



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?

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!