International Rules for Pre-Collegiate Research: Guideline for Science and Engineering Fairs

Changes for 2025-2026

The following items were the key changes made to the International Rules for 2025-2026.

The 2026 edition of the International Rules & Guidelines has been reorganized from previous editions to emphasize the rules and to format the information similarly in each section. Each section has been organized to address 1) key definitions of the section, 2) prohibited studies, 3) rules, 4) documentation & approval, and 5) exempt studies.

All Projects (pages 3-5)

In Ethics Statement, under Integrity (page 3) final sentence has been reworded for clarity.

- Honesty, objectivity, and avoidance of conflicts of interest are expected during every phase of the project. The project should reflect independent research done by the student(s) and presented in their own words with proper citation. The presentation of fraudulent data, the evidence of plagiarism or the inappropriate use of AI are prohibited and grounds for the project to fail to qualify.

In Ethics Statement, the last sentence of the last paragraph has been reworded for clarity.

Scientific fraud and misconduct are not condoned at any level of research or competition. This includes plagiarism, forgery, use or presentation of other researcher's work as one's own and fabrication of data. A violation of this ethics statement may result in disqualification from participating in ISEF and ISEF-affiliated fairs, and forfeiture of any awards, prizes, and acknowledgment received.

Human Participant Rules (pages 6-9)

Under Prohibited Studies, 1d was added.

- Students are prohibited from disclosing results or data from their study to the human participants.

Under Rules, #2a, written parental permission is now required for all human participant projects working with minors (students under the age of 18).

- 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.

Under Documentation and Approval, #3 was added.

- 3. When working with a facility where participants live or attend programming (e.g. retirement home, daycare, prison, etc.) written approval from the facility must be obtained as well as informed consents for the individual participants.

Vertebrate Animal Rules (page 10-12)

Under What are consider vertebrate animals? #6 has been added.

- 6. Cephalopods are to be treated as vertebrate animals

Under What are consider vertebrate animals? a NOTE has been added to clarify the difference between a vertebrate animal project and a tissue project.

- 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 & Body Fluid Rules)

Under Prohibited Studes, rule 6 was edited to include barbed hooks and live bait.

- Students are prohibited from fishing with barbed hooks, live bait, or from performing electrofishing.

Potentially Hazardous Biological Agents (PHBA) Rules (page 13-15)

Under Prohibited Studies, language was added to clarify the prion rule

- 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.

Under Rules, #3 has been edited to clarify BSL-2 safety

- Research determined to be a 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. (Commonly limited to a RRI).

Under Rules, #7 and #8 have been added

- 7. Projects involving water samples collected from active Harmful Algal Blooms are considered BSL-2 studies.
- 8. Insect and arthropod vector-borne pathogens such as Malaria, Lyme, etc. are considered BSL-2 studies.

Tissue & Body Fluid Rules (page 16-17)

This is a new section that has been added to clarify what constitutes a tissue project and how to conduct such a project safely. None of the information listed in this section is new material or new rules but was simply pulled from other areas of the rules book.

Hazardous Chemicals, Activities, or Devices Rules (page 18-19)

Last sentence of the Introduction was added.

- The following rules apply to projects using hazardous chemicals, devices and activities. These include substances and devices that are regulated by local, state, country, or international law. Hazardous activities are those that involve a level of risk above and beyond that encountered in the student's everyday life. The student researcher must minimize the impact of an experiment on the environment.

Under Rules, #5 was added.

- 5. 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.
    c. c. Be conducted with a Direct Supervisor with proper training and knowledge of the chemicals being used

Under Rules, #6 was added.

- 6. Disposal procedures shall be described in sufficient detail to ensure compliance with 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.

Forms

Student Checklist (1A)

- Added clarification on question 6 section b that Form 7s for all previous project years are required.

  b. Explain how this project is new and different from previous years on
  - Continuation/Research Progression Form (7); include forms for all previous years

Regulated Research Institutional/Industrial Setting Form (1C)

- First bullet under number 1, received data was added
  - Used equipment and/or received data

Qualified Scientist Form (2)

- Question 3 was added
  - 3. Did you provide any data; if yes, please provide source or describe

Risk Assessment Form 3

- Added second sentence to number 3.
  - 3. Describe the safety precautions and procedures that will be used to reduce the risks. If you conducted fieldwork, include permits received and safety plans, as applicable.

Human Participants Form (4)

- Under IRB USE ONLY section, combined numbers 3 and 4 and removed the No checkbox
- Under IRB USE ONLY section, #6. Was added.
  - 6. Facility for “protected groups” used, written approval has been obtained. Yes No

Potentially Hazardous Biological Agents Risk Assessment Form (6A)

- Added sentence to the end of the intro.
  - The student researcher must minimize the impact of an experiment on the environment.
- Under Section 1: Project Assessment, reworded number 2.
  - 2. Describe the biosafety level of the experimentation site.
- Under Section 1: Project Assessment, in number 3, changed "hood type" to "safety cabinet type"
- Under Section 1: Project Assessment, deleted number 4.
- Provided links to the BSL-2 checklist throughout the document
- Under Section 3, checkbox 2 was added.
  - This project involves the culturing of Multi Drug Resistant Organisms (MDROs). It has been conducted in a BSL-2 or higher lab at a Regulated Research Institution and the required IBC pre-approval is attached. Date of IBC approval _____
- Final SRC signature box was removed. SRC should be signing form 1B either 2a or 2b, depending on if the project needed pre-approval from the fair's SRC (2a) or if the project was done at an RRI and received pre-approval from the RRI and not the fair's SRC (2b).

Continuation/Research Progression Projects Form (7)

Added to the bottom of the form another checkbox for additional Form 7s