



2. Continued preparation

2.1 Step 4: Practicing the oral presentation

- Practice your presentation a few times with colleagues (and possibly with friends or family members¹) and ask them to come with difficult questions. It will give you the opportunity to discuss the issues in your proposal. Very often the candidates know the answers to the questions but they have problems in formulating the answers or with explaining the added value of their project to research in general. Giving colleagues an answer helps in practicing how to formulate answers to difficult questions.
- Practice your presentation and use also your hands so they can underline your words a few times. Hands that make movements are unconsciously underlining words and are showing your enthusiasm for this project. It is not easy but you will notice that using your hands can help you in formulating the answers. There are several don'ts regarding hands. Please do not fold your arms in front of you as if you need to protect your body. Please remember that you are in Europe and not in U.S.A where you keep one hand in your pocket. Europeans may perceive hands in your pocket as impolite. So if you have a habit of putting hands in your pocket, consider to stick your pockets.
- In the past the panels also asked non-scientific questions on budget, possibility to cut the budget, host institute, environment, role and contributions of partners to the project etc. Remember that you are the project leader of this project, so you decide how you will spend the money, who you will hire, when you draft papers and who will be author on the papers etc. You are also the person responsible for analysing all data and drawing conclusions. Please read for more information the concept Commitment of the Host Institute Letter (Annex a) in the Information for Applicants. Ask EU support staff within your university to participate in the interview training to help you to prepare for non-scientific questions.
- After a few rounds you end up with a lot of tips and advices. Listen to advice but pick out what you think is useful. In the end you decide what advice gives you the right energy to give a better performance in Brussels.

2.2 Possible questions asked by the panel

Applicants invited to the interview session in Brussels have provided us with feedback information on the type of questions asked. There are different types of questions asked, see the chapter on interview questions.

Questions posed by the panel members typically address perceived weaknesses, novelty, the challenges, the appropriateness of the chosen scientific approach, the effectiveness of the workplan, the intellectual concepts behind the project as well as the potential feasibility and its back-up plans. In the last few calls the panels are focusing on whether you can draw conclusions based on the data obtained and whether you are able to conceptualise/generalise the findings. Prepare thoroughly for these questions because the nature of the questions will be for 95% scientific/technical/scholarly.

Analyse your project and identify the strong points and weak points and the added value of your project to the overall science. The panels have the tendency to select projects that will have a major impact by delivering key enabling technology or knowledge having a crucial role in solving a major (scientific) problem. The trick is to explain what will be your unique

1. Some applicants have told us that the most crucial question asked by the panel was similar to a question asked by a friend or family member, being an outsider trying to understand the project and relevance.



role in solving a major problem, regarding concept, approach and technology etc. and having an impact beyond the scope of the project.

2.3 Presenting yourself

- Make sure that you wear something in which you are comfortable in particular considering that the temperature regulation in Covent Garden is not very sophisticated, so if is the sun shining, the room of your interview may be very warm and stuffy as well. Be prepared for this and choose your outfit accordingly.
- The panel is selecting **confident, convincing and enthusiastic** applicants who show broad knowledge, can answer all scientific questions appropriately and are clearly independent. Please remember that there is a high likelihood that similar projects have been submitted. The panels are trying to select the project with the best concept, approach, preliminary results and added value that will be carried out by the best candidate with the right knowledge and expertise to tackle the project.
- Ignore how the panel members are responding to your interview. In the last calls the panels were instructed to be and act neutral even if you are a very enthusiastic presenter. But the panel may also give you another signal not reflecting the outcome. For example several panels applaud after a session, even when the candidate received negative news afterwards.
- You are the scientific expert in the world on this topic; otherwise you would not have been selected. Your chance is already 33-45% to be ranked as one of the top 10 percentile of promising outstanding scientists in Europe. So be confident.
- Assess your English and make sure that you do not speak too fast and mumble. Try to pronounce difficult words correctly or add them to your slides.
- **Be yourself. The only person who can sell this project is YOU.**

2.4 Tips for the day before the interview

- E-mail the PowerPoint presentation and its PDF version to yourself. Use a webmail account in case you lose your USB stick or your laptop is stolen. Also, be aware of pickpockets in Brussels, especially at the airport, metro but also on the street. It happens very fast and you don't have the time to deal with lost luggage or lost USB sticks.
- Check the transport and the location of Covent Garden (the EC building) on the day you arrive. Covent Garden can be reached via the metro, exit Metro Rogier. Look around and you notice Place de Rogier is a mess with a lot of big buildings around. Coven Garden is slightly hidden behind other buildings. First locate the hotels Hilton Brussels City and Crown Plaza situated next to each other and walk to the new building on the left side of these hotels. The EC building Covent Garden is a greenish glass building with only a few floors facing Place de Rogier and extending to the back with 2 large glass buildings that you do not see immediately. Use street viewer of Google maps to orient yourself prior to travelling to Brussels.
- If you stand in front of Covent Garden there may be signs indicating how you can enter the building since you are most likely not allowed to use the same entrance as panel members.
- Check whether you have the Invitation Letter, necessary ID, papers and files.



- Spend the rest of the day doing something inspiring, like visiting a museum or a park or having fun with friends to give your brain the chance to rest, digest the input and prepare for the next day.
- Remember that you have been selected as being one of the most promising scientists in Europe who can change the scientific world.

2.5 The interview day

- Bring along (check your invitation letter for more specifications):
 - Your invitation letter;
 - Your passport (including a copy of the passport);
 - Your presentation as a PDF file and a power point presentation on an empty USB stick (in case the ERC officers need to help you);
 - If requested the hand-outs; and
 - Something to drink and to read, while waiting for the interview. There is water, orange juice, tea and Nespresso (Nespresso costs money) available in the waiting rooms.
 - Consider to send the presentation to a web-based mail-account so you can access it, in case you lost your USB stick.
- Arrive at least one hour before the scheduled interview session, in case of a cancelled interview.
- You need to identify and register yourself to be able to enter the main buildings. On the ground floor there is a reception desk with clear signs and banners for ERC Starting/Consolidating Grant where they ask you to show your passport and Invitation Letter to provide you permission to go to the top floors.
- After registration you will receive a paper with the exact time when to present yourself in the waiting room + floor:
 - Be present 40 min before the presentation. There are plenty options for waiting. Just make sure that you enter the indicated waiting room 40 minutes before your indicated presentation time.
 - Upon arrival at the reception on the floor, you give them the USB + hand-outs.
 - There will be about 8 people in the waiting room (those waiting and those coming out); in general there is not much talking going on
 - A Panel member will pick you up (and bring you back). This person will explain the procedure while walking to the interview room,
 - The Chair will call you inside.
- The ERC staff will upload your presentation to a Covent Garden computer for presentation, so you get a chance to check whether the slideshow is working. Do this **as soon as possible**. This can be done on one of the computers provided. Check both versions, being the PowerPoint and PDF version or just the PDF version. Currently PowerPoint 2010 version is installed on the Covent Garden computer, causing problems if you have a high tech presentation or using a Mac programme with high tech features. This is the reason why you have also brought along a PDF version of your presentation (Adobe Reader X). Short movies are a problem and an applicant told that he was allowed to use her laptop to show a short movie but lost precious seconds when switching computers. Somebody else told me he walked with an open laptop in to the room and was able to plug and launch the



presentation in a few seconds. Do not expect the panel to give you permission to use your laptop.

- The presentation room is a rectangular room with the screen on the short wall and the panel sitting around a table in a horseshoe (board room). There may be two screens beside each other: one for projecting your slides and one for projecting a clock. The clock is indicating how much time has elapsed, a bit nerve wrecking. If you stand on the side of your slides, probably closest to the door you are not caught by the lights of the projectors and may even see the clock tick. A clicker with laser pointer is usually provided. If you did not prepare using a laser pointer, do not use it during the interview.

2.6 The Interview itself

- The whole interview session will last approximately 25 minutes - provided you have a 30 minutes slot scheduled - from the moment you enter the interview room till you leave..
- You may have to wait a minute outside the interview room before the panel is ready for you. Check in the meantime if a list of panel members is stuck on the door to the interview room. Some of the panel members were panel member in previous calls. In one of the enclosed chapters we have compiled a list of panel compositions in the past.
- When you enter the interview room you will most likely not be given the time to shake hands. In most cases the chairperson will welcome you and tell you how many minutes you have to present the proposal. In some panels a clock is counting down the time. As soon as the chairperson gives you the word the clock STARTS... Most panels have a clock ticking backwards behind your head, other panels are using a bell or turn the projector black. Try to present your presentation well within the allocated time.
 - Nod to the chairperson or say good morning/afternoon;
 - Check whether your presentation is on the screen when entering the room;
 - Consider whether you start with thanking the panel for the opportunity to present your project: For example "thank you for inviting me to present my project";
 - In the meantime look at all the panel members. It takes only 10-15 seconds to look at all their faces but then you have already addressed the scariest moment of the interview, seeing all those panel members and realizing that they are also humans;
 - Refocus on your presentation and start your talk;
 - If you have problems with the power point version switch immediately to the PDF version. You do not have the time to solve software problems; and
 - Try to present your presentation in 9 minutes if you have been given 10 minutes, giving the panel an extra minute for discussions.
 - If there is a clock counting the minutes down, try to ignore it and focus on your presentation.
- The panel is composed of experts covering different research fields. They are all worldwide recognized researchers with a capacity to look beyond the borders of their research field. You will however notice that 2-3 panel members will ask most of



the questions. These panel members are your “panel reviewers” who have evaluated your proposal. One or two of these panel reviewers is working in your research field and the other one or two in adjacent researcher fields. The other panel members have only “familiarized” themselves with the proposal. The panel member opening the discussion is most likely the person who has read your proposal in detail. S/he may also be the person who is responsible for monitoring a fair assessment of your proposal.

- Some panels have microphones in place.
- The questions vary from science to methodology with maybe a few about management and finance. The questions regarding science can be difficult. Try to give precise answers and show that you know what you are talking about. Sometimes it is easier to address these questions when you show the key slide of your presentation during the discussions. It may therefore be an option to remember which number this slide has and type the “number” and “enter” when you have finished your power point² presentation (and up comes this slide on the screen). See also section potential questions.
- Sometimes the panel is asking twice nearly the same question to check whether you are giving consistent answers to the questions. If you are not the writer of the proposal or do not know your science you would give different answers. But there may also be an issue identified by an external referee and the panel is not sure whether you are addressing this issue adequately. Some applicants told us that when they read the feedback from the external reviewers they understood the issue, but somehow the panel did not phrase the question correctly.
- Twenty minutes discussion is not enough to ask all questions. Look at the person who is asking a question. It gives him/her the possibility to check whether you have understood the question. If you start answering keep looking at the person for a few seconds and focus then on the question and keep eye contact with the panel. It is important that you include the whole panel in your story by looking at them. Try to make eye-contact again with the person asking the question at the end to check whether s/he has understood the answer and is satisfied. It gives the other person the opportunity to give involuntary a positive feedback (like a small nod or smile) or to rephrase the question.
- Please note that the panel members have been instructed not to show any body language (being neutral). This may be frustrating when you are showing enthusiasm and passion about your project and are giving excellent and interesting answers. Do not get discouraged by the lack of positive response by the panel members.
- Be clear in your presentation and underline or indicate with hand gestures where appropriate (size, draw attention to issues on the screen etc). Using your hands effectively during the presentation or while answering will be helpful for the audience to understand the complexities within your research design.
- As a scientist you can never guarantee the outcomes and the panel is fully aware of this. Therefore be realistic in what you promise, be specific about what is high-risk and why this is important for opening new horizons in research. Above all be precise in all scientific, scholarly, engineering matters that you address.
- Be confident: You are the expert in this field and the only person who can carry out this project. You came up with a very original idea, the results of your project may open up new horizons of research in this field and this is your chance to become an

2. This trick does not work with PDF



independent researcher with the potential to become one of the key-players in the world in this field in 5-10 years.

- Prepare for highly technical scientific questions but also the more generic scientific questions (at least don't be surprised when panel members ask rather basic questions). The interviews are mainly about the scientific questions. Where in the past there was a lot of emphasis on non-scientific questions. Today they only seemed to be thrown in occasionally.
- This presentation is the opportunity to convince the reviewers about the scientific value of the project; don't be a salesman and don't lecture.
- At the end of the interview say "thank you" and nod to the chairperson.
- We know we are asking too much but just selecting some of the tips may help you in presenting your proposal: concept, approach, novelty, ground breaking nature and impact are key. In other words why this project, why now and why you?