be attached to the consent form as part of the written parental permission process. All participants must sign an informed consent form. When working with a facility where participants live or attend programming (retirement home, daycare, prison) written approval from the facility must be obtained as well as informed consents for the individual participants.
d. Studies that involve recruitment and interaction with human participants online or via the internet are allowed if they adhere to all the human participant rules above regarding consent processes and restrictions, including obtaining written parental permission for studies involving minors. This written parental permission must also include a copy of the survey and be obtained prior to a minor accessing the online survey. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, it is extremely important that IP addresses, as well as the data provided, be safeguarded.
e. Students are prohibited from disclosing research data from their study and/or from providing advice, diagnostic or medical information to participants.