Tips and Tricks for Proposal Writing in Linguistics

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Aim

- Present my experience in applying for a Marie Curie Individual Fellowship

- Offer some potentially useful tips for proposal writing in linguistics

Defining the target

▪ **Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions** (MSCA or Marie Curie): This action is meant to support the best proposals from individual researchers

▪ Only experienced researchers can apply. This means you will have a doctoral degree or at least four years' full-time research experience by the time of the call deadline.

▪ Two key ingredients are **mobility** and **promotion of collaboration** across countries

▪ Long application process where you need to detail what, why, why now, why you, why there, how, why this way and not another one, and what is the benefit for the EU

▪ Precisely because it is one of the most prestigious grants, it also is one of the more time-consuming (to prepare) grants

Why apply for a Marie Curie?

- You choose your own topic of research
- Meaning you can work on whatever makes you happy!
- You choose the supervisor (but of course s/he has to accept you too)
- Money is very good (= ca. 200.000 for two years)
- The grant is VERY prestigious

Why apply for a Marie Curie?

- It is a highly competitive grant

- Number of proposals receiving an evaluation score above the threshold (75%) for the last round of applications
  - **5,814**

- For our field (= SOC that stands for Humanities and Social Sciences), 1456 proposals were submitted

- Success rate for SOC in my round of application: 12%

- Only proposals that scored above 92% were funded

- This means that a lot of excellent proposals that got very good marks were not funded!

- An excellent proposal is not enough…

Why apply for a Marie Curie?

- Quality and credibility of the research/innovation action
- Research methodology and approach
- Originality and innovative aspects of the research programme
- The interdisciplinary aspects of the action
- Best career possibilities for the ER and new collaboration opportunities for the host organisation(s)
- Quality and appropriateness of the training and of the two-way transfer of knowledge between the researcher and the host
- Transferable training
- Quality of the supervision and of the integration in the team/institution
- Capacity of the ER to reach/re-enforce a position of professional maturity

Tips

- Quality of the proposed measures to exploit and disseminate the action results

- Quality of the proposed measures to communicate the action activities to different target audiences

- Appropriateness of the allocation of tasks and resources

- Appropriateness of the management structure and procedures, including risk management

- There's no doubt that the most difficult part is not to provide answers to these questions, but to provide adequate answers in a way that does not exceed 10 pages

- Tip 1: Follow all the instructions **very** carefully! **The first thing to do is to find out if you are eligible to get the grant. Do this before you invest any time in writing the proposal.**

Tips

- Tip 2: **The amount of work you put into this shows!**

- Hard work will not guarantee you funding (excellent proposals that get top marks are still not funded)

- I worked on my unsuccessful proposal for 1 month - score 87% (above threshold, so it could have been funded, but the budget is limited, and only top-ranked proposals are funded)

- A year later, I tried again with a new, completely different proposal. I worked on the second proposal for 3 months - score 94.6%

Tips

- Your evaluators are not necessarily experts on the topic of your proposal. Don't assume that they know what you know.

- Of course, don't expect them to go back and read your previous work even if you cite it in the proposal

- Tip 3: **Write as if your reviewers have no prior knowledge on the topic**

Tips

- Tip 4: **Write in the simplest way possible.** Fancy language will not impress the reviewers

- Also, it is likely that reviewers are not native speakers of English

Tips

- Evaluators are often handling many proposals around the same time. You have to make yours stand out. They have to remember you

- Tip 5: **Don't refer to the project, the ER and the supervisor**

- Tip 6: **Choose a catchy acronym for your proposal**

- An acronym has to be memorable, but naturally nothing obscene will be accepted

Tips

- The acronym has to refer to the title and reflect the content of the proposal

- My project was called DIVA → **Di**sentangling **Va**riation: A crosslinguistic investigation of bilingualism and non-standardization

- There are many automatic acronym creators online, if you don't feel inspired!

Tips

- *Addressing the 'what' question*: Choose the topic of your research wisely

- Ties to your research background are necessary (if you have been working on the acquisition of phonology in language X, don't expect to get funding for research on the cognitive phenotype of autism unless you spell out a connection) but also the proposal should be sufficiently different than what you've done so far

- Tip 6: **Find a topic that ties in with your research background but is novel enough**

- If it is not novel enough or if it is something you've sort of done already (you or somebody else), why would the EC invest a big amount of money on this?

Tips

- Tip 7: **Don't write a proposal as if you're writing a thesis and don't make the whole proposal revolve around your thesis**

- You are not a graduate student anymore, you are a researcher. References to your dissertation should be kept at a minimum

- Tip 8: **Understand early on that what matters most is not to put the right things on paper when applying, but to make them fit in the allotted space!**

- I spent 2 months rephrasing my proposal so as to say all the things I wanted to say in 10 pages in the most optimal way

- The most frequent comment one sees in MSC evaluations is 'this point was not adequately addressed'

- The 10p. limit means that one has to spend a considerable amount of time to choose their words wisely…

Tips

- Tip 9: **The proposal is crucial, but equally important is the CV**

- First, if you are past the BA phase make sure you have own webpage, where one can read about you and your research and of course find your CV

- Tip 10: **The place and the CV of the supervisor is also VERY important**

Tips*

▪ Tip 11: **To obtain funding you need a project with the potential to open up new areas of scientific enquiry**

▪ So you need

- To address a tangible scientific or technological problem
- Have a sound, novel and original idea
- To develop world class Science/Technology
- And your concept needs to be achievable
  - ✓ By you and your team
  - ✓ Within your declared Resources
  - ✓ Show you understand the Risks

Material by Peter Sheard, Pera Technologies

Tips

- Tip 12: **Highlight your strong points as much as you can**

- Research in understudied, non-codified varieties? -- Argue that your research is concordant with European Union's efforts to promote linguistic diversity.

- Interdisciplinary proposal? -- Explain how the results will considerably advance two fields of scientific study, not one.

- Strong CV in terms of publications? -- Highlight it.

Tips

- Tip 13: **Show that you have decided your career path and make it as ambitious as you can**

- Example 1 in section 'Impact': The ER's long-term aim is to reach a professorship in the field of Z in Europe.

- Example 2 in section 'Impact': Dr. X's long-term aim is to apply the training gained during the fellowship towards securing X grant, leading to Y position, eventually creating her own research team on Z.

- Which proposal would you score better?

- Always remember, don't mention the ER, but Dr. X, not the Supervisor, but Professor Y, not 'the project', but CATCHY ACRONYM Z

Tips

- Tip 14: **Remember that your evaluator is interested in projects that are likely to achieve solid and novel results; and not just pretty proposals**

- Highlight possible beneficial impact on society (e.g., in education policy making, in treating atypical populations etc)

- Show that the results will solve long-standing problems in the current literature

- Topic is very important!

Tips

- Tip 15: **Be careful with respect to the theory-internal terms you use**

- In DIVA, I had mentioned the term 'Universal Grammar' as early as the second paragraph

- A colleague suggested rephrasing and mentioning the term later, after I have presented the bigger picture

- Why?

- Because there's no guarantee that the reviewers work in the same framework as me!

- Of course, one does not have to be theory-neutral…

Tips

- Tip 16: **Find a catchy phrase by someone famous and well-respected in the field**

Tips

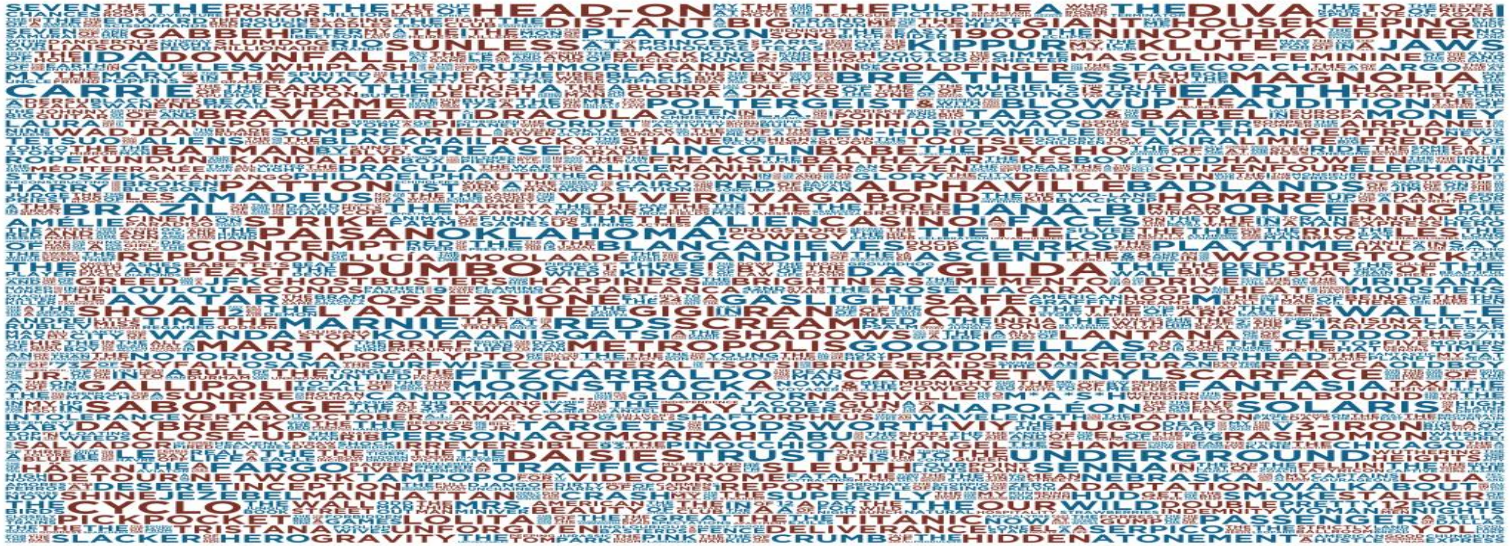
- Tip 17: **Do not repeat the same text throughout the proposal**

- You have to address all topics. The fact that you may have a good publication profile doesn't mean that you have to repeat this point again and again

- Mention everything once, unless the instructions explicitly ask you otherwise

Tips

- Tip 18: **Space is valuable, but still use paragraphs properly**



- You want the evaluators to spend time on your proposal, not put it aside because it is not reader-friendly

- The text has to be easy to read

Tips

- Tip 19: **Bold and italics should be reserved for the most important terms or points**

- Do not overdo it, it makes the text hard to read

- The really important points - the ones you must highlight - will just go unnoticed

- Don't use it all together (bold, italics, underlining) on one word; one type of highlighting is enough to get their attention

- Do not use capitals, unless you must (genes, acronyms etc)

Tips

- Example from DIVA: Demonstrating the ability to receive a prestigious post-doctoral fellowship at this stage will both enhance her research-related skills and maximize her chances for obtaining an advanced research position after the fellowship ends. Since DIVA involves crosslinguistic research **across European countries**, it is likely that this research will establish **collaboration ties** that will prove useful for her future career

Tips

- Tip 20: **Emphasize the importance of complementary training that you will acquire during the fellowship**

- Strictly speaking, evaluators seek to fund people with the potential to develop in world-leading experts in their domain of study

- An expert is not only writing, but is also teaching, supervising etc.

- Elaborate on all complementary training activities that your host offers (e.g., networking, language courses, communicating research to non-academic audiences, co-supervising students, etc.)

Tips

- Tip 21: **Ask somebody else to read your proposal, before you send it to the Supervisor. If they say that this or that point is confusing, IT IS!**

- Sometimes when we think about a topic/project a lot, we develop a deep understanding that makes us skip steps when presenting the idea

- If the evaluator finds the point confusing, s/he will not go back to search the relevant literature or your previous work to understand what you mean

- Always remember: The evaluators deduct points whenever they have to!

- They have to retain for funding only the best of the best. It is **their job** to cut points whenever they see it fit. It is **your job** to make sure that they don't have such opportunities

- If something is unclear, you can expect a comment like 'implementation is not clearly addressed' and this line will cost you critical points…

Tips

- Tip 22: **Always give credit, when credit is due!**

- You cannot save space by not citing properly

- Avoid quoting large parts of text from other people's work -- space is valuable!

- Avoid overcriticizing other people's work -- give a positive tone to your proposal, not a negative one. When necessary, identify gaps in the literature and then focus **on your solutions and their novelty**

- Also, always remember that you don't know who your reviewers are

Tips

- Tip 23: **Try to find successful proposals but do not rely too much on what applicants from previous rounds of application told you**

- Especially when it comes to ongoing projects, people might be reluctant to share it, so if somebody does share it with you (I had access to two successful proposals when I was preparing my MSC), treat them with respect and **NEVER** share it with anyone without their permission!

- Do not rely too much on successful proposals as rules change (sometimes a lot) from one year/round of application to another

Tips

- Tip 24: **Keep in mind that there is no sure way to win a Marie Curie or any other prestigious grant**
- You may take into account all the tips
- You may study previous proposals
- You may follow the guidelines in a religious way
- You may have a great project, one that you can demonstrably implement
- You may choose the most appropriate supervisor/university in the world
- And still, you might fail…

Tips

- Tip 25: **Remember that failing is fine!**
- Do not compare yourself to other people that may look successful to you
- You do not know how many times they failed before succeeding
- Failing will prepare you for the time you succeed
- You must realize early on that when a grant has ca. 11% success rate, this means that many people who did all the steps as they should, would still not get the grant
- Yes, it is like a lottery…
- … but proposals that are not excellent will NOT win the lottery!
- The best advice I can give you is to do your best and assume you will not get it, so keep applying elsewhere

Tips

- Tip 26: **Precision has to become your favorite word**

- Choose your sources wisely

- Do not copy-paste the information that the supervisor or the host institution send you (i.e. you have to present them too in your proposal)

- Make sure your first draft has space for accommodating your supervisor's comments (which almost always will involve a phrase that starts with 'Add…')

Tips

- Tip 27: **Dedicate time in writing a good abstract and selecting the appropriate keywords**

- Read the guidelines about selecting keywords super carefully

- Remember that keywords will determine your reviewers

- Tip 28: **Do not spend time on chasing the outcome of the application**

- When the results are out you will be informed

- Invest your time better and work on other applications or on strengthening your CV

Tips

- Tip 29: **Understand that a grant is not a goal, but a step in the process, a mean to achieve your ultimate goal**

- This entails that one has a career plan

- This is something your work should transpire both in your publications and in your grant applications, but also in your talks and interactions with your colleagues

Tips

- Tip 30: **Highlight the presence of transferrable training in your proposal**

- Evaluators do not want to fund YOU

- They want to fund the proposal that has the biggest benefit for both science and society

- Therefore, they value transferrable training

- They will train you (i.e. give you the research funds to be trained) so you should make your best to diffuse this knowledge to your peers

- Make sure that you explain how your results will reach the general public too -- it's not all about academia

- Don't forget the role of social media

Tips

- Tip 31: **Research the type of feedback previous applicants got**

- Feel free to email me if you want to hear more about this point

Killer tip

▪ Tip 32 and the best one: **Submit your application and if you win the fellowship, CONGRATULATIONS**

But if you fail (and we all fail), remember the words of Rocky Balboa

✓ *"It ain't about how hard you hit… It's about how hard you can get hit, and keep moving forward… how much you can take, and keep moving forward".*

Thank you

Comments, questions, ideas? Drop me a line!

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For more information about my research, please visit

evelinaleivada.com