

Excavator Operator interview questions

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

What to expect

Excavator Operator interviews mix practical competency checks with questions about safety judgement, site communication and machine control. Employers are hiring for someone they can trust unsupervised on a live site, so expect the conversation to probe how you actually behave when conditions aren't straightforward.

- **Process:** Questions about your standard routine, such as pre-shift checks or how you set up before digging.
- **Scenario / judgement:** Hypothetical site situations testing how you'd respond to hazards, unclear plans or equipment faults.
- **Safety:** Direct questions on exclusion zones, licensing and WHS obligations specific to plant operation.
- **Behavioural:** Past experience questions about coordinating with ground crew, spotters or supervisors.
- **Technical:** Questions on machine control, GPS grading systems and grade accuracy.

Most interviews for this role start with licence and ticket verification (White Card, plant competencies, VOC), move into scenario and safety questions, then behavioural questions about working with crews. Some employers will also run a short practical assessment or ask you to talk through a VOC on their machine before or after the interview.

1. Walk me through your pre-shift inspection on an excavator before you start digging.

Why they ask

This checks whether you have a genuine, consistent routine rather than skipping checks under time pressure.

How to structure your answer

Step-by-step walkthrough: describe the order you check things in, from a walk-around to hydraulic and track checks to logging any defects.

Example answer

"I start with a walk-around looking for leaks, damage to the bucket, boom and tracks, and check tyre or track condition. Then I check fluid levels, test the hydraulics with a slow lift and swing before load, and check the cab controls, mirrors and camera if fitted. I confirm the two-way radio is working since I rely on it to talk to the spotter. Anything out of order gets logged and reported before I start, not worked around."

2. You're mid-dig on a trench and your spotter signals to stop because something's not right underground. What do you do?

Why they ask

Tests judgement under pressure and whether safety takes priority over schedule.

How to structure your answer

Judgement-under-pressure structure: immediate action, verification, escalation, and how work resumes.

Example answer

"I stop the bucket immediately and shut down swing movement rather than trying to interpret the signal myself. I get out or use the radio to confirm exactly what they've seen, whether it's a service,

unstable ground or something else. If it's a potential service strike I isolate the area and get the supervisor to check against the Dial Before You Dig plans before anyone goes near it again. I don't restart digging until it's been cleared and confirmed safe."

3. Tell me about a time you had to coordinate closely with ground crew or a spotter in a tight or low-visibility site.

Why they ask

Behavioural question checking real experience with the communication side of the job, not just machine skill.

How to structure your answer

STAR: situation, task, action, result.

Example answer

"On one site we were excavating close to an existing structure with a blind spot behind the machine. My task was to load trucks without swinging into the exclusion zone or losing sight of the ground crew. I agreed hand signals and radio call-outs with the spotter before starting, kept my speed down on the swing, and stopped the moment I lost visual contact. We finished the loading without any near misses and the supervisor flagged it as a well-run sequence in the toolbox talk afterwards."

4. How do you use a GPS grading system to hold grade on a civil job, and what do you do if it's not available?

Why they ask

Technical question checking real familiarity with machine guidance versus just claiming it on a resume.

How to structure your answer

Technical explanation: describe the tool, how you use it day to day, and your fallback method.

Example answer

"With GPS grading fitted, I set the design file for the cut and use the in-cab display to guide bucket depth against the target grade, checking against survey pegs periodically rather than relying on the screen alone. When GPS isn't available or the machine isn't fitted with it, I fall back to the laser level and staff, taking regular readings against the site benchmark to make sure I'm not drifting off grade over a long run."

5. What's your understanding of exclusion zones and how you manage them around an operating excavator?

Why they ask

Direct safety knowledge check specific to plant operation on shared sites.

How to structure your answer

Knowledge-check: state the rule, then explain how you apply it practically on site.

Example answer

"The exclusion zone needs to account for the machine's full swing radius plus a safety margin, and it has to be enforced for anyone on foot, not just other plant. In practice I confirm the zone with the site supervisor at the start of the shift, make sure barricading or spotters are in place before I start swinging, and I stop work if anyone enters the zone without eye contact and a clear signal from me first."

6. A supervisor's plan doesn't match what you're seeing in the ground once you start digging. How do you handle it?

Why they ask

Checks whether you can read plans critically and raise issues rather than digging on regardless.

How to structure your answer

Judgement-under-pressure structure: recognise the discrepancy, stop and verify, communicate up, agree a way forward.

Example answer

"I stop digging as soon as something doesn't line up, whether that's unexpected fill, a service not shown on the plan, or ground levels that don't match the survey. I flag it straight to the supervisor or engineer rather than assuming the plan is right or guessing a fix myself. Once we've confirmed the actual conditions, I keep working to whatever revised instruction they give, and I make sure it's documented if it changes the scope."