

Plastics Machine Operator interview questions

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

What to expect

Interviews for plastics machine operator roles are practical and safety-focused. Employers want to know you can set up a machine without supervision, read the process, spot a bad part and know when to stop and escalate.

- **Technical and process:** Questions about machine setup, parameter adjustment, tool changes and how you read temperatures, pressures and cycle times on a control panel.
- **Fault-finding scenario:** A described defect or machine behaviour, with the interviewer listening for a logical order of checks rather than a lucky guess.
- **Safety and compliance:** Lockout tagout, hot barrels and platens, resin dust, PPE, safety data sheets and what you do when a guard or interlock is bypassed.
- **Behavioural:** Past examples of catching quality problems, working with maintenance, or handling a difficult shift or handover.
- **Reliability and shift fit:** Rotating rosters, night shifts, overtime and attendance, since the line runs to a schedule regardless of who is on.

Usually a short phone screen with a recruiter or production supervisor, then an on-site interview with the production manager and possibly a leading hand. Many plants add a walkthrough of the floor and a practical discussion at a machine, where you talk through a setup or a defect. A pre-employment medical, drug and alcohol screen and site induction typically follow a verbal offer.

1. Walk me through how you set up an injection moulding machine for a production run.

Why they ask

This is the core skill of the job. The interviewer wants to hear a repeatable sequence, not a general answer about being careful.

How to structure your answer

A sequential walk-through: pre-start checks, then setup, then first-off approval. Move through each step in order and say what you verify before moving on.

Example answer

"First I check the job pack and confirm the tool, material and colour match the schedule. I inspect the mould for damage, make sure the water lines are connected and flowing, and check the machine is isolated before I fit anything. Then I mount the tool, set the clamp force and open and close positions, and bring the barrel up to the temperatures on the setup sheet, allowing soak time before I purge. I set shot size, injection speed, hold pressure and cooling time from the sheet, then run a few shots into the scrap bin. Once the parts look sound I run a first-off and check it against the drawing with callipers, and I do not release to full production until the leading hand or quality signs it off. I record the final parameters on the setup sheet so the next operator can repeat the run."

2. Tell me about a time you spotted a quality problem before it got worse.

Why they ask

It tests whether you actually look at the parts you produce and whether you act early instead of letting a bad batch run.

How to structure your answer

STAR. Keep the situation and task short, spend the time on what you checked and what you did, and finish with what changed afterwards.

Example answer

"I was running a large part on a night shift when I noticed the edges felt sharper than the sample and the weight was drifting. I pulled parts every few minutes and checked them with callipers, and the wall thickness was sitting under the lower limit. I stopped the machine, quarantined the parts from the last hour into a clearly labelled bin, and checked the last signed-off sample to work out when it started. The dryer had been running warm and the material was over-dried, so I adjusted it, purged the barrel and restarted. I logged the fault and the fix on the handover sheet. The quarantined parts went to quality for review and the rest of the shift ran clean."

3. You are running a job and the parts start coming off with short shots while the cycle time has crept up. What do you do?

Why they ask

A realistic fault that can have several causes. The interviewer is watching how you reason under production pressure.

How to structure your answer

Judgement under pressure: contain the problem, work from the simplest cause outward, then escalate and document.

Example answer

"I would contain first. I would stop releasing parts, quarantine what has been produced since the last good check, and tell the leading hand the job is on hold so the schedule can be adjusted. Then I would work through the likely causes in order. Short shots with a rising cycle time usually point to a feed or temperature issue, so I would check the hopper for bridging or a blocked feed throat, confirm the dryer is working and the material is not damp, and check the barrel temperatures against the setup sheet. If the temperatures were fine I would check that the non-return valve is holding by doing a shot into the air, and look at whether injection pressure or speed has drifted. If it is something I can correct with parameters, I adjust and run a new first-off. If it is mechanical, I lock out the machine and raise a maintenance request rather than push on."

4. What does working safely around hot barrels, moving platens and resin dust look like to you?

Why they ask

Polymer plants carry real hazards. Employers want someone who understands the controls rather than someone who says they are safe.

How to structure your answer

Principles first, then a concrete example from your own work. Name the specific controls, then show you use them on a normal day, not just after an incident.

Example answer

"It means using the controls every time, not when someone is watching. On my machines that starts with lockout tagout before any tool change, guard or purge work, and testing the isolation before I put my hands anywhere near the platens. I wear the right PPE for the task, heat gloves and a face shield for purging, hearing protection and safety glasses on the floor, and a respirator if I am working around fine resin dust. I keep the area clear of pellets because they are a slip hazard, and I check the safety data sheets before I handle a material I have not used before. If a guard or interlock is faulty I stop the job and report it rather than run around it, because a machine that is running is not worth an injury."

5. How do you manage the rotating shift roster, including nights and weekends?

Why they ask

Attendance and shift tolerance decide whether you last on the roster. They are checking that you have thought about it honestly.

How to structure your answer

Honest situational answer: what the roster is, how you prepare for it, and how you stay reliable across the cycle.

Example answer

"I have worked rotating shifts for several years and I treat the roster as part of the job rather than something to work around. Before a run of nights I shift my sleep pattern over the day or two before, keep my meals on a routine and avoid turning the first day off into an all-nighter. I keep my handover notes tight so the incoming operator does not have to chase me for information, and I arrive early enough to do a proper handover rather than a rushed one. If something unavoidable comes up I tell the supervisor as early as I can so cover can be arranged. I would rather be upfront about availability than say yes to every shift and then let the line down."

6. The schedule changes mid-shift and you need to do a changeover you were not expecting. How do you handle it?

Why they ask

Changeovers are where scrap, downtime and safety incidents cluster. It shows how you plan and document under time pressure.

How to structure your answer

A plan-then-do structure: confirm the new requirement, prepare, execute to procedure, verify first-off, and document.

Example answer

"First I confirm the details with the leading hand: which tool, which material, what quantity and when the run needs to start. Then I finish and close off what I am running safely, purge the barrel with the correct purge material for the colour change, and clean down the machine so there is no cross-contamination. I check the new tool is available and undamaged, fit it, and set the machine to the parameters on the setup sheet for that job. I run first-offs and check them against the drawing before releasing to production. If the changeover takes longer than expected I let the leading hand know early rather than at the end of the shift. When it is running, I record the actual parameters and any issues on the job sheet and pass them on at handover so the next operator starts from a known point."