Tips for applicants

How to prepare an application for an AIRC individual grant

This presentation is meant as a series of suggestions for writing an application for an AIRC individual grant.
To apply, please read the AIRC Calls for proposals 2024 and the "Guide to proposal preparation 2024", where eligibility requirements and rules are listed.

AIRC individual grants 2024

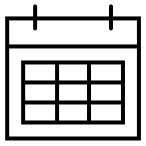
	My First AIRC Grant (MFAG)	Start-Up Grant	Bridge Grant	Southern Italy Scholars (SIS) Grant	Next Gen Clinician Scientist Grant	Investigator Grant (IG)
A good opportunity for	**Junior scientists** who have never obtained an AIRC grant before, in order to establish a record of independent research.	**Junior scientists** seeking the opportunity to set up their own lab in Italy after a successful research experience abroad.	**MFAG or Start-Up grantees** to help finalize their projects and prepare for Calls for established investigators.	**Junior scientists** seeking an opportunity to develop their independent careers in Southern or Insular Italy.	**Junior physician scientists** wishing to carry out an investigator-driven clinical research project with the final aim of optimizing clinical practice.	**Established researchers** active in cancer research.

Our tips for applicants

- General recommendations before starting to apply
- Tips learned from reviewers' comments
- A consistent budget matters
- Final recommendations

Before starting to apply

Find the right funding scheme **for you** - consider career stage and research interests

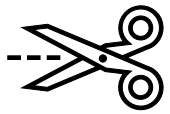


Check **Call calendars** - many timelines are recurrent

Make sure you meet all **eligibility criteria**

! In 2023, 33 applications for individual grants were excluded from the peer-review process because they did not meet all formal requirements.

Start the application process **early** and make a plan to the **deadlines**



Read and follow **instructions**

Select the appropriate Hosting Institution & Legal Representative

The **Principal Investigator** (PI) and the **Legal Representative** of the Hosting Institution must digitally sign the full application.

What is the HOSTING INSTITUTION?

The research center where the PI will carry out the research activity supported by the grant.
→ *Hosting Institutions already registered in the AIRC system are listed in the "Title page" form.*

Who is the LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE?

The person with the legal authority to sign documents on behalf of the Hosting Institution.
→ *A legal representative is already associated to each Hosting Institution in the AIRC system. Please check that all data are correct.*

What DIGITAL SIGNATURE should I use?

Applicants must use the digital signature tool (FEA) provided through the AIRC web platform.
Legal Representatives must use their own legally recognized tool for electronic signature.
For further details, please check:
https://www.direzionescientifica.airc.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/FEAInstructions.pdf

Keep in mind that reviewers are asked to answer these questions:

Project	• Is the project **significant** for cancer, and will it have an **impact** on cancer knowledge and treatment? • Is there **innovation** and **potential for competition** at the international level? • Is the project **feasible and scientifically rigorous**? • Does **the Hosting Institution** support the establishment of a new research group? (MFAG and Start-Up) • What is the **quality of collaborations** and the **plan for training young fellows**? (SIS)
PI's track record	• Is the PI seriously **committed to cancer research**? • Does the PI have the **expertise** and the **track record** needed to perform the proposed work? • Is the PI showing enough **maturity** to act as an **independent group leader**? (MFAG, Start-Up and SIS) • Is the PI coming from a **truly valuable post-doc experience abroad**? (Start-Up)
Budget	• Is the requested **budget appropriate**?

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Choose an effective title

The title should accurately and briefly describe the scientific question(s) being addressed.

Examples of strong titles

- “Control of immune-mediated antitumor activities of IRF-8 by epigenetic drugs in colorectal cancer”
- “Dissecting p63 functions in skin cancer initiation and progression”
- “Plasma microRNA profiling as first line screening test for lung cancer detection: a prospective study”

Examples of weak titles

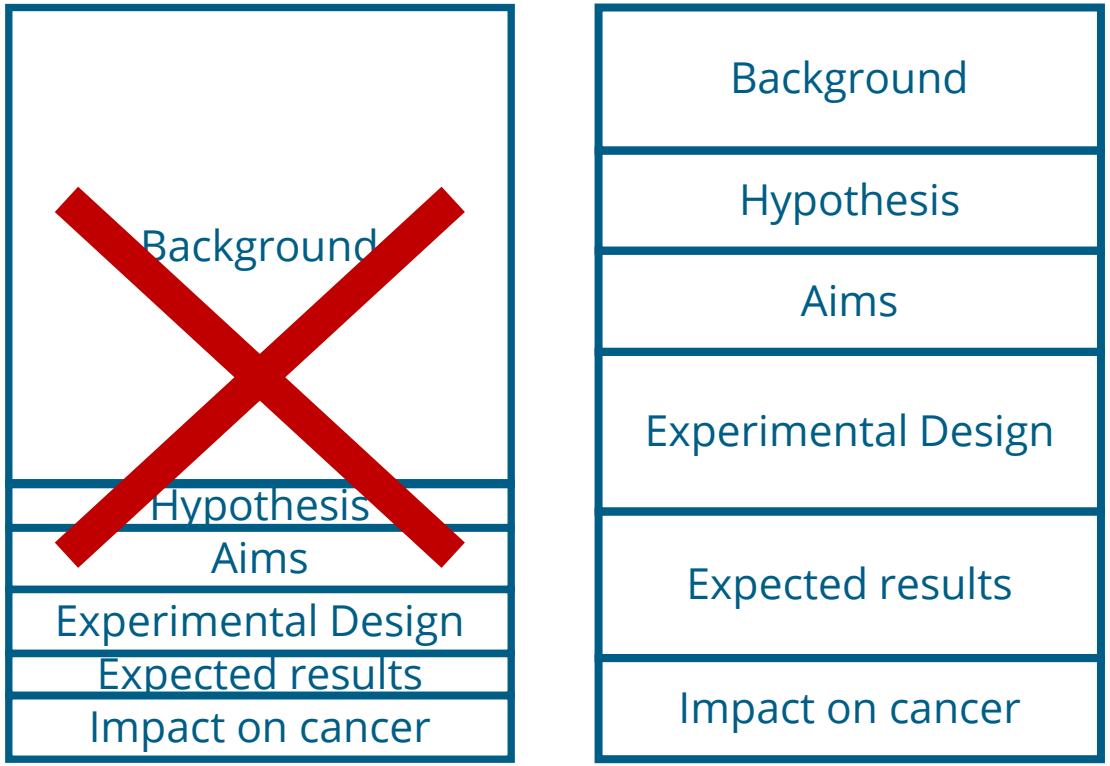
- “Structural variations in cancer and the 3D genome” *too vague*
- “Natural killer cells in antitumour adoptive cell immunotherapy” *too vague*
- “The energy sensing LKB1-AMPKα1 pathway regulates IGF1 secretion and consequent activation of the IGF1R-PKB pathway in primary hepatocytes.” *too long, too specific, too many abbreviations*

! If you need to use acronyms, use only those that are widely known in the field, and do it sparingly.

Write a focused and balanced abstract

Keep in mind the following questions:

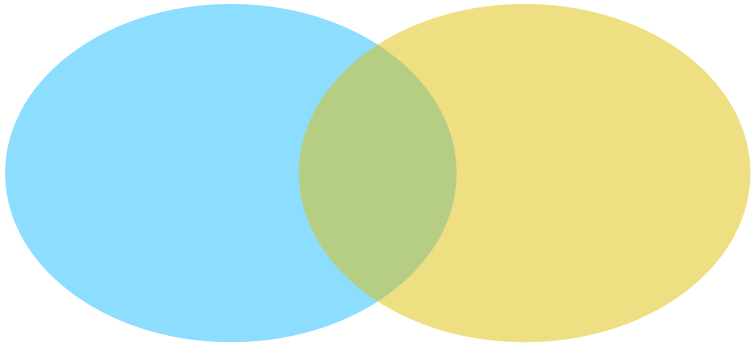
- Why is your **question** important?
- What is your **key aim**?
- How will you **address the problem**?
- What is the **impact** on cancer?
- What **advances** will be made?



Choose keywords that describe the key features of your research plan

Keywords selected by applicants and reviewers help make an initial **match between an application and appropriate reviewers**.

APPLICATION keywords



REVIEWER's keywords

The complete list of keywords is available here:
https://www.pages.airc.it/DataFiles/Calls/SupportInfo/Keywords.pdf

Choose keywords that describe the key features of your research plan

Type of cancer	+	Topic	+	Experimental models	+	Techniques used
Melanoma Solid tumors Leukaemia Thyroid ca. Breast ca. Lymphomas Kidney ca. …		DNA damage Autophagy Biomarkers Immunotherapy Microenvironment Epigenetics p53, p63, p73 …		Clinical trials Pre-clinical studies Mouse models Animal models Zebrafish Yeast Organoids …		PET and/or PET-TC Biophysics Bioinformatics In vivo imaging Microarrays Drug screening Systems biology ….

Avoid choosing a set of keywords that are:

- too vague (*e.g.*, genetics + animal models + genomics)
- too similar with each other (*e.g.*, DNA damage + DNA repair)

Key points to remember for the research plan

"After reading the aims page, I still had no initial idea what this proposal entailed."

Make sure the **relevance to the charity's mission** is clear: cancer

"There is a lack of clear goals/aims/impact when it comes to cancer research except for some rather general statements."

"Several external collaborators will integrate the PI's expertise and will guarantee clinical and statistical support, therefore increasing the feasibility of the project."

Show **you are experienced** in the proposed research field

"It is not clear that the investigator has the experience to do the work".

Key points to remember for the research plan

"This is mainly a 'fishing' expedition. On the one hand, it is possible for fishermen to catch fish. On the other hand, one would like some indication that fish are really present in these waters."

"The substantial preliminary data support the underlying premise and the feasibility of these studies"

Support hypotheses with **solid preliminary data**

"The present proposal seems to be «a little of everything on very many topics»."

"A collection of tasks not related to each other is not a project."

Present a **focused**, **organized**, and **compelling** story

"Overall, the project is diffuse. Since no clear questions are put, no clear answers can follow."

Key points to remember for the research plan

"The applicant's chief response to the prior critique seems to be «give me the money and I'll show you». This was a very disappointing revision in nearly every respect."

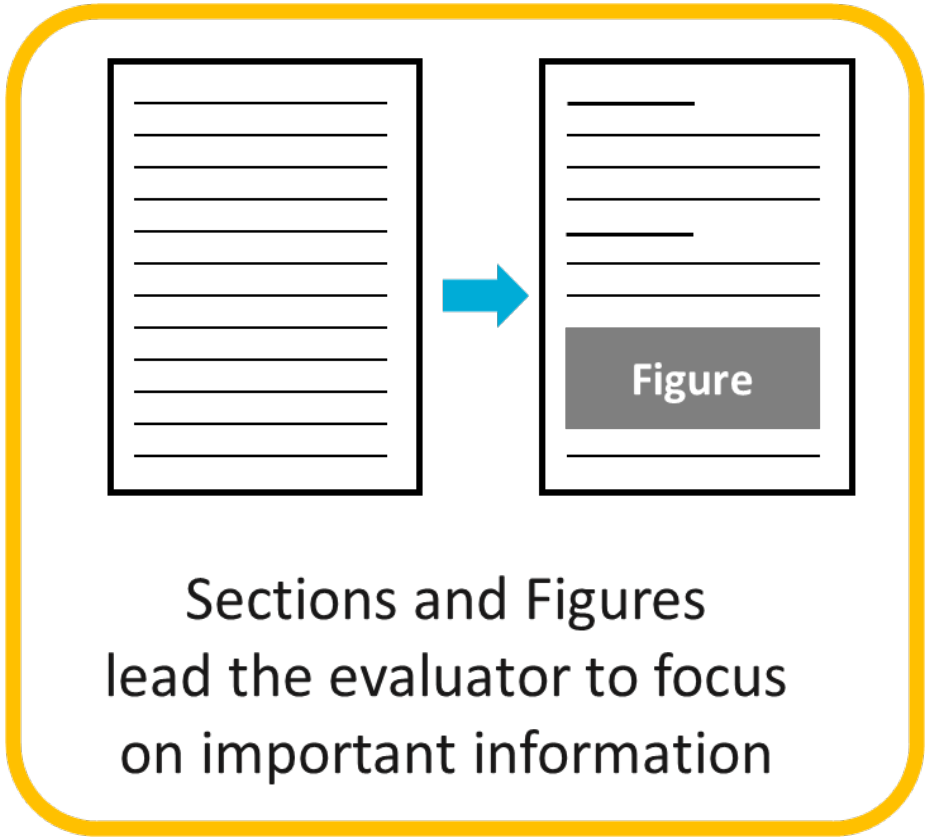
"This is a well written application that has addressed many of the concerns of the previous reviewers and has taken a significantly new direction in response to those concerns."

If your application is a revision, **address the reviewers' criticisms**

Caveat and pitfalls: make sure you have a "**plan B"**; avoid interdependency

"If the first experiment fails, they have nothing to do."

Use figures, diagrams and tables to make a concept clearer



- **Simplify** figures
- Make figures **readable** by human eyes
- **Avoid** the use of too many **acronyms**
- Provide **short titles** for figure legends

"the presentation of preliminary data in a single panel figure, in which many of the panels are so small as to be almost indecipherable, is probably not the best way to make the most compelling case for the proposed studies"

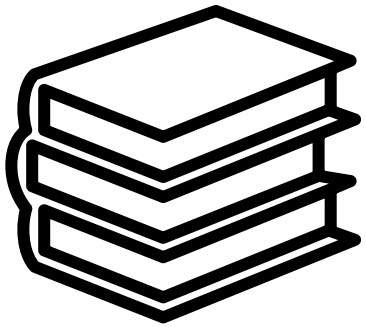
Keep in mind: the research plan must be original

An anti-plagiarism software is used to check that the main documents are original.

If the research plan bears a high level of identity to that submitted to AIRC by a different PI (including past applications and different funding schemes) without including proper reference, the application will be excluded from the peer review.

Highlight your role in publications

Provide complete and accurate information about AUTHORSHIP because:



- they are required, among other things, to check for the **eligibility criteria**
- the track-record is considered part of the **feasibility** of the project
- it helps reviewers evaluate **seniority and independence**

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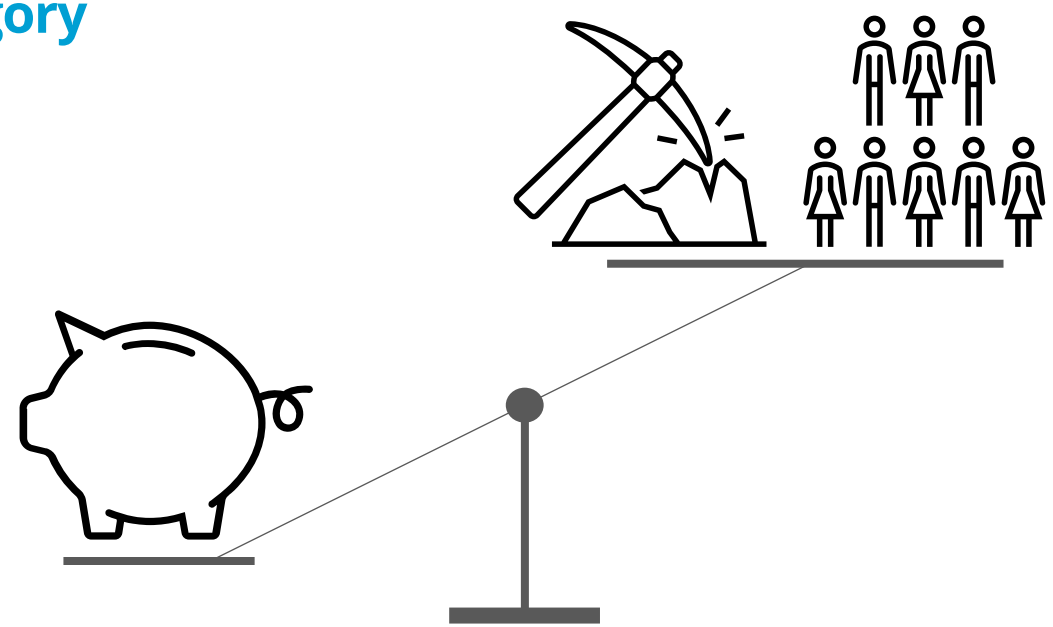
Tips for budget preparation

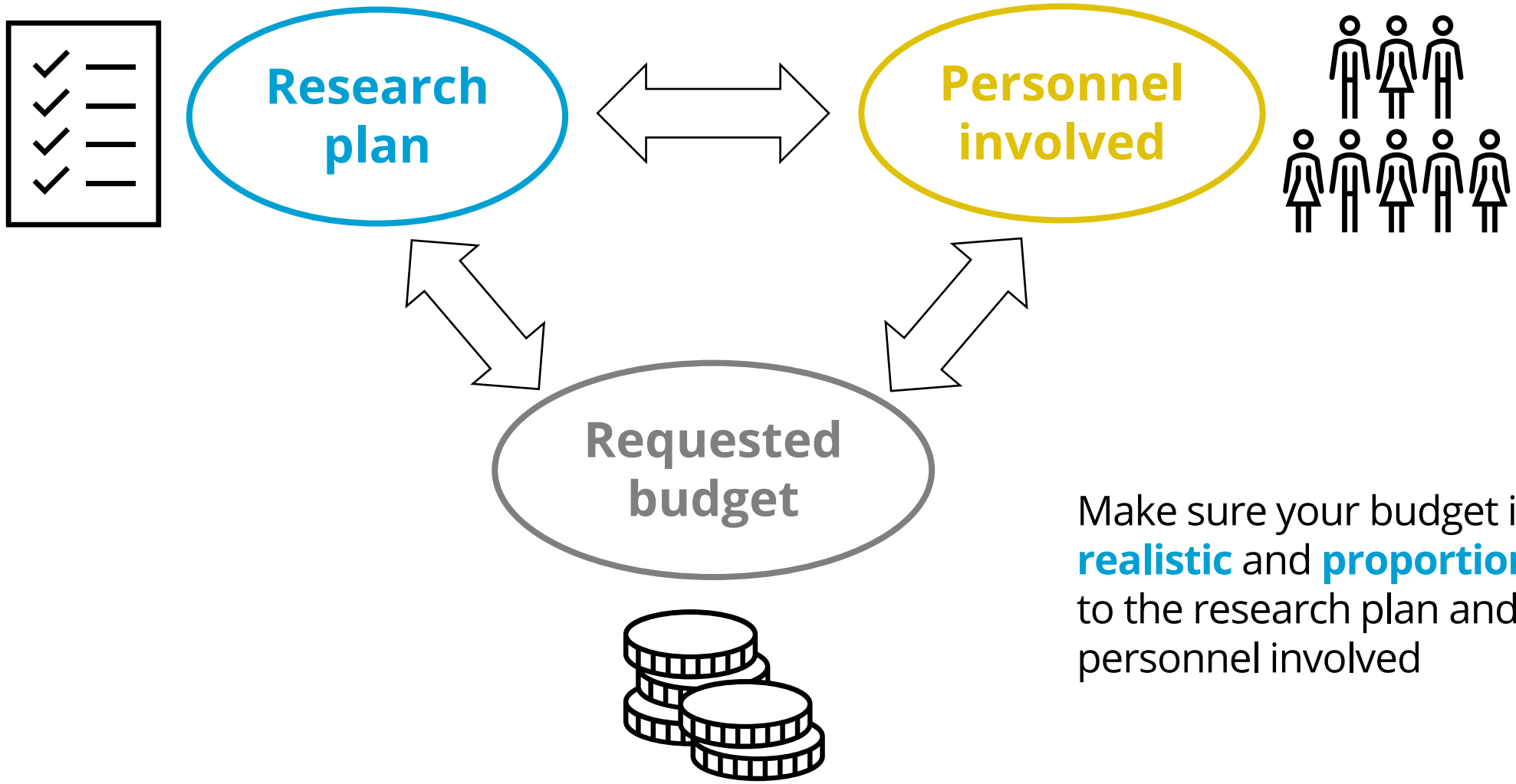
Make sure your budget is **adequate** for your scheduled tasks

Make sure the described activities are **feasible** by the staff involved

Properly **justify each budget category**



Tips for budget preparation



Make sure your budget is **realistic** and **proportionate** to the research plan and the personnel involved

Tips for budget preparation

Avoid reverse budgeting

"The statement that he is setting the number of patients based on budgetary issues is neither valid nor acceptable. Statistical relevance and not budgets is what drives good science."

Be realistic! Don't inflate the budget

"Each and every component of the budget is inflated given the relatively straightforward nature of much of the programme. I recommend a 40% reduction in the total budget requested."

Commensurate the requested budget with the personnel involved and with the required consumables

"This budget is overestimated for the few people that will be actively working on the research plan."

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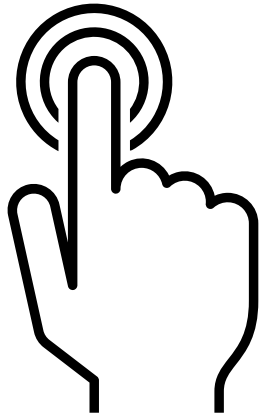
Before clicking on the APPLY button



- **Download the draft** and take time to read it
- Ask someone else to read your application
- Do proper **editing** and **proofreading**
- Remember that the application cannot be submitted/modified after the deadline

Grants.applicationsupport@airc.it

www.direzionescientifica.airc.it/funding-for-research/individual-grants/