

How do you bargain with auto mechanics?

A little background, first. Distinguish the small jobs (tune-ups, brake pads, mufflers) from the big jobs (collisions, transmissions.) The real negotiating – and money-saving – is on the big jobs. Second, forget about parts and concentrate on labor. The amount of money garages make on parts is negligible; labor is a different story.

The labor charge is the garage's hourly rate times the hours required for your job. So far so good; but now it gets weird. The hours usually aren't the actual hours; they're the "book time" – what the published labor-time guide used by the garage says the job should take. There are a number of these labor guides, they estimate the time required for almost any auto repair down to the nearest tenth of an hour, and most importantly, *they're all different*. None are low, some are pretty accurate, and some are high. Most garages charge book time, not actual time. If the job was estimated to take 2.2 hours but Randy Rapidwrench gets it done in an hour, you'll be charged 2.2. (To be fair, if it takes 10 hours, you'll probably still be charged 2.2.)

On small jobs, the best technique by far is a simple krunch: "\$400 for a tune-up? I'm stunned. The whole car isn't worth \$400. Let's put our heads together on this and try to come up with a better number." You can take it from here.

With larger jobs, have the garage in possession of your busted car (the "admitting garage") give you an estimate. When you get it, call at least two other reputable garages for estimates. Insist that each garage specify the time required (call it "the book time" if you want to sound like a *cognoscenti*) and the hourly rate. If the admitting garage is significantly higher, ask them to match your best quote. They probably will; it's a cutthroat business. If they won't, have the other garage come get your car (nibble for a free tow, of course.) If the admitting garage is competitive, krunch a few times and then sit back.

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