

Archaeologist interview questions

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What to expect

Interviews for archaeologist roles in Australia typically assess how you read a landscape, apply heritage legislation, work with communities and write for regulators and clients. Panels usually include a heritage manager and a project lead, and they want evidence you can move between field, lab and report.

- **Technical and field method:** Questions about survey design, excavation technique, stratigraphy, artefact recording and dating.
- **Legislative and compliance:** Questions about state and Commonwealth heritage acts, permits, due diligence and assessment processes.
- **Community consultation:** Behavioural questions about working with Aboriginal communities and Traditional Owner groups.
- **Scenario and judgement:** Situational questions about unexpected finds, site disturbance or competing client priorities.
- **Report writing and client communication:** Questions about turning field results into reports that regulators and clients can act on.

The interview is usually a panel of two or three people, running for about an hour. It often starts with introductions and a short overview of the role, then moves through technical and legislative questions, a behavioural question about community or stakeholder work, and one or two scenarios. You will usually be asked to walk through a recent project from start to finish. There is time at the end for your questions, and panels often expect you to ask about their current projects and heritage management approach.

1. Walk us through how you take a development proposal from a desktop assessment through to a final heritage report.

Why they ask

This shows whether you understand the full assessment process, not just excavation.

How to structure your answer

A chronological walk-through. Start with the trigger and the legislation, then desktop review, field survey, recording, analysis and reporting. Name the decisions you make at each step and finish with the outcome for the client or regulator.

Example answer

"First I confirm which legislation applies, because that sets the assessment pathway. I check the relevant heritage registers and search the Aboriginal heritage information system for known sites. Then I design a field survey based on the landscape, the development footprint and the level of ground disturbance. In the field I walk the area, record any artefacts or features, and use a total station or GPS to map them. If I find something significant, I assess its extent and discuss management options with the client and community representatives. Back in the office I analyse the artefacts, prepare a significance assessment, and write the report with clear recommendations. The final report goes to the client and often to the regulator, and I make sure the conditions are practical and can be implemented on site."

2. Tell me about a time you worked with an Aboriginal community or Traditional Owner group on a heritage project. What did you do to build trust?

Why they ask

Community consultation is central to the role, and panels want to see genuine respect and practical collaboration.

How to structure your answer

STAR. Situation, Task, Action, Result. Keep the focus on the actions you took to build relationships, not just the outcome.

Example answer

“On a road upgrade project, the survey area overlapped with a site that was important to the local Aboriginal community. I was asked to lead the field survey and consultation. I started by meeting the community representatives early, before any fieldwork, and I asked how they wanted to be involved. We agreed on a survey method and they joined the field team. When we found a scatter of stone artefacts, I stopped work in that area and we discussed options together. We adjusted the alignment slightly and put a buffer around the site. The project stayed on schedule, the community endorsed the approach, and the regulator accepted the assessment without further requests. The main thing I learned was to pick up the phone early and keep people informed at every stage.”

3. You are on a construction site and a worker uncovers what looks like human remains or a significant artefact. What do you do?

Why they ask

Unexpected finds are a real risk on development sites, and the panel wants to know you can act quickly and correctly.

How to structure your answer

Judgement under pressure. Give a clear sequence of steps: stop work, protect the area, notify the right people, and record what you see. Show that you know the legal obligations and the safety considerations.

Example answer

“First I would ask the machine operator or worker to stop work immediately in that area and keep everyone back. I would protect the find by marking a buffer around it and making sure nothing is moved. Then I would notify the site supervisor and the client, and check the project's unexpected finds procedure. If the find could be human remains, I would contact the police and the relevant state heritage authority or Aboriginal heritage body, because there are specific legal requirements. I would record the location with a GPS, take photographs without touching anything, and write a clear note about the context. I would not resume work in that area until I had approval from the regulator or the appropriate community representatives. I would also brief the site team so they know what to do if they find anything else.”

4. How do you record and interpret stratigraphy in the field, and what does it tell you about a site?

Why they ask

Stratigraphy is core technical knowledge, and the panel wants to hear how you read a section and connect it to dating and site formation.

How to structure your answer

Technical explanation. Define stratigraphy briefly, describe your field method, then give an example of what you have interpreted from a section.

Example answer

“I record stratigraphy by drawing and photographing each section, measuring the depth and thickness of each layer, and noting the colour, texture and any inclusions. I use a Munsell chart for colour and a metric scale in photographs. I also record the relationship between layers, because that tells me which deposits are older and which are younger. For example, on a recent excavation I found a dark occupation layer containing charcoal and stone artefacts sealed beneath a sterile sand layer. That

suggested the occupation was intact and not disturbed by later flooding. I took a radiocarbon sample from the charcoal and a sediment sample for analysis. The section drawing and the sample results together let me argue that the site had good integrity and was worth further investigation.”

5. Describe your experience managing archaeological permits and compliance conditions.

Why they ask

Permits and conditions are a major part of the job, and panels need to know you can keep a project legally compliant.

How to structure your answer

A concise process answer with a specific example. Outline the permit types you have worked with, then describe how you tracked conditions and reported back.

Example answer

“I have managed permits under state heritage legislation, including excavation permits and Aboriginal heritage impact permits. On a recent project I was responsible for the permit application, which meant preparing the research design, the methodology and the consultation record. Once the permit was granted, I set up a conditions register so nothing was missed. I tracked the dates for reporting, the areas approved for excavation, and the requirements for artefact analysis and storage. I made sure the field team knew the conditions before we started. At the end of the project I prepared the compliance report and lodged it with the regulator on time. I also kept the client informed so they knew what was happening and when. The permit was granted without conditions we could not meet, and the project closed out without any compliance issues.”

6. How do you handle a client who wants to push ahead without waiting for heritage approvals?

Why they ask

This tests your client management and your ability to hold a line on legal and ethical obligations without damaging the relationship.

How to structure your answer

Client-facing judgement. Acknowledge the commercial pressure, explain the risk clearly, then offer practical alternatives that keep the project moving.

Example answer

“I would start by acknowledging that they have a schedule to meet. Then I would explain the specific risk, because moving ahead without approval can lead to stop-work orders, fines and much bigger delays. I would not just say no. I would look for parts of the project that can proceed while the heritage assessment is under way, such as works in areas that have already been cleared or outside the sensitive zone. I would also give them a clear timeline for the assessment and keep them updated so they can plan. If the client still wanted to proceed, I would document my advice in writing and escalate it to my manager. Most clients understand once you explain the consequences and give them a practical way forward.”