

Database Administrator interview questions

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What to expect

Database Administrator interviews mix technical depth with judgement under pressure, since most of the job involves preventing problems before they affect the business and responding quickly when they do. Expect a panel that includes a technical lead or senior DBA alongside a hiring manager.

- **Technical:** Questions testing knowledge of specific platforms (SQL Server, Oracle, PostgreSQL, AWS RDS, MongoDB), SQL tuning and configuration.
- **Scenario:** Hypothetical incidents such as a performance degradation or failed backup, testing troubleshooting approach and prioritisation.
- **Behavioural:** Past examples of handling outages, security incidents or working with developers and analysts, usually assessed with STAR.
- **Safety/compliance:** Questions on access control, patching cadence and how you balance security requirements against system availability.

Interviews usually open with a walk-through of your experience and platforms used, move into scenario or technical questions (sometimes with a whiteboard or live SQL exercise), then close with behavioural questions and your own questions about the environment and on-call arrangements.

1. Walk me through how you would set up capacity planning for a production database that's growing steadily.

Why they ask

Tests whether you understand proactive monitoring rather than just reactive fixes, a core part of the role.

How to structure your answer

Process walk-through: describe each stage in order, from baseline metrics through to alerting thresholds and review cadence.

Example answer

"I'd start by establishing baseline metrics for storage growth, query volume and response times over a few weeks. From there I'd set alerting thresholds at levels that give enough lead time to act, typically well before hitting hard limits. I'd review growth trends monthly against business forecasts, and flag to stakeholders early if we're tracking toward a storage or performance ceiling so budget and downtime for upgrades can be planned rather than forced."

2. Tell me about a time you had to troubleshoot a connectivity or performance issue under time pressure.

Why they ask

Directly maps to the troubleshooting task central to this role and reveals how you work when systems are down.

How to structure your answer

STAR: situation, task, action, result.

Example answer

"A reporting application started timing out during business hours (situation). I needed to identify the cause and restore normal response times without taking the database offline (task). I checked active sessions and found a blocking query from a batch job that had been rescheduled incorrectly, then killed the session and worked with the application team to move the job to an off-peak window (action). Response times returned to normal within the hour and we updated the runbook to flag that"

job's scheduling dependency (result)."

3. A backup job has been reporting success for weeks, but a recovery test fails. What do you do?

Why they ask

Probes judgement on backup integrity, a critical and sometimes overlooked risk area.

How to structure your answer

Scenario/judgement under pressure: state immediate priority, diagnostic steps, and how you'd communicate the risk.

Example answer

"My first priority is establishing how far back a valid recovery point actually exists, since that defines our real exposure. I'd check backup logs for silent failures like truncated files or permission issues, and test recovery against several recent backups to find the last good one. I'd escalate immediately to my manager and relevant stakeholders since this is a business continuity risk, then fix the underlying backup issue and build a recurring recovery test into the schedule so this isn't caught only when it's needed."

4. How do you manage user access controls while keeping systems usable for developers and analysts who need regular access?

Why they ask

Tests the balance between security and operational practicality, a recurring tension in this role.

How to structure your answer

Direct explanation with a supporting example.

Example answer

"I apply least-privilege access by default and use role-based permissions tied to job function rather than individual accounts, so access is easier to audit and revoke. When developers need temporary elevated access for a migration or investigation, I grant it with an expiry and log the reason. I review access lists on a regular schedule and remove anything that's no longer justified, which keeps the system both usable and defensible in an audit."

5. What experience do you have with AWS RDS or other cloud database platforms compared to on-premises systems?

Why they ask

Cloud infrastructure is listed as a core skill for this role, and many employers are migrating away from on-premises setups.

How to structure your answer

Direct technical comparison, drawing on specific platform experience.

Example answer

"I've managed both on-premises SQL Server instances and AWS RDS deployments. RDS takes care of a lot of the underlying patching and backup infrastructure, which frees up time for performance tuning and schema design, but you lose some low-level control over configuration, so I've had to get comfortable working within parameter groups and RDS-specific monitoring tools like CloudWatch and Performance Insights rather than direct OS access."

6. How do you decide when a security patch needs to be applied immediately versus scheduled for the next maintenance window?

Why they ask

Tests risk judgement, since patching decisions affect both security exposure and system availability.

How to structure your answer

Judgement-based reasoning: describe the factors weighed and a concrete example.

Example answer

"I look at the severity of the vulnerability, whether it's actively being exploited, and whether the affected system is internet-facing or handles sensitive data. A critical vulnerability on a public-facing database gets patched out of cycle, even if that means a short planned outage. Lower-severity patches go into the next scheduled maintenance window so we can test them properly and avoid introducing new issues into a stable production system."