

ERC Starting Grant Online Interview Notes and Tips

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

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What happens before, during and after the interview?

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 the panel members in step one. In **step one, only part B1 is read by usually four panel** out of the approximately 12-16 members that constitute each ERC panel. The overall success rate of proposals at this stage is approximately 30%. The panel members will typically be **generalists** rather than specialists in your field.

In **step two, the full proposal (B1 and B2) is assessed** by two types of reviewers: 1) by the same **panel members** who evaluated part B1 in step one, and 2) by **specialist remote referees** (usually minimum three, often 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 evaluation 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 forwarded your proposal to step two will likely ask most or possibly all of the questions. They can be seen as your advocates, who invited you to personally explain your project, answer possibly surprising questions, and dispel e.g. methodological doubts. The online interview also provides the important opportunity 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 – not only the four panel members who read the proposal – 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 result of the evaluation.



Fig 1 – Evaluation timeline Starting/Consolidator Grant Call 2023 (source: ERC Information for Applicants)

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 the 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 receive **information on the online tool** employed for the ERC interview (Webex Guidelines).

Please note that in case the interview instruction for your panel refers to certain aspects that should be covered in your presentation (e.g. CV, team), this does typically 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.

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 and « eye contact »

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. You might also consider standing rather than sitting during your online interview.

We suggest to practice looking directly into the camera as much as possible during the presentation and discussion, even if it may feel counterintuitive. If you **look into the camera rather than at the panel members on your screen**, you will appear to be looking directly at your audience.

Webex Waiting Room

Depending on the order of interviews, you may spend up to 30 minutes or more in the online “waiting room” in the Webex tool. Please note that you may need to reconnect if your waiting time exceeds 30 minutes, as you may be logged out automatically after this timespan.

Preparing Your Presentation

- **Re-read your proposal carefully** to identify 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 presentation, and the **broader context** of your proposal. This can support you in engaging also panel members who are not in your field (likely the majority).
- Decide on the **narrative first** and then prepare the slides (if slides are allowed)/your presentation, rather than the other way round.
- Your slides should **illustrate** what you are saying, but not contain all the information. Panel members should listen to you rather than read the slides.
- **Focus on the key messages.** 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.
- **Think about the best way to link from one slide to the next.** Rhetorical questions (*How are we going to do this,...?*) may not be the best approach, at least this method should not be used too often
- **Timing** is kept very **strictly** by the panel.
- Take particular care with the **first and the last sentence** - for a catchy start and a lasting impression of your final statement. We suggest to memorize at least the first and last sentences of your talk.
- We recommend to present **key messages on the last slide** (or for the conclusion of a presentation without slides), for instance your more long-term scientific vision. (Please note though that the last slide will likely 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, and you will get even more used to looking into the camera directly rather than on the screen.
- 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 lose time by starting 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...”
- Whenever possible, answer questions directly rather than flicking back through slides “in search for an answer”.

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 done, 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 (e.g. "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 is unique about your project?
- What is the supporting evidence that you can achieve aim X?
- Why is your project timely?
- Why could this problem not be solved until now?
- How will you measure success of your project? How will you validate/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?
- 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,...*
- A few seconds are left - is there anything else you want to say about the 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. at institution X/ in the US,...?
- 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?
- Describe your team and your recruiting strategy.