

How to Host a Geography Fair

by Maureen Trepp



Geography Fairs can be exciting for a single classroom, a department, a school, a school district or even your whole state. Fairs provide a project-based learning style that benefits both individual students and small groups by allowing them to apply their geographic knowledge to projects of their own choice. The experience of a Geography Fair goes beyond displays and actively involves the observer, thereby increasing the diffusion of geography education.

Here are a Few Tips to Get You Started

1. Planning a Classroom Fair

A. Choosing a Theme or Topic

Encourage students to explore further a topic you have already covered that they can expand upon through further research. If you are teaching research skills, the topic might be a new one that students learn about through their research. The students may pick the topic based on their own interests. The project could be done by a whole class and serve as a primary focus of a unit, i.e., study the rainforest and then paint a wall-size mural of a rainforest or construct a relief map so students understand how they are made. Why not pick a theme together as a class, brainstorm about possible projects, and then assign or choose a project for each student with the class gathering information and sharing it, i.e., a study of travel with information gathered from travel agencies, map companies, airlines, statistical references, and then shared on maps, fictional travel itineraries, graphs, charts or slide shows.

B. Decide How to Structure Project Research & Construction Time

Do you want to use class time on this project? Is it a homework assignment? Or both? Will the students be working individually, in partners, small groups or as a whole class? Will there be planning time in class and work time at home? How important will this project be to the student's evaluation -- part of their semester grade, extra credit or strongly encouraged? Have in mind your own expectations.

C. Choose a Type of Project

After students have gathered information, present a wide range of suggestions as to how the students could visually represent their information. Teacher suggestions strongly influence the finished projects and listing possibilities together as a class greatly enhances the originality of the projects. If you don't want to mess with paper mache -- don't! (Or ask the students to do it at home). However, if you are willing to get the paint, glue, markers, tools, etc. the finished projects are bound to be more exciting and fun.

Project Ideas: Dioramas, graphs, charts, electrically wired answer boards, models, maps, tapes (audio and video), quilts, costumed dolls, dramatic performances, slide shows, displays of real objects or foods, more maps. Cartoons, paintings, murals, sculptures, puzzles, board games, clothing, flags, rebus stories, comic strips, and much, much, more. By combining this list, and the students' ingenuity, the visual representations of geography are sure to be fantastic!

D. Clearly Define Expectations

When is the project due? How much time should they devote to it? Should written materials be typed? Should all pictures be in color or is a pencil drawing all right? Spell out your guidelines by providing students with a written form describing what you expect.

E. Decide on the Evaluation Process

Are the projects to be graded or evaluated? How will they be shared with the class or the public? Will there be a competition for the best project or recognition of participation? When presenting expectations with students, clearly define the evaluation process.

F. Let them Loose!

The most fun is in the creation of the project. Be encouraging, but remember this is their project!

G. Put the Projects on Display

- Choose a date, location, and devise a plan for how to display the projects.
- Order extra tables if necessary.
- Design certificates of participation or order ribbons.
- Send out notices to families.
- Contact the newspaper to publicize your event.
- Plan games to play* and food to sell
- Keep the best projects for permanent display at the school or in a local public space
- Or simply set aside a class period to view all projects.

**A Fair is more successful when there is a lot of activity, so consider a organizing a game that the students might play involving the projects. For example, develop a scavenger hunt where the answers are found in the projects. Or, students could participate in brief trivia contests. Consider awarding ribbons or participation certificates. Remember, lots of activities and family participation will lead to a successful event.*

2. Additional Information for Planning a School-Wide Geography Fair

A. Who Should Participate?

The first decision is really based on who wants to participate. For example, if you are secondary social studies teacher, you will probably encourage your entire social studies department to participate. Consider requesting projects from other subject areas, to encourage integrating geography into other subjects. A well-chosen theme for your Fair allows a lot of flexibility as to whether the projects are created by individuals, small groups or a classroom. Whatever the decision, be sure to include all participating teachers the planning process.

B. What's Important in the Planning?

Obviously, a well thought out date, location, and Fair activities are key to a successful Fair. Again, consider selecting a theme and awarding prizes. Get school staff involved by dividing up the work of publicity, activities, judging etc. Provide all entrants with similar guidelines about their project, and you will certainly want to invite parents. Think about door prizes, celebrities, involving parents in the creation of projects and who will do all the grunt work. Make up a timeline for when you want to get things done and assign tasks to planning members. There's more to celebrate at the end when everyone has felt they've done their part.

C. Special Thoughts About a School Fair

Consider scheduling the Fair concurrently with another school event, e.g., Open House, Talent Night, a Band Concert, or some other type of academic competition. Or, on the other hand, the Fair could run for a week (with no special events planned) but with projects displayed in hallways or a common space that would give classes an opportunity to view them. Know the energy level of the staff and keep it simple if you feel that is all you and your school want to put into a Fair.

Note: Consider contacting local business to solicit donations for door prizes.

Remember -- *be creative, be flexible, have fun and don't forget to sign up for the MN State Geographers' Fair held annually each February at the Science Museum of Minnesota!*