Judge-to-Coach Translation Guide

Turning Judge Evaluation Language into Student Coaching Questions · All Categories · All Levels

Judges write about what they see in a project. Coaches translate that into questions students can act on. Vague feedback ('needs more analysis') is useless. Specific coaching questions are the goal.

01 The Six Patterns — and How to Coach Through Them

1	PATTERN 1: THEME CONFUSION	COACHING QUESTIONS
	Judges say things like: "The theme connection is unclear" "Is this really a revolution, or a reaction?" "The theme word is present but not argued"	→ Where in your project do you explicitly argue WHY this connects to the theme — not just that it does? → Is your topic the event that caused the change, the response to it, or the new system that resulted? Pick one and prove it. ★ Where in your project do you argue that this was an innovation — not just an invention? Show me where Impact, Influence, or Change is argued.

2	PATTERN 2: NARRATIVE VS. ANALYSIS	COACHING QUESTIONS
	Judges say things like: "More historical analysis vs. narrative" "Reads like a timeline, not an argument" "The project describes what happened without explaining why it matters"	→ For every event or scene you describe, ask yourself: So what? What does this PROVE about your argument? → Read your thesis, then read your conclusion. Does your conclusion say something different — deeper — than your thesis? It should. If it just restates the thesis, you've narrated, not analyzed. → Point to one paragraph where you don't just say what happened, but explain what it means for your argument.

3	PATTERN 3: SOURCE CONFUSION & CITATION GAPS	COACHING QUESTIONS
	Judges say things like: "Sources are mislabeled as primary" "Wikipedia is cited as a scholarly source" "Images are not credited on the exhibit/project" "Annotations are too generic"	→ For each source labeled Primary: can you prove it was created during the time period you're studying, or by someone with firsthand experience? If not, move it to Secondary. → For every image, map, or quote on your exhibit/project: is the credit visible right next to it? Not just in the bibliography — on the board itself. → Your annotation says 'this source was helpful.' Helpful how? Rewrite it: 'This source helped me argue [X] because it provided [specific evidence].'

4	PATTERN 4: MISSING MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES	COACHING QUESTIONS
	Judges say things like: "Perspectives are limited" "Only one side of the story is represented" "No opposing viewpoint is included"	→ Who would argue against your thesis? Find me one primary source from that side. → Whose voices are in your project right now? Whose are missing that would matter — that would make the argument stronger or more honest? ★ Who was harmed by this innovation, or left out of its benefits? They need to appear in your project — through sources, not just your summary of them.

5	PATTERN 5: SCOPE CONTROL	COACHING QUESTIONS
	Judges say things like: "The topic is too broad" "The title is narrower than the actual argument" "The project jumps across decades without connective tissue"	→ Your title says [X]. Your argument spans [much more]. Which is it? Narrow the argument to match the title — or add a timeline to anchor the broader scope. → If your argument covers 100 years, what's the turning point? What's the one moment or decision that everything else flows from? Start there and narrow outward. ★ 'Electricity' is an invention. 'Rural electrification in Nevada, 1935–1945' is an arguable Innovation topic. Narrow your innovation to a specific time, place, and community.

6	PATTERN 6: HISTORICAL ACCURACY & INTERNAL CONSISTENCY	COACHING QUESTIONS
	Judges say things like: "The evidence contradicts the argument" "The projects own timeline undermines its claim"	→ Read your project against your own evidence. Does your argument hold up? Are there any facts you cite that could actually disprove what you're claiming? → Put your timeline next to your thesis. Is there any date or event on that timeline that your thesis would need to explain — but doesn't? → If a judge who knows this topic well read your project, what's the one thing they'd immediately push back on? Find it before they do.

★ Innovation-specific: Coaching questions marked ★ apply specifically to the 2027 theme. All other questions apply across any NHD year.

02 Five Core Coaching Questions — Use with Any Project, Any Year

THESIS	"If a judge reads only your thesis, do they know your argument AND your significance claim?"
RESEARCH	"For every claim you make, where is the evidence? Is it primary? Does it actually support your argument — not just relate to your topic?"
CONTEXT	"What would a reader need to know about the time and place to understand why this mattered? Have you explained it?"
SIGNIFICANCE	"So what? What changed — or didn't — because of this? Short-term and long-term?"
STUDENT VOICE	"Read a section aloud. Is that your voice, or did the sources swallow it?"