Proposal Writing Guide - ERC Starting Grant 2023

Version of 12 September 2022

This writing guide is based on the "Information for Applicants", the proposal templates and our experience as ERC National Contact Points. The document is meant to complement and not replace information contained in the official documents. Typically, instructions and explanations that are included in the template are not repeated here. If in doubt, always refer to the information provided in the official document.
For questions on the proposal, please contact your ERC National Contact Points and/or your local Euresearch support.

Good luck with your proposal!

Important Documents and Links

- Information for Applicants to the ERC Starting and Consolidator Grant 2023 calls
  This official but long document contains all relevant information for applicants. Of particular interest for proposal writing are the detailed evaluation criteria (p. 13) and the explanations and instructions on the different proposal parts (p. 19-22).

- ERC Work Programme 2023
  This document lays down the strategy of the ERC and forms the basis for all calls. It contains information on the planned timeline of calls (p. 15).

- ERC panel structure for calls 2021 and 2022

- Proposal templates in pdf-format – editable proposal templates are available once you have registered for the call on the funding and tenders portal, where you will also find the online submission system

- ERC videos for applicants

- Starting Grant on ERC website: description and links

- Database of ERC funded projects

Proposal Format

Document Format

- You should use the templates for parts B1 and B2 pertinent to the open call and complete the **header** with your last name and proposal acronym. If you do not use the templates, make sure to include an appropriate header and footer and follow the instructions on p. 19 of "Information for Applicants" on page margins.
- Make sure to remove the instructions and comments from the template before submission.
- Use a well-readable font of at least size 11.
- You upload the document in **pdf-format**. Make sure the document size is less than 10 Mbytes, ideally less than 2 Mbytes each. Name them in a sensible way. Use only alphanumerical characters and avoid special characters and spaces.
- Check all details, including page count, after conversion to pdf-format.

Document Layout

A nice layout is important. Evaluators read many proposals with limited time, thus it is essential that they can see the important information in your proposal at first glance. A well-structured proposal with clearly labeled sections is also particularly helpful when panel members look up information during panel meetings or during your interview. Consider including figures, bullet points, lists, numbered sub-titles etc.

B1 - Cover Page

Title and Acronym

Chose a **title** that is informative and not too narrow. E.g. if you study a phenomenon using a certain model organism or you plan to study at a certain epoch in time, it's not necessarily a good idea to specify this in the title. Use a title that will describe the larger impact/conclusions of your project that will go beyond the system/epoch studied.

There are no special rules for **acronyms** and the choice does not impact the evaluation. Still, it is worth putting some effort into finding a good acronym as you and your evaluators will use it so many times before, during, and after the project. So use a term that can be easily spelled, even for non-native English speakers. You also want your acronym to be as unique as possible. Consider getting inspiration from an acronym creator/generator (several tools available online).

Abstract

Focus on the bold concept of your project, your idea and the main objectives. Highlight its novelties and innovative aspects and briefly discuss the expected impact on the academic discipline(s)/ the contribution of your project to solving an important academic problem. Keep in mind that the abstract (together with the title) forms the evaluators' first impression of your proposal. Don't include any confidential information in the abstract. It will be sent to external peers with the enquiry to review your proposal, and end up on the ERC website eventually once your project is funded. You may want to have a look at abstracts of funded projects for inspiration via the link provided above.

Explanation in Case you Chose a Secondary Panel

Complete the text box underneath the abstract only if you chose a second evaluation panel.

B1 - Synopsis

Relevant Evaluation Questions

Cf. “Information for Applicants” p. 13

- **To what extent does the proposed research address important challenges?**
- **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)?**
- **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)?**
- **To what extent is the outlined scientific approach feasible bearing in mind the extent that the proposed research is high risk/high gain?**

The evaluators only have access to B1 in the first evaluation step – so they will not read your full proposal at this point. This means that you should not underestimate the importance of the synopsis (B1), that will be the basis of the decision (together with the CV/track record part) to invite you to the interview or not. Focus on the description of the ground-breaking nature and ambition of your concept, and include sufficient information for the panel to assess its feasibility. Try to introduce the bold concept/research question of your project as early on in the text as possible, after a short introduction to the topic.

Write the Synopsis with the audience – the evaluation panel – in mind. Be aware that you ultimately compete for funding with peers that have chosen the same evaluation panel as you have. The choice of the evaluation panel determines the way you introduce the bold concept and novel idea of your project, and its expected impacts on science.

Note for re-applicants: Some panels have changed significantly for the calls under the current Work Programme. Therefore carefully re-evaluate panel choice and have a close look at what disciplines are included in the chosen panel.

B1 – CV and Track Record

Relevant Evaluation Questions

Cf. “Information for Applicants” p. 13

- **To what extent has the PI demonstrated the ability to conduct ground-breaking research?**
- **To what extent does the PI provide evidence of creative independent thinking?**
- **To what extent does the PI have the required scientific expertise and capacity to successfully execute the project?**

CV

This section is a classical academic CV, excluding information on publications. The latter are all included in the track-record section. We advise you to use the templates, but you are not obliged to use this structure. If a particular subheader is not meaningful to describe your career (e.g. because you had no career break), delete the title (and don't waste space in keeping the title and stating that it is not applicable).
Ask yourself which of your achievements are exceptional at your career stage and make sure to provide sufficient details on these so that everyone can fully appreciate them.
If the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant negative impact on your CV and/or track-record, do mention and explain this. The panels are instructed to take this into account when assessing your past achievements.

Tips:

- Use English terms throughout and translate terms from other languages.
- Provide all indications on amounts of funding in Euro.
- Only use abbreviations if you can safely assume that representatives of all disciplines included in the panel are familiar with these.
- Keep all your web profiles up to date throughout the duration of the evaluation. Evaluators sometimes get impressions from these and check e.g. for latest achievements during the 2nd evaluation step.
- Don't repeat information between e.g. CV and track-record or CV and appendix table on funding.

Tips on sub-headers:

- Education: Indicate the exact date of your PhD defense (not the date of on your degree itself)
- Supervision: Include not only students/postdocs for whose supervision you were formally responsible, but everyone whom you (co)supervised in practice. If any of the people you have mentored have continued with an exceptionally successful career path, you may want to mention this specifically.
- Major collaboration: State not only with whom you have been/are collaborating, but also the subject of collaboration.
- Career breaks: Report any significant career breaks. Peer reviewers are asked to take breaks into consideration when assessing your scientific output and career progression.

Appendix Table on Funding

The main aim of the funding ID is for the ERC to detect potential double funding. Applying for projects with overlap to the ERC project (2nd table on grant applications) is legitimate and no problem at the application stage, but already accepted grants (1st table) should have no overlap with the ERC project. This should be clearly visible from the information provided in the last column.
The 1st table is an excellent opportunity to show how much you are able to raise and manage funding. In this appendix table however only ongoing grants can be listed. The table can be complemented by information on already concluded projects in the main CV section.
The funding ID does not count towards page limit. It must follow the table format indicated in the Part B1 template. If there are no ongoing applications, state this explicitly.

Track Record

You need to choose five important publications with a separate heading at the beginning of the track-record and also highlight those that were not part of collaboration with your PhD supervisor. Chose publications that demonstrate your independent scientific thinking and ability to conceive and conduct excellent research projects. The publications don't necessarily have to be related to the research proposal.

Evaluators often look at these chosen publications to get a first impression of the applicant. Hence the choice and presentation of these publications is very important. In case the order of authors leaves doubt as to your role, or there might be uncertainties about the importance of the work (e.g. because it was published in a lesser known journal) do explain. You may also include succinct explanations on the novelty and reception in the community for each publication (e.g. in a text box underneath each reference). Again, keep the disciplinary composition of the panel in mind and ask yourself what prior knowledge you can assume. You are free to list as many additional publications as you want within the limits of the two pages.

Tips:

- Highlight your name in bold.
- Don't repeat information that is already included in the CV. You may juggle with some sub-headers and include them either in the CV or track-record, depending on space.

B2 – Full Proposal

Relevant Evaluation Questions

Cf. "Information for Applicants" p. 13

- **To what extent does the proposed research address important challenges?**
- **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)?**
- **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)?**
- **To what extent is the outlined scientific approach feasible bearing in mind the extent that the proposed research is high risk/high gain?**
- **To what extent are the proposed research methodology and working arrangements appropriate to achieve the goals of the project?**
- **To what extent does the proposal involve the development of novel methodology?**
- **To what extent are the proposed timescales, resources and PI commitment adequate and properly justified?**

This part is only evaluated in step 2 of the evaluation. It is assessed by panel members and external evaluators. The latter are typically experts in your field. Hence you write this document for both generalists and specialists.

At step 2 of the evaluation, panel members and external reviewers have access to B1 but it is not guaranteed that all of them will have a look at/remember the contents of B1 before reading B2. So it is important to consider B2 as a stand-alone document and include information

already presented in B1. Ideally, you do not copy-paste entire paragraphs, as this is a bit tiring for someone who reads both parts in succession.

Note for re-applicants:
The page limit for part B2 (excluding the description of the team and resources) for this call is 14 pages, regardless of the length of the flow text on the team and resources in form A3.

State-of-the-Art and Objectives

- Explain why the proposal is important for the field, and what impact on scientific discipline(s) it is expected to have.
- Specify any particularly challenging or unconventional aspects of the proposal. Be explicit: What is ground-breaking? What is new, ambitious, challenging? Why?
- Communicate your objectives explicitly: Your overall objective and typically several individual objectives.
- Link the challenges ("high-risk") to the potential high gain. Explain why you need to take some risks to attain a potentially high gain.
- Ideally, structure your proposal around these objectives (e.g. one work package per objective, or something similarly logical) – this will facilitate your reviewers' jobs.

Methodology

- Describe the work planned in as much detail as is sensible. Since the work is highly novel and innovative, you are not expected to indicate expected outputs etc. on the level of tasks.
- Explicitly state aspects that cannot be planned ahead, e.g. if they depend on results of previous steps.
- You are not expected to include deliverables or details on planned publications or other dissemination activities.
- Explain the division of the project in subprojects/work packages.
- Ideally, different project parts have different levels of challenges/risks, and even the parts that are less risky will deliver results well beyond the state of the art.
- When describing potential risks, explain the measures you will take to minimize them, and provide a contingency plan.
- Think of all types of factors that help to minimize risks, including:
    - Your knowledge and experience with the type of research tasks, but also with conducting and leading challenging projects in general
    - The knowledge/experience that you will recruit into your team
    - Preliminary results showing the feasibility of a new method
    - The available infrastructure, access to data, field work sites etc.
    - Experts at your host institution and in your wider network that you can ask for advice on particular issues
- Keep in mind that ERC projects are led by one person – the PI – and that the PI is the absolute expert on the topic. Input by external experts should be restricted to specific aspects of the proposal. You do not want to have experts that give guidance on the project as a whole, or even a scientific advisory board.
- If external experts are expected to help out with minor tasks or input, describe their commitment.
- You may want to include a general overview of which team members are working on which parts parts of the project throughout the duration of the project (very simple gantt chart). Be aware that when submitting you can only estimate when you can start the project, therefore do not include actual calendar dates.

Resources (included in online form A3)

- Make full use of the available space (8 000 characters) in this section.
- Describe the team. State the number of PhD students, postdocs, and other personnel you plan to recruit for the project. Explain the profile of the team members. Especially with postdocs, you may want to explicitly point out any complimentary knowledge and experience they bring to the project.
- If you plan to engage team members in another institution you should fully justify this and demonstrate the added scientific value.
- Provide explanations on the type of expenditure for each of the cost categories. Include the basis for calculating the costs.
- In case you request an increased budget (beyond the €1.5 mio), provide a detailed justification of why these additional costs/items are important for your project.
- Approach the Euresearch office/grants office at your institution for support with establishing and describing the budget.

Note for re-applicants:
The resource description was part of B2 up until calls under Work Programme 2019. Applicants to calls under Work Programme 2020 inserted the text into online form A3. The space counted towards the 15 page limit for B2. From calls under Work Programme 2021 onwards, B2 is limited to 14 pages, and you have 1-2 pages (4 000 – 8 000 characters) available in form A3 to describe the team and resources.