

Tips for the online ERC Starting Grant Interview

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The following compilation of information, tips and example questions for the ERC online interview is based on several sources, in particular on experience reports shared by ERC Interviewees and on feedback provided by trainers in the context of ERC interview trainings

ERC evaluation step 2: What happens before, during and after the interview?

You are invited for an interview on your Starting Grant application if the short version of your proposal, part B1, has been favourably rated in step one of the ERC evaluation process. The overall success rate in step one is approximately 25-30%. Only part B1 is read by usually four panel members (out of the ~ 12-16 members that constitute the respective ERC panels) in step one.

In step two, the full proposal (part B1 and B2) is read both by the four panel members (who frequently will be generalists rather than specialists in your field) and the “specialist” remote referees (usually minimum three) whom the panel members have invited. Thus the proposal is entirely new to the specialist referees, and they may question any aspect of the proposal even if it was favourably evaluated in step one.

At the time of your online interview, the panel members will usually have prepared a preliminary ranking list of proposals, based on their own assessments and the comments they have received by the remote referees. You will not be informed on any reviewer comments or the ranking position of your proposal at this stage. Only the panel members will be present at the online interview, but they may frequently also ask questions that have been raised by the specialist referees, quoting from their evaluation comments.

The four panel members who favourably evaluated your proposal at step one can be seen as your “advocates”. Based on part B1 of your proposal, they provide you with the opportunity to personally outline your project and your (long-term) research vision, to demonstrate that you are a convincing PI of a project that will change the field. You have the chance to dispel doubts, e.g. in case remote referees questioned methodological aspects.

The interview also provides the opportunity to convince the other panel members who did not read your proposal of the unique promise of your proposal. This is important as the entire panel will discuss all proposals and prepare the final ranking list once the interviews have been concluded.

Afterwards, all evaluation reports have to be compiled and checked by the ERC Executive Agency, which is why it takes several weeks in addition before you are informed about the final results of the evaluation.



Fig 1 – Evaluation timeline for the Starting and Consolidator Grant Call 2022 (source: ERC Information for Applicants, StG/CoG-2022)

Important - No contact allowed with peer reviewers: In case you meet panel members/peer reviewers whom you know after you submitted your 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.

“Dress code” online, camera settings, background

While there is no dress code for ERC interviews, and experiences between panels vary, there appears to be a trend towards more formal clothing for the interview (e.g. shirt and jacket rather than a sweater/T-shirt). Most importantly, 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 to wear in front of the camera (e.g. no stripes or busy patterns), are available online, for instance at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ashiraprossack1/2020/04/23/what-not-to-wear-for-an-online-interview/#1994711d2124>

Furthermore, we recommend to test the optimal camera setting with respect to the lighting conditions, and to ensure that the background is appealing and not distracting. In our experience it is not advisable to use a virtual background, due to potential distortion effects e.g. in the case of hand movements.

It may also be helpful to stand rather than sit during the interview.

Presentation (with or without slides)

- Provide a **narrative** in your presentation (with or without slides), including the “big picture”. This will support you in engaging also those panel members who are not in your field.

- Take particular care with the **first and the last sentence** (for a captivating start and a lasting impression of your final statement).
- For presentations with **slides**:
 - Decide on your **narrative first** and prepare the slides afterwards (rather than building a narrative with slides you already prepared previously). The presentation should come across as a story and not as if you were going through a checklist
 - Your slides should **illustrate** what you are saying, but not contain all the information – the panel members should be prompted to look at/listen to you rather than looking at the slides.
 - Avoid overloading the slides with details or rushing through a too high number of slides
 - Figures/graphs should be meaningful and not merely decorative
 - **Think about the best way to link from one slide to the next**: Rhetorical questions may not be the best approach to do so, at least this method should not be used too often
 - Take particular care in preparing the **first and the last slide**: The last slide may remain displayed during the discussion (and is thus ideal for a summary of the project and your research vision)
 - Whenever possible, answer questions directly rather than flicking back through slides “in search for an answer”.
 - Practice the talk also at least once **without slides**

General tips and example questions

- Check the instructions you have received for the interview by your ERC panel. **Timing** is kept very **strictly**.
- If the ERC instruction says “provide short information on the CV, the team,...etc”, this does not imply that each of these aspects has to be presented with a distinct slide. It may be more effective to embed the relevant information at suitable places within your narrative.
- **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, choice of case studies or recent scientific developments (→ competing approaches)
- Memorize at least the first and last sentences of your talk
- A catchy start will help to capture the panel’s attention

- 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,...*
- Expect surprises: Panel members will try to ask questions you have not been asked before, and to see how you react “under pressure”.
→ **Take a moment to think before answering a question.** 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 if you know the answer or not.
- **Never interrupt** a question, even if it is lengthy.
- 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, but not “it is wrong/not correct that...”
- In the discussion, do not start your reply with a phrase like “This is a very good question” (which may sound condescending), “thank you for the question”, or similar.

The PI, the Team, the Host Institution – Tips and example questions

- Describe your position vis-à-vis the competitors (who are your main competitors?); your competitive/unique advantage
- Recognize the work of others
- Prepare to explain about your independence as PI versus your embedment in the Host Institution
- *Why is this work best carried out at your Host Institution, and not e.g. in the USA,...*?
- *Describe your team and your recruiting strategy*
- *What is your strategy for selection of collaboration partners, e.g. with competitors?*
- *Expertise in area X/method Y seems to be missing in your project...?*

- *Your interaction with other ERC grant holders at the institution?*
- *What are your main achievements so far?*
- *Why will the ERC Grant be crucial for you at this stage?*
- *Do you have a permanent position at your institution without the ERC grant?*

The Project – Tips and example questions

- Panel Members may ask questions that aim at relating your work to their own research field. This is an opportunity to “invite them on board”. The answer should therefore never be “this area/application is not of interest for this project”, but as inclusive as possible
- Preliminary work presented should not give the impression that a large part of the work has already been done, so that there would only be limited need for ERC funding. The project should not come across as a “mere extension of previous work”. → Describe the 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 beyond) do you envisage beyond the project duration? What is your more long-term **research vision?** (5-10 years)
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- Present (a) testable hypothesis/hypotheses for your project or, if this is not usual in your field, provide clearly formulated 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 the Life Sciences) or a largely methods/technology-driven approach.
- Consider whether 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 oral presentation
- *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?*

- *Why is your project timely?*
- *Validation of project results: How will you know that you have succeeded? How will you interpret results? E.g. statistical power analysis,...?*
- *What is the key risk of the project? How do you deal with it, what is your plan B?*
- *This is a mainly correlative approach (?) – how are you going to establish causality?*
- *How could you test this hypothesis?*
- *What is your focus now, what are your priorities?*
- *Would this research not better be funded by industry?*
- *How do you use the rest of your working time?*
- *What are milestones/intermediate goals of your project?*