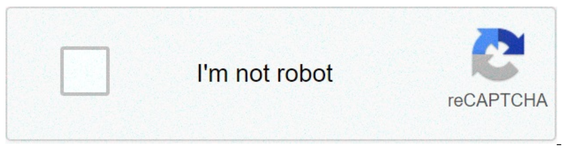

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How to write erc starting grant

I am a botanist, and work on tropical rain forest evolution in general. I will not go into the details here about my research because I want this blog to be as general as possible. I will share my ERC adventure with you, and provide tips that worked for me and myth busters at different stages. I will avoid more formal/technical details about the application or oral exam, because you will get that from different sources already. The most important ingredient is to have a great idea, believe in it and really prepare every step hard, do not leave anything to luck.When I was a young researcher / PhD student, the ERC grants appeared to me as impossible to get. Applying for 1.5 or 2.5 million euros depending on the category, write an incredibly ambitious project, convince a large panel of top experts in your field, compete with your peers, an oral exam in front of these top experts… needless to say that applying for an ERC is quite intimidating. However, as for many things, once to create your "ERC folder" on your computer, and put your mind to it, anything becomes possible.A bit about my background, academically.Before the ERC, I had obtained a few mid-level grants around my research subject, ranging from 40 000 to 300 000 euros (including the local french funding ANR Jeune Chercheur, which took me 4 attempts to get, but that is another story). Throughout these projects I was able to build my publication record and make a niche for myself within my field (tropical rain forest evolution).So the first question is: if I apply, do I have a good shot at the grant?I provide here a snap shot taken from google scholar of my publication record when I applied. As you can see, no Science, no Nature, no PNAS, no PLoS Biology (top journals in my field and most), at least not as first or senior (last) author. However, I had over 60 articles published, and several (as first author) well cited ones (+100 citations). My citations per year was also going up year after year. So the first myth buster is "no you do not necessary need a publication in a top multi disciplinary journal to apply". However, I guess that having one or a few helps (a lot?). The important thing, is that you are seen as a leader (in Europe) in your field and have some important publications PhD-supervisor free. These projects also allowed me to build the preliminary tools and data I needed to convince panel members that my project was feasible, even though it could sound crazy or unachievable. Of course, next myth buster, I never started my earlier projects thinking about the ERC… although I had the idea of an ERC-like project for some time. Gradually, as projects went by and tools became available I saw that my project was feasible. So don't think that you need to be born with the project in mind! It can all come gradually and be self-evident in retrospect. However, I would not recommend applying if you do not have at last some data to prove that your idea has some potential to be successful. ERCs are high risk / high gain (you will hear that a lot) but you need to have some foundations, some reality, that it is possible given the right context, which the ERC will provide. Having said that, part of your project can rely on no preliminary data, but not all of it.Your project needs to be scientifically important, significant, going beyond the state of the art (again something you will hear a lot), ground-breaking, going where no other project has gone in your field. This might seem "obvious" to you, but not to everybody. The challenge is to convince your peers, or anybody you talk to for that matter, that your project is really "beyond state of the art". I guess that is the hardest. Saying "my project is great!" is different from your colleagues ending up understanding it is great. I had to work really hard to convince people, and I didn't convince everybody. The first time I pitched my project to my peers (mostly outside of my specialty field) I felt like none of them were buying it. They were not saying things like "ah yes, what a great ambitious project Thomas, go for it!" Rather they were saying, "ah ok, but you know that ERCs are really competitive and you need to go beyond the state of the art?" That translated to me as "bof… not that interesting, you have no chance". Instead of getting upset and frustrated, I used those comments to improve clarity in the way I thought about my project and especially how I pitched it. Talking to people early on was important (colleagues, working groups etc). If they don't buy it, it is because you are not pitching it correctly. You need to work on that, especially for the oral exam if you get there.Another myth buster relates to those who have tried submitting a similar project to a local funding body prior to attempting the ERC and were rejected. We are tempted to say "How can I get ERC funding if my local funding body doesn't even want to fund it!" This is total nonsense. Because of the size of the grant and the way it is set up (two part projects, oral exam, international panel) everything is different. I know two cases where an ERC project (mine included) was unsuccessful several times (3-4!) at local funding, but was accepted for an ERC the first time round. The thinking is just different, and the ERC panel might see something the local panel doesn't…Frankly, besides what I said above, I don't think much else matters in terms of CV (awards, promotions, invited talks (I was only invited twice to give a seminar)): it boils down to: prove you are a leader in your field; have a great project that goes beyond the state of the art and show that that you are the only one (or best researcher) who could do it. And once you decide to apply, go for it 150%.The writing partSome people will say that you need a good six months to write an ERC before you submit. I agree with that. But again it depends. In my case, I decided to apply 2.5 months before the dead line. However, the project I was submitting was something I started working on 2 years prior looking for local French funding (ANR, see above). I already had a very strong basis to start with, even though the ERC project that I finally submitted was an almost total rewrite from the previous project I used.Once I decided to apply, I informed my institution, which were only too happy to hear it. They really helped as much as they could with the budget, admin stuff and the oral exam formation (see below). I just had to concentrate on the project, the writing, the science. An ERC is all about the science, nothing else. No general public impact section, no EU developmental goals in which your project will participate (although showing that it is relevant to Europe in general is always good), no major social objective, just fundamental science (in my LS8 panel at least off course). For me that was a total liberation in grant writing.Concretely, you need to prepare two documents: a pre project (project B1, 5 pages when I applied)) and the full project (B2, 15 pages when I applied). These need to be prepared and submitted at the same time. If you get through the first step which is based on the preproposal B1 document ONLY (and your CV), then the B2 will be reviewed. So, yes, you prepare a 15 page proposal that might never even be read… quite frustrating. For the ANR [local french funding body] it is different, you first write a preproposal (5 or 4 pages) and if you are invited, you write the full proposal. Both have their advantages and disadvantages. The only thing I can say, is that when you do both together ERC-style, they are complementary and writing is dynamic between B1 and B2. You end up with a very solid B1, because the whole project is already well thought through. So when you write your B1 and B2 make sure you think of them as such, complementary, and don't hesitate to switch between them as you write. However, you should start with the B2, and then build your B1. Your B1 should be more general, as to appeal to a broader range of scientists (the committee panel).The B1 is the key, it is the "CV", the document that convinces the committee members to say: this is a good, solid and well thought through project, I am really curious to hear more. Just like a CV, it gets you your interview. So it must really be clear concise and convincing. This brings me back to the part where I said that you need convince people that your project is great. The B1 is where you really do that. However, you must not exaggerate or say things you cannot do. This is why the B2 is so important. The B2 will keep you in check against what you can achieve or not. So in the B1 you can say "I shall do X which has never been done before". In the B2, you will have to say how. If you cannot write it in the B2 then, you cannot do it and it maybe shouldn't be in the B1… dynamic…Working on the proposalI will not give a class on writing or grant preparation, I wouldn't be qualified. I just wanted to share a personal note that really worked for me. Both documents must be as perfect as you can write them. You need to spend time on the project in general (state of the art, methods, time, budget), that goes without saying. However, I recommend you leave enough (significant) time to go over each sentence, each paragraph, and each section or work package making sure you explain everything in the best and easiest way possible. Re read your project regularly. I read an excellent book, that I recommend: "Writing Science: How to Write Papers That Get Cited and Proposals That Get Funded" by Joshua Schimel. I have followed many of his tips over the years and always found them to be very good and helpful. Of course there are many other books out there, but this one really hits the mark for me, especially for grant writing.I said earlier: do not leave anything to luck. One of these "unknowns" is the way your write your project. A project with too many mistakes, badly constructed sentences or confusing will not be favorably viewed and possibly not go to the next step (even if the science is great). So spend time, as much as you can, on the text itself, once your great idea is laid down. For me this meant long working days, 5-6 am to 5-6 pm just writing and improving as much as I can my ideas, my methods and the text.As I wrote, I was more and more convinced and motivated that my project was really great! I got excited and impatient to get started on the project if funded. I listened to lots of music that motivated me, a bit like athletes before a competition. Sounds stupid, but it really helps to get into the zone, even when you are writing. I won't share my playlist, but whatever works to get you pumped up. That is why in the end, I really enjoyed writing an ERC proposal, because I was free to write up my dream project, my institution was 100% behind (I know that for some this isn't the case), I was learning a lot, reading lots of top notch research (something you don't always have the time to) and I was having a great time!Idea BouncerOne vitally important person for me during the writing was the presence of my then post doc, Andrew Helmstetter. He was my "idea bouncer". I would bounced ideas and he would give me his honest opinion. Was it interesting, was it correct, and is it feasible? I would bounce a lot of ideas off him and this really provided a lot of wonderful feedback. I knew that if he was convinced then I was in good shape. It motivated me and kept me in touch with reality. I also ran the project timetable (chronogram) by him because he had been doing similar analyses than the ones I planned, so he could say if the planning was realistic or not. This allowed me to already start preparing the oral exam. I knew that everything was well thought out. So I suggest that you also find yourself an "idea bouncer", a colleague, a student, someone interested in your project. Andrew also read some of my drafts including the B2 (he was the only one to fully read the B2 in fact) and provided a lot of feedback. I sent drafts of the B1, however, to several people, including past ERC grantees. Feedback was always very important. Basically, try and bounce your project off as many people as possible. They will tell you if it is coherent, well-structured or if they don't get something.The final stretchOk, so time has gone by and you are ready to submit. I suggest finishing both B1 and 2 at least a week before the dead line. Any late minute ideas or major additions will not be good for the project structure. I also suggest taking two days off, not looking at the project at all. This allows you to forget about it a bit. I would then spend the last days reading over and over, trying to improve clarity and minimizing mistakes. Underline in yellow parts you are not happy with yet and use the time left to try and make them better.A last tip before D day. Getting rid of post submission stress! This refers to the stress you feel once your project is submitted and you start to worry about silly mistakes in the proposal that might still be there. Are there any mistakes? Did I get rid of the yellow highlighting I used two days before submission? Is the reference list formatted properly? To avoid that, I suggest you read out aloud and slowly the whole project (B1 and B2). Take a whole day for that at least. Doing this has two advantages: 1) by reading out loud, you read every word and you see mistakes that you do not see when reading in your mind. For example missing words, badly constructed sentences, and especially words or whole sentences that are misplaced (copy and paste fails)! It also allows you to get rid of any formatting you might have used that you do not want. 2) Doing this will reduce your post submission stress. Because you read it out loud you know that everything is ok with the proposal, every word is where it should be and there are no overall problems. You can relax, rest and take it easy knowing that you did your best and that that you left nothing to luck.Getting the time to writeFor me this writing part took about 2.5 months (Mid November start of February). I didn't do just that, but I made time for it as much as I could (also there were end of year holidays…). Here are a few tips on how I achieved getting as much time for the proposal as possible (note: I am a full time researcher and did not have any teaching obligations): I refused all reviews, I said "no" too many non-essential requests, I had an automatic response for emails saying that I might not respond because I was writing a grant. That last tip is really useful, it allows you to focus and not worry about answering emails of lesser importance. I only really made time for my students and article revisions.Waiting for the first responseOnce you finished, you slowly get back to your normal life. As I said earlier this was a very exciting and interesting time, and only for that I thought the ERC experience was worthwhile. I had fun and got up to speed with literature and had some very interesting talks.Then the day arrived where I got an email saying that my proposal has passed the first hurdle and I was invited for an interview. Houra! At that point, you know that your grant will be evaluated in full (B2), and that the B1 served its purpose. You know that the committee members are intrigued by your proposal, and that no matter what, you have a real shot at getting this grant. The next part will focus on the oral exam, which like the first part will demand a lot of your time and a lot of practice… I got the email on the 26th of June and my oral was planned for early October. I thus had 3 months to prepare.The oral preparationObviously, the first month I did nothing. I barely thought about the oral exam, and in fact I had mostly forgotten the details of my project! I gathered that I would need one month and a half to prepare, and I think I was right.You have 10 minutes to convince a panel of experts to fund your 2 million euro project… That's 3333 euros a second!Below I provide a few tips that helped with the overall process (again, besides all the typical advice you will get). I will not provide info about the presentation or what you have to say, everybody has her/his own way and you know your project best. I will just provide my training tips.As a scientist, I always thought that oral presentations were important. Not just the science but the way to present and the presentation per se (slides). Being able to give a good presentation or a wonderful pitch will always be a plus in your career. Early on I read numerous books or watched several youtube videos on how to present effectively, from the fonts to use, the number of images to have on a slide, the structure of the presentation, and the flow of what to say. I generally spend significant time on my presentations, making sure everything looks good. Needless to say that for the ERC presentation I knew I had to have a near perfect presentation in all aspects. My perception was that every candidate in the ERC oral exam will have a perfect presentation and will pitch the prefect project. So, you cannot go there with a suboptimal presentation. You will again need to make significant time for this step.I decided to write down my text, chose every word carefully and then learn it. I normally do not do that. I generally practice without a written text. However, in this case, every word matters. So I preferred to use that approach. The text evolved over the days, but it was always improvements, finding better words, sentences.On extra tip: I recommend finishing your presentation between 9.30 and 9.50 minutes. Too early (before 9 min) isn't good and too late (after 10 min), well that is very bad. A tad early is perfect and the panel will appreciate that I think. Aiming for 9.50 is good, because it also gives you 10 s in case you need it. Remember that in general we talk faster during the real thing…A few tips for the oralPractice, practice, practice. I practiced my speech very often, in different formats and different places. A month before D day, I would generally rehearse 3-4 times a day, towards D day, it was almost all the time. My goal was to learn the text off by heart but deliver it as if I didn't … not easy to do. As for anything, the first step is to know your text inside out, then you add in the intonations and pauses. I tried numerous tricks. 1) start your presentation from different points, not always from the beginning; 2) when you do your rehearsals imagine a committee in front of you; 3) one very effective trick I discovered was shutting my eyes, visualising the slides and saying the text out loud as fast as I could without making any mistakes. Do that several times in row; 4) I would rehearse in different situations, at home cooking, when swimming, walking; 5) Have someone distract you when you present, like get up, say "oh no…", move around, yawn, look at the phone etc… I had my kid distract me when I was rehearsing which was pretty hard! That last point is also important as you learn to continue no matter what happens! As you can see I undertook a quite serious training approach. Practice makes perfect or "entraînement difficil, guerre facile" as we say in French.TED talks: One important source of inspiration I found were TED talks. These talks are top quality in terms of pitching an idea and are generally between 10 and 20 minutes. I listened to as many as I could, focusing on how they pitched their ideas, tones of voices, structure of presentation. You can in fact just listen to the talk, no need to watch the actual video, so I listened to these talks on the bus while commuting or when walking. It is great and you learn a lot in general! So a few weeks before the oral, just listen to as many as you can and get inspired. Try to use what you hear in your presentation.Eye contact: Effective communication starts with eye contact, so look at the committee members (all of them, not just one). For that, you need to learn to present without looking at your slides or when you move between them. Your face must also be relaxed with a slight smile… so yes, learning your text inside out will be a first step to achieve this.Present in front of many different people: Present your talk in front of as many people you can from different backgrounds. They will provide important feedback. You will however have to filter out comments you think are important and some that might be less so. With zoom and skype now well anchored in our daily life it will be easy to invite colleagues for a quick 10 min presentation and feedback session. So don' hesitate. It was really important for me and helped with the coherence of the presentation.Go to an ERC oral training (if you have funding): I was lucky that my institute paid for me to attend a special ERC consolidator formatting of two days. This was really useful, especially as you get to interact with other candidates (but not from your own session) and see how they prepared and present. It is especially useful I you have difficulties presenting or feel uneasy.Go to a "fake" ERC exam. In France, Aviesan organized fake interviews. The panel is made of ERC laureates and expects in your field. This was really very useful, especially for the questions. Puts you in a real life situation.Finalize your presentation on time. I finalized my presentation 4 days before D day. You need to provide a printed version before the exam, so I wanted this to be done several days in advance to avoid any last minute stress. That means that you cannot change your presentation, which is a good thing. You only focus on the talking and pitching from now on.The above tips will allow you to master your presentation in such a way that you will appear natural and confident. The oral exam is also about the committee members getting to know you and they need to feel you are a confident researcher who knows what she/he is talking about. D day minus 2I arrived to Brussels a couple of days early. I wanted to have time to focus, do a few last test runs and especially visit the building before. The day before I did a reconnaissance trip to the ERC building. I took the tram to Place Roger and went right up to the building. I spend some time there (you cannot go in) just looking around and visualizing myself going in there the next day. This offloads a lot of stress actually! D dayMy oral exam was at 11 am, which was really good for me as I am a morning person in general. I got up, and prepared myself. I did some articulation exercises to loosen my jaw, again, you can find all sorts of youtube videos for that. You sound a bit silly but they are very useful. I did one last rehearsal of my talk, that's it. My philosophy is "if it isn't ready the day before it will never be". I was as prepared as I could be, so no need to over rehearse a few hours before.I left an hour before my time slot. There are a number of things one needs to do before entering the room, so better just leave early and give yourself enough time. I arrived before the building a bit too early so I just waited outside and went for a walk. I listened to some music, the same music that inspired me during the written process. I entered the building gave my ID (don't forget that!) and made way the secretariat of my panel (LS8). There you need to give your presentation which they upload, and you do a test run. You also need to bring the printed version. Once everything is uploaded and working, you go to a waiting room. There other candidates await, but not necessarily from your panel. It is a formal meeting room and you can have tea or water. I had a glass of water… I observed what the other candidates were doing. Some were working on their laptop, some listening to music, others were on their phones. I guess they were all trying to focus in their own way. I just sat there doing nothing (no phone (turned off), no laptop, no music), just thinking and trying to focus. After 20 min, the panel coordinator enters and calls your name. As you walk to the room she/he tells you how the room is and hands you the remote to the PC to pass the slides.The exam room, at least how I had it, was a long rectangular room, and panel members are placed all around the center table. There were at least 15 panel members. As I walked in, I smiled and quickly scanned all the panel members while saying good morning. There are two large screens which are placed behind you, one with the time (in big!) and one with your presentation, already on the screen. There is a stand with the laptop. The president of the panel introduces her/himself and tells you have 10 min. As I went through my presentation I could feel the pressure rising and rising. Because I knew my text by heart I had time to carefully tilt my attention across the panel members. This calmed me down, because I could see they were paying attention (different than in conferences when a lot of people dose off or are on their phones!). A good thing I practiced without looking at my slides, because you really don't see the clock, and if you tried to take a look at the time you would have to turn almost 180°, which would break your focus I think.So I finished, on time. Then came the questions! There is no real secret about question answering. Be short, be honest, be precise, and to a certain extant be prepared for the typical questions. Again, I will not go over those, you will get them from other web sites or training courses. I answered a plane and short "No" to the first question (it was a "do you think you will do this too?" type question). I think the panel members appreciated that. I got questions I expected, some I didn't. The expected one was why do I think my project is ground breaking. I had prepared that question and had three main points. I got technical questions, such as what does this theory mean, or how can you explain this fact. You need to be able to explain complicated concepts in simple straightforward terms. During my career I interacted a bit with the press and the general public (radio, presentations, newspapers, journalists). Having this experience can help in these situations. Even if the panel members are top rated scientists they are not necessarily well versed in your particular domain. I also had questions on the methods and feasibility, which I also prepared beforehand. A good tip for questions is to read you proposal, and at every statement or sentence, try and think of some questions that the panel could ask. Research them and think of a way you could answer. I also practiced "auto questions". I wrote some down and after my presentation I simulated a question and answer session. Even though I knew the questions, this helped me visualize the panel and helped me formulate some answers. After the 15 min questions, the panel president stopped the interview, said thank you. I thanked them too, smiled, and exited. Overall, I felt really good, and I knew that I couldn't have done a better job. I answered all the questions and in general didn't hesitate. I also felt (this is just a feeling) that the panel members were also quite satisfied. So overall I was pleased and especially relived! I whatsApp-ed my family and colleagues to tell them how it went. I rested and let steam off.The long waitOK, so you have done all the different steps. Now the long and stressful wait starts. It takes about 4 weeks to get the decision. In the meantime, the panel sends you the reviewer's comments. Just the comments, nothing about your position. This part was really hard on me. I had 8 reviewers. Some were very positive, some negative. The negative ones are hard to stomach. After reading these comments I felt pleased and upset at the same time! Some reviewers bought the ground breaking idea, others didn't… In any case, this extensive review process provides a lot of comments to improve your project for the next time if you fail…One morning, I woke up and there it was, in my in box, the long awaited email. It has been almost a year since I wrote the first words of my proposal… a long but fascinating road. My heart pounded! These are the first words I read:"Following the Step 2 panel meetings of the ERC-2019-COG call, the review panels have concluded their work and identified proposals to be recommended for funding for this call. We are pleased to inform you that your proposal has been"…Yessss!!! I jumped of joy! "we are pleased" that means I got it! Or have I?"retained on a reserve list for possible funding in this call, if additional budget becomes available and subject to confirmation by the ERC Scientific Council of the final ranked list of proposals recommended for funding in this call and finalisation of the evaluation process by the ERC Executive Agency."What??? What does that mean? I was never told about this, and all the excitement I felt just disappeared… I frantically started emailing people who knew the ERC system so they could explain to me what this means…Well it means you are on a waiting list… meaning you can still get it "if more funds are available". How the ERC works is that you get a grade from the presentation and the oral exam. The panel decides what projects they want to fund (A) and those they don't (B). B rated proposals are rejected and are not funded. The A rated projects are ordered by grade. Depending on the total budget the panel has to spend, they chose the top first projects within that budget. The other projects graded A, but not in the funded ones, are placed on a reserve list. So basically your project is approved for funding, but there are not enough funds! I was told that in most cases, the ERC president always finds a way to fund at least one or two projects on the waiting list within each panel, so my hopes were still alive! But it just made the process even longer. In fact, your project stays on this waiting list for up to a year! Meaning that the ERC has a year to come up with the money… What? I might have to wait a whole year to get funded? Sounded like torture. However, I was still very happy, because my project was basically approved, and hence all the hard work was somehow worthwhile.So I had to wait three extra weeks… until finally I got an email saying that the ERC was preparing my project documents! Houra! In fact, later, I learned I was first on that waiting list.EpilogueThis brought an end to a process that lasted over a year. A year I shall remember. I really enjoyed the whole process. The oral exam is a great experience as you get to defend your ideas and ambition in front of a unique panel of scientists. I enjoyed the search for perfection in my presentation (off course not prefect at all, but the pursuit of it) and the interaction with the panel members. I didn't enjoy the long wait, especially long for reserve list projects.Well I hope this long text will motivate you to apply and prepare your project. I thought that giving all these personal details nobody really tells you could be useful. It takes time to get these grants and a lot of preparation, hard work and dedication.

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