ERC Starting Grant Interview, 2023 call

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1. Congratulations

Congratulations with progressing to step 2.

In this guide some key elements of the interview session will be explained to you and how to prepare the presentation and yourself for potential questions. Please note **this guide is personal and cannot be shared with a colleague.** The congratulation letter has been developed for preparing yourself for the interview session with help of your colleagues. This guide contains too much insight information to be spread across Europe.

1.1 Preparing yourself for the interview session

You progressed to step 2 so what is mainly at stake in this step is the scientific quality of your project proposal, the sole selection criterion. The ERC definition of Scientific Excellence is ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility. This implies that the panel will assess the innovativeness and feasibility of your conceptual idea(s), scientific approach and methodology and the likelihood of forcing a breakthrough in science and setting the worldwide research agenda. If applicable, the panel will also assess to what extent the outcome can be translated into applications for society, industry or health care. The panel instructions for the presentation are in line with this selection criterion: innovative aspects, research team (including you), methodology, expected results and potential contribution to your research field.

You have already been qualified as excellent to outstanding by progressing to step 2. So, straighten up your shoulders since the panel has already decided that you are belonging to the top of researchers in Europe. Your proposal contains already information on your quality as an academic researcher. The panel will only probe whether you are the driving force behind the project and the right person having the scientific expertise and scientific capacity to lead the team and carry out the proposed research.

Your goal is now to show to the panel that the proposed research is of high scientific quality and has a high likelihood of forcing a breakthrough in science by generating novel conceptual knowledge and thereby changing our current knowledge or adding new knowledge to the body of knowledge, leading subsequently to a change in our research landscape, setting a new inspirational target for researchers across the world. Every conceptual knowledge is welcome as long as it is significant or potentially very significant in view of the state of science in your research community, opening up new research perspectives and horizons in your research field and likely beyond.

In front of you is the Yellow Research guide for ERC interview training. I advise you to read the guide and decide for yourself what parts are useful to you and what parts may be useful to you another time. Please note that in one of the annexes is a list of potential questions. These questions are in most cases general and may not be asked if the panel has too many technical questions based on the review reports. **Your colleagues can probably help you with identifying more project specific questions and with preparing answers**. In most cases these specific questions are based on the review reports written by remote referees, who are experts but may not always agree with the proposed research and solutions. However, do not underestimate the panel since they may be better informed than you thanks to the review reports. The reason hereto is that they are very good in using their brains and discussing scientific content.

Do not forget to ask help from colleagues (you trust) to prepare your presentation (how and what including updates) and to answer questions to the point. Ask experts in the field whether they are willing to give you an update on the latest developments outside your comfort zone or can explain scientific elements in your proposal that are not within your expertise. In the end the quality of the science counts and being prepared could make the difference in step 2.

Good luck with the preparation.

2. What to expect?

In this chapter is explained what to expect in the interview session with your ERC panel, by providing insight into how the panel is preparing the interview sessions and how the interview will be conducted. Please note that **the ERC panel has the mandate and authority to decide** on 1) to whom an ERC grant is awarded, 2) based on what scientific information and 3) what will be the budget limit. The decision by the ERC panel will be justified in the panel comments of the Evaluation Summary Report containing all individual review reports, sent to you after the interview session with the final outcome of step 2.

2.1 Success rate and final news

The success rate at step 2 is about 35-40%. How many proposals are selected for step 2 depend on how many applicants selected your panel as their primary ERC panel. This number fluctuates per call and per panel. The number of proposals per panel progressing to step 2 is in most panels between 25 to 50 proposals. And one of those promising proposals is yours!

In this phase of ERC review process, all applicants have a sufficiently good scientific track record to be awarded an ERC grant. The question is whether your proposal is of sufficient scientific quality in view of the competing proposals in the primary ERC panel selected by you and whether you have the scientific and intellectual expertise and capacity to achieve all proposed objectives.

Please note that scientific excellence is the sole selection criterion. There are no sub-panels, only a quality threshold for the proposed research and the PI across the panel sending you the panel instructions for the interview. The interview session helps the panel to take a final decision in view of the review reports and your answers to the questions.

You will be formally notified of the final results of the 2023 call in August 2023 according to the ERC time schedule. Most likely you receive informally the outcome and the Evaluation Summary Report at the end of July 2023 or beginning of August 2023, in time -if required - to resubmit your proposal before the Starting Grant 2024 call closing in October 2023, if you are still eligible. See https://erc.europa.eu/timeframe-advanced-grant-2022-evaluation-erc-2022-adg. Please note that the ERC panels expect you to resubmit your proposal if your proposal has passed to step 2. To increase the likelihood of funding the panel is providing to the point panel comments per proposal in line with the selection criterion Scientific Excellence.

2.2 Preparation of interview by the panel

Review: At step 2 your full proposal (B1 and B2 parts and A3 form) is read by 6 to 10 reviewers, consisting of 4-5 panel members and 2-5 remote referees. The number of remote reviewers selected depends mainly on to what extent your proposal is interdisciplinary. The ERC evaluation criteria are guiding the reviewers in assessing the quality of the proposed research and identifying **the strong and weak points in view of the seven ERC evaluation criteria** for the proposed research. See the Congratulation Letter for more information on the evaluation criteria. Each reviewer has to provide a written review report on the proposed research.

- The panel members act mainly as **general reviewers** and have the task to assess the scientific quality of the proposed research in view of the other proposals on the stack, the matureness of the proposed research, the potential to generate conclusive results, the potential of a breakthrough in science and the relevance of the expected results for the scientific communities. They write mainly general review reports and indicate -if possible - the relevance of the proposed research in view of our current theoretical and conceptual knowledge. Spotting weak points in the proposed research is in most panels a task for remote referees. In some panels the lead reviewers in the panel write more detailed review reports going into the proposed research.

- The remote referees are the **experts** in view of the proposed research and have the task to assess the scientific quality of the proposed research and provide more in-depth written feedback on the proposed research in view of the current ongoing research and developments across the world. This is not an easy task since **the sole expert is you** and the B1 and B2 parts contain in most cases not sufficient information for a thorough assessment of the proposed research. Some of the remote referees may be expert on the topic, conceptual ideas, scientific approach and methodology proposed. Others may be partial expert in view of the innovative aspects of the proposed research, such as an interdisciplinary approach or a development of a novel methodology, technique, tool or device. The feedbacks of the remote reviewers are providing the panel with a sufficient informative analysis of the **strong and weak points** in view of the ERC evaluation criteria and a better insight of the proposed research and methodologies, feasibility and potential knowledge gain and impact of the outcome on science. The number of remote referees depends to some extent on the content of the proposed research.

- Besides writing a review report, each reviewer gives the proposed research and the PI a score ranging from 1 to 5 points[1]. The scores on the proposed research and the PI will lead to a ranking of all the proposals with most proposals ending close to the cut-off for funding, since there is in most cases one reviewer who is slightly less positive. This implies that the interview session offers you the chance to go from close to the cut-off to funding. In the final Evaluation Summary Report the numerical score on the PI will be provided but not on the proposed research. The latter numerical score is not provided since the panels are ranking the proposals for funding. Currently, some panels are telling that they do not see the numerical scores on the proposed research in step 2. This is probably due to the trend within ERC to move towards qualitative parameters based on the scientific content of the proposed research, which will become the standard in the upcoming 2024 calls.

- Please note that remote referees are not able to give appropriate numerical scores since they only see 1 to 2 proposals per call and are not aware of the quality of all proposals. In other words, the panel decides and not the remote referees on who is awarded a grant. Of course, positive feedback by remote referees is increasing the likelihood of funding if the comments are the point according to the panel.

- Please note that **only** the panel members see sufficient proposals in a call to determine the quality of the proposed research of each proposal in view of the quality threshold in a panel. This is why the Scientific Council of the ERC has given the panel the authority to decide who is awarded a grant, based on the sole selection criterion Scientific Excellence.

- Some calls are more competitive than others due to a higher quality of proposals or less budget reserved. The budget per panel is determined by the requested budget of the applicants per panel. In step 1 the panel is informed what is the budget reserved for their panel and how many proposals need to be funded in step 2. The panel has also to decide whether some proposals are put on a reserve list, in case more funding is available or some ERC agreements are not signed.

- Please note that the panel will take into account the interview session itself for the final ranking of the proposals. It is in the end the ERC panel that decides who is awarded a grant and to what extent your budget request is honoured.

Lead reviewer and their tasks: One panel member will be the "**lead reviewer**" or **rapporteur**, responsible for preparing the panel discussion in step 1 and 2 but also the questions for the interview session in step 2 based on the review reports provided by remote reviewers (**very technical and in-depth questions or identifying weak points or doubting the potential of a breakthrough in science**) and the panel members (more **general** questions in view of our

1. To be awarded an ERC grant the average score for the proposed research and for the PI should be close to 4 points or more. Since you passed to step 2 you are already being assessed as at least excellent having a score close to 4 points or more. For your information: 3 points is equivalent to very good, 4 excellent and 5 exceptional.

current theoretical knowledge or scientific justifications). This lead reviewer will also write the panel comments that you will receive with the final outcome of step 2. The lead reviewer will get help from 1 or 2 panel members in carrying out this task.

For your information, every panel member has the capacity to carry out this task according to the highest standards in science. Do not underestimate the panel members since they know that being a panel member comes with the **scientific responsibility to shape the future research agenda** in Europe and across the world. A task that is not taken light hearted by the panel members but provides them with the drive to do an excellent job.

How is the lead reviewer preparing the interview session? After all review reports have been uploaded in the EU database the lead reviewer will go through all the review reports provided by the panel members and remote referees to identify potential issues, weak points, questions and requested clarifications. The lead reviewer will revert to your proposal to assess what questions are relevant and how to phrase the questions coming from the remote reviewers. The lead reviewer will be assisted by 1 up to 2 panel members in preparing the final questions for the interview session. The questions and strategy for asking the questions will be discussed in a separate panel meeting prior to your interview session. The panel may also decide to ask some general questions to every candidate to assess the potential of forcing a breakthrough. For example, what will be the most important publications in your research field in the coming five years[2]?

Number of questions asked: The number of questions depends to some extent on the number of minutes reserved for the question-and-answer session but also on the feedback by the remote reviewers. One of your challenges in preparing yourself for the interview session is that you have **no idea how many questions will be asked**. So, you need to prepare yourself not only for a question but also how you will respond to each question. Taking the time to answer each question in detail with the risk that you did not address all questions and potentially ending up with no funding? Or develop a strategy for answering questions? For example, deciding based on the relevance of the question to the scientific content of your proposal or how the question is phrased to spend time in answering some questions and to give a short and concise answer in other cases? Probably concise questions can be addressed effectively and vague questions more explicitly to enable the whole panel to understand what part of the answer is addressing what part of the question? In most interview sessions candidates have been struggling with answering all questions in time since they had not been practicing sufficiently or involving the right colleagues to train them or not having thought through the proposed research in sufficient detail. Leading to long winding answers, unstructured answers or empty wording addressing questions that could be expected or leading to clear answers after the interview session is closed. It is important to practice how you will answer the questions with colleagues, friends and family members. You probably also have to think through the proposed research, structure of activities and coherence and maybe update the proposed research in view of current developments in your group or world.

In depth and technical questions: The remote referees indicate in their reports what may be potential weak points in the proposed research. This feedback may lead to in-depth or technical questions being asked in the interview session. ERC STG, COG and ADG candidates in 2021 and 2022 calls were sometimes surprised about the in-depth questions, truly addressing the core of the proposed research. As if the panel does not have the scientific capacity to understand the proposed research? Of course, they have the scientific capacity since they decide and not the remote referees.

In many interview sessions, the panel started first with tough questions without allowing the applicant to switch from presentation mode to answering mode. The questions were in most cases going immediately to the weak points in the proposed research such as the proposed scientific approach in view of our current knowledge, the techniques proposed, the need for developing novel methodologies, the scientific added value of novel information, the potential of generating

2. Answer: A publication based on the results generated by your ERC project

ground-breaking results, the parameters chosen, the control experiments, the scientific argumentation for the conceptual idea or hypothesis in view of our current body of knowledge, the focus or coherence of the research objectives and tasks, the complexity of the proposed research, the balance between assumptions and facts. **As if the panel members had become the experts in the room and not the applicant!!!**

I added exclamation marks to the previous sentence since many applicants (even in Advanced Grant 2022 call having their interview trainings last January) do not realise that the panel is clever and intelligent.

Please note that the review reports by remote reviewers are of very good quality and the panel can contact them if they have questions that were not resolved in the meetings preparing the interview session. In rare cases the panel is allowed to ask an outsider to prepare the questions for the interview session.

The best way to prepare yourself for this type of questions is to analyse your project proposal, read the latest literature, ask colleagues to provide you in 20 minutes with the latest update on those topics that are not your core expertise according to your publication and ask colleagues to ask you difficult questions during mock panel sessions or meetings and challenge you. **You want to be better prepared than the panel and have thought through potential questions or weaknesses in your proposal**. Maybe some of the weak points can be turned into potential strong scientific reasoning? For example enabling you to investigate or study something that nobody else can with the current state of the art methodology, as demonstrated by preliminary results generated by you? Moreover, you also would like to give **concise and precise answers** to enable the panel to take a decision in your favour, by letting the whole panel understand the proposed research and why the proposed research has a potential to force a breakthrough.

Conceptual and feasibility questions: The panel uses the review reports to assess to what extent is the proposed research of sufficient high quality and mature to be funded now. Questions that may be raised in the panel discussion range from research questions, (is this what we need to know?), the conceptual idea (is this idea the most promising project idea in view of what we know or what others are proposing?), the balance of facts and assumptions, the balance of risks and gain, the feasibility of the scientific approach proposed and the evidence and the complexity of the proposed research. The panels prefer in most cases focussed research projects with a project idea and scientific approach that the panel understands, since the implementation of these project proposals have a higher likelihood of success[3]. Think through to what extent can you conceptualise the proposed research findings/results and what do we need to know in 3-5 years to open up novel avenues of research.

General questions: In some panels the chair prepares one or two general questions for each interviewee to assess the added value of the grant to their career. Examples are: Where do you position yourself in 5 years? What is the added value of this grant to your career or research? You seem to have more than sufficient funding so why do you need ERC funding? What was the key finding in your research field in the past 5 years? What will be the key finding in the coming 5 years? Your answer to the last one is that the ERC proposal will provide the key finding and hopefully you also can tell the panel that the key finding in the past 5 years was published by you.

Prepare yourself: The outcome of the review and preparation of the interview session is that **2 to 3 panel members may be better informed than you**, thanks to 1) the input by external referees and 2) reading your proposal twice before the interview session: once to write a review report and once to prepare the questions. 2 to 4 panel members read your proposal in step 1 or 2 and are informed but will not remember the details. The rest of the panel most likely did not

3. The ERC is monitoring the success of ERC project proposals selected to enable the panels to select the most promising proposals in step 2. Two key parameters is to what extent has the panel understood the proposed research in step 2 and the likelihood of forcing a breakthrough in science. Both parameters are related to scientific excellence, the sole criterion for selection.

have the time to read the abstract of your proposal due to the time pressure or at the most managed to only swiftly read it.

Advice: your task is **to be better prepared than the panel** for the interview session.

2.3. Interview set-up

The ERC advises the panel chair on how to conduct the interview session, being 10 minutes presentation and 15 minutes question and answer session. The chair can adapt this recommendation in view of the interest from panel members to listen to you or to have sufficient time for asking questions. Each interview session consists of a presentation and time for questions and answers. **Each applicant receives the same instructions per panel.** The duration of the presentation may vary per panel between 3 up to 10 minutes and the total interview session varies between 23 up to 30 minutes.

Function of the presentation: The presentation is a presentation of the proposed research to the panel which as a whole will decide on whether to fund your project proposal. If the presentation time is 3 or 5 minutes the panel is mainly interested in hearing the main messages, enabling them to follow the discussion during the questions and answers session. For example, if the presentation time is 3 minutes the panel just wants to hear where “we are” in science (the bigger picture), why this topic is important in view of the needs of science and what new conceptual knowledge will emerge, opening up new perspectives for research and beyond. If the duration is 5 minutes you can highlight briefly 1 element or 2 small elements. If the presentation time is longer than 5 minutes the panel is also interested in hearing some details to form an opinion on the quality of the proposed research and follow the in-depth discussion during the questions and answers session.

Please note that the presentation time varies from call to call and year to year. It is therefore important to check the panel interview instructions and think through what is the purpose of the presentation in your case. Please note that the presentation is not a regular conference lecture with a lot of technical details and presented with a high speed, targeting your scientific colleagues, who are not in the room. It is also not a TED talk wherein you explain that as a young child you were already interested in science. The audience in front of you is composed of seasoned senior researchers with an excellent scientific track record. Your task is to inform the whole panel, independent of their scientific background why the proposed research is of interest to your scientific community (and if applicable beyond) and of scientifically high quality. Check therefore the scientific scope description of the panel, the ERC keywords and also the composition of the 2021 panel. See ERC website or the annex of this guide for links. If you look at the composition of your panel, you probably realise that the ERC is able to attract excellent panel members.

All panel members will attend the interview session. There are 12 to 16 panel members depending on the scope of the panel and the number of applications in call. The names of the chairs have been published on the website of the ERC. About 66-75% of the 2021 panel members have been invited for the 2023 call. Please note that PE11 and SH7 are new panels that were established in 2021 calls for the first time. In calls prior to 2021 calls they were part of other ERC panels. Please ask for internal help from your ERC advisors.

The panel has provided you with instructions for the presentation that are reflecting how the panel is assessing and selecting proposals in step 2 (next sub-chapter). Hereunder key questions are listed and between brackets the general panel instructions. Key questions of the panel are:

1) whether the proposed research is sufficient innovative on the level of the project idea, scientific strategy and methodology and new knowledge emerging (innovative aspects);

2) whether the proposed research methodology is appropriate for achieving the objectives and long-term goals of the project and feasible (methodology);

3) whether you have the scientific expertise and capacity to execute the proposed research and lead the research team being you and the team members to be hired by you;

4) whether the excepted results will force the breakthrough and are sufficient relevant in view of the needs in science and if applicable beyond such as society, industry and patient care (expected results); and

5) whether the proposed research is sufficient "mature" to potentially force a breakthrough in science in your research field and potentially useful for other research fields (potential contribution to the current state of the science in your field). In most cases this implies that there are sufficient preliminary findings or results generated by the PI to demonstrate partial feasibility of scientific approach;

6) whether the budget is adequate and sufficiently justified (the panel may have questions on the budget);

7) why you; and/or

8) why now in view of the ongoing developments in the scientific field.

These questions will help the panel to assess the scientific quality of the proposed research, the innovative aspects, the feasibility of the scientific approach with the right high-risk and high-gain balance and the potential breakthrough in science based on the expected results. Providing information relevant to the sole selection criterion of scientific excellence in step 2: ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility.

Strategy by the panel for the interview session: All applicants in a panel have the same interview set-up to ensure a fair assessment. In most panels even the opening sentence and/or closing sentence by the panel may be the same. The panel has discussed prior to your presentation a strategy for asking the questions to enable the panel to follow the questions and answers session but also sense whether the lead panel member(s) is lining your project proposal up for funding or not. The first question is in many interview sessions a very technical or theoretical question, leading to you realising that session is going to be though. In other interview sessions the first question may be very general, **leading to you wondering whether the panel did read your proposal? Yes, they did!** But not all panel members read your proposal and not everybody remembers explicitly the content of your proposal. Do you remember all the details of each presentation at a conference 3 to 4 weeks later? If yes, you have an excellent memory but not every brilliant scientist has this capacity.

A reason for general questions is to use your answers in the panel discussion for justifying the selection of your project proposal. A reason for very technical questions is to line you up for funding by letting you "show off" that you are indeed the expert in the room. **Prepare yourself for any strategy, order or type of questions**. If the panel asks similar questions, ask them politely what kind of information they are looking for. It may be that several remote reviewers gave input on the same issue or similar issues or that the panel did not fully understand your answer in view of the review reports written by remote referees. Please be aware that the trickiest question may be asked in the last few minutes, leaving nearly no time to give the most important messages. So, keep your energy level high and only "relax" when the panel said "thank you and goodbye" and you are looking at a black screen.

The time limits are carved in stone. During the presentation you may see a clock counting down the time but during Web-Ex meetings most applicants told me that the clock was not visible. The chair or lead panel member will cut you off. if you are not taking into account the time limits. They may also ask you to shorten your answers. **The trick is to give concise answers**. Consider to have your own clock counting the minutes to enable you to think through how much time you spent on each question. You can always ask the panel members whether a concise and precise answer without lengthy explanations was sufficient. In most cases it is in view of the reports written by remote reviewers and the panel discussion preparing your interview session.

2.4. Experiences in 2021 and 2022 calls

Hereunder is a reflection on the interview experiences by applicants in 2021 and 2022 calls. Most of them had a positive experience although the questions were tough.

The ones who were awarded the grant told me that they were prepared and had been thinking through how to answer questions and how to leave the panel with an impression that whatever would happen the applicant would be able to progress, even if their research plan has to be adjusted based on results generated by themselves or others. Because their scientific plan for the coming 5 years is solid and robust, containing convincing evidence for feasibility of the scientific approach, allowing the applicant to manage the risks and adapt the plan, if required.

Most Starting and Consolidator Grant 2021 call applicants experienced that in general the atmosphere was nice and to some extent relaxed. In contrast with experiences of applicants in previous calls or in 2022 calls where the applicants sensed tension and stress in the panel. Hopefully also you will have a positive experience. Although, though questions could be a positive sign. Please remember that the panel has to take a decision and your task is to inform them and explain key scientific elements to enable them to take a fair decision. What all candidates noted in the 2021 calls was that the panel was trying to assess whether the proposed research was not too complex and not sufficiently broken down into steps and building blocks.

Many Advanced Grant 2021 call applicants experienced in general a tough interview session that was clearly probing to what extent the proposed research would generate the findings required to force a breakthrough in science. The review reports received afterwards indicated that the reviewers were doubting whether the applicant would be able to force a breakthrough in science since the proposed research was not sufficient focussed and developed but too explorative. Or was missing key evidence for feasibility of the scientific approach or for the appropriateness of the proposed methodology. Some applicants realised during the interview session that there were not so many challenging questions as if the remote referees had not uncovered weak points in their proposal. In the latter cases, it turned out that the review reports were very positive.

STG and COG 2022 call candidates had in most cases a tougher interview session than expected. They reported afterwards that they were not always prepared for the type of questions asked and they felt the tension within the panel. It came to some of them as a surprise that the panel switched immediately to asking difficult questions or provoking them. Not starting with kind words or an easy question. Some of the candidates did not realise they had to repeat the core information already told in the presentation or in the proposal itself. Please remember that the panel is most likely not remembering all details in your proposal of the lead panel member want you to remind the panel why your proposal should be funded. Other candidates noted that the questions asked were leading to answers contradicting themselves.

Many applicants felt the tension in the panel, realising that the panel is struggling to assess which proposals should be funded. Try to reach out to the panel in these cases by acknowledging that the proposed research is not carved in stone and that the answers are not conclusive. In the end science is science and most likely there will be developments within your research project or across the world that will lead to adjustments of the proposed research. But explain that your project proposal has currently the best factual evidence to enable a breakthrough in science in view of our current knowledge and ongoing attempts. Therefore, your research will make a difference.

If you are starting to contradict yourself because you did not notice a trap set-up for you, respond to it and let them know that you would like to rephrase the answer since you realise that you are starting to talk in circles. The panel likes human beings.

Some negative feedback on the panels was reported to me. A few candidates told me that the panel was rude, set with the back to the applicant or were playing good and bad cop. As if we are back again in a kindergarten and have not learned the basic principles of how to interact with others. In principle, **the panel should behave and be polite since they invited you!!** It is their

task to ensure that you are given the opportunity to answer the questions and that all panel members behave. If you have a negative experience, report this in writing to the ERC since it is the task of the ERC Scientific Council to monitor the panels and the quality of their work delivered.

What was reported to me? Some 2022 call candidates noted that the interview strategy was based on a good cop and a bad cop strategy and sometimes even a third cop being the silent cop. In the latter case this panel member never asked half questions leaving it up to you to provide adequate answers. As if the panel had decided that a good interview session should be an interrogation session inspired by "cops" who have just arrested a serial killer. My advice is to ignore the behaviour of panel members who consider that an interrogation strategy of cops is a good strategy for assessing scientific excellence. Forgetting that the task of the panel is not to punch holes in the proposed research (or even you)[4] but to understand the proposed research. Try to answer the questions and if they are becoming too rude, ask them whether there is a problem with the content of your answers? Or whether there is something that is not sufficient clarified by you? It may be that you are not providing sufficient informative answers. To prepare yourself for this panel strategy, my advice is to think through what is the core of the proposed research and why do you postulate that your research and methodology can generate those results that we need to understand science. And why is the proposed research exciting. From the bottom of my heart, I hope that your interview session will be a positive experience. Though, but still a positive experience.

2.5. Homework given to you by the panel

The panel has given you instructions for preparing yourself and a presentation. The focus of the presentation should be on the "*innovative aspects, the research team, methodology, expected results and the potential contributions to the current state of science in your field*". Some ERC panels may have other instructions (see last bullets). If you tear this panel instruction apart the panel instructions are reflecting the ERC definition of **Scientific Excellence**: ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility. Ambition is explained by discussing the innovative aspects, expected results and potential contribution to your research field. The feasibility is explained by discussing the Research Team and Methodology. The potential of the ground-breaking nature of the proposed research is captured by fine balance between ambition and feasibility reflecting the high risk and high gain balance by proposing sufficient mature and developed research. Hereunder is a potential explanation per term. Please read also the chapter on project analysis in this guide and the yellow research congratulation letter.

1. Innovative aspect is referring to those elements in the proposed research that are not only novel but also unconventional, creative and original. Being ground-breaking and different than all ongoing research attempts. The ERC panels are instructed to select project proposals that are a bit surprising or creative in view of the current state of science and ongoing scientific developments in competing groups and not a logical or incremental step forward. Try to identify what are the **innovative/pioneering aspects** of the topic, project idea/concept, scientific strategy, research design, focus or lens or dimension, methodology, new knowledge/concept(s) emerging, crossing the boundaries of disciplines, opening up new horizons and opportunities for research. Note that the last sentence contains wording related to the ERC objectives and evaluation criteria.

2. **Research team** is referring to the persons carrying out the proposed research tasks such as the number of PhD students and postdocs to be hired. But it also refers to potential experts being involved directly or indirectly in the planned research who are helping you out with some elements. Please note that experts employed by your host institute are seen as team members and experts employed by another host institute should in principle be replaceable. If not, the proposed research may turn into an ERC Synergy proposal. There are always exceptions such

4. You probably sense my frustration with this type behaviour within panels. In most cases the panels are professional and showing respect but in STG 2022 call some applicants noted this behaviour. A bit strange behaviour since the panel invited the applicants for the interview session. But probably I am too much an idealist.

as when the expert is delivering a kind of service to the proposed research (access to archives, material, samples, datasets, services or facilities). If this external expert is a busy person there may be questions about the availability and commitment of this expert. But this term is also about how will you train, guide, supervise and manage a team. Think through how you will answer a question on how will you manage a team when you have nearly no experience.

3. **Methodology** is referring to the scientific approach but also to methods, device, techniques, tools, statistical tools, input and sources used. The panel has to assess to what extent will the proposed methodology be appropriate for achieving the goals of the project? The goals of the project entail the objectives of the research project and the goals of opening up novel avenues of research. If you have only 3 minutes to present your proposal you can only explain the methodology on the main lines. If you have more minutes you can explain to the panel how one or two specific methods are generating the required data or information leading to exciting results and solid scientific conclusions. Consider to explain methods that may lead to potential questions by external referees. Or choose a part of the proposed research that according to you is very exciting. Probably 1 method if you have a 5 minutes presentation and 2 or 3 if you have more minutes.

4. **Expected results** are referring to the new knowledge emerging. What will we learn? And to what extent will these expected results lead to a change in knowledge and/or research landscape? ERC is funding projects that have a large potential to change our current knowledge by forcing a breakthrough. Think through what are the elements in the proposed research to will lead to a game change or paradigm shift and the potential likelihood.

5. **Potential contribution** or **advancing the research field** is referring to the scientific added value by forcing a breakthrough in your research field and opening up new horizons and opportunities for research in your research field and potentially also in other research fields. The expected results will be used to assess the potential gain. In most cases to what extent will the potential gain go beyond the scope of the topic addressed in your ERC project. Consider what results could be used by other research communities in the future. Some panels will also assess the added value to the industry, society and health care by asking relevant questions on for example translational potential, possibility of upscaling, sustainability, or contextual differences.

6. **Conceptual nugget**: In some panels you are requested to explain the conceptual nugget being the brilliant project and/or conceptual idea standing on the shoulders of our current theoretical and conceptual knowledge and -if applicable- based on preliminary data/results. Indicating clearly that the expected results/findings of your project proposal will lead to a paradigm shift, change one or a few key sentences in the textbook or add novel knowledge opening up novel research avenues. Think through what is your project idea and to what extent is this based on facts or assumptions and to what extent will this project idea address current important challenges resolve big/urgent research questions, change our current knowledge and understanding and thereby closing knowledge gaps. Think through what kind of wording you can use to explain this conceptual nugget that are in line with scientific and/or theoretical definitions and wording used in your research field.

7. The panel may have questions on your CV in view of the ERC evaluation criteria. Most questions are related to your contribution to science in the past (give an example of a significant contribution in the past 5 years) or leading the team (how will you manage the team). The questions can also be focussing on the added value to your scientific career by asking you what is your scientific vision for the future, where do you envision yourself in 4 years time (or another period of time) and what will be the most important publication in the coming 4-5 years? The answer to the last question is a publication based on the ground-breaking findings of your ERC project. The panel may also ask you what are the innovative elements of the proposed research in view of your past and ongoing research or why do you need an ERC grant in view of the current ongoing funding.

8. The panel may also have questions on the budget. Discuss again your budget request with the financial manager to see what are potential pitfalls and what key information Is relevant in case you have to re-budget the proposed research due to not obtaining a key intermediate goal in the proposed research and have to adapt the original project planning. See writing instructions of the ERC for the B2 part in the guide Information for Applicants of your call.

3. How can you prepare yourself?

A good starting point is to make a to do list for yourself but also to familiarise yourself with the panel, ERC objectives, ERC evaluation criteria and how to translate these into terms that you can use to identify information in your proposal. The aim of the ERC is to select those proposals that meet the Scientific Excellence criterion of ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility and will a clear and inspirational target for science, scholarship and technology. Note that ERC funding is primarily addressing the needs of science and if applicable the expected results may also benefit society, industry and/or health care.

3.1. ERC evaluation criteria: weak and strong points

As written in the previous chapter the reviewers have the task to assess the weak and strong points in view of the seven ERC evaluation criteria for the scientific proposal. Consider to carry out this analysis yourself and assess what are the strong and weal points in your proposal. Ask also help from your close colleagues and use the yellow research congratulation letter as a guidance.

Most likely the strong points are being brought to the front in your proposal and the potential weak points are not always discussed by you. The remote reviewers will most likely identify the weak points and caveats for the panel.

Why is this analysis important? Strong points can be used to highlight why the proposed research is potentially feasible. Weak points may require a back-up plan, an explanation or a rationale. Some of the weak points may be the innovative aspects in your project proposal that are required to force a breakthrough in science in view of the current ongoing developments in science. It will be mainly remote referees who have pinpointed the weak points in their review report since they have the role of the experts in step 2. But panel members are good in identifying conceptual flaws in the proposed research as a reviewer or during panel meetings or interview sessions. In some panels the panel is collecting potential limitations and caveats in science to understand better what type of research and methods have the potential to achieve the objectives. The task of the panel is to assess which project proposal has the potential to force a breakthrough and the highest likelihood based on the science proposed to be successful. Remember, the panel decides which project is selected for funding and not the remote referees. So, if you can address appropriately and convincingly the questions asked during the interview session, the panel may overrule the comments provided by the remote referees in their reports.

In chapter 6 of this guide the what, why, how, why and to what extent questions per evaluation criterion are provided to enable you to assess whether you have identified the relevant strong and weak points in your proposal, using the congratulation letter information. This type of what, why and how questions are the basis for asking specific and to the point conceptual, input, methodological and technical questions based on your full Scientific Proposal. This analysis will help you to identify potential questions coming from remote referees who are wondering how the proposed research will provide the expected results to resolve to some extent the important challenges, research questions or gap of knowledge in your research field. But it may also help you to think through how to present the proposed research in the presentation and whether an update of the proposed research is required or novel findings/results need to be shown to tip the balance of high risk and high gain more towards high gain.

In the meantime, start to collect and write down potential questions in view of the panel instructions, ERC evaluation criteria: conceptual and technical questions.

Why you? Think through and discuss with your colleagues why you are the obvious Principal Investigator in view of the scientific expertise required to execute the proposed research. Analyse what expertise and skills are required for the proposed research and what competence you have and what competence, expertise and skills will be brought into the team by postdocs, technicians or senior experts. Please note that every expert outside the host institute should be replaceable

by another expert. Assess whether you are able to analyse and conceptualise the “findings” and draw conclusions. Conclusions that lead to novel conceptual knowledge and are not just descriptive, and which are changing our current knowledge and opening up novel research avenues in your research field and beyond. Read this in conjunction with the next subheading addressing the homework given to you by the panel.

Check what competing groups are doing and why the ERC should bet on you and not on the competing groups.

Check also the latest articles in the field. If your panel is a very broad panel, search also on the internet since several times a broad panel such as PE8 panel has uncovered articles that the PI was not aware of. Some ERC grantees had the luck that another group had published on a part of the proposed research, confirming the PI preliminary results and demonstrating that the project idea is to some extent valid.

Ask current ERC grantees within your host institute or others what made their interview successful.

3.2. Homework – background information on panel

Analyse the ERC panel you selected and familiarise yourself with the potential panel members. In one of the annexes of this guide the links to the panels compositions in the even years are provided. Please note that there are 27 ERC panels and these panels are only active for your call. The reason is the enormous workload per STG, COG or ADG call. Please note that the panel composition in even years is not identical to the odd years. The panels are active either in an even year or odd year. About 25-33% of the panel members are replaced.

- Check the 2021 panel composition and familiarise yourself with the members’ background and potential interest. Check also the list of 2023 chairs published on the website of the ERC. Please note how narrow or broad the scope of the panel is that you selected. Some panels have a very broad scope and need to understand where and how your proposed research is fitting into the broader science picture. Other panels have a quite narrow scope and can deduct based on your first sentence where the proposed research fits into the bigger scientific picture. This gives you an indication of both how to present the proposed research and how to answer the potential questions (in-depth, a bit in-depth or rather on the Scientific American Magazine level). Please note that very technical questions may require technical details enabling the panel to understand to what degree the comment made by the remote referee is to the point.

- Check what projects the selected panel has funded in 2021 and 2019 to assess what is their interest as a panel. If you are lucky, your primary panel funded a project on your topic that is clearly not as promising as your project proposal based on recent developments, enabling you to explain the innovativeness and likelihood of success of your proposal in view of ongoing research.

- Please note that the funded projects are to some extent outdated, explaining why ERC grantees are allowed to update their research plans. But also explaining why some ERC proposals granted prior to January 2020 are currently investigating Covid-19 pandemic, a concept and a scientific field that did not exist when these grantees submitted their proposals to the ERC. However, their proposed research has a scientific added value by investigating for example the cellular response to a virus or a societal problem arising during a pandemic.

3.3. Preparing the interview session by practising

Hereunder the main steps are listed. In subsequent chapters more information is provided.

- Visualise that you are just below the cut-off with tens of other proposals and have a high change of ending above the cut-off based on the outcome of the interview session. Most likely this vision may give you the boost to prepare the interview session since you realise you have a chance but need to prepare the session.
- Think through what is the unifying concept behind the proposed research turning the proposed research into focused research, enhancing the likelihood of forcing a breakthrough in research. Not a shopping list of what to do without conceptual coherence.
- Think through whether you can break down the proposed research in clear steps/tasks or downscale the complexity to enable you to achieve timely key intermediate goals before upscaling it or adding additional complexities or dimensions.
- Analyse the proposal submitted and also the current state of the art of science and scientific developments across the world.
- Consider potential updates or preliminary results that can be added to the presentation. The panel likes to hear about new developments that may counterbalance critical feedback from remote referees.
- Prepare a presentation/storyline/narrative taking into account the panel instructions before generating slides. The presentation/storyline/narrative should be leading and not the slides. See chapter on presentation.
- Practise the presentation with slides till the storyline is fluent and ends within the minutes allocated. Ask colleagues, friends and family members to be your audience.
- Practise also in front of the camera with or without remote audience and record these sessions.
- Practise with the Web-Ex software used by the ERC since it may work differently than you thought. Ask a colleague to check from her/his computer what s/he sees when you show the slides.
- Practise in answering questions. The trick is to give a concise and precise answer and then start to explain. You have already collected potential questions so consider writing one or two sentences answering potential questions. Consider also what you would like to say if you have more time to answer the questions to ensure the panel understands the proposed research and scientific relevance. Refer only to key figures in the proposal since the audience needs some time to scroll and locate this figure.
- Practise also in asking a panel member to repeat a question or rephrase a question. If you did not grasp it the second time, indicate that if you understood it correctly the question is about blablabla and start to answer the question by checking the face of this panel member in the hope this panel member starts to nod. If not, ask afterwards whether the answer addressed sufficiently the question.
- Practise also in using your hands to explain some key elements of the proposed research. A simple gesture can explain more than words.
- Practise in switching from giving the presentation to answering the first question. You are still amazed by your talk and the panel has been waiting for the opportunity to ask the first question. This first question can be an easy one but can also be a very tough one, forcing you to switch from abstract thinking into nitty gritty detail.
- Please note that the mode of asking questions and the type of questions do not indicate the position of your proposal. The questions asked are to help the panel form an opinion on the proposed research. Try to help the panel members by informing on and explaining the proposed research.

- There is no need to be defensive. According to the panel you and your proposal are of sufficient quality to be funded. The question on the table is which proposal should be selected for funding. Please note that excellence is the sole criterion.
- If your proposal is not selected for funding, the homework done for preparing the interview session will be useful to improve your proposal.

3.4. When are you ready?

A good sign is when you start to realise that you are not considering using new advices or tips provided by colleagues. Your brain has already sorted out what advices and tips are useful in this phase and you realise that any new advice given is not useful anymore. This realisation should emerge at least one week before the interview session. If not, ignore any new tips or advices and just focus on the presentation and being able to answer questions.

Another good sign is that you notice that colleagues ask questions that you have already heard and you know how to answer the questions. But also have the capacity to reflect on how you will answer the questions, explaining clearly the proposed research and all technicalities to the panel but also realising that the proposed research is not carved in stone. Since there will be new developments and your research field will move on but you have seen the light in the tunnel and know that your research will make a significant difference and hopefully force a breakthrough.

4. Preparing the presentation

Purpose: The main goal of the presentation is 1) to inform those panel members who did not read your proposal in preparation of the interview session and 2) to remind the rest of the panel about the proposed research and the strong points/argumentations in your proposal. The lead panel members will probably just listen to assess to what extent are you providing information that enables them to take a decision. The rest of the panel will listen carefully to every word said, trying to assess whether your ERC proposal has the potential to force a breakthrough in science by setting a new paradigm and change the research landscape and what scientific evidence is provided.

What is the best strategy to inform the panel to enable them to decide on funding your proposal? There are plenty options for giving a good presentation but the ERC interview instructions provide you the clues what information the panel requires for assessing the proposed research. ERC interview instructions in the Annex I are: *"its innovative aspects, the research team, the methodology, the expected results and the potential contribution to the current state of the science in your field".* These instructions are related to the ERC evaluation criteria and ERC objectives.

A major limitation is time. The panel reserves a relatively short time slot to discuss the proposed research with you. The emphasis is on the questions and answers session but the presentation is key in lining your proposal up for funding. The time constraint for the presentation will determine how much information you can provide prior to the questions and answers session. The trick is to keep the storyline simple to enable the panel not only to hear what you are saying but also to understand what the proposed research entails. Our experience based on the Evaluation Summary Reports and individual feedbacks is that if the panel has understood the science proposed and how it will be turned into new knowledge of high quality, the panel is able to take a decision on funding. Please note, that the panel decides and not the remote referees of your proposal.

The panel instructions for all candidates in the same panel are identical. Each panel chair decides how many minutes are reserved for the presentation based on past experiences. If you have 3 minutes for a presentation you cannot present (any) details but if you have 5 or 8 minutes you can present one or two details explaining the core scientific elements of the proposed research without presenting all planned activities. An option could be to start with the current state of the science in your field explaining what we know and then follow to some extent the panel instructions to emphasise the ground-breaking nature, scientific approach, results and outcome. Ensure that the presentation contains clear messages and a conclusion.

Hereunder are some examples.

Example 1:

- Bigger picture: what we currently know, current challenges or open-standing questions and importance/relevance
- Zooming in on your ideas and solutions to address the challenges and – if time – a short explanation of the differences in view of other attempts, being the innovative aspects of the proposed research (concepts, approach, methodology and crossing the boundaries of disciplines)
- What is the **contrast/difference** between what we know and what we will learn based on your project proposal? For example, we have A but we need to have B.
- Why feasible in view of proposed methodologies (and team)?
- What will be the main expected results?
- What will we learn being the contribution to the state of the art?

- Added value for science (primary impact of outcome) and if appliable stakeholders in other research fields (zooming out again to the bigger picture and relevance): opening up new horizons and opportunities for science, scholarship and engineering and maybe beyond.

Example 2:

- Starting with a rhetoric scientific question. Please consider not opt for a TED talk strategy. The panel has the task to select your proposal based on scientific quality.
- What is the issue or problem? Showing for example the current state.
- What is a potential solution and why? Offering new scientific knowledge.
- How will this solution be realised?
- How will this solution change the current research landscape by opening up novel horizons and opportunities also beyond research?

Example 3 for a 3 minutes presentation in Social Sciences and Humanities panels

- What is the current gap of knowledge?
- Why do we need to fill this gap?
- What are the key concepts we have?
- What key concepts do you propose?
- If time left explain the research design in a few sentences
- What will be the expected findings?
- How will this not only lead to new knowledge but also change our views on other topics or research designs and open up novel research perspectives

4.1. How to prepare the content of the presentation?

It takes a lot of time to prepare a 3, 5, 7, 8 or 10 minutes talk. Especially, if there is a cap on the number of slides. You need to ensure you use the allocated time wisely. But, be happy that you are allowed to give a presentation and answer questions. You have now the opportunity to present an update since the proposal was submitted and to explain the proposed research to the whole panel. An update that could potentially address critical feedback from remote referees or even panel members. Furthermore, all invitees to the interview session are struggling with the same limitation, including panel members who have the task to ensure fair assessment of all proposals across the panel. Preparing a good presentation can change your chances for funding.

You need to start with the obvious task. Sit down and think through what are the key messages of your proposal that you need to tell to the panel in the presentation so they can follow the questions and answers session afterwards. Hopefully, leading to all panel members voting in favour of your project proposal. You may consider drafting a storyline but my advice is to list some keywords representing key messages and debate what keywords should be added or removed and in what order the storyline should be told. Use post-it so you can easily reshuffle keywords or move or add keywords. Please keep the storyline simple since the whole panel should remember the content and main messages of the presentation. Start to give a talk based on these keywords and practice. If the presentation is not good consider to start first with developing a good opening of the presentation drawing the attention of the whole panel to the research questions or scientific ideas driving the proposed research and a good closure explaining the

expected results and contribution to your research field and beyond. Probably this narrative is 3 to 4 minutes giving you a good indication how much time is left for explaining the proposed research. If only 3 minutes are allocated to the presentation you need probably to shorten the narrative to 2,5 minutes and think through what information should be added.

The emerging storyline will be based on your rhetorical skills as a researcher and not on your capacity to read a text. A text being read aloud is boring for most listeners, except if you are president and are not allowed to make any mistake in wording or phrasing due to the potential consequences. If you have difficulties to decide how to present the core of the proposed research, consider to prepare different stories of a few minutes and let your colleagues listening to you choose. In many cases your colleagues realise what should be told to let somebody who is not having the same level of knowledge as you to understand the proposed research. Note the last words in the previous sentence: "*understand the proposed research*". In the end the panel needs also to understand how the proposed research will be turned into scientifically high quality results, knowledge gain, outcome and impact.

When the storyline starts to form, run the updated versions with colleagues, friend or family member until you have the feeling the storyline is good. If you are focussing on the main messages the presentation is about 3-5 minutes. If you are adding too many details the presentation is between 7 up to 10 minutes. If it is longer you need to start to conceptualise the proposed research since the panel is thinking in concepts.

If you have 5 minutes you can provide a few details to explain a key element but the core of the presentation should be on the topic, relevance for the research communities and beyond, the key challenge or key research question or key hypothesis, your innovative ideas to resolve the challenge or research question, the scientific strategy and key "methods" used, expected results and potential scientific gain. Returning to the key challenge or key research question to be resolved, opening up new research perspectives. Not closing research perspectives. If you have 8 minutes you can explain one element in more detail. If you have 2 minutes you can only explain the bigger picture, the key challenge or research question addressed, the relevance to the research communities and beyond and what are your innovative ideas and key expected result(s) opening up new avenues of research. You have no time to explain all methodologies used in detail. So highlight one or two methodologies or techniques being core to the proposed research. Check whether the core elements of the proposed research making your proposal unique and ground-breaking but still feasible to some extent, are presented.

You have now made a good start. The next step is to go back to the drawing board. Check again the content of the presentation and consider the composition of the panel. Does it contain the key messages and are you also able to explain 1 or 2 key scientific elements to the whole panel? If not, rework the presentation till your main storyline is sufficient short to also explain 1 or 2 key elements. If 3 minutes are allocated you can explain 1 key element and if you have 5 or 8 minutes you can explain 2 key elements. Keep the presentation simple without turning the presentation into a lecture. Rerun the presentation with colleagues, friends and family members until everybody is content. Consider to ask them why they are content with the presentation, giving you insight into what should be presented but also how. In the end the presentation is about raising interest in the whole panel to increase the likelihood of funding.

If you have taken the time to prepare the presentation you are probably very good in explaining complex research in a few simple sentences. If not, add **metaphors** to explain the proposed research to the listeners.

And then, ask help in phrasing each sentence and each word correctly with the right grammar and emphasis on the keywords. If you give your presentation, each word is precious. If you give a 10 minutes talk and you applied for 1,8 MEUR, **each second is worth 3.000 EUR**. Think about this since it will help you to give a concise and precise presentation focussing on helping the panel to take a decision.

When you have put together this narrative reflect on what parts of the narrative needed a lot of tweaking, indicating that those parts are probably also your weak points in knowledge and expertise. In most cases the broader theoretical background of the proposed research or some techniques, tools or sources used. Gather information from colleagues on those aspects that you are not so familiar with.

By the way, panels do not like TED talks but they like good scientific presentations because it is easier to remember the content of the proposed research, enabling a good panel discussion and helping the lead reviewers to convince the rest of the panel that your proposal should be funded. Of course, you have visions for future research but try to give scientific information and arguments during your presentation that are specific and explicit. The panel is selecting proposals using the sole selection criterion Scientific Excellence and are not selecting a proposal per ERC keyword. This might imply that several proposals with the same primary ERC keyword are selected for funding and none for another primary ERC keyword.

4.2. How to prepare the slides?

When you have developed a good storyline, start to draw an initial storyboard for the slides with the main lines of your presentation (words or drawings). Check how many slides are allowed. Think through how many slides you need to explain the main lines of the proposed research in view of the ERC panel instructions and how many slides to explain a detail relevant for presenting the core ideas or key technique of the proposed research. Think also through whether some text of the presentation does not require a slide to underpin the storyline. Look at your old slides and think through if there are words, sentences or figures that you can use for your presentation. If there is already 1 or few good slides think through how they can be used and what should be revised. This should lead to a rough storyboard of slides. Check how this storyboard is affecting your current presentation and whether your presentation is improving or not. Adjust the storyboard of slides or presentation accordingly. You have probably noticed that the storyline is key and the slides are used to underpin your storyline and scientific argumentation.

Remember the eye is dominant so to enable the whole panel to listen to your presentation the slides should be in line with your presentation and not the other way around. The slides are a tool to present the proposed research. You should force the panels to look at the slides and listen to you and not start to read text on your slide. This implies **no long sentences on the slides but keywords, key messages and key pictures.** Keep it simple but do not turn it into abstract art.

When you are content with the storyboard of the slides generate each slide and rerun the presentation to assess how the slides affect your presentation. If you are content rerun the presentation for an audience before polishing slides. When you are content with the set of slides the task starts to polish the slides.

- The first task is to think through is the **lay-out.** Will you use the standard slide lay-out of the university or not?
- What will be the minimum font-size for your slides? Read the invitation letter and the annex about the panel room lay-out to assess what can the panel read while seated at 3 to even 6 meters distance from the screen. A panel composed of persons not having young eyes and probably wearing outdated glasses.
- What **colours** will you use? Since the presentation is projected on a screen in Brussels, you do not want to have too colourful slides needing a lot of guidance since each colour has a potential meaning. There should also be sufficient colour contrast in view of the light in the panel room. Check also whether the colours can be seen by colour blind people. See for example the colour combination of Paul Tol: https://personal.sron.nl/~pault/
- The next question is the **guidance** of how to read a slide, preferably in line with the presentation. In which corner of the slide will the storyline per slide begin? From the top to the bottom? From the left top corner and down towards the bottom right corner? Any

guidance visualisation required such as an arrow? Where will the key messages be on the slide? In the middle or top enforcing its relevance or at the bottom of the slides?

- You can also consider adding a kind of coding to the slides to help the panel navigate through the slides when listening to you. For example, a bar at the top or side with tabs containing keyword of your storyline or using different colour per objective or conceptual idea. Be creative.
- **Density.** How much information will be on each slide? You are familiar with the slides but the panel is seeing the slides for the first time and has difficulties to focus their eyes and listen to you. Simple slides with not too much text leave a stronger impression than dense slides. Leave those dense slides for a potential back-up slide. Check per slide what information can be deleted for example logo's, text not relevant for the storyline, too many details.
- **Figures** can sometimes tell more than words. Take the time to generate good figures that are self-explanatory or can be explained easily. If a figure is too complex most of the panel members will not capture the explanation. Consider to use cartoons to explain a complicated but core element of your proposal. If the panel understands the core elements of the proposed research, they are more tempted to vote for your project. Check if you can use one of the figures in your ERC proposal of need to generate new figures. Ask professional help if you are not able to generate good figures.
- **Update.** Check whether there are new developments in the field or additional preliminary results generated by you and your team that can be added to the storyline.
- **Why you.** Filter into your storyline why you and add preliminary data, an update of progress and references to your own work to the slides but do not spend minutes on explaining why you. Or use the first slide to provide the core CV information. Or present why you when you are presenting the team to be hired.
- **Last slide.** Ensure that this slide explains to the panel why the proposed research will lead to a significant contribution to science and potentially very significant contribution, changing our knowledge and current research landscape by opening up novel perspectives.
- **Redraft** the slides till you are happy with the set of slides and rehearse with different audiences and reiterate again.
- **Professional slide design:** The panel has noted that many applicants use professional slide designers, explaining that some panels do not allow you to present slides or have cut back the minutes for presentation in the past calls. There is no requirement for professional slide design but sometimes these designers are able to convey complicated messages with a good figure or lay-out. Discuss with your colleagues what is a wise decision.

4.3. Time slot and duration

Most likely the panel will start a clock when the word is handed to you for after a brief introduction. The introduction is in most panels identical for every applicant invited. It can be brief or it can also contain a kind sentence to set the atmosphere for the interview session.

When the clock starts, the time is ticking away. You have to practice how to quickly set-up your presentation and take the word. In the meantime, the whole panel is watching the countdown of the clock projected on one of the walls in the room. You may not be able to see this clock.

The panel appreciates candidates who take into account the time allocated for the presentation. Most panel members do not only appreciate it but also consider you well prepared if you finisg the presentation in time. Consider therefore to prepare a presentation that is 10 to 20 seconds shorter the allocated time so you know you will be ready before your microphone is muted.

Consider also to prepare a presentation that is 30 seconds or 1 minute shorter in case there is a technical problem or you need to switch to your phone. In most cases the last slide can be used to cut the story short by having a last slide containing an overview of results and outcome and not a thank you slide. Please note that the panels are working with strict time slots.

After the presentation, the questions and answers session starts. Immediately, since the whole panel has been watching the count-down of the clock and is eager to ask questions. Prepare yourself for making the switch to answering immediately a question. A question that could be 1) a nice opening question in view of the proposed research, 2) a very nasty question in view of a technical detail that may not be your scientific expertise, 3) a tough question to assess are you sufficient prepared for funding now, or 4) a standard question to enable the panel to understand a potential element such as ground-breaking potential. Please be aware that the panel members asking you questions are trying to line your proposal up for funding by ensuring that most of the questions raised by the remote referees or panel members are addressed by you and that the panel understands the content of the proposed research and any potential issues. See also the annex with potential questions.

4.4. Answering different types of questions

How to answer questions in an interview? Again, do not speak too fast. Slow down even more if you are answering technical questions since the person asking the question should be able to understand the answer and the panel should be able to follow the discussion and remember the answers given. Practice by giving your answer as if the panel is listening to you.

The main advice is to give **concise and precise answers.** Please note that your role is to inform and explain to the panel. There is no need to be defensive, even it the panel is pushing or challenging you. The panel is just curious and probing to figure out to what extent is the proposed research ambitious and feasible in view of the potential ground-breaking potential.

But you also need to develop **a strategy for answering questions**. When you hear a question, you need to think through what information will help the panel to understand the answer to the question, should you give only a concise and short answer or take the time to explain or provide additional unrequested information. You are allowed to think. You can also consider to rephrase the question to let your brain think how to answer the question. You have in most cases only 15 minutes and probably the panel has 8 to 12 questions based on the feedback from the remote referees plus some panel questions.

If you do not know the answer, tell the panel to please move on and that you will come back later with an answer to the question asked. Please note that you are building up a tension in the panel when you ask the panel to move on and the whole panel will be relieved if you answer the question a few minutes later. Most applicants realised afterwards when reading the Evaluation Summary Report that the answer to that question was crucial for taking a decision on funding.

If you would like to add some information to a previous question asked, just tell the panel this and provide the answer. If you notice after 5 to 10 minutes that the panel is not asking the key scientific questions, think through whether you should indicate to them what are key elements in the proposed research. Prepare such answers in case you need to through in some extra information when answering questions.

Your task is to ensure that the panel understood the **core elements** of the conceptual propositions, the **technical details** of innovative approach or methodology key to generate the results and the potential impact in view of current knowledge, ongoing research in other labs and what is required to move the field significantly forward. Enabling the panel to assess the scientific excellence of your proposal based on the ERC definition for scientific excellence: ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility.

There are different types of questions, which are categorised hereunder. In the annex examples of potential questions are listed and also more information on the dimensions of questions asked.

Please note that most of the questions listed are not project specific. The panel assesses based on the answers to the project specific questions whether your proposal is sufficient mature and based on the answers to the project general questions whether it is the type of research that should be funded by the ERC.

Open or closed questions. It is easier to answer closed questions since a simple answer is in most cases sufficient, provided the panel understands your answer. If you give implicit answers such as “this is not relevant to the proposed research” the panel may not have understood why the question is scientific or methodological not relevant. Be explicit in answering the questions. If open questions are asked, think through how much time you spend on answering this type of questions in view of the time slot allocated for questions and answers. It may be tempting to show what you know but in the end your task is to answer all questions of the panel. You may start to answer and ask halfway the panel whether that is sufficient information or that you should expand. The panel is in 99% of the cases willing to indicate whether a question is sufficient answered, since they are aware of the clock ticking.

If you take the time to answer the questions the panel may also ask you to spend only 30 seconds on answering questions in view of the time allocation. Hereunder is a brief summary of potential type of questions.

General questions to understand the ground-breaking nature on the main lines, the project ideas and potential gain. These questions are in most cases asked by the panel to enable them to understand why they should prioritise your project proposal in view of all other excellent project proposals. In the annex of this guide we listed many of this type of questions.

Conceptual questions related to what extent is your proposed research feasible and not based on too many assumptions or high-risk elements. Please note that the grant is for 5 years and the panel has to assess whether you will be able to carry out a part of the proposed research that will at least lead to significant gain and with a bit of luck to very significant gain, being a potential breakthrough and leading to adaptation of text books or an important monograph. The panel will therefore ask you questions related to why this project, why this conceptual project idea and/or scientific approach, why you, why now.

Technical questions related to the weaknesses identified by remote referees that could be related to the theoretical input, the exact project ideas, what is measured and why (such as measurable, sufficient precise, correct parameter), potential of generating knowledge, feasibility of scientific approach and methodologies, relevance or scientific added value, techniques and tools used, caveats in ideas or methodologies proposed, being able to draw *correct* conclusions, and generalise findings to new knowledge.

Panel questions: Many panels have a few standard questions that they ask all applicants. Such as what was the key finding in the past 5 years in your research field? The answer should contain the outcome of the ERC proposal. What was the most important finding in the past 5 years in your research field? Hopefully, you can refer to your own work in the past. What were your most important scientific contributions in the past? Ask your colleagues how they perceive you based on what scientific contributions.

4.5. Using slides during questions and answers session

Print the slides so you have a good overview of the content of the slides in your presentation.

Number the slides to allow the panel to go back to a specific slide during the questions and answers session.

Some panels allow you to use the slides shown during the presentation to answer questions. Other panels allow you to use the slides shown during the presentation and back-up slides to answer the questions. The panel instructions in the Annex I tell you what is allowed. If you have only a few slides you can in principle scroll to the slide when answering questions. But if you have

more than 5 slides it may not be a good idea to scroll through the slides to find the right slide for answering questions. Moreover, you need to know what is on each slide to decide in a split second whether you will go to a specific slide to answer the question or not and which slide is adequate.

In the Microsoft PowerPoint “presentation mode” you can jump to a specific slide by pressing the “number” of the slide followed by “enter”. For example, if you would like to jump to slide 5, press “5” followed by “enter” and slide 5 pops up. Or press 1 and subsequently 2 followed by enter and slide 12 pops up. Try this for yourself and see how it works. Decide then for yourself whether this is a good feature or that you prefer PDF. In PDF this feature is not available.

What is the added value of generating back-up slides? In most cases applicants tell afterwards that they did not use the back-up slides to answer the questions since there was not sufficient time. But the fact that they had generated back-up slides allowed them to give a concise and precise answer.

5. Voice and body language

Most ERC applicants are not gifted with a good voice. Telling a good storyline with a nice voice to listen to and a body language in line with the messages requires some training. The first thing you need to do is to sit straight. Remember it is a kind of job interview. Another solution is to stand while giving the presentation.

5.1. Breathing

It is important to breathe correctly. If you notice a high pitch in your voice or having too little volume it may be due to wrong breathing. Ask for help to improve your breathing techniques to ensure you are using the right muscles. Consider also to stand when talking since this enables you to use your lungs to full extent by activating your abdominal muscles.

Ensure that your voice is not dropping at the end of a sentence due to a breathing problem and the panel missed the key message. If you are without breath, you are probably not using your abdominal muscles. A simple trick to force yourself to use your abdominal muscles is to stand with your back to the wall, go through your knees to Alpine skiing position while leaning with your back to the wall and talk. Since your abdominal muscles are contracted in this position you use the right muscles to talk. If you use your abdominal muscles, you can control better your breath. If you are still without breath avoid long sentences or introduce pauses.

5.2. Fine tuning pace

Slow down!!

Our brain is not a hard disk where information is etched/recorded. It is more a processing disk with different levels. The ear has to capture each word that you said. Subsequently the brain needs to process the information (active memory) and compare it to knowledge stored in the brain (passive memory), understand what is said in order 1) to remember the information told and 2) to be able to explain it to the others panel members during the panel discussion. In the end the panel decides. If you talk too fast the information is lost; lost to the ear, brain and/or in the panel discussion[5]. The number of words per minute decides how much a brain can remember afterwards.

Normal speaking rate is about 130 - 150 words per minute. If you speed up the brain cannot capture all information said, certainly if the panel is tired after listening to many presentations. This is due to cognitive overload and according to a late publication caused by too much glutamate. It is your task to take the audience by the hand and guide the listener through your magic world of science. Think through what are key messages, what messages need to be conveyed and what sentences are just for information.

A speaking rate of 140 words per minute is fine for information that is easy to capture and understand. But a rate of 150 words per minute is a too rate to explain key or novel information that the panel needs to remember. You probably have to slow down to 100 -120 words per minute to explain a key element. Moreover, in a remote session you need to pay more attention to the pace since the connection may not be outstanding. It is more important to convey the key messages of the presentation than tell the panel all details. Please slow down and keep the story simple without too many technicalities and details but still considering the intelligence of the panel members in front of you. The questions and answers session is reserved for the details.

5. Of course, ERC has awarded grants to very fast speaking persons. But their colleagues told me that these candidates are exceptional gifted researchers and speakers.

5.3. Conveying messages with your voice

Besides (changing) speaking rate there are other tools to convey messages such as t**one, intonation, rhythm and pauses**. A presentation is story telling. You have an audience in front of you who is not too eager to listen to you. They are tired and have listened to (too) many presentations and are looking forward to a coffee break. It is therefore important to capture the attention of the whole panel. Please vary intonation, tone and rhythm. By varying the speaking rate, you can help the audience to capture what are main messages and what are explanations or side information, but you can also emphasise what are the key words in a sentence by intonation, tone and rhythm. Listen to professional native English-speaking storytellers and notice how they draw the listeners into the story. The trick is not to overdo it, but to use natural tools of storytelling to draw and keep the attention of the audience composed of professors.

Rhythm or prosody is an important element in pronouncing the words in English. English is stressed-timed wherein the speaker alternates between stressed (longer) and unstressed (shorter) syllables in regular intervals[6]. The stress is put on the words with a content. The stressed syllables create beats or a rhythm in a sentence, similar to a Morse code. In contract, Spanish is a syllable-timed language, wherein every syllable has the same length. This, in conjunction with some rolling “r” sounds, is why Spanish may sound like a machine gun (not my wording). If you speak English too fast with a machine gun rhythm, it becomes difficult to decipher the words, hear the words correctly and grasp their meaning. My advice is to slow down to 130 words per minute to allow the listener to hear and process what you say. If the listener understood what you said, you probably have made your point.

How to convey important information in the narrative? For example, by slowing down. pausing 2 or 3 seconds after a key message is said before continuing. Thereby you give the cue to the listener that this is important information and also time to process the information. Test your pauses by recording and notice the difference or watch how an audience responds when you insert pauses.

You can also change the tone or intonation to get a message across to the panel to mark what is important information. For example, by inserting a rhetoric question to prepare the panel for key information (tone shift but also letting the panel think that this is indeed an important question in view of what has just been said). Another option is to emphasise specific (key)words in a sentence and in particular words that explains the proposed ideas or research.

How to convey excitement? By speeding up a bit and slowing down again when giving the cue or conclusive remark, with the correct volume and having the right facial expression. Think through what is according to you the most exciting scientific parts and spend some time on those.

How to draw attention? 1) If you notice that the panel is not listening consider to pause a few seconds so the panel’s attention is drawn to you. A grantee told me that the panel was clearly not interested to listen to his presentation but when he shut up a few seconds the whole panel realised the unexpected silence and started to look at the applicant, realising that they should listen to the applicant[7]. 2) Consider to ask a rhetorical question to activate the brain of the listeners. It gives the panel to think through what we know and what not, before you start to explain your ideas or solutions. 3) Consider to pause a second or two after having said something important. 4) Consider to contrast sufficiently what we have and what we should have. It gives the panel time to hear what you said, absorb the information and store it in their brain for future use. Practise these effects on the audience and ask colleagues what techniques they use.

6. See the first pages of https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1025&context=honorstheses

7. This applicant was awarded an ERC grant, according to him because the panel listened and captured the scientific core but also the relevance of the novel results generated after the submission date.

5.4. Gestures but don’t fidget

Messages are not only conveyed with words, rhythm, pauses, tone and intonation but also with body language and gestures. Since the panel can only see the upper part of your body, use your hand(s) to convey important message, to mark the number of arguments or to explain something. A delay in the images may not capture a movement. So, you need to move your hands decisively and consciously. Moving too fast may create a blur and the message is lost and moving too slow may not underpin your messages. Practise this beforehand. Be aware that there may be small time delays, this may make any hand gestures difficult, visual and sound may be asynchronous but in general the Webex connections are pretty good.

Stop any unnecessary fidgeting during the presentation or listening to the questions. Sit or stand still or calm. Practise by standing behind a chair and by putting both hands on the top of the back rest. This will make you conscious of the use of your hands and therefore help you to prevent unnecessary hand gestures or body movements. If you are sitting a tip could be to fold your hands in front of you. It takes time to unfold them.

Also, body language is important. As your mother probably told you, sit straight up to enable you to breath correctly, shoulders down, and show interest in the audience. A smile in the eye helps. You can also consider to stand in front of the camera. In that case make sure that you are wearing comfortable shoes and your feet are placed solid on the floor. Most likely the feet are placed a bit apart so you are not wiggling. If you are still wiggling consider to bent a bit your knees as if you are skiing down the hill.

6. Preparing yourself for the what, why and how questions

What and why/how questions in view of the transformational potential of knowledge and research directions

There are three main strategies for preparing yourself for critical questions. One is to analyse first the potential what and why/how questions and continue with analysing the weak and strong points in view of the ERC evaluation criteria. The second strategy is the other way around and the third strategy is asking colleagues for critical questions or why somebody may not believe you can turn your promises into scientific results since not all reviewers in step 2 will be convinced. We start first with the what and why/how questions since this gives you a good insight into what reviewers are looking for. Besides these evaluation criteria the reviewers are instructed by the ERC to indicate in their reports what are the weak and strong points, see next chapter.

Prepare yourself for potential questions on these topics.

Scientific Excellence: Ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility		
Ground-breaking nature and potential impact of the research project		
What question	***Why / How / When / Who question***	***Rethink***
1) To what extent does the proposed research address <u>Important challenges</u>?		
What are the main/major challenge(s)? **Or** *What are the <u>Big Research Question(s) = BRQ?</u>*]	**Why** is the challenge important across fields? Or, What is its Significance across fields [M*irror this to the ultimate outcome - breakthroughs*]	**Key question:** How and why is the proposed research important for the broader research community/communities? **YR:** The panels select preferably proposals that are fascinating and intriguing researchers across different disciplines and addressing (urgent) needs of science/engineering/scholarship. The potential breakthrough would not only open up a new research field but also open up research perspectives in existing research fields (represented by the PI's) and perhaps in adjacent fields. The word challenge can be replaced with the word Big Research Question or Major Gap of Knowledge as long as these contain challenges or risks that need to be resolved (not a logical step forward).
2) To what extent are the Objectives Ambitious and beyond the state of the art? (e.g. novel concepts and approaches or development across disciplines)? *YR: Carefully distinguish this level of discussion from the discussion on the Big Research Questions under point 1 above.*		

Scientific Excellence: Ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility		
What is the overarching aim (coherence), the objectives / aims / specific research questions (SRQ)? **What** are the conceptual ideas driving the proposed research? **What** is the novel dimension of concepts, of knowledge and of approach? **What** are the innovative aspects?	**Why** are the objectives and/or SQRs ambitious and going beyond the state of the art? Why will these objectives already lead to ground-breaking contributions and the overarching aim to a transformational breakthrough? **Why** are these novel concepts / approaches or developments across disciplines ?	**Key issue**: Novel concept, novel approach and novel development across disciplines help to bridge to the new future; opening new research horizons. It is important to explain what makes the proposed research different (for example other "scientific" elements) than past and ongoing research (ambition of partially uncharted research field) and having the potential to change the research landscape (setting a benchmark) **YR:** The panel members have the PDF of the proposal in front of them so you can sometimes refer to figures in the proposal if these are underpinning what you explain orally to the panel **Provide** preliminary evidence (published/ unpublished) is important to convince the panel chairs about the robustness of the novel concept and approach. **Novel/innovative:** Novel is referring to "not done before" and could be done by another researcher, being to some extent a logical step forward. Innovative is referring to unconventional, original, inventive or creative aspects of the proposed research that could not be done by others and having a transformational potential to set a benchmark in research. **Update:** Panels love updates and to see new results since the submission of the proposal.
3) To what extent is the proposed research high risk/high gain (i.e. if successful the payoffs will be very significant, but there is a high risk that the research project does not entirely fulfil its aims)?		
What is the high-risk dimension?	Why does this undertaking lead to a breakthrough (high-risk)?	**Key issue:** resolving the challenge(s) of point 1 is the high-risk dimension of the project. Some key objectives specified in point 2 are likely to be

Scientific Excellence: Ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility		
	What would be the fall back in terms of significant (ground-breaking) contributions? Why will partial failure still be important for the breakthrough?	achieved. Partial achievement will already be important for the challenge(s) and lead to significant gain. Besides the risk related to achieving the goals there is also a risk dimension in view of the methodologies proposed (appropriateness of the methodologies) requiring key intermediate stages for adapting the project plan. Consider **mitigation and back-up-plans** for those specifically. **Tip YR:** The discussion of the objectives and research design are focused on very significant contributions to the science (for example changing the knowledge or research landscape) and must seem likely to be achieved within the 5-year timescale. The breakthrough may be more speculative but your preliminary evidence makes it a potentially feasible endeavour. **Please note** that the high risk/high gain evaluation criterion is a balance. The project proposal should be sufficient mature to force a breakthrough in science but not a logical step forward. Your project proposal has been selected for step 2 so the panel has assessed your project as not being a logical step forward. The focus is on will you be able to generate sufficient robust and reliable (generalised and conceptualised) findings or results, changing our knowledge and forcing a breakthrough. Consider not only what but also how significant the impact of your results will be on science.
What is the gain if fully successful? **What** is the gain if partially successful?		

Scientific Approach		
4) To what extent is the scientific approach feasible?		
What is the evidence that the scientific approach is feasible considering the high risk/high gain balance?	**Why** should the panel fund this project now? **Why** is the evidence demonstrating feasibility of the scientific approach? **Why** opt for this approach, strategy, design?	**Key Issue:** The proposed research should be (partially) based on facts and not solely on assumptions. If the proposed research is only based on assumptions and wishful thinking the ERC panel may assess the proposed research as not sufficient mature or immature. **YR:** Feasibility of the scientific approach is linked to the next ERC criterion on appropriateness of the methodologies: will the scientific approach 1) generate reliable "information" and 2) (subsequently) provide the novel insight and understanding required to achieve the goals.
5) To what extent are the proposed methodology (research design) **and 'working arrangements' appropriate to achieve the goals?**		

What is the research design and therefore specific methodology (methods, tools, techniques, experiments…) to obtain the different /Objectives and resolve the Challenges or BQRs? Is there a clear strategy and a clear structure such as WPs ? **How** Are the different WPs requiring the different expertise of the PI or is there a significant mismatch? **What** are the working arrangements of the PI and team to address the objectives of the WPs **How are these** appropriate to achieve the key intermediate goals (KIGs), the specific objectives and the overarching aim of the project by synthesis and conceptualisation of the findings and feeding into the 5-10 year long term goal?	**Why** is the research design and therefore proposed strategy, set-up, methodology (the research design including methods, tools, techniques, experiments …) appropriate to achieve each SRQs / objective / KIG? **What are the key intermediate goals to achieve the overarching aim or address the BRQ?** **Why** is the research design appropriate to do so? And not too complex? **How** will the PI strategically deploy the team over the 5 years with regard to the KIGs**?** **How** will you synthesize results (what are the KIGs) to generate the Big Picture – how will your team set up over time allow you do so?	**Key issue:** The panel needs to be convinced of the potential feasibility and credibility of the research design (*per objective*) as well as how you will achieve to put the big picture together. **YR:** 1. Be able to present in a few sentences the structure of the full research design 2. Be able to describe per WP/specific objective/ KIG the novelty in the ideas, design, the strategy, its complexities and synthesis. 3. Discuss based on work packages or key intermediate goals the specific research designs
6) To what extent does the proposal involve the development of Novel Methodology?		
What is the novel methodology? In terms of novel research design and / or methods, techniques, tools	**Why** is this new methodology necessary in order to achieve the goals?	Explain and justify any particularly novel or unconventional aspects in view of the available methodology and explain advantages and disadvantages. Include any unpublished preliminary evidence Please note that in the past calls a novel element in the methodology is a bonus required to be selected for funding.
7) To What extend are the proposed timescales, resources and time commitment adequate and properly justified?		

When, expressed in a rough scale of time are the key intermediate goals envisaged that lead to achieving the challenge as specified under 1 above? **What** are the key intermediate goals for monitoring the progress of the proposed research, requiring a potential adaptation of the research plan? **What** are the available resources and requested ERC resources **What** is the time commitment of each PI to the project? Is this feasible when considering the funding IDs as described in section B1b annex Funding ID of the PI?	**Why** are the timescales of the Key Intermediate Goals appropriate; adjustable? **Why** are these resources appropriate? **(What level of expertise is needed**) **Why** is the time commitment sufficient and adequate in view of the supervision and role in carrying out the proposed research successful and drawing conclusions?	**Key Issue:** Is the set up OK. This is related to the research design. • size and nature of the team, indicating, where appropriate, the key team members (profile not names); • available infrastructure and equipment and • timescales related to your key intermediate goals. • time commitment (too high or too low) and overall view on how this project fits into future perspective of the PI (main project or part of a new research line?)

7. Checklist for strong and weak points in your proposal

In the Congratulations Letter is written how to analyse the weak and strong points in your proposal. In the previous chapter you have analysed what, why how in view of the ERC evaluation criteria and in this chapter, you are being **guided to reflect** on the strong and weak points of your proposed research and potential specific questions raised by external referees who do not fully believe your proposed research will provide the expected results and paradigm shift. Or that you have the scientific expertise and capacity to execute the proposed research successfully.

Each reviewer of your proposal, being a panel member or remote referee has to explain based on the ERC evaluation criteria what are the strong points and what are the weak points. In answering the questions, you are going to acknowledge the view of the external referee and explain subsequently what are the strong points and either how you will overcome the weak points or how the strong points will lead to a potential breakthrough.

First step - analysis of your CV and track record.
Please address the following questions to assess the strengths and weaknesses of your scientific expertise and capacity in view of the proposed research but also novelty.

1) What are the core elements of the proposed research and is your core knowledge and expertise clearly in line with these core elements? Consider for example the topic of the proposed research, the theoretical knowledge, ideas, skills, disciplines, expertise, experience, approaches, methods, used?
2) Is this core knowledge and expertise documented in publications? If not, this is a potential weakness in your CV, see next point.
3) What are your weaknesses regarding the core elements? Have you involved a colleague or partner to compensate for your weaknesses? If not, organise this prior to the interview session.
4) The panel will perceive you as the expert on all elements that are core to the proposed research and forcing a breakthrough. Talk with your colleagues about your weaknesses and ensure that you have sufficient knowledge and understanding to answer any question touching upon this weakness in your CV. For example, a chemist applied as PI on a biology topic and ensured he knew all the ins and outs of biological experiments and parameters before the interview session. The question is not whether all the answers are 100% correct but that the panel draw the conclusion that you can take the lead and decide what research should be carried out and how to force a breakthrough.
5) You have now a good overview of your core competence and weaknesses. Cross check now what parts of the proposed research are novel in view of your past research so you can explain to the panel your core competence and sufficient knowledge on new elements but also can highlight was is novel in the proposed research in view of your past research
6) The conclusion of the panel should be that you have the right scientific expertise and competence to execute the proposed research and the proposed research has some novel elements in view of your past research.

Second step - State of Science, methodology and scientific field

1) Please check the latest State of the Science. If your proposed research is cross disciplinary talk to colleagues about the latest State of Science on those elements that are not your daily cup of tea. Some panel members google or use network analysis of publications to figure out what do we know. Spend in particular time on those elements that are not part of your core expertise.
2) Please check the latest state of the art of methodologies across disciplines. Your assignment will be to add new knowledge to the body of knowledge across disciplines or change our current knowledge. Most methods, tools and techniques are used cross-disciplinary and the panel will try to understand why you made specific choices. Please note that you can indicate in the interview session that if there are important developments these will be considered
3) Please check the State of the Scientific field. What are the latest developments in your field and what are your competitors investigating. Panel members like to hear that you are informed and a) have read the latest articles in your field and/or b) are aware what other groups are

doing. Moreover, that you are able to explain the differences and/or why your project is (still) important in view of ongoing research. The differences are relevant for the analysis of to what extent your proposal is innovative and unconventional. See 4th step.

4) Tip: If you are unfamiliar with some adjacent research fields ask colleagues which 2 papers you need to read in preparation of the interview session. Ask them also what are the main ideas or working hypotheses in these fields. If you are unfamiliar with some methods or devices ask colleagues whether you can see how this method or device works and how these will be used in your project or even adapted. According to the ERC panel you are the expert who should know the ins and outs and whether the proposed methodology is appropriate to achieving the goals.

Third step project analysis in combination with what and why/how

1) Define why the challenge is important for the research community (or communities) and why your project idea and scientific approach might be much better than what is being done or proposed by others (advantages and disadvantages balance but also need and urgency).
2) Analyse to what extent your proposal is addressing the ERC objectives: 1) crossing the boundaries of disciplines (multi- and interdisciplinary), 2) pioneering and opening up new research horizons and research fields and 3) containing innovative approach and scientific invention (creative or unconventional ideas). Go back to your abstract and check also to what extent you addressed these ERC objectives in the abstract and what promises you made.
3) Check the weak and strong points in your project proposal and consider how you can address the weak points. Potential weak points could be:
    a. Project idea (not well defined or not sufficiently mature);
    b. Objectives: not sufficiently specific or not sufficient coherent;
    c. Objectives are not broken down into sub-objectives, key intermediate goals, steps, tasks with a clear strategy before scaling up the proposed research;
    d. (working) Hypotheses, notes, ideas, concepts, conceptual and theoretical framework and/or research questions guiding the proposed research are not sufficient explicit;
    e. Scope of the proposed research: too broad or too narrow according to the panel in view of the timescale, workload and budget;
    f. Not sufficiently focussed on the problem(s) or key issue(s) or too complex or too many dimensions;
    g. Scientific approach or strategy: the panel is not convinced that the chosen approach or methodology will lead to a breakthrough in view of other proposals and recent developments;
    h. The degree of novelty or innovativeness (not sufficiently ground-breaking) of the idea and scientific approach and methodology. Define what makes your project different or original in view of what everybody else is doing or planning to do;
    i. Added value of innovative aspects: For the external referee it is not clear why these innovative or novel aspects will provide the results required to resolve a challenge or research question;
    j. Not sufficient crossing the boundaries of disciplines on the level of knowledge, approach, methodology to resolve the challenge or research question;
    k. Feasibility of the scientific approach is debated. Check whether you can obtain or gather the data, have chosen the right study strategy, parameter and/or method for analysis and can draw conclusions. For example, panels check whether you have sufficient preliminary data presented in proposal and/or during the presentation to demonstrate you can measure “something” or deduct what are potential findings.
    l. Too little details or lack of justification of choices made: This may lead to in depth questions and very technical questions based on the review reports by external referees who are struggling to understand the proposed research and indicated potential weak points or choices made.
    m. No back-up or alternative plans presented for the most risky or uncertain parts in the proposed research. Please discuss with your colleagues what could be good back-up or alternative plans in case the proposed research turns out to be too challenging or the initial findings are not sufficient promising or conclusive.

n. Panels check whether you are able to draw positive conclusions based on data generated and/or gathered and/or analysed going beyond correlation, leading to novel insight advancing significantly the current knowledge;
o. Risk management: insufficiently described or mitigation and/or back-up plans are missing or inadequate. Please discuss with your colleagues what could be good back-up or alternative plans in case the proposed research turns out to be too challenging or the initial findings are not sufficient promising or conclusive;
p. What are the moments in time (key intermediate goals or intermediate stages) that you will execute your risk management plan or consider to adapt the original research plan? The panels are looking for proposals that will be partially successful and a PI able to manage the risks by revising the research plan if the findings or results are not in line with the expectations;
q. High risk and high gain balance: Consider what will be the gain if the proposed research partially fails (safe bet) and what will be the gain if the proposed research is successful;
r. Team composition: not all expertise and knowledge needed for the project are included or it is not clear why everybody is involved;
s. Check whether all external partners can be replaced by others.

4) Define what your key project results will be if you are successful and/or partially successful. Are these results leading to the break-through that everybody is hoping for?
5) Conceptualise, generalise or deduce the results and define how your results will lead to a theoretical or conceptual change in research including beyond the topic of your project proposal or even your research community. Develop a vision on research? Check whether these generalised results are addressing the ERC primary panel and the ERC keywords selected by you.
6) Assess for yourself to what extent are potential external referees helping the panel with assessing your project proposal in step 2 are full experts on the topic, project ideas and methodology or partial experts. This is a question about how unique is your expertise. In most cases not all external referees have similar expertise as you. In that case, partial experts are reviewing your proposal who may not be as well informed as you and may spot incorrectly weaknesses. How to deal with this type of questions during the interview session?
7) Why you? Are you truly the driving force behind the project? Do you have the right expertise and knowledge? The right team and experts?

8. The technical details and the panel room

Read carefully the ERC invitation letter for the interview session and its Annex II. Ask help from your support staff to understand what is allowed or not, since most support staff learned a lot during the remote interview sessions for 2020, 2021 and 2022 calls. Please note that the ERC is using Web-Ex software and is allowing slides in most panels in 2023 calls.

8.1. The panel room in Brussels

If there is no COVID-19 pandemic limitation the panel will assemble in Brussels. In Annex C some pictures of the panel rooms are depicted. The person leading your interview session can be the chair of the panel or your lead panel member. Around the tables are microphones that can be switched on or muted. There is a set of projectors next to each other at the front and in 6 out of 11 rooms also halfway the room, allowing the panel to see your presentation and you. Whether you are shown on the same screen as the slides is depending on the technical set-up. Some reported that the applicant was shown on one screen and the slides on another screen.

You can follow what happens in the panel room since several cameras are installed. One camera is placed above the screens on which your slideshow is projected and allows you to see the whole room if no microphone is activated. In most rooms the tables are set up as a horseshoe and cameras are placed in the middle. If a panel member activates a microphone, a closely placed camera is activated and turns to the person talking while slowly zooming in. Interview candidates said that the cameras zooming in are useful to see the panel member talking but in most cases this panel member is clearly looking at a screen on which you are projected and not in the camera. If you have a hearing problem, contact the ERC before the interview session. The Executive Agency will discuss with you how to ensure the interview session is running smoothly[8]. Starting Grant candidates in LS7 panel told that the panel member talking was instructed to look in the camera when you talked while the other panel members were looking at the screen on which you are projected. Technical solutions are not resolving everything but all candidates appreciated the effort to mimic a life situation.

A warning: The experiences of candidates interviewed in 2022 calls were not all positive. As if the panel had forgotten that they have invited you. Think through how you will respond. In most cases a though interview session is a positive sign since the panel is probing whether your proposal should be selected for funding and if not, whether it should be listed as nr 1 on the reserve list in case additional funding becomes available.

8.2. The physical and digital rooms you are in

Please note that the sessions are **confidential.** Photographing or recording is not allowed.

The physical room: Besides you nobody is allowed to be present in the physical room from which you give the presentation, except if there is a technical problem with the connection. Note that this time is deducted from your time slot. A solution is to switch to an interview session by phone. If the interview session cannot be conducted in the time slot allocated to you, the ERC panel will assess your proposal based on the full proposal, individual review reports and panel discussion. Think through from which room you will conduct the interview session and to what extent does this room have a good internet connection and light.

Ask your university whether they offer the use of a specific room for these interview sessions with all technical equipment and potentially technical assistance.

[8] I have heard only positive feedback on the professional response by the Executive Agency when it comes to assistance: kind, to the point, proposing solutions, instructing the panel how to interact with you during the interview. If you are not satisfied with the response of the Executive Agency, ask your support staff members or ERC NCP in your country to help you.

The digital waiting room: You are being asked to log in for a specific time slot and to wait for your turn. Per time slot 3 candidates are lined up. You can be a few minutes in the waiting room up till more than an hour, depending whether you are the first candidate lined up or the last one. Some 2022 candidates told that by accident they were moved into the panel room and subsequently removed. If this happens, check the name of the person you saw on the screen since this person may be one of your lead panel members asking questions after your presentation. It gives you the time to check the background of this panel member while you are waiting. Others have told that they were kicked out of the waiting room by accident and had to log in again. All very stressful events. Think through how you are going to handle this waiting time and stress. Read a good book or stressing yourself with running through all your papers?

If you are not logging in one time, your interview slot may be gone. Call the ERC immediately on the phone number given to you if there is an issue. Please note that if somebody calls you on your phone with a number starting with +32 this may be the ERC trying to contact you. Pick up the phone then.

The digital panel room: When it was their turn, some candidates explained that it went so fast that before they knew the panel started the clock that is counting down the minutes allocated for your presentation. Telling that the panel is stressed and has no time to welcome you properly and wait for the presentation to be full screen. Practise to start to give your presentation when you are still setting up your presentation to full screen. But there are also panels taking the time to welcome you as described in the next paragraph. Panels who realise that they invited you and you are stressed since you have no clue how reviewers assessed your proposal and what are the questions.

When you enter the room with the panel members you will be welcomed by the chair or the leading panel member, giving you the time to set-up the presentation. If you are not able to set-up the presentation the panel will set up the PDF presentation that you sent to the ERC per e-mail. The word will be handed to you, so you know when to start. In Starting Grant 2021 call there was an elaborate welcome such as "*welcome Dr X, I am the leading panel member, we are all looking forward to hearing your presentation and afterwards we will have some questions. You have x minutes for your presentation and the clock starts now*". But you may also get a more business-like welcome such as "*you have x minutes for the presentation starting now*" while you still need to switch to the presentation mode. In this case you would like to start talking while you set up the slides. Why?

Please note that after the word has been handed to you, the clock is started and counting down the minutes. A clock that the whole panel can see. After the presentation it is up to the chair to decide whether you can go back to specific slides or – if allowed – to back-up slides. Most applicants have told me that they did not have the time to go back to their slides but preparing the slides and back-up slides helped them in preparing the answers to difficult or technical questions.

Some applicants were so well prepared for the interview session in the Starting Grant 2021 call that they already went to the right slide in their presentation before the last word of the question was said. Some told that the chair protested but the applicants explained that they knew how to navigate quickly to the right slide when the panel was asking the questions. Without scrolling. In PDF this can be done by activating the page thumbnails overview (search on internet for instructions Adobe thumbnails), a similar thumbnail set-up as with PowerPoint.

8.3. Webex software

This call the ERC is using Webex for the remote meetings. **Download** all required software upfront. Please familiarise yourself with Webex before your interview session and in particular in **setting up correctly the presentation mode**. Being full screen without seeing the next slide or your notes. You may have to give Webex the right to access your computer. Webex is allowing you to run short sessions of 40 minutes for free. Please note that Webex is slightly different than

Teams or Zooms. Practise Webex with colleagues, friends or family members by asking them to invite you for a Webex session.

8.4. Technical set-up on your side

- Consider to conduct the interview session from your university since they have better equipment and internet connection than you have at home.
- Run a test with your colleagues using Webex to assess what the panel sees in the different presentation modes. The presentation mode wherein you see the next slide may not work. Most likely your colleagues see what you see on your screen.
- Think through what mode you will use for the presentation: PowerPoint/Keynote or PDF. The advantage of the PowerPoint or Keynote programme is that if in the presentation mode of the slides you can easily jump from one slide to another slide by typing the number of the slide followed by a return. For example “5 enter”. This enables you to go back to specific slides during the questions and answers session or to jump to a back-up slide. If you use PDF you can use the thumbnail mode to quickly go to a specific slide.
- Have a good clock next to you so you can monitor the time used for the presentation and answering questions.
- Use a high-resolution camera and a very good microphone. If your computer or laptop does not have a good camera or microphone, buy one.
- Consider to use a headphone so you can clearly hear the questions but also to avoid the panel hearing you moving or searching through a printout for an answer.
- Check the position of the camera. The recommendation is that the camera is **on the level of your eyes so you look straight into the camera and making eye contact with the listeners**. Position the camera at one arm length from your body on eye level and angle the camera so it projects your head mainly in the upper part of the “screen”, allowing the panel to see a bit of your upper part of your body. This enables you to use your hands and visualise with hands explanations to the panel during the interview session. Make some screenshots with a camera to assess what is the best position of the camera and you.
- Most candidates will probably opt for being seated in front of the camera. Select a chair that does not move. Some candidates are opting for standing. The advantage of standing is that you can use your voice to full extent and it enable you to lower the shoulders. If you are standing, make sure that if you move, you move with the talking so the body movements underline what you are saying. Consider to stand a bit further away when giving the presentation and move close when answering questions.
- Check the light on your face. The light should come from behind the camera and light up your whole face and not a part of your face or the top of your head.
- Check the background behind you. In most cases a white wall is better than a busy background, distracting potentially panel members who are attending 12 to 16 interview sessions per day. In some cases, the panels are running interviews in the evening to accommodate panel members in other time zones.
- If the Webex connection is not working the interview will continue via a telco, using the telephone number you provided to the ERC.

8.4. Your desk

You will not have the time to search through papers on your desk to figure out how a question should be answered. But sometimes it is practical to have key documents on your desk in case

the panel asks a question that needs to be clarified. Knowing that these papers are next to you may calm you down and let you realise that you know all the answers, even those that are not your core competence. The panel has the full proposal as a PDF in front of them so you can refer to figures in the proposal to explain something.

Potential items on your desk?

- A copy of the slide presentation. Think through what is practical, a print with one slide per page or not (or both) and practice answering questions with this copy.
- A copy of your full proposal. If more practical, split your proposal into three stapled parts: The A3 form with a print out of the budget justification, B1 part and B2 part.
- An enlarged print of all your figures in B1 and B2 parts or some key figures. You could consider to hang these figures on the wall behind the screen so you can take a quick look - if required - just to memorise the content of the figures.
- Your telephone in case the ERC calls you to conduct a telco when there are technical problems. Please pick up the phone if a +32 telephone number is calling you.
- Paper and pen to take key notes such as words to enable you to answer the questions but also to remember afterwards what questions were asked during the interview session. Giving you a hint of what were the comments in the review reports enabling you to consider what should be revised in your proposal in case 2022 call panel is not awarding the grant. Please note that the ERC panels expect you to resubmit your proposal and are therefore providing panel comments to increase the likelihood of funding in the next call. The ERC states that re-applicants have a twice as high chance of funding that first time applicants.
- Consider what could be useful to have next to you when answering questions.
- Practise several times with these items on your desk so you know where these items are on your desk.
- Remember there is only one person who can present and explain the proposed research to the panel and that is you. You may not give the best answers to all questions but you would like to leave the impression with the panel that the science is excellent and you know most ins and outs of the proposed research, how to manage the risks and uncertainties but also when to adjust the original research plan. Moreover, you know how the expected results fit into the bigger picture or current body of knowledge.

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A. Interview Questions – dimensions and examples

The reviewers (panel members) from the panel assigned to your proposal, as well as the remote reviewers, have read your proposal and provided written reports. The lead reviewer makes a comprehensive overview of this feedback and prepares the questions with together with one or two panel members who have read your proposal in step 2. The panel may discuss before the interview session what are the key questions that need to be clarified. Please note that most technical questions asked are based on the reports provided by the external referees. In the interview the panel members can ask any kind of clarification that they deem needed to assess and rank your proposal. Collect also questions asked by your colleagues that are probably more project specific.

Type of questions

The questions asked have different dimensions. The most relevant is dimension 5 in view of the feasibility of the scientific strategy and methodologies proposed:

- Dimension 1: questions that will elucidate a particular ERC evaluation criterion and/or ERC objective in view of the sole selection criterion Scientific Excellence,
- Dimension 2: the specific nature of question: what, why, how questions. There may be additional questions such as who and when. **These questions can be very technical but also general**;
- Dimension 3: abstract questions to assess the potential knowledge emerging or general gain versus highly technical questions, discussing whether A will provide B when using method X. These questions can also be related to the context of the proposed research or the bigger picture of current knowledge and theories.
- Dimension 4: to what extent is the proposed research unique and innovative in view of the competition and flexible to accommodate novel developments or partial failures of proposed research and still lead to a transformational or significant change in “science”.
- Dimension 5: questions related to the strengths and weaknesses of the proposed research in view of our current knowledge, conceptual propositions, scientific approach, methodologies, matureness, challenges, risks, likelihood of results, and potential breakthrough, paradigm shift. **These questions can be very technical and are In most cases the bulk of the questions asked if the remote referees had a lot of comments.**

These 5 categories are interrelated of course. But understanding 1 and 2 will help you in your strategy to give precise and concise answers in view of your project. It allows you to incorporate the bigger picture of science, when answering the questions but also explain to the panel why your proposal may be successful.

Below we follow the ERC evaluation criteria. Please note that some elements of the evaluation criteria are addressed from different angles. We will mostly start with a “What” question follow-up by a question digging into the rationale, therefore “Why-questions”. These will also help you in assessing the strong and weak points of the proposed research.

The first 3 cells are focussing on the ground-breaking potential, ambition and impact and the last rows on feasibility of the proposed research.

On the next page are questions that are frequently asked but are most likely not sufficient project specific or technical. Please note that some of the questions hereunder may lead to similar answers. **Ask your colleagues to ask potential questions that are more technical or going into the details of the proposed research since the panel will ask you project specific questions.** Moreover, they are able to understand what you give concise and explicit answers to them. If the panel does not understand your answers, most likely the remote referees did also not

understand these aspects in the proposed research. Since in most cases the remote referees are able to pinpoint what are the issues or weak points to the panel since they have the capacity to be explicit and concise in writing their reports.

Potential questions that are general and not project specific
ERC evaluation criterion: To what extent does the proposed research address major challenges?
What are the major challenges?
If applicable what is the "Big Research Question(s)?
If applicable what is the current major gap of knowledge?
What are scientific/scholarly/engineering needs?
If applicable, what are the industrial, societal or clinical needs?
What is the potential breakthrough?
Why is this project timely in view of current developments or new knowledge emerging? Why Now? If applicable, why Urgent?
ERC evaluation criterion: To what extent are the objectives ambitious and beyond the state of the art (e.g. novel concepts and approaches or development between or across disciplines)?
Why are the proposed objectives ambitious in view of the current knowledge and ongoing research across the world?
Why are the objectives coherent?
Why is each objective required to address the overarching aim or goal?
The notion concept is used by the panel for project idea, for conceptual ideas driving the proposed research and new concepts emerging from the proposed research. Consider all other variants that may be relevant for your project proposal.
What are the key project ideas? Specify this by asking yourself what is it that allows you to bridge from where we are standing today to the new future you foresee?
Why has nobody considered this idea before you?
What are the conceptual ideas driving the proposed research? It may be for example the testing of hypothesis or the use of a novel conceptual framework, addressing specific research questions.
What are the conceptual ideas driving the proposed research? This is referring
What potential new concepts will emerge from the proposed research?
What are the novel aspects and what are the innovative aspects?
All research proposed is in principle novel but the question is what are the innovative, inventive or creative aspects? The level of innovativeness is determined by the differences between the proposed research and ongoing research across the world. Consider the project idea, the conceptual ideas, the approach proposed, the methodologies proposed.
What boundaries of disciplines are being crossed when it comes to knowledge (interdisciplinary), methodologies (multidisciplinary) and knowledge plus methodologies (transdisciplinary)? In the case of transdisciplinary research more than one PI may be required to execute successfully the proposed research. In the latter case you need to think through why only you are the sole PI (End of this cell)

Potential questions that are general and not project specific

ERC evaluation criterion: To what extent is the proposed research high risk-high gain (i.e. if successful the payoffs will be very significant, but there is a high risk that the research project does not entirely fulfil its aims)?

What are the major challenges or risks in your project? (intellectual / scholarly, scientific, methodological, technical, analytical or statistical challenges)? An ERC project has three dimensions of potential failure: 1) project idea or concepts were not correct leading to different findings than expected, 2) the methodologies are not appropriate to achieve the goals, 3) uncertainties, complexity or immatureness of the proposed research. Your track record indicates to some extent whether you can handle these types of risks. The panels do not like implementation risks related to not being able to hire temporary staff, not having access to archives, infrastructures since this type or risk could lead to a premature termination of the project by the ERC. Mitigation plans or some insight information or sufficient PhD students in your network can diminish implementation risks.

What are the high-risk elements of the proposed research? Why are these risky elements required in view of the potential breakthrough?

What are the alternative or mitigation plans if the project idea or conceptual ideas are not successful? What will be the consequences for the project if you have to opt for an alternative or mitigation plan?

What is the key factor that will tip the proposed research to success? Why will the proposed research lead to a breakthrough?

What will we learn? What will be the new insights and understanding in view of the challenges or research questions addressed?

What will be feasible? What will be more risky? Referring to what part of the proposed research is realistic and what part is more risky? What will be the icing on the cake?

Note Yellow Research: High risk/high gain research in ERC context is balancing towards significant gain (safe bet) and potentially very significant gain (risky bet)?

What are is the transformational potential of the proposed research in view of the conceptual ideas driving the proposed research? When it comes to knowledge and research opportunities?

What are the expected results or findings?

Will these findings describe a phenomenon or lead to insight and understanding? ERC is selecting project proposals leading to conceptual new knowledge and not descriptive knowledge.

What will be the paradigm shift or conceptual change? What are the key results per WP proposed?

How will you synthesise and generalise the findings per WP proposed, resolving the challenges or research questions?

If applicable, what novel theoretical or conceptual framework will emerge and how will this change our current knowledge and open up new perspectives?

How solid and robust will these results or findings be?

What will be the leap forward in view of ongoing research? ERC is not funding incremental research. How will these results change our current knowledge? Placing the results in the larger context of the knowledge map.

What will be the impact on your research field? And on adjacent research field?

Will the gain not be too narrow? ERC is preferably selecting project proposals having a major gain, preferably on large research communities or across research communities.

To what extent will these results resolve the major challenges or big research question?

What could be an alternative outcome if your ideas (hypotheses) turn out not to be true?

What new horizons or avenues of research will be opened? Or more specific, how will the expected results/findings open up new avenues of research?

What will be the potential outcome and impact? And if applicable on industry, society, culture and clinic? What are the potential applications? How versatile are the findings or potential applications? Can the findings be up-scaled for industrial use?

Check for yourself what the “Big Picture” may be for your field. (End of cell)

Potential questions that are general and not project specific

ERC evaluation criterion: To what extent is the outlined scientific approach feasible bearing in mind the extent that the proposed research is high risk/high gain (based on the Extended Synopsis)?

The panel tries to figure out what is feasible and what not. For example, limitations, caveats, uncertainties, lack of control, lack of good parameters or read-out, incomplete archives, low quality of material or samples, dependency on experts, Covid-19 pandemic can all jeopordise the proposed research and lead to failure. Think through what could be mitigation or back-up plans.

What is the key factor turning this proposal into a feasible project?

What part of the scientific approach is feasible?

What are the guiding key intermediate goals and stages to monitor the progress of the proposed research? What are the alternative or adaptation plans if the progress is not made or too slow?

What are the preliminary data indicating the potential feasibility of the scientific approach?

How do these preliminary data support your hypothesis?

What is the project design, structure, approach and workplan to mitigate the potential risks?

Are these preliminary data sufficient robust to build a whole project on? In case of a linear workflow of research.

Why will this project succeed where others may fail? Check what your competitors and colleagues are doing.

How will the innovative aspects affect the feasibility of the scientific approach or the ability to generate results, findings, technology, device, model?

What are potential caveats, uncertainties affecting the feasibility of the scientific approach?

What are the interdependencies of the proposed research and may this not jeopordise a potential success? The ERC panels prefer simple project structures addressing complex “topics” and not vice versa.

The proposed research is addressing a scientific/scholarly debate. To what extent can you contribute to this debate?

Do you have access to the required infrastructure or archives?

If I visit you the first day, what are you and your team doing? This question forces you to think through is the first activity to bring the team up to prepare them for the first research activity.

If I visit you after 18 months, what will I see? This question forces you to visualise a research activity in a few years time.

The panel can also ask you questions related to ethics or security issues in case these may affect the feasibility of the scientific approach. Please note, a separate committee will assess whether your project is in line with the applicable ethical and security law and regulation in your country after your proposal has been lined up for funding or -if applicable- third countries.

Potential questions that are general and not project specific
To what extent are the proposed research methodology and working arrangements appropriate to achieve the goals of the project (based on the full Scientific Proposal)? What is the added value of task 1 in view of the overarching aim or goal of the project? Why is method or tool A appropriate for the proposed research and not B? Method B is measuring the same so why use method A? Tool B resolves the same problem so why use A? Will you use method B in the future if this becomes available for this kind of research questions? What are the preliminary data indicating that this method is appropriate? Why are the cases, samples or models, experiments representative allowing you to extrapolate the findings? Or draw general conclusions? What parameter will you measure with method? Is this the parameter providing novel insight and understanding? Is this method not measuring X? Is the proposed research not too complex to enable you to achieve the goals? How will you categorise the archives, samples using what kind of definitions? How will you do X or Y and how does this lead to the right input for the next step or conclusions? What will be the methodological framework? And what will be the analytical framework? What techniques will you use for measuring X? What analytical or statistical tools will be used? Will you have sufficient power to draw conclusions? What are the control steps to check whether the methodologies work? How will you draw conclusions in view of the complexity of topic or proposed research?
To what extent does the proposal involve the development of novel methodology (based on the full Scientific Proposal)? What will the novel tool, method, device "measure" that is not measured with current methodologies and what is the added value? Tool A is measuring the same as the novel tool to be developed? Why is a novel method, device, tool …. required for resolving the challenge/research question? What will you measure with this methodology? What will be the order of improvement and is this sufficient for resolving the challenge/research question? This question is related to the significance of the potential gain. What will you do if a better method is launched at the end of this year? Accelerate since you know how to use the method to achieve the goals.
To what extent are the proposed timescales, resources and PI commitment adequate and properly justified (based on the full Scientific Proposal)? Is this project proposal not too ambitious in view of the timescales of an ERC project? Do you have the knowledge and expertise and/or access to the methods, facilities, material and data needed for carrying out the experiments? Who are your key team members and what is their role? Who are your external experts and what is their role? Can they be replaced? Are you the leading researcher with the right expertise and knowledge? Why? Do you need the requested personnel for the project? The panel will not discuss the height of salary costs etc. but will discuss whether all resources are needed to carry out the project. Be aware of any personnel that your university specifically specified as needed as for example support staff. Understand why support staff will actually free up the time of the researchers to work on the project and not on support issues directly related to the project; like booking trips, organizing the lab/fieldwork etc. What equipment do you need to carry out the project?

Potential questions that are general and not project specific
In particular when a request is made for the extra budget. Understand how equipment costs are computed by taking into account percentage of use and depreciation rules. In the first calls the panel asked applicants whether they can carry out the project if the panel cut the budget with 33%..... You can, but you will not achieve the breakthrough in 5 years' time.
PI related questions to scientific intellectual capacity and creativity: What was the major breakthrough in your research field in the past 5 years? What will be the major breakthrough in your research field in the coming 5 years? A trap set by the panel to assess to what extent will your ERC proposal force a breakthrough in science. How do you position yourself in 4 or 10 year time? What is your vision for the coming 10 years? What is the added value of the ERC grant to your career and/or research? To what extent could the proposed research be funded by other funding agencies? Please think through why ERC is the only funding agency available and/or suitable for your research project. Why you? Is the proposed research not a logical step forward in view of your past and ongoing research? Try to explain to the panel what are the innovative aspects and steps. How will you lead/manage the team? What is your expertise on the method related to …..? If method is key to your project, mention that you will bring in a postdoc and recognised experts to help you. How will you use this technique in your research project? Remember, you are the expert in the room so you have to answer so it may be a good idea to discuss with an expert how the technique will be used if you are not familiar with the technique, method, tool, model, device, type of analysis, data, sources, archives, samples……

B. Starting Grant panels in 2023 call

ERC 2023 call has 27 panels: 11 in the domain of physical sciences and engineering, 9 in the domain of life sciences and 7 in the domain of social sciences and humanities, see ERC guide Information for Applicants Starting and Consolidator Grant 2023 calls. The chair has assigned your project proposal to 4-5 panel members who have read your proposal in step 1 and 2 and have prepared the questions for the interview session, mainly based on the feedback provided by the remote referees and concerns raised by the panel members in view of the ERC evaluation criteria. Please note that all panel members act as generalists and the remote referees as experts to ensure a fair assessment of all proposals on the stack. Furthermore, the whole panel decides who is awarded an ERC grant.

The list of panel chairs of 2023 panel is provided. In 2023 call the ERC 2021 panels will be active, not the ERC 2022 panels. Approximately 60-75% of the 2021 panel members has been invited to become panel member in 2023 call. Consider to check the 2021 panel members to get an insight into their scientific competence and expertise. It will help you to understand how potential questions could be answered to enable the panel to understand your answers in view of the written review reports by remote referees. You will notice that most of the names are not familiar to you, potentially indicating that these panel members are most likely not working in a research field connected to your research field and/or topic.

Please note that PE11 panel and SH7 are new panels that emerged from other panels in 2021 call.

The list of the panel chairs of 2023 call is provided hereunder as also the composition of past panels. Per call 25-33% of the panel members are replaced. This implies that most likely none of the 2015 panel members are active. A few of the 2017 panel members may still be active in 2023 if they were active in 2019 and 2021. The new panel members in 2019 and in 2021 are most likely active in 2023 call. I provide the lists since many applicants tell me that looking at the old lists gives them some insight into the knowledge of the panel members.

Links to panel information: If the links do not work, copy them to your browser

https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-12/erc_2023_stg_panel_chairs.pdf

https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/file/Panel_Members_ERC_Starting_Grant_2021.pdf

https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/file/erc_2019_stg_panel_members.pdf

https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/file/erc_2017_stg_panel_members.pdf

https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/file/erc_2015_stg_panel_members.pdf

C. Potential lay-out of a Panel Room in Brussels

This Annex contains some important information for your presentation:

To give you an impression of how the interview room in Covent Garden looks like, hereunder two pictures of a potential interview room in Covent Garden. The first picture shows the new panel rooms made available in 2018 with high tech equipment and the second picture shows a room upgraded in 2012 with regular projection screens. In 2022 these rooms were upgraded by installing cameras to accommodate the remote interview sessions.

The first picture shows the two projection screens on the wall and two projection screens hanging from the ceiling, halfway the room to allow the panel members seated in the back to read your slides. On one screen your slides will be projected and on the other screen you. Note the distance from a chair to a screen. Telling you that if the panel is composed of many 45+ panel members, the font size used for the slides cannot be too small. Please project your slides on the wall targeting a 213 cm by 120 cm size and stand at about 5, 6 and even 8 meters distance to assess what can you read and what can an older colleague read who probably is representing the panel members.

The count of the chairs adds up to 22-24 chairs around the tables in figure 1 (10 chairs on each side and 2 or 4 chairs at the end). This room can easily accommodate the chair, 12-15 panel members, one or two members of the ERC executive agency supporting the panel in their tasks, a monitor[9] and/or an ERC scientific council member. Leaving not a lot of space to move around. All in all, a relatively small room for so many persons. The room in figure 2 is smaller and does not have screens hanging from the ceiling.

On both pictures, microphones are visible on the table which are used for your benefit – so you can hear the questions. In these pictures, the new set-up of cameras in the room is not shown. One camera is installed above the screens on which your presentation is projected (short wall of the room). Other cameras are installed between the panel members, zooming slightly in on the panel member who is talking[10].

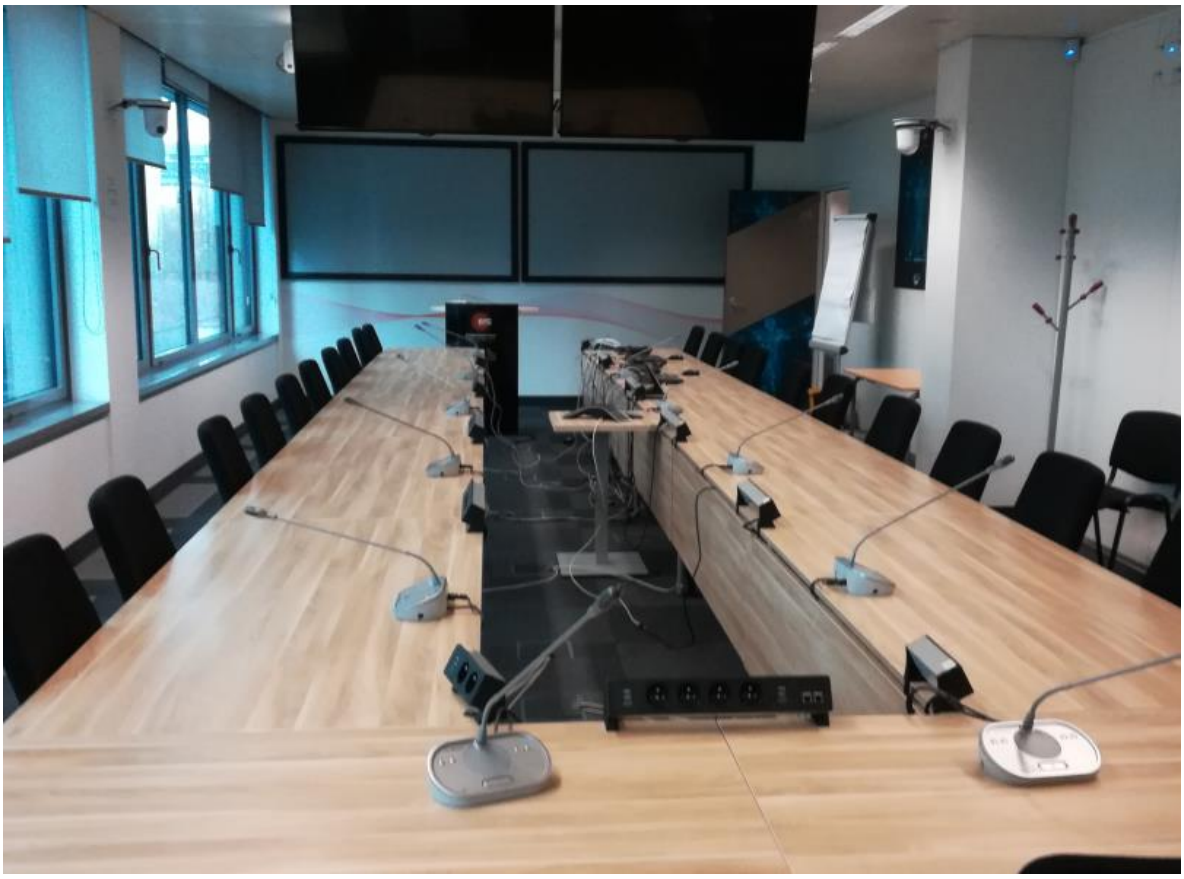
The sun blinds are not available for each room, therefore ensure that your slides have **sufficient contrast** so that they are readable under all circumstances (lots of light flooding in or light tempered by the blinds).

On one of the walls may be a clock projected enabling the panel to follow the count-down of the minutes. Please ensure that your presentation finishes within the allocated time slot.

9. A monitor is a person monitoring the quality of the interview sessions conducted on behalf of one of the 27 EU member stated. Every EU member state has the right to monitor the work carried out in assessing research proposals under the umbrella of ERC and Horizon Europe.

10. The feedback on the use of camera's was very positive for the 2021 calls but some 2022 call applicants told me that the panel was not always polite. One 2022 applicant told me that what he could see was the backs of all panel members but not their faces. As if each applicant has not understood the information provided in the invitation letter on confidentiality: you are not allowed to share the information on panel composition with others. It was frustrating for the applicant since he could not assess whether the panel had understood the answers given.

Picture 1: This is one of the new rooms made available in 2018. In 2022 even larger rooms became available. Note the microphones and two sets of double screens for projecting the slides. Note the quality of the sunlight screens and the grey sky outside. What can the panel see if the sun is shining and your slides do not have sufficient contrast? For your information, the cameras filming the panel members are standing between the tables. Most likely there is also a camera installed at the front of the room.



Picture 2 of a panel room dated 2012 that may not be used if there are sufficient updated rooms available.