

Milliner interview questions

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What to expect

Interviews for milliner roles blend practical craft assessment with client-facing and design questions. Employers want to see your hand skills, your eye, and how you work with people who commission hats for races, weddings and everyday wear.

- **Technical craft:** You may be asked to talk through or show blocking, sewing, and trimming techniques.
- **Process:** Walk-throughs of how you take a design from brief to finished hat.
- **Behavioural:** Past examples of client fittings, repairs, or deadline pressure.
- **Scenario:** Hypothetical client requests, material problems, or alterations.
- **Client-facing:** How you communicate with clients, manage expectations, and handle feedback.
- **Safety:** Awareness of safe studio practice with steam, sharp tools, and machinery.

Often starts with a portfolio review or a look at photos of your work, then a conversation about your making process. Some studios set a short practical test, such as blocking a small piece or hand-sewing a trim. You may meet the studio owner or head milliner, and if the role is client-facing, they will ask how you handle fittings and commissions. For retail or fashion label roles, there may be a second conversation about range development and production timelines.

1. Walk me through how you block a felt hat, from preparing the hood to the finished crown.

Why they ask

This is a core millinery skill, and the interviewer wants to hear your sequence, your feel for the material, and how you avoid common problems like stretching or uneven brims.

How to structure your answer

A step-by-step walk-through. Start with the material and tools, move through each stage, and mention the checks you make along the way.

Example answer

"I start by checking the felt hood for any thin spots or marks, then I give it a good steam over the iron to soften the fibres. I choose a block in the crown shape and size I need, and I place the hood over it, easing the felt down evenly. I work from the crown down to the brim, pinning as I go, and I make sure the felt is not stretched too hard in one area. For a fedora, I tie a string around the base of the crown to define the break, then I let it dry completely before removing it. Once it is dry, I trim the brim, sand the edge, and finish with a grosgrain ribbon inside. I always check the fit on a head block before I call it done."

2. Tell me about a time you had to alter a hat to fit a client's specific needs, such as a larger head size or a change to the trim.

Why they ask

Milliners often work with individual clients, and alterations are a big part of the job. They want to see how you solve fit and style problems without losing the original design.

How to structure your answer

STAR: Situation, Task, Action, Result.

Example answer

"A client came to me with a vintage straw hat she wanted to wear to a wedding, but it was too small and the brim was cracked. The task was to make it wearable without losing its character. I measured her head and added a hidden inner band to bring it to the right size, then I reinforced the cracked brim with a thin layer of matching straw and a silk underlay. I replaced the old trim with fresh flowers and a ribbon that suited her outfit. She wore it to the wedding and later asked me to make a felt hat for her winter races. It taught me that a careful alteration can keep a piece alive and build a client's trust."

3. A client brings in a fragile vintage hat and wants it restyled for a race day. How do you approach it?

Why they ask

This tests your judgement with delicate materials, your creativity, and how you manage a client's expectations when the original piece is at risk.

How to structure your answer

A judgement-under-pressure structure: assess the condition, explain the risks, propose a plan, and confirm with the client before you start.

Example answer

"First, I would examine the hat under good light and feel the material gently to see how fragile it really is. I would tell the client what can and cannot be done, for example that the straw may not take a new shape without cracking. Then I would suggest a plan that works with the hat rather than against it, such as adding a new trim, a veil, or a band to cover weak areas, and maybe a new lining for comfort. I would show them a sketch or a sample of the trim so they can see the direction. I would get their agreement on the plan and the price before starting, and I would keep the original character of the hat. If the hat is too fragile to wear, I would say so and offer to make a new piece inspired by it."

4. Which millinery materials do you enjoy working with, and how do you choose the right one for a design?

Why they ask

They want to hear your material knowledge and how you match material to purpose, season, and client need.

How to structure your answer

A technical knowledge answer: name materials, explain their properties, and give an example of matching material to a brief.

Example answer

"I enjoy working with fur felt for structured hats because it blocks beautifully and holds a shape, and with sinamay for lighter, sculptural pieces. Straw is lovely for spring and summer, but it can be brittle, so I choose it when the design is simple and the client wants something breathable. For a race day hat, I might choose felt for a winter carnival or sinamay for a spring event. I also think about the client's outfit and the occasion. If they want something they can wear again, I suggest a classic shape in a neutral colour. If it is a one-off statement piece, I might use crinoline or feathers. I always test a small piece first to see how it behaves with steam and pins."

5. How do you handle a client who is unhappy with the fit or style of a custom hat after you have finished it?

Why they ask

This is a client-facing question. They want to see that you can listen, stay calm, and find a solution that protects the relationship and your reputation.

How to structure your answer

A client-facing problem-solving structure: listen without defensiveness, ask questions, offer options, and follow through.

Example answer

"I would start by thanking them for telling me, because I would rather fix it than have them unhappy. I would ask them to show me what is not working, whether it is the fit, the trim, or the overall look. If it is a fit issue, I would check the measurements again and adjust the inner band or reshape the crown. If it is the style, I would offer to change the trim or add a detail that brings it closer to what they imagined. I would give a clear timeline for the alteration and keep them updated. If we cannot agree, I would offer a credit or a remake depending on the situation. The goal is to have them leave happy and to learn something for next time."

6. What safety practices do you follow in a millinery studio, especially with steam irons, pins, and sewing machines?

Why they ask

Safety is part of the job, and employers want to know you will not hurt yourself or others and that you respect the equipment.

How to structure your answer

A safety question: list the hazards, explain your controls, and mention any training or habits.

Example answer

"I always keep the steam iron on a stable surface and never leave it face down. I use a heatproof mat and check the cord for damage. With pins, I keep them in a magnetic dish or a pin cushion, and I never put them in my mouth. When I am sewing, I keep my fingers away from the needle and use a finger guard if I need to. I also keep the work area tidy so I do not trip or knock things over. If I am using a steamer, I make sure the room is ventilated. I have done a basic workplace safety induction at TAFE, and I follow the studio's rules for chemicals like stiffener or glue. I also take breaks when I am doing repetitive work to avoid strain."