

An Opinion Is Not a Score

Why pitch competitions should judge like the Olympics.

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Watch the judges at an Olympic figure skating final or a world gymnastics championship. A row of experts, seated a few feet apart, and not one of them says a word to another. That silence is not stagecraft. It is the rule.

Nearly every judgment-centric sport has converged on the same design. Sports like skating, gymnastics, and diving all have judges evaluate contestants independently, and communication among judges during evaluation is restricted or outright prohibited. The panel's scores are combined by formula, usually with the high and low thrown out. Skating learned it the hard way. The 2002 Salt Lake City pairs scandal, where a judge admitted she had been pressured on her vote, destroyed the old 6.0 system and forced a rebuild around independence and arithmetic.

These bodies did not choose silence because judges are untrustworthy. They chose it because deliberation reliably degrades judgment. *It rewards confidence over accuracy.* It converges on whoever speaks first or loudest. It lets one senior judge's read propagate through a panel that would otherwise have disagreed usefully. Disagreement among qualified judges is not noise to be smoothed out. It is information.

Now look at how a typical pitch competition, academic contest, or business plan contest runs. The judges huddle. They compare impressions. They "align on a winner."

Imagine Mark Cuban is on your panel. You scored a founder a 6 on financials; he announces she is fundable and he would write the check today. Are you going to ask Mark Cuban to conform to your view? Of course not. You will inevitably drift toward his. Everyone will. From that moment the panel is not five judges. It is one judge and four ratifiers. And it does not take a celebrity. Every panel has someone more senior, more famous, or simply louder, and deliberation hands the result to that person.

The Pitch Council standard puts it bluntly:

"A panel that talks its way to an answer has produced an opinion, not a score."

Independence has a second effect that gets far less attention: accountability. A judge who deliberates hides inside the panel. The result belongs to everyone, so it belongs to no one. A judge who scores alone puts a signature beneath a score.

Software sharpens this further. A judge scoring in LiveJudge™ sees the rubric language for every criterion at the moment of scoring, along with a map of every element they are expected to evaluate. No skipping, no vibes, no “I had her third overall.” The tool walks the judge through the rubric criterion by criterion and records exactly where they landed. When judges know their scores stand alone, on the record, their behavior changes. They study the rubric before the event. They score to the published words instead of the mood in the room. They write feedback a contestant can actually use, because a bare number with their name on it feels insufficient even to them.

This is why the Pitch Council exists. The PCSC Judging Standard for Business Pitch Competitions (Version 1.0, free at pitchcouncil.org) gives any host a uniform, predictable rubric with independence built in as provided by Section 1.0: judges score alone from published band wording, scores lock before any discussion, and results are produced arithmetically, never negotiated. Judges may raise questions of fact before scores lock; statements of opinion are out of order. With modern judging software, a host can implement all of it quickly, for less than the cost of a trophy. For educational institutions, this is significant.

Here is the part that matters most. In any competition worth entering, all but one contestant will not win. If the event produces nothing but a winner, it failed everyone else who showed up. At the very least, the rest should receive actionable feedback; criterion by criterion, judge by judge, measured against the same rubric as everyone else. “The judges liked someone else better” is a shrug. “Here are the four places you lost points, and here is what the top band requires” is a roadmap.

Detailed, objective, independent scores are the first step toward a competition that serves the people who do not take home the check. The Olympics settled this decades ago. Our contestants deserve the same rigor.



Complex rubrics transformed into an intuitive guidepost-driven judging roadmap.