

# Pathways to an ERC Grant: Learning from Success and Failure

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## The allure and enigma of ERC grants

Grants from the European Research Council (ERC) stand out in the landscape of research funding. They're awarded on the basis of 'excellence' alone, in a joint evaluation of the project and the applicant. Recipients lead a project team for up to five years, in an aura of accomplishment and with the freedom to pursue a scientific passion.<sup>1</sup>

Starting my own ERC project marked the end of a five-year roller-coaster journey. In this essay, I use experiences from that ride to reflect on the work of developing a proposal and to extract advice for future applicants. Grants from the ERC represent academia at its most competitive and individualistic. But, like most other grantees, I have benefitted from being part of mutually supportive communities. Sharing my experience is a way of extending this spirit.

The path towards an ERC grant is almost mythological. Official information and standard interpretations provide directions, but no blueprint. Projects should be 'ground-breaking' and 'high risk, high gain'. The research should neither be 'incremental' nor 'exploratory'. What do such phrases mean – in practical terms – in a specific research field? And how does it add up when other ERC grantees apparently build incrementally on their past work or get funding for projects that seem largely exploratory?

There's no shortage of advice on ERC funding for those who seek it. University support staff, national funding agencies and private consultancy firms offer proposal-writing courses, proposal reviews, interview training and other services. In different ways, these players all stand to gain when they help candidates succeed.

As a two-time applicant and current grantee, I speak from a different position – more personal, but also more distant. I can share the actual frustrations, joys and revelations I experienced along the way, and I can reflect on the funding system as an independent outsider.

## Excellence with a human face?

'Excellence' is not only the evaluation criterion of the ERC, but also a buzzword that now pervades science policy, university management and

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<sup>1</sup> Grants are tiered by the principal investigator's experience after PhD: Starting Grants (2–7 years), Consolidator Grants (7–12 years) and Advanced Grants (no limit). See [erc.europa.eu](http://erc.europa.eu).

everyday academia. In recent years, the ideology of excellence has spurred a considerable backlash. Some have described ‘excellence’ as ‘a neoliberal euphemizer hallowing political cost-cutting’<sup>2</sup> and others have claimed that ‘excellence’ is essentially meaningless as a principle for allocating scarce resources.<sup>3</sup> The result for researchers, a widely read paper argues, is a regime of guilt-inducing ‘oppressive acceleration’ of academic life.<sup>4</sup> For many early and mid-career academics in Europe, the expectation to apply for (and obtain) an ERC grant resonates with these descriptions.

The doctrine of excellence has been met with calls for ‘slow scholarship’ as an ethos of more caring, considered, and creative academic life.<sup>5</sup> But just like the ethos of excellence, the ethos of slow scholarship can be oppressive and elitist. To be a slow scholar is, for most of us, only an aspirational identity.<sup>6</sup>

When I received my ERC grant, I had spent sixteen years depending on external grants to cover all my research time. I could be working on half a dozen projects in parallel, and, at one point, I could look back on nine consecutive funding proposals that were all rejected. Slowing down was not an option.

The path I took towards a more considered and creative academic life did not involve rejecting the ‘excellence’ ethos, but rather trying to make the most of it. I knew that an ERC grant would offer unmatched possibilities to think, learn, write and create. What took time to realize – and which I write about in this essay – is that the application process, too, requires ‘slow’ thinking, learning, writing and creating.

My ERC experience covers a rejected proposal for a Starting Grant (2015) and a successful proposal for a Consolidator Grant (2018), which funded the project Future Migration as Present Fact.<sup>7</sup> There have also been other successful and unsuccessful proposals at my institution, the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), and among my colleagues in the European migration research community. My wife Heidi Østbø Haugen, who is also a geographer, was awarded a Starting Grant (2017) and contributed to my own accomplishment a year later.<sup>8</sup>

*Just like the ethos of excellence, the ethos of slow scholarship can be oppressive and elitist*

<sup>2</sup> Flink, T. and Peter, T. (2018) ‘Excellence and Frontier Research as Travelling Concepts in Science Policymaking.’ *Minerva*, 56(4): 431–452.

<sup>3</sup> Moore, S., Neylon, C., Paul Eve, M., Paul O’Donnell, D. and Pattinson, D. (2017) ‘“Excellence R Us”: university research and the fetishisation of excellence.’ *Palgrave Communications*, 3: 16105.

<sup>4</sup> Vostal, F. (2015) ‘Academic life in the fast lane: The experience of time and speed in British academia.’ *Time & Society*, 24(1): 71–95.

<sup>5</sup> There have been different versions of such a call, taking issue with not only the doctrine of excellence, but ‘the fast-paced, metric-oriented neoliberal university’ more generally. See, among others, Mountz, A., Bonds, A., Mansfield, B., Loyd, J., Hyndman, J., Walton-Roberts, M., Basu, R., Whitson, R., Hawkins, R., Hamilton, T. and Curran, W. (2015) ‘For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University.’ *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, 14(4): 1235–1259, and discussions in Vostal (2015), cited in note 4.

<sup>6</sup> See [markcarrigan.net/2018/05/17/against-slow-scholarship](http://markcarrigan.net/2018/05/17/against-slow-scholarship).

<sup>7</sup> See [prio.org/fumi](http://prio.org/fumi) for information about the project.

<sup>8</sup> See [www.hf.uio.no/jkos/english/people/aca/chinese-and-korean-studies/tenured/heidiha](http://www.hf.uio.no/jkos/english/people/aca/chinese-and-korean-studies/tenured/heidiha) and the project website [brokex.org](http://brokex.org).

## Laying out the journey

The journey towards an ERC grant has three stages. The first is the years of research that produce what the ERC calls ‘a scientific track record showing great promise’. The second stage is the development of the proposal, and the final one – for the shortlisted applicants only – is the preparation for the interview.<sup>9</sup> In this essay, I focus on the second stage, which requires at least a few months of writing and rewriting and perhaps much longer for the underlying thoughts to take shape. In order to bring out lessons learned, I structure the remainder of the text around six recommendations:

1. Focus on the narrative
2. Craft the narrative hook
3. Sequence your thinking and writing
4. Expose your vulnerabilities
5. Consult outsiders, but trust yourself
6. Accept the arbitrariness

The obvious objective of the advice is to increase the chances of obtaining the grant. Beyond this, I also consider how to make the proposal-writing more rewarding, and I relate it to life as a researcher before and after submitting the proposal.

## Focus on the narrative

Well before I started writing my first ERC application, I knew that proposals should be driven by a clear and compelling narrative. It’s surprisingly hard, though, to develop a narrative that can play this role. What is needed is a narrative that is (1) simple enough to be effective, (2) surprising enough to be thought-provoking, and (3) true to the conceptual and methodological substance of a large research project. Framing the proposal in a way that meets these three criteria can’t necessarily be done just by working hard – it might take time for ideas to mature before the pieces start falling into place.

A fruitful strategy is to develop a sense of what successful project narratives are like. One of the first ERC projects I heard about provided a good example. Maurice Crul’s Starting Grant project ELITES was based on a striking innovation: research on children of immigrants had so far primarily addressed their poor educational and labour market outcomes, but the ELITES project focused on the minority who attain elite positions.<sup>10</sup> The project set out to analyse the pathways, resources and strategies that make this minority succeed.

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<sup>9</sup> For advice on interview preparations, which were of great help to me, see Heidi’s blog post: [www.hf.uio.no/ikos/english/research/projects/brokex/brokex-blog/2019/ercadvice.html](http://www.hf.uio.no/ikos/english/research/projects/brokex/brokex-blog/2019/ercadvice.html).

<sup>10</sup> See project factsheet at [cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/101323/factsheet/en](http://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/101323/factsheet/en).



The substance of the ELITES project narrative was easy to understand, also for non-experts. At the same time, it was well-rooted in the research frontier. Moreover, the ‘flip’ of perspective or approach, compared to conventional research, made the originality of the project specific and persuasive. In fact, several successful projects have followed a version of this formula, opening up for new insights by some form of reversal or twist that seems both radical and ingenious.

A project’s core narrative effectively conveys *what is being researched* by means of a condensed story that selectively simplifies reality and prepares the ground for the research questions. The image of children of immigrants who follow certain pathways to elite positions sets the stage in this way.

Since ERC grants are so focused on the principal investigator, the proposal must also invoke a narrative image of a *researcher on a mission*. These two narratives are intertwined; the appeal and clarity of the project underpin the momentum of the researcher’s venture.

My own pathway from rejection to success in ERC funding reflects, at least partly, a stronger narrative in the second proposal. The underlying motivation has been the same: I want to understand the thoughts and feelings that precede migration in order to formulate alternatives to conventional notions of ‘migration decisions’. My first ERC proposal was one of several applications, addressed to different funders, that pursued this aim. One after the other, the proposals were rejected. That’s the fate of most funding applications, of course,<sup>11</sup> but these had a specific problem: as I became better at pinning down where and how a breakthrough was possible, appreciating it required ever more specialized knowledge. My proposals became dependent on having reviewers who either had very specific background knowledge or were motivated to follow long and complex reasoning. There was no simple and compelling narrative.

*As I became better at pinning down where and how a breakthrough was possible, appreciating it required ever more specialized knowledge.*

What I did differently in my successful ERC proposal was to shift attention to the potential *uses* of the conceptual and theoretical innovations. My argument was that people who hope or expect to migrate make different choices in the present. This transformation of choices and priorities in turn has consequences for people’s lives and for the societies in which they live. By laying out this scenario, I created a narrative that could sustain the entire proposal. My research, I argued, would enable a fuller understanding of people’s elusive thoughts and feelings about migration, and thereby allow for judging the significance of these thoughts and feelings – even when people end up staying.

I eventually settled on the following main research question: *how does migration that has not yet taken place shape the lives of individuals and the development of societies?* It avoids jargon and is expressed in simple terms but is intriguing because it is counterintuitive. Something that has not

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<sup>11</sup> The most important funder for PRIO, the Research Council of Norway, has a success rate below 10% in the relevant funding programmes.



occurred is not expected to have any consequences. This paradox triggers curiosity and is resolved by the project's core narrative.

The theoretical and methodological work did not become less important in the second proposal, but the role it played in the narrative changed. While the first proposal gave theory and method centre stage, the second proposal recast them as groundwork. By drawing from theory and method to build up to a more intuitive core research question, I could more clearly give that question the main role in the narrative.

The potential of narratives (or 'storytelling') in research communication is well-documented, but still under-appreciated.<sup>12</sup> Storytelling is sometimes seen as a way to communicate with non-expert audiences.<sup>13</sup> But, as Josh Schimel points out in his excellent book *Writing Science*, storytelling is also key to writing 'papers that get cited and proposals that get funded'.<sup>14</sup> In other words, a strong narrative is not only pretty wrapping for the 'real science'. It can be its backbone.

Images, like text, can have a high degree of narrativity, invoking a sense of temporally and causally related events.

(Photo: J. Carling)

<sup>12</sup> For examples including science in general, environmental evidence synthesis, and applied policy-oriented research, see Olson, R. (2015) *Houston, We Have a Narrative: Why Science Needs Story*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Sundin A., Andersson K. and Watt R. (2018) 'Rethinking communication: integrating storytelling for increased stakeholder engagement in environmental evidence synthesis.' *Environmental Evidence*, 7(1): 6; and Muller, A. (2018) 'A new model for think-tank communications (Part II).' Posted in *we are Flint blog*, 1 October ([weareflint.co.uk/blog/2018/8/7/a-new-model-for-think-tank-communications-part-ii](http://weareflint.co.uk/blog/2018/8/7/a-new-model-for-think-tank-communications-part-ii)).

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Dahlstrom M.F. (2014) 'Using narratives and storytelling to communicate science with nonexpert audiences.' *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111(S4): 13614–13620.

<sup>14</sup> Schimel, J. (2012) *Writing Science*. New York: Oxford University Press.

The power of narrative is partly subconscious and usually not explicit in the way we talk about research quality. For instance, when evaluators claim that a project's objectives are not sufficiently clear, the problem might be diagnosed – and more effectively addressed – as narrative deficiency. In other words, it might be necessary to not only tweak the formulation of objectives, but to judge how they are supported by a storyline that render them urgent, intriguing, or both.

Thinking in terms of narrative is much more dynamic than the well-worn notion of establishing a 'knowledge gap' to be filled. There are countless gaps that are not worth spending public funds to fill, and the implicit notion that a gap can be 'filled' once and for all assumes a naïve logic that many researchers in the social sciences and humanities would reject.

In the context of the ERC, a strong core narrative can help prevent the proposed research seeming 'incremental' or 'exploratory'. You can build on past work and be agnostic as to what you will find, but still have a unique and clearly communicated sense of purpose that galvanizes the project.

## Craft the narrative hook

In one of my favourite books about writing, Eric Hayot argues that for academics, 'ideas *are*, effectively, the sentences they're in.' From this perspective, he claims, 'people don't have ideas; they have sentences that communicate ideas'.<sup>15</sup> Since the core narrative plays such a fundamental role in an ERC proposal, it is a good strategy to start the writing process by trying to pin down the narrative hook in sentences. This short text – just a few sentences – should quickly engage and orient the reader by telling a condensed version of the story that energizes the project.

*For academics,  
ideas are, effectively,  
the sentences  
they're in.*

Different versions of the narrative hook will eventually form the opening of the *project summary*, the *extended synopsis* (B1) and the *scientific proposal* (B2). It should also be reflected in the main research question or hypothesis. What matters at the start of the writing process, though, is to express the core narrative in at least one way that works well.

Here are two good examples from the summaries of recently funded ERC projects:<sup>16</sup>

The project will develop a new ethnography of statehood through architecture. It goes beyond conventional approaches to statehood, which describe states as an objectively existing set of tools used to run a country, and critical approaches that understand them as discursive constructs. Instead, this research understands statehood as a result of the relationship between functions and symbols, and will read it through an innovative new methodology, namely a study of state architecture. (Julia Gallagher: *Understanding statehood through architecture: a comparative study of Africa's state buildings* - ASA, SH2 ERC-2017-COG)

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<sup>15</sup> Hayot, E. (2014) *The Elements of Academic Style*: New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>16</sup> See [erc.europa.eu/projects-figures/erc-funded-projects](https://erc.europa.eu/projects-figures/erc-funded-projects) for the full project catalogue.

DenCity offers a new approach for understanding density and its relationship to the city. [...] Existing research provides rich resources for how we might define and represent density, how we might arrive at optimum numbers of people in a given area, and how capitalism builds or reduces densities within and between places globally. However, we lack an understanding of how high density – what I call intensity – is understood and experienced by different urban inhabitants, and the implications for how we understand the contemporary city. (Colin McFarlane: *Density assemblages: intensity and the city in a global urban age – DenCity*, SH2 ERC-2017-COG)

Both projects seem fairly exploratory, I think, but they make it clear how the proposed research stands out. Gallagher references two ‘conventional approaches’ to statehood that differ greatly from each other. She then casts her own approach as a third way, focused on a foundational relationship between the functional and the symbolic – a relationship that is obscured by working within either one of the conventional frames.

McFarlane’s framing is different, but just as rhetorically effective. He refers to the richness of existing research on urban density and lists three distinct research perspectives. The implicit message is that this is a thoroughly researched topic. But then he points out that we *don’t know* how high density is experienced by the people directly affected. The diverse perspectives he first listed then suddenly appear similar: they are all external observations. The newness of his research is thereby defined by a flip to a view from within, not simply by an addition of a fourth perspective.

In retrospect, I see that my own project summary has parallels with Gallagher’s and McFarlane’s. It begins as follows:

The springboard for this project is a striking statistic: half of all young adults in West Africa wish to leave their own country and settle elsewhere. Yet, the vast majority never depart. This discrepancy raises a fundamental question: if migration is desired, but never materializes, what are the consequences? The project breaks with traditional approaches by shifting the object of study from observed migration in the present to imagined migration in the future. (Jørgen Carling: *Future migration as present fact – FUMI*, SH3 ERC-2018-CoG)

Like the two other summaries, it suggests a fairly open, perhaps exploratory approach, but one that is anchored in a powerfully formulated contrast with conventional research. In this respect, the summaries of the three successful projects contrast with the summary for my previous, unsuccessful proposal:

This project aims to refine and advance a key component in migration theory: our comprehension of how people think and feel about geographic mobility. To denote such thoughts and feelings, the project introduces the construct ‘mental dispositions towards mobility’. This is a critical component in analyses that see migration as the outcome of two sequential processes: first evaluating the scenario of migration, and then converting the conclusion into action (Jørgen Carling, SH2 ERC-2015-STG proposal).

The theoretical interests that I lay out were roughly the same as in my successful proposal. Yet the unsuccessful attempt fell short of building the project around a simple core narrative. There were too many complex elements to digest in just a few sentences of the summary, and it was too difficult to imagine the project as an important mission. Complex elements figure in the successful proposal too, but only once the core narrative has been established.

In the successful proposal, I chose to open with what I called ‘a striking statistic’ to draw readers into my argument. Since the core narrative is about people who wish or expect to leave, it is an effective foundation to show readers that, in some parts of the world, this is astonishingly common. A different, equally effective approach is illustrated by the opening of my wife Heidi’s ERC project summary:

Chinese global engagements are deepening across sectors and geographic regions. The objective of BROKEX is to fill specific gaps in knowledge about how China’s extraversion advances. The project takes an original approach by examining brokers who mediate in transnational fields. It opens the ‘black box’ of China’s global integration by moving beyond descriptions of input and output characteristics to elucidate underlying dynamics. (Heidi Østbø Haugen: *Brokering China’s extraversion: an ethnographic analysis of transnational arbitration - BROKEX*, SH2 ERC-2018-STG)

The first sentence makes an assertion that is *not* meant to surprise. Instead, it elicits an implicit ‘I’m with you’ in the reader’s mind. From there, it’s easier to go step by step towards central parts of the narrative that are new to the reader.

The four examples of successful summaries take different rhetorical approaches to the narrative hook, but they are all similar in one important respect: each of the proposed projects are contrasted with existing research in a specific and easily understandable way. Creating this contrast depends as much on the description of conventional approaches as it depends on presenting the new idea. The conventional is the backdrop that makes the allegedly new stand out. But portraying this backdrop as dark and dull – for maximum contrast – will create resistance in peer review by specialists in the field. What seems to be common to the examples is that they create a clear contrast without disparaging current research. In the case of my own proposal, there is nothing dismissive in saying that migration research is primarily concerned with migration in the present. Yet it provides an effective contrast to studying imagined migration in the future.<sup>17</sup>

*In the unsuccessful proposal, it was too difficult to imagine the project as an important mission.*

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<sup>17</sup> Many other scholars have, in various ways, also studied imagined migration in the future, for instance through surveys on migration intentions. In the body of the proposal, I showed how my approach differs from these studies. The contrast was therefore not quite as simple as the present/future distinction. Nevertheless, this distinction served well in the core narrative because it was not undermined by the nuance that was added later.

## Sequence your thinking and writing

Developing an ERC proposal is hardly a linear process. The narrative hook is a good place to start because it provides direction to the work that follows, even if the opening sentences are revisited again and again until the proposal is submitted.

There's a dilemma, though, in deciding what to do next, since there are many parts of the proposal and few that can easily be postponed. Two principles can offer guidance. First, it is sensible to develop rough contours of the big pieces of the puzzle before spending too much time on either one. The big pieces here are elements like research design, team composition, and empirical foundations, which depend on each other.

Developing a good research design starts with knowing what is possible with the available resources. How much of your own time can you spend on the project? How many others, at which level of seniority, will work alongside you? It's risky to think that budgeting can be tackled at a later stage once the substance is in place.

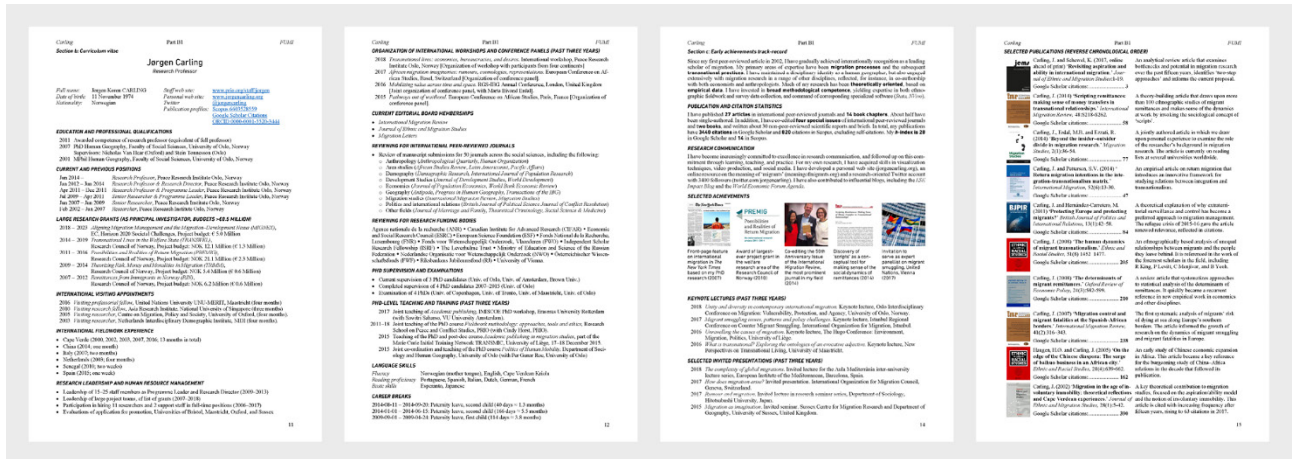
In my own case, I had to consider that I am based in a high-cost country, at an institution with limited possibilities for topping up the ERC budget with additional funding. Consequently, a Consolidator Grant could cover 50% of my own time for five years, two post-docs for 2–3 years each, research assistance, and operating costs. Applicants elsewhere could stretch the same amount much further and have a larger team. These differences don't affect the chances of funding, but they mean that the organizational design must be adapted to the context.

*It's risky to think that budgeting can be tackled later, once the substance is in place.*

While my team had to be small, I have the advantage of being based at a high-profile institution that can attract highly qualified team members who will be physically present. In settings where working conditions are not as good and presence in the office is not the norm, ERC projects might be more of a coalition of individuals who rarely meet in person. Such variation affects what kind of teamwork is possible and how the project should be designed – not just to make it look good in the evaluation, but also to make it a well-functioning project once it is funded.

Personnel planning also has to do with personal and career considerations. For instance, I chose to include postdocs rather than PhD candidates because their level of experience allows for working more closely as a team. Had I needed more experience with PhD supervision, the project design would have needed to be different. The PhD candidates would have required more autonomy for independent research (which is the norm for doctorates in social sciences), and it would have been risky to make the project overall critically dependent on the results of the PhD candidates' work.

With a rough plan for a feasible project organization, it is possible to start writing the proposal. I first wrote the extended synopsis (5 pages), then the scientific proposal (15 pages), and then I entirely re-wrote the



The CV and track record could steal valuable time in the final weeks.

extended synopsis. This worked well since I could receive feedback on the extended synopsis before developing the full proposal. Rewriting the extended synopsis was necessary as a result of this feedback, and also because the in-depth work on the scientific proposal led to refinements of the concepts, methodology, and research questions. (With my unsuccessful proposal, I drafted the extended synopsis too late to go through the full cycle in this way.)

The final weeks before the deadline are inevitably stressful. I found that the proposal-writing was a process of maturing that accelerated towards the end. Apart from the obvious advice of starting early, I would stress the benefit of creating space to work *only* on the synopsis and proposal as the deadline approaches.

Besides financial and administrative hurdles – which are greater in some institutions than others – the CV and track record could steal valuable time in the final weeks. That’s unnecessary, though, since they are relatively independent of other parts of the proposal and can be prepared at an early stage. Maybe there are things to add or revise close to the deadline, but the groundwork can be started right after deciding to apply. Since this part of the application weighs heavily in the evaluation, it needs careful work.

Developing the CV is largely a matter of deciding how to structure it, what to include and what to leave out. The two-page track record is also subject to certain requirements, but there is ample room for diverse approaches. I followed the specific advice of including citation figures, although it’s not a formal requirement. Other than that, I sought guidance in the evaluation criteria. The purpose of the CV and track record is to evaluate ‘the intellectual capacity, creativity and commitment’ of applicants, including an assessment of whether their achievements have ‘typically gone beyond the state of the art’. Making a case for having such a profile is – just like the project proposal – a matter of narrative.

I think the most effective narrative strategy for the track record lies in being specific and fact-based, while not over-estimating the ability of facts to speak for themselves. I included two short paragraphs of text (about my research profile and my interest in research communication)

and then highlighted five diverse achievements that could illustrate and back up what I had claimed. In the presentation of publications, I combined the standard facts (the full reference and number of citations) with a couple of sentences about each one, briefly telling what the publication sought to achieve, what role it had played in the field, or how it related to my proposed research.<sup>18</sup>

In the CV and track record I obviously included what I considered my ‘top’ achievements and publications, but then tried to use the remaining flexibility to highlight creativity and versatility, which were important traits for my proposed project. For instance, I chose to list the different *disciplines and research fields* in which I have been a peer reviewer, with examples of specific journals under each. In this way, I supported the claim that I have the necessary experience to lead a project that draws extensively on disparate disciplines.

Once the various parts of the proposal are in place, many applicants have their final text language-edited or proofread. Non-native speakers are commonly advised to have their English reviewed. Such final steps can be important, but emphasizing them can belittle the role of language in the proposal, casting it as a matter of cosmetics and correctness. The language of the proposal cannot be ‘fixed’ at the end. In particular, the core narrative depends fundamentally on the words and sentences through which it is expressed. It can therefore be valuable to have detailed critical comments – also on the language – on the key pieces of text before there is a coherent draft to read.

## Expose your vulnerabilities

Writing an ERC proposal is daunting because the investment is so large and the chances of success so slim. The focus on individual excellence also makes a rejection painfully personal. Still, it can make a big difference to let the world know that you are applying. An ERC grantee is supposedly an ambitious and confident person who takes on risky endeavours. It makes sense, then, to embrace that mindset also as an ERC proposal-writer.

Recognizing the audacity of applying and being prepared to share your rejection can make you a more agile and creative thinker, which benefits the proposal. Such openness also contributes to a healthier academic environment. Nick Hopwood’s famous ‘wall of rejection’ is the ultimate expression of this philosophy.<sup>19</sup> One of the things I appreciated as an applicant was that submitting a strong proposal was recognized by people around me as an achievement in its own right.

Exposing your vulnerabilities is also about soliciting frank feedback on the text. It takes help from others to overcome the curse of knowledge – the inability to imagine what it is like to not know what you know. As

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<sup>18</sup> See [jorgencarling.org/erc-cv-and-track-record](http://jorgencarling.org/erc-cv-and-track-record) for my own submission.

<sup>19</sup> See [nickhop.wordpress.com/2017/06/21/my-wall-of-rejection-and-why-it-matters](http://nickhop.wordpress.com/2017/06/21/my-wall-of-rejection-and-why-it-matters).



Steven Pinker writes, ‘the curse of knowledge is the single best explanation [...] why good people write bad prose’.<sup>20</sup> In writing a research proposal, a fundamental challenge is grasping how it will be read by reviewers who don’t share your pre-existing understanding – and perhaps your fascination – for the subject matter. If a colleague reads the proposal and says that ‘this part is really uninspiring’, for instance, you have successfully exposed a weakness and made a big step towards a better proposal.

The need to expose your vulnerabilities extends into the proposal itself, though in a different, more carefully choreographed way. ERC projects are expected to face risks and to have strategies and contingency plans for dealing with them. What I found difficult was to identify risks that met ERC expectations – liabilities that were ‘scientific’ and not ‘operational’. Risks such as having laptops stolen in the field, or a postdoc resigning early to take up a tenure-track job, might be very real, but they are not what gives an ERC proposal virtuous riskiness.<sup>21</sup>

The norms of ERC projects are clearly founded on natural sciences, where scientific risks are different from in social sciences and humanities. It therefore took time for me to find appropriate ways to discuss risk. One risk that I chose to discuss was the possibility of not finding any relationship between people’s thoughts and feelings about migration and their current behaviour. I would not have thought of this as a ‘risk’ before engaging with the ERC proposal, but it made sense. Moreover, this risk could be meaningfully addressed in the proposal. I emphasized measures to ensure that such a non-finding would reflect an empirical reality (and therefore be interesting) rather than my own failure to capture relevant aspects of thoughts and behaviour.

## **Consult outsiders, but trust yourself**

Writing an ERC proposal is potentially a lonely process, since it is so focused on the individual. Involving others in a systematic way helps ensure critical feedback. It also provides momentum to the process of drafting and revising. This kind of committed support to one’s writing process is a huge favour to ask, and not every applicant has someone to turn to.

Given the time it takes to develop a proposal – and hence the cost – it can be a good idea for institutions to invest in external assistance to support ERC applicants. I used one external consulting service for my first ERC proposal and two other ones for the second. Splitting the budget across two perspectives was particularly valuable. Not only did the

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<sup>20</sup> Pinker, S. (2015) *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person’s Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*. London: Penguin Books.

<sup>21</sup> The second time I applied, I heard that the evaluators now tended to favour feasibility over riskiness. This type of rumour – which is exhausting to figure out how to relate to in the writing process – contributes to what I initially called the ‘mythological’ nature of the path towards ERC grants.

two services have very different approaches, but having two made it easier to also listen to my own voice. The enigmatic nature of ERC funding can make it challenging to respond to comments from external consultants. They sell their services based on claiming to know what it takes to obtain an ERC grant. Yet, they too face the challenges of adapting general principles to a specific proposal and giving advice that ensures favourable assessments from diverse and unknown evaluators – generalists as well as specialists. You need to trust yourself in deciding what advice to follow and how.

I became better at trusting my own judgements the second time I applied, but I struggled with feedback on my first ERC proposal. The project involved fieldwork among diverse groups of foreigners in China, examining their plans and desires for onward migration. We had lived in China for a year because of Heidi's research, and this was how I had discovered the rich empirical terrain and what it might contribute to migration studies. During our stay, I actively explored the field with future research in mind. I explained this background in my ERC proposal, but was advised by a consultant to remove it, since, they said, the fact that I had been a trailing spouse would reflect very poorly on my professional profile.

I heeded the advice and replaced the true explanation with a vague description of reconnaissance in China. In retrospect, I wish I had handled it differently. The evaluation report that came with the rejection stressed that I had not demonstrated sufficient experience from China. So from a purely strategic perspective, the revision could have weakened my chances. Moreover, it feels ethically and politically wrong to have concealed the fact that it was my family life that broadened my horizon and spurred new ideas.

The ethical dimension aside, this experience illustrates a perennial challenge in addressing comments: how do you judge what is strategically wise? It can be an exhaustive guessing game since there are so many unknowns. Agonising over tactical decisions could potentially deprive the proposal of the enthusiasm it needs to stand out.

Proposal-writing specialists often have minimal expertise on the subject matter and cannot replace advice from colleagues who know your field. I was fortunate to receive comments and advice from both perspectives. Since the ERC funding decisions are ultimately made by relatively broad panels, the text must appeal to specialists *and* non-specialists. Ideally, comments on the drafts should therefore come from diverse vantage points. A range of input, whether from colleagues or external consultants, can also make it easier to trust yourself in making decisions. Faced with comments from a single Expert with a capital E, you are more likely to give in to suggestions that might not feel right, as I did with suppressing my experience in China.

One thing I have learned through receiving comments is that, often, suggestions for changes should neither be followed nor ignored. This is because readers can be in a good position to identify weaknesses but lack

*Often, suggestions for changes should neither be followed nor ignored.*

the full overview or in-depth knowledge to formulate solutions. When a suggested change seems like a bad idea, it might still reflect a real problem in the text. The solution, then, is to first try to understand what the problem really is, and then find a better way of addressing it.

The comments I received from others were based on advanced drafts. If I were to apply again, I would ask for input at a much earlier stage, based on one-paragraph formulations of the core narrative. I could even have asked for comments on two or three different versions, which could open a more creative discussion than the traditional suggestions for improvement of a single draft. I would first have had to write much longer texts in order to clarify my thinking, but it's the condensed narrative that would benefit the most from being read by others.

*If I were to apply again, I would ask for input at a much earlier stage.*

Overall, I benefitted more from the input I received from others when I applied for the second time. Yet, the reason why the proposal succeeded, I think, was everything that I had learned and applied to the proposal-writing. Colleagues and consultants raised flags and nudged me in the right direction, but the big difference was the stronger core narrative that I was eventually able to develop.

## Accept the arbitrariness

When reviewers assess a research proposal, they are making subjective judgements. The outcome is easily swayed by the degree of luck in the selection of evaluators. This is especially the case when you do something out of the ordinary, which the ERC encourages. For instance, my own idea of focusing on imagined or desired migration had been dismissed by leading researchers in the field as a futile exercise. I tried to pre-empt such scepticism as I wrote the proposal, but it might have been in vain if I had been unlucky with the reviewers.

Even though luck plays a role, the ERC probably has a more reliable assessment procedure than most funders, not only because of how the process is organized, but also thanks to the clear objectives. Terms such as 'ground-breaking' may be elusive pointers, but the ERC is uniquely clear in its priorities. Other funding programmes issue calls with long lists of requirements and preferences. Responding to such calls is frustrating because the funder's priorities can pull in different directions, and because it is impossible to know which of the many priorities will ultimately prevail.

Against this background, working on an ERC proposal is not only demanding, but meaningful and rewarding. It is illustrative that one recent grantee, Paolo Boccagni, developed his proposal into a book, published a few months after the project started.<sup>22</sup> Even if he had not received the grant, he could have gone ahead with the book. This

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<sup>22</sup> Boccagni, P. (2017) *Migration and the Search for Home: Mapping Domestic Space in Migrants' Everyday Lives*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.



anecdote paints an intimidating picture of the workload of an ERC application, but also illustrates the potential for learning and developing as a scholar in the process – regardless of the funding outcome.

The arbitrariness of ERC funding (like all research funding) is something you will rarely hear about. Consultants live off the idea that they can improve the odds, and grantees have no reason to undermine the impression that they are objectively selected as the best of the best. Even research policy makers who despise the idea that there's prestige in having articles published in highly selective journals see ERC funding as a legitimate badge of honour.<sup>23</sup> The arbitrariness doesn't mean that the system is flawed, just that it's necessarily subjective. Many good proposals will not be funded, and the margins between success and failure are narrow. Being aware of the arbitrariness can soften the blow of a rejection.

Luck works both ways, though. Reading the summaries of funded ERC projects shows that many are neither clear nor compelling. Maybe the full proposals were much better and maybe the applicants excelled at the interview, but they have probably also had luck on their side in a subjective and unpredictable process.

At the end of the day, an amazing proposal might be neither necessary nor sufficient for receiving a grant.

(Photo: Riho Kroll)

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<sup>23</sup> Carling, J. (2019) 'DORA has become an alibi for Plan S failure.' Posted in *Medium*. 14 January ([medium.com/@jorgencarling/dora-has-become-an-alibi-for-plan-s-failure-b734170bed86](https://medium.com/@jorgencarling/dora-has-become-an-alibi-for-plan-s-failure-b734170bed86)).

## Labouring and learning

The combination of a huge workload and a slim success rate can make the prospect of developing an ERC proposal quite disheartening.<sup>24</sup> Is it worth the effort? I wrote my ERC proposals because I wanted the grant and thought I had a chance to succeed – the obvious motivation. But in retrospect, there is another argument in favour of trying: I learned a lot through the ERC proposal-writing that will benefit me beyond this specific grant.

First and foremost, the lengthy and intensive process helped me *internalise* things I have known superficially for a long time – especially about the power of narrative and the pitfalls of the knowledge curse. Second, I have learned something new about the relationship between the core narrative and the project design. The core narrative should not necessarily *summarize* the project but should *situate* the research effort. It begins with a selective (but credible and substantiated) representation of the empirical and scientific context and sets the stage for the proposed research.

The learning process was valuable beyond the ERC, but I was obviously elated by the outcome of my second attempt. I was relieved that all the hard work paid off and excited about the opportunity that lay ahead of me. I will never know if I would have appreciated the learning experience in the face of another rejection. But seeing the proposal-writing as a learning process is a good way to start. Aim high and make your research as exciting as possible – for the ERC and for yourself.

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<sup>24</sup> The success rate for Starting, Consolidator and Advanced grants has recently been around 12%, which is higher than for many other sources of research funding. However, the workload of developing the proposal is particularly large. In my case, the time I spent on the proposal adds up to roughly 20% of the time I will spend on the project itself.

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# Pathways to an ERC Grant: Learning from Success and Failure

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Grants from the European Research Council (ERC) stand out in the landscape of research funding. They're awarded on the basis of 'excellence' alone, in a joint evaluation of the project and the applicant. Recipients lead a project team for up to five years, in an aura of accomplishment and with the freedom to pursue a scientific passion.

Starting my own ERC project marked the end of a five-year rollercoaster journey. In this essay I use experiences from that ride to reflect on the work of developing a proposal and to extract advice for future applicants.

Grants from the ERC represent academia at its most competitive and individualistic. But, like most other grantees, I have benefitted from being part of mutually supportive communities. Sharing my experience is a way of extending this spirit.

The most important lessons I have learned concern the *narrativity* of the proposal. These insights are illustrated by the cover photo: images, like text, can have a high degree of narrativity, invoking a sense of temporally and causally related events. In the text I use examples of funded proposals to pin down what

characterizes a narrative hook that conveys specific and persuasive innovation – the 'ground-breaking' essence that the ERC calls for.

There is no blueprint for succeeding with ERC funding. Every project is different and the evaluation necessarily has a strong element of arbitrariness. However, the process of writing a proposal can be a rewarding experience regardless of the outcome. It takes thorough thinking about what research can be, why it can make a difference, and how it can be depicted with well-chosen words and carefully crafted sentences.