

Air Traffic Controller interview questions

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What to expect

Air Traffic Controller interviews sit alongside a formal aptitude and simulator assessment process, so the interview itself tends to focus less on technical recall and more on judgement, communication under pressure and how a candidate thinks through fast-changing traffic pictures. Expect questions that probe how you handle sustained concentration, competing priorities and genuine emergencies, not just whether you know the rules.

- **Scenario and judgement:** Hypothetical traffic or emergency situations used to assess split-second decision-making and prioritisation under pressure.
- **Behavioural (STAR):** Questions about past experience handling high-pressure situations, errors, or coordination with others, looking for evidence rather than general claims.
- **Safety and process:** Questions on how you apply separation standards, emergency procedures and communication protocols in practice.
- **Cognitive load and stress:** Questions exploring how you sustain concentration and accuracy over long shifts or during unexpected surges in traffic.
- **Stakeholder communication:** Questions on communicating clearly and unambiguously with pilots, adjacent sectors and supervisors, especially when instructions must be corrected or repeated.

Recruitment usually starts with aptitude testing (multitasking, spatial reasoning, memory) before candidates reach a panel interview, which is often followed by, or combined with, simulator-based exercises assessing real-time traffic management. The interview itself typically opens with background and motivation questions, moves into scenario and behavioural questions, and closes with questions about training commitment given the extended endorsement period this role requires.

1. Talk me through how you would manage a sudden increase in arriving traffic when the runway configuration limits your landing rate.

Why they ask

Tests real-time prioritisation and resequencing judgement under pressure, a core daily demand of the role.

How to structure your answer

Walk through the situation step by step: assess the current picture, identify constraints, decide on sequencing or holding actions, communicate instructions clearly, and confirm the outcome.

Example answer

"I'd first get a clear picture of exactly how many aircraft are inbound and their fuel and time constraints. If the runway can't absorb the rate, I'd start holding or slowing lower-priority arrivals further out while keeping the closest aircraft sequenced tightly, and I'd flag the situation early to the next sector so they can adjust their release rate rather than adding to the backlog. Throughout, I'd keep instructions short and unambiguous so pilots aren't left guessing about their sequence, and I'd reassess the picture every few minutes as aircraft join or leave the pattern."

2. Describe a time you had to respond to an unexpected emergency or serious deviation from a plan.

Why they ask

Looks for evidence of composure and correct procedural response during genuine high-stakes events, not hypothetical confidence.

How to structure your answer

STAR: situation, task, action, result, with emphasis on what you actually did and the outcome.

Example answer

"During a training exercise simulating an engine failure shortly after takeoff, my task was to clear the aircraft's path immediately and coordinate with other sectors to give it priority. I issued an immediate turn and altitude clearance to keep it clear of departing traffic, notified the tower and emergency services in line with procedure, and held other departures until the aircraft was clear. The exercise was assessed as a correct response, and it reinforced for me how important it is to act on the emergency first and manage the paperwork and notifications afterward."

3. How do you keep your concentration and accuracy consistent across a long or unusually busy shift?

Why they ask

Directly probes sustained cognitive load management, which is central to safety in this role.

How to structure your answer

Personal practice explanation: describe specific habits or techniques, not just an assurance that you "cope well."

Example answer

"I rely on short, deliberate breaks between busy periods where possible, and I actively rebuild my mental picture of the traffic rather than assuming I still remember it exactly after any distraction. On unusually busy shifts I narrow my focus to the immediate next few minutes of decisions rather than trying to plan too far ahead, which keeps errors from creeping in when the picture is changing quickly."

4. An aircraft reports a medical emergency on board and requests priority landing. Walk me through your immediate actions.

Why they ask

Safety-critical scenario testing procedural knowledge and the ability to coordinate multiple parties at once.

How to structure your answer

Judgement-under-pressure structure: immediate safety actions first, then coordination and communication steps, then follow-up.

Example answer

"My first priority is airspace: I'd clear other traffic from the aircraft's path and give it a direct route and priority handling. I'd confirm with the pilot what assistance they need on the ground, then notify the tower or approach controller taking the handoff, along with airport emergency services, so ground support is ready before the aircraft lands. I'd keep other traffic informed of the delay this may cause without overloading the emergency aircraft's pilot with unnecessary radio calls."

5. Tell me about a time your instruction was misunderstood or not followed correctly. What did you do?

Why they ask

Assesses how you handle communication breakdowns, an unavoidable risk in radiotelephony-based work.

How to structure your answer

STAR, with particular attention to the corrective action taken and any changes made afterward.

Example answer

"During a busy sequencing exercise, a pilot read back an altitude incorrectly and began descending earlier than instructed. I picked up the discrepancy on the radar display, immediately issued a

correction and confirmed the readback before continuing. Afterward, I made a habit of listening more closely to full readbacks during busy periods rather than assuming a quick acknowledgement meant the instruction was correct, which cut down on similar issues."

6. This role requires lengthy endorsement training before you're fully qualified on a unit. How do you feel about that commitment, and what would you do if you struggled with a particular endorsement?

Why they ask

Employers want to confirm genuine commitment to the extended and demanding training pathway.

How to structure your answer

Direct motivational response supported by a concrete plan for handling setbacks, not just a statement of enthusiasm.

Example answer

"I understand the endorsement process takes real time and that not everyone passes every stage on the first attempt. I'd treat a setback as a signal to go back over the specific procedures or traffic scenarios I was weaker on, ask for additional simulator time if it's available, and be upfront with my training officer about where I need support rather than trying to push through without addressing the gap."