

# Guide to Peer Review



A Foundation  
of Knowledge



Volkswagen**Stiftung**

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## The Foundation and how it operates

The Volkswagen Foundation supports the humanities and social sciences as well as science and technology in research and higher education. It does so with various objectives, contents and funding instruments within the framework of changing funding initiatives.

As a rule, applications for funding are only considered if they fall under one of the Foundation's existing funding initiatives. However, the Foundation may also be open to extraordinary proposals beyond its current funding portfolio. The Foundation decides on proposals at meetings of the Board of Trustees, which are held three times a year.



## Expert opinions as the basis for decision-making

As a rule, the Foundation bases its decision-making process on external expert opinions (peer review). Depending on the respective evaluation procedure established to fit the individual funding initiative, the Foundation either asks experts to submit written opinions on individual funding proposals or it appoints an expert commission comprising a larger number of members.

The work of the review panel can be augmented by additional written expert opinions. In many cases, applicants are given the opportunity to present and discuss their research proposal personally to the reviewers. The Foundation does not maintain a permanent pool of experts, but rather selects them from different disciplines, universities and research institutions – as well as from the non-university area and from abroad – according to the individual requirements of the respective funding initiative

## Criteria

With its support, the Volkswagen Foundation seeks to encourage original, high-potential research, which may possibly also be rather risk-prone. The Foundation has compiled a criteria catalog which acts as a benchmark for the assessment. Owing to the varying strategic and content-related orientation of the individual funding initiatives, the relevance and weighting of the criteria is variable. Detailed information on this can be found in the “Information for Applicants” on the respective initiative pages on the Foundation’s website. The following aspects are of overriding importance:

### Significant contribution to research

Where is the project located within the scientific or scholarly development of the area in question? What is new and original in the approach? What is the expected knowledge gain? Does the project clearly reach beyond previous knowledge? Does it integrate different perspectives?

### Consistency

Does the proposal reflect the state of research? Are the objectives clearly defined and attainable? Are the proposed methods, work schedule and implementation plan coherent and likely to achieve the project goals? How is the scientific environment to be assessed in this respect?

### Personal qualification

What is the expertise of the project participants and the quality of previous research results, also in consideration of their biographical circumstances (e. g. family phases)? Does the project hold promise of a creative and unconventional approach? Does the applicant show outstanding commitment to science communication? In case research cooperation is intended, is such cooperation convincingly displayed?

## Reasonable effort

Are the planned timetable, personnel and resources adequate to achieve the objectives? Are aspects of career planning for junior staff taken into account? Are the quality assurance measures sufficient and are there any convincing considerations in respect of a communication strategy?

## Suggestions for implementation

Are there any recommendations that could help the implementation of the project and therefore, in the case of a positive decision, be communicated anonymously to the applicant?

## Scope and submission of expert opinions

As a rule, expert opinions submitted in writing do not exceed one or two pages. In certain clear-cut cases, even one page or less may be sufficient. In more complex cases, it is rare that an expert opinion encompasses more than three pages.

The Foundation is grateful if expert opinions can be submitted within four to six weeks, usually by e-mail. In the event that you for any reason feel unable to provide the requested opinion, please inform the Foundation as soon as possible.



## Participation in expert panels

The members of expert panels receive the application documents about a month before the meeting. During the meeting, a discussion ensues on the merits and weaknesses of the project proposal. As a rule, the Foundation does not expect to receive a detailed written evaluation.

Expert panels are newly formed at irregular intervals; on the one hand, in order to avoid undue pressure on the participants' time and, on the other hand, to avoid any entrenchment of opinions.

## Final recommendation

Written expert opinions as well as verbal consultation should result in a clear-cut and unambiguous recommendation. In the event that a funding recommendation is attached to prerequisites and conditions, these should be clearly defined, thus providing a basis for further proceedings.

## Confidentiality

In the interest of arriving at an open vote, the Foundation is committed to strict confidentiality with regard to the evaluation procedure. If in individual cases extracts from expert opinions are communicated to the applicants, this is done in strict anonymity.

## Six rules for good practice of assessment

When acting as an expert for the Foundation, you agree to abide by the following rules of good scientific practice. If under certain circumstances you feel unable to vote in accordance with these rules, you should refuse to work on the evaluation in question. You can do this informally and without giving reasons. It is not necessary to sign a written declaration to accept the rules as binding.

1. The assessment follows the rules of good research practice and academic integrity. All statements must be truthful and in no way intended to impinge on the intellectual property of others or to impair their research activities.
2. On agreeing to participate in the review process, the experts indicate their competency for essential aspects of the applications. Should they subsequently consider themselves insufficiently competent, they should inform the Foundation accordingly and destroy the documents in question.
3. Should experts feel biased concerning the matter at hand, they should likewise withdraw from the review process and destroy the pertinent documents. This shall also apply if a conflict of interests is perceived.
4. Members of expert panels agree not to submit any applications for funding on their own behalf for the duration they are involved in assessment procedures and not to become involved in other applications which may be submitted to the Foundation by third-parties.

5. In addition to the assessment, the recommendation, whether positive or negative, also takes into account the requirements, goals and restrictions contained in the respective “Information for Applicants”.
  
6. The reviewers maintain strict confidentiality in respect of the applications they are requested to evaluate and do not pass on any information to third parties.



## About the Foundation

The Volkswagen Foundation was established in 1961 by the Federal Republic of Germany and the State of Lower Saxony as a foundation with legal capacity under private law and started work in 1962.

The Foundation is independent and not affiliated to the car manufacturer of the same name. Its purpose is to be seen against the specific background of post-war Germany. The Foundation owes its existence to a treaty concluded between the State of Lower Saxony and the Federal Republic of Germany in November 1959, which settled a controversy over the ownership of the assets of the Volkswagen car manufacturer. It was decided to set up a foundation to promote science.

According to this treaty, the then Volkswagenwerk GmbH was turned into a stock corporation. 60 percent of the share capital was transferred to private ownership in the form of so-called “people’s shares”, and the Federal Republic of Germany and the State of Lower Saxony received 20 percent each. The proceeds from privatization and the profit entitlements of the shares remaining in the hands of the Federal Government and the State of Lower Saxony were classified as assets of the newly established „Volkswagenwerk Foundation“, as it was called until 1989. This was based on the idea that the still young Federal Republic of Germany should establish a strong independent institution for the promotion of research and teaching in the areas of science and technology.

## The Foundation Office

At present, some 100 members of staff process and submit proposals to the Board of Trustees and execute their decisions. The Board of Trustees appoints the Secretary General, who heads the office and – together with the executive management team – runs the affairs of the Foundation.



### Photo credits

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