From the idea to the project: The story of one ERC Starting Grant

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Background

- MSc in Geology
- PhD in Agronomical sciences & Biological engineering
- FNRS research associate

- Applied for an ERC Starting Grant in November 2015
- Informed that the grant was funded in September 2016

Mineral weathering in thawing permafrost: causes and consequences (WeThaw)
From the idea to the proposal...

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<tr>
<td>« You should consider... »</td>
<td>Consolidate CV &amp; publications without PhD advisor</td>
<td>First info session on ERC in Brussels Feedback on CV from institution</td>
<td>Discuss the idea Identify the innovation &amp; impact Get experience with proposal writing</td>
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<td><strong>Aug 2015</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sept 2015</strong></td>
<td><strong>Mid-sept/Mid-Nov 2015</strong></td>
<td><strong>17 Nov 2015 DEADLINE</strong></td>
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<td>Decision to submit this year</td>
<td>Second info session on ERC in Brussels</td>
<td>100% dedicated to the project Training: « Writing ERC proposal » (mid-oct)</td>
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When?

- Window after PhD 2-7 years
  - Extended if maternity
  - Consider your chance to resubmit a Starting Grant

- Check if your CV is enough at that stage
  - Consolidate (ask advice at your institution)

- Think about the maturity of the idea & its impact for the field:
  - Good timing?

- Make sure that you can be fully dedicated to the writing
  - Give you the best chance if you decide to do it

- My window was « submission in 2015 or 2016 »
Thinking period

- Go to conferences: listen and clarify what has already been done related to your idea
- Clarify the impact of your idea beyond your field
- About 1 year to discuss your idea with colleagues, to expose your view
- Make sure that your idea requires an ERC to do it
- Initiate collaborations to generate preliminary data
- Try to discuss with people who have had an ERC in your discipline
How to proceed to write?

1st month

- Collect all info for the CV (for part B1)
- Contact all collaborators (to secure samples,...)
- Collect all info for the budget (team, quote...)
- Discuss/check the budget with your institution
- Deep reading : conceptual figure
- Do and redo the structure of the WPs until convincing
- Think it as a team, with the profile of the team members

2nd month

- Training to write (ask your institution)
- Write based on a skeleton of the proposal
  - not only the headings from the ERC
  - also the idea of each paragraph
  - check the link with the budget
- Ask several feedback (ask in advance)
  - more specialist for part B2
  - less specialist for part B1
  - the research administration in your institution
Writing: selected advices

- If you have the opportunity, follow a training (ask your institution)

- Write part B2 first (15 pages), then part B1 (5 pages)

- The abstract is very important

- Provide the info expected:
  - What is groundbreaking?
  - Feasibility?
  - Why you?

- Try the submission procedure online few days before the deadline (you can upload a new version later)

- Polish the part B1!
When the proposal is submitted….

Dec 2015/ Feb 2016
- Generate preliminary data
- Create a delta for the interview

March 2016
- Notification for the interview: STEP 1

April 2016
- Visit/discuss with collaborators of the project

May 2016
- Interview preparation
- Training: « ERC interview training »

June 2016
- How to proceed?
- 09 June 2016 INTERVIEW

Summer 2016
- Try to think about something else

Sept 2016
- Notification that the grant was funded

17 Nov 2015 DEADLINE

Advice to prepare the interview
When you succeed for Step 1

- Congratulations for this first step

- Ask your institution which funding you can access to prepare the interview (training, etc.)

- Visit your collaborators and discuss your preliminary data with them

- Register for a « Interview training » session: my experience was that if you go early, you can adjust

- Maybe create a logo that you can use at the interview
To prepare the interview

- The format can vary from one panel to another (be careful)
- Integrate the comments received at the « Interview training » (useful for me)
- Ask your colleagues (including from further disciplines) to come to trial sessions + questions
- Prepare a **interview sample question list** (including questions on the weaknesses of the project) and prepare them
  - Be prepared for short answers
- Content of the presentation:
  - Discuss more the project itself
  - Show the delta since the proposal submission (e.g., preliminary data)
  - Every word counts in 5 minutes!
After the interview

- **Try** to think about something else until you receive the answer
- Enjoy the idea that you have had to initiate small projects (such as MSc thesis)
- Consolidate your preliminary data in case you have to resubmit (the deadline is often close to the notification)

I really learned a lot from the entire process!