

Would Your Proposal Survive a Reviewer's First Read?

A Practical Grant Application Checklist, with 2026 Guidance for ERC Applicants

Every proposal is judged on the same fundamentals: is the idea genuinely new, is the evidence solid, and can a reviewer follow the argument on a first read?

This checklist covers both the habits that strengthen any grant application, and the ERC-specific rules that have changed for the 2026–2027 calls. Work through it in order, or use it to stress-test a draft before you submit.



Think Before You Write

- ☐ **Do** start early and plan for several rounds of restructuring, review and revision.
- ☐ **Do** read the call text and the evaluation criteria closely. Write to what reviewers score, and echo language from the call itself.
- ☐ **Do** state your overall goal in the first few sentences.
- ☐ **Do** position your work against the literature. Be generous to the field, and say precisely how your project advances it.
- ☐ **Do** consider what scope and focus the reviewers will expect. The balance between "the proposal lacks focus" vs. "why are they proposing to study just one protein?"
- ☐ **Avoid** claiming your work will be impactful, significant, or innovative without explaining why.
- ☐ **Avoid** ignoring, dismissing, or attacking competing literature and alternative viewpoints. Engage them, and build data-driven counterarguments.



Stress-Test the Science

- ☐ **Do** build a narrative: what's known --> the gap in knowledge and why it persists --> what it costs to leave unsolved --> how you'll solve it --> why you're the one to do it.
- ☐ **Do** make your objectives falsifiable, and tie every expected outcome back to your goal.
- ☐ **Do** showcase your expertise, tools, collaborations, infrastructure, and preliminary data. Use that data specifically to demonstrate rigor and feasibility.
- ☐ **Do** name the pitfalls. Give alternative approaches, mitigation strategies, and what you'd learn if your hypothesis turns out wrong.
- ☐ **Do** stress-test the proposal before submission. Ask an AI review tool, an outside reader, or both, to identify unsupported claims, gaps in logic, unclear novelty, weak feasibility arguments, missing controls, and inconsistencies between the aims and methodology.
- ☐ **Avoid** building a chain of dependent aims. One early failure takes down the whole project.
- ☐ **Avoid** presenting data or proposing experiments without appropriate controls and statistics.



Make It Easy to Review

- ☐ **Do** use headings, formatting, and white space so reviewers can quickly locate and return to key information.
- ☐ **Avoid** writing in jargon to show what you know. Write to be understood.
- ☐ **Avoid** overusing formatting.
- ☐ **Avoid** writing long, unstructured paragraphs. Every sentence, paragraph, and section should make a clear point.
- ☐ **Avoid** figures that consume space without advancing the argument. Every figure should communicate one clear point and remain legible at the submitted size.
- ☐ **Avoid** leaving any section until the last minute. Keep a checklist so that no element or instruction gets missed.
- ☐ **Avoid** contacting panel members or reviewers directly to lobby for your application.

READY FOR A SECOND PASS?

Find the Weaknesses Before Reviewers Do.

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QED critically reviews your grant proposal for gaps in logic, background, feasibility, methodology, and internal consistency—so you can make the fixes that matter before submission.

If You're Applying to the ERC

- ☐ **Do** lead Part I with the "ground-breaking" concept early. The bold idea should appear right after a short state-of-the-art gap statement, not buried in background.³
- ☐ **Do** make the high-risk/high-gain dimension explicit. Explain how the project could substantially advance the field, rather than presenting it as a safe extension of established work.
- ☐ **Do** choose your panel (and, if relevant, a second cross-panel option) deliberately, and use the cover-page textbox to justify a cross-domain submission if applicable.
- ☐ **Do** treat the CV/track-record template as a narrative, not a list. The template explicitly allows brief narrative context, so use it to explain non-standard career paths or gaps.
- ☐ **Do** document written consent from all named participants (e.g., a dated email) before the deadline. Required, though not submitted with the application.
- ☐ **Do** disclose other applications and current funding in the funding-ID tables. This is used to identify possible overlap or double funding.
- ☐ **Do** prepare for the interview. Panels have already read your written proposal, so use your time to convey vision and answer probing questions, not to summarize it again.

2026–2027 changes to know

- There is a revised two-part proposal structure: Part I sells the idea and objectives. Part II contains the detailed methodology, work plan, risk assessment and mitigation. The budget and resource justification is provided in Part A, Section 3, with additional explanation in Part II only where necessary to support the methodology or work plan.¹
- Step 2 now carries the feasibility assessment (previously feasibility was weighed earlier); Step 1 is a sharper cut focused on the idea itself.
- Broader eligibility-extension grounds (career breaks), including new disability and gender-based-violence categories, claimed in Part A, Section 5 of the online form, with supporting documents as a single labeled PDF annex.
- Higher additional relocation funding for PIs moving into the EU/Associated Countries to take up the grant.
- From the 2027 calls, Starting Grant eligibility is confirmed to widen to 0–10 years post-PhD, and Consolidator Grant to 5–15 years.²

☐ **Avoid** letting Part I and Part II duplicate each other. The template was restructured to eliminate redundancy between the two, and reviewers will notice repeated text.

☐ **Avoid** putting your budget justification in the scientific proposal. It belongs in the online form's Resources section (Part A, Section 3); Part II should only reference budget where it's necessary to support the methodology or work plan.⁴

☐ **Avoid** assuming societal/economic impact will help your case. ERC deliberately excludes this from the evaluation criteria.

☐ **Avoid** contacting or attempting to identify panel reviewers. The ERC treats this as a research-integrity violation with rejection as a possible consequence.

☐ **Avoid** waiting until the last week to plan your host institution's role. Many required elements are completed on the Funding & Tenders Portal and need institutional input.

☐ **Avoid** submitting thin methodology sections in Part II expecting the idea alone to carry you. Under the current structure, feasibility is explicitly assessed at Step 2.

Where to verify current details before submitting

- *ERC Work Programme 2026 and the live call page (ERC-2026-STG / -COG / -AdG) on the EU Funding & Tenders Portal⁵*
- *The ERC's "Information for Applicants" document for your specific scheme (updated periodically, versioned)*
- *Your institution's grants/research office (for internal deadlines, sign-off, and portal access)*

This checklist reflects publicly available ERC guidance current as of mid-2026. Rules, templates, and deadlines are revised most years. Confirm against the official call page before finalizing your submission.

SOURCES

- 1 ERC Work Programme 2026 (European Commission Decision C(2025) 5000). https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/wp-call/2026/wp_horizon-erc-2026_en.pdf
- 2 ERC Starting Grant and Consolidator Grant scheme pages, and "Applying for an ERC grant in the 2027 competitions: what you need to know." <https://erc.europa.eu/apply-grant/starting-grant> · <https://erc.europa.eu/apply-grant/consolidator-grant> · <https://erc.europa.eu/news-events/news/applying-erc-grant-2027-competitions-what-you-need-know>
- 3 Information for Applicants to the Starting and Consolidator Grant Calls, V10.0, 30.09.2025. https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/information-for-applicants_he-erc-stg-cog_en.pdf
- 4 EU Funding & Tenders Portal. <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/>
- 5 ERC Document Library <https://erc.europa.eu/support/document-library>

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Dr. Angela Andersen is Co-CEO and Co-Founder of Life Science Editors, which she established in 2015 to help researchers strengthen grant proposals and scientific manuscripts through rigorous editorial review. Before co-founding the company, she worked as an independent editor and spent almost four years as an editor at Cell.

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