

## Applying for the ERC Starting Grant: Personal experience and perspective

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- ① Why? Five most important reasons
- ② How? Five most important tips for preparing the application

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# Why apply?

## 1. Intellectual freedom

- Pursue research questions for the sake of answering them, not for some other goals
- Curiosity-driven or basic/fundamental science:
  - No need to worry about the applied side of the project or the “so-what” question that is posed by many other funders
- Of course, you must explain why your research question is important in the scientific sense. For example:
  - Does the project address fundamental scientific debates/challenges?
  - Does the project present a novel perspective/approach that holds potential to advance existing research in major ways?

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# Why apply?

## 2. Financial freedom

- My previous grant (prior to ERC StG) amounted to  $\sim$  EUR 250,000
  - Covered my salary for 2 years
  - Allowed conducting 3 large surveys
  - Covered a 5-month research stay in the US
  - Covered conference travels, etc.
- ERC StG amounts to  $\sim$  1,500,000 EUR
  - Covers my salary for 5 years
  - Covers salaries for 3 postdocs for 1.5–2 years each
  - Allows conducting 30 large surveys and 20 well-powered lab experiments
  - Covers long-term research stays for me and two of the postdocs
  - Covers conference travel, research assistance, etc., for the entire research team
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# Why apply?

## 3. Academic freedom

- The grant covers up to 100% of your salary
  - Hence, you can take 5 years off teaching to focus 100% on research
- You can have a research stay at any institution of your choice
- You can even change the host institution
  - E.g., I moved my project from Aarhus University (Denmark) to Peace Research Institute Oslo (Norway)
- Overall, the ERC is very flexible
  - Once again, the goal is to create the best possible conditions for people to pursue “big” ideas

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## 4. Major (probably life-time) boost for your academic career

- ERC StG almost certainly secures tenure in academia
  - Some universities have formal programs that offer tenured positions to grantees in exchange of hosting the grant
  - Many universities that do not have such programs are keen to offer ad hoc arrangements that eventually lead to tenure
    - This is not only because of the money
    - The grants bring huge prestige to the hosts
- Receiving ERC StG increases chances of funding in the future
  - In fact, passing Step 1 evaluation already constitutes an important entry in your CV
  - Some countries even have funding programs for those who passed Step 1 (but did not succeed at Step 2)

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# Why apply?

## 5. Success rates are not unreasonably low

- ERC StG (2020): 13.3%
  - Compare, e.g., to the Independent Research Fund Denmark (2018): 14%
- Since 2007, only 5 ERC StGs awarded to institutions in the Baltics (all in Estonia)
  - Compare, e.g., to 110 awarded to Danish institutions
- Very small N of submissions is likely the culprit
  - In the last call year, Lithuanian institutions only sent 5 applications, Latvian 1, and Estonian 13
  - Danish sent 100

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# How?

## 1. Allocate enough time and start early

- Standard recommendation is 6 weeks full time
  - 6 weeks full time is probably the minimum
  - 10-12 weeks in my case
- Therefore, start very early
  - Standard recommendation is 6 months prior to the deadline
  - Count the time for peer feedback and multiple revision rounds
  - Count the time for budgeting, ethics, and other parts of the application

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## 2. Focus on the assessment criteria

- INFORMATION FOR APPLICANTS document: 1.3 EVALUATION PROCESS: esp. EVALUATION CRITERIA (pp. 12–13 in the 2020 v.)
  - Panel members/external reviewers will use this criteria—quite literally—while evaluating your project
- Pay particular attention to the “high-risk/high-gain” aspect
  - Consider having a separate section on this
  - Present a clear plan in case the high-risk part fails
  - Do not frame this as a “plan B”

Remember: Even if the high-risk part of the project fails, the project must produce significant new knowledge or major advances

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- INFORMATION FOR APPLICANTS document: 1.3 EVALUATION PROCESS: esp. EVALUATION CRITERIA (pp. 12–13 in the 2020 v.)
  - Panel members/external reviewers will use this criteria—quite literally—while evaluating your project
- Pay particular attention to the “high-risk/high-gain” aspect
  - Consider having a separate section on this
  - Present a clear plan in case the high-risk part fails
  - Do not frame this as a “plan B”

Remember: Even if the high-risk part of the project fails, the project must include a plan for how to continue the research.

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## 3. Peer feedback

- 15 people commented on my application
  - Some 2 or even 3 times on different versions of the proposal
  - People are busy and may take long time to comment on you project
- However, once again, start very early
- Ideally, seek feedback from ERC grantees/those who passed Stage 1
- Seek feedback from people from different disciplines/research fields
- Seek feedback from people who are likely to be critical of your ideas
- However, take all feedback with a grain of salt, in particular from those who have never applied for ERC funding
  - ERC applications are very different from standard applications to national research councils (esp. with respect to the high-risk and basic-science aspects)

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## 4. Think about and choose your panel very carefully

- Choose the panel where your project will be most heretic/unorthodox
- Choose the panel where your track-record will be most appreciated
  - Note that your track-record composes 50% of the evaluation grade
  - People from other disciplines may not appreciate publications or other achievements in your discipline
- None of the panel members may be experts in your specific field—and in Step 1 evaluation only panel members will evaluate your B1
  - Therefore, prepare B1 so that panel members (“generalists”) could appreciate the significance and feasibility of your project
- In Step 2, you must convince both “generalists” and “specialists” (i.e., external reviewers)
  - Hence, B2 can be much more detailed and technical than B1

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## 5. Find your own style and highlight your unique strengths

- Read many granted applications but do not imitate them
- Of course, the central elements, such as the research question, the contributions of the project, the high-risk aspect of the project, must be absolutely clear from the very start of the project proposal
- Streamline your project with your profile in Section C of B1 (i.e., “Early achievements track-record”)
- Identify unique/comparative strengths in your profile
  - You may not have the best CV in the world (whatever that means) but you may have unique strengths that make you exceptionally fit to run your particular project
  - One of the rare situations in academia where you are actually allowed to cherry-pick facts in your favor
- CV is important, but the project proposal/idea is the key

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