

Barrister interview questions

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What to expect

Interviews for barrister roles, including chambers admission panels and pupillage or reading committees, focus on advocacy judgement, legal reasoning under pressure, and how candidates handle the ethical demands of independent practice. Expect a mix of scenario-based questioning and direct probing of past matters you've worked on.

- **Scenario/judgement:** Hypothetical courtroom or client situations testing how you'd argue a point, handle a difficult witness, or respond to an adverse ruling.
- **Behavioural:** Questions about past matters, asking you to walk through how you prepared a brief, managed a difficult cross-examination, or advised on settlement.
- **Technical/legal reasoning:** Questions probing your grasp of evidence law, procedure, or a specific area of practice relevant to the chambers or panel.
- **Ethics and professional conduct:** Questions on conflicts of interest, duties to the court, and the cab-rank principle that underpins independent practice at the bar.

Typically opens with background and motivation for the bar, moves into a scenario or hypothetical requiring on-the-spot legal reasoning, then a behavioural section on past advocacy or drafting experience, and closes with questions on practice area fit and availability for briefs.

1. Talk me through how you'd prepare for a cross-examination of a key witness in a matter you know only from the brief.

Why they ask

Tests your process for turning a written brief into an effective courtroom strategy, a core daily task for a barrister.

How to structure your answer

Walk through your process step by step: reviewing the brief and prior statements, identifying inconsistencies, planning question sequence, and how you'd adapt if the witness answers unexpectedly.

Example answer

"I'd start by reading the brief and all prior statements or affidavits from that witness, noting any inconsistencies against the pleaded case. I'd then draft a question sequence that builds toward the key inconsistency rather than announcing it early, so the witness doesn't see it coming. During the hearing I'd stay flexible: if an answer opens a new avenue I hadn't planned for, I'd follow it before returning to my prepared sequence, always keeping the ultimate issues in the case in view."

2. Tell me about a time you advised a client or instructing solicitor to settle rather than proceed to trial.

Why they ask

Assesses judgement on litigation risk and the ability to give commercially realistic advice, a routine part of advising solicitors on prospects and settlement.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR: situation and stakes, task you were briefed to do, action you took in forming and delivering the advice, result including how the advice was received.

Example answer

"I was briefed to advise on prospects in a contract dispute a few weeks before hearing. The situation looked strong for our client on paper, but reviewing recent case law, I found a line of authority that

weakened one of the key arguments. I set out the risk clearly in a written opinion, quantifying the likely range of outcomes rather than giving a bare yes or no. The client accepted a settlement offer that was better than the likely litigated outcome once costs were factored in, and the instructing solicitor later briefed me again on a separate matter."

3. A judge interrupts your submission and puts a hostile question to you that you hadn't anticipated. How do you respond?

Why they ask

Direct test of composure and legal reasoning under pressure, which panels use as a proxy for courtroom performance.

How to structure your answer

Describe the judgement call you'd make in the moment: acknowledge the point, buy a moment to think if needed, then answer directly without retreating from your case unless the point requires it.

Example answer

"I'd acknowledge the question directly rather than deflecting, since judges notice evasion quickly. If I need a moment, I'll say so plainly rather than filling the silence with filler. I'd then answer on the merits, conceding a minor point if the law supports it, because credibility with the bench matters more across the whole hearing than winning every single exchange."

4. How do you approach drafting a legal opinion when the law is unsettled or the authorities point in different directions?

Why they ask

Probes legal research and writing skill, and how you communicate uncertainty to solicitors and clients who need to make practical decisions.

How to structure your answer

Explain your reasoning process: how you weigh conflicting authority, structure the opinion, and present risk to a non-specialist reader.

Example answer

"I'd set out the competing lines of authority plainly, rather than picking one and hiding the tension. I'd give a reasoned view on which line is more likely to be followed and why, then translate that into a practical risk assessment the client can use, for example a rough likelihood of success rather than legal jargon alone. Solicitors need something they can act on, not just a survey of case law."

5. What would you do if you realised partway through a hearing that you'd been given incomplete instructions by the solicitor or client?

Why they ask

Tests ethical judgement and duty to the court, both central to independent practice at the bar.

How to structure your answer

Outline the judgement call: your duty to the court comes first, then how you'd manage the immediate situation and the client relationship afterward.

Example answer

"My duty to the court takes priority, so I wouldn't press an argument I now knew rested on incomplete or misleading information. I'd seek an adjournment or a short break to get instructions clarified before continuing, rather than pushing on regardless. Afterward I'd have a direct conversation with the instructing solicitor about what happened and why full instructions matter for how I can run the case."

6. Why do you want to move to the independent bar rather than continue in a solicitor's role or in-house practice?

Why they ask

Assesses motivation and understanding of what independent practice actually involves, including irregular income and the cab-rank principle.

How to structure your answer

Give a direct, honest answer covering what draws you to advocacy specifically and your understanding of the practical realities of chambers life.

Example answer

"I want to focus on advocacy and legal argument rather than file management and client relationship work, and I've found the courtroom is where I do my best work. I understand the bar means variable income between briefs and taking matters under the cab-rank principle even when they're not to my taste, and I've spoken to several barristers in chambers about how they manage that before deciding this is the right move."