sefh
Science & Engineering
Fair of Houston

Presented by
Chevron

SPECIAL AWARDING AGENCY

Judge's Manual

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Introduction

Each year, more than 50 professional organizations affiliate with the Science and Engineering Fair of Houston (SEFH) as Special Award Agencies (SAAs). These partners represent a wide range of fields—from government and industry to academia—and play a vital role in recognizing outstanding student achievements in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM).

The Special Awards Program complements SEFH's Grand Awards by allowing organizations to honor students whose projects align with their specific interests or mission. Awards may include certificates, cash prizes, internships, equipment, or other forms of recognition. Each SAA sets its own criteria and selects its own winners.

SEFH promotes inquiry-based STEM education, guiding students from local school fairs to district competitions, and ultimately to SEFH. Top-performing students may advance to the Texas State Science and Engineering Fair and the Regeneron International Science & Engineering Fair.

Beyond awarding prizes, SAAs help foster meaningful connections between students and STEM professionals. These interactions can spark new interests, offer mentorship, and encourage students to explore future opportunities in STEM fields.

Participation in the Special Awards Program includes:

- Registering your organization and judges
- Reviewing student abstracts
- Conducting interviews and selecting awardees
- Presenting awards during the fair

Your involvement helps support STEM education in the Houston region and inspires the next generation of innovators. We're excited to have you join us in celebrating these remarkable students.

Benefits of Being a Special Awarding Agency

By joining SEFH as a Special Awarding Agency (SAA), your organization becomes part of a dynamic community committed to advancing STEM education. Here's how your participation makes an impact:

Educational Impact

- Support over 1,000 top middle and high school STEM students from Houston and surrounding counties.
- Inspire future scientists and engineers by recognizing excellence in your field of expertise.
- Offer mentorship, guidance, and opportunities for continued engagement.

Organizational Visibility

- Be part of a prestigious group contributing over $50,000 annually in awards, scholarships, and STEM experiences.
- Gain exposure through SEFH's website, social media, and printed materials.
- Showcase your commitment to STEM education to students, families, educators, and the broader community.

Networking & Engagement

- Connect with other SAAs, including leading corporations, academic institutions, and professional associations.
- Build long-term relationships with awardees who may become future members, employees, or collaborators.
- Invite winning students to your organization's events or programs.

On-Site Perks

- Receive dedicated space and materials for judging.
- Enjoy complimentary lunch and access to the awards ceremony.
- Participate in event photography and promotional opportunities.

Your involvement not only celebrates student achievement—it strengthens the future of STEM. We invite you to join us in making a lasting impact.

What are Special Awarding Agencies?

Special Awarding Agencies (SAAs) are external organizations - such as professional associations, corporations, government agencies, and academic institutions - that sponsor awards at SEFH. These awards are based on criteria established by the organization, allowing each SAA to recognize student projects that align with their mission, values, or area of expertise.

SAAs have full discretion over:

- The number and type of awards (e.g., scholarships, certificates, internships, equipment)
- The judging criteria and selection process
- The categories or topics they wish to evaluate

This flexibility allows SAAs to highlight innovation and excellence in areas that may not be fully captured by SEFH's place award judging criteria.

Registering as a Special Awarding Agency

To participate in SEFH as a Special Awarding Agency, your organization must complete a brief registration process.

- Visit sefhouston.org to access the SAA Registration Form.
- The form should be completed by the organization's Lead Judge or Coordinator.
- Registration should be completed before recruiting judges, as it generates a unique judge registration link specific to your organization.

Note: Organizations that do not pre-register may still register on-site on the day of the fair and will be allowed to participate in judging.

Special Awarding Agency Judging Procedures

Judge Recruitment:
SAAs are responsible for recruiting their own judges. Once the organization registers, a confirmation email is sent to the Primary Contact with a unique judge registration link. This link must be forwarded to all prospective judges.

Note: Judges may not serve as both a Special Award Judge and a Place Award Judge.

The Lead Judge or Coordinator is responsible for assigning judges to projects. One week before the fair, SEFH will provide access to the abstract directory, which includes project titles, topics, and IDs. The Primary Contact should distribute these abstracts to the judging team for review.

Project Abstracts:
The abstract directory is the primary tool for identifying projects that align with your organization's award criteria. Reviewing abstracts in advance helps streamline judging and reduce the number of projects that need to be evaluated on-site.

Special Awarding Agency Check-in Process:

Check-in for SAA Lead Judges and organizers begins at 10:00 AM and must be completed by 12:30 PM. Upon arrival, the Lead Judge will check-in at the SAA registration table to receive a Judging Record folder, which includes the final certification sheet for award results. This folder is the responsibility of the Special Awards Leader and must be returned to the check-in table by 5:00 PM on Saturday.

Judging Guidelines:

- Each Special Awarding Agency (SAA) is encouraged to provide at least three (3) judges, though the number may vary depending on the scope of the award and the number of projects to be reviewed.
- Judging may begin at 11:00 AM, but no later than 1:15 PM.
- Judging must conclude by 4:15 PM.
- If team judging is necessary, please limit to no more than two judges per project.
- Judges should aim to spend no more than 10 minutes per project.
- If a project is currently being interviewed by another judge, please proceed to your next assigned project and return later.
- If a project or student is a no-show, judges may choose to evaluate the display board or disqualify the project from consideration.
- Team projects should be evaluated consistently, and awards must be available for each team member.
- Judges should collect a copy of the abstract from each project under consideration.

Team Leaders or Coordinators should ensure adequate staffing, as judging occurs within a limited timeframe and efficiency is key to selecting winners.

Final Certification of results is not official until the Leader has:

- Returned the Judging Record Folder, including the signed certification sheet, to the SAA check-in table (see Appendix A).
- Reviewed the computer-generated award documents to confirm that all selected winners are properly listed.

Important: Final awards documentation must be submitted **before the Special Awards Leader leaves the judging area.**

Judging Criteria

Special Award Judges are guided by the criteria and instructions provided by the organization they represent, under the coordination of their designated Team Leader. The Team Leader is responsible for assigning projects to judges and ensuring that the judging process is consistent and efficient.

SAA may use its own evaluation criteria, tailored to the nature and goals of its awards. If needed and to provide a reference point, SEFH offers a suggested scoring sheet and criteria, included in the Judging Record Folder (see Appendix B). This optional tool can help judges assess projects more systematically.

Additionally:

- The official SEFH scoresheet is available online for reference.
- Organizations are not required to use SEFH's scoring sheet and may develop their own rubric or evaluation method.
- Regardless of the scoring system used, judges should aim for fairness, consistency, and clarity in their evaluations.

Judges are encouraged to review their organization's criteria in advance and coordinate with their Team Leader to ensure alignment in scoring and selection processes.

Judging Tips for Special Awarding Agencies

Each SAA affiliated with SEFH may approach judging differently, based on its mission and award criteria. To support a fair and enriching experience for students, SEFH offers the following judging tips and suggested criteria (see Appendix C) to guide your process.

General Guidance for Judges

- **Focus on student understanding:** Prioritize the student's grasp of their project and subject area over the appearance of the display. Look for evidence of original work – laboratory, field, or theoretical, rather than relying solely on library research or gadget construction.
- **Create a positive experience:** Remember, the science fair is not just a competition, it's an educational and motivational opportunity. For many students, judging interviews is the highlight of their experience. Approach each interaction with enthusiasm and respect.
- **Evaluate current-year research:** Students may build on prior work, but only research conducted during the current year should be considered for judging. Refer to Form 7, displayed at the booth, for details on previous work.
- **Maintain professionalism:** Judges represent a position of authority and influence. Use an encouraging tone when asking questions or offering feedback. Avoid dismissive comments, visible disinterest, or harsh criticism. Always acknowledge the student's effort and commitment.
- **Judge within context:** Compare projects only with others competing at this fair, not with those seen at other events or competitions.
- **Assess mentorship and support:** Consider the level of guidance the student received. For projects conducted in institutional or industrial settings, review ISEF Form 1C for mentor input and project context.

Confidentiality and Conduct

- **Be discreet:** Avoid discussing judging outcomes or making critical remarks in public areas such as elevators, restaurants, or hallways. Students, teachers, or chaperones may overhear these conversations.
- **Secure judging materials:** After judging concludes, all materials, except the official certification documents, must be collected and securely destroyed to maintain confidentiality and integrity.

Student Participants/Judge Interaction

At SEFH, we believe that every student participant is already a winner. For many, this event represents the culmination of a year's dedication, curiosity, and hard work. Judges play a vital role in shaping the student experience – not only by evaluating projects but also by encouraging future engagement in STEM fields.

Interaction Guidelines

- **Foster a positive experience:** Judges are encouraged to explore the depth of each student's knowledge while maintaining a respectful and supportive tone. Many students are taking their first steps toward a STEM career, and your interaction can be a source of lasting inspiration.
- **Uphold professional conduct:** As outlined in the SEFH Judge Ethics Agreement, judges must treat all students equitably and respectfully, regardless of background, identity, or project topic. Judges should avoid dismissive comments, visible disinterest, or harsh criticism. Always acknowledge the student's effort and commitment.
- **Respect boundaries:**
    - Do not exchange personal contact information or request it from students.
    - Students have been instructed not to share or accept personal contact details. SEFH will facilitate any appropriate follow-up communication.
    - If you wish to follow up with a student regarding research opportunities or questions about their project, email info@sefhouston.org with the student's name and/or project ID.
- **Maintain confidentiality:** Judges must not use or disclose privileged information or ideas obtained during the judging process for personal or professional gain.
- **Report concerns promptly:** If you witness or are informed of any inappropriate or uncomfortable interaction between a judge and a student, report it immediately to the Associate Fair Director, located in the judges' area. Students may also report concerns directly. Open communication is essential to ensuring a safe and enjoyable experience for all participants.
- **Avoid conflicts of interest:** Judges must disclose any direct competitive, collaborative, or personal relationships with student participants and recuse themselves from evaluating those projects.

Judging at SEFH is both a privilege and a responsibility. By upholding the highest standards of integrity and professionalism, judges help foster a fair, inclusive, and inspiring environment for all participants.

Fair Project Categories

Student participants select the category that best fits their project when entering SEFH. While SEFH provides a structured list of categories and definitions to guide this process, many projects naturally span multiple disciplines. If you encounter a project that appears to be miscategorized, work with your judging team to determine whether the project meets the criteria being used for evaluation, especially when the work could reasonably fit into more than one area.

SAAs are encouraged to review abstracts across multiple categories to identify projects that align with their award criteria. This approach ensures a broader and more inclusive evaluation process.

For detailed definitions and descriptions of each SEFH category, visit https://sefhouston.org/for-participants/#Project-Categories.

Life Science	Physical Science	Engineering
Animal Science	Chemistry	Aerospace Engineering
Behavioral & Social Sciences	Earth and Environmental Sciences	Biomedical Engineering
Biochemistry & Microbiology	Energy and Transportation	Chemical Engineering & Materials Science
Medicine and Health	Mathematics	Embedded Systems
Plant Sciences	Physics and Astronomy	Engineering Mechanics
	Systems Software	Environmental Engineering
		Robotics and Intelligent Machines

Dress Code

Judges are encouraged to wear professional attire or clothing that reflects their specific field of work. If your organization or agency prefers, we encourage you to wear attire that highlights your affiliation such as branded shirts, lab coats, or other professional identifiers.

Please ensure your footwear is comfortable, as judging day is a full-day event with extended periods of walking and standing. While participants have been advised to wear business attire, we recognize that comfort is essential for judges as well.

Note: Seating is limited throughout the Exhibit Hall, so plan accordingly to remain comfortable and mobile throughout the day.

Awarding Recipients

On Saturday, February 14, beginning at 3:30 PM, each SAA is invited to present and recognize their award recipients directly on the main judging floor. This time allows your organization to:

- Personally congratulate students
- Take photographs with recipients and representatives
- Celebrate achievements in a meaningful and memorable way

Note: If your organization selects a team project, please ensure you have an adequate number of awards for each team member.

Ceremony Format Update
The official SEFH Award Ceremony will now take place on the evening of judging and has been condensed to a 90-minute program. As part of this streamlined format:

- SAA award winners will be recognized from their seats
- The primary celebration will have already occurred during your organization's presentation earlier in the day

This updated approach allows for a more efficient ceremony while preserving the opportunity for personalized recognition and engagement between SAAs and student participants.

Post Fair Follow-up

If your organization or agency does not plan to present awards onsite during the fair, we encourage you to present your recipients with a congratulatory letter. This letter should inform the student's that your organization will follow up with them at a later date regarding the award and any next steps.

After the fair, each Special Awarding Agency (SAA) will receive a list of award recipients, which includes:

- Student name(s)
- Teacher name(s)
- Teacher email address
- Parent/guardian names
- Parent/ guardian email addresses

Note: In compliance with FERPA regulations, SEFH will not release any additional personal information about students. It is the responsibility of each organization to initiate contact and make arrangements with award recipients if further communication is needed.

This follow-up process helps maintain student privacy while ensuring that awardees receive appropriate recognition and support from your organization.

Fair Location

Fort Bend County Epicenter
28505 Southwest Fwy
Rosenberg, TX 77471

Fair Parking

Please check the SEFH website for parking updates.

Helpful Links

SEFH website:
http://www.sefhouston.org

SAA Information:
General Information
SAA Registration
Resources

Contact SEFH:
info@sefhouston.com

Appendix A

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SPECIAL AWARDING AGENCY
WINNER CERTIFICATION REPORT

Thank you for serving as a Special Awarding Agency!

This certification report will be the only form of winner entry. Please be sure and submit this for to the SAO Check-in table before you depart from the fair. All forms are due no later than 4:30 PM.

A list of winners' contact information will be sent to your lead judge via email within the next few days. Thank you for your service and commitment to the future of STEM, see you next year!

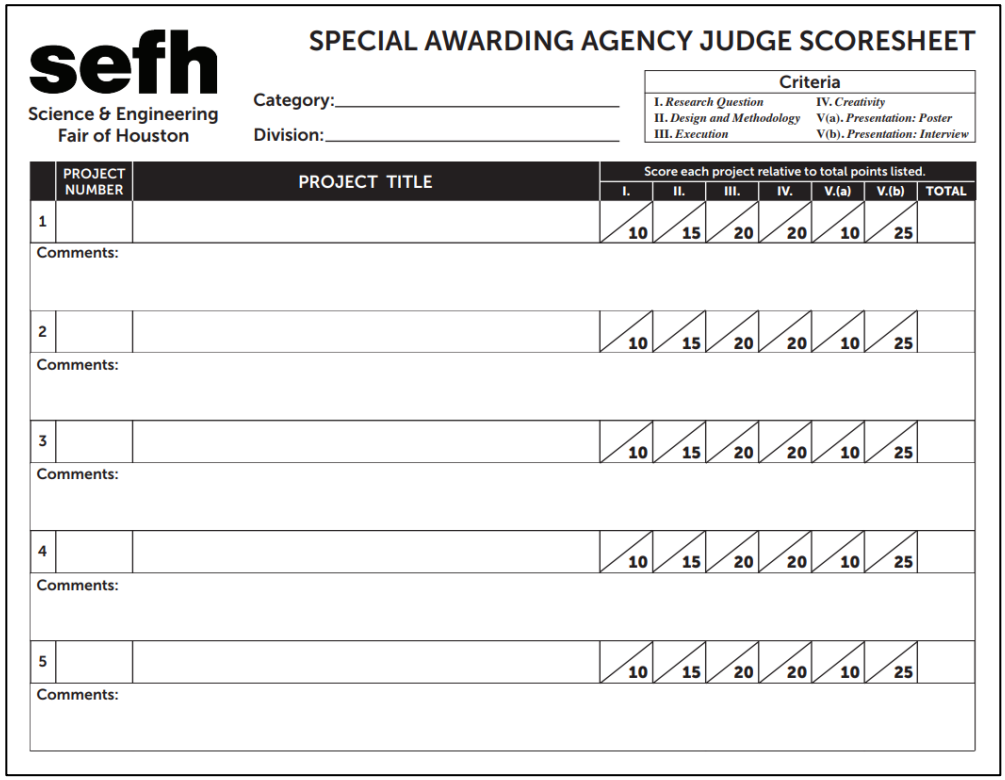
Name of Special Awarding Organization: _____

Name of Award: _____

PROJECT ID	ABBREVIATED TITLE	PLACE (if designated)	AWARD DESCRIPTION

Lead Judge Signature: _____

Appendix B



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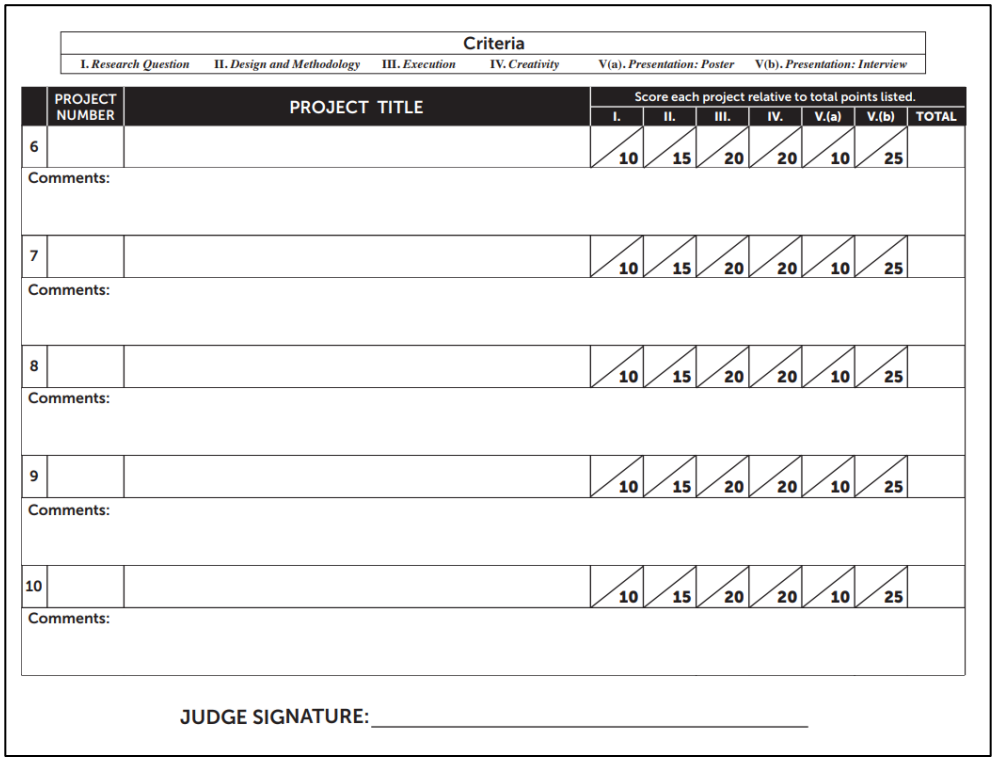
SPECIAL AWARDING AGENCY JUDGE SCORESHEET

Category:_____

Division:_____

Criteria	
I. *Research Question*	IV. *Creativity*
II. *Design and Methodology*	V(a). *Presentation: Poster*
III. *Execution*	V(b). *Presentation: Interview*

	PROJECT NUMBER	PROJECT TITLE	Score each project relative to total points listed. I.	II.	III.	IV.	V.(a)	V.(b)	TOTAL
1			10	15	20	20	10	25	
Comments:									
2			10	15	20	20	10	25	
Comments:									
3			10	15	20	20	10	25	
Comments:									
4			10	15	20	20	10	25	
Comments:									
5			10	15	20	20	10	25	
Comments:									



Criteria					
I. *Research Question*	II. *Design and Methodology*	III. *Execution*	IV. *Creativity*	V(a). *Presentation: Poster*	V(b). *Presentation: Interview*

	PROJECT NUMBER	PROJECT TITLE	Score each project relative to total points listed. I.	II.	III.	IV.	V.(a)	V.(b)	TOTAL
6			10	15	20	20	10	25	
Comments:									
7			10	15	20	20	10	25	
Comments:									
8			10	15	20	20	10	25	
Comments:									
9			10	15	20	20	10	25	
Comments:									
10			10	15	20	20	10	25	
Comments:									

JUDGE SIGNATURE:_____

Appendix C

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JUDGING CRITERIA FOR PROJECTS

SCIENCE

I. Research Question (10 points)
- clear and focused purpose
- identifies contribution to field of study
- testable using scientific methods

II. Design and Methodology (15 points)
- well designed plan and data collection methods
- variables and controls defined, appropriate, and complete

III. Execution: Data Collection, Analysis, and Interpretation (20 points)
- systematic data collection and analysis
- reproducibility of results
- appropriate application of mathematical and statistical methods
- sufficient data collected to support interpretation and conclusions

IV. Creativity (20 points)
- project demonstrates significant creativity in one or more of the above criteria

V.a. Presentation: Poster (10 points)
- logical organization of material
- clarity of graphics and legends
- supporting documentation displayed

V.b. Presentation: Interview (25 points)
- clear, concise, thoughtful responses to questions
- understanding of basic science relevant to project
- understanding interpretation and limitations of results and conclusions
- degree of independence in conducting project
- recognition of potential impact in science, society and/or economics
- quality of ideas for further research
- for team projects, contributions to and understanding of project by all members

ENGINEERING

I. Research Question (10 points)
- description of a practical need or problem to be solved
- definition of criteria for proposed solution
- explanation of constraints

II. Design and Methodology (15 points)
- exploration of alternatives to answer need or problem
- identification of a solution
- development of a prototype/model

III. Execution: Construction and Testing (20 points)
- prototype demonstrates intended design
- prototype has been tested in multiple conditions/trials
- prototype demonstrates engineering skill and completeness

IV. Creativity (20 points)
- project demonstrates significant creativity in one or more of the above criteria

V.a. Presentation: Poster (10 points)
- logical organization of material
- clarity of graphics and legends
- supporting documentation displayed

V.b. Presentation: Interview (25 points)
- clear, concise, thoughtful responses to questions
- understanding of basic science relevant to project
- understanding interpretation and limitations of results and conclusions
- degree of independence in conducting project
- recognition of potential impact in science, society and/or economics
- quality of ideas for further research
- for team projects, contributions to and understanding of project by all members

Notes