ERC Calls: Guidelines for proposal preparation

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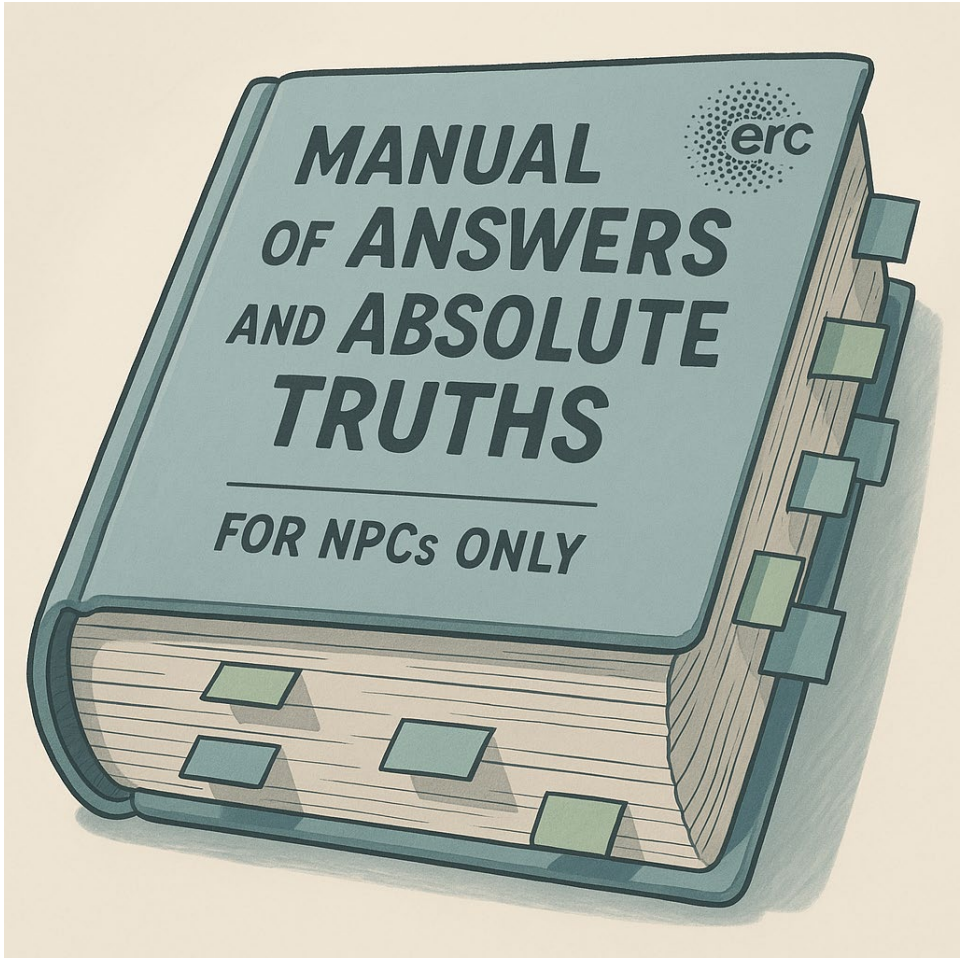
DISCLAIMER

- Despite reviewing many proposals and ESRs, experience has shown us that there is no single winning structure.
- Our recommendations are meant as guidance, based on observed patterns, but they do not guarantee success
- There is no single winning structure, but successful AdG proposals consistently show a **very clear and convincing scientific vision and positioning**.



Content

1. **First Steps:** From the idea to the scientific challenge
2. **Looking at the templates**
3. **Who we want to convince**

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1. **First Steps:** From the idea to the scientific challenge
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Everything starts with a big question

Define the scientific challenge

- Starts from a **conceptual gap**, not a technical limitation.
- Formulate a **clear and ambitious** research question
- Show **why this question matters**: If solved, it changes how we understand a phenomenon
- A question simple to state, **difficult to answer**
- **Curiosity and relevance** must go hand in hand: the question must matter for knowledge, not just for an application.
- At **AdG level**, the question is not only ‘is it ambitious?’ but also ‘is this the researcher **who can lead this conceptual shift?’**
- If the question can be answered by a standard national or collaborative project, it is probably not yet ‘ERC level’

Examples

Weak framing (technical / incremental)	*ERC-level framing (conceptual / transformative)*
How does social media affect political opinions?	*How does exposure to digital information ecosystems reshape the formation of political beliefs, and what does this imply for democratic decision-making?*
Can compound X be used to treat disease Y	*What are the underlying mechanisms that drive the onset of disease Y, and how can understanding them redefine therapeutic strategies?*
Can we use material X to improve device Y?	*What are the fundamental limits of material X under extreme conditions, and can these redefine the principles behind next-generation devices?"*

At AdG level, the key is not only to reformulate the question, but to do it from a position of authority in the field. ***Show that you understand its limitations and can propose a new direction.***

What is your approach to answering this question?

- **What are you really good at?** What idea can you convincingly defend?
- An ERC idea should not aim to confirm existing knowledge, but to shift **how we understand a problem.**
- It needs to represent a **clear step** change beyond the state of the art.
- Your proposal should naturally **build on your background, expertise, and track record**.
- Test your idea early: **discuss it with colleagues** (the more, the better).
- And be clear about its origin: is it **truly your own idea**, or does it emerge from your community?

Articulating the expected advance

Ambition = conceptual advance, not complexity

- **Advancing knowledge** does not mean doing more of the same, but rather opening up a new perspective or explaining what was previously not understood.
- **Ambition ≠ technical complexity**: this is about a conceptual leap, not adding layers of detail.
- What distinguishes a good idea from a great idea is its **transformative potential:** Not “doing more” but reframing how the field thinks/asks/tests. And/or … creating new connections between ideas, methods, or fields.
- Evaluators are looking for projects that **change the game** in their field.

Content

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Structure of the proposal

One deadline | 2 steps evaluation process

The ERC full proposal = part B1 + part B2+ Part A

Part B1 - pdf

Cover Page and summary (1p)

Part I of the Scientific Proposal **(5p)**

Curriculum vitae + Track-record (4p)

Evaluated in Step 1

Part B2 - pdf

Part II of the Scientific Proposal **(7p)**

Appendix: funding ID

NOT evaluated in Step 1 (only in Step 2)

Part A – online forms

A1 General Information
A2 Participants
A3 Budget: table + description (Section C. Resources)
A4 Ethics and security
A5 Other questions
- % Time commitment
- Excluded Reviewers (up to 3)

Declaration 10.

Annexes

HI support letter
Ethics and security issues
Equipment Table

Two parts of the same proposal and two different audiences

Step 1 & 2

Step 2

Part I of the Scientific Proposal (5p)

Objective

To convince the evaluation panel that the proposal presents an **original and creative idea** addressing an **important scientific question**, with the potential to **advance the frontiers of knowledge**

Content

- State of the knowledge
- Scientific question and objectives
- Overall approach or research strategy
- *Expected contribution to the field*

** Assumed by the Spanish NCPs*

How to write in Part I

Tone: Visionary, conceptual, persuasive: focused on scientific ambition, without technical detail and c**onvincing**

- Explain the **conceptual gap** in 2–3 sentences.
- Formulate **the central scientific question** clearly and ambitiously.
- Add a one-line credibility check: the “green shoots” that **show feasibility**
- (Optional and field-dependent) Briefly clarify why your approach or perspective makes the question **timely** or ripe for progress — only if this actually strengthens the case.
- Short subsection: **Expected Contribution to the Field.**
- Map **each objective → the specific conceptual advance** it enables.
- Name the **bottleneck & competitors’ routes** and state why your conceptual path is the best bet.
- Close with **credibility** (preliminary results): ambition supported by early evidence.

** Assumed by the Spanish NCPs*

Research strategy (Part I)

Purpose: : Convince the panel that your idea is original, ambitious, and scientifically sound

- **Style: Concise, clear, accessible to non-specialists**
- **Overview of the scientific approach.**
- **Preliminary evidence (own data, pilots, key publications).**
- **Added value compared to the SoA and the competitors.**
- **Critical risk (go/no-go) evaluation and how you plan to address them.**
- **Key collaborations that contribute capacity (without detailing contracts).**
- **What to avoid: Technical or methodological detail (this belongs in Part II) OR NOT**

How to write it in Part I (no methods)

- Make the reasoning explicit: show the **logical pathway** from the question to the anticipated conceptual shift.
- Organize the narrative **around steps of thought**, then complement them with tasks or methods.
- Explain briefly why your reasoning is more promising than existing approaches in the field.
- (SyG) Describe the intellectual interdependence between PIs — how their conceptual contributions unlock the transformation together.

Curriculum vitae + Track-record (4p)

Personal details: education, key qualifications, current position(s) and relevant previous positions.
Research achievements (<=10) a list of up to 10 research outputs:

- demonstrating advancement in the field
- emphasis on more recent achievements
- short narrative on significance of achievements

Peer recognition: a list of selected examples of significant prizes, fellowships, academy membership, etc.

Additional information:

- career breaks, diverse career paths, life events
- other contributions to research community

A short explanation of the significance of the selected outputs, the role of the applicant in producing each of them, and how they demonstrate the applicant's capacity to successfully carry out their proposed project may be included, as well as a short explanation of the importance of the listed examples of significant peer recognition.

The ERC CV+ TR is flexible: use it strategically

- **Research achievements:** Not just a list of outputs. Explain how each contribution **advances the field.** Include diverse outputs (papers, datasets, methods, software, policy impact)
- **Narrative on significance:** Use a short paragraph to highlight **originality, impact and coherence** of your trajectory
- **Peer recognition:** Select a few key examples and briefly explain **why they matter**
- **Personal details & career path:** Provide a **clear and focused narrative**, not a traditional CV
- At AdG level, track-record is not only about excellence, but about showing scientific leadership, independence and the **ability to shape a field**.

*This is not a standard CV. It is a **targeted argument showing why you can deliver the project***

This is a narrative CV: context matters

- ***Example: Apparent low productivity period***

While publication output was limited during 2020–2021, this period was dedicated to developing a new methodology that underpins the present proposal.

- ***Example: Career break / transition***

Following a career break, I reoriented my research towards X, which led to the development of the core idea behind this project.

- ***Example: Non-linear career path***

My trajectory across disciplines has allowed me to develop a unique, integrative approach to complex research questions.

- **The ERC does not expect a "perfect" CV.** You are encouraged to:
  - explain your trajectory
  - provide context (career breaks, changes, non-academic experience)
  - highlight diverse contributions

What matters is how these elements strengthen your ability to deliver the project.

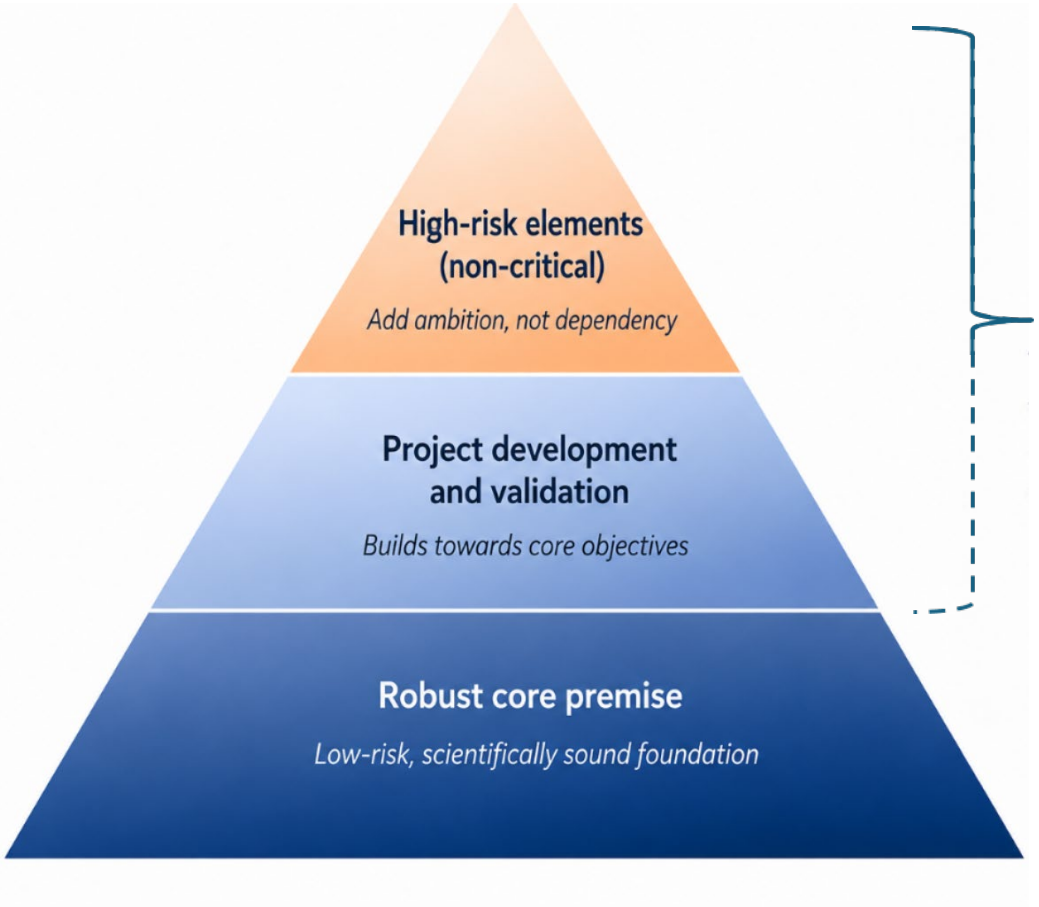
Part II of the Scientific Proposal (7p)

- **OBJECTIVE:** Explain **how** the project will be implemented in detail.
- **CONTENT:**
  - Detailed methodology
  - Work plan and timeline
  - Risk assessment and mitigation
  - Additional background (if needed)
- TONE:
  - Precise, technical, and implementation-focused. Aimed at experts in the field.

Detailed methodology & Work plan and timeline

- **Purpose:** Show that you have thought thoroughly about how to execute each part of the project.
- **Style: Technical, rigorous, detailed, for experts in your field.**
- **What to include:**
  - Refer back to the objectives in Part I and focus on how your methods will achieve them. No need to restate them.
  - Detailed design of the work plan (packages, tasks, schedule).
  - Specific methods you will use at each stage.
  - Methodological justification (why those methods?).
  - Technical and human resources required.
  - More specific risk evaluation and contingency plans.
  - Collaboration details: roles, contributions, planned agreements.
- **What to avoid: Selling the idea as if it were a pitch. This section should demonstrate** technical expertise

Risk assessment and mitigation



The project remains valuable even if high-risk elements do not work

The goal is not to eliminate risk, but to ensure that the project does not critically depend on it.

Content

Panel Members

- Each of the 28 panels is composed by 12-18 (20) panel members.
- The full list of panel members is known during the evaluation.
- A panel may not include an expert in your discipline , they are semi-generalists , but ERC can establish collaborations between panels…
- The members of ERC panels alternate to allow panel members to apply to the ERC calls in alternate years.

This story was based on fact. Any similarity with fictitious events or characters was purely coincidental

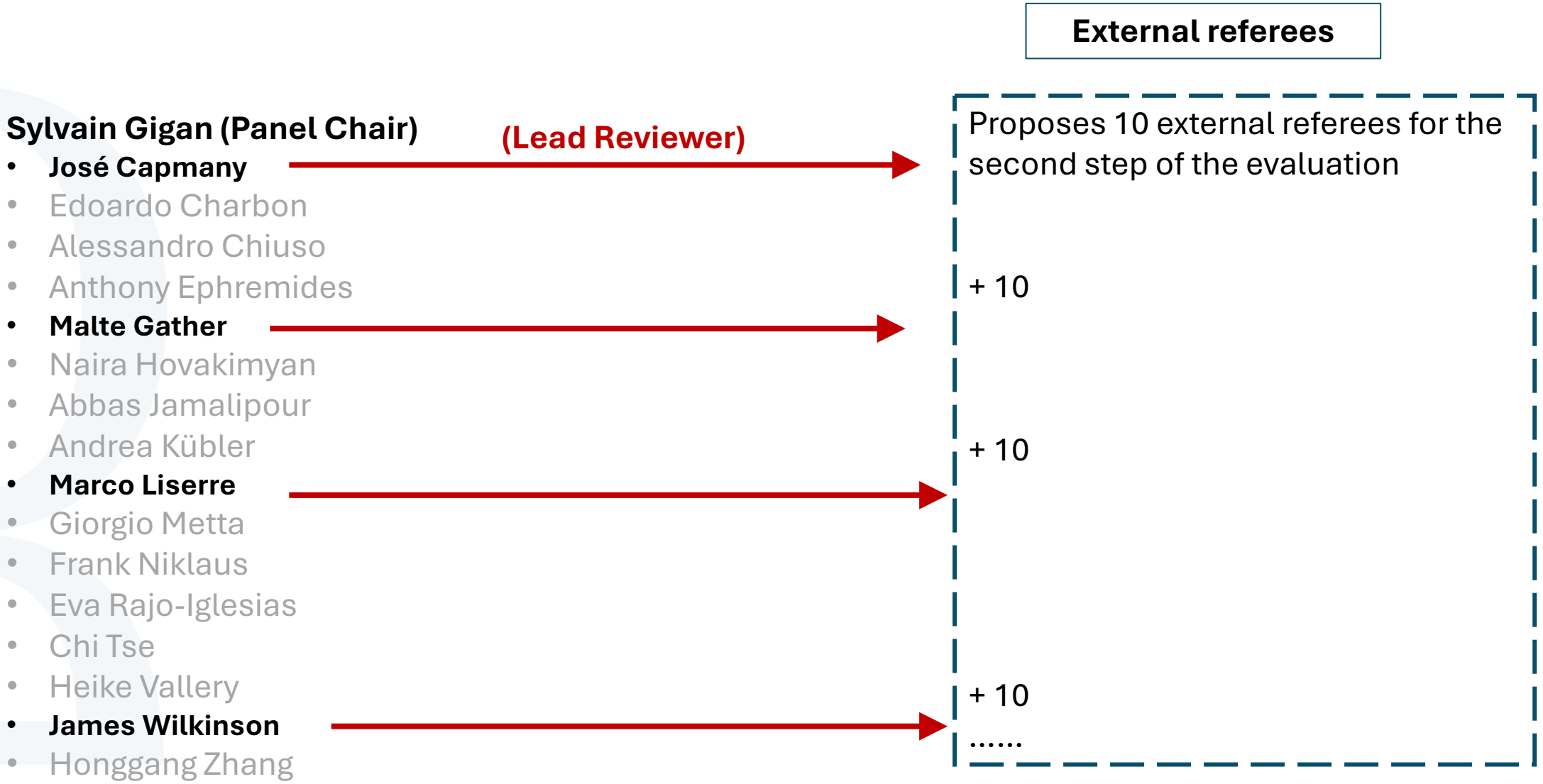
PE7 Systems and Communication Engineering

- PE7_1 Control engineering
- PE7_2 Electrical engineering: power components and/or systems
- PE7_3 Simulation engineering and modelling
- PE7_4 (Micro- and nano-) systems engineering
- **PE7_5 (Micro- and nano-) electronic, optoelectronic and photonic components**
- PE7_6 Communication systems, wireless technology, high-frequency technology
- PE7_7 Signal processing
- PE7_8 Networks, e.g. communication networks and nodes, Internet of Things, sensor networks, networks of robots
- PE7_9 Man-machine interfaces
- PE7_10 Robotics
- PE7_11 Components and systems for applications (in e.g. medicine, biology, environment)
- PE7_12 Electrical energy production, distribution, applications

Your proposal

Sylvain Gigan (Panel Chair)

- **José Capmany** — Lead reviewer
- Edoardo Charbon
- Alessandro Chiuso
- Anthony Ephremides
- **Malte Gather** — Reviewer
- Naira Hovakimyan
- Abbas Jamalipour
- Andrea Kübler
- **Marco Liserre** — Reviewer
- Giorgio Metta
- Frank Niklaus
- Eva Rajo-Iglesias
- Chi Tse
- Heike Vallery
- **James Wilkinson** — Reviewer
- Honggang Zhang



Experts identification tool: Prophy The ERCEA informed the ScC members about Prophy, the support tool for the identification of potential panel members and remote referees for the evaluation of proposals: https://www.prophy.science/referee-finder/

THE END

- Knowing the **potential panelists** (or similar profiles) is a good strategy for success.
- Think about who might read the proposal.
- Make them **understand the impact** on the scientific field.
- Tell them a story that will appeal to them (B1) and to convinces them (B2)

Understanding the ERC Evaluation Process

- Each ERC panel includes 12–18 members, collectively covering all disciplines represented by the panel's keywords.
- In Step 1, your proposal is read in detail by 2–3 panel members—those most familiar with your field.
- If you reach Step 2, it means you've convinced those experts (during the interview and final discussion)
- There are no quotas by discipline: all proposals compete equally, regardless of topic.
- At AdG level, your proposal must be defendable by peers who recognise your position in the field. People are not only evaluating what you propose, but whether you are the right person to push that idea forward.

Write your proposal so that a few experts can defend it and the full panel can support it

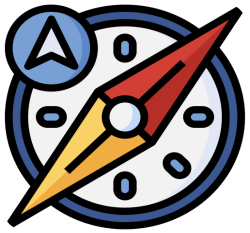
Summary

Everything starts with a big question

A question that challenges the status quo and seeks to expand the frontiers of knowledge

Ambition = conceptual advance, not complexity

ERC rewards ideas that change how we understand a phenomenon



Excellence lies also in the “how”

A coherent, rigorous strategy shows leadership and feasibility

Your voice and vision matter

The panel wants to see the creative mind behind the project

Final recommendations

Think in two complementary parts: Part I (Vision) & Part II (Implementation)

Be clear, concrete and persuasive: avoid jargon, justify claims, show your voice

Ambition ≠ Technical complexity: focus on advancing knowledge

Transformative impact: open new research avenues, inspire others, etc.

Build trust with the panel: show leadership, coherence and execution capacity.

Ultimately, AdG proposals stand out when ambition, vision and scientific leadership converge convincingly

Gracias