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How to write competitive proposals – an EU advisor's perspective
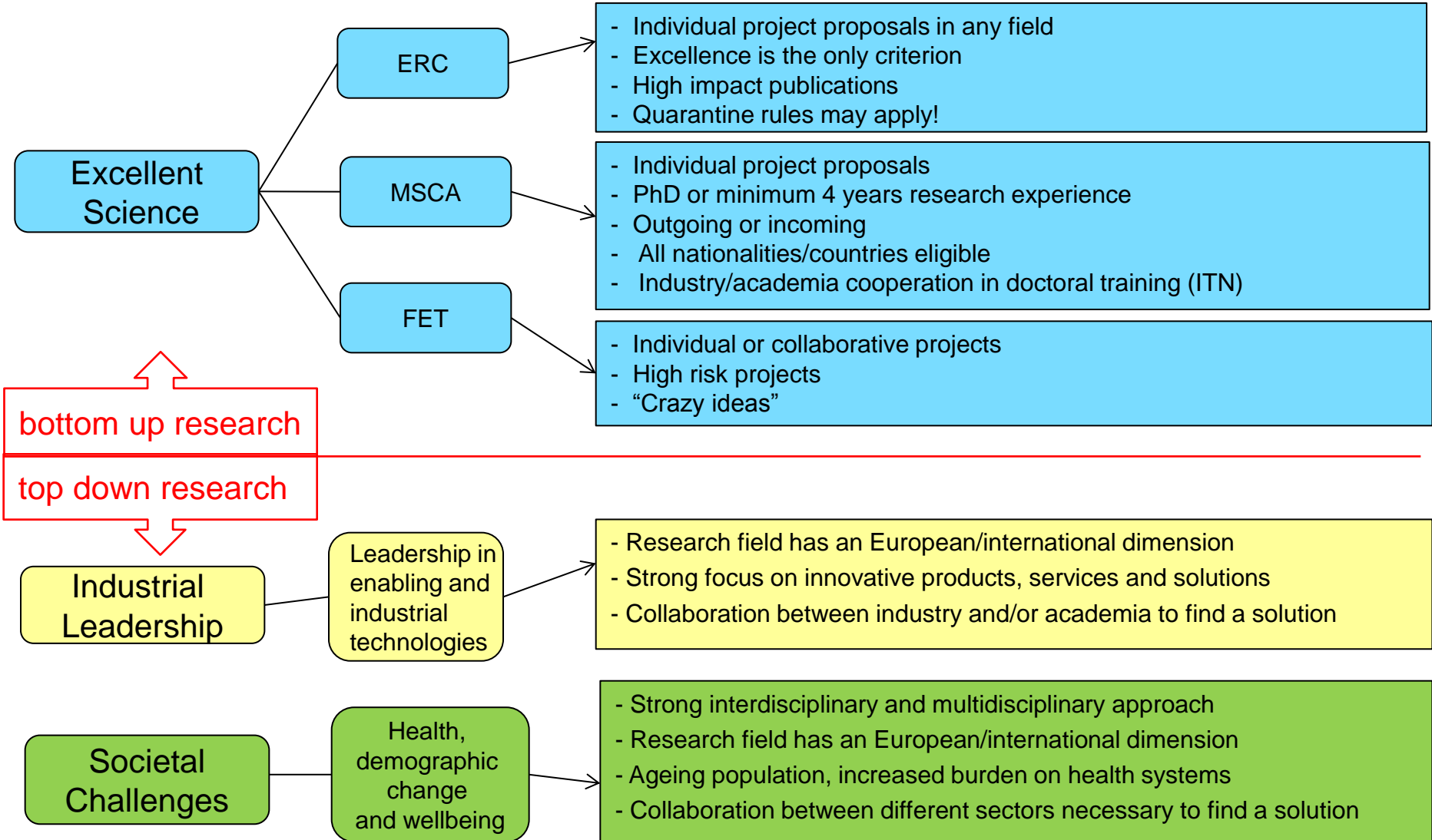
Konstantinos Chilidis

Outline

- Find the right call
- The proposal structure
- The writing process
- Take home messages

Find your path in the funding jungle

Which EU programme fits your project idea?

Excellent Science

ERC
- Individual project proposals in any field
- Excellence is the only criterion
- High impact publications
- Quarantine rules may apply!

MSCA
- Individual project proposals
- PhD or minimum 4 years research experience
- Outgoing or incoming
- All nationalities/countries eligible
- Industry/academia cooperation in doctoral training (ITN)

FET
- Individual or collaborative projects
- High risk projects
- "Crazy ideas"

bottom up research

top down research

Industrial Leadership

Leadership in enabling and industrial technologies
- Research field has an European/international dimension
- Strong focus on innovative products, services and solutions
- Collaboration between industry and/or academia to find a solution

Societal Challenges

Health, demographic change and wellbeing
- Strong interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach
- Research field has an European/international dimension
- Ageing population, increased burden on health systems
- Collaboration between different sectors necessary to find a solution

SSH-flagged topics

List of SSH disciplines
Guidance for applicants
Guidance for evaluators
List of SSH-flagged topics

http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/portal/desktop/en/opportuniti es/h2020/ftags/ssh.html#c,topics=flags/s/SSH/1/1&+callStatus/asc

# THE PROPOSAL STRUCTURE

How to write and plan your application

- Start early!

- Read the call text thoroughly

- Understand the context of the call

- Discuss your idea with your collegues

- Involve your administration

Networking

- Without a network EU is an impossible arena

- Use your network

- Conferences

- COST actions networks (old and new)

- Find partners at CORDIS

The big picture

Politicians → Policy → Funding source → Funding Program →
Your project → IMPACT → Politicians

EC strategy 2020

Horizon 2020

Calls for projects

Impact

Dissemination and use

Results
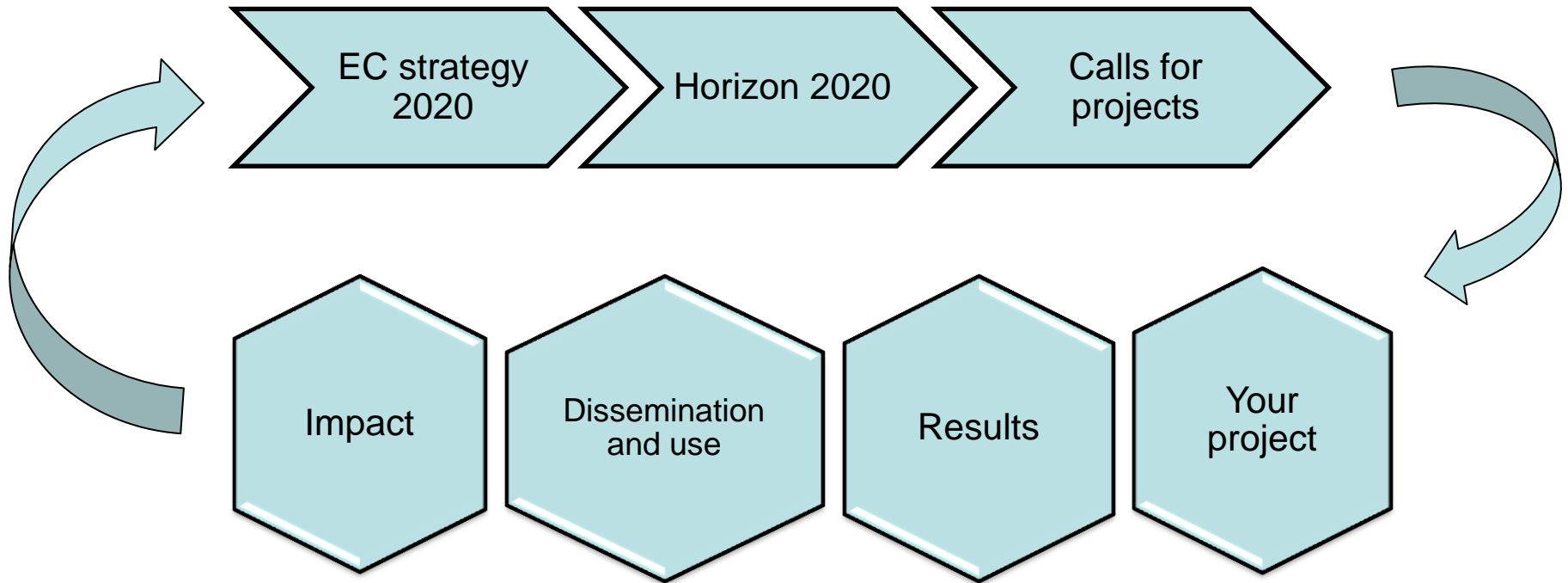
Your project

Discover your position in the big picture…

Terminology

- **Objectives** is what you will achieve in the project period

- **Deliverables** are the products/results of your work

- **Impact** is spreading (**dissemination**) and use (**exploitation**) of your results during and after project

- **Communication** is everything you do to inform about and get attention to your project during the project period

- **Implementation** is how you will do your project in the project period

Ask and answer the following questions

- **WHY** is the proposal of interest?

- **WHAT** exactly is your idea?

- **WHO** will do the work (are you credible)?

- **HOW** will you do it?
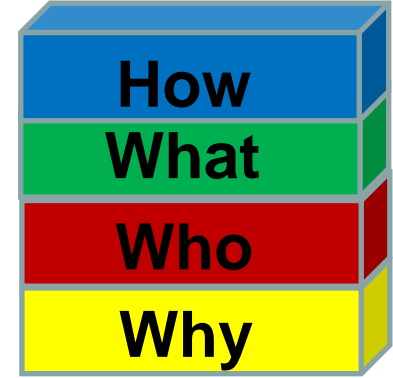
Application structure

How
What
Who
Why

🟨🟥🟩🟦 Project summary

🟨🟥🟩 Excellence (introduction, background)

🟨🟥🟩 Impact (communication, dissemination)

🟥 🟦 Implementation (approach, project plan)

Excellence	Impact	Implementation
WHY	WHY	WHY
WHO	WHO	WHO
WHAT	WHAT	WHAT
HOW	HOW	HOW

What are they looking for?

1. Excellent, highly ambitious science that corresponds to the topic description

2. Results that make a difference on several levels: impact

3. Coherence and effectiveness of the work plan executed by a competent team

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Vision or idea

SotA – your scientific platform
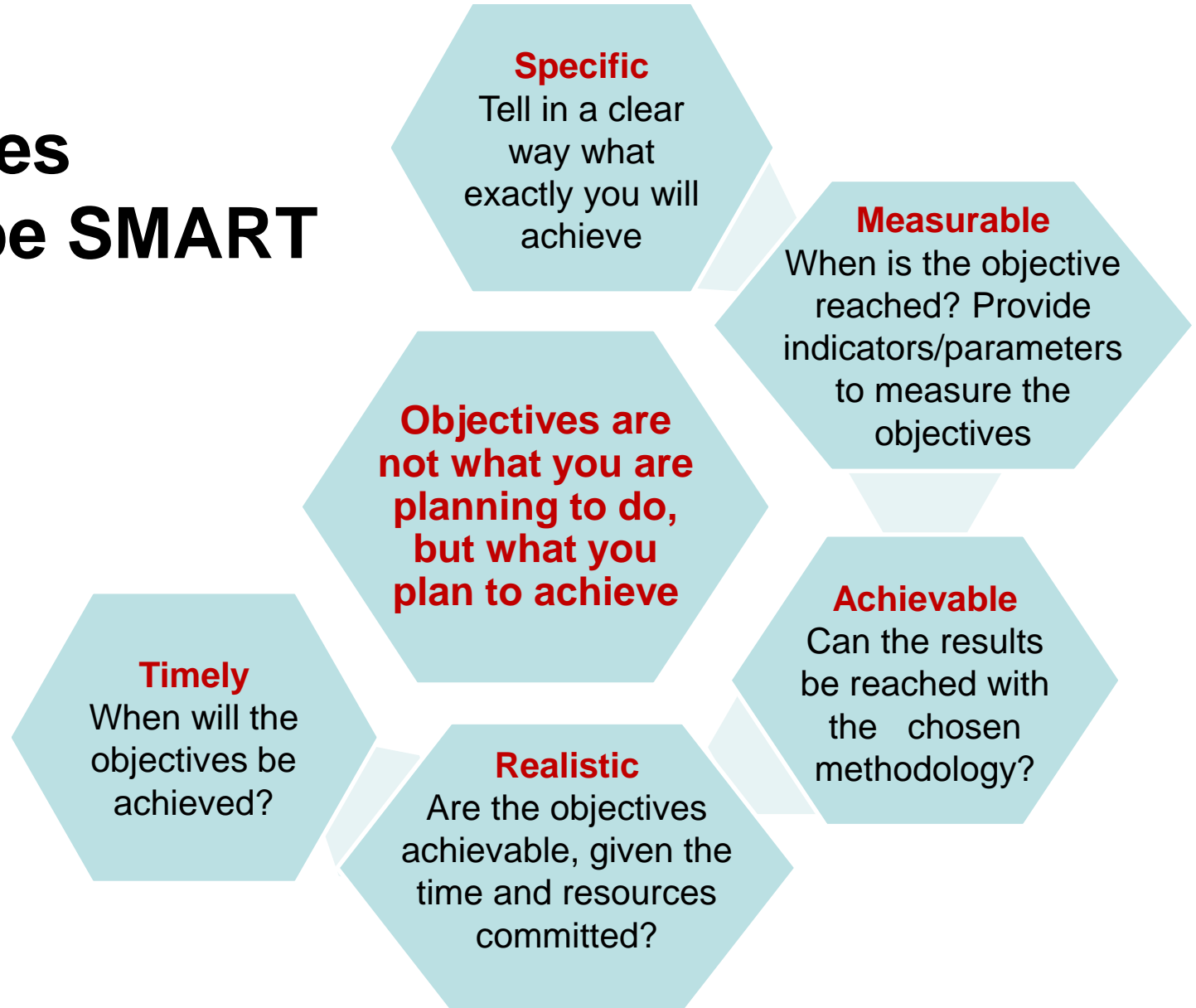
Objectives – what you will achieve

Go beyond SotA – the results of your objectives

Impact – the effect and use of your results

WPs, methods and results – the effort to fulfill the objectives

Resources – the means to fulfill the objectives

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Objectives should be SMART

Specific
Tell in a clear way what exactly you will achieve

Measurable
When is the objective reached? Provide indicators/parameters to measure the objectives

Objectives are not what you are planning to do, but what you plan to achieve

Achievable
Can the results be reached with the chosen methodology?

Timely
When will the objectives be achieved?

Realistic
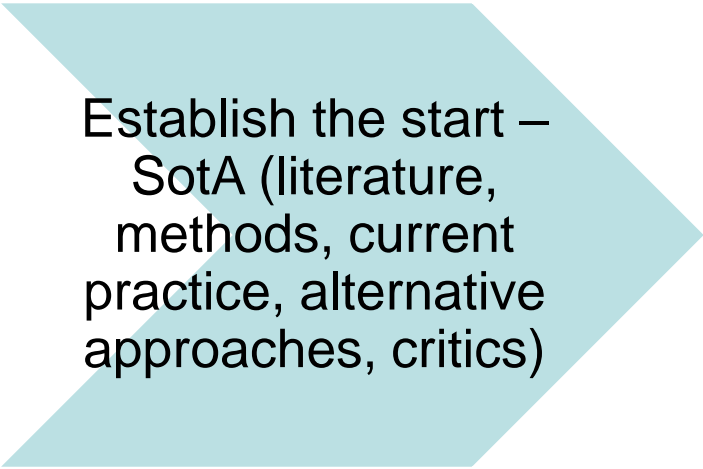Are the objectives achievable, given the time and resources committed?

Objective – Example

- Obesity causes death in millions of Europeans. The objective of this research project is to study the role of nutritional signals causing bad food habits as a starting point for a possible new therapy.

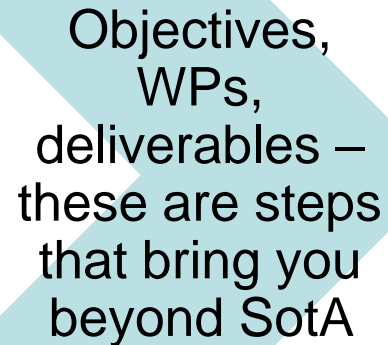- The objective is to develop a new therapy for obesity based on bioactive compounds.

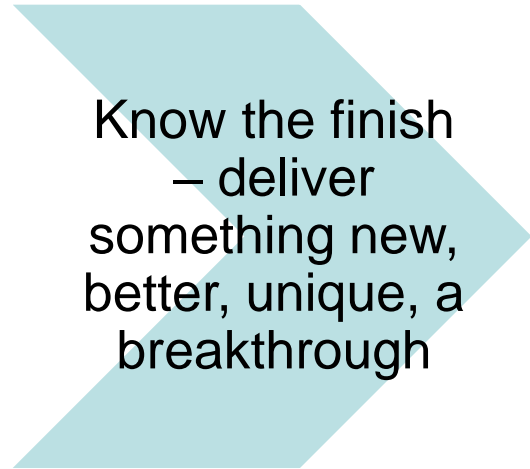- Example from Fit for health 2.0 presentation

Beyond State of the Art

Establish the start – SotA (literature, methods, current practice, alternative approaches, critics)

Objectives, WPs, deliverables – these are steps that bring you beyond SotA

Know the finish – deliver something new, better, unique, a breakthrough

Section 2: Impact

- What is the **expected impact** of the project? And does this answer the expected impact of the call text? Be specific and quantify…

- Provide a draft "**plan for the dissemination and exploitation**" of the project's results during and after its end

- Outline the **strategy for knowledge management and protection**. Include measures to provide Open Access

- What is the social and **societal benefit** of the project?

- Communication: How will you bring the results **to the audiences** (to whom, why, how, and when)?
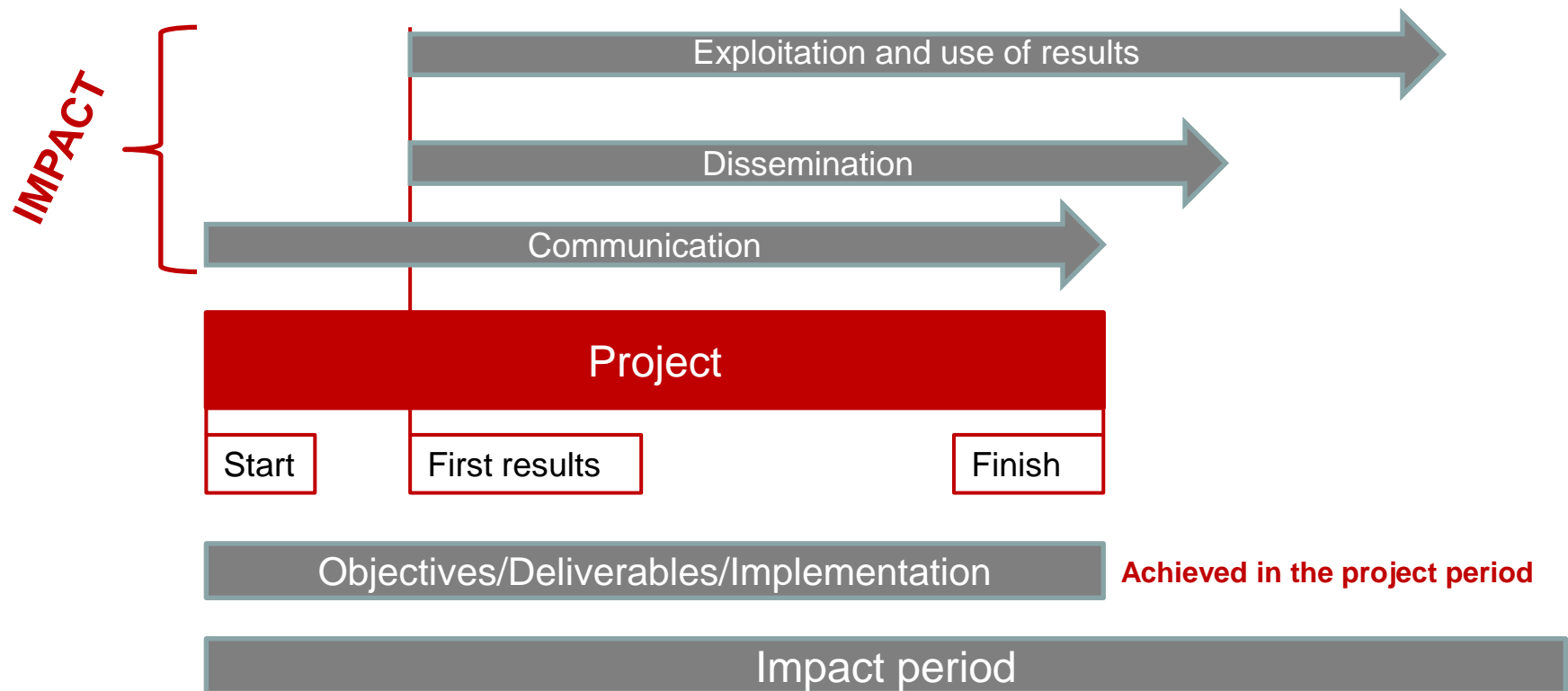
Maximizing impact

- **Impact on research**
  - excellence, mobility and training of researchers
- **Impact on economy**
  - European competitiveness, creation of jobs
- **Societal impact**
  - public policy and society

Involving users will maximise IMPACT

Impact and timing

- Short term changes in
  - knowledge, skills, aspirations, attitudes, awareness

- Medium term changes in
  - behaviour, practices, procedures, values, decision making

- Long term changes in
  - policies, legislation, economy, society, technology, environment

Dissemination plans

- How are you disseminating your results?
  - scientific publications, books, webside, workshops, conferences, portal, lectures, media (newspapers, magazines, TV, radio), social media

- Be as concrete as possible
  - name the publications/conferences, mention expected dates, types as well as size of audiences

- Identify your target groups
  - academics, health personnel, politicians, public/private sector, patient organisations, family/relatives, press etc.

INNOVATION

- The successful exploitation of research results which when *used* produce *benefits and* satisfy needs

- Elements of innovation

  1. Innovation potential – how much benefit?

  2. Innovation capacity – can your results stimulate further innovation or be used in other areas?

  3. Innovation management – what does it take to successfully implement your results?

Section 3: Implementation

- Work plan — Work packages, deliverables and milestones
- Management structure and procedures
  - Describe the organisational structure and the decision-making
  - Describe how effective innovation management will be addressed in the management structure and work plan.
  - Describe any critical risks, relating to project implementation, that the stated project's objectives may not be achieved. Detail any risk mitigation measures
- Consortium as a whole
  - Describe the consortium. How will it match the project's objectives? How do the members complement one another? In what way does each of them contribute to the project?
- Resources to be committed
  - Please provide the following:
    - a table showing number of person/months required
    - a table showing 'other direct costs'

Project management 101

- Clearly described roles
  - coordinator/scientific leader, WP leaders, project administrator, dissemination/IPR/innovation manager and advisory board

- Voting roles
  - general assembly or executive board?

- Conflict resolution
  - coordinator or executive board?

THE WRITING PROCESS

There is no "right way" or no hidden formulas
Winning proposals may be written very differently

Writing articles and applications are two different endeavours

Academic writing/Ideas

- **Researcher-centered**
  - Scholarly passion
- **Past oriented**
  - *Work you have done*
- **Expository**
  - *Explaining to reader*
- **Impersonal**
  - *Objective, dispassionate*
- **Individualistic**
  - *Usually solo activity*
- **Verbosity rewarded**
  - *Few length constraints*
- **Specialized terminology**
  - "*Insider jargon*

Grant writing/Action

- **Sponsor-centered**
  - Service attitude
- **Future oriented**
  - *Work you wish to do*
- **Persuasive**
  - "*Sell*" *the reader*
- **Personal**
  - *Convey excitement*
- **Team-oriented**
  - *Feedback needed*
- **Brevity rewarded**
  - *Strict length constraints*
- **Accessible language**
  - *Broad audience*

Robert Porter, Why academics have a hard time writing good grant proposals, The Journal of Research Administration 38 Vol. XXXVIII, n.2, 2007.

Writing tips

- Read the call
- Sell your idea in the opening paragraph
- You have one page to catch the reader
- Divide the work in manageable pieces
- Highlight template text
- Rephrase – use the language and style of the call docs
- Sort critical and trivial text

- Don't do:

The opening 2-3 paragraphs should sell your idea!

Set the Stage – Lay Out the Problem *("Who Cares?")*

- Get the reviewer interested at the outset
- Identify the importance—stress the need
- Summarize the state of the art
- Describe technical challenges to solving the problem and potential benefits

State the theme – Your Solution

- Describe the concept and establish credibility
- Describe your project's fundamental purpose

Create a Vision *("So What?")*

- Show how your work will advance the field
- Envision the world with the problem solved

Characteristics of a good proposal

- Tells a good story
- Consistent, well organized and easy to read
- Responds to the expected impacts of the call
- Shows how the project fits into the big picture
- Provides new insight into an important European problem
- Its results will be used for the benefit of something or someone
- Writing communicates enthusiasm and commitment
- Shows clearly that the proposers know the field
- Feasible work plan with appropriate budget and available resources

- because if you win you must do the promised work…

The most usual proposal writers' mistakes

- Inappropriate writing style:
  - Vague and unfocused: "*cannot figure out what the project is about*"
  - Dense academic prose: "*everything important comes as a conclusion*"
  - Verbosity: *"long sentences, small fonts and crowded margins"*

- Unclear objectives: what you do vs. what you will achieve

- Incomplete response to the call text

- Poor organisation of the application – difficult to understand the causal relations of claims

- Evaluation criteria not followed due to lack of understanding of the financial scheme/programme

- Weak abstract

Advice to proposal writers

- Study, study, study the call text

- Make your proposal easy to read

- Start much earlier than you think you have to

- Make sure you know what's already been done

- Write in an accessible way that can be understood by a diverse group of readers

- Don't take rejection personally

- Get in the habit of resubmitting

Take home messages

- It is all about writing a GOOD STORY

- Start in time and structure the writing process!

- Involve your administration from start

- Remember for whom you're writing!

- Create a logical link between objectives, WPs, deliverables and resources

- Identify the users of your results

- Pinpoint the social/societal benefits

- Recognise any connections between your project and funding policies