Qafila

Founder Application Scoring Rubric and Review Form

August 27, 2026 · Part One is the rubric. Part Two is the form to be completed for every application.

Every founder application is scored from 1 to 5 against each of Qafila's five criteria. This document says what each score means for each criterion. It exists so that two people reading the same application arrive at close to the same judgment, and so that a founder who is declined can be told something true and specific about why.

Three things this rubric is built to do. It rewards evidence of real work rather than size or maturity, so a founder with no revenue who has built something with their own savings can score at the top. It separates what the founder has done from how well they wrote about it. And it keeps the reviewer inside what the application can actually tell them, leaving the question of what is true in the world to the people who go and look.

How to use it

Read the whole application first, then score. Scoring as you read produces a judgment formed on page three and defended for the next seventeen.

Score against the descriptor, not against other founders. The question is never whether this application is better than the last one. It is which of the five paragraphs below describes what is in front of you.

Write one sentence of evidence for every score. Quote or cite the part of the application that produced it. A score without that sentence is not a score, and the founder cannot be told anything true about it.

When you are between two scores, take the lower one and write down what would have moved it up. That sentence becomes what the founder is told.

You are reading an application, not investigating a founder. Anything that cannot be settled from the page is a note for vetting, not a reason to go looking. Do not contact Founder Due Diligence about a founder you are scoring. The wall between the two is described at the end of this document.

Score the substance, never the language. Applications arrive in Dari, Pashto, or English and are scored identically. How well a founder writes English is never evidence for or against any criterion.

The five criteria

Criterion	What it measures
1. Real, or credibly underway	Whether something actually exists: effort, spending, output, customers, at whatever stage the founder is at
2. Capable and coachable founder	Whether this person can run the venture, and whether they will get better with help
3. Genuine market need and differentiation	Whether anyone wants this, and why they would choose this founder over the alternative
4. The ask is specific	Whether the founder knows what they need, what it is for, and what changes if they get it
5. Coherent and checkable	Whether the account holds together, and whether it is written so that someone could go and verify it

Criterion 1 · Real, or credibly underway

This measures evidence of real work, not the size of the business. Qafila sets no business maturity floor. Many capable founders cannot yet afford the licenses, tooling, and upfront costs, and helping them cross exactly that gap is much of what mentorship is for. A founder with no revenue who has built a prototype with her own savings and put it in front of real users can score 5. A trading business that cannot evidence anything it claims can score 2.

Score	What the application shows
1	An idea and an intention, nothing more. The application describes what the founder would do if they had money. Nothing has been built, nothing spent, nothing registered, and no customer or user has been approached.
2	Intent made concrete, but nothing yet exists that a visitor could look at. A business name, a plan, perhaps a registration in progress with the Central Business Registry, but no product, no spending of the founder's own money, and no first user.
3	Real effort is visible but thin. Something exists that could be inspected: a prototype, a first production batch, a modest amount of the founder's own money or time, or roughly ten or fewer early customers. It is recent, small, or hard to check from the application alone.
4	Clear evidence of a working venture at its stage, with at least two of the following named specifically: paying customers, orders in hand, premises, equipment, stock, staff, or a prototype in genuine use. Figures are given for at least three months and are consistent with each other.
5	All of the above, sustained over a year or more, with buyers named, revenue figures that reconcile across the whole application, and documents or photographs attached. The founder points to things a visitor to the premises could see for themselves.

Example of a 2. *A founder in Kabul who plans to open a tailoring workshop. He has chosen a name, priced two industrial sewing machines with a supplier, and drafted a plan. He has not bought a machine, spent any of his own money, or made a single garment.*

Example of a 4. *A saffron processor in Herat with a rented drying room, three seasonal workers, sales to two wholesalers in Kabul she names, and six months of HesabPay records showing the payments.*

Criterion 2 · Capable and coachable founder

Two halves, and both must be present for a high score. Capability is shown by what the founder has already done and how they reason. Coachability is shown by how they answered: whether they engaged with the questions, named what they do not know, and asked for help in a way that shows they know where they are weak.

An application that reads as though written by a chatbot is scored here, under coachability, and not under criterion 5. It tells us nothing about the founder, so it cannot score above 1. But the founder is told directly and given the chance to answer in their own words, because many will simply have been trying to sound professional.

Score	What the application shows
1	Not the founder's own answers, or not really answers. Generic, fluent, and empty; plainly produced by a chatbot or written by somebody else; or so brief as to be uninformative. Several questions are answered with text that does not address what was asked.

Score	What the application shows
2	Recognizably the founder's own voice, but thin. Little relevant experience, no sign of having sought advice or changed their mind about anything, and difficulties described in general terms such as "the market is difficult."
3	Some real experience and some honest self-assessment. The founder names at least one thing they got wrong or do not know. Answers are specific in places and vague in others. A person is visible, but cannot yet be judged.
4	Clearly competent and clearly open. Relevant experience described with dates and detail, at least one decision the founder changed after evidence or advice, weaknesses named without excuse, and at least two specific questions they want help with.
5	All of that, and the founder reasons in numbers, describes a failure and what they changed because of it, and asks for help in a way that shows they already know where they are weak. Somebody a busy professional in Virginia or Hamburg would be glad to spend an hour with.

Example of a 2. *A poultry farmer who writes that he has "many years of experience in this sector" but gives no dates, no flock size, no customers, and no account of anything that has gone wrong.*

Example of a 5. *A founder in Mazar who ran a small trading business that closed in 2023. She explains that she underestimated transport costs on the Hairatan route, gives the figures, says what she now does differently, and asks for help on pricing for buyers outside Afghanistan.*

Criterion 3 · Genuine market need and differentiation

Founders answer using the Business Model Canvas and questions drawn from Porter's work on competitive strategy, so this criterion is where that material is actually assessed. The test for differentiation is simple. Would the claimed advantage still hold if a competitor read the answer? Anything that would not is a sentence that merely sounds like an advantage.

Score	What the application shows
1	No identifiable customer. The need is asserted in the abstract, or the market is described as "everyone in Afghanistan," or as a national population figure with no route to a first buyer.
2	A customer segment is named but not evidenced. Nothing about what those customers do today instead, and differentiation stated as a claim such as better quality or lower price, with nothing behind it.
3	A plausible customer and a plausible need. The founder knows what the alternative is and can say roughly why someone would switch, but the advantage is one a competitor could copy within a season, and nobody has yet paid for it.
4	The need is evidenced and the advantage is concrete. Customers are described by what they do today and what it costs them, and the advantage rests on something specific: location, an exclusive supply, a trade relationship, a cost structure, a skill that is scarce locally, or access to a buyer abroad.
5	Someone is already paying, or has committed in writing to pay, and the founder explains exactly why them rather than the alternative, in terms that would still hold if a competitor read the answer. Copying the advantage would cost a rival real time and money.

Example of a 2. *A dried fruit exporter who writes that Afghan raisins are the best in the world and that buyers will prefer his because of quality.*

Example of a 4. *The same founder, naming three importers in the Gulf, what those importers currently pay a competitor per ton, and the grading and sorting equipment he has in Kandahar that his competitor does not.*

Criterion 4 · The ask is specific

A backer cannot help a founder who cannot say what help is. This criterion is also the best early warning of how a Serai will go, because a vague ask produces thirty minutes of questions the founder cannot answer.

Score	What the application shows
1	No ask, or an ask that is only a number. “I need investment.” No amount given, or an amount with nothing behind it.
2	An amount with a general purpose such as expansion or equipment. No breakdown, no timeline, and no statement of what the money produces.
3	An amount, a broad use of funds, and some sense of what it achieves. The arithmetic is not shown, but the intent is clear and what the founder offers in return is at least mentioned.
4	A specific amount, a use of funds broken into at least three costed lines, a timeline, and a clear statement of what changes as a result. What the founder offers in return, whether a share of the business, a revenue share, repayment, or a working relationship, is stated plainly.
5	All of that, and the amount follows from the plan rather than being a round figure. The founder says what they would do with half the money, separates what they need capital for from what they need advice for, and a backer could act on the ask without a further conversation.

Example of a 2. *“I need $10,000 to grow my business and buy equipment.”*

Example of a 5. *“$6,400. $3,900 for two sewing machines, quoted by a supplier in Kabul; $1,700 for six months of fabric at today’s prices; $800 for registration and license. This takes output from 40 to 110 garments a month by March. With $3,000 I would buy one machine and grow more slowly. Separately, I need advice on pricing for buyers outside Afghanistan.”*

Criterion 5 · Coherent and checkable

This criterion is about the document, not about the founder. The reviewer has only the application. They cannot know what is true out in the world, and it is not their job to find out: that is what Step 4 exists for, and it is done by somebody who does not report to the founder side of the company. What a reviewer can judge is whether the account holds together, and whether it is written in a way that would let another person go and verify it.

So this is not a finding about anyone’s honesty. A founder who names her buyers, gives figures with a basis, and says plainly what she has not yet done is easy to check. A founder who refers to “a large customer” and never names them is hard to check, whether or not he is telling the truth. Score the first higher than the second, and say nothing about which of them is honest.

Where a reviewer believes an application is deliberately dishonest rather than merely vague, that goes to the Matching Lead by the route set out at the end of this document. It does not go to Founder Due Diligence, and it does not change the score.

Score	What the application shows
1	The account contradicts itself and cannot be assessed as written. Figures that cannot both be true, a timeline that does not work, or claims that are mutually exclusive. Nobody could plan a verification from this without going back to the founder first.
2	Serious gaps where the founder avoids specifics. Customers, suppliers, or partners referred to but never named. A headline figure with no basis given. An obstacle described only in general terms. There is very little a verifier could take hold of.
3	Broadly coherent, with two or three things a careful reader would want resolved: a period unaccounted for, a figure that looks high for the sector, a relationship not fully explained. Checkable, but the visit will spend time on it.
4	Coherent throughout, with the main claims specific enough to check. Names, places, and figures are given. Ordinary vagueness of the kind an inexperienced applicant produces, and nothing a verifier would struggle to test.
5	Coherent, specific, and volunteering its own gaps. The founder names buyers and suppliers, gives figures with their basis such as "from the last three months of sales," says what has not yet been done, and attaches documents. A verifier could plan the visit from the application alone.

Example of a 2. *A founder claiming $4,000 a month in revenue from a shop whose stated rent, staff, and stock do not add up to that volume, and who refers throughout to "a large buyer" without ever naming them.*

Example of a 5. *A founder who attaches three months of HesabPay records, names the two wholesalers who buy from her, says her registration is still in progress and gives the reference number, and marks the one figure she has estimated rather than measured.*

Deciding

The five scores add to a total between 5 and 25. All five criteria carry equal weight in version 1. Weighting is the obvious refinement once there are enough scored applications to know which criterion actually predicts a good match, and that is a decision for the Founders Lead to make with evidence rather than in advance.

There is no fixed pass mark, and that is deliberate. Qafila is too early to know where the line should sit, and a number invented now would either turn away founders worth meeting or admit founders who would waste a backer's hour. The Founders Lead decides each application on the five scores and the evidence written beneath them, and records the reasoning. Finding out where the line actually falls is one of the purposes of the first twenty applications.

There are three outcomes.

Pass. The founder goes to Founder Due Diligence for vetting, Step 4 of the founder journey.

Return to the founder. Genuine promise, but not yet ready. The founder is told which criteria were weakest and what would change them, and is invited to resubmit after at least one month.

Decline. The founder is told why, plainly, and may apply again after at least one month.

Two rules stand whatever the scores say.

A 1 or 2 on criterion 5 does not go to vetting as it stands. Either it goes back to the founder with the contradictions named specifically, or it goes forward with those items listed as the first thing Founder Due Diligence must resolve. Sending an incoherent application to vetting spends a working-team member's journey, and some risk, on questions the founder could have answered in an email.

A 1 on any of criteria 1 to 4 cannot pass unless the Founders Lead records in writing why it should. This is not a prohibition. It is a requirement to say so out loud.

Assumed, please confirm or correct: *equal weighting across the five criteria in version 1, and both of the rules above. These are the parts most likely to need changing on first contact with real applications, and the calibration below is how they get changed.*

How scoring is run

Who scores. Founder Preparation reads and scores. The Founders Lead reviews, decides, and owns the standard. For the first twenty applications both score independently before comparing, because that is the only way to find out whether these descriptions mean the same thing to two different people.

Disagreement. Where the two scores differ by two or more on any criterion, they are discussed and the Founders Lead records the agreed score and the reason. Persistent disagreement on one criterion means the descriptions are wrong, not the reviewers.

Working in translation. Where a reviewer is reading a translated application, the file records that. A translated answer can lose the specificity that criterion 2 depends on, and the founder should not lose points for it.

Conflict of interest. Nobody scores a founder they know personally, hold any interest in, or sourced themselves. They step off the file and record why.

What the founder is told

Every founder receives a written statement of why they were or were not selected. That is a promise Founder Recruitment makes when it asks somebody to spend four to five hours on an application, and it is the reason the evidence sentences exist.

The statement draws on the rubric but never shares raw scores. It names the one or two criteria that were weakest, says specifically what would change them, and, where the outcome is a decline or a return, makes clear that the founder may apply again after at least one month. It never overstates. A founder told they were “close” when they were not will apply again unchanged and be declined twice.

Where the reader believed an application was written by an AI tool, the founder is told so directly and offered the chance to answer in their own words before any decision is recorded.

Calibrating the rubric

This document is version 1 of a method, not a finished instrument, and it is expected to be wrong in places. The Founders Lead is charged with building Qafila’s proprietary way of identifying the best founders. This rubric is the first draft of it, and it becomes proprietary by being tested.

After twenty applications. Review the spread of scores. If almost everyone lands on 3, the descriptions are not discriminating and need sharpening at both ends. Look at every criterion where the two reviewers disagreed by two or more, and rewrite those descriptions. This is also the point at which to decide whether a pass mark is worth setting at all, and if so where it should sit.

After fifty applications, and then continuously. Compare the score against what actually happened. Did high-scoring founders pass vetting? Did they do well at the Serai? A criterion that predicts neither is measuring something Qafila does not need. A criterion that predicts strongly should carry more weight.

What to record from the very first application. Every score, every evidence sentence, the reviewer, the decision, and later the vetting outcome and the Serai outcome against the same founder. Without those links the formula cannot be built, and they cannot be reconstructed afterwards.

The wall between review and vetting

Founder Due Diligence reports to the Matching Lead and not to the Founders Lead. The reason is written into the org structure: the person verifying a founder must not be assessed by the person whose number improves when that founder passes. That separation only holds if information moves in one direction, so these rules are part of the scoring standard rather than a footnote to it.

Nobody scoring an application asks Founder Due Diligence what they know about that founder. And Founder Due Diligence does not answer if asked. The review is a reading of the application and nothing else. Its whole value is that it is an independent second look, and a review that leans on the verifier's work is not one.

Only the vetting brief crosses. Section 4 of the review form is the sole channel. The scores, the evidence sentences, and the Founders Lead's reasoning stay on the founder side of the wall. Founder Due Diligence receives the application and the list of what to check, and nothing that tells them what anyone at Qafila already thinks of this founder. Being told that the Founders Lead considers a founder outstanding is exactly the pressure the reporting line exists to remove.

Suspicion of deception goes up, not across. Where a reviewer believes an application is deliberately dishonest rather than merely vague, they write down what they saw and give it to the Matching Lead, who owns the vetting standard and decides what to do with it. It does not go to Founder Due Diligence directly, and it does not change the score.

The same rule runs the other way. If Founder Due Diligence already holds something disqualifying about a founder who is only now being reviewed, they take it to the Matching Lead, who decides whether to stop the file. They do not tell the reviewers, because a review shaped by what the verifier knows is no longer a second opinion.

The review score is never revised after vetting. If vetting finds something the application concealed, that is the system working rather than a scoring error. Going back and lowering the score destroys the only evidence of whether a review can predict a vetting outcome, which is the thing the calibration depends on.

Assumed, please confirm or correct: *that Founder Due Diligence may see the scores once their own file is complete, but never before. Showing them afterwards helps both sides calibrate; showing them beforehand defeats the purpose of the separation.*

Part Two

Application Review Form

One form per application. Founder Preparation completes the five criterion boxes and the score summary. The Founders Lead then completes the review section and records the decision.

Founder name		**Application reference**	
Province		Language of application	
Date received		Source, and AEBLN (yes or no)	
Scored by (Founder Preparation)		Date scored	
Reviewed by (Founders Lead)		Date reviewed	

Founder Preparation: scores and evidence

One or two sentences for each criterion, citing the part of the application that produced the score. Where you were between two scores, take the lower one and say here what would have moved it up.

Criterion 1 · Real, or credibly underway	**Score (1 to 5):**
What exists today, and how you know. Name the specific things: customers, orders, premises, equipment, stock, staff, prototype, months of figures. Say what you could not check from the application alone.	

Criterion 2 · Capable and coachable founder	**Score (1 to 5):**
What this founder has actually done, and how they answered. Note any decision they changed after advice, any weakness they named themselves, and anything they asked for help with. Say here if the answers read as written by a chatbot or by somebody else.	

Criterion 3 · Genuine market need and differentiation	**Score (1 to 5):**
Who the customer is, what they do today instead, and why they would switch. State the claimed advantage in one line and say whether it would still hold if a competitor read the answer.	

Criterion 4 · The ask is specific	**Score (1 to 5):**
The amount, what it is for, over what period, and what changes as a result. Note what the founder offers in return, and whether they separate what they need money for from what they need advice for.	

Criterion 5 · Coherent and checkable	**Score (1 to 5):**
Does the account hold together, and could someone go and verify it? List anything that does not reconcile, anything referred to but never named, and any figure given without a basis. Write "coherent, nothing outstanding" if that is the case. This is a judgment about the document, not about the founder: do not contact Founder Due Diligence, and do not record a view on anyone's honesty here.	

Score summary

Criterion	**Score**	**Notes**
1. Real, or credibly underway		
2. Capable and coachable founder		
3. Genuine market need and differentiation		
4. The ask is specific		
5. Coherent and checkable		
Total out of 25		

Founders Lead: review and decision

The Founders Lead reviews the scores above, decides, and owns the standard. This section carries more weight than the scores. A total is a summary, not a reason, and nobody downstream can act on a number.

Sections 1, 2, 3, and 5 stay on the founder side of the wall. Section 4 is the only part of this form that goes to Founder Due Diligence.

1. Agreement with the scores
Do you agree with each of the five scores? Where you differ by two or more on any criterion, record the agreed score and why. For the first twenty applications, score independently before reading Founder Preparation's scores.

2. Decision
Mark one. Pass to Step 4, Vetting, by Founder Due Diligence · Return to the founder to improve and resubmit, at Step 2, after at least one month · Decline, with the founder free to apply again after at least one month. If you are passing a founder who scored 1 on any of criteria 1 to 4, record here why.

3. Why this founder should go forward, or should not
The substance of your review. What is genuinely strong here, what is weak, and what you believe about this founder that the scores do not capture. If you are passing them, say what you think a backer would find compelling, and what would worry one. If you are not, say what would have to change.

4. Vetting brief for Founder Due Diligence at Step 4
Detach or copy this box on its own. It travels with the application to Founder Due Diligence; the scores and sections 1, 2, 3, and 5 do not. Write only what must be checked, seen, or resolved when the working team meets this founder in person: the specific claims to verify, the figures to break down, the customer or supplier to reach, and anything you could not settle from the page. Do not write what you think of the founder, and do not indicate whether you were enthusiastic. The verifier has to be able to reach their own conclusion.

5. What the founder will be told
The written statement this founder receives, whichever way the decision goes. Name the one or two criteria that were weakest and what would change them. Do not share raw scores. Do not say a founder was close when they were not.

Founders Lead signature		**Date**	

Once the decision is recorded, this form is attached to the founder record. Where the decision is a pass, Section 4 alone goes to Founder Due Diligence with the application. The vetting outcome and, later, the Serai outcome are recorded against this form afterwards. Those links are what turn this rubric into Qafila's own method for identifying good founders, and they are also how the company finds out whether a reading of the page predicts what a visit discovers.