

Shoemaker interview questions

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What to expect

Shoemaker interviews usually focus on your practical craft skills, your ability to solve fit and repair problems, and how you work with customers in a small workshop. Employers want to see that you can handle both the bench work and the business side of a repair or bespoke order.

- **Technical craft:** Questions that ask you to demonstrate or describe cutting, stitching, lasting, and finishing techniques. You may be asked to complete a practical test on the bench.
- **Process and workflow:** Questions about how you measure feet, record fit details, and manage a repair or production job from start to finish.
- **Customer fit and repair scenarios:** Scenario questions where a customer brings in a specific problem, such as a cracked sole or a difficult fit, and you explain your assessment and recommended solution.
- **Safety and workshop practice:** Questions about using clicker presses, industrial sewing machines, and hand tools safely, including how you maintain a clean and organised workspace.
- **Business and quoting:** Questions about estimating costs, managing inventory, and quoting for bespoke or repair work, especially if you might be self-employed or run a small team.

Usually a single interview with the workshop owner or manager, often including a practical bench test where you demonstrate cutting, stitching, or finishing. Some employers ask you to bring a portfolio or photos of previous work. For repair roles, you may be given a worn shoe and asked how you would assess and fix it. Be ready to talk through your process out loud as you work.

1. Walk me through how you measure a customer's feet and choose or adjust a last for a custom pair.

Why they ask

This shows whether you can translate a customer's measurements into a wearable last and a comfortable final product.

How to structure your answer

Process walk-through. Start with the customer's foot shape and any pressure points, describe how you record length, width, and arch, then explain how you select or modify the last and check the fit during making.

Example answer

"First, I have the customer stand on a sheet of paper so I can trace both feet and note any asymmetry. I measure length from heel to longest toe, width across the ball, and the heel width. I also check for bunions, high arches, or a dropped metatarsal head. I write all of this on a fit card along with the shoe style and heel height they want. Then I choose a last that matches the closest size and width. If the customer has a high instep or a wide forefoot, I add leather patches to the last or sand it down in specific spots. I build the upper and do a trial fitting with the customer before attaching the sole. If anything is tight or loose, I adjust the last and try again. Only when the fit is right do I finish the shoe."

2. Tell me about a time you repaired a shoe that seemed beyond saving. How did you approach it?

Why they ask

Repair work often involves judgement calls about what is worth fixing and how to keep the customer's trust.

How to structure your answer

Behavioural, use STAR. Describe the Situation, the Task (what needed to be saved), the Action (your assessment, materials, and techniques), and the Result (the outcome for the customer and the shoe).

Example answer

"A customer brought in a pair of leather work boots with a deep crack across the flex point of the sole and a separated heel. They were attached to the boots and did not want to replace them. I assessed the crack and decided that a full sole replacement was the only safe option. I removed the old sole and heel, cleaned the welt, and stitched on a new leather midsole. I then attached a new rubber outsole and heel, and finished the edges. The boots were back in use within a week and the customer wore them for another two years. I also advised them to use a shoe tree and condition the leather to prevent the upper from cracking next time."

3. A customer brings in a pair of expensive leather boots with a cracked sole and asks if they can be resoled. How do you assess the job and what do you tell them?

Why they ask

This tests your ability to diagnose a repair, communicate clearly, and manage expectations.

How to structure your answer

Scenario judgement. First inspect the boots, identify the construction method (Goodyear welt, cemented, Blake stitch), then explain what can and cannot be fixed. Give the customer a clear recommendation and a realistic timeline.

Example answer

"I would start by looking at the sole and the upper. If the sole is cracked but the upper is still supple and the welt is intact, a resole is usually possible. I check whether the boots are Goodyear welted, because that makes resoling straightforward. If they are cemented, I explain that the new sole will be glued and may not last as long. I also look for cracks in the leather upper, especially at the flex point, because those cannot be repaired invisibly. I would tell the customer that I can replace the sole and heel, and that the boots will be ready in about a week. If the upper is too far gone, I would say so honestly and suggest that the money is better put toward a new pair. I always give a written quote before starting work."

4. What steps do you take to keep yourself and others safe when using the clicker press and industrial sewing machine?

Why they ask

Shoemaking involves sharp tools and powerful machinery, so employers need to know you work safely.

How to structure your answer

Direct checklist with reasoning. List the specific safety steps for each machine, explain why each matters, and mention housekeeping.

Example answer

"Before using the clicker press, I check that the guards are in place and the dies are sharp and correctly aligned. I keep my hands clear of the cutting area and use a push stick for small pieces. I never reach into the press while it is running. For the industrial sewing machine, I make sure the needle guard is fitted and the machine is threaded correctly. I keep my fingers away from the needle and use a slow speed when starting a seam. I also wear safety glasses when cutting or grinding, and I keep the bench clear of offcuts and tools. At the end of the day, I clean the machines and sweep the floor to prevent slips. If anything seems unsafe, I stop and fix it before continuing."

5. How do you quote a bespoke order when the customer wants a specific leather and a custom fit?

Why they ask

This role often involves self-employment or small business work, so quoting and estimating are key skills.

How to structure your answer

Methodical breakdown. Explain how you calculate material, labour, and overheads, how you present the quote, and how you handle changes.

Example answer

"I start by writing down exactly what the customer wants: the style, the leather, the sole type, and any special fitting needs. Then I estimate the leather required, including a margin for mistakes or pattern matching. I check the current price of the leather and any hardware like buckles or laces. For labour, I estimate the hours for pattern making, cutting, stitching, lasting, and finishing. I add a portion for workshop overheads like rent, electricity, and machine maintenance. I present the quote in person or by email, with a clear breakdown and a deposit amount. I also explain that if the customer changes the design or the leather after we start, the price may change. I never give a final price until I have measured the feet and seen the leather."

6. Describe your experience with Shoemaster or Rhino 3D in footwear design or pattern making.**Why they ask**

Some workshops use digital tools for pattern making, grading, and visualisation, so familiarity can set you apart.

How to structure your answer

Experience-based, show proficiency. Describe a specific project where you used the software, what you did, and how it improved the outcome.

Example answer

"I have used Rhino 3D to model a custom last and generate a pattern for a pair of orthopaedic shoes. I started by scanning the customer's foot and importing the mesh into Rhino. I then built a surface around the scan to create a last that matched their measurements. From that last, I flattened the surface into a 2D pattern, which I exported to cut leather by hand. The software helped me visualise the fit and make adjustments before cutting any leather, which saved time and material. I have also used Shoemaster for basic pattern grading when I worked on a small production run of sandals. I am comfortable learning new software and would be glad to train on your system."