Be successful in your research grant applications: lessons from the ERC

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ERC Life Sciences Unit

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European Research Council (ERC)

A bit of context

Directorate-General Research and Innovation (RTD)

EUR 16 billion ERC budget in Horizon Europe

17% of the entire Horizon Europe budget
The ERC is …

- A **funding body** set up by the EU in 2007, based in Brussels
- Led by **scientists** for **scientists**
- **International** peer-review
- Supports **bottom-up, investigator-driven** research across **all fields**, on the basis of **scientific excellence**
- Looking for **High-risk/High-gain** ambitious projects
ERC funding schemes

Starting Grant
Size of the grant: up to €1.5 million + up to €1 million
Duration: up to 5 years
2-7 years of experience since completion of their PhD

Consolidator Grant
Size of the grant: up to €2 million + up to €1 million
Duration: up to 5 years
7-12 years of experience since completion of their PhD

Advanced Grant
Size of the grant: up to €2.5 million + up to €1 million
Duration: up to 5 years
An excellent scientific track record of recognized achievements in the last 10 years
Why should you apply? ERC grants provide independence, recognition & visibility

- Work on a research topic of your own choice, with a team of your own choice
- Gain true financial autonomy for 5 years
- Negotiate the best conditions with the Host Institution
- Attract top team members and collaborators
- Move with the grant to any place in Europe (portability)
- Attract additional funding
Evaluation procedure

Single submission, **two-steps** evaluation

**STEP 1**

Remote individual assessment by Panel Members of **Part B1 only**
(synopsis and CV)
Evaluation procedure

Single submission, two-steps evaluation

STEP 1

Remote individual assessment by Panel Members of Part B1 only (synopsis and CV)

Panel meeting 1

score B & C: Rejected

score A: proposals continue to step 2

Feedback to applicants
Evaluation procedure

Single submission, two-steps evaluation

**STEP 1**
Remote individual assessment by Panel Members of Part B1 only (synopsis and CV)

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- score B & C: Rejected
- score A: proposals continue to step 2

**STEP 2**
Remote individual assessment by Panel Members and External Reviewers of Part B1+ Part B2 (full proposal)

Feedback to applicants
Evaluation procedure
Single submission, two-steps evaluation

**STEP 1**
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Panel meeting 1

- score B & C: Rejected
- score A: proposals continue to step 2

**STEP 2**
Remote individual assessment by Panel Members and External Reviewers of Part B1+ Part B2 (full proposal)

Panel meeting 2 + Interview

- scores A & B

Feedback to applicants
Preparing your proposal:

Tips

- **Register early**, get familiar with the system and templates and start filling in the forms.
- A submitted proposal can be **revised until the call deadline** by submitting a new version and overwriting the previous one.
- Follow the formatting rules and page limits.
- Get feedback from peers (who have an ERC Grant).
- Make use of the **help tools and call documents** (*Information for Applicants, Work Programme, FAQs*).
- Talk to your country’s **National Contact Point** and your Institution’s **Grant Office**.
Preparing your proposal …for StG/CoG, make sure you are eligible!

1. Eligibility window measured from the 1\textsuperscript{st} of January of the year of the Call

Extensions of eligibility window possible for documented cases of:

- Maternity – 18 months per child (before or after PhD)
- Paternity – actual time taken off
- Military service
- Medical specialty training
- Caring for seriously ill family members

2. Time commitment: Min. 50% (StG), 40% (CoG), 30% (AdG)

3. Minimum 50% of PI working time in an EU Member State or Associated Country
Rumour: I should wait until the end of the eligibility window since then I will be more competitive

✖ NOT true: The success rate is virtually flat across the eligibility window (StG, CoG)
Updated ERC panel structure (from Starting Grant 2021 onwards)

3 domains, 27 panels, each panel: Panel Chair + 12-16 Panel Members

Life Sciences

LS1 Molecules of Life: Biological Mechanisms, Structures and Functions
LS2 Integrative Biology: from Genes and Genomes to Systems
LS3 Cellular, Developmental and Regenerative Biology
LS4 Physiology in Health, Disease and Ageing
LS5 Neuroscience and Disorders of the Nervous System
LS6 Immunity, Infection and Immunotherapy
LS7 Prevention, Diagnosis and Treatment of Human Diseases
LS8 Environmental Biology, Ecology and Evolution
LS9 Biotechnology and Biosystems Engineering

Physical Sciences & Engineering

PE1 Mathematics
PE2 Fundamental Constituents of Matter
PE3 Condensed Matter Physics
PE4 Physical and Analytical Chemical Sciences
PE5 Synthetic Chemistry and Materials
PE6 Computer Science and Informatics
PE7 Systems and Communication Engineering
PE8 Products and Processes Engineering
PE9 Universe Sciences
PE10 Earth System Science
PE11 Materials Engineering

Social Sciences and Humanities

SH1 Individuals, Markets and Organisations
SH2 Institutions, Governance and Legal Systems
SH3 The Social World and Its Diversity
SH4 The Human Mind and Its Complexity
SH5 Cultures and Cultural Production
SH6 The Study of the Human Past
SH7 Human Mobility, Environment, and Space
Choosing the right Panel is very important

- Proposals are assigned to the Panel of the PI's choice
- The PI can flag one "Secondary Review Panel": the PI must explain the interdisciplinary nature of the proposal in Part B1
- Choose your descriptors/free keywords carefully!
- Transfer of proposals between panels may occur if:
  - there is a clear mistake on part of the PI
  - the necessary expertise is available in a different panel

Rumour: Choose the panel "strategically" in order to increase chances of success
× NOT true: The budget is distributed among the scientific panels as a function of demand → success rate is equal amongst panels → choose the Panel that is right for your proposal!
Excellence is the only evaluation criterion

Research Project
- Ground-breaking nature
- Potential impact
- Clever Scientific Approach

Principal Investigator
- Creativity
- Leadership
- Scientific expertise and capacity to execute the project
Questions to ask yourself when writing your proposal

**Research Project**

Is my project new, **innovative**, bringing in new solutions/theories?

Does it promise to go **substantially beyond the state of the art**?

Why is my project **important**? Think Big!

How can I **prove/support** my case? Have I proven the project's **feasibility**?

Is it **timely**? (Why wasn't it done in the past?)

What's the **risk**? Have I proposed **alternatives**?

Have I given a realistic picture of my **collaborations**? Show that it is you who will be leading the project.
## Questions to ask yourself when writing your proposal

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**Principal Investigator**

Why am I the **best/only person** to carry it out? Know your competitors

Am I able to **work independently**, and to manage a 5-year project with a substantial budget?

Am I **internationally competitive**?

Have I shown my **scientific leadership** in my CV?

**Evaluation process**

- NO THEMATIC PRIORITIES
- NO CONSORTIA
- NO CAREER DEVELOPMENT PLAN
- NO SOCIETAL/ECONOMIC IMPACT

**ONLY CRITERION: EXCELLENCE OF BOTH THE PI AND THE RESEARCH PROJECT**
🌟 When writing your CV

- Remember that the CV/Track Record are as **important as your project**!
- **Explain** what has been **your own contribution to your key publications** (incl. papers published without your PhD and postdoc supervisor).
- If you know that **you have gaps** or other issues in your CV (e.g. co-authored publications), **explain them**.
- Describe accurately **any other activity which can indicate scientific maturity**.
- **Fully fill in your Funding ID**
Part B1

- Spark curiosity and excitement
- State of the art
- Feasibility
- Originality/Novelty
- Importance/Impact
- Scientific approach
- References
- Show scientific independence in CV
- Specificity of your career path/breaks/research environment and context

Part B2

- Impress with plans and details
- DO NOT just copy paste B1
- Detailed scientific approach
- Preliminary results
- Detailed workplan
- Resources
- Budget
- Risk assessment/contingency plans
- Time commitment
Explain your budget properly

- Panels have to ensure that the requested resources are reasonable and well justified. Unexplained costs may (will) be cut.
- Granting is made on a 'take-it-or-leave-it' basis: no negotiations.
- Ensure coherence between the description of resources and the budget table.
- Follow Information for Applicants on how to fill the budget table and calculate overheads.
- Ask for funding for Open Access – OA is obligatory and these costs are eligible.
I have been invited for an interview .. now what?

- Have **clear and representative slides** and focus on SCIENCE!
- Anticipate questions.
- Know the **details** of your proposal and methods, as well as your research area – who are your main competitors/collaborators?
- Bring **additional slides** on new supporting data, if you have, and for possible explanations.
- Don't over-explain your CV!

**PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE!!!!!!**

**Rumour:** Choose your Acronym in alphabetical order, interviews are planned alphabetically.

**NOT true:** the important thing is to choose an easy-to-remember acronym since this helps identifying the project during discussions!
Typical reasons for rejection

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

- Insufficient track-record
- Insufficient (potential for) independence
- Insufficient experience in leading projects

RESEARCH PROJECT

- Scope: Too narrow ↔ too broad/unfocussed
- Incremental research
- Work plan not detailed enough/unclear
- Insufficient risk management
In order to make the evaluation process more effective, the Scientific Council has introduced **re-submission restrictions**.

**STEP 1**

- **C**: you have to wait for 2 years before re-applying

**STEP 2**

- **A**: you can re-apply next year
- **B**: you can re-apply next year
- **B (unfunded)**: you have to wait for 1 year before re-applying

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**I did not get the grant, can I apply next year?**
Contrary to what you may think…..

- ERC funds "frontier research", including applied research
- The budget is distributed among the panels as a function of demand (equal success rate)
- The panel descriptors do not represent ERC scientific priorities
- Publication record is not decisive in selection
- Re-applying pays off (50% success rate increase)
- No indication that native English speakers are more likely to succeed
Calendar for 2021 and 2022 calls

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- **WP**
  - 2021: 25/02/2021
  - 2022: 23/09/2021

**Consolidator Grant**
- **WP**
  - 2021: 11/03/2021
  - 2022: 19/10/2021

**Advanced Grant**
- **WP**
  - 2021: 20/05/2021
  - 2022: 20/01/2022

**Synergy Grant**
- **WP**
  - 2022: 15/07/2021
Where can you find more information?

Videos - ERC Classes

- What to consider before applying
- How to fill in the application
  (Part B1 and B2)
- The interview
- How the evaluation works

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x
bFbzkVWgCU&list=PLtv6FnsXqnXA
YRk6HCErwMxwML0ZKoMcy
Where can you find more information?

Our website:
erc.europa.eu

Our social media channels:

National Contact Points (NCP):
https://erc.europa.eu/funding/national-contact-points

Funding & Tender Opportunities:
https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/home
Speakers

Dr Jane REZNICK
ERC-2019-StG
Project: METAMOLE

Dr Daniela COTA
Panel Member AdG LS4
Thank you