

The answer to the toughest interview question

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There's a lot of advice on this blog about how to interview: [Tell good stories](#), [ask good questions](#), [be a closer](#). But here's only one most important thing to remember: when it comes to discussing your potential salary, never give the number first.

The right answer to the question, "What's your salary range?" is almost always some version of "I'm not telling you."

The person who gives the first number sets the starting point. But if that's you, you lose. If you request a salary higher than the range for the job, the interviewer will tell you you're high, and you've just lost money. If you request a salary lower than the range, the interviewer will say nothing, and you've just lost money.

So you can only hurt yourself by giving the first number. You want the interviewer to tell you the range for the position, because then you can focus on getting to the high end of that range. But you can't work to the high point if you don't know it.

So if there are two [good salary negotiators](#) in the room, it will be a game to see who has to give the first number. Fortunately, the company cannot make you an offer without also offering a salary, so the cards are stacked in your favor, as long as you hold your ground.

So here's a list of responses for all the ways the interviewer will ask you how much money you expect to make. The more times you can fend off the question, the less likely you will have to be the one to give the first number. This works, even [if you don't have the upper hand](#) and you really need the job.

What salary range are you looking for?

"Let's talk about the job requirements and expectations first, so I can get a sense of what you need." That's a soft answer to a soft way to ask the question.

What did you make at your last job?

"This position is not exactly the same as my last job. So let's discuss what my responsibilities would be here and then determine a fair salary for this job." It's hard to argue with words like "fair" and "responsibilities"—you're earning respect with this one.

What are you expecting to make in terms of salary?

"I am interested in finding a job that is a good fit for me. I'm sure whatever salary you're

paying is consistent with the rest of the market." In other words, I respect myself and I want to think I can respect this company.

I need to know what salary you want in order to make you an offer. Can you tell me a range?

"I'd appreciate it if you could make me an offer based on whatever you have budgeted for this position and we can go from there." This is a pretty direct response, so using words like "appreciate" focuses on drawing out the interviewer's better qualities instead of her tougher side.

Why don't you want to give your salary requirements?

"I think you have a good idea of what this position is worth to your company, and that's important information for me to know." Enough dancing—this is one last attempt to force you to give the number first. Hold your line here and you win.

You can see the pattern, right? If you think you sound obnoxious or obstinate by not answering the question, think of how he feels asking the question more than once. The interviewer is just trying to get a leg up on you in negotiations. If you give in, you look like a poor negotiator, and the interviewer is probably not looking for someone like that.

So stand your ground, and understand that the interviewer is being as insistent as you are. And it might encourage you to know that research shows that if you mirror the behavior of the interviewer, you are more likely to get the job. Sure, this usually applies to tone of voice, level of enthusiasm, and body language, but who's to say it doesn't apply to negotiation tactics, too? Try it. You could come away lots richer.

