ERC Advanced Grant Online Interview
Notes and Tips

The present compilation is based on several sources, in particular on
experience reports shared by ERC Interviewees (StG, CoG, SyG), feedback provided by trainers
in the context of ERC interview trainings, and evaluation comments.

Content

What happens before, during and after the interview?

For many years, interviews have been an integral part of the evaluation process for the ERC Starting, Consolidator and the Synergy Grant. Starting with the ERC Work Programme 2021, interviews have become part of the ERC Advanced Grant Call. According to our information, the ERC Scientific Council felt that also PIs at an advanced career stage would profit from an opportunity to reply to questions on their proposal raised by ERC reviewers.

Before the Interview

You are invited to an interview in evaluation step two if the short version of your proposal (part B1) has been favourably rated by panel members in step one. In step one, only part B1 is read by usually four panel members, out of the approximately 12-16 members that constitute each ERC panel. The overall success rate of proposals at this stage is approximately 30-35%. The panel members will typically be generalists rather than specialists in your field.

In step two, the full proposal (B1 and B2) is read by two types of reviewers: 1) by the same panel members who assessed part B1 in step one, and 2) by specialist remote referees (usually minimum three, often five or more) whom the panel members have invited after reading part B1. The proposal is thus entirely new to the remote referees joining in step two. The remote referees send their individual reviews to the panel, but they do not participate in any discussions.

At the time of your interview, the panel members will have prepared a preliminary ranking list of proposals, based on their own assessment and the comments they have received by the remote referees. You will not have access to any of the reviewers' comments at this stage.

During the Interview

Only the panel members will be present at the online interview. Many of the questions they ask may stem from evaluation comments that the remote specialist referees have sent. The four panel members who moved your proposal to step two can be seen as your advocates. They invited you to personally explain your project, answer possibly surprising questions, and dispel e.g. methodological doubts. The online interview also provides the important chance to convince the other panel members who did not read your proposal of the unique promise of your approach.

After the Interview

Following the interview, the panel will discuss all proposals and prepare the final ranking list. Importantly, the entire panel – and not only four panel members – will take the decision on whether your project should be funded.

Subsequently, all evaluation reports have to be compiled and checked by the ERC Executive Agency, which is the reason why it takes several weeks following the interview before you are informed about the final outcome of the evaluation.

SUBMISSION DEADLINE	STEP 1 PANEL MEETING	INFORM APPLICANTS	STEP 2 PANEL MEETING	INFORM APPLICANTS
31 Aug 2021	Nov 2021	Jan 2022	Feb/March 2022	May 2022

Fig 1 – Evaluation timeline Avanced Grant Call 2021 (source: ERC Information for Applicants, AdG 2021)

Important – No contact allowed with peer reviewers

In case you meet panel members/peer reviewers after you submitted your ERC proposal, do not ask any question or provide any comment that even remotely touches upon your proposal, the interview or evaluation process in general. Otherwise the risk is extremely high that your proposal will be excluded from the evaluation process, as experience has shown.

Technicalities and Style

Instructions for the Interview

We recommend to **carefully check the instruction mails** you receive in advance of the interview. The instructions can differ markedly between ERC panels, e.g. in terms of duration of the presentation and discussion or the possibility to show slides. Panels frequently ask PIs to send a **pdf-version of their presentation in advance**, with a fixed deadline. You should also have received **information on the online tool** employed for the ERC interview (Webex Guidelines).

Dress code

While there is no dress code for ERC interviews, and experiences between panels vary, we understand that there is a trend towards more formal clothing for the interview (e.g. shirt and jacket rather than a sweater/T-shirt). You should feel comfortable in your clothes, also in front of the camera. If in doubt, we suggest to choose a more formal wear. Many recommendations on what to wear and what not in an online interview setting are available in the [web](#) (e.g. not to wear stripes or busy patterns).

Camera Setting

Please check also your **camera settings, light sources and background** for an optimal online impression. We do not recommend to use a virtual background as any movement you make may contort the picture. It may also be helpful to stand rather than sit during your online interview.

Preparing Your Presentation

- **Re-check your proposal** to identify possible open questions/ambiguities/weak spots that could be addressed by reviewers in the hearing, e.g. more information on methodology, risk management, team composition, criteria for choice of case studies/model organisms or recent scientific developments (e.g. competing approaches)

- Provide a **narrative** in your oral presentation, and the broader context/big picture of your proposal. This can be helpful to appeal also to panel members who are not in your field (most likely, the majority).

- Decide on the **narrative first** and prepare the slides (if slides are allowed)/your presentation accordingly, rather than the other way round.

- It may be better to **focus on 1-2 particularly important objectives and/or examples** instead of trying to get across too many messages during the presentation.

- **Avoid overloading** slides with information. Panel members should listen to you rather than read the slides.

- **Timing** is kept very **strictly** by the panel.

- Take particular care with the **first and the last sentence** - for a captivating start and a lasting impression of your final statement. Memorize at least the first and last sentences of your talk.

- We recommend to present **key messages on the last slide**, e.g. your more long-term vision. (We understand though that the last slide may not remain on display during the online discussion, as opposed to the situation with on site-interviews in Brussels)

- **Practice the talk also without slides.** This way you will be well prepared also in case there is a problem with displaying the slides.

- If you have a tendency to speak quickly, be conscious about it to ensure comfortable speed.

- Pronounce clearly.

- **Avoid empty words / filling phrases** such as *basically*, *obviously, as I already said before, as written in the proposal,…*

Tips for the Discussion

General

- In the discussion, do not start your reply with a phrase like "This is a very good question" (which may sound condescending) or "thank you for the question".

- Expect surprises: Panel members will try to ask questions you have not been asked before. →**Take a moment to think before answering**. Also apparently simple questions may have a catch.

- **Keep your answers short and to the point.** Panel members can always ask a follow-up-question if they want further information. In general, panel members will be less interested in your answer as such – above all, they will seek to determine whether you know the answer or not.

- **Never interrupt** a question, even if it is lengthy and you think you know exactly where it is going.

- Say "I am planning to…" rather than "I am thinking of…"

- If a panel member appears to have misunderstood something, you could say "perhaps I gave the impression that…"; "I had no time in my brief presentation to explain X" or similar. By contrast, it is not advisable to say "It is wrong/not correct that…"

Discussing the Project

- Panel Members may ask questions that aim at relating your work to their own research field. This is an opportunity to show **why your work can also be of relevance to them**. The answer should therefore not be "area x/application y is not of interest for this project", but as inclusive as possible ("…in the future,…"/ "We are open to collaborate,…")

- Your preliminary work should not give the impression that a large part of the research you propose has already been carried out, so that there would only be limited need for ERC funding. The project should thus not come across as a "mere extension of previous work". → Describe your **preliminary work as pilot study/proof of concept**, and focus on what is new in the project

- Prepare for questions on the scope of the project ("too broad/unfocused" or "too narrow"?)

- What impact of the ERC project on your field (and possibly other fields) do you envisage beyond the project duration? What is your more long-term **research vision?** (5-10 years)

- Present a testable **hypothesis**/hypotheses for your project or, if this is not usual in your field, provide clear driving **research questions**. Which important research gap/currently intractable problem do you aim to tackle? → To avoid a potential perception of the project as a "fishing expedition" (e.g. in case of screens in molecular biology) or a largely methods/technology-driven-approach

Example Questions Related to the Project

- What would you do if equipment X/PostDoc Nr. 2 were not funded by the ERC?
  → *It should be clear from your answer that this would limit the impact of your project as you have carefully planned your budget; you would apply for alternative funding sources,…*

- What is unique about your project?

- What is the supporting evidence that you can achieve aim X?

- Why is your project timely?

- Validation of project results: How will you know that you have succeeded? How will you interpret results?

- What is the key risk of the project? How do you deal with it, what is your plan B?

- You will have a postdoc with experience in [technology X] in your team, but is this sufficient if you, the PI, are not an expert?

- This is a mainly correlative approach (?) – how are you going to establish causality?

- How could you test this hypothesis?

- How exactly could the new conceptual and theoretical approaches of your project provide significant progress for this research challenge?

- What is your focus now, what are your priorities?

- Would this research not better be funded by industry?

- Questions x and y of your proposal are not new questions, they involve concepts that have been already published in the literature? Progress seems incremental?

- How will the findings of the different streams/work packages inform each other, how will they be integrated?

- What are milestones/intermediate goals of your project?

Discussing the PI, the Team, the Host Institution

- Be ready to explain your position vis-à-vis the competitors (who are your main competitors?), outlining your competitive advantage.

- Recognize the work of others.

Example Questions Related to People and Institution

- Expertise in area X/method Y seems to be missing in your project…?

- What is your strategy for the selection of collaboration partners?

- Your interaction with other ERC grant holders at the institution?

- Why is this work best carried out at your Host Institution, and not e.g. in the US,…?

- Describe your team and your recruiting strategy.