

ERC Consolidator 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. A maximum of 44 proposals per panel is selected for the interview stage. In step one, only part B1 is read, by usually four out of the approximately 12-16 members that constitute each ERC panel. For cross-panel proposals (which e.g. have been submitted to two panels), the number of panel members reading the proposal may be five or higher. Please note that many of the panel members may 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 based on 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 themselves participate in any discussions – these are reserved to the panel members, who will eventually decide on the funding.

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 before the interview.

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 member – 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 on the final result of the evaluation.

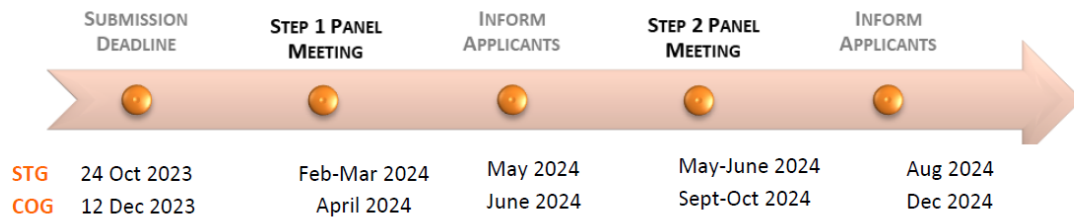


Fig 1 – Evaluation timeline Starting / Consolidator Grant Call 2024

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 the ERC, 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). According to the ERCEA, 16:9 is the preferred format for power point slides.

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 presentation narrative.

Dress code

While there is no dress code for ERC interviews, and experiences between panels vary, we have sometimes heard of a trend towards more formal clothing for the interview (e.g. shirt and jacket rather than a sweater/T-shirt). At any rate, 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, potential weak spots etc. that could be addressed by reviewers in the hearing. This may include e.g. more information on methodology, risk management, team composition, criteria for your choice of case studies, model organisms, recent scientific developments (e.g. preliminary results you obtained meanwhile; emerging competing approaches,...), etc.
- Tell a story with your presentation. Decide on the narrative first and then prepare the slides (if slides are allowed)/your presentation, rather than the other way round.
- Put your proposal in a broader context. This can support you in engaging also panel members who are not in your field (likely the majority).
- 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.
- Think about the best way to link from one slide to the next. Rhetorical questions (*How are we going to do this,...?*) may appear less inventive as a method, at least we recommend not to use them frequently.
- Be prepared that timing is kept very strictly by the panel. Think of short-cuts in case you should run out of time in spite of practicing.
- 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 may not remain on display during the online discussion.)
- 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.
- Pronounce clearly. If you have a tendency to speak quickly, be conscious about it to ensure comfortable speed.
- 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 even sound condescending) or *Thank you for the question*.
- Expect surprises: Panel members will likely 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”.
- Also for the discussion: Avoid empty words, filling phrases such as *basically, obviously, as I already said before, as written in the proposal, ...*

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,...*)
- Prepare for questions on the scope of the project (e.g. too broad/unfocused or too narrow?)

- Your preliminary work should not give the impression that a large part of the research you propose already has been carried out, 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 your preliminary work as pilot study/proof of concept, and focus on what is new in the project
- 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 scientific vision? (5-10 years)
- Present a testable hypothesis/hypotheses for your project or, if this is not usual in your field, present the driving research question(s). Which important research gap/currently intractable problem do you aim to tackle? By doing this, you 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?

- What are the parameters you can quantify with this analysis?
- 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?
- How will you address gender balance in your team?
- Describe your team and your recruiting strategy.