The Aspen Institute’s Case Competition: Judging Feedback & Suggestions

- Start with the case assignment.
- Keep the assignment questions in mind as you go through the material and use them to orient your initial thoughts.
- The case writers put together a wide range of material to help students.
- The judges want you to succeed.
- In Round Two, we’re looking for interesting and innovative ideas that are grounded in solid analysis. We want to give the final Round Three roster a great batch of submissions.
- The Round Three judges are equally interested in success. There’s nothing they want more than to have five terrific ideas battling to solve this problem.
- Don’t forget that these are real issues on the table, with real people and real problems to address.

What Do We Look For?

*Analysis:*
- Read the case in full. The supplemental information can be very useful in finding new ways to approach the problem, and innovative frameworks with which to support your proposal.
- We’re interested in whether you've thoroughly considered the issues, but try not to spend too much time rehashing the case. Focus on laying a foundation for your solution and how the data support it (and not some alternative approach).
- You’d be surprised how many people submit a SWOT analysis. This isn’t about proving that you know a given technique or can check off required skills, it’s about building a convincing case for your proposed course of action. Your analysis of the problem needs to be on point, but that’s not the whole story, it's a foundation from which to start. As a general guideline, the analysis portion should be no more than 1 – 2 pages. This is very different than a case write-up for class where the primary objective is analysis.

*Recommendations:*
- We know it’s a mad rush of a competition, but try to take a step back and consider the issue. The sponsoring company is looking for real solutions, not checklists proving you’ve read the material.
- New ideas are great, so long as they aren’t pie in the sky (i.e. if your proposal involves a space elevator, keep thinking!). Judges are looking for innovation that’s feasible now.
- Proposals should be internally consistent.
- Are your recommendations innovative and thoughtful?
- When relevant, integrate both qualitative and quantitative arguments. Don’t forget that this is a complex real-world case with multiple dimensions, and there are human beings behind the numbers.
- Why is your proposed approach good? Interesting? Innovative? Something the sponsor hasn’t already thought of? How is it going to achieve the assignment's stated goals?
- A “safe” proposal might advocate doing more of the same, only bigger. The hope is that students will present innovative ideas that may not have already occurred to people in the industry. Diverse perspectives bring added value.
Overall:
• Submissions will be judged on innovativeness, feasibility and potential impact.
• Presentation and persuasiveness matter.
• Appearance and quality of writing also matter: spelling, length, supporting information and numbers, etc. are important; the final product should be professional. Stay within the requested length, avoid tricks like tiny fonts and mini-margins, and spellcheck. Obviously.
• Address all assignment questions. Also obvious, but you might be surprised at what can fall by the wayside in the pressure of competition.
• Build a persuasive case! This isn't just about reading and understanding the problem, it's about taking that next step and finding an innovative solution based on evidence and selling it.
• Ask yourselves: what story are you trying to tell about the problem and its solution? Why should the judges buy it?
• We're looking for well-considered solutions based on compelling interpretation of the evidence. There is no one right answer, so you'll be competing against other ideas that could also work. Make the argument: why is your solution the best path to take?
• Stay organized and distribute the work, but leave time to discuss and combine each team member's findings so that the final product is a well-integrated whole.
• The competition is demanding but pace yourselves and you'll get it done.