

Import Export Clerk interview questions

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What to expect

Import export clerk interviews focus on your practical knowledge of customs documentation, your ability to use border systems accurately, and how you handle pressure when shipments are held. Employers want to know you can keep cargo moving and keep clients informed.

- **Process:** Questions that ask you to walk through a customs declaration or freight booking step by step, to show you understand the end-to-end workflow.
- **Technical:** Questions about tariff classification, duty calculation, permits and the software you use, such as Integrated Cargo System and CargoWise One.
- **Behavioural:** Questions that ask for a real example of how you managed deadlines, solved a problem or worked with a difficult client.
- **Scenario:** Questions that put you in a hypothetical hold or delay, to see how you judge the situation and communicate under pressure.
- **Client-facing:** Questions about explaining delays, extra duties or clearance outcomes to clients in plain language.
- **Regulatory:** Questions that check your knowledge of Australian border requirements, including biosecurity and tariff concession orders.

Typically a phone screen with a recruiter or hiring manager, then a face-to-face or video interview with the customs or operations manager. You might be asked to walk through a sample declaration or complete a short exercise in ICS or CargoWise One. The interview usually moves from your background to technical questions, then scenario and behavioural questions, leaving time for your questions.

1. Walk me through how you prepare and lodge an import customs declaration from start to finish.

Why they ask

This tests your practical knowledge of the declaration process and whether you understand the steps that keep cargo moving.

How to structure your answer

A chronological walk-through: gather documents, classify goods, check permits and biosecurity, lodge in ICS, monitor status, advise the client, and finalise the entry.

Example answer

"I start by collecting the commercial invoice, packing list and bill of lading from the client or forwarder. I check the Incoterms to confirm who is responsible for what, then classify the goods using the tariff. I check if any import permits or biosecurity conditions apply, especially for food or plant products. Once everything is accurate, I enter the declaration into ICS, lodge it, and monitor the response. If ABF or DAFF request more information, I respond quickly. I keep the client updated on clearance progress and make sure the entry is finalised before the cargo is released."

2. You notice a tariff classification that could attract a higher duty than the client expected. What do you do?

Why they ask

This checks your technical judgement and your ability to balance compliance with the client's commercial interests.

How to structure your answer

Assess, verify, communicate and act: double-check the classification, look for duty-saving options, explain the options to the client, and seek expert advice if needed before lodging.

Example answer

"I would first double-check the classification against the tariff and any explanatory notes. If I still believe the higher duty applies, I would look for a tariff concession order or a different entry type that might reduce the duty. I would then contact the client with a clear explanation of the options and the likely duty, so they can decide. If needed, I would seek advice from a licensed customs broker. I would not lodge the declaration until the client understands and agrees to the duty outcome."

3. Tell me about a time you had to juggle multiple shipments with tight deadlines. How did you manage?

Why they ask

This looks at your time management and how you prioritise when several files need attention at once.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR: describe the situation, the task, the action you took to prioritise and communicate, and the result.

Example answer

"At my last role, we had three sea freight containers arriving on the same day, and two clients needed urgent clearance. I used CargoWise to prioritise the files, focusing on the shipments with the earliest cut-off times. I prepared all declarations in advance and lodged them in order. I kept the forwarders and clients updated throughout the day. By staying organised and communicating early, all three cleared without demurrage charges, and both urgent clients received their cargo on time."

4. A shipment is held by biosecurity because of a packaging material. How do you handle it?

Why they ask

This scenario checks how you work with border agencies and keep a client calm when a shipment is stuck.

How to structure your answer

Judgement under pressure: stay calm, gather facts, liaise with the agency and forwarder, resolve the issue, keep the client informed, and review the process to prevent a repeat.

Example answer

"First, I would check the biosecurity notice to understand exactly what the issue is. Then I would contact the freight forwarder and the client to see if the packaging can be treated, re-exported or disposed of. I would liaise with DAFF to confirm the options and timeline. While that is happening, I would keep the client informed so they can adjust their delivery plans. Once the issue is resolved, I would update our procedures to make sure the same packaging problem does not happen again."

5. How do you explain a clearance delay or extra duty to a frustrated client?

Why they ask

This tests your customer service and written and verbal communication skills, which are central to the role.

How to structure your answer

Show empathy, clarity and action: acknowledge the frustration, explain the reason in plain language, outline what you are doing, give a realistic timeline, and follow up.

Example answer

"I would start by acknowledging their frustration and apologising for the inconvenience. Then I would explain the reason for the delay in plain language, without jargon, such as a biosecurity inspection or a missing permit. I would outline what I am doing to fix it, give a realistic timeline, and offer to follow up by a certain time. I would also suggest ways to avoid the issue on future shipments. The key is to be honest and keep them informed."

6. What experience do you have with Integrated Cargo System and CargoWise One?

Why they ask

This checks your tool proficiency, because these systems are used daily to lodge declarations and manage freight.

How to structure your answer

Describe the systems, the tasks you perform in them, your level of proficiency, and any training or support you have given to others.

Example answer

"I have used ICS daily to lodge import and export declarations, check statuses and respond to queries from ABF and DAFF. In CargoWise One, I manage freight bookings, track shipments, and maintain client records. I am comfortable with tariff classification and using Excel to analyse duty and freight data. I have also trained new team members on both systems. I am always keen to learn new features or updates."