

Author interview questions

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

What to expect

Author interviews tend to be portfolio-led conversations rather than tick-box assessments. You will be asked to talk about your work, your process and how you handle the realities of publishing.

- **Process:** How you generate, develop and pitch ideas, from first spark to submission.
- **Behavioural:** How you have handled deadlines, feedback and rejection in past projects.
- **Scenario:** What you would do if a manuscript stalls, a plot fails or a publisher changes direction.
- **Technical and craft:** Questions about narrative structure, research methods, voice and editing.
- **Client-facing:** How you pitch to agents and commissioning editors, and how you talk about your work in a commercial context.

Usually a one-on-one conversation with a commissioning editor, agent or publisher. Expect to discuss your writing sample or manuscript, your process for developing work, and your availability or next project. Some interviews include a short pitch exercise or a written response to a brief.

1. Walk me through how you develop an idea from first spark to a pitch ready for a publisher or agent.

Why they ask

This shows whether you understand the commercial and creative steps that turn a notion into a viable project.

How to structure your answer

Process walk-through: start with the spark, then cover research, outline, sample chapters, pitch letter and any market positioning.

Example answer

"I start with a question or image that will not leave me alone. Then I read around it, look for gaps in the market and test the premise against a few trusted readers. If it holds up, I write a one-page outline, then a chapter breakdown, then a sample chapter. I will draft a pitch letter that names the audience, comparable titles and why this story matters now. I share that with my agent or a commissioning editor for feedback before I send it out widely. The whole process usually takes a few months of part-time work before I have something worth pitching."

2. Tell me about a time you had to revise a manuscript in response to editor feedback you initially disagreed with.

Why they ask

Editors want to see that you can separate your ego from the work and make changes that serve the book.

How to structure your answer

STAR: situation, task, action, result.

Example answer

"My editor once said the middle third of my novel sagged and the protagonist's motivation was unclear. I disagreed at first because I loved those scenes, but I sat with the note for a week. I mapped the draft and realised the editor was right: the character was reacting instead of driving the plot. I cut two chapters, rewrote three others and added a new scene that clarified her goal. The revised draft went to copyedit without further structural notes, and the book was stronger for it. I now treat every editorial note as a question worth answering, even if my first reaction is defensive."

3. You are midway through a commissioned manuscript when you realise a major plot point is not working. What do you do?

Why they ask

This tests your judgement under pressure and whether you can solve creative problems without blowing the deadline.

How to structure your answer

Judgement under pressure: acknowledge the problem, weigh options, choose a path, communicate, then execute.

Example answer

"First I would stop writing forward and write a one-page diagnosis of why the plot point fails. Then I would sketch two or three alternatives and test them against the book's ending. If the fix is small, I would make it and keep going. If it is structural, I would contact my editor early, explain the issue and propose a revised outline with a new delivery date if needed. I would rather raise it ten thousand words in than hand in a manuscript I know is broken. In one case, a simple change to a character's secret solved the problem and I still met the deadline."

4. How do you manage multiple projects with overlapping deadlines?

Why they ask

Freelance authors often juggle book edits, pitches, script work and paid writing, so interviewers want evidence of project management.

How to structure your answer

Behavioural: describe your system, then give a specific example.

Example answer

"I use a project board in Scrivener and a separate calendar for deadlines. Each morning I block out two hours of deep writing on the project that is closest to deadline. Afternoons go to editing, emails and pitches. When I had a book edit due the same month as a script draft, I set a weekly word count for the book and reserved Fridays for the script. I delivered both on time by protecting the writing time and saying no to new commissions until the crunch passed."

5. What is your approach to researching a subject you know very little about?

Why they ask

Authors are often expected to become instant experts, so interviewers probe your research method and your ability to verify facts.

How to structure your answer

Technical walk-through: describe your sources, interview practice, fact-checking and how you know when to stop.

Example answer

"I start with broad reading, then narrow to primary sources and experts. I keep a research file in Scrivener with notes, quotes and links, and I interview people who have lived experience. I always fact-check with at least two independent sources, especially for anything legal or medical. I stop researching when new sources start repeating what I already know, and I write a short memo to my editor listing any gaps or uncertainties. For a historical piece, that meant three months of reading and six interviews before I felt ready to draft."

6. How do you handle a pitch that gets rejected or a manuscript that does not find a publisher?

Why they ask

Resilience matters in a field with regular rejection, and interviewers want to see you can keep working.

How to structure your answer

Behavioural: describe your emotional process, then your practical response, then what you learned.

Example answer

"I let myself be disappointed for a day, then I ask for feedback if I can. I look at whether the pitch missed the mark on audience, timing or sample quality. If the writing is strong but the market is not there, I will put the manuscript aside and start the next project. One novel was rejected by several publishers before it found a home with a small press that loved it. I kept writing through the rejections, and that next book is the one that got me my agent. Rejection is data, not a verdict."