When I applied for an ERC and what I learnt about it
My story

• Joel Fine, mathematician, ULB.

• Applied for a consolidator grant in 2013.

• Got to the interview, my final grade was “A”, but I didn’t get the grant.

• I applied again in 2014 and this time it worked!
My first application

I tried to emphasise what they were looking for:

“the 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?

• To what extent is the proposed research high risk/high gain?

Source: ERC evaluation form, StG and CoG 2015
So, high risk/ high gain, right?

- The feedback: “we felt the project was just too risky.”

- It’s about the right sort of risk: huge payoff if it works, but still worthwhile if it doesn’t.

- The project should develop techniques aimed at solving a big problem, but which also have plenty of other applications, even if the main one doesn’t work.
Second time round

- I emphasised the ambitious goals and the novel techniques.

- But I also emphasised the ubiquity of the techniques and ideas, that they will be useful for many problems, and will be applied by many people.

- The project will create directions of research broader than the main goals, which last far longer than the five years.
What I think the ERC is looking for

• Ambitious goals.

• Novel ideas and techniques.

• A broad project: applications and new research directions for you and others during and after the project.

• Applicants with a vision of where their subject will be in 5 or 10 years time.
My advice for writing the project

• Explaining new ideas is HARD. Don’t get bogged down in technical detail. Try and use analogies.

• If something will be difficult, don’t hide it, make it clear you realise this.

• Take your time. It took me 2 months to write my first project, and over a month to write the second one.

• Be enthusiastic; make your project exciting to read!
My advice for preparing for the interview

• Paint a picture with broad brush strokes. Save any technical detail for “hidden slides”.

• Avoid jargon, abbreviations, etc. You want the whole panel to follow.

• But don’t be put off if half of them don’t pay any attention!

• Write down several questions you don’t want to be asked and work out what you’ll say.
And what if I do all that and don’t get the grant?

• The ERC application is not like other grant applications.

• After my first failure I was miserable, but I soon realised what I’d gained.

• It forced me to think long and hard about what I was going to do for the next 5 or 10 years.

• It gave me the opportunity to spell out my programme to world experts in my field.
Good luck!