Small Engine Mechanic interview questions

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What to expect

Interviews for small engine mechanic roles usually combine a technical discussion with a practical assessment. Employers want to see how you think through a fault, handle tools safely, and deal with customers who rely on their equipment. The questions below reflect what comes up most often.

- **Technical and diagnostic:** Questions about how you trace faults in two-stroke and four-stroke engines, and your familiarity with common brands and tools.
- **Safety and compliance:** Questions about workshop safety, correct handling of fuel and tools, and testing equipment after repair.
- **Customer service:** Questions about explaining repairs, managing expectations, and handling complaints.
- **Behavioural and teamwork:** Questions about past experiences working in a workshop, managing time, and collaborating with colleagues.
- **Scenario and judgement:** Hypothetical situations where you must prioritise safety, cost, and customer needs.

The process often starts with a phone screen or a short chat with the workshop supervisor. Then you may be invited to a face-to-face interview and a practical test, where you might be asked to diagnose a non-starting mower or service a carburettor. Some employers combine the interview and practical into one session. Final decisions are usually made by the workshop manager or owner.

1. Can you walk me through how you diagnose a two-stroke engine that won't start?

Why they ask

This tests your systematic approach to fault-finding and your knowledge of the basic systems in a small engine.

How to structure your answer

Use a step-by-step walk-through. Start with the simplest checks and move to more involved tests. Explain what each test tells you and why you would do it in that order.

Example answer

“I start by checking the easy things first. I ask the customer when it last ran and whether the fuel is fresh. Then I check the spark plug for spark and condition. If there's no spark, I test the ignition coil and the kill switch circuit. If spark is good, I move to fuel. I check the fuel filter, lines and carburettor for blockages or stale fuel. I also do a compression test to rule out internal damage. For a two-stroke, I listen for the exhaust note and check the air filter. Usually it's a clogged carburettor or a fouled plug. Once I find the fault, I fix it, reassemble and test run under load.”

2. Tell me about a time you had to explain a repair to a customer who was upset about the cost or the wait.

Why they ask

This assesses your customer service skills and how you handle difficult conversations while maintaining trust.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR: Situation, Task, Action, Result. Focus on how you listened, explained the work in plain language, and found a solution.

Example answer

“A customer brought in a ride-on mower that had been serviced elsewhere and was still cutting out. They were frustrated because they'd already paid for a repair. I listened to their concerns and explained that I needed to run a diagnostic to find the real cause. I showed them the worn ignition coil and explained how it was breaking down when hot. I gave them a clear quote and offered to prioritise the work so they could have it back for the weekend. They agreed, and when they picked it up, they said it ran better than it had in years. They've been back for their annual service since.”

3. You're servicing a chainsaw and notice a cracked fuel line and a worn sprocket. The customer only asked for a tune-up. What do you do?

Why they ask

This tests your judgement around safety, honesty, and upselling without being pushy.

How to structure your answer

Think out loud about safety first, then communication. Explain how you would document the issues, inform the customer, and get approval before doing extra work.

Example answer

“Safety comes first. A cracked fuel line can leak and cause a fire, and a worn sprocket can throw the chain. I would stop the tune-up and take photos of both issues. I'd call the customer, explain what I found and why it matters, and give them a clear price for the extra parts and labour. I'd let them decide. If they decline the sprocket but approve the fuel line, I'd note on the job sheet that the sprocket needs attention and recommend they avoid using the saw until it's replaced. I never do extra work without approval, but I always flag safety issues.”

4. What safety checks do you perform before and after repairing a mower or generator?

Why they ask

This checks your commitment to safety and your knowledge of workshop and equipment safety procedures.

How to structure your answer

List the checks in a logical order. Cover pre-work checks, during-work precautions, and post-repair testing. Mention personal protective equipment and fuel handling.

Example answer

“Before I start, I make sure the work area is clear and I have the right PPE: gloves, safety glasses and hearing protection if I'm testing. I disconnect the spark plug lead and remove the fuel cap to relieve pressure. I check for fuel leaks, damaged leads and loose parts. During the repair, I use the right tools and never modify safety guards. After the repair, I check that all guards are back on, blades are secure and the stop switch works. I run the engine, let it warm up, and test it under load. For a generator, I check the oil level and make sure there's no exhaust leak. I only hand it back when I'm satisfied it's safe.”

5. Describe a time you had to work with limited parts or tools to get a piece of equipment running. How did you manage?

Why they ask

This assesses your problem-solving skills and resourcefulness when parts are delayed or unavailable.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR. Highlight how you prioritised, communicated with the customer, and found a safe workaround.

Example answer

“We had a customer's mower in the workshop and the replacement ignition coil was on backorder. The customer needed it for a weekend job. I checked our spare parts bin and found a similar coil from another brand that had the same resistance. I tested it on the bench, then installed it and ran the engine for twenty minutes. It worked perfectly. I told the customer what I'd done, that it was a temporary fix, and that I'd call them when the correct part arrived. They were happy to have the mower back. I always make sure any workaround is safe and I document it clearly.”

6. How do you keep your technical knowledge up to date with different brands like Briggs & Stratton, Honda, or Stihl?

Why they ask

This shows your willingness to learn and adapt as engines and diagnostic software change.

How to structure your answer

Explain your methods: formal training, online resources, manufacturer software, and hands-on practice. Be specific about what you do.

Example answer

“I use the manufacturer diagnostic software regularly, especially Briggs & Stratton and Stihl. I also subscribe to a couple of trade newsletters and watch repair videos from reputable sources. Whenever a new model comes into the workshop, I read the service manual before I start. I've also done short courses through my employer on fuel injection and electronic ignition. I find that the best learning is on the job, so I ask questions and take notes when I come across something unfamiliar. I keep a notebook of fixes that worked well.”