ERC GRANTS IN NUTSHELL

PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR PREPARATION OF WINNING ERC PROJECTS

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„Excellence is never an accident. It is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, and intelligent execution; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives - choice, not chance, it determines your destiny.” - Aristotle

The aim of this guide is to share my experience and knowledge gained as a project manager and consultant focused on ERC and other H2020 grants. In recent years, I had the opportunity to collaborate the on preparation and implementation of ERC projects with amazing and inspiring scientists. They all face similar problems and challenges every ERC applicant has to deal with. This guide should promote the sharing of gained insights, interesting observations and useful information that may help other ERC candidates to achieve success.

I want to stress that this document is not intended to replace the official guidelines available on the European Research Council website. Instead, it provides practical tips and recommendations based on my own practice and the reviews of both successful and unsuccessful projects in previous ERC calls. The idea is to respond to scientists’ frequently asked questions, motivate hesitant candidates and help them to get over any doubts or unnecessary fears.

BEFORE YOU START WRITING YOUR ERC

Am I a potential ERC grantee?

- Discuss your idea with people who already have experience getting or evaluating ERC grants. Do not get overly influenced by colleagues who have never tried to apply for an ERC or have never read any such project.
- Check the repository of funded projects here. Search for projects according to the research domain and type of call that is relevant for you.
- This article will help you refute the common myths and untruths about ERC
- You should know that the current success rate for ERC is as follows: Starting Grant 12.7% (403 supported out of 3170 proposals submitted in 2018), Consolidator Grant 12.3% (301 funded out of 2453 proposals submitted in 2019) and Advanced Grant 10.8% (222 awarded out of 2052 project submitted in 2018).
- Read the ERC Work Programme and the Information for Applicants guide to understand the grant scheme and overall ERC candidate expectations.
- May you have any doubts; send me your CV and/or draft of your abstract or proposal. I will help you to assess whether your project idea and career achievements are in line with the expectations and requirements of ERC evaluators. This short review is for free and it will help you effectively focus your efforts where it is most needed, thus it saves you time and the possible disappointment after a preparation of a project proposal with low chances of success.
- You can discuss your intent and any doubts with the NCP (national contact point) dedicated to the ERC in your country.

How long does ERC preparation take?

- Reserve 3 months as the minimum for very intensive preparation. Most people take 4-5 months to prepare an ERC.
- You should write your project anytime you feel like, not when the approaching deadline or pressure of your supervisor forces you.
- Set aside time to incorporate feedback and comments from your colleagues or other experts. Various input from any consultations can make major contributions to your success so do not underestimate time for revisions!

How should I start?

- Before you start writing, make sure your project goal(s) and research hypothesis are crystal clear and will no longer change.
- Download the templates for B1 and B2 proposals to get to know what is expected. To do so, you have to login into the Participant Portal first or ask the relevant grant officer at your institution to do that for you.

- Important - start with B1! Despite the fact, it consists of only 5 pages, writing B1 usually demands more time and intellectual effort. Moreover, its positive evaluation is decisive for you and opens the door to the 2nd round of evaluation. Until you get there, your B2 gets no feedback from evaluators. Therefore, B1 deserves very thorough preparation.
- After finishing B1, clarify your budget requirements and calculate the project costs.
- The third step is to dive into your B2 proposal. Simply expand the ideas from B1 and describe all planned work in more detail.

How similar or different should be proposals B1 and B2?

- It is the same proposal described from a different perspective. To get that, take a short break between writing B1 and B2 (e.g. distract yourself with budgeting)
- B1 should be readable to a generalist, while B2 should be aimed at a specialist in your particular research field.
- Never use copy paste for longer sections or whole paragraphs between B1 and B2!
- Never refer to B1 in B2 and vice versa. Do not force reviewers to jump from one document to another if they do not want to.

How to choose the evaluation panel?

- Select the evaluation panel according to ERC key words that characterize the subject of your project here.
- The scientific focus of the panel members can give you a hint. Check the names of panel chairs and panel members here and consider the scientific relevance of their research focus to the topic of your proposal.

GUIDELINES FOR THE B1 PROPOSAL

How to compose the perfect abstract?

- Abstract, at a glance, outlines the ***key message*** and provides the reader with a clear understanding of the ***overall aim*** of the research proposal.
- It should contain the ***hypothesis/research question*** you address in your proposal.
- It briefly describes the scientific approach or ***key/newly established/original methodology*** to be used.
- It should address the ***impact on science*** and possible utility in the future.

- Additional note on ground-breaking nature, novelty, high-risk high-gain nature of the project.
- To avoid confusions keep abstract in part A and part B1 identical. You can (but not do not need) place the same abstract also at the beginning of B2 to provide nice introduction.
- Carefully pick the key terminology – highlight (e.g. in bold font) the key words representing your project.

Drafting the Extended Synopsis (form B1):

- Bear in mind the ***selection criterion*** for the Extended Synopsis that are in short: (1) novelty, (2) addressing a challenge, (3) ground-breaking nature of the project and scientific impact, (3) high-risk and high-gain balance, (4) feasibility of scientific approach (the order here does not reflect the importance).
- Ensure the text is readable for a broad audience, being your WHOLE panel (the composition of the evaluation panels for past years is known and does not change every year). Readable implies that a colleague who is not familiar with the details of your specific field can read your Extended Synopsis once and explain what your project idea is about. Choose one, or ideally more colleagues you trust and ask them to review your proposal.
- You cannot suggest potential reviewers but sometimes you can influence the process by ***citing the appropriate experts*** and key literature in the field.
- Use relatively ***short paragraphs*** of 7-15 lines.
- ***Visualize your idea***, use tables, schemes, and figures with legends – a ***graphic abstract*** highlighting the key information is the best. Do not use complicated, very specialized expressions or abbreviations or long sentences!

- ***Clearly structure*** your proposal. It is up to you how you name and organize chapters within the Extended Synopsis. Add a reader guidance if your project or topic is very complex, add a proper lay-out to your project etc.
- B1 should cover:
  - **State-of-the-art** highlighting the gap of knowledge
    - Describe your contribution to the state-of-the-art and indicate whether you have handled similar "challenges" before.
  - **Concept**/main idea/hypothesis
  - **Objectives**
    - Smart objectives/aims/goals - max. 4 that together create a single, compact story.
    - Focus on urgent and big scientific challenges.
    - How are the results of the project going to be a step forward, and beyond the limits of the fields that the project involves?
  - **Methodological approach**
    - What approach are you going to use – robust concept, unconventional approach (high risk)
    - Only pinpoint the key or most attractive methods for each research objective.
    - Are you going to develop new methods, concepts, tools, technology?
    - Is the combination of methods original?
  - **Workplan**
    - Link research objective to workpackages (WPs)/individual aims/pillars/stages.
    - Describe activities/tasks within each WP.
    - Define milestones for your WPs.
    - Suggest a time schedule and workflow per WP. You can use a Gantt chart.
    - What are you going to achieve at each stage of the project? (ERC does not expect you to generate deliverables).
  - **Feasibility describing risks**
    - Preliminary results (include self-references) - supporting the feasibility of your concept
    - Risks/mitigation plan – identify the risks linking them with research objectives and envisaged results
    - Stress high-risk/high-gain - reviewers are instructed to also assess the feasibility in step 1 in order to select those high-gain / high-risk projects that may be successful. Explain to the reviewers why you will achieve the objectives by including a description of the identified **high-risk elements**, the reasons for succeeding and providing a **plan for adjustments** (a back-up plan). Specify your

expertise and knowledge clearly, thanks to which the project will be feasible, provided you are selected.

- **Results and scientific impact/utility**,
  - What is your project going to achieve – impact beyond the frontiers?
  - What will your contribution to SCIENCE be? Do not think about deliverables (conferences, publications), think about research results and the impact on your scientific field or adjacent fields.
  - Describe what kind of novel research is possible after your ERC project has ended, opening up novel horizons and opportunities for research
- **Resources**
  - In very few sentences, describe existing and requested resources and your commitment to this project. It will be further elaborated in the administrative form.
  - What kind of a team are you going to need? How many PhD/Postdocs (In Life Sciences, ERC teams consists of approx. 4-7 members).
  - Which research profiles will team members have? How will they complement your research profile and contribute to the project?

Tips for writing Section c: Early achievements track-record:

1. Publications (up to five for a Starting Grant and up to ten for a Consolidator Grant) in major international peer-reviewed multi-disciplinary scientific journals and/or in the leading international peer-reviewed journals, peer-reviewed conferences proceedings and/or monographs of their respective research fields, highlighting those as main author or without the presence of their PhD supervisor as co-author (properly referenced (including all authors), field relevant bibliometric indicators may also be included;
2. Overview of scientific output – graph or table demonstrating n_o or your publications, citations, H-index etc.
3. Description of breakthrough results – pick up to three research results (whether they are published/patented or not) and briefly describe their impact on the given scientific field and how you personally contributed to these.

4. Contribution to your scientists' careers – are you a good supervisor, can you guide and inspire others who, thanks to you, achieve success in their early career – give examples of names, their work and new positions achieved.
5. Research monographs and any translations thereof;
6. Granted patent(s);
7. Invited presentations to peer-reviewed, internationally established conferences and/or international advanced schools;
8. Prizes/Awards/Academy memberships.

AFTER SUBMISSION

How long I will wait for the results of evaluation?

- After the first round, you will be either (1) invited to the second round of evaluation, which also includes a personal interview, or (2) obtain the evaluation report together with a rejection letter. This usually happens 4-5 months after submitting the proposal. The overall evaluation usually lasts 9 months and subsequent negotiation takes about 1-2 months. Therefore, if you think your project's time management and workplan, plan the start of your research activities no earlier than 11 months after the proposal submission.

Shoot for the moon and if you miss you will still be among the stars.

Norman Vincent Peale

How does the evaluation report look?

- If you are not successful after the first round of evaluation, you obtain the evaluation report 4-5 months submitting your proposal. However, this is not a reason to give up on ERC. In fact, the evaluation report might be your very useful and valuable servant. It shows you feedback from 4-8 knowledgeable scientists sitting in the panel of your choice. Each of them provides a detailed verbal comment and scores the project (on the ground-breaking nature and potential impact of the research project as well as on the scientific approach) and on you as a grant applicant. The evaluators' insights can guide you to prepare a better project that will succeed in the future.