ERC Starting Grant Call 2021:
Notes and Tips for Applicants

(Short preliminary Version Feb 4, 2021 – will be extended and revised once the ERC Call 2021 templates are available)

Deadline: March 24, 2021 17:00 CET (tbc)

The information provided in this compilation is based on several sources, in particular on key documents published by the ERC, such as the Information for Applicants, as well as suggestions by ERC Panel members and evaluation comments

Important documents and useful links: complete section will be included in full version of "Notes and Tips" once the templates are available

- ERC Homepage: erc.europa.eu

- Link to previous **ERC panel members (frequently generalists)**:
  - https://erc.europa.eu/document-category/evaluation-panels
    We recommend to use the lists of previous panel members to understand the different backgrounds and perspectives from which panel members may view your proposal. ERC panel members alternate between even and odd years, while several of the panel members will usually be replaced by new ones.

- Link to lists of previous **ERC external referees (specialists)** and panel members:
  https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/how-to-participate/reference-documents;programCode=H2020 (select button "expert names – annual lists")

- Link to **database of ERC-funded projects**:
  https://erc.europa.eu/projects-figures/erc-funded-projects
  Here you can search for ERC project summaries and Principle Investigators of ERC grants. Search results can be filtered e.g. by panel and keywords. Project abstracts and the CVs of Principal Investigators funded by the panel you consider applying for may prove helpful for deciding on the most suitable evaluation panel, and for comparing CVs/track records of PIs.

- ERC webpage on **open access**: https://erc.europa.eu/funding-and-grants/managing-project/open-access

Online submission of ERC proposals: Submit early, submit often

(Please note that some of the information in this section may change upon publication of the templates for the Call 2021)

We strongly recommend to **submit a first version of your proposal around 1 week before the deadline**, in order to check for any browser problem or other technical issues that may block proposal submission, or lead to layout changes in the submitted versions. Up to the call deadline, **you can continuously modify your proposal by submitting (not just uploading) a new version, which will overwrite the previous one**.

In case of problems with the online submission system, please contact your **host institution** (grant management/researchers´ service), **FFG** (ylva.huber@ffg.at) or directly the SEP Service Desk: DIGIT-EFP7-SEP-SUPPORT@ec.europa.eu or +32 (2) 29 92222.

Information on how to use the online submission system is also available via the submission service user manual: http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/support/sep_usermanual.pdf

Please ensure that all the **required supporting documents are obtained and submitted** via the submission tool in time (Commitment letter of the Host Institution, ethical issues annex [ethical self-assessment and any additional documents related to ethics], other supporting documents as applicable)

Also, please note the remark on "Declarations" in the online forms - **Written consent**:
The Principal Investigator declares to have the written consent of all participants on their involvement and on the content of this proposal, as well as of any researcher mentioned in the proposal as participating in the project (either as other PI, team member or collaborator). The ERCEA may request the applicants to provide the written consent of all participants at any time during the evaluation process.

The written consents should however not be submitted with the application. Consent can e.g. be documented by an **email** by the participant, which is **dated before the call deadline**.

Evaluating scientific excellence: Questions that StG reviewers need to answer

(Based on draft ERC Work Programme 2021)

1. **Research Project**
   Ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility

Starting, Consolidator, Advanced
Ground-breaking nature and potential impact of the research project

To what extent does the proposed research address important challenges?

To what extent are the objectives ambitious and beyond the state of the art (e.g. novel concepts and approaches or development between or across disciplines)?

To what extent is the proposed research high risk/high gain (i.e. if successful the payoffs will be very significant, but there is a higher-than-normal risk that the research project does not entirely fulfil its aims)?

Scientific Approach
To what extent is the outlined scientific approach feasible bearing in mind the extent that the proposed research is high risk/high gain (based on the Extended Synopsis)?

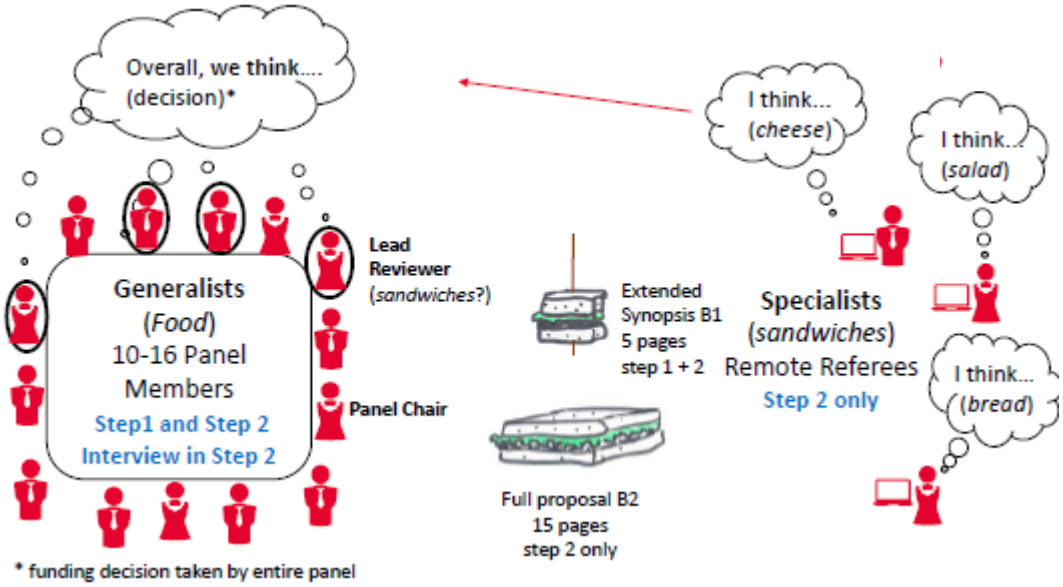
To what extent are the proposed research methodology and working arrangements appropriate to achieve the goals of the project (based on the full Scientific Proposal)?

To what extent does the proposal involve the development of novel methodology (based on the full Scientific Proposal)?

To what extent are the proposed timescales, resources and PI commitment adequate and properly justified (based on the full Scientific Proposal)?

2. Principal Investigator (Starting and Consolidator)
Intellectual capacity and creativity

To what extent has the PI demonstrated the ability to conduct ground-breaking research?
To what extent does the PI provide evidence of creative independent thinking?
To what extent does the PI have the required scientific expertise and capacity to successfully execute the project?



Evaluation step 1: Usually **four Panel Members** (out of appr. 14-16), the majority of whom may often be **generalists** rather than specialists in the area(s) of your project, **read part B1 only**.

Evaluation step 2: The **full proposal (B1 and B2) becomes accessible** to the **panel** members and **specialist remote referees** (who are selected by the panel members). The final decision on the recommendation of a project for funding lies with the panel members.

Tips for a convincing ERC Starting Grant proposal

Structure

- Provide a **clear structure** (everything served on a silver platter ☺)
- Your proposal should read as a compelling, **authentic narrative**.

- **Present the big picture to** put your research into a broader **context**. This will help to **motivate your research goals** and to capture the interest also of **panel members** who are **non-specialists** in the field (often the majority)

- The introduction/motivation should, however, not dominate the proposal: The **major part** of the grant application (also in the extended synopsis/B1) should explain concretely your **novel approach** and **planned work** (as a rule of thumb: minimum 50 % of the extended synopsis in B1)

- Present the **aims/objectives** of your project rather early and in a highly visible manner (e.g. bullet points, bold fonts, text box). Panel Members like to see them at the first glance.

- The **perfect match between aims/objectives**, the **methodology** and the **workplan** of the project should be easy to perceive. This will support the notion of a **coherent, well-integrated** proposal. To support this, it can e.g. be helpful to refer to aim(s) 1,2 when describing research line/workpackage x or method y).

Part B1
is your ticket to the interview: a crucial element of the proposal that needs to communicate **both the breakthrough character and the feasibility** of the project. The success rate for step1 of the evaluation process, where only Part B1 is assessed, is typically around 30% for the Starting Grant.

The extended synopsis in B1 should contain **all important information** to convince reviewers that your project and your **scientific vision** clearly stand out (roughly, one out of ten proposals gets funded).

This includes succinct information on:
-key **preliminary data**/results/**proof of principle** already obtained, e.g. in a pilot study. Ideally, a first publication demonstrating the high promise of your approach is available
-**risks and contingency strategies** (what are significant risks and your plan B, why does the project have a favourable risk-gain-balance)
-how will you **validate** the results of your project? (E.g. how will you determine causality, as opposed to "only" correlation?) → to show the **explanatory power** of your approach

- any other important information to underscore the **breakthrough potential** of your proposal. For instance, reviewers frequently ask whether the results obtained in the ERC project will be **generalizable.**

- Based on ERC evaluation comments, we strongly recommend to also include a paragraph/sentence on the **team composition** in B1 (message: the necessary expertise will be assembled in your team), as well as a **brief timeplan** (1-2 sentences, or putting timing information in brackets, e.g. "aim 1… [Year 1-3]" / "key intermediate goal x [Year 3]").

- One or a few high quality **figure(s)** can also be very helpful for B1, e.g. a flowchart to illustrate your approach

- **References** to literature should be included. They do not count towards the 5 page-limit. The references in B1 may also support Panel Members in selecting the external referees to evaluate the proposal in step 2 of the evaluation.

Part B2
presents the required **details for the evaluation by specialist reviewers in step 2.** This concerns in particular the methodology, preliminary data, and risks and contingency plans.

- Avoid unnecessary repetition between part B1 and B2: As part B1 should capture the essence of the entire proposal, B1 and B2 need to be mutually consistent. However, panel members are increasingly likely to disapprove of longer sections with identical wording in B1 and B2. In part B2, you can also refer to figures/text presented in part B1.

- Present your **key intermediate goals** and expected **results** and how you will **validate/ interpret** results

- Highlight any **novel/unconventional methodology**

- Deal **appropriately with significant risks** (contingency plans, alternative strategies; promising preliminary data), in order to further bolster the message of a favourable risk-gain-balance.

- At least in most cases, reviewers will likely expect a reasonable **time plan** for an ERC project. It has meanwhile become standard in part B2 of ERC proposals to present e.g. a Gantt chart or overview table on **key intermediate goals/milestones** (see also example below). The time plan should however not be too detailed to be credible for a groundbreaking research agenda.

Fictitious example table for key intermediate goals

	Aim 1	Aim 2	Aim 3
Years 1-2	Analysis of... Publication 1...	Purify...	Visualize... Conference...
Years 3-4	Maps...	Integration of...	...
Year 5	Model...	Correlation of findings...	...Publications,...

- High quality **figure(s)** can play an important role to demonstrate feasibility and/or provide a crisp overview on the project.

- **References** to literature should be included (they do not count towards the 15/14 pages-limit[1])

Further suggestions with relevance both for B1 and B2

Novelty and unique feature(s)

[1] Most likely, there will be a 14-pages limit für B2 in the Starting Grant Call 2021, and two pages extra for the resources section – but the templates are not yet finalized

- Carve out the **ground-breaking nature** of the project (what is the core novelty?) and its potential scientific **impact**. Explain the short-term impact on your field/other fields, and provide an outline of your more **long-term-vision** (5-10 years or beyond) as well. This will ideally support the notion that your project can establish an entirely new field of research.

- It should be evident for reviewers that your approach is **original, timely, genuinely novel**, and not a limited/incremental "extension" of (your) previous research.

- Explain the **unique features** and the advantage of your approach compared to **competing approaches.**

Hypothesis-driven project and/or clearly defined research questions

- While there can be differences between research fields/disciplines, ERC reviewers frequently comment positively on the fact that a project is hypothesis-driven. In any case, however, the overarching research questions should be crystal clear. Proposals that lack such question(s) and come across as largely technology- or methodology-driven will likely be at a disadvantage.

Scope of the project well justified

- As for any research proposal, also the scope of an ERC project can be questioned by reviewers – either as being too broad/unfocused or too narrowly focused/incremental. It is therefore important to explain why the approach you have chosen is the best strategy to achieve a breakthrough.

Clarity

- Your proposal needs to be **well understandable** also for **reviewers that are not specialists** in your own research field/topic.

- Important: **Precise wording**/descriptions, **clear** (working) **definitions**, concrete **examples**, high quality **figures**

- Ensure a **reader-friendly layout**, with sufficient spaces, highlighting key messages, e.g. by a short summary of a section in a text box, bullet points, selective use of bold fonts

Collaborations

- Strive for a good balance when describing collaborations for the project: explain their importance for the project, but without giving the impression of the PI being "too dependent" on them. Messages: Due to the excellent network of the PI, s/he will have access to all required complementary expertise and infrastructure. The collaborations are well-defined and targeted. This should avoid a potential impression of a project based on a consortium, as the ERC explicitly does not fund consortia (see ERC

Work Programme). If you think your project would actually require several PIs, the ERC Synergy Grant call (for a group of 2-4 PIs) could be an interesting option.

Demonstrating a competitive "Starter" profile

- **CV, Track Record, State of the art:**
  Make sure that your own contributions (e.g. in important co-authored papers) are clearly visible. "Research independence" of the PI should be evident throughout the proposal, i.e. not only shown in the CV and Track Record, but also in B1 and B2, for instance when presenting preliminary work/data ("As we could show in [ref.x]…")

Which panel?

- Consider which panel is likely in the best position to understand the ground-breaking nature of your project, and to appreciate your previous achievements.

- While the ERC welcomes **interdisciplinary** projects, they constitute a challenge for the evaluation process, as these proposals need to be rated as excellent in every discipline they cover. If you consider your proposal to be interdisciplinary (cross-panel/cross-domain), you can indicate a secondary panel in the online-submission system. In this case, please describe the cross-panel/cross-domain nature in the dedicated text box on the B1 cover page.
  However, we recommend to give some extra thought to this question, as so far the success rates of explicitly cross-panel proposals apparently has been lower. One reason for this might be that panel members from the secondary panel are, according to our information, not physically present during panel meetings, but only submit their written comments to the panel.
  As an alternative to selecting two panels, you can choose only one panel, and add keywords from other relevant panels (as well as free keywords).

- Exceptionally, the ERC may also allocate a proposal to a different panel than the one indicated by the PI
- Please note that the ERC panel structure has been revised, and two new panels have been added: https://erc.europa.eu/content/revision-erc-panel-structure-rationale-and-main-changes

Proposal Abstract
The abstract is an important part of the proposal, also during panel discussions. The majority of panel members may only read the abstract and possibly leaf through the proposals when they are discussed in the panel meetings. The abstract should therefore present the essence of your project: scientific challenge/knowledge gap, novel approach, objectives, potential impact, unique features.

Timely feedback-loops with colleagues

- Questions and critical comments of colleagues (both within and beyond your research field, ideally with a background similar to that of potential panel members) on the proposal will be highly valuable. In addition, polishing of the proposal by an English native speaker, where applicable, is highly recommended.

Picture the interview

We strongly recommend to picture the interview situation when writing the proposal. This should help to ensure that the main messages you would pitch to generalist panel members in a 5-10 minutes presentation are highly visible in your proposal and well understandable also to generalists.

Specific remarks on CV and Track Record

Please note that some of the information in this section may change upon publication of the templates for the Call 2021

B1, Section b: Curriculum vitae (max. 2 pages)

- In addition to the suggestions provided by the **CV template**, please present also key activities as reviewer for **journals** (top examples)
- Ensure an **impeccable and reader-friendly layout** also of the CV and Track Record section

- ***Appendix to CV: All ongoing and submitted grants and funding of the PI (Funding ID)*** **-** Mandatory information not counting towards page limits

  - According to the ERCEA, the information in this table is also used to support the selection of reviewers for the proposal (avoiding potential conflicts of interest with reviewers that might be involved in running/submitted projects with the applicant).

    However, if several ongoing grants are listed which will temporally overlap with the ERC project, it is advisable to also demonstrate that **the PI will be able to fulfil his/her time commitment to the ERC project**, e.g. by indicating the percentage of time commitment of the PI for the other grants in the table.

  - For submitted grant proposals which strongly overlap with the content of the ERC project, we recommend to add an explanatory sentence, e.g.: *In case both the X grant application and the ERC grant application are successful, I shall accept the ERC Grant and decline the X grant*

  - You can also present the total amount of funding obtained by the PI so far (CV or Track record)

B1, Section c: Early achievements track-record (max. 2 pages)

- The typical **structure of the early track record** is provided in the **ERC Work Programme 2021**

- In the early achievements track record, your most important publications (**up to five**) should be presented, highlighting those as main author and/or without the co-authorship of your PhD supervisor. You can also add field relevant bibliometric indicators (see ERC Work programme). **Preprints** may be included, if freely available from a preprint server (preprints should be properly referenced and either a link to the preprint or a DOI should be provided).

- We recommend to provide **summary/overview information** for the reviewers (e.g. total number of publications, contributions to conferences, citations, h-index etc as applicable; weblink to full list of publications), as well as specific "**highlight information**".

- For the list of five top publications in the track record, it is very advisable to **describe their significance and your contribution in 1-2 sentences**, e.g. in a textbox ("Here, we could show for the first time…"). We understand that such summaries are highly appreciated by panel members

- There is hardly any information available to date on how much attention ERC reviewers pay to the provision of listing only up to five publications in the Track Record. According to the ERC Executive Agency, *„the 'up to 5 publications' is not an eligibility issue but how strictly each panel will look at this in the evaluation is their own decision and cannot be predicted."*

- We also recommend to mention any **further important papers of particular relevance for your ERC projec**t (i.e. in addition to the top 5) in the proposal as well, e.g. by integrating this information in a brief additional running text section in the Track record ("research profile", "research interests" or similar), and/or in the extended synopsis and B2.