

Historian interview questions

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

What to expect

Interviews for historian roles usually focus on your research process, your ability to communicate history to different audiences, and how you handle ethical and interpretive challenges. You may be asked to discuss your experience with archives, digital tools, and working with communities or stakeholders.

- **Research process:** Questions about how you plan, conduct and manage historical research from brief to output.
- **Behavioural:** Questions asking for past examples of collaboration, communication or problem solving.
- **Scenario:** Hypothetical situations about curation, community engagement or conflicting interpretations.
- **Technical:** Questions about tools, archives and information management.

The interview is often a two-stage process. First, a panel interview with a hiring manager and possibly a curator or senior historian, covering your experience and approach. Second, you may be asked to complete a short task, such as interpreting a primary source or outlining a project plan, and present it to the panel. Some roles also include a conversation with community representatives or a tour of the collection.

1. Walk us through how you approach a new research project from initial brief to final output.

Why they ask

This question assesses your research process, project management and ability to work independently.

How to structure your answer

A process walk-through: start with scoping and questions, then source identification, analysis, drafting, review and final delivery. Mention tools and milestones.

Example answer

"When I start a new project, I first meet with the client or lead to clarify the research question, scope and deadlines. I then map out potential sources, from national archives to local historical societies, and check what is available online through Trove or ArchivesSpace. I create a research plan with key milestones and a system for managing references in Zotero. After gathering sources, I analyse them for patterns, gaps and contradictions, then draft the narrative or report. I usually share a draft with colleagues or community representatives for feedback before finalising. For example, for an exhibition on women in manufacturing, I started with a broad question, narrowed it after a week of scoping, and delivered a script that balanced academic rigour with accessibility."

2. Tell me about a time you had to interpret conflicting sources or deal with incomplete evidence.

Why they ask

Historical interpretation often involves gaps and contradictions. Employers want to see your analytical judgement and transparency.

How to structure your answer

STAR: Situation, Task, Action, Result. Focus on how you weighed evidence and communicated uncertainty.

Example answer

"In a project on a local shipbuilding industry, I found conflicting accounts of a strike in the 1940s. Company records suggested a short dispute, while oral histories described months of tension. My task was to write an accurate account for a museum panel. I compared union records, newspaper reports and three oral history interviews, then noted the discrepancies in my research notes. I decided to present the strike as a period of uncertainty, using quotes from both sides and explaining that records were incomplete. The result was an interpretive text that acknowledged the gaps and prompted visitors to think about how history is constructed. The curator appreciated the honesty, and the panel became a talking point for school groups."

3. How would you curate an exhibition or digital history project for a community that feels underrepresented in your collection?

Why they ask

This scenario tests your approach to community engagement, ethics and creative problem solving.

How to structure your answer

Scenario judgement under pressure: acknowledge the gap, propose a collaborative process, outline practical steps, and consider ethical implications.

Example answer

"If a community is underrepresented, I would first reach out to community leaders and organisations to understand their perspectives and what they would like to see. I would not assume what stories to tell. I would propose a co-curation approach, perhaps running workshops to gather oral histories, photographs and objects. I would also look for gaps in our collection and seek to acquire or borrow relevant materials. For a digital project, I would ensure the community has control over how their stories are presented and that consent is ongoing. I would set a realistic timeline and budget, and build in evaluation. The outcome would be a project that builds trust and reflects the community's own voice, not just an institutional narrative."

4. What tools and methods do you use to manage large amounts of archival material?

Why they ask

This technical question checks your familiarity with digital tools and information management.

How to structure your answer

Technical demonstration: name specific tools, describe your workflow, and give an example of how they helped.

Example answer

"I use Zotero to manage references and PDFs, tagging items by theme and source type. For qualitative analysis, I use NVivo to code oral histories and identify patterns across interviews. When working with archives, I use ArchivesSpace to catalogue collections and track locations, and PastPerfect for museum object records. I also use Microsoft 365 for collaborative writing and spreadsheets for research logs. In one project, I inherited a chaotic collection of 200 letters. I created a spreadsheet with fields for date, author, recipient and summary, then imported the data into ArchivesSpace. That made it possible to search by name or topic, and my colleagues could add notes easily. The system saved time and reduced duplication."

5. Describe a time you presented complex historical research to a non-academic audience.

Why they ask

Historians must communicate clearly. This behavioural question assesses your public speaking and ability to translate research.

How to structure your answer

STAR: Situation, Task, Action, Result. Emphasise audience adaptation and feedback.

Example answer

"I was asked to present my research on colonial water management to a community group in a regional town. The audience included farmers, local councillors and retirees, few of whom had a background in history. My task was to make the topic relevant and engaging. I rewrote my conference paper into a story, using maps, photographs and a few well-chosen quotes. I avoided jargon and focused on how past decisions still affect water access today. During the talk, I paused for questions and encouraged people to share their own memories. The result was a lively discussion, and the local historical society later asked me to help them record oral histories on the same theme. Several attendees said they had never thought of history as relevant to current issues."

6. How do you handle a situation where a stakeholder or community group disagrees with your historical interpretation?

Why they ask

This scenario tests your diplomacy, ethical grounding and ability to navigate conflict.

How to structure your answer

Scenario conflict resolution: listen, acknowledge, explain your evidence, seek common ground, and know when to hold your position or adjust.

Example answer

"I would start by listening carefully to their concerns and asking questions to understand their perspective. Often disagreement comes from a different memory or a lack of access to sources. I would explain the evidence I used and how I reached my interpretation, while acknowledging that history is always open to revision. If they have new sources or oral histories, I would take them seriously and check them. I would look for areas of agreement and consider whether a note in the exhibition or a public forum could present multiple viewpoints. If the disagreement is about a factual matter, I would not change the record without evidence, but I would be transparent about uncertainty. In one case, a family disputed my account of a local figure's role. After meeting with them, I incorporated their letters into the archive and added a footnote explaining the different perspectives, which enriched the final publication."