



Horizon Europe

European Research Council (ERC)

Guide for Reviewers Proof of Concept Grant Calls



European Research Council
Executive Agency

Established by the European Commission

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Guide for Reviewers

**Applicable to the ERC Proof of Concept Grants
(ERC Work Programme 2024)**

**Version 3.0
14 March 2024**

IMPORTANT TO NOTE

This Guide for Reviewers is based on legal documents setting the rules and conditions for the ERC main frontier research grants, in particular:

The ERC Rules of Submission

The European Research Council rules for submission (hereinafter the [ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe](#)), establish the rules applying to the submission of proposals and the related methods and procedures for peer review and proposal evaluation relevant to the specific programme implementing Horizon Europe selection and award procedures relevant to the Specific Programme of Horizon Europe – the Framework programme for Research and Innovation (2021-2027);

The ERC Work Programme

The [ERC Work Programme \(ERC WP\) for 2024¹](#), defines, inter alia, the parameters of the Call for Proposals for ERC Proof of Concept Grants. More specifically, it defines the call deadlines or cut-off dates and the call budget. It specifies the evaluation criterion and sets the framework for budgetary implementation. The selection of proposals for funding by the European Research Council (ERC) Proof of Concept is based strictly on the evaluation criterion set in the relevant ERC Work Programme

The Contract for ERC experts

The Model [Contract for Experts²](#) defines the relationship between the ERC Executive Agency (ERCEA) and the independent external experts ('experts'). Signature of this contract by the expert indicates acceptance of the conditions regarding confidentiality and conflict of interest (Code of Conduct to the Model Contract for Experts), and use of personal data by the ERCEA. The ERCEA cannot make proposals available to an expert who has not been officially contracted (i.e. signed the contract and, by so doing, agreed to the terms laid down in it including, in particular, confidentiality and conflict of interest aspects). A breach of the Code of Conduct or other serious misconduct by an expert may be qualified as grave professional misconduct and may lead to the exclusion of this expert.

This document

This document complements and does not supersede the aforementioned documents, which are legally binding and prevail in case of any discrepancies. It specifies in more detail the evaluation process and its inputs and outputs, and it defines the responsibilities of the participants in the process. It provides further details on certain provisions of the [ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe³](#), such as the management of conflict of interest. The European Commission, the ERCEA or any person or body acting on their behalf cannot be held responsible for the use made of this document.

The selection of proposals for funding by the European Research Council (ERC) Proof of Concept is based strictly on the evaluation criterion set in the relevant ERC Work Programme.

¹ European Commission Decision C(2023) 3999 of 10 July 2023.

² It is published on the F&T Portal: [Work as an expert \(europa.eu\)](#) as "model contract for monitors".

³ https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/erc-rules-for-submission-and-evaluation_he-erc_en.pdf

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Abbreviations

AC – Associated Country
ER – Evaluation Report
ERC – European Research Council
ERCEA – ERC Executive Agency
ERC WP – ERC Work Programme
F&T portal – EU Funding & Tenders opportunities Portal - Single Electronic Data Interchange Area (SEDIA)
HI – Host Institution
PI – Principal Investigator
PM – Panel Member
PoC – Proof of Concept
SEP – Submission and Evaluation of Proposals System
ScC – ERC Scientific Council

1. Panel structure

In the context of the PoC evaluation process, given that it does not involve any scientific evaluation per se, experts are grouped in a single evaluation panel.

2. Reviewers

The panels

An ERC PoC panel differs from other ERC panels in several ways. It is composed by a pool of experts, who do not necessarily have similar professional background, and is not chaired by a Panel Chair. The PoC experts are selected by the ERC ScC on the basis of their expertise in technology transfer and social innovation. The ERC ScC may rely on its members and on information provided by the ERCEA to identify the experts. The experts make a significant commitment of their time to the ERC review process. The size of the panel might be increased if the demand of the PoC call increases.

PoC experts perform the following tasks:

- Individual review – by electronic means – of a subset of the proposals (remote work).
- Participation in the initial panel meeting, and if necessary in an additional panel meeting.
- In case an additional panel meeting is needed, prior familiarisation with a relevant subset of proposals in preparation for the meeting.

Use of personal data

All experts involved in the evaluation of proposals must keep in mind that any personal data received are only to be used for the purposes for which they are transmitted. All unnecessary and excessive information submitted by applicants should be disregarded.

3. The individual reviews

Individual reviews are carried out remotely by the deadline set by the call coordinator. All experts participate in the individual remote review stage.

Minimum requirements

In the PoC scheme, each proposal is evaluated by at least 3 experts. If a panel meeting takes place, each application is assigned to a “lead reviewer” who introduces the proposal to the panel for discussion and is responsible for drafting the panel comment⁴.

The interpretation of ‘individual’

During the individual remote evaluation process, there shall be no discussions of the proposals between experts. Moreover, experts should not disclose the proposals assigned for their evaluation to other experts. When experts consider that they have insufficient expertise to evaluate any of the assigned proposals, they should immediately inform the

⁴ The panel comment is part of the “Evaluation Report” which is sent to the applicant as feedback.

ERCEA's PoC call coordinator so that the proposal can be reallocated to another expert. If an expert has limited availability in an evaluation round, they should inform the PoC call coordinator without delay.

Marks and comments

Individual evaluation consists of:

- Awarding a pass mark ('very good' or 'good') or a fail mark ('fail') for each of the evaluation elements⁵. It is of utmost importance that only the sole evaluation criterion of excellence broken down into evaluation elements as described in the [ERC WP 2024](#) are used to assess the proposals. Experts should refrain from using any additional criteria or evaluation element(s) no matter the importance it bears in the frame of a given proposal. Each proposal should be treated with the same severity and professionalism (equal treatment).
- Providing a succinct explanatory comment substantiating each mark. 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 elements. The marks should be consistent with the comments.

Quality standards of individual reviewers' comments

Comments should be provided by each expert for the proposal. As these comments will be sent to the applicant as feedback, they should be of high quality, succinct but substantial. They should also be impeccably polite. A decision of the expert to attribute a "fail" mark shall be explained in detail in order for the applicant to be able to understand the deficiencies and weaknesses of their proposal, so as to seek effective remedy for any future applications. Likewise, in case of a "good" mark, the applicant should be put in a position to understand why the expert did not award a "very good" mark.

Experts are obliged to observe the following guidelines:

- Provide substantial, explanatory comments; avoid comments that merely give a description or a summary of the proposal.
- Use dispassionate, analytical and unambiguous language.
- Use grammatically correct, complete, clear sentences with no jargon.
- Provide polite comments.
- Be constructive and not offensive if providing critical comments.
- Avoid self-declaration of insufficient expertise (personal or panel) or non-confidence in the proposal.
- Avoid any comments about your expertise that may reveal your identity.
- Avoid reference to the applicant's age, nationality, gender, or personal matters.
- Avoid making reference to marks in the comments.
- Avoid inconsistency between the nature of the comment and the mark attributed.
- Be aware of unconscious bias in aspects such as gender and diversity more broadly⁶.

⁵ See page 49 of the [ERC Work Programme 2024](#).

⁶ Unconscious bias apply equally, regardless of whether the evaluators are male or female. Whereas possible

- Avoid any comments on PI's past, current or future Host Institution; its standing is not an ERC evaluation criterion.
- Avoid any direct comparison with any other proposals.
- Avoid any reference or comparison with previous assessments in case of a resubmitted proposal.
- Avoid dismissive statements about the Principal Investigator or the project. Keep in mind that previous experience in innovation is not required for the Principal Investigator. Avoid very short comments, especially in the case of a "fail" mark.
- Double check after submitting the review if the mark appearing for each element assessed corresponds to the intended mark.
- Avoid comments on the ethical and security aspects of the proposal. Ethical and security clearance is performed by the ERCEA and respective EU institutions for all fundable proposals.
- Avoid any reference to costs, budget figures when assessing the description of resources (see point 5 below).

Individual reviews have to be submitted in due time according to the deadline set by the ERCEA.

4. Conflict of Interest (Col)

Experts 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, a clear set of rules pertaining to conflict of interest (Col) are an integral part of the Contract and can be found at the end of this document.

A list of conflicts of interests (see below) will be displayed in the on-line evaluation system, and the experts will be asked to confirm the absence of conflict of interests when accepting to review and when submitting their individual review. Based on the information available, call coordination shall avoid assigning proposals to experts who have a conflict of interest. Please note that it is always the responsibility of the expert to declare the conflict of interest.

A list of conflicts of interests displayed in the on-line evaluation system⁷:

- I am PI or team member in the proposal (or any other proposal submitted to the same call).
- I was involved in the preparation of the proposal (or any other proposal submitted to the same panel).
- I would benefit directly should the proposal (or any other proposal submitted to the same panel) be accepted or rejected.

gender biases may be rooted in the institutions or the community where the applicants may come from, a wealth of evidence points at possible introduction of unconscious biases in evaluation processes). Experts are requested to be vigilant and aware so such elements are not introduced in the evaluation process.

⁷ The above-mentioned briefly outlined examples of the conflict of interest situations are fully described in the [Code of Conduct](#).

- I am employed or contracted by the host or partner institutions of the proposal - or have been so in the past 3 years.
- I am involved in the management of the host or partner institutions of the proposal - or have been so in the past 3 years.
- I am collaborating scientifically - or have done so in the past 5 years - with the PI.
- I have (or have had) a mentor/mentee relationship with the PI.
- I have family ties or close personal relationship with the PI (or any PI submitting a proposal to the same panel).
- I have family ties or close personal relationship with anyone who was involved in the preparation of the proposal (or any other proposal submitted to the same panel).
- I have family ties or close personal relationship with anyone who would benefit directly from the proposal being granted (or from any other proposal submitted to the same panel being granted) or rejected.
- I am (or was) in a relationship of scientific rivalry or hostility with the PI.
- I am a National Contact Point or working for the Enterprise Europe Network (EEN).
- I am a member of an EU programme committee.
- I am in any other situation that would preclude the impartial review of the proposal or that could appear to do so.

5. 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:

- Admissibility and Eligibility criteria.
- Evaluation criterion.

Admissibility and Eligibility criteria

Admissibility and eligibility criteria⁸ are simple, factual and legally binding. Their interpretation does not involve technical or scientific judgement. Hence, neither admissibility nor eligibility is part of the review process. Instead, it is carried out in parallel by the ERCEA staff. Nevertheless, if an expert considers a proposal to be potentially inadmissible (incomplete proposal because sections are missing) or ineligible during the evaluation process they should clarify the case immediately with the ERCEA's PoC call coordinator. In some cases, proposals may be declared inadmissible or ineligible during or even after the evaluation, if it becomes clear that one or more of the admissibility or eligibility criteria have not been or are no longer met.

Evaluation criterion and elements

The evaluation criterion is at the core of the review process. The evaluation criterion and evaluation elements as well as their interpretation are described in the [ERC Work Programme 2024](#). All judgement on proposals must be made against the evaluation elements and against these evaluation elements alone. It is to be noted that, **in order to be considered for funding, proposals will have to be awarded a pass mark by a majority of experts on each of the three evaluation elements. The incorrect application of an evaluation element or the application of an inexistent or irrelevant evaluation element is considered a procedural error, which may justify a re-evaluation of the proposal.**

Experts should pay particular attention to the evaluation element “Approach and methodology” due to the fact that the grants to be awarded under the Proof of Concept take

⁸ See Admissibility and eligibility criteria of the [ERC Work Programme 2024](#).

the form of a standard lump sum pre-fixed at EUR 150 000⁹. The lump sum is deemed to cover all eligible (direct and indirect) costs for the action and it cannot be increased or decreased. The Principal Investigator must demonstrate that the proposed timescales and resources are adequate and properly justified, which is part of evaluation element 1.b. The applicant is expected to provide a **narrative description** of the resources planned for each activity. Examples of resources that the applicant is expected to describe are the type of staff working on a task and the estimated effort (person-months), type of equipment and consumables required for the project implementation, staff travel requirements, etc. **The applicants are specifically requested not to describe the resources financially**, which means that **no cost figures should appear in the proposal**. The applicants are expected to justify the good use of the lump sum for the resources described. In case a proposal includes budget figures, cost details etc. they shall be disregarded by the expert and the applicant shall not be penalised for this. The expert shall refrain from assessing budget and costs figures and avoid any reference to them that include their assessment. However, when a proposal does not include sufficient details about the resources once the budget and cost details are disregarded, the expert can comment on this deficiency in their individual review.

Experts have access to the annexes of PoC proposals containing Letters of support or intent from relevant stakeholders. If such contacts already exist, applicants are asked to include them to document the 1b.ii description of PoC activities ([Part B](#) template). Experts should disregard any Ethics and Security issues annexes, as Ethical clearance is performed by the ERCEA and Security clearance by the European Commission for all funded proposals. Experts should avoid comments on the ethical aspects of the proposal, except in the (rare) case of potential use of hESC (human embryonic stem cells): which should be flagged and reported to the ERC PoC Call coordination, as these might need further consultation. If one of the PoC activities involve hESCs, the Experts involved in the evaluation of the proposal should confirm whether this use of hESC is necessary in order to achieve the scientific objectives set forth in the proposal (see also Annex and footnote 11 of this document). Any other Annex than Support letters can be disregarded by the experts. NB: Annexes do not count towards the maximum page limit of Part B (10 pages, excluding the headers, the abstract, references and the risk mitigation table).

6. Preparation and organisation of the evaluation including panel meetings

About the necessity of the panel meeting

Proposals will be funded in order of the ranking described below, up to depletion of the available budget. If necessary, the experts will meet as an evaluation panel in order to determine a priority order for proposals which have the same ranking. Panel meetings will hence only be held if there is any ambiguity on the list of proposals to be considered for funding. Otherwise, the determination of the priority order for proposals which have the same ranking will be carried out remotely.

Briefings of reviewers

At the start of the evaluation session, experts are invited to the Initial Panel Meeting. This

⁹ In accordance with the Decision authorising the use of lump sums for the European Research Council Proof of Concept actions under the Horizon Europe Programme – the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation
https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/ls-decision_he-erc-poc_en.pdf

meeting's purpose is two-fold – the first is to brief the experts on all relevant aspects of the evaluation processes and procedures, and the second is to exchange views with the ERCEA's staff about the evaluation.

Experts are strongly encouraged to participate at this initial briefing.

The briefing covers matters such as the evaluation processes and procedures; the content of topics under consideration; the terms of the experts' contract, including confidentiality, impartiality, concealment of conflict of interest rules, completion of tasks and approval of reports and the possible consequences of non-compliance.

Ranking

A proposal which fails overall one or more of the evaluation elements will not be ranked and will not be funded.

If there is not enough budget to fund all the proposals which pass all three evaluation elements, those proposals will be ranked according to the aggregated marks¹⁰ (which they received from experts for each of the three evaluation elements which constitute the Excellence criterion, and sorted in the following order:

- 1.a Breakthrough innovation potential,
- 1.b Approach and methodology,
- 1.c. Principal Investigator - strategic lead and project management.

Proposals will be funded in order of the ranking resulting from this 3-level sorting exercise until depletion of the available budget per evaluation round.

At the Initial Panel Meeting, ERCEA staff presents the methodology to be followed for the evaluation, marking and final ranking and the experts agree to follow a remote evaluation process. If as a result of the remote evaluation process, there is a tie between two or more proposals, a ranking methodology is also agreed ahead of time to break the tie.

Experts are explicitly asked in the Initial Panel Meeting to agree to follow the methodology for the evaluation and ranking. This agreement is asked explicitly and minuted. If not, a final ranking meeting is offered.

The final ranking order is later sent to the experts for their information and endorsement. The endorsement may also take place electronically in the evaluation IT system. In this phase, the experts may consult and check their scores and comments for the reviewed proposals against the ranked list. The ranked list shows the accumulated scores for each proposal from all experts involved in the evaluation of the proposal concerned. Although experts cannot see comments and direct scores of the other experts, they can deduct the others' scores from the accumulated score. During this phase, the experts are able to access their own reviews via the 'All tasks' tab in the system. Experts are able to leave a comment, if they wish, when accessing and submitting the 'Approve panel ranking' task.

The possible use of a voting system

In the later stages of the evaluation process, the panel may expedite their ranking process by the use of a voting system (e.g. a majority vote on one or more proposals, with each expert having one vote per proposal being considered). An expert cannot vote for a proposal if under a CoI, and in such case, an appropriate adjustment is applied. Voting can be an

¹⁰ The awarded marks can be: very good – good – fail.

effective way of finalising a ranking list. If there is a group of equally ranked fundable proposals that crosses the budget cut off-line, the panel will proceed as follows:

- ✓ All the experts involved in the evaluation of at least one proposal in this group will be sent the reviews of all the proposals in the group taking into account the Cols proposals, without revealing the expert's identity.
- ✓ The experts will then examine all the proposals in the group and the existing reviews, and decide on their own personal ranking.
- ✓ The ERCEA will compile a sub-ranking within the group taking into account the Cols, and will then come up with an overall final ranking list, for final endorsement by all experts.

Outputs of the evaluation

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

1. The ranked list of proposals;
2. The feedback to applicants (see section 7 below);
3. The panel report.

7. Feedback to applicants (the Evaluation Report)

Apart from recommendations on fundable proposals and their ranking, the most important output of the evaluation process is the feedback to applicants. According to the [ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe](#), the ERCEA will provide an Evaluation Report to each applicant, which documents the results of the evaluation process. Especially in the case of rejection, the Evaluation Report needs to convey a comprehensive 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 the experts.

Components of the Evaluation Report

The Evaluation Report of any proposal comprises three components:

1. The recommendation of the panel (according to the ranking list and the available call budget)
2. The ranking range of their proposal among the proposals evaluated by the panel.
3. A compilation of the individual reviews by evaluation element including the final marks for each element 'pass' or 'fail').

The comments by individual experts

The comments by experts are included in the Evaluation Report as received. The ERCEA will not change the content of the ERs that form part of the panel report, except if necessary to improve readability or, exceptionally, to remove any clerical errors or inappropriate comments, provided such errors or comments do not affect the evaluation results. These individual comments may not necessarily be convergent - differences of opinion about the merits of a proposal are legitimate among experts, and it is potentially useful for an applicant to be informed of the various views. The PoC call coordinator can contact the expert for clarification if necessary and can also alert the expert if a potential irregularity is spotted by the ERCEA, which would necessitate the revision of a comment or mark.

The panel report

In addition to the ranked list of proposals, the panel report 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 call budget and other observations. It may furthermore contain recommendations to be taken into account by the ERC in future review sessions.

8. The role of the ERC Scientific Council (ScC)

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

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

9. The role of Independent Observers

Under the [ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe](#), independent external experts may be appointed as observers to examine the evaluation process from the point of view of its working and execution. The Independent Observers are not associated with the ERCEA or the ERC ScC. Their function and role is described in the ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe.

10. Electronic tools used in evaluation

Experts work individually using the on-line Commission's Submission and Evaluation of Proposals System tool ([SEP](#)).

Useful information on SEP is reported here: [Quick Guide on SEP Evaluation tool](#).

Detailed how-to procedures and instructional video presentations on the usage of the SEP evaluation tool are available on [this location](#) under 'Expert Evaluation of Proposals'.

Information on EU Login is available [here](#).

Annex 1 – Evaluation form

Criterion 1 – Breakthrough Innovation potential

Does the proposed idea have the potential to drive innovation and business inventiveness and/or tackle societal challenges?

Are the proposed expected outcomes innovative or distinctive compared to existing solutions?

Is the proposed idea high risk-high gain?

o If successful, will the outcome result in a breakthrough innovation?

o Is there a risk that some aspects are difficult to overcome?

Criterion 2 – Approach and methodology

Are the proposed activities and planning appropriate and effective to explore the pathway from ground-breaking research towards innovation? Activities may include:

- testing, experimenting, demonstrating and validating the idea;
- conducting research required to carry out the above activities and to address the weaknesses uncovered by them;
- clarifying IPR protection or knowledge transfer strategy;
- involving industry partners, societal or cultural organisations, policymakers or any other potential stakeholder supporting the translation of research results into innovation;
- assessing potential “end users” of the expected innovation.

Are the proposed timescales and resources adequate for the implementation and feasibility of the project, and properly justified? Will the activities be conducted by persons well qualified for the purpose?

Criterion 3: Principal Investigator - strategic lead and project management

Does the PI demonstrate a clear vision on how to organise the management of the project, the consolidation of information and data needed to take strategic decisions and implement the proposed plan, including risk and contingency measures?

Use of human embryonic stem cells (hESC)¹¹

Does this proposal involve the use of hESC?

If yes, please state whether the use of hESC is, or is not, in your opinion, necessary to achieve the scientific objectives of the proposal and the reasons why. Alternatively, please also state if it cannot be assessed whether the use of hESC is necessary or not because of a lack of information.

¹¹ Only relevant for proposals, which make use of human embryonic stem cells

Non-associated third country participation¹²

Does this proposal involve the participation of any non-associated third country beneficiaries receiving paid ERC contribution?

Legal entities established outside of the European Union or an Associated Country are eligible for funding when they host additional team members bringing scientific added value to the project, or their participation is deemed essential for carrying out the action.

Please state whether their participation will, or will not, in your opinion, bring scientific added value to the project or whether it is essential to achieve the scientific objectives of the proposal and the reasons why. Alternatively, please also state if it cannot be assessed because of a lack of information.

¹² Only relevant for proposals, with paid contribution to third country beneficiaries (beneficiaries who are not located in an EU or a country, which is associated to Horizon Europe)