How hard can it be to write a contract?” I asked myself. After all, I had already overcome some long odds. Seven weeks earlier—just days before I was to fly to Brussels for the second evaluation phase of a European Research Council (ERC) Starting Grant application—the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull erupted, throwing enough ash into the sky to essentially halt European air traffic. Yet my flight from Sweden, where I was an assistant professor at Umeå University, was one of the few not grounded. Then, when I arrived at ERC headquarters and entered the hot, airless meeting room to present my proposed work, the chairperson told me, “You have 10 minutes—sharp.” I finished in 9 minutes and 59 seconds. “This must be a good sign,” I told myself.

I turned out to be right. In the middle of the summer holidays, I learned that I received the grant! But the contract negotiations had to start immediately. With 19 different documents amounting to more than 150 pages to read or fill out, the contract process seemed like a many-headed bureaucratic hydra. I had to convert the text and budget of my application into a legal document, but my knowledge of legalese was limited, so I enlisted help from administrators and lawyers at my university. Eight weeks later, my team at Umeå and ERC officers in Brussels had exchanged many emails and documents, 15 people had been mobilized, and I had sacrificed a large part of my vacation, but the contract was signed.

A couple of months later, I realized that I needed to temporarily hire an outside person to bring in some specific expertise. The ERC officer said I would have to amend the painstakingly negotiated contract and asked me, “Do you really need to do this?” Any sensible person would have realized that such a statement meant problems, but I somehow missed the not-so-subtle message. After once again going through the lengthy contract process, I had an amended contract.

A year later the hydra returned, hidden in a discreet email entitled “Advanced Notice Letter,” alerting me to the fast-approaching deadline for my first financial report. A failure to have the report approved would prevent me from receiving further funding, but meeting all the requirements laid out in the 36-page user guide seemed almost impossibly complicated. Again, a fierce communication between Umeå and Brussels began. Through a strategy that amounted to trial and error, and with the help of supportive ERC officials, the report was approved, and I could turn my attention back to research.

The hydra returned at unpleasantly regular intervals, demanding its share of sacrifice. I have now finished the ERC project and completed four financial reports and two scientific reports. In addition, three different external auditing firms have scrutinized the project because auditing is required once a certain budget threshold is reached.

My ERC adventure helped me build up my research group and produce good science, and it has meant an enormous amount to me. But fighting the hydra has taken its toll. Certainly large grants require some control measures, but I don’t think that cutting the number of reports and audits by half would have been irresponsible—and it would have allowed me to spend more of my time on the research the grant was meant to fund. But on the positive side, the experience helped me become more patient and stress resistant, and I now know that I have many helpful colleagues who can support me.

So what advice can I offer for others facing the hydra? First, before even applying for a grant, carefully plan how you’d like to spend the money to avoid time-consuming amendments. Second, the administrators helping you with the process are probably much more experienced in dealing with these situations than you are, so listen to their advice. Third, don’t despair. Even if the requirements are complicated and lengthy, you will get through them—with the assistance of those more expert than you. Then you can return to the real reason you became a scientist and get back to the research.

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Battling the bureaucracy hydra
Jörgen Johansson

Science 351 (6272), 530.
DOI: 10.1126/science.351.6272.530