Five Tips for Succeeding at Science Fairs

by Nolan Kamitaki

If anyone knows science fairs, it's Nolan Kamitaki. Nolan has won awards at the Intel International Science and Engineering Fair and the National Junior Science and Humanities Symposium, and he took the Top Young Scientist award at the Discovery Channel Young Scientist Challenge. For his project "Programming a Network Approach to Contain the Spread of Epidemic," Nolan was named a Davidson Fellow. Here, Nolan provides some sage advice on how to participate in science fairs—and have fun in the process.

Find something you're really passionate about.
Pursuing something you're genuinely interested in will probably make the biggest difference in how you conduct your research. If you're fascinated with what you're working on, it will seem less like work, and those long nights spent staring at data will be intriguing rather than overwhelming. And being interested in your research will also pay off during the creative process because you will be thinking about the topic more often—and more thoroughly.

Don't be afraid to ask for help.
Depending on the type of science you're pursuing, it might be near impossible to get started without help from a mentor and laboratory. Even if your field of research doesn't require anything more than what you could find at home, the guidance of a mentor in your field can be invaluable when approaching a new topic. If your school doesn't have a program to match you with a mentor, don't be afraid to call or e-mail someone at a nearby college or business. I've found that scientists are usually happy that someone is interested in their research, and at the very least will recommend someone who might be better able to help.

Keep a daily schedule and stick to it.
When you're working on a part of your project that's not as interesting, or you're frustrated because something isn't working quite the way you planned, it's easy to think, I'll do it tomorrow. But if you set a daily schedule for yourself, you can be sure to get something accomplished every day. Just as important, a schedule can help you avoid exhausting yourself. I have often done this myself, staying up far too late following something that looked promising. But it doesn't help to be tired the next day, and a solution will probably come to you faster after a good night's rest.

Have a list of any deadlines on hand (AKA: Don't procrastinate until the week before you have to present!).
Just as important as a daily schedule is remembering how many days you have until the science fair. With so many other things going on in school and extracurricular activities, it can be easy to lose track of dates. If you are working with human subjects or dangerous materials, you might also need to get forms cleared ahead of time with the science fair's safety review committee (SRC). I found it a huge help to hang a big checklist of deadlines on the wall near my desk. It helped me keep things in perspective and also gave me a sense of accomplishment as I completed each step.

When you present your research, be confident.
Speak slowly, clearly, and calmly. I don't think this can be overstated, regardless of what setting you're in. Remember that you are the person who knows the most about what you're presenting. Other people are interested in hearing what you have to say, and unless they are professionals in your field, they might not know more than the fundamentals. So don't panic when you have to talk in front of people, even if they are asking tough questions. Just speak with confidence, and you'll be impressing them before you know it. i

Nolan Kamitaki was named a 2010 Presidential Scholar and is now a freshman at Harvard, where he plans to major in molecular and cellular biology. Outside of science research, Nolan enjoys playing the piano and clarinet, and also hosts a short program—*Living in Paradise*, which promotes public education, healthy lifestyles, and sustainability—on a local access TV channel.