Science Savvy on Display
Here’s how to design a winning presentation

By Katrina Taylor

Whether the project is on zoology, electricity, or genetics, just about every entry in a science fair is presented visually, on a three-panel display board or a digital slide show like PowerPoint. A well-organized presentation is essential because it helps students communicate their findings to other students, teachers, people attending the fair, and — most importantly — the judges. Scientists not only conduct experiments and do research, but in order to get their work out into the world, they also must be able to communicate their results. A great way for aspiring young scientists to practice explaining their research is to participate in science fairs and perfect the art of creating an organized presentation.

Know the Rules
In order to create a winning presentation, you’ll need to be familiar with the science fair rules. It’s common for physical science fairs to require that display boards include certain information, such as your name, a list of sources, or an acknowledgment section of people who helped you. They also might specify exact dimensions for the board, though generally display boards are about 36 inches high by 48 inches wide. It is important to keep these requirements in mind when planning how you want to organize your display board.

Map Your Research
Organization is key to a great presentation because you need it to be clear and readable. When judges and fair visitors go through your slide show or come up to your table, they need to be able to follow your experiment and research from start to finish. To make this easy for them, create sections for each part of the process. The website sciencebuddies.org has great advice on how to organize science fair research. Their recommendations may focus on display boards, but you can adapt the principles for a slide show: visualize creating slides based on their recommendation of having a physical board read from top to bottom and then left to right.

Using this advice, the main question, hypothesis, and any other information obtained before the experiment should be placed on the left panel. The middle panel will act as center stage, with the title at the top over the main information about the experiment, such as procedure, materials, and the results. The right panel consists of the conclusion and any future plans or acknowledgments. For a physical board, make sure all the text can be easily read from a foot away — the main text font size should be at least 16 points. The title and headings for each section should be large and easy to read from several feet away.

Stand Out
A physical board should be not only well organized, it should also grab attention and entice people to walk over to your table to learn more. The first thing people will see is the name of the project, so for both physical and virtual presentations, come up with a powerful title. This is where your creativity can shine, so go for a title that doesn’t just state what the project consists of, but describes it in an exciting way. As blog editor Susan Wells writes, “A title like ‘Mentos and Diet Coke Geysers’ is nice, but it doesn’t jump out. Try something like ‘Icky Sticky Soda Geysers — Which One Makes the Biggest Mess?’”

Normally the title will be in the center of the board or first slide, but if you are having a tough time fitting the title on the board because the explanation of your project and images take up most of the room, you can get a header board — a thin board that sits on top of the main display board — giving you all the room you need. Once you’re past the hurdle of creating a great title, you can move on to other things that will make your display board stand out.

Visuals Count
A great way to make your presentation shine is to use colors and images. Use two to three colors for the background and text — you want the colors to attract people to read your work but not distract them with too much going on. One way you can use contrast on a board is to put colored construction paper at the back of a box of text to act as a border, making the text pop. Another way to make the whole board stand out is to use a colored display board instead of a plain white one. These supplies can be easily found at showboard.com.

Be sure to include images to help the judges envision the project, so take pictures while you are working on your research. Depending on what type of project you’re presenting, you may want graphs or charts as well. One thing to avoid is placing text over an image as it makes the text difficult to read and may be distracting. Also, do not crowd the presentation with too many images; be selective and use only images that best explain the process of your project.

Creating a presentation for a science fair might seem daunting, but as long as you plan carefully and keep the information organized, everything will go smoothly. Also, remember to let your creativity shine when crafting your slides or decorating the board to show the judges the effort you put in and how much fun you had with your project. Follow these steps and you’re sure to design a winning presentation!