

Joiner interview questions

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What to expect

A joiner interview usually combines a conversation about your trade background with a practical assessment of how you read drawings, work timber and manage safety. Employers are trying to work out whether your finished work is accurate and whether you can be trusted on site without close supervision.

- **Trade and technical knowledge:** Questions about materials, set-out, tolerances, joinery methods, hardware and the machinery you can operate.
- **Process walk-through:** Being asked to talk through how you take a drawing from a plan to a cut list, a finished component and an installed unit.
- **Scenario and problem solving:** What you do when something does not line up, a measurement is wrong, or the site condition differs from the drawing.
- **Safety:** How you set up and use fixed machinery and power tools, manage dust and site hazards, and handle working at heights.
- **Behavioural:** Past examples of working to a deadline, resolving a defect, or coordinating with other trades.
- **Client and site communication:** How you handle changes, delays and expectations with a builder, site supervisor or homeowner.

Expect an initial phone or short in-person conversation, then a longer interview at the workshop or site office. Many employers include a practical trade test on the bench, such as building a frame, hanging a door or machining a component to a drawing, sometimes followed by a paid trial day alongside the existing crew.

1. Walk me through how you take a set of architectural drawings and turn them into a cut list for a kitchen run.

Why they ask

This shows whether you genuinely read plans or just work from someone else's instructions, and how you organise a production batch.

How to structure your answer

A process walk-through in order: read and check the drawings, confirm dimensions against site, note hardware and finishes, draft the cutting schedule, allow for grain direction and tolerances, then cut and label.

Example answer

"I start with the plan and the elevations together, because the plan gives me the footprint and the elevations give me heights, door reveals and hardware positions. I check the critical dimensions against a site measure rather than trusting the drawing alone, since wall square and floor level are rarely perfect. Then I list every component with its material, thickness, grain direction and edge banding, and I group them by sheet so the panel saw runs one setup. I add a few millimetres to anything that gets scribed on site and I keep tight tolerances on anything that is machined to a fixed size. Each part gets labelled before it comes off the saw so the assembly stage is not a guessing game."

2. Tell me about a time an installed item did not line up on site. How did you handle it?

Why they ask

Defects happen in joinery work. The answer shows whether you own the problem, diagnose it properly and communicate before it becomes someone else's issue.

How to structure your answer

STAR: the situation and the job, the task you were responsible for, the action you took to diagnose and resolve it, and the result for the client and the program.

Example answer

"I was fitting a run of overhead cabinets in a kitchen where the wall had a bow of about ten millimetres across the height. The first carcass sat proud at the top and there was no way to pull it in without distorting the doors. I stopped, checked it with a straight edge and confirmed the wall was the problem rather than my cabinet. I spoke to the site supervisor that morning, agreed to pack the carcass out and scribe a filler to the wall so the gap closed cleanly, and I adjusted the remaining cabinets to the same line. The run ended up flush and the doors sat evenly, and the supervisor knew about the wall before the plasterer came back rather than after. It also meant the next kitchen in that block was measured with the same issue in mind."

3. You are on site and the carcass is out of square against the wall. What do you do?

Why they ask

This is a judgement question under pressure. Employers want to see that you diagnose before you cut, and that you escalate rather than improvise something that will fail later.

How to structure your answer

Stay calm, assess: check with a square and straight edge to find where the error actually sits, decide whether it is fixable by packing, scribing or adjustment or whether a component needs remaking, then communicate with the supervisor before committing to a fix that changes the drawings.

Example answer

"First I would not start cutting anything to cover it. I would put a square and a straight edge on the carcass and work out whether it is my assembly, the wall or the floor that is out. If it is my assembly, I take it apart and redo it, because a twisted carcass will show in every door on that run. If the wall is bowed, I look at whether packing and a scribed filler can close it without pulling the unit out of shape, and if the bow is too big for that I go to the supervisor with the measurement and the options before I do anything permanent. What I will not do is force it with clamps and screws and hope the doors hide it, because that comes back as a defect later."

4. What do you check before you cut a batch of door frames from a stack of timber?

Why they ask

A technical question about material selection and set-out. It tests whether you inspect stock, allow for defects and plan a cut so you do not waste a run.

How to structure your answer

Technical reasoning: assess the material, check the moisture content and straightness, look for knots, splits and cupping, confirm the drawing dimensions and tolerances, then plan the cut sequence so defects fall outside finished components.

Example answer

"I check the moisture content first, because timber that is still moving will cup after it is machined and the joint will open. Then I sight down each length for bow, twist and cup, and I look for knots, gum pockets and surface splits. Anything structural or exposed goes to one side. I confirm the finished sizes and tolerances from the drawing, allowing for the machining allowance so the finished component is right after it comes off the thicknesser. Then I lay out the cut sequence so any defect I cannot avoid falls into an offcut rather than the finished frame, and I set a stop on the saw so every

piece in the batch is identical.”

5. How do you set up and use a panel saw or table saw safely?

Why they ask

Fixed machinery is where joiners get hurt. The answer shows whether safety is a habit or something you recite, and whether you know your obligations under work health and safety law.

How to structure your answer

Work through a safety sequence: pre-start checks, guarding, dust extraction, personal protective equipment, correct technique and safe work practice, then what you do if something is not right.

Example answer

“Before I start I do the pre-start check: guard in place and adjusted to the cut, riving knife aligned, blade sharp and correct for the material, stop button tested. I make sure the dust extraction is connected and running, because fine dust is a real hazard in a workshop. Then I put on safety glasses, hearing protection and a dust mask, and I check that the material is flat and free of nails or staples before it goes anywhere near the blade. I use a push stick for anything narrow, I never reach over the blade, and I set the fence and stops before I switch on rather than adjusting mid-cut. If anything feels wrong, I shut down and fix it before continuing, and I tag the machine out if it needs repair.”

6. A client asks for a change mid-installation that will affect the agreed timeline. How do you respond?

Why they ask

Joiners often work in occupied homes or to a builder's program. This tests your communication and whether you protect the job without overstepping your authority.

How to structure your answer

Client-facing structure: listen and clarify what they actually want, explain the impact in plain terms, avoid committing on price or program beyond your authority, escalate to the supervisor or builder, then confirm the change in writing.

Example answer

“I would stop and hear them out properly, because sometimes what sounds like a big change is a small one once you understand it. Then I would explain plainly what it means for the work already done and for the schedule, for example that moving a cabinet run means the bench top template has to be redone and the plumber needs to come back. I would not quote a price or promise a date on the spot, because that is the builder's or the business owner's call. I would pass it to the supervisor that day with the details, and I would ask for the change to be confirmed in writing before I touch anything, so there is no argument at handover about what was agreed.”