

Librarian interview questions

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What to expect

Librarian interviews mix hands-on process questions about cataloguing and systems with behavioural questions about patron support, and often include at least one scenario question testing judgement around access, privacy or difficult requests. Panels typically include a library manager and sometimes a representative from the service area (school, faculty or council).

- **Process:** Questions checking you can actually perform core technical tasks like cataloguing, classification or database indexing correctly.
- **Behavioural:** Questions about past patron interactions, program delivery or collection decisions, looking for how you actually handled real situations.
- **Scenario:** Hypothetical situations testing judgement, especially around sensitive information requests, patron conflict or resource access.
- **Technical:** Questions about specific systems and standards (MARC, Koha, Alma, Primo/Summon) and your practical experience with them.
- **Client-facing:** Questions about designing and running programs or workshops for a specific audience, such as digital literacy sessions.

Most panels open with general background and motivation questions, move into technical and process questions to confirm capability, then use one or two scenario or behavioural questions to probe judgement and interpersonal skill, before closing with your questions for them.

1. Walk me through how you would catalogue a new physical item using MARC standards.

Why they ask

Cataloguing accuracy is core to the role, and panels want to hear you can describe the actual steps, not just name the standard.

How to structure your answer

Give a step-by-step walkthrough: intake and check for existing records, assign classification and subject headings, complete the MARC record fields, quality-check against the catalogue, then make the item discoverable.

Example answer

"First I'd check whether the item already has a record in the library management system or a shared catalogue, to avoid duplicating work. If not, I'd assign a classification number and subject headings, then build out the MARC record: title, author, publication details, physical description and the relevant subject and added-entry fields. Once that's done I'd run a quick quality check against our local cataloguing standards, confirm the item displays correctly in the discovery platform, and then process it for shelving."

2. Tell me about a time you helped a patron who was frustrated or struggling to find what they needed.

Why they ask

Reference and research support is a daily part of the job, and this checks how you handle pressure and communicate with someone who isn't finding it easy.

How to structure your answer

STAR: describe the situation, your specific task, the actions you took to clarify their need and find a solution, and the result for the patron.

Example answer

"A student came in close to an assignment deadline convinced the library had nothing useful on their topic, because their initial keyword searches in the discovery platform weren't returning much. I sat with them, asked what the assignment actually required, and reframed their search terms using broader and narrower subject headings. We found a database with directly relevant journal articles they hadn't known to check. They left with enough material to finish the assignment, and I made a note to flag that topic area for a possible resource gap."

3. A patron asks for help finding sensitive information, for example on a legal or health matter, and is uncomfortable being seen asking. How would you handle this?

Why they ask

This tests judgement around discretion, professional boundaries and patron privacy, which matters a lot in public-facing library work.

How to structure your answer

Judgement-under-pressure: state the priority (patron dignity and privacy), the practical steps you'd take, and how you'd balance helpfulness with discretion.

Example answer

"I'd keep the interaction low-key and matter-of-fact, so the patron doesn't feel singled out. I'd offer to search or point them toward the resource myself rather than asking them to explain the request loudly at a busy desk, and if there's a private space or self-service option I'd mention that too. I wouldn't record or discuss the nature of their request with colleagues unless there was a genuine safety concern, since patron privacy around what they're researching is something I take seriously."

4. Which library management systems have you used, and how would you approach migrating records from one system to another, for example Koha to Alma?

Why they ask

Systems vary between employers, and panels want to know your practical depth rather than just a list of software names.

How to structure your answer

Technical knowledge answer: name your actual experience, then describe the practical considerations for a migration task.

Example answer

"I've worked mainly in Koha, handling day-to-day cataloguing, circulation and acquisitions. For a migration to a system like Alma, I'd want to start with a data audit: checking for inconsistent MARC fields, duplicate records or outdated classification that would cause problems once mapped into the new system. I'd work with whoever manages the migration to test a sample batch first, check how records display in the new discovery layer, and only then move to a full migration, with a rollback plan in case something doesn't map cleanly."

5. How would you design a digital literacy workshop for people who have never used a library database before?

Why they ask

Program design and teaching ability are named skills for this role, and this checks whether you can plan for a specific audience rather than run a generic session.

How to structure your answer

Planning walkthrough: audience needs, learning goals, session structure, and how you'd check it worked.

Example answer

"I'd start by finding out what this group actually wants to do, whether that's searching for health information, family history or general research, since that shapes what I demonstrate. I'd keep the group small, start with basic navigation and search terms on a shared screen, then let people try a guided search themselves with me circulating for questions. I'd finish with a simple handout of steps so they can repeat the process at home, and ask a few quick questions at the end to see what actually landed."

6. Tell me about a time you decided not to renew or to remove a resource from a collection. How did you make that call?

Why they ask

Collection development involves ongoing judgement about relevance and budget, and this checks how systematically you approach it.

How to structure your answer

STAR: the situation prompting the review, your task, the criteria you applied, and the outcome.

Example answer

"I was reviewing a subscription database as part of a budget review and noticed usage data showed very low uptake compared to its cost. I checked whether that was seasonal or tied to a specific course that had since changed, spoke with a couple of regular users to see if it was still valued, and confirmed there was a cheaper alternative covering similar content. Based on that I recommended not renewing it and redirected the saved budget toward a resource with clearer demand."