1. Start of Preparation

This guideline was supposed to be a short guideline but is expanding in time. Please select those tips that you consider to be useful and forget the rest. Our most important tips are be yourself, show passion for the project and research by sharing with the reviewers what drives you personally and why you are so knowledgeable on the topic.

1.1 Step 1: preparing for the interview

- Analyse the evaluation criteria described in the ERC Work Programme 2018– re-familiarize yourself with these criteria. These criteria are being used to select proposal. Check the writing instructions for B1 and B2 parts in the "Information for Applicants" to get an impression on what could be potential topics of a panel discussion.

- Analyse the B2 full proposal on its strong and weak points. Relate this to the evaluation criteria and writing instructions. The B1 was already successfully reviewed, and has convincingly described a potentially exciting proposal which may be potentially feasible. In the second step of the review the reviewers dig into these aspects ferociously. See for more details step 2 below.

- Check the literature and internet for new results affecting (negatively and positively) your project and in particular your specific objectives, research questions, hypothesis as well as your project concept/idea and/or scientific approach. Panel members like to hear that you are aware of the latest developments and explain to them how these developments may potentially affect your project.

- Check what your potential competitors are doing and define what makes your project different and novel and why you have a better scientific approach.

- What new evidence do you have which supports the potential feasibility of addressing the Important Challenge, the Scientific Need, the Big Research Question, the concept, the scientific approach and the potential impact? Referees love to be convinced through preliminary results, demonstrating the feasibility of the scientific approach. If your project concept is disruptive and going against the current understanding or theory in natural or life sciences, the panels may even expect that the first results have recently been published. Additional preliminary results are also demonstrating there is a flow and your project will be a success.

- Check who your potential reviewers are:
  - the chairs of the panels are known before hand, the members of the panels will only be published after the grants have been awarded.
  - Panels are alternating in year, therefore check the composition of the other odd or even year panels, published data on ERC website[1] A panel member that served 3 times or more is most likely not a panel member for your call.

- Check the keywords listed for your panel[2]. What makes your proposal a ground-breaking proposal for the research area or methodology covered by the keyword(s). Please note that every panel member represents 1-3 key words per panel. Only 1 or 2 panel members will have an in-depth understanding of your project and another 1-2 panel members will understand it. These panel members are most likely your referees and the in-depth expert will be the leading reviewer. These 3 to 4 panel members will have read and analysed the B1 and B2 sections of your proposal. The

[1] https://erc.europa.eu/document-library/results?title=panel+members

[2] Annex 1 of the Information for Applicants for the Starting Grant or Consolidator Grant 2018 call.

other panel members will only briefly familiarise themselves with the proposal and in particular with the reviews by external referees.

- Check, beside the keywords, the general panel description which indicates the scope of the research areas covered by the panel. Assess which of these areas you may have an impact on as well as the area covered by your keywords. Impact in the ERC terminology means impact on science primarily. Only impacting a single area may lead to the conclusion that your project is ground-breaking but limited. Having an impact on society and industry is a bonus.

- Be able to express your personal career ambition or your vision on future research perspectives. The panels have the task to select potential scientific leaders that can put Europe at the frontier of science.

1.2 Step 2: Analysis strong and weak points

The panels are selecting project based on sound science. This implies that you need to define for your own research field how sound science is defined. Talk to your colleagues about the definition of sound science. Hereunder we provide some tips but these do not cover all research fields.

- Quality of the research questions and/or research objectives and how addressing them will contribute to resolving the Important Challenge, Scientific Need or Big Research Question. Depending on your research field either the formulation of the research question and/or objective is key. Emphasize your answer to the “So What is it that we Must Understand” for conceptual research questions/objectives or the “So What is it that we Must Know before we Can Do” for more applied research questions. This re-iteration has the purpose to further evaluate several aspects.

- In most life sciences panels the project proposals need to be hypothesis driven. Other panels are looking for elements such as specific research questions, conjectures or conceptual framework. Check how you phrased the hypotheses and whether you have proper controls or control experiments included.

- Ground-breaking nature and impact. The panels are looking for significant contributions to the current state of the art. Significant contributions can be 1) the development of a novel scientific approach useful for versatile applications or addressing other research questions and/or 2) generating new knowledge leading to a conceptual change in science.

  Define the ground-breaking nature of your project. What makes this project different than what others are doing. Define what the potential results are and their impact on your research field. Subsequently conceptualise these results by synthesis, deduction or generalisation into general knowledge having an impact beyond your field. For example, obtaining the project results will lead to a new understanding in your field and a new concept/paradigm/model/framework having an impact beyond your research field. When the impact is limited to your research field, than the panel may consider your project ground-breaking but lacking potential impact.

  In research fields driven by a Big Research Question, asking the right research question(s) is a step in the right direction, but without a novel concept or novel approach or a novel development across disciplines reviewers will have trouble to understand why you are the one scientist/scholar who is able to answer this important question. Achieving the potential breakthrough indicated in the research question requires a new “twist/direction/etc” otherwise it would already have been undertaken by the community.

- Therefore analyse if you have properly captured in words -and perhaps in a visualization- what the novel concept, approach or development is, and why it is underpinning the Important Challenge, Scientific Need or Big Research Question.
- Analyse in the light of the cascade effect of things, if the key terminology is well explained and supported by proper references;
- What evidence do you have, showing that you might be able to address the question; what evidence do you have that your concept, approach or the novel development across disciplines is potentially effective in answering this question.
- Is the scope of the project well chosen. Not too narrow (not leading to a conceptual change across different research fields) or not too broad (addressing different aspects without a scientific justification).
- Critically analyse your workplan. Is there a logical clustering of activities, Is there a clear description of What these activities are, Is there sufficient technical, scholarly, and scientific detail addressed so that the reviewers can understand How this will be done? The questions of the reviewers during the interview can be very technical in nature.
- Are risks and contingency plans well addressed?
- Is there a timeline included?

The reviewers have read the B1 and the B2. Therefore, start balancing which of the strong and weak points need to be addressed in your presentation and what points will need specific attention for the question and answer session following your presentation. Further down in this guide we propose how to effectively use your slide presentation, as well as the question and answer session, to create a more favourable evaluation when your proposal is taken into consideration.

1.3 Step 3: The slides and hand-out

In Annex I of the Invitation Letter is stated how long the interview will last and how many minutes you have to present your project. Please note that the details vary from panel to panel. In most panels you are allowed to give a 10 minutes presentation supported with a Power Point presentation and a hand-out for the panel members. Try to bring along a hand-out that is nicely printed, for example in colours on a slightly thicker paper than normally used. Annex I defines also the focus of your presentation: these being innovative aspects, the research team, the methodology, the expected results and the potential contribution to the current state of the science in your field.

Please start with the most important message, as you have (in most panels) only 10 minutes and you want to capture the attention of all panel members directly from the start. While preparing the presentation, discuss the order and content of the slides with your colleagues who have a lot of experience with reviewing proposals, especially international proposals. Make sure that you do not have too many slides. Please realise that you will lose valuable seconds before you start or click to the next slide. Also, it may become a bit “busy” if you have many slides making it difficult for the panel members to stay focussed. Furthermore, the panel appreciates if you finish a minute earlier than scheduled (in the case of 10 minutes presentation). Take the time to come up with good slides. Use pictures are helpful and underline your ideas. This is your opportunity to become a recognized promising scientist with the potential to become a worldwide leading scientist in the future.

Below some suggestions for your slides:

- Start with the (re-iterated) Big Research Question, Important Challenge, the Big Problem or Scientific Need. You may also consider to start with the Overarching Goal/Aim which expresses (your contribution to) the challenge that you are going to address + the novel concept/ novel approach/development across disciplines. Your concept should be innovative and clear as to how it is addressing a major challenge or big research question and why YOUR project with you as the scientist is a key and unique element in solving this.

- Explain the novel/innovative and ground-breaking aspects of your project. If you are carrying out applied research you need to explain what the novel scientific/engineering aspects are in your proposal and how it will open up new research horizons and/or opportunities. Even if you carry out a humanities project you need to explain how the new knowledge will open up new horizons for other scholars.

- Add a slide (or 2 slides) on envisioned outcomes or expected results of the project and how these results will open up new research possibilities for you and others (new horizons) and utility.

Some panels are very restrictive in the number of slides; for example only 3 slides. If this is the case consider the following structure: on the first slide emphasize what the concept of your project is including the main objectives and novelty. Explain on the second slide the scientific approach and methodology including preliminary results. Address on the last slide the most important evidence of what your project will achieve**:** the expected results, the (scientific, scholarly or engineering) impact and the team. If only 1 slide is permitted (5 min presentation) than divide the slide in different boxes and try to address the items as mentioned above, with focus on concept, ground-breaking nature, novelty and impact.

- Add a slide on the scholarly, scientific, technical How to. For most research areas this means the technical description of the workplan which explains the methodology part. However in some fields there needs to be an in-between step addressing the conceptual (intellectual) part of the workplan. Besides explaining the methods, address why the proposed methodology is novel, appropriate and necessary. Not all proposals will have novel methodology, in such cases the novelty will be more at the level of the concept/approach; most likely the risks will then also be connected to this level. The reviewers will try to assess how appropriate the proposed methodology is to achieve the projected outcomes and how relevant these outcomes are for specific objectives and the big research question. Therefore do a thorough analysis on the workplan as well as any alternative routes towards the goals you have projected be critical about why it is necessary to conduct the work as you are proposing (not making things complex for the sake of high-risk but only because that seems the only way to achieve the breakthrough).

- Add a slide on the challenging and risky elements. These challenges and risks can occur at the level of the concept/approach/novel developments or be at the level of the workplan where novel methodologies, techniques, equipment are being developed. This slide should include the potential feasibility (what preliminary evidence do you have) and your back-up plan in case the most challenging parts fail. Please remember that the panel will assess whether you are capable in adjusting the project plan, if required.

- If applicable, add a slide on new preliminary results (for example obtained after submission of your proposal) demonstrating that this project is potentially feasible. Please note that the panels are selecting high-risk projects with a potential high-gain and therefore the preliminary evidence should still contain significant uncertainties/risks; a low-risk project will not be selected.

- If you have not included a Gantt chart in your proposal, include one now or add it as a back-up slide.
- Add a slide on budget and present team. Showing your present team is indicating that you are recognised by your host institute.
- Try to limit yourself to 1 slide about yourself including an update of the latest developments, demonstrating that you are a recognised promising researcher, f.i. new publications, prizes, etc.
- Include in the slides the project references to your own work to show that you are the right person for the project.

If you have too many slides, you may not be able to present all slides (the panel chair will stop the presentation after 10 minutes and zero seconds). Make sure to avoid this. Please note that most likely behind you a clock projected on the wall is counting down the minutes In recent years most panels have a clock projected behind the applicant, visible to all panel members, ticking and increasing the tension in the room. In some cases the panel allows you to show a new slide when a specific question is asked. Therefore, consider including a few extra slides to support your answers in case the panel allows more flexibility but don't count on this.