ERC START GRANT – REFLECTIONS FROM A PARTICIPANT

The ERC start grant has two rounds of testing – the written application (with a ~20% success rate) and the interview (with a ~40% success rate). You need to succeed at both to get a grant.

> The application and interview are two distinct rounds - not simply a written and oral version of the same grant

→ THE WRITTEN APPLICATION

- The first hurdle in the application process – you need to succeed in the written application in order to proceed to the interview.
- Fully utilise every section of Part B1 and Part B2 to sell your application.
- Abide by every rule of length and format. Don't try to cheat length by using a tiny font or cramming – the reviewers read a lot of applications, and they'll pick up your application and be exhausted and irritated before they read a word. Equally, don't have a short application. If you only use 13/15 pages in Part B2 it looks like you just ran out of ideas.

PART B1
- Write every part of B1 in the context of the project that you are going to propose.
- In your CV you are selling yourself, not describing yourself. Identify your relative strengths and make them stand out. Perhaps you have lots of middle authorships in great journals – then put the journal impact factors in bold, so a quick scan of the page will highlight the great journals rather than your position on them. Perhaps you haven't published in the top journals, but your work has gathered a disproportionate number of citations – then don't put the journal impact factor in bold, instead put your individual number of citations in bold.
- Most importantly, when you are presenting your "scientific or scholarly contributions to the field" this is not a generic description. Use this to show how you are uniquely suited to run the project that you have proposed. For example, if you are proposing a project that melds skills you learned from your PhD and your post-doc, place special emphasis on these skills. Your career descriptions should be interwoven with the perspective of where you are going.

Key tip: write about your career projection in the same way you write a scientific paper. You wouldn't write "we investigated gene X, because of the twelve candidate genes the lab next door had a knockout of this one available". Instead you would write up results that placed intent and direction in your activity, justifying gene X as your primary focus for a reason. Likewise, don't describe your career trajectory as it actually occurred, "I did a PhD in metabolism, then my partner moved to Leuven so I looked for a post-doc and got offered one in dendritic cell biology", rewrite it with intent and direction – "I have had a long-term interest on the impact of metabolism on the innate immune response, so in order to gain skills in both disciplines I first pursued a PhD in biochemistry and afterwards moved to a dendritic cell laboratory. Now I am able to utilise my training in both disciplines, with my independent laboratory focused on the effect of metabolic processes on monocyte activity."

- Do not use the extended synopsis in Part B1 to simply summarise the project of Part B2. Use it to discuss the novelty of the approach or the concept. You do not know which part a reviewer will read first, so each document needs to be able to stand alone. Part B2 has a key function in showing that the outcome of your work will be important

PART B2

- As a rough length guide, think of ~4 pages for state-of-the-art and objectives, ~2 pages for progress beyond state-of-the-art, ~8 pages for methodology, ~1 page for budget. Adapt to your particular project.
- You need to be ambitious. Prove that you are thinking as future PI, not as a post-doc. This is not a conservative FWO or IWT grant application, where they pick solid projects. The ERC sees itself more like a MacArthur or Howard Hughes "genius award", to fund the best and brightest. You can definitely go too far (for example, see the reviewers' comments that I got from my application), but the panel is generally much more forgiving on over-ambition than under-ambition. The criticism I had on feasibility and over-ambition would have been fatal in an FWO application, but at the ERC the project was approved.
- Refer to your unique edge on this project. Is this a direct continuation of your post-doc work? If so, describe how this builds off some technique or tool that you pioneered, giving you an edge over the competition (and either here or in Part B1 make it very clear that you will not be competing with your former PI). Is this a meld of the skills you picked up in your different training periods? Then work in references to strategies you have used in the past. Is this possible due to a unique combination of institute resources or collaborations? Then work in the network you created. Be relatively subtle, the place for direct marketing of your work is Part B1, but references like "using the strategy that I previously designed for gene Y (Jones, Science 2010)" show that you are highly capable of getting this to work.
- The application needs to have an accurate assessment of risk – do you have a back-up plan in case that approach doesn't work? Why is it that you have a shot of getting this to work while no one else does? (if it is due to your training or past successes, this should be the focus on Part B1). It is not enough to have a grand idea; you need to show that you will have a decent change at success.
- You need to show a future career path. The ERC is not just funding a project, it is funding the start of a new elite laboratory. You need to have tangible outcomes during the 5 year period, but there should also be a sense of how you will build on this after the grant has finished.

Example reviewers' comments:

"This is a ground breaking project that interconnects genetic studies, cohort studies and biological studies… It is an extremely ambitious proposal with important and broad objectives and diverse perspectives."

"Some of the research directions could be difficult to accomplish during the project time, in particular some of the objectives of RT3. Perhaps, the PI should have planned them more realistically."

"The proposal goes beyond the current state of the art, but its major problem is the over-ambition."

"The proposed research involves an innovative and ambitious study design, but the risk is justified by the potential impact in the field."

- Ethical issues need to show that you have a realistic idea of what is involved, but you do not need to have approval at the time of application (you will need to before you get money from the ERC, however). If it just involves mice a simple referral to an animal ethics committee should be sufficient, if it involves humans or primates you need to demonstrate that you have sufficient knowledge of the ethical and legal framework to make your project practical.

→ THE INTERVIEW

- The interview is not simply an oral version of your written application. There is a panel of around 15 panel members, each of these panel members will be experts on maybe 5 applications and more-or-less bystanders on the other 15 applications.
  o Experts. Your chance to impress the experts was your written application, and if you made it to the interview stage than you already succeeded here. The experts are familiar with your work from reading your 30 page dossier; they do not expect to learn anything new from the talk. Instead they will be waiting for the question time to hit you with any issues they have.
  o Additional panel members. These are people who are within your general area of research, but outside your specific discipline. They only glossed over your proposal, if they looked at it at all. Design your talk as if they haven't read your application and focus on importance and strategy. Don't get bogged down in experimental details and don't think they really care too much about your discipline – explain to them the advantage in the knowledge that you propose to generate. Focus on the importance and novelty, and why your approach will succeed while others have failed.

Behind the scenes of a panel discussion.
In a typical panel, such as the ERC, only a fraction of the applications are read by each panel member. All the panel members are active scientists and all want to support good science. Typically, when going into a panel meeting, each member has a handful of application that they are really keen to push forward – and invariably there is not enough money available to cover all of these applications. In the discussion the experts will take up 90% of the time talking about each grant, but the decision making is split evenly between the panel members. It is not unusual to see an expert trying to convince the rest of the panel that their favourite project is more deserving than your favourite project. In the ERC you have a unique chance to help out the experts on your side, by pitching your talk to the non-experts. If it is dry and technical they will basically ignore it. As an immunologist who regularly sits on an immunology-biochemistry panel I almost fall asleep when there is an application by a structural biologist to find the structure of protein X. So if you are a structural biologist don't waste your time describing purification strategies to the experts who already read your application – instead use this opportunity to tell the non-structural biologists why this gene is important and what you will be able to do with the structural information (eg, the role of the gene in disease, solid examples of how structural knowledge can be used for rational drug design – perhaps you have a collaboration with chemists?).

The questions you get asked will vary based on your project and your application. Have you been wildly ambitious? Expect to get a lot of questions on feasibility. Have you stuck very close by your existing research? Expect to get questions about competitiveness. The experts should ask most of the questions, any technological or methodological concerns they have will be raised here. Generally these will be along the lines of "X is risky, what will you do if it doesn't work?" or "this is a highly competitive field, how will you compete?" If there is enough time you may get some standard questions from chair or other panel members, such as questions about your long-term career plan and so forth. A few general points apply across the different questions you will get:

- Listen politely to the full question, never assume where it is going or interrupt to answer
- Your tone and attitude matter as much as your words – a grant application is a sales pitch!
- Being right is less important than having a clear articulate message and sounding competent. Even if the expert is wrong there is little benefit in arguing – it certainly comes off badly to the rest of the panel. That said, you can still disagree – "based on my experience the approach is feasible, but in case we do hit a roadblock there is an alternative strategy that we can take..." is completely reasonable response.
- Don't waffle. It wastes time and it makes it look like you have not thought about the question before. A clear and concise answer reassures the entire panel that you are aware of the issue and have already got a strategy in place. You don't need an answer for everything, but you need to look like you are capable with dealing with anything.
- Sometimes this involves thinking quickly on your feet and bluffing

ON THE DAY

- Talk clearly and smoothly
- Do not waste time
- Know what you are going to say
- Make every sentence count
- Look at the panel
- Be calm and confident
- Exude gravitas
- Be polite rather than adversarial

On the day of the interview you will arrive at the ERC building, show your passport and be given a visitors badge to enter. You then need to go and upload your talk and deliver ~15 copies of a printed version of your talk before being shown to the waiting room. The room will be full of the other candidates that are being interviewed that day and the wait can be several hours. When your interview is approaching you will be shown up to second waiting room where you will be alone, at this point there is only 10 minutes or so. You will then be led into the interview room. There will be no introductions of the panel members, your talk will already be on the screen and you will be expected to essentially go straight into your presentation.

Please note that this is just the individual advice of one ERC Start Grant holder, who may have been awarded a grant because of, or in spite of, these preconceptions. Get advice from experienced people within your discipline, ask them to read your application well in advance (no point in getting advice if you don't have time to make major changes!), rehearse your talk in front of a relevant audience and have one-line answers ready to all the questions you can anticipate.

Finally, remember that grant writing is a numbers game. No one gets every grant, but if you put in the hard work and apply to enough funding bodies you should be successful. Good luck!