



European Research Council

ERC Grant Schemes

Guide for Peer Reviewers

**Applicable to the ERC
Starting Grants and Advanced Grants
(Work-Programme 2011)**

Updated September 2010

The guide is published by the ERC Scientific Council on <http://erc.europa.eu>



European Commission
FP7 Specific Programme IDEAS



CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	3
2. DOMAIN AND PANEL STRUCTURE	3
3. PANEL CHAIRS, PANEL MEMBERS AND REFEREES	4
4. THE APPROACH TO INTER-DISCIPLINARY PROPOSALS.....	5
5. DISTRIBUTION OF BUDGET: MAIN PRINCIPLES.....	6
6. THE INDIVIDUAL REVIEWS	6
7. CONFLICT OF INTEREST (COI).....	9
8. THE CRITERIA.....	10
9. PREPARATION AND ORGANISATION OF THE PANEL MEETINGS	10
10. THE TASKS OF THE PANEL MEETINGS.....	12
12. FEEDBACK TO APPLICANTS (THE EVALUATION REPORT).....	13
13. THE ROLE OF THE SCIENTIFIC COUNCIL	14
14. THE ROLE OF INDEPENDENT OBSERVERS	14



1. Introduction

The selection of scientific and scholarly proposals for funding by the ERC is based strictly on peer review evaluation with excellence as the sole criterion. ERC uses a typical panel-based system, in which panels of high-level scientists and/or scholars make recommendations for funding either autonomously or based on the feedback of specialists external to the panel – the referees.

The "Rules"

The ERC Scientific Council (**ERC-ScC or ScC**) has established a document, adopted by the European Commission, namely the "**ERC rules for the submission of proposals and the related evaluation, selection and award procedures for indirect actions under the Ideas Specific Programme of the Seventh Framework Programme (2007-2013)**" ("Rules"). This document defines a number of high-level requirements on the processes implemented by the ERC.

The Work-Programme

The ERC-ScC has also established the **Work-Programme (WP) for 2011**, which was adopted by the European Commission Decision C (2010) 4898 of 19 July 2010. The WP for 2011 in particular, defines the parameters of the Call for Proposals for ERC Starting Grants and Advanced Grants. More specifically, it defines the call deadline(s), the call budget, it stipulates that a two-step peer review procedure will be applied following a single submission of a full proposal, it sets the framework for budgetary decisions, and it specifies the evaluation criteria.

This document

This document complements the abovementioned legal texts. It specifies in more detail the reviewing process and its inputs and outputs, and it defines the responsibilities of the participants in the process. It details the "Rules" in a number of important issues, such as: clarification of the methodology as regards inter-disciplinary proposals; practical guidelines for the management of conflict of interest; clarification of inter-panel and inter-domain issues.

2. Domain and panel structure

The ERC has the mandate to implement a bottom-up, investigator-driven approach to research funding. Consequently, the principal objective of the peer review system is to select the best science, independent of its discipline and independent of the particularities of the review panel structure. The panel structure is, in essence, no more than an operational instrument.

A single submission of the full proposal is followed by a two-step evaluation process. Initially the applicant decides to which primary panel he/she submits the proposal. The review of the proposals is then conducted in two steps by review panels.



In this context, the ERC has established a panel structure consisting of 25 panel titles, grouped in three discipline domains, covering the entire spectrum of science and scholarship in the remit of the ERC:

- Social sciences and Humanities (SH)
- Life sciences (LS)
- Physical and Engineering Sciences (PE)

In defining the panel structure, a forward-looking approach was taken and narrow discipline definitions have been avoided.

The 25 panel titles are accompanied by a list of panel descriptors (i.e. *ERC keywords*) indicating the fields of research covered by the respective ERC panels. The panel descriptors must always be read and understood in the overall context of the panels' titles and sub-titles.

The treatment of inter-disciplinary (cross panel or cross domain) proposals is tackled by the creation of the fourth domain. Those cross panel / cross domain proposals which have been highly ranked by individual panels are further evaluated by the Panel Chairs or their delegated Panel Members at a separate meeting, subsequent to the two-step evaluation.

3. Panel Chairs, Panel Members and Referees

The panels

An ERC panel, for a particular review session, consists of a chairperson plus 10 - 15 members. The Panel Chair and the Panel Members are selected by the ERC-ScC on the basis of their scientific reputation. They make a significant commitment of their time to the ERC review process. Each panel meets twice to carry out a two-step review of proposals.

Panel Chairs and Panel Members perform the following tasks:

1. Familiarisation with proposals of their panel in preparation for the panel meetings.
2. Individual review – by electronic means – of a subset of those proposals in preparation for the panel meetings.
3. Participation in the panel meetings.

Panel Chairs have additional tasks and responsibilities, while working in close collaboration with the ERC's Scientific Officers of the panel concerned:

1. To chair the panel meetings.
2. To (re-)allocate proposals to review panels and to the appropriate career stage for evaluation ("starters" vs. "consolidators") according to the relevant WP.
3. To assign proposals to Panel Members (and to remote Referees) for individual reviewing.



4. To ensure the panels produce all necessary deliverables of the required quality standards by the end of the panel meetings, including the ranked lists and feedback to applicants.
5. To attend the initial Panel Chairs' meeting in order to assess the response to the call for proposal and plan the work of the panel accordingly.
6. To participate at the final meeting of Panel Chairs to consolidate the results of different panels and to establish the fourth domain list. If unable to attend the final meeting, Panel Chairs can delegate this task to one of their panel members.

The names of the Panel Chairs are publicly available after the call deadline. The names of Panel Members are published at the end of the Call.

The Referees

In addition to the panels and Panel Members (who act as “generalists”), the ERC evaluations rely on input from remote Referees. They are scientists and scholars who bring in the necessary *specialised* expertise. Referees work remotely and deliver their individual reviews by electronic means. Because of the specialised nature of the work, the demands on the time of individual Referees are comparatively smaller (of the order of a day). The names of the Referees are made public at the end of the Call.

The assignment of Referees to proposals is carried out under the responsibility of the Panel Chair in collaboration with the ERC's Scientific Officers. There is no limitation on the participation of any member of the international scientific community to act as a Referee, subject to the approval and accreditation of the person in question.

The contribution from remote Referees

In the second step of the review, to take advantage of the best spectrum of specialised expertise, in addition to Panel Members, reviews are typically requested from 2-5 Referees that work remotely. All the reviews will then form the basis for the panel discussions.

The appointment letters

In all cases, the relationship between the ERCEA and the reviewers is defined by a written and signed agreement (*the Appointment Letter*). Signature of this agreement by the reviewer indicates acceptance of the conditions regarding confidentiality, conflict of interest, and use of personal data by the ERCEA. ERCEA can not make available proposals to a reviewer who has not been officially appointed (i.e. signed the Appointment Letter and, in so doing, agreeing to the terms laid down in it including in particular, confidentiality and Conflict of Interest aspects). The template of the Appointment Letter is included in the "Rules".

4. The approach to inter-disciplinary proposals

The fourth domain

The initial choice indicated by the applicant when submitting his/her proposal is paramount in determining the panel under which a proposal is evaluated. An applicant who is considering his/her proposal as interdisciplinary (i.e. cross panel or cross



domain) can also explicitly mention a second panel in the application form. The broad definition of the panels allows many inter-disciplinary proposals to be treated within a single panel (mainstreaming of interdisciplinarity). During the evaluation process, potentially interdisciplinary proposals (i.e. across panels or across domains) are flagged as such, and the panel may request additional reviews from appropriate members of other panel(s) or additional referees.

The Work-Programme makes provision for a so-called 'fourth domain' where cross panel/domain proposals, not funded within the budget of the primary (or mainstream) individual panel, can be brought forward for further discussion by the Panel Chairs. A proposal may be considered for the fourth domain when flagged by the primary panel cross panel/domain at the end of step 2 of evaluation.

Following the conclusion of the panel reviews, Panel Chairs or their delegated Panel Members meet and discuss, from an interdisciplinary point of view, those proposals flagged by the panels as cross panel/ cross domain. At the end of this discussion, the ranked list of the fourth domain (see section 11 below) is established.

Responsibility of the panels

The responsibility to ensure that cross panel/cross domain proposals receive equal and fair treatment rests fundamentally with the panels to which they are allocated. No proposal is allocated to multiple panels, ensuring an equal treatment of all proposals.

The structure of the review criteria, defined in the WP, allows the panels to fulfil this responsibility. In the first step, the review panels can come to clear recommendations on the potential of the Principal Investigator, and the quality of the research proposed, even while recognising that certain scientific aspects of the proposals may not be fully covered by the panel's specialities. The same may be true for proposals that fall entirely within the panel. The panels and Panel Members therefore play a “*generalist*” role.

5. Distribution of budget: main principles

Initial allocation to the domains

The Work Programme establishes an indicative percentage distribution of the total call budget between the three main research domains and the fourth domain.

Allocation of indicative budget to panels

An indicative budget is allocated to each panel, in proportion to the budgetary demand. The budget is calculated on the basis of the cumulative grant request of all proposals to the panel as a proportion of the cumulative grant request in response to the domain of the call.

6. The individual reviews

Individual reviews are carried out prior to panel meetings. Panel Members and Referees participate in the individual review stage.



Minimum requirements

The “Rules” stipulate that each proposal shall be subject to at least three individual reviews. In Step 1, all proposals are reviewed by Panel Members. In case of a high workload, they will be supported by Members of other panels. In Step 2, reviews are carried out by Panel Members (ideally 3) and include Referees (ideally 2-3).

Each application is assigned to a “lead reviewer”¹ who introduces the proposal to the panel for discussion and is responsible for drafting the panel comment. The panel comment is part of the “Evaluation Report” which is returned to the applicant as feedback.

The applicant submits the proposal to a primary review panel. If the applicant has indicated a secondary review panel, the primary panel will determine whether the proposal is indeed cross-panel or cross-domain and if necessary may request additional reviews by appropriate Members of other panel(s) or additional Referees. If the primary panel decides that the proposal is well within the panel's scope and no additional expertise is necessary then it will only be evaluated by this panel.

The interpretation of "individual"

During the individual reviewing process, there shall be no discussions of the proposals between reviewers. Moreover, during the remote evaluation of proposals (i.e. before panel meetings) Panel Members should not disclose the proposals assigned for their evaluation to other experts. When a Panel Member considers having insufficient expertise to evaluate any of the proposals he/she received to review, he/she should immediately inform the ERCEA Scientific Officers and the Panel Chair for having the proposal timely reallocated to another panel member or reviewer.

Marks and comments

Individual reviewing consists of:

- Awarding marks for each of the evaluation criteria.
- Providing a succinct explanatory comment substantiating each mark.

The importance of marks and comments

Both marks and comments are critically important as they form the basis of the feedback to the applicant:

- The individual review marks determine the relative position on the list which is the starting point for the panel discussions.
- The comments are included in the Evaluation Report, in principle as provided (see also section 12). Reviewers should therefore take care about the formulation of comments in their individual assessments.

¹ The 'lead reviewer' is a Panel Member selected from those assigned to evaluate the proposal. A 'lead reviewer' may be assigned to each proposal during the evaluation process. The lead reviewer has the role to briefly introduce the proposal to its peers during the panel meetings and draft the panel comment in order to reflect the main points of the panel discussion. The panel comment drafted by the lead reviewer is agreed upon in its final version by all Panel Members.



The nature of the comments

Comments should be provided by each reviewer for each criterion. They should be of good quality, succinct but substantial. They should also be impeccably polite.

Comments should take the form of a statement and explanation of key strengths and key weaknesses of the proposal, in the light of the evaluation criteria.

Reviewers are encouraged to observe the following guidelines:

- Avoid comments that give a description or a summary of the proposal.
- Always use dispassionate and analytical language.
- Avoid dismissive statements about the PI, the proposed science, or the scientific field concerned.
- Avoid the use of the first person or equivalent: "I think..." or "This reviewer finds...".

In case a very large number of proposals is received, some standardisation of the comments may be implemented.

Individual reviews have to be submitted in due time to the ERCEA prior to the panel meeting.

The range of marks

Panels and Referees will evaluate and mark the proposals under the criteria of **Heading 1: Principal Investigator** and **Heading 2: Research project**.

Each proposal receives a mark on a scale from 1 to 4 for each of the two review criteria (Heading 1 and 2). Marks are awarded in integers or halves. Marks for criteria 1 and 2 range from 1 (non-competitive) to 4 (outstanding). As a general recommendation, it seems reasonable to advise panels to reserve the highest mark, i.e. 4.0 (outstanding), for the top 10% of proposals, marks 4.0 or 3.5 only for the top 20%, and marks 4.0, 3.5 and 3.0 only for the top 30% of proposals. In all cases, reviewers are requested to base their evaluation strictly on the review criteria.

At the end of each evaluation step, the proposals will be ranked by the panels on the basis of the marks they have received and an overall appreciation of their strengths and weaknesses.

A quality threshold of ≥ 2 is applied on the review criteria. If at the end of each evaluation step a proposal is marked below the quality threshold of 2 on either of the two headings, it will not be further evaluated nor funded.



Review of the grant level

Panels should only recommend reductions in the level of the requested grant where there are specific recommendations for a particular proposal (i.e. there should be no across-the-board cuts). Recommendations for amendments to the amount granted must be documented and explained in the panel comments for each proposal concerned, based on an analysis of the resources requested to carry out the work.

The appropriate level of budget should be evaluated within the 'Research project' criterion under the heading 'Methodology' which refers to resources. Panels are advised to consider carefully whether recommendations for large reductions may in fact be a reflection of a weak proposal and whether it would be advisable to reject the proposal.

7. Conflict of Interest (Col)

Peer-reviewers should not be put in a situation in which their impartiality might be questioned, or where the suspicion could arise that recommendations are affected by elements that lie outside the scope of the review. To that effect, the ERC has formulated a clear set of rules pertaining to conflict of interest (Col). These rules are incorporated in the Appointment Letter, in the form of the need for disclosure by the reviewer of any actual (disqualifying) or potential conflict of interest regarding the proposals.

In the "potential" case, ERCEA will make a decision whether the situation in question constitutes an actual Col - or whether no Col exists.

No individual assessments under Col

No reviewer shall make an individual review of a proposal if in Col with it. To that effect, on the basis of the information available, the Panel Chair shall avoid making conflicting assignments of proposals to reviewers. Beyond the measures taken by the ERCEA, reviewers are bound to disclose any Col and will not participate or be present when a proposal that places them in Col is being evaluated.

Col and panel meetings

- Any Col must be declared prior to or in the beginning of the panel meeting to all participants at the meeting.
- A Panel Member will refrain from any attempt to influence directly or indirectly the result of the review of any proposal with which he / she has a Col. In particular, such Panel Member will not participate in the discussion, or in any voting related to that proposal. Panel Members should leave the meeting room when detailed discussions or decisions are taking place on proposals for which they have a Col.
- No Panel Member is permitted to contribute to a proposal (either as a P.I. or as a team member) and at the same time to remain an active Panel Member for the same call. In such cases the Panel Member should step down for that round of evaluations. Additional restrictions may be established in the annual Work Programme



8. The criteria

The criteria express the objectives of the ERC activity at the level of the review. They are, therefore, defined in the applicable ERC Work Programme. There are two types of criteria:

- Eligibility criteria.
- Evaluation criteria.

Eligibility criteria

Eligibility criteria are simple, factual and legally-binding rules. Their interpretation does not involve scientific judgement. Hence, eligibility is not part of the review process. Instead, it is carried out in parallel by the ERCEA. Most ineligible proposals are identified prior to the start of the reviewing process. However, in some (rare) cases, proposals may be withdrawn during or even after the reviewing process, as their ineligibility can only be confirmed with some delay.

Evaluation criteria

The evaluation criteria are at the core of the review process. The evaluation criteria and their interpretation are described in the applicable ERC Work Programme. All judgement on proposals must be made against the evaluation criteria, and these criteria alone.

9. Preparation and organisation of the panel meetings

Autonomy of Panel Chairs

Panel Chairs have a high degree of autonomy in the conduct of their meetings: which proposals to discuss in detail, in which order, when to resort to voting and how to vote, etc. The conduct of the meetings will also be influenced by the number of proposals to be reviewed by the panel.

Re-allocation of proposals to a different panel

Although the initial allocation is based on the expressed preference of the applicant, when necessary, owing to the expertise required for their evaluation, proposals may be reallocated to different panels during the peer reviewing process. This reallocation should be done by common agreement of the two Panel Chairs concerned in the main interest of the applicant aiming to ensure a competent and fair evaluation of the proposal.

The efficiency of meetings and preparation

The ERC attaches great importance to the principle that panel meetings should be efficient. For this reason, preparatory work is carried out in advance of the meeting by electronic means:

1. Panel Members familiarise themselves with proposals in their panel, in order to be able to make high-quality recommendations.
2. In step 1, Panel Members and panel evaluators carry out remotely individual reviews of a subset of proposals.



3. In step 1, each Panel Member is asked to recommend potential remote Referees for an in-depth review of those proposals he/she recommends to be retained for step 2.
4. In step 2, remote Referees contribute to the evaluation process with individual reviews prepared remotely.

The prior individual reviewing stage increases the efficiency of evaluation in two ways:

1. By creating a preliminary ranking of proposals. This allows panel discussions to focus on those proposals that merit substantial discussions and an early elimination of the low-ranked proposals.
2. By gathering elements of the feedback to applicants. Particularly for the low ranked proposals, the comments obtained by their individual reviewing may sufficiently capture substantial reasons for the rejection.

Ranking methodology

Starting from the preliminary ranking, panels may decide to go through a process of successive elimination stages, where the depth of discussion increases as the number of proposals in contention decreases. For each eliminated proposal, panels will either decide to adopt the average mark resulting from the individual reviews, or to assign a different mark. Panels will also provide an appropriate panel comment (see feedback to applicants section).

The possible use of a voting system

In the later stages of the evaluation process, panels may expedite their ranking process by the use of a voting system. In such a system, each Panel Member distributes a number of votes to his / her preferred proposals. Proposals would be ranked based on the votes received. A Panel Member cannot vote for a proposal if under a Col, and in such case, an appropriate adjustment is applied. The voting shall avoid tactical behaviour; however, after voting is complete, individual votes are transparent to the panel. The results of such a vote need not be binding. The voting is to be considered mainly as an effective way to create a ranking based on a set of individual preferences.

Outputs of the panel meetings

The output of any individual panel meeting, to be provided at the end of the meeting, consists of the following elements:

1. The ranked list of proposals, depending on the evaluation step;
2. The feedback to applicants (see the relevant section);
3. A panel report.

The panel report

In addition to the ranked list of proposals, the panel report (prepared by the Panel Chair) briefly documents the evaluation methodology followed by the panel. It may also contain, as deemed appropriate, reflections on issues such as the quality of proposals in relation to the budget and observations on cross panel/cross domain proposals. It may contain recommendations to be taken into account by the ERC in future review sessions.



10. The tasks of the panel meetings

In step 1 of the evaluation process part B1 of the proposal is assessed, marked and ranked.

At the end of step 1, the panel makes three types of recommendations:

1. Proposals that should go forward to the second step. The number of proposals selected for step 2 may correspond to up to 3.0 times the panel's indicative budget and should only include proposals with final scores above the quality threshold.
2. Proposals with a mark passing both quality thresholds (for each heading this is =2) but which fall below the budgetary threshold of the panel. These proposals are not further evaluated and will not be recommended for funding.
3. Proposals to be rejected because their final scores fall below the quality threshold (<2.) on either of the two headings.

For cases 2 and 3, resubmission restrictions may apply as determined by the ERC Scientific Council, and specified in the Work Programme relevant to any future Call.

In step 2, the panel produces a ranked list and identifies interdisciplinary proposals.

All sections of the retained proposals (i.e. Part B1 and B2) are assessed and ranked by the panel (criteria 1, 2). Proposals of inter-disciplinary nature (cross-panel or cross-domain) demanding particular attention are identified.

At the end of the step 2, panel meetings deliver three outputs:

1. The retained list of proposals. It includes those proposals falling inside the panel's indicative budget, and which are of sufficiently high quality to be retained for possible funding. Their final scores, given by the panel, must be above the quality threshold.
2. The pending list of proposals identified by the panel as being of sufficiently high quality but ranking outside the indicative budget available to the panel. Their final scores must be above the quality threshold. These proposals go to the subsequent Final Panel Chairs' consolidation meeting.
3. The list of proposals not recommended for funding. It includes those proposals (a) not retained on the basis of budget limitations and (b) those not passing the quality thresholds.



11. The Panel Chairs' consolidation meeting and the fourth domain retained list

Once the panel meetings are completed and the consolidated ranked lists drafted, a meeting of the Panel Chairs (or their delegated Panel Members) is organised. The purpose of this meeting is twofold:

- To consider those proposals of an interdisciplinary nature (i.e. cross-panel and cross-domain as well as projects with the potential to open up new fields) flagged by the individual panels at the end of step 2. Panel Chairs or their delegated Panel members discuss these proposals and establish a ranked fourth domain list. In order to maintain the level of quality of selected proposals, this ranked list is compared to the unfunded proposals from the panels' ranked lists.
- To establish for each domain the consolidated reserve list of proposals that can be proposed for funding in order of priority.

Any funds still available in any of the four domains, after exhausting the domain reserve lists, will be distributed to the other domains based upon the original percentage distribution of the budget established in the applicable Work-Programme.

The reserve list is to allow for eventualities such as failure to conclude Grant Agreements, withdrawal of proposals, budget savings agreed during the granting process or availability of additional budgetary funds from other sources. Additional funds will also be distributed according to the initial call budget breakdown.

12. Feedback to applicants (the Evaluation Report)

Apart from recommendations on "fundability" of proposals and their ranking, **the most important output of the panel meetings is the feedback to applicants**. According to the "Rules", the ERCEA will provide an *Evaluation Report* to each applicant, which documents, in terms of marks and comments, the results of the evaluation. Especially in the case of rejection, the Evaluation Report needs to convey a compressive explanation of the fate of the proposal and the position of the Panel with regard to it. The principle applied is that the Evaluation Report of each proposal contains a documentation of all comments and observations, it received from both panel members and reviewers.

Elements of the Evaluation Report

The Evaluation Report of any proposal comprises three components:

1. The final marks and decision of the panel.
2. A comment by the panel, written by the "lead reviewer" and approved by the panel.
3. The comments from the individual reviews given by Referees and Panel Members prior to the panel meeting.



The comments by individual reviewers

The comments by remote reviewers (Panel Members and Referees) are included in the Evaluation Report in principle as received. They may be subject to mild editing by the ERCEA, without altering their intended message, in order to enhance clarity, remove any inappropriate, irrelevant or polemic remarks, remove revelation of the referee's identity, misleading recommendations, etc. These individual comments may not necessarily be convergent – differences of opinion about the merits of a proposal are legitimate among evaluators, and it is potentially useful for an applicant to be informed of the various views.

The panel comment

In many cases the comments by the individual reviewers provide a sufficient explanation of the fate of the proposal. In such cases, typically the panel comment simply acknowledges the weaknesses or strengths pointed out by the individual reviewers. It does not contain observations that substantially deviate from the view expressed by the individual reviewers.

In other cases, the panel may take a position that is different from what could be inferred from the comments of the individual reviewers. For example, if the panel discussion reveals an important weakness in a proposal the panel comment will document its reasons in a substantial comment.

In the first step, a number of proposals of reasonable / good quality but ranking below the budgetary cut-off level will be rejected. Such proposals may typically have positive comments from individual reviewers. However they do not gather enough support from Panel Members when taking into account the budgetary constraint. In such cases, the panel comments may be expressed in these terms.

13. The role of the Scientific Council

The ERC ScC may delegate its members to attend panel meetings. The role of the ScC delegates relates to ensure and promote coherence of reviews between panels, to identify best practices, and to gather information for future reviews of the procedures by the ScC.

In conformity with the mandate of the ScC, to carry out the scientific governance of the ERC, and in line with the role of the ScC foreseen in the WP, ScC Members will abstain from influencing the results of the review process.

14. The role of Independent Observers

Under the Rules, the ERCEA has an obligation to invite Independent Observers to monitor at regular intervals its reviewing sessions. The Independent Observers are independent of the ERCEA and of the ScC. Their function and role is described in the "Rules".