Reviewers Perspective

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My experiences

- Remote panels
  - MSCA-IF-2018

- In-person panels
  - ERC-StG-2013, ERC-StG-2015, ERC-StG-2017, ERC-StG-2019
  - Royal Society URF since 2014

- Remote referee
  - UK STFC, UKRI, Royal Society
  - DE Humboldt, DFG
  - SE Vetenskapsradet
  - CH SNSF, NL NOW
  - …

Disclaimer

Typically, panel members not allowed to reveal details of the process.

But some useful information is publicly available e.g.

https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/msca_if_2018_manual_for_evaluators.pdf

to accompany the guide for applicants

2. The expert undertakes to observe strict **confidentiality** in relation to their work. To this end, the expert:

(a) must not use confidential information or documents for any purpose other than fulfilling their obligations under the Contract without prior written approval of the contracting party

(b) must not disclose, directly or indirectly, confidential information or documents relating to proposals or applicants, without prior written approval of the contracting party.

In particular, the expert:

i. must not discuss any proposal with others, including other experts or contracting party or relevant service staff not directly involved in evaluating the proposal, except during the formal discussion at the meetings moderated by or with the knowledge and approval of the responsible contracting party or relevant service staff

ii. must not disclose:

- any detail of the evaluation process and its outcomes or of any proposal submitted for evaluation for any purpose other than fulfilling their obligations under the Contract without prior written approval of the contracting party

- their advice to the contracting party or relevant service on any proposal to the applicants or to any other person (including colleagues, students, etc.)

- the names of other experts participating in the evaluation.

iii. must not communicate with applicants on any proposal:

- during the evaluation , except in panel hearings between experts and the applicants organised by the contracting party or relevant service as part of the evaluation process;

- after the evaluation.

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Everything I say today is a personal opinion about the
reviewing process in general and does not relate to
specific calls

Please read the guidance for your specific call carefully!

Experts/evaluators?

2. Evaluation by independent experts

In order to ensure that only proposals of the highest quality are selected for funding, we rely on **independent experts** for the evaluation of proposals ('evaluators').

How are the evaluators selected? We appoint independent evaluators for each call from the database of experts. When selecting evaluators, we look for:

- a high level of skill, experience and knowledge in the relevant areas *(e.g. project management, innovation, exploitation, dissemination and communication)*

and, provided the above condition can be satisfied, a balance in terms of:

- skills, experience and knowledge
- geographical diversity
- gender
- where appropriate, the private and public sectors, and
- an appropriate turnover from year to year.

In principle, your proposal will be examined initially by at least three experts (in many cases, five or more).

For MCSA – pool of about 150 evaluators for all of Physics

For panels – typically 15-20 members covering the topics of that panel

For remote referees – usually can be anyone in the field, typically selected by the panel members

It will not be possible to have enough reviewers on a panel so that your proposal is only looked at by real experts

e.g. someone who published in hep-ph would be expected to be able to comment on any proposal on hep-ph but perhaps also some proposals in hep-ex, hep-th

Experts/evaluators

- They will be research active people, who have either volunteered or been approached to participate in the scheme

- In some schemes there is reimbursement for their time, in others there isn't

- They don't do this for the money. They usually do it because they think it helps the field

- They do this in addition to their normal jobs

Process

- Each proposal read by at least three reviewers
  - At least one should be "close"
  - Some panels like to use "generalists" to calibrate across areas

- Remote panels tend to look for black and white comments
  - for MSCA these would be Strengths and Weaknesses
  - Remote discussions are only amongst the reviewers and focus on the strengths and weaknesses
  - final ranking decided by score, which is led by strengths and weaknesses
- In person Panels – the written comments tend to be more nuanced and there is a discussion of each proposal amongst the whole panel.

https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/msca_if_2018_manual_for_evaluators.pdf
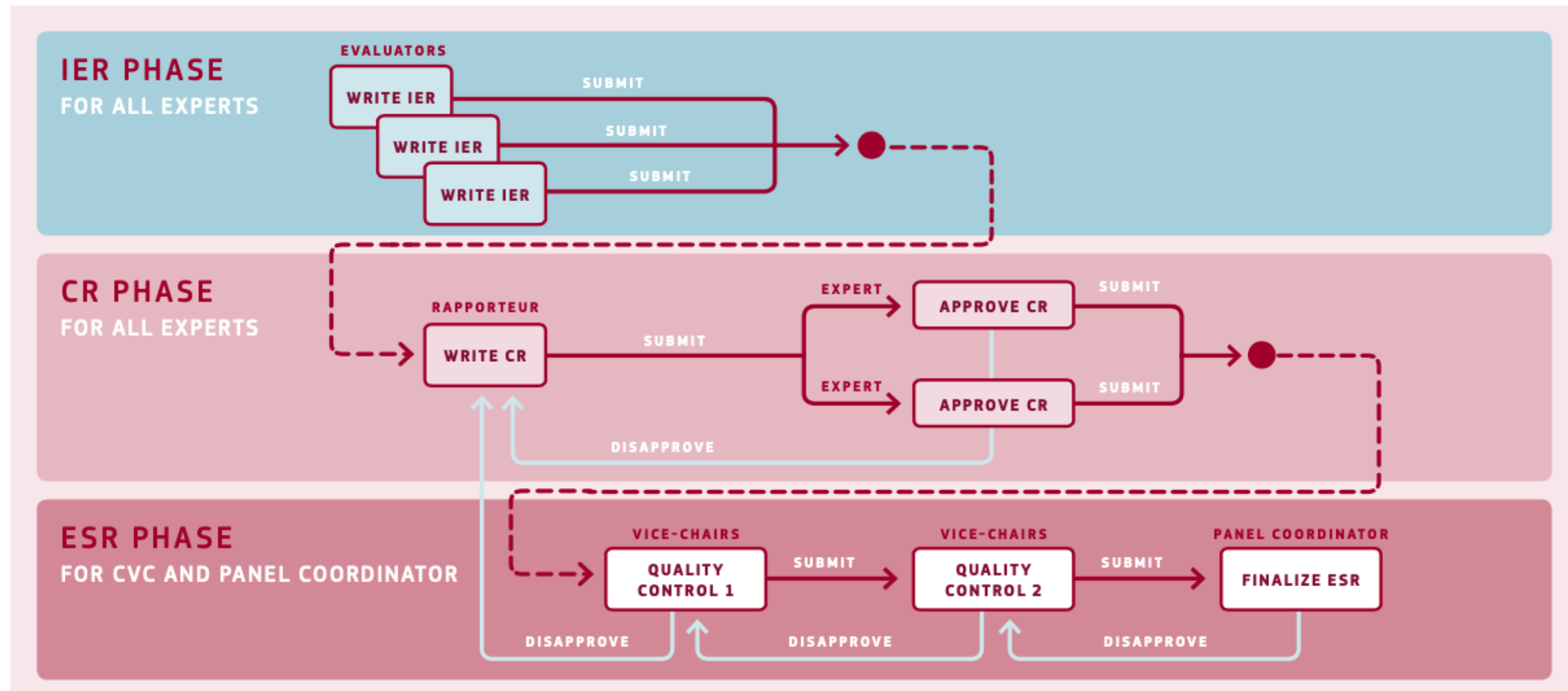
Reviewer's perspective

- Panel members typically asked to review from 20 to 35 proposals.
- Its a lot of work – at least one hour per proposal – to read, and assess

The easier it is for the reviewer to identify the strong points of your proposal, the better.

- Usually, reviewers get very clear guidance

↗ **Read** the proposal and **independently** assess it:

✒ without discussing it with anybody else, except your Vice-Chair (if necessary).

✒ **as submitted** – not on its potential, if certain changes were to be made, nor by visiting websites which might be mentioned in the proposal.

↗ Assess the proposal against the 3 evaluation criteria.

↗ Assess the quality and degree of involvement of partner organisation(s) and the impact of the secondment(s), if any. In all cases, **the secondment must be meaningful and appropriate to the type of fellowship and research field.**

↗ Keep a **bullet-point list of 'strengths and weaknesses' for each criterion** (Excellence, Impact, and Implementation).

↗ For each criterion, make your comments and give a score between 0 and 5 (scores must match comments). The whole range of scores must be used:

0 - Proposal **FAILS** to address the criterion or cannot be assessed due to missing or incomplete information.

1 – POOR. The criterion is inadequately addressed, or there are serious inherent weaknesses.

2 – FAIR. Proposal broadly addresses the criterion but there are significant weaknesses.

3 – GOOD. Proposal addresses the criterion well but there are a number of shortcomings.

4 – VERY GOOD. Proposal addresses the criterion very well but there are a few shortcomings.

5 – EXCELLENT. Proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion, and any shortcomings are minor.

4.3.1 HOW TO DRAFT THE CONSENSUS REPORT (CR)

The aim of the CR is to give:

➤ a clear assessment of the proposal based on its merit, with justification;

➤ clear feedback on the proposal's strengths and weaknesses, of an adequate length, and in an appropriate tone;

➤ an explanation of the shortcomings, but without making recommendations.

The quality of the CR is crucial because the text will be included as such in the Evaluation Summary Report which is sent to the applicant. Feedback for the applicant must give a clear and fair assessment of the proposal based on its strengths and weaknesses in a manner consistent with the score.

How to proceed in SEP?

Use the SEP merging option – 'new form with expert assessment': it merges the comments of the 3 experts.

➤ Keep the bullet-point structure (strengths and weaknesses) for each of the three evaluation criteria.

➤ Identify and organise the comments from IERs under each criterion into:

○ **STRENGTHS** (i.e. strong points that all three experts agree upon - with no repetition!).

○ **WEAKNESSES** (i.e. weak points that all three experts agree upon - with no repetition!).

○ Divergences in comments and/or scores

→ **POINTS FOR DISCUSSION IN SEP**

A proposal's overall score depends on the agreed scores in the CR, weighted according to the three evaluation criteria:

EVALUATION CRITERION	WEIGHT
EXCELLENCE	50 %
IMPACT	30 %
IMPLEMENTATION	20 %

An overall threshold of 70 % will be applied to the total weighted score.

Winning scores will most likely be over 90%

Evaluation criteria

The "scientific excellence" evaluation criterion will be applied in conjunction of both: (i) the ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility of the research project, and, (ii) the intellectual capacity, creativity and commitment of the PI:

1. Research Project - Ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility

Ground-breaking nature and potential impact of the research project

- To what extent does the proposed research address important challenges?
- To what extent are the objectives ambitious and beyond the state of the art (e.g. novel concepts and approaches or development between or across disciplines)?
- To what extent is the proposed research high risk/high gain (i.e. if successful the payoffs will be very significant, but there is a higher-than-normal risk that the research project does not entirely fulfil its aims)?

Scientific Approach

- To what extent is the outlined scientific approach feasible bearing in mind the extent that the proposed research is high risk/high gain *[based on the Extended Synopsis at step 1]*?
- To what extent are the proposed research methodology and working arrangements appropriate to achieve the goals of the project *[to be assessed at step 2 based on parts B1 and B2]*?
- To what extent does the proposal involve the development of novel methodology *[to be assessed at step 2 based on parts B1 and B]*?
- To what extent are the proposed timescales, resources and PI commitment adequate and properly justified *[to be assessed at step 2 based on parts B1 and B2]*?

2. Principal Investigator - Intellectual capacity and creativity

- To what extent has the PI demonstrated the ability to conduct ground-breaking research?
- To what extent does the PI provide evidence of creative independent thinking?
- To what extent does the PI have the required scientific expertise and capacity to successfully execute the project?

Applying for a fellowship is not for everyone

- A Fellowship proposal is not the same as a normal postdoc application

- It is usually the stage where you prove you are an independent researcher and is the stepping stone to a longer term position.

- If you want "just" to continue doing what you are doing just in a different place, this is not for you...

- You need to credibly claim that the work you want to do is "your own" and that the ideas you have, in the place you want to go will help you on this path

Structuring your application

- You will need to be tailoring what you write to explain clearly and succinctly
    - Why what you want to do is important/will advance the field
    - Why you are the right person to do this/Why your CV to date has prepared you for this
    - What happens if you hit obstacles/someone else does it
    - Why you want to do it at the place you have selected (what you bring and what you gain from doing it there)
    - How this fits into your career plans/objectives – see training and previous point

No false modesty! and **No overclaiming!**

How to help your reviewers and what to avoid

- At every stage, try to make it easy for the reviewer to see the strengths of your proposal
    - dense text is hard to read.
    - Important ideas mentioned only once may be easily missed
    - Highlight important ideas, or put them in boxes.
    - Even better make sure that they are repeated – make the abstract "sing"

- Don't just try to fill the space - try to be succinct and link your key ideas and themes throughout the proposal

- Give evidence to support your statements/claims

How to help your reviewers and what to avoid

- Remember that the reviewer may not be an expert on the details of your project, so try to help them understand better.

- Need to connect well known problems in the field to your project

- And remember experts from the other community!
  - Experimentalist – explain what your role in the experiment is, so a theorist can understand. Arent there already 1000's of people doing this? So explain clearly the extra thing you bring?

  - Theorist – explain why your calculation is important to experiment, and how will it be made available to/used by experimenters. How is this calculation better/more accurate/more flexible than what is currently used?

Excellence and Impact

- emphasise the novelty/idea that separates you from the herd

- something unique has to come out of your research
  - Possibly, a deliverable that will be used by a wider community (a calculation, a piece of code that others will use, a detector calibration, a tool to be made public, at least inside your collaboration)

- figure out what that unique thing is, and make sure it is really clear

- explain what the risks are in delivering it and how you will mitigate them
  - for example, if someone else does a similar calculation/analysis – does that invalidate your proposal?

You will be tempted to write banalities

- "the results of my work will be published in a scientific journal"
- "I will be going to CERN to work on my analysis."
- "I will participate to the institute's open day"

but you wont stand out from the crowd

Try to be more creative, and if you are able to

- identify which papers might be breakthroughs – and therefore PRL or letters type - which might be follow-ups (JHEP) or which might spawn collaborative studies between theorists/experimentalists
- If an analysis uses XXX detectors, then by going to CERN, I will work with YYY and become an expert on XXX operation, taking on-call shifts, data-quality validation etc.
- link to your contribution to past outreach activities in the CV, and how you would transform the new place

will make the plan much more credible

CV

- This can be a simply factual list of information, where if you are not careful, highlights or particularly relevant information are buried
- Use the space to explain for example,
  - your contributions to your papers – especially your role in the ones that lead into your proposal or,
  - why being on a particular working group makes you the right person to execute your project,
  - or the expertise you already have, so that the benefits of the training/place will be complementary
- Always contextualise the information to help the reviewer
  - e.g. long lists of talks is generally not helpful – pick out a few highlight talks, say why they were highlights – plus XX other talks.

How to help me

- Its not enough for me, personally, that someone proposes to do something new – e.g. a new calculation, or a new piece of code, or a new analysis

  … even if I think it is a good idea!

- I want to be convinced that it is

  (a)   their idea (and not their supervisors/collaborators)

  and

  (b)   that it is feasible – that the person (or possibly the person assisted by an expert at the place – who has committed to support the activity) has the track record (CV) to deliver it, and has thought about the potential pitfalls.

Summary

- Try to put yourself in the reviewers shoes: they evaluate a lot of proposals, and only a few will get funded

- They have to be special, convince us that this is a unique opportunity that is missed if the project is not funded

- Reviewers have more experience than you, and they tend to be good at spotting overclaims, so do not try to fool them

- Be honest, be positive about yourself, be enthusiastic, be creative

- You need to be the first one to believe that the fellowship is the best way to go forward for a piece of original research you really care for!