

Archivist interview questions

careertips.com.au: common questions and what they're really testing

What to expect

Archivist interviews mix technical questions about cataloguing standards and preservation systems with scenario questions that test judgment when access, legal compliance and conservation pull in different directions. Panels usually include a senior archivist or collection manager and sometimes a records or compliance officer.

- **Technical:** Questions on metadata schemas, cataloguing platforms and digital preservation tools you have used or would need to learn.
- **Process:** Walk-throughs of how you would appraise, catalogue or manage a collection from intake to public access.
- **Scenario:** Judgment calls where preservation risk, researcher access and legal retention requirements are in tension.
- **Behavioural:** Past examples of managing stakeholders, projects or difficult access requests.
- **Client-facing:** How you handle researcher, government or community group enquiries about locating or accessing records.

Expect an opening discussion of your background and interest in the role, followed by technical and process questions on cataloguing and preservation systems, then one or two scenario questions on compliance or access trade-offs, and a closing behavioural question on stakeholder management before you're given time to ask questions of the panel.

1. Walk me through how you would appraise a newly transferred set of government records to decide what gets retained, digitised or destroyed.

Why they ask

Appraisal against retention and disposal schedules is a core, legally sensitive task for this role and panels want to see you understand the process, not just the theory.

How to structure your answer

Describe the process step by step: initial assessment against the retention schedule, checking for legal or historical significance, consulting relevant legislation, then documenting the decision and any disposal authorisation.

Example answer

"I'd start by checking the transfer against the agency's retention and disposal schedule to see if a determination already exists for that record series. If it's ambiguous, I'd assess the material for evidential or historical value, for example whether it documents a significant decision or public interest matter. I'd also check whether the records are subject to any hold under the Archives Act or related legislation before making a recommendation. Anything flagged for permanent retention would go into the cataloguing queue, and anything approved for destruction would be documented with the disposal authority reference, so there's a clear audit trail."

2. How would you structure metadata for a mixed collection of photographs, correspondence and digital files so it can be searched consistently?

Why they ask

Tests practical knowledge of Dublin Core and how you handle format diversity within one discovery system.

How to structure your answer

Explain your reasoning on schema choice, then describe how you'd apply it consistently across formats and check for quality.

Example answer

"I'd apply a Dublin Core based schema as the common baseline across all formats, using consistent fields for creator, date, subject and provenance, then add format-specific extensions where needed, for example dimensions for photographs or file format details for digital records. I'd batch catalogue similar items to keep terminology consistent and run periodic quality checks by spot-testing search results against known items to make sure nothing is falling through the gaps."

3. Tell me about a time you had to manage competing demands from a researcher wanting quick access and a conservation requirement to limit handling of fragile material.

Why they ask

Directly probes the tension between access and preservation that defines much of the role.

How to structure your answer

STAR: situation, task, action, result.

Example answer

"A researcher needed to review a fragile set of early correspondence for a time-sensitive project. The material was flagged as high risk for handling damage. I assessed whether a digitised surrogate already existed, and when it didn't, I arranged a priority digitisation of just the relevant items so the researcher could work from scans rather than the originals. This gave them access within their deadline while keeping the physical material out of frequent handling, and it also meant we now had a digital copy for future requests."

4. A community group requests access to records that may contain sensitive personal information about living individuals. How do you handle this?

Why they ask

Tests judgment on privacy, access legislation and stakeholder communication, a genuine day to day tension in public sector archives.

How to structure your answer

Scenario response: identify the competing obligations, describe the decision process and how you'd communicate the outcome.

Example answer

"I'd first check whether the records fall under any access restriction due to privacy legislation or a closure period set at the time of transfer. If parts of the material contain sensitive personal details about living people, I'd look at whether redaction or partial release is possible rather than a blanket refusal. I'd then explain the outcome to the community group clearly, including what they can access now and whether a formal request or waiting period applies to the rest, so they understand the reasoning rather than just receiving a no."

5. What experience do you have with digital preservation systems like Archivematica, and how would you approach ingest of a large born-digital collection?

Why they ask

Digital preservation is increasingly central to the role and panels want to know you can handle born-digital material, not just physical collections.

How to structure your answer

Technical walk-through: describe prior experience, then outline the ingest workflow you'd follow.

Example answer

"I've used Archivematica to process digitised and born-digital material through to preservation-ready packages. For a large ingest, I'd start with a survey of file formats and check for any at-risk or obsolete formats needing migration. I'd run the material through virus checks and format identification, generate preservation metadata automatically where the tool supports it, and spot-check the resulting packages against the original files before confirming ingest. I'd also make sure the collection was linked back to its finding aid in ArchivesSpace so it's discoverable once processing is complete."

6. Describe a time you managed a project with a fixed deadline, such as a digitisation or cataloguing backlog project.

Why they ask

Project management is listed as a core specialist skill for this role, and backlog or digitisation projects are common in archives work.

How to structure your answer

STAR: situation, task, action, result.

Example answer

"I was assigned a cataloguing backlog of several hundred uncatalogued items ahead of a collection launch date. I broke the work into batches by material type, set weekly targets, and flagged items needing conservation input early so they didn't hold up the rest of the batch. I checked progress against the schedule each week and adjusted batch sizes when a particularly complex series took longer than expected. The backlog was cleared in time for the launch, with the finding aid fully updated and searchable."