Science fair board ideas judges actually read

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Science fair board ideas that help a judge in four minutes: a question for a title, a big results panel, a child's own drawings, and the ten mistakes to avoid.

The board ideas that work are the ones that help a judge with only a few minutes: the question as the title, the results given the biggest space in the middle, a graph with both axes labelled, the child's own writing and drawings, and photos of the test in place of anything wet or alive. Glitter, borders and 3D lettering don't hurt, but they don't score either. A plain board that answers the judge's questions before they're asked does.

I built a board layout tool on Peabody that lays a 36 × 48 inch tri-fold out to scale, and every project's page carries its own board plan. Here are the ideas behind it, and the mistakes that cost the most.

Ideas that help a judge

Make the title a question. "Magnets" says what it's about; "Does a steeper ramp make a toy car go farther?" says what was tested. The judge knows the whole project from across the room.

Give the results the middle. The table and the graph are what the judge will point at when they ask "What did you find out?", so put them where the eye lands after the title, and make them big enough to read from a step back.

Draw the test. Most school rules say nothing wet, hot, powered or alive on the display table. A child's drawing of the ramp with the three books, or a photo of the foil boats in the tub, shows what happened better than the thing itself would.

Use one colour, and use it to group. One colour for every card, a darker edge, and the title on white. The tool offers six from Peabody's palette. Colour that groups things helps; colour that decorates distracts.

Leave the logbook on the table. Dated pages from every day of the project show the work happened over time. Judges pick it up.

Number the steps. A judge checking for a fair test looks for what was kept the same. "1. Put the car on the line. 2. Let go; don't push." answers that before they ask.

Ten mistakes, in the order a judge meets them

1. A title that's a topic, not a question.
2. No hypothesis, or one with no because.
3. A grown-up's words. One district's rules tell its judges to favour children's own language and drawings.

4. Materials with no amounts.
5. Steps nobody could repeat.
6. One try at each level instead of three.
7. A table with no units.
8. No graph, or a graph with no labels.
9. A conclusion that hides a wrong hypothesis. Say it plainly, then say what the numbers showed.
10. Something wet, hot or alive on the table.

There's a printable version of this list on Peabody's Top 10 board mistakes page.

Try tonight

Open the board layout tool with your child. They pick a layout, a colour and a title line (from three made from their project, nothing typed), then tap each section card and tap where it goes on the board. Print the plan at 1:12 and the six headers full size. If you haven't got a project yet, Pick my project will choose one.

Questions grown-ups ask

Should we decorate the board?

A little, if your child enjoys it. Keep decoration off the results and the conclusion, which need to be easy to read.

Is a black board better than a white one?

Either works. White makes coloured cards and pencil drawings easier to read under gym lighting.

How big should the writing be?

The question and the section headers should be readable from about two metres away; the body text from arm's length. The tool prints the headers full size so you don't have to guess.

Peabody (peabody.kids) is free through the end of 2026, with no ads and no sign-up. The library has a story waiting when the glue is drying.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/science-fair-board-ideas