

## Breaking down the reasons for non-competitive ERC proposals

More than 10 years of ongoing work with ERC applicants have made it soundly clear that the **proposal preparation period is a very gruelling and long process**. Applicant after another has solidified for us the need to be wholly devoted to the ERC application and dedicate a considerable period of time and resources to meet an ERC deadline with a highly competitive proposal. Unfortunately, it happens quite often that applicants fail to fully realize beforehand the challenge in preparing such a highly competitive ERC proposal. As a result – they reach the deadline with a proposal that is not nearly competitive enough for the critical ERC review process. With valid risks of submitting non-competitive ERC proposals at hand (discussed below), we encounter incidents where applicants decide not to submit their proposal at the last minute. While it is certainly important to first understand exactly WHY this happens, it is much more pressing to know (ahead of time) how to overcome or avoid the exact issues leading to noncompetitive ERC applications. Therefore, if you are considering to apply to the ERC grant – keep reading to gain more context about how to avoid the ‘noncompetitive ERC proposal’ issue, and to discover applicable tips for managing your ERC application process successfully.

### The risk of submitting an ERC application that is not competitive enough

Before we review the reasons leading to non-competitive ERC proposals – it is important to understand the risk in submitting non-competitive ERC proposals in the first place. Generally – researchers who submit noncompetitive applications take **two risks**:

- Risk #1: Potential penalties associated with rejection in the first stage of the ERC evaluation process. These penalties are actually in place as a screening process of low-quality ERC proposals.
- Risk #2: Their reputation in the eyes of the reviewers, which are typically part of the applicant’s scientific community. Understandably, reputation and networking within the scientific community are critical and one should avoid jeopardizing this.

Due to these risks, and as a means of avoiding them, applicants who realize that they are about to fail in the process of fully developing their application in line with the expected ERC nature, typically drop out of

the race (to a given deadline). But what are the leading factors causing non-competitive applications in the first place? Let's now discuss these below.

### Top reasons for non-competitive ERC proposals

Our ongoing work with ERC applicants has enabled us to identify the exact conditions leading to non-competitive ERC applications:

1. **The nature of the ERC grant is counterintuitive when compared to most other funding opportunities.** From our work with applicants, we've come to know that many fail to realize the **conceptual and counterintuitive** nature of ERC, and as a result, they tend to introduce a 'typical' project proposal, similar to what they are used to in other funding schemes. In these cases – a conceptual gap forms, which then requires a shift to take place for the proposal to fit the ERC criteria for success. Such 'conceptual gaps' vary between projects and could be minor or major (requiring rethinking the entire project's concept and scope at worst), but whenever there is such a 'conceptual gap', it is already a **warning sign** about the "ERC competitiveness" of the said proposal. One such typical issue we often see is the case of recycling grants submitted to other funding agencies, which is a **practice we strongly recommend not to follow**. Whatever the case may be, a thorough ERC understanding (for example through training) must **first** take place to properly attend to the required conceptual shift. Then, once the new "ERC standards" sink in deep and new building blocks are in place, we can move on to prepare the application in true ERC form.
2. **The ERC thinking process takes longer than other grants.** Many researchers are often initially thrown off when they understand that the ERC application itself is a rather short grant application. Unfortunately, this is a classic case of "judging a book by its cover" because in the context of ERC – the time *required* to prepare a competitive ERC proposal is *much* longer than many presume. As we know from experience, the most challenging component in the development process of a highly competitive ERC application is actually the **thinking process** that precludes the actual writing process. This thinking process, which is the base to any competitive ERC proposal, takes most of the time, sometimes to the extent of months and years. Therefore, applicants which begin this process too late in the game, or effectively skip right to the writing process for a given deadline (which is the usual tendency of many applicants), may end up with a partial and non-competitive ERC proposal.

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3. **ERC is evaluated by top experts.** In ERC – extremely high expectations are coupled with pinpoint reviewer recruitment of top scientists from all over the world. In most cases, those recruited are experts in the specific topic of the evaluated proposal and are assigned with the important task of reviewing the full ERC application (the 2nd step of the evaluation process). This means that the level of expected review quality is *much higher* compared to other grants (often marked by general reviewers that are selected from an existing pool). Though such specific review measures are assigned to step 2, we've come to learn that the review panel members assigned to the review process in the 1st step of the evaluation are to be regarded just as highly. We know this **community of panel members**, and strongly recommend to refer to them as experts as well in this regard (unlike 'generalists'). Often times, the realization of such high review standards alone results with applicants dropping out of the ERC process.
4. **Bold statements alone cannot substitute for scientific depth.** In the general context of grant writing, many applicants believe that alongside impeccable and flawless language, reviewers also expect 'marketing-like' statements that attempt to amplify elements of the project and impress the grant reviewers. Honestly, we recommend being careful with this type of thinking when applying to ERC. While in other funding schemes it may do the trick, in the case of ERC it will never be enough, as it can not substitute for the scientific depth and excellence that is expected in this grant. While a clearly written proposal facilitates a smooth review and improves the overall impression, the conceptual core is what really matters here (as presented above), and the language will always be second. Therefore – an incredibly well-written proposal showcasing an underdeveloped or weak scientific concept is a major case for non-competitive ERC proposals.
5. **The timing of the ERC deadlines throughout the year.** The Consolidator Grant (CoG) and the Advanced Grant (AdG) are two ERC calls that tend to suffer the most from inconvenient deadlines. The CoG deadline typically falls about a month after the December holiday season. This means that the most crucial time for proposal preparation coincides with a time marked by a general slowdown in most fields and industries, and this is clearly the same for the research community. This CoG "holiday bottleneck" is **further discussed in this article**, but in short, it has certainly become a leading pain point for many researchers aiming at the ERC CoG call. Making things worse, the beginning of the year often brings with it other pressing commitments (such as teaching) and the ERC proposal preparation is often further pushed aside. Concurrently, the ERC AdG is not much better for researchers as it falls at the end of the summer break. Again, this is

also a time marked by a general slowdown, vacations, and time off. Even if the researchers aren't away, many other important contact points may be, and this often leads to a huge stall in the progress of the application. Therefore, applicants that do not start with enough time to spare are truly affected by these yearly circumstances.

### **A checklist to ensure you'll meet your deadline with a highly competitive and professional ERC proposal**

Having listed the above obstacles linked with the non-competitive ERC proposal phenomena, let us now set forth with offering our top tips for best managing your own ERC timeline to achieve a better outcome of this process. Together, these can surely further ensure you are set to prepare a competitive proposal in time for your selected deadline:

1. **Start with a thinking process.** As stated above, the thinking process which precedes the writing of the proposal requires significant time. Our recommendation is to plan ahead and allow 6-12 months for thoroughly constructing a project idea that demonstrates the scientific depth and level of conceptual thought that is required for ERC success. In that context, we remind that recycling of grants submitted to other funding agencies is usually a **practice that we recommend not to follow.**
2. **Learn the ERC basics and unique “unwritten” expectations.** Since the ERC is so counterintuitive, it is highly recommended to first acquire a very firm grasp at the ERC's basic rules and requirements, but then also to go beyond these and thoroughly understand the unique essence of this grant. Alone, this can take a lot of time and resources. At Enspire Science, we've constructed customized **ERC Basics** and **ERC Beyond** workshops through which one can gain the necessary information that will help construct professional ERC applications that meet both the written rules and “unwritten” conceptual aspects.
3. **Ensure your specific project idea is in line with the “ERC standard”.** Before setting out on the long and meticulous task of preparing your ERC application, make sure the core idea of your project adheres to the ERC's demands. To help in this important stage, our team offers a **free-of-charge screening “Go/No-Go”** service that was developed exactly with this important need in mind. Briefly, the free service evaluates whether the initial project's presentation is in line with the ERC's requirements.

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4. **Begin the writing process at LEAST 3 months before the official deadline.** To be clear, the above three points must be done with enough time to allow for at least three months of pure proposal writing and editing (in the case of CoG and AdG, due to the breaks mentioned above, start even earlier). Again, we go by our ongoing experience which has enabled us to track just how long it requires to construct such a highly competitive ERC proposal.

## **Conclusion**

The above discussion clearly outlines the various issues leading to non-competitive ERC proposals. With the offered tips that follow, we truly hope that we make the case for setting aside the necessary time and resources to construct a highly competitive proposal. It is our biggest hope to help you avoid dropping out of the ERC race, so if you should need any further assistance, we are more than happy to **work with you towards your upcoming ERC application.**