

Cooper interview questions

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What to expect

The interview for a Cooper role typically assesses your technical knowledge of barrel making, your practical skills, and your ability to work safely and solve problems. Employers look for a blend of traditional craftsmanship and modern production awareness.

- **Technical:** Questions about wood selection, stave shaping, barrel assembly, and tool use.
- **Process:** Walk-throughs of how you approach tasks such as making or repairing a barrel.
- **Behavioural:** Questions asking for examples of past work, teamwork, or problem-solving.
- **Scenario:** Hypothetical situations, such as a leaking barrel or a tight deadline.
- **Safety:** Questions about safe work practices with tools, machinery, and materials.

The interview usually starts with a brief phone screen, then an in-person interview at the workshop. You may be asked to demonstrate a skill, such as shaping a stave or fitting a hoop. There is often a tour of the facility and a chance to meet the team. The process typically ends with an opportunity for you to ask questions.

1. Can you walk me through the process of making a barrel from start to finish?

Why they ask

This tests your technical knowledge and whether you understand the full production process, from wood selection to finishing.

How to structure your answer

A walk-through structure: outline the main stages in order, explaining key decisions and tools used at each step.

Example answer

"First, I select the wood, usually oak, checking for grain and moisture. I season it if needed. Then I shape the staves using a hand plane and a cooper's jointer, making sure they fit tightly. I assemble the staves into a barrel shape, using a hoop driver to fit the metal hoops. Then I test for leaks by filling with water or air. If there are leaks, I repair them. Finally, I finish the barrel and prepare it for use."

2. Tell me about a time when you discovered a defect in a barrel you were working on. How did you handle it?

Why they ask

This assesses your problem-solving skills and attention to detail, as well as your ability to take responsibility.

How to structure your answer

STAR: describe the situation, the task, the action you took, and the result.

Example answer

"In my previous job, I was assembling a barrel for a winery client when I noticed a small crack in one of the staves. I stopped work, informed my supervisor, and replaced the stave with a new one from the same batch of wood. I then re-assembled the barrel and tested it thoroughly. The barrel passed testing, and the client received a quality product on time. I learned to always inspect each stave carefully before assembly."

3. Imagine you've just assembled a barrel and it leaks during testing. What steps would you take?

Why they ask

This tests your judgement under pressure and your practical troubleshooting skills.

How to structure your answer

Judgement under pressure: stay calm, identify the cause, take corrective action, and prevent future issues.

Example answer

"First, I would try to locate the leak. I might fill the barrel with water and look for drips. If the leak is from a gap between staves, I might need to tighten the hoops or add a small amount of filler. If it's a defect in a stave, I would replace that stave. After fixing, I would re-test. I would also check my assembly process to see if I could avoid the issue next time."

4. What are the key safety considerations when working with hand and power tools in a cooperage?

Why they ask

Safety is paramount in any workshop, and this role involves sharp tools and heavy machinery.

How to structure your answer

List and explain: cover the main hazards and your approach to managing them.

Example answer

"Key considerations include wearing personal protective equipment like safety glasses and gloves when needed, keeping tools sharp and well-maintained, and ensuring a clean and organised workspace. When using power tools, I make sure guards are in place and follow correct operating procedures. I also think about manual handling, as barrels and wood can be heavy. I always lift with proper technique or use equipment. I also keep fire extinguishers accessible and know emergency procedures."

5. Which tools do you consider essential for a cooper, and how do you maintain them?

Why they ask

This shows your familiarity with the trade and your commitment to tool care.

How to structure your answer

Specific examples: name the tools and describe maintenance routines.

Example answer

"Essential tools include hand planes, a cooper's jointer, a hoop driver, a croze, and a barrel shave. I maintain them by sharpening blades regularly, cleaning off sap and debris, and storing them in a dry place to prevent rust. I also inspect handles and parts for wear and replace them as needed. Proper maintenance ensures they work efficiently and safely."

6. How do you ensure the wood you select is suitable for ageing wine or spirits?

Why they ask

This probes your understanding of wood quality and how it affects the final product.

How to structure your answer

Explain factors: discuss wood type, grain, moisture, and any treatments.

Example answer

"I look for tight grain and minimal knots, as these are less likely to leak. I check moisture content to ensure it's within a suitable range for staves, not too wet and not too dry. I also consider the type of

wood; oak is common for wine and spirits because it imparts desirable flavours. I avoid wood with cracks or signs of rot. Sometimes I season the wood myself to ensure it's ready. I also follow any specific requirements from the client or the product being aged."