

Title: Judging in 4-H: The Difference Between the American, Danish, and Merit Systems

Judging is a fundamental part of the 4-H Youth Development Program. It allows members to showcase their projects, receive valuable feedback, and strive for improvement. However, not all 4-H competitions are judged the same way. There are three primary judging systems used in 4-H: the **American system**, the **Danish system**, and the **Merit system**. Each has its own purpose, method, and impact on how youth experiences are shaped.

The American System

The **American system** is a *comparative judging system*, where projects are ranked against each other. In this method, only one entry can receive first place, another second place, and so on. The main focus is to determine the best project in the group. While this system can promote a high level of competition and excellence, it also means that even good projects might receive lower placements if the competition is particularly strong. This system is often used in fairs or shows where showcasing top-tier performance is a priority.

The Danish System

The **Danish system** is a *standard-based judging system*. Instead of comparing entries against each other, each project is judged against a set standard of excellence. Entries are awarded ribbons—blue for excellent, red for good, and white for fair—based solely on how well they meet the criteria. Multiple participants can receive the same ribbon, which emphasizes personal achievement and learning rather than competition. This system is widely used in 4-H because it supports positive youth development and recognizes effort and growth at all skill levels.

The Merit System

The **Merit system** is similar to the Danish system in that it evaluates projects based on established standards, but it introduces more detailed grading levels. For example, it may include additional ribbon colors or specific award levels like “Grand Champion,” “Reserve Champion,” or “Honorable Mention.” The merit system is often used to recognize excellence while still promoting fairness and encouragement. It combines aspects of both the American and Danish systems, balancing competition with personal achievement.

Key Differences and Educational Impact

The choice of judging system affects the educational outcomes for 4-H participants. The **American system** encourages high achievement and competition but can be discouraging to beginners. The **Danish system** promotes growth, learning, and self-improvement, which aligns closely with 4-H’s educational goals. The **Merit system** provides a middle ground, recognizing both excellence and effort.

In conclusion, judging in 4-H serves not just to reward projects, but to support learning, growth, and confidence in youth. Understanding the differences between the American, Danish, and Merit systems helps explain how 4-H fosters both individual development and excellence. By using the appropriate judging system for each event, 4-H ensures that all members have a meaningful and educational experience.