

# Harbour Master interview questions

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

## What to expect

Harbour Master interviews focus on your ability to manage vessel traffic, enforce safety and environmental rules, and lead under pressure. Employers want to know you can handle the operational and regulatory demands of a port, and that you communicate well with pilots, agents and emergency services.

- **Process and coordination:** Questions that ask you to walk through how you schedule vessel movements, manage pilotage and towage, and keep harbour traffic flowing.
- **Safety and emergency response:** Scenario-based questions about incidents, pollution, or vessel emergencies, testing your judgement and escalation.
- **Regulatory and technical:** Questions on marine regulations, AMSA requirements, and your use of VTMS, AIS and marine radio.
- **Stakeholder and leadership:** Behavioural questions about managing port users, resolving conflicts, and leading your team.

Typically two stages. First, a panel interview with the port operations manager and HR, covering technical knowledge and past experience. Second, a scenario-based assessment or second panel focusing on emergency response and leadership, often including a site walk-through of the harbour and control room. Some employers may ask you to complete a written exercise on a regulatory or safety matter.

## 1. Walk me through how you coordinate a large vessel arrival from the first notification to berthing.

### Why they ask

This tests your operational knowledge and ability to sequence tasks, communicate with multiple parties, and anticipate problems.

### How to structure your answer

A step-by-step walk-through. Start with the notification and risk assessment, then cover pilotage, towage, berth allocation, communication with the vessel and port users, and contingency plans.

### Example answer

*"When I receive notification of a large vessel arrival, I first check the berth availability, weather forecast and any draft restrictions. I confirm the pilot and tug bookings, then issue a pre-arrival briefing to the vessel and relevant port users. On the day, I monitor the vessel's progress on VTMS and AIS, maintain radio contact with the pilot, and adjust the schedule if traffic or weather changes. Once the vessel is secure at berth, I debrief with the pilot and tugs to note any issues for next time."*

## 2. Tell me about a time you managed a conflict between two port users competing for the same berth.

### Why they ask

Ports run on cooperation, and this question shows how you handle competing priorities without damaging relationships.

### How to structure your answer

STAR (Situation, Task, Action, Result).

### Example answer

*"A cruise ship and a bulk carrier were both scheduled for the same berth on a busy weekend. The situation was tense because the bulk carrier had a tight turnaround and the cruise ship had hundreds*

*of passengers. I gathered both agents, reviewed the cargo and passenger schedules, and negotiated a swap that moved the bulk carrier to a different berth with a short tow. I kept everyone informed with regular updates and documented the new plan. As a result, both vessels departed on time and the agents agreed to a more flexible booking protocol for future weekends."*

### **3. A vessel loses steering in the main channel during peak traffic. What do you do?**

#### **Why they ask**

This tests your ability to stay calm, prioritise safety, and coordinate an emergency response.

#### **How to structure your answer**

Immediate actions first, then communication and escalation, then post-incident. Describe how you would assess the situation, alert nearby vessels, deploy tugs, and notify authorities.

#### **Example answer**

*"My first action is to broadcast a safety message on marine radio to alert other traffic and ask them to keep clear. I would then contact the vessel to confirm its status and whether it can anchor or needs immediate assistance. I would dispatch tugs to the scene and inform the harbour patrol and emergency services. If the vessel is blocking the channel, I would suspend inbound and outbound movements and activate the port's emergency plan. After the incident, I would lead a debrief and review the response for improvements."*

### **4. How do you ensure compliance with marine safety and environmental regulations in daily operations?**

#### **Why they ask**

This checks your knowledge of AMSA requirements and your ability to embed compliance into routine work.

#### **How to structure your answer**

A framework answer. Describe your approach to monitoring, auditing, training, and reporting. Give an example of how you handled a non-compliance.

#### **Example answer**

*"I start with a clear safety management system that maps every regulation to a daily task. I run regular audits and inspections with the port operations team, and I make sure everyone knows how to report a hazard or a near miss. For environmental compliance, I monitor fuel transfers, waste disposal and ballast water management. When I found a small oil leak from a tug, I reported it immediately, contained the spill, and worked with the operator to fix the source and update their procedures. I then shared the lesson across the port to prevent a repeat."*

### **5. How do you lead your team during an emergency response drill or real incident?**

#### **Why they ask**

Harbour Masters are leaders in a crisis, and employers want to see how you prepare, direct and support your team.

#### **How to structure your answer**

Before, during, after. Explain your preparation, your communication during the event, and how you debrief and improve.

#### **Example answer**

*"Before any drill, I brief the team on the scenario and the key objectives, and I assign clear roles. During the drill, I stay at the control room and monitor the response via radio and VTMS, stepping in only if safety is at risk. I keep communication calm and direct. After the drill, I run a debrief where everyone can raise what worked and what did not, and we agree on actions. In a real incident, the*

*same structure applies: clear roles, calm communication, and a thorough review afterwards.”*

## **6. How do you handle a shipping agent who repeatedly ignores berth scheduling protocols?**

### **Why they ask**

This tests your ability to enforce rules while maintaining a working relationship with a key port user.

### **How to structure your answer**

A problem-solving approach: understand the cause, communicate expectations, escalate if needed, and follow up.

### **Example answer**

*“I would first meet with the agent to understand why the protocols are being ignored. It might be a misunderstanding or a resource issue on their side. I would restate the scheduling rules and explain the impact on other port users and safety. If the behaviour continues, I would issue a formal warning and involve the port authority's management. I would also document every incident and follow up regularly to make sure the agent is meeting the requirements. The goal is compliance without damaging the relationship, because we need to work together every day.”*