

System Design Interview's Red Flag List

(and how to avoid them)



by Neo Kim

1. Start the design without wasting time

Interviewer: I didn't ask for this.

This is the fastest way to fail an interview.

Instead:

- Ask the right questions and create a list of requirements.
- Don't start the design until you've understood the requirements.



2. Draw block diagrams

Interviewer: NoSQL... in what way? How? Why?

This shows you didn't consider tradeoffs (= mediocre results).

Instead:

- Summarize tradeoffs for each architectural decision.
- Point out bottlenecks and single points of failure.
- Talk about alternative technologies.
- Default to proven technologies.

When you discuss tradeoffs, you make the right architectural decision.



3. Do capacity planning and database design

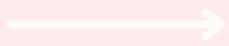
Interviewer: Okay, where's this going?... meh.

This wastes everybody's time, so you get less time on the solution.

Instead:

- Ask whether API and database schema design are necessary.
- Turn the interview into a 2-way conversation.
- Focus only on important requirements.

When you understand the interviewer's expectations, you have a better chance of passing.



4. Focus on high-level architecture

Interviewer: Okay, when do we talk about the data layer?

Great for presentations, useless for interviews.

Instead:

- Do mock interviews to improve communication skills.
- Keep the high-level architecture simple.
- Track time during the interview.

This forces a systematic approach to interviews.



5. Discuss the solution until the interview ends

Interviewer: More bottlenecks? More single points of failure? More...?

This is bad and leads to fluff.

Instead:

- List the cross-cutting concerns such as monitoring and logging.
- Validate the final design against the requirements.
- List what you'll improve if you get extra time.



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