ISEF Paperwork Survival Guide

Navigating the rules and forms without getting disqualified.

Paperwork is undeniably the most tedious part of competing in a science fair. However, failing to fill out the correct forms is the number one reason top-tier, international-level projects get disqualified before judging even begins. You must play by the rules.

> **CRITICAL WARNING**
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> You MUST get your paperwork approved before you begin any testing or data collection. If you start testing on humans, animals, or with dangerous chemicals before your forms are signed and dated, you will be disqualified. There are zero exceptions to this rule.

The Core Requirements (Everyone Needs These)

No matter what your project is about, you must complete the following baseline documents:

- **Form 1: Checklist for Adult Sponsor.** Your science teacher or mentor fills this out. It serves as proof that an adult reviewed your research plan and confirmed it is safe to proceed.
- **Form 1A: Student Checklist.** This contains your basic demographic and project information. It includes your name, school, project title, and the physical location where you will conduct the research (home, school, or a professional research institution).
- **Form 1B: Approval Form.** You and your parents or guardians must sign this document, stating that you understand the safety guidelines and ethical rules of the competition.
- **The Research Plan.** This is not a fill-in-the-blank form. It is a document you must type from scratch. You must clearly explain your rationale, hypothesis, step-by-step methodology, and exactly how you plan to analyze your final data.

The Special Forms (Project Dependent)

If your project involves anything potentially risky or ethically sensitive, a group of adults called the Scientific Review Committee (SRC) or Institutional Review Board (IRB) must review and approve your plan before you start.

Human Subjects (Form 4)

If you are surveying students, having people test a software application, or testing a physical prototype on humans (even yourself), you need IRB approval. You will also need a separate Informed Consent Form that your human test subjects must sign before participating.

Hazardous Materials & Activities (Form 3)

If you are using dangerous chemicals, firing lasers, operating heavy machinery, or handling prescription drugs, you need a Risk Assessment form. This proves you understand the specific dangers and have secured the proper protective gear and supervision.

Vertebrate Animals (Form 5A / 5B)

If you are working with mice, fish, or any animal with a backbone, the rules are extremely strict to prevent animal cruelty. You should avoid this entirely unless you are working directly in a certified, professional university lab under expert supervision.

Potentially Hazardous Biological Agents (Form 6A)

You cannot grow unknown bacteria or handle dangerous microbes at home. Period. You must conduct this research in a certified BSL-1 or BSL-2 laboratory at a school or university, and you must file this specific form to prove the lab meets safety standards.