



# Guide to Federal Salary Negotiation



# Many people don't know this, but YES—you can negotiate your federal salary and get a higher step before getting hired.

For the doubters in the crowd, here are a couple resources that prove I am correct:

- OPM Fact Sheet: [Superior Qualifications and Special Needs Pay-Setting Authority](#)
- 5 CFR 531.212: [Superior qualifications and special needs pay-setting authority](#)

In fact, as a GS-0201-12 HR Specialist (Recruitment/Placement), I served as the middle-man, negotiating with tentatively-selected candidates on behalf of the hiring manager. I negotiated, at one time or another, the following: Salary; Vacation (Leave) Earning Rate; Start Date; Work Schedule; Recruitment Incentive; Moving (Relocation) Expenses, All; Relocation Incentive, Lump Sum; Education Debt Reduction Program (EDRP); Federal Student Loan Repayment Program (SLRP); Telework; and Alternative Work Schedules. So, I promise – it can be done.

I even recorded a [Short Video](#) (click link to watch) explaining how all of these things get negotiated. It's a brief overview and doesn't dive too deeply primarily because people tend to favor short videos.

This guide, however, only focuses on negotiating salaries/steps.

Now, keep in mind that each Agency has its own rules on this, so my advice herein is merely based on my experience. Simply put: there is no guarantee any given Agency can –or will–negotiate salary with you. Let me state that one more time: There is no guarantee the Agency will negotiate with you. They can merely tell you 'no'...and then you are out of luck.

Put yourself into their shoes. Agencies have a fiscal responsibility to the American taxpayers to be a good steward of taxpayers' dollars. Therefore, it's imperative that they offer the lowest salary necessary to attract a candidate.

The good news is this: many times the Agency will negotiate with you....but they aren't going to tell you that. It's something YOU have to ask for.

**"Failing to Negotiate Your Federal Salary Will Haunt You the Rest of Your Career!"**

Before going any further, here are some frequently asked questions along with their answers.

**Q Does the Government have to negotiate with me?**

A: No. Each Agency has its own policy on negotiating salaries. Please contact the employing agency for information about its policy.

**Q: I've already started as a Federal employee. Can I negotiate my salary now?**

A: In most cases, no—it's too late. An agency must approve each determination to use this authority before the employee enters on duty – the determination cannot be made retroactively.

**Q: Can everyone negotiate their salary?**

A: No. In some cases, for example in many medical-related occupations, pay is set by a professional standards board based on the applicant's experience and education. There is no negotiating.

**Q: Can people negotiate their salary at all grade levels, or just at higher grades?**

A: In many cases you can negotiate higher steps and salaries, especially at higher grades (GS11 and above). But, I've personally seen GS-7s successfully negotiate higher steps, too. It's always worth asking!

**Q: Are there times when management WILL NOT negotiate salary?**

A: Yes. Here are a few reasons they may not be willing to negotiate with you:

- **Budgetary constraints.**  
This is when the work unit doesn't have the personnel budget to support hiring a person at a higher salary. This can be a legitimate reason why they will not negotiate salary – with anyone!
- **No experience.**  
If you have qualified for a job based on education alone, but you bring no practical hands-on experience with you, then the Agency is unlikely to negotiate salary with you.
- **Numerous applicants.**  
If a lot of people applied for the job you got selected for, there may not be any incentive for the Agency to negotiate to give you anything higher than the typical starting salary (Step 1). Why would they negotiate to give you more money when they can make an offer to the next person in line who would be glad to take the Step 1 salary?!
- **If you are unemployed.**  
If you are unemployed and have no current salary, the Agency can argue that any salary – including Step 1 – is better than being unemployed, so they are unlikely to negotiate. That is, if your current salary is \$0 then you have no grounds to negotiate. HOWEVER, if you voluntarily left the workforce (to be a stay at home parent, for example) and you possess superior qualifications that would likely yield you a higher salary (past income for example), then they MAY negotiate. It's always worth asking!

- **They are bluffing to see if you will back out.**  
In some cases, Agency's have a policy that states they are not allowed to negotiate salary until AFTER a selectee declines the job offer due to salary. In other cases, Agencies will simply wait for you to say "I cannot accept this job unless I get a higher salary. Otherwise I will need to decline." Then, they will proceed with negotiating. So, sometimes, you have to force the agency into a corner and give them an ultimatum.
- **Lower graded position.**  
In many cases there are a lot of applicants for lower graded positions. Therefore, it's easier for the Agency to deny offering a higher salary. Sometimes it's much easier to replace a person with entry-level skills at the GS-5 level than it is to replace someone with advanced skills at the GS-12 grade level.

**PRO TIP: If HR has stated that they aren't willing to negotiate with you, ask to speak to the hiring manager. Essentially, take out the HR 'middle-man' and speak to your future supervisor. They are sometimes more likely to agree to a higher salary if they are dealing one-on-one with a person rather than through an intermediary.**

**Q: When is the best time to start negotiating salary?**

A: There are really two different answers to this question:

- Some HR Specialists will tell you to request a higher salary during the tentative offer. That way, HR can work on gathering all of the documents they need and submitting the request while you are simultaneously going through all of the other pre-employment activities (physicals, fingerprints, background check, etc.).
- Others, however, will tell you that you should wait until you have completed all of the other pre-hire activities and then let them know you want a higher salary when you get a final and firm job offer. That way, the Agency has invested a lot of time screening you, conducting background checks, giving you a physical, etc. and they are more likely to negotiate because they just spend a lot of time getting you into the system. Why would they want to lose you now and have to re-start the entire process with another applicant once you back out (because they wouldn't negotiate with you).

In the end, it's your call when you let them know you want a higher salary. The one piece of advice I have for you is this: don't try to do it during the job interview (before you have been selected). You will look foolish....and we don't want that.

**PRO TIP: When you get called for the initial tentative job offer, make sure you ask what grade and salary you are being offered! Also, ask the HR person to email you a link to the exact pay chart they are using to determine the salary they are offering.**

There are two situations where an Agency will negotiate a higher step with you:

**1. When you – the selectee—has “superior qualifications”. This is where you get to brag about yourself and highlight why you should be hired at a higher salary. Some of the points you want to mention are below.**

Reminder: Any expert-level skills, competencies, experience, and/or accomplishments must be relevant to the requirements of the position to be filled. There is no reason to mention certifications in basket-weaving when you are getting an IT position.

- You possess a Graduate Degree or have participated in Advanced studies
- You possess numerous certifications in your field
- You possess special or hard-to-find certifications relating to your field
- You are bringing X years of experience into the job
- You taught the subject matter in classes/college/Vocation schools/universities, etc.
- You have published work in peer-reviewed journals related to the field
- Plus, lots more.

**2. When the Agency itself has a “special need” for your knowledge skills and abilities; when the position is hard to fill (hard to locate highly trained applicants); or when the position is deemed ‘critical’ by the agency.**

- The position is hard-to-fill (been announced multiple times with few applicants; requires very specialized certifications; etc.)
- The position is located in an area with a documented chronic labor shortage
- The Agencies annual strategic plan (human capital plan) lists the job as a “critical occupation” that needs filled.
- There are significant disparities between Federal and non-Federal salaries for the skills and competencies required in the position to be filled.
- Recent (or a pattern of high) turnover in the same or similar positions
- How critical the position is and what effect on the Agency (if the position is not filled or if there is a delay in filling it)
- Local labor market is weak overall

Below, you will find a ‘master template’ letter, which you can customize and immediately deploy. It’s a compilation of three things:

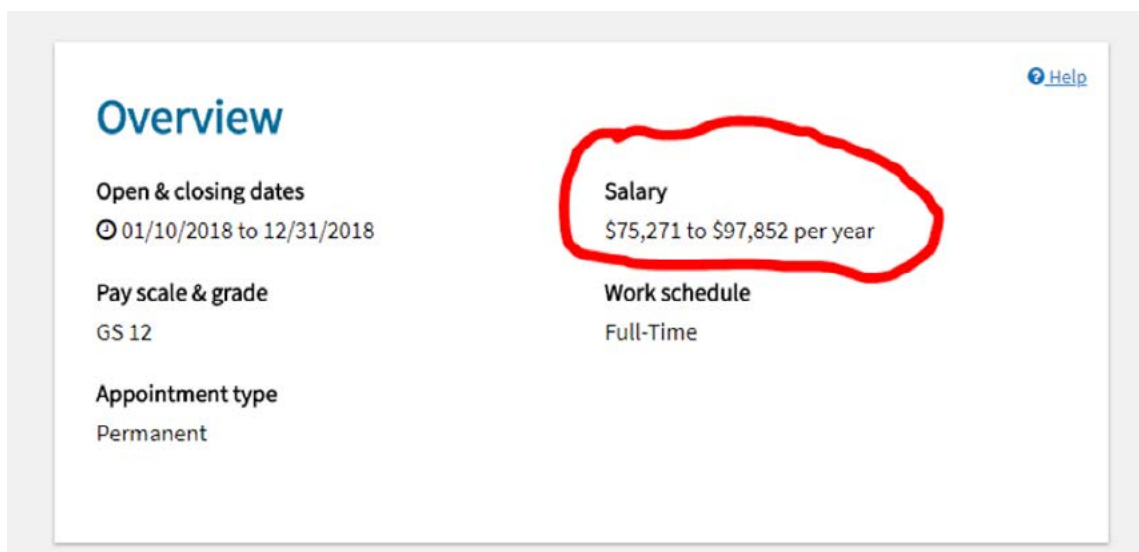
1. Some templates we gathered online
2. Some successful real-life letters that were used and submitted to me by our facebook members so it could be included in this template
3. The regulations we could find that gave examples that meet the definition of superior qualifications.

So, basically, this template is your one-stop-shop to customize your request for a higher step.

**It's super easy to use:** simply change the contact information, remove the bullet point items that don't apply to your situation, leave in and customize what DOES apply, then copy and paste your customized letter into an email and fire it off to HR.

**Pro Tip:** You must be able to prove every statement you make. If you tell them you have another job offer they will ask to see it. Simply put, they will not 'take your word for it.'

**Remember:** The salary range of your target job is identified on its USAJOBS vacancy announcement. You won't be able to negotiate your salary above the top of that range.



The image shows a screenshot of a job overview page from USAJOBS. The page is titled "Overview" and includes a "Help" link in the top right corner. The main content is organized into two columns. The left column lists "Open & closing dates" (01/10/2018 to 12/31/2018), "Pay scale & grade" (GS 12), and "Appointment type" (Permanent). The right column lists "Salary" (\$75,271 to \$97,852 per year) and "Work schedule" (Full-Time). The salary information is circled in red.

Category	Value
Open & closing dates	01/10/2018 to 12/31/2018
Pay scale & grade	GS 12
Appointment type	Permanent
Salary	\$75,271 to \$97,852 per year
Work schedule	Full-Time

YOUR NAME AND  
FULL ADDRESS

DATE: October 17, 2019

HIRING MANAGER NAME AND  
FULL ADDRESS

Dear HR Specialist / Hiring Manager:

You've certainly built an exceptional (TYPE OF ORGANIZATION) team over the years, and your offer to join it is enormously gratifying!

As you know, I am very eager to accept this honor. I look forward to bringing my experience, contacts, credentials, and determination to (DEPARTMENT NAME) as a (JOB TITLE YOU WERE OFFERED).

Because the knowledge, skills, and abilities are ones I've nurtured for more than (NUMBER OF YEARS OF EXPERIENCE YOU HAVE IN CAREER FIELD) years, they're naturally of great value to me and to you. My potential in (DEPARTMENT NAME) is substantial. Further, I believe I am considered a superior qualification candidate, based on demonstrated proficiencies.

I feel it is reasonable to request a higher step within Grade (Whichever Grade level you were offered such as 7, 9, 11, 12) based on the following:

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- I previously held the rank/title of XX. At this grade/rank, we are recognized as having unsurpassed mastery of technical skills in the area of XX. Along with this level of expertise, I am bringing XX years of military experience into this job.
  - I have been an (Use titles that show your EXPERTISE, such as: expert, supervisor, instructor, policy creator, team leader, etc.) in the x field for x years; since (year).
  - I currently hold a Doctorate Degree in (field), a Master's Degree in (field), and a Bachelor's in (field).
  - I possess the following certifications in (your field): List all/special/hard to find certifications relating to your field.
  - I am bringing X years of hands-on experience into the job and will be able to 'hit the ground running.
  - I need a higher step since I will be relocating to a geographic area with a higher cost of living and require additional income to support my relocation, my family and my needs.

- I recognize that most new employees are brought in at Step 1. However, I feel as though I am a candidate with superior qualifications. Simply put, I am not a beginner in this career field. If I had started in your office as a new employee XX years ago as a GS-XX (Lowest grade level), I would have worked my way up to GS-xx Step 10 as of today. I think that is a fair assessment of where I am professionally.
- By accepting this job I will be sacrificing additional sources of income outside of my normal salary, including consulting fees (due to relocating and leaving business behind, because of a conflict of interest with the new position.
- I taught the subject matter in classes/college/Vocation schools/universities, etc.
- I have written 10 and had published 10 articles in peer-reviewed journals related to the field.
- I have authored a book/s about (subject matter).
- I have demonstrated a consistent pattern (3 to 5 years) of receiving bonuses or pay increases, and feel these should also be factored in when considering the income that would be forfeited.
- I possess a competing job offer with a higher salary than Step 1 that you offered me (You must prove it by showing them the job offer in writing).
- My current salary is higher than Step 1 and I cannot take a pay cut to accept this job. I am asking for Step X in order to ensure that I am gaining a 10% pay increase for professional advancement. My current annual salary of \$XXXXXX supports a higher level of competency and compensation than the GS-xx Step 1 level.
- I will incur substantial travel and relocation expenses to move to the new position, and therefore, need additional funds (since the agency may not specifically pay for the relocation expenses) to make up for the cost.
- My current benefits package is better than what I will get in your Agency. Therefore, I will be taking a net loss and need a higher salary to compensate for the difference in income so this isn't a step backwards for me.
- This position is hard-to-fill (It was shared with me that this position has been announced multiple times with few applicants each time.
- The announcement for this position sought very specialized certifications, which I possess. They are.....
- This position is located in an area with a documented chronic labor shortage, and I am bringing a highly-sought after skill set with me.



- The Agency annual strategic plan (also sometimes called human capital plan) lists the job as a “critical occupation”. This demonstrates the importance of having it filled with an applicant who is well-versed in this field, which I am.
  - There are significant disparities between Federal and non-Federal salaries for the skills and competencies required in this career field. Because I am entering the Federal sector, my earning capacity will be restricted, versus remaining in the higher-paying private sector.
  - There has been a recent pattern of high turnover in this position. This position is critical and needs to be filled ASAP with a highly qualified candidate. Additional delays in filling this positions can negatively impact your Agency and work unit’s mission.
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I respectfully request GS-xx Step xx with an annual salary of \$xx,xxx.

Can you pass this request to the hiring manager and forward me their written response?

If you have previously negotiated with other employees in your department, I would appreciate having the same courtesy extended to me, in the name of fairness.

**{CAUTION: YOU MAY NOT WANT TO USE THIS SENTENCE}** Also, please note that I may not accept this job unless I get a higher salary. If you are unwilling to negotiate I may need to decline.

Thank you for your consideration. I am excited to accept a career with you and launch our promising partnership!

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely

YOUR NAME

## So, what happens next?

First, congrats for being smart enough to know you should ask for more money and for actually having the guts to submit a request!

HR can respond with several answers:

1. We cannot negotiate for x reason
2. We can negotiate (...and then they do)
3. We cannot negotiate BUT we can offer another incentive:
  - a. Sometimes HR will counter with an offer for a signing bonus (recruitment incentive). This is much cheaper for them because it would be an one-time payment to you. BUT, it isn't such a good deal for you because a higher salary would be worth thousands and thousands of dollars over the course of your career.
  - b. Tuition Reimbursement for future classes (given to current employees)
  - c. Student Loan repayment for past loans
  - d. Recruitment Bonus Incentives: Some agencies may pay a Recruitment Bonus
  - e. Relocation Allowance: (Check the vacancy announcement for whether or not they will pay for relocation)

# Good Luck!!!