

Private Investigator interview questions

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What to expect

Private investigator interviews focus on how you handle real-world investigations, from planning surveillance to writing reports that stand up in court. Employers also probe your understanding of licensing, privacy and surveillance laws, because a mistake in these areas can compromise a case or lead to penalties.

- **Process:** Questions that ask you to walk through a task step by step, such as planning surveillance or conducting record searches.
- **Behavioural:** Questions that ask for past examples of managing difficult subjects, conflicting evidence or tight deadlines.
- **Scenario:** Hypothetical situations that test your judgement under pressure, such as a subject becoming aggressive or discovering evidence that changes the case.
- **Technical and compliance:** Questions on licensing, privacy law, surveillance devices law and the standards for report writing and evidence handling.
- **Client-facing:** Questions about explaining findings to clients, especially when the evidence contradicts what they hoped to hear.

Usually a phone screen first, followed by a face-to-face interview with a senior investigator or operations manager. You may be asked to complete a written report exercise or a short practical assessment. Expect questions about your licence status, police check and availability for weekend or evening work early in the process.

1. Can you walk me through how you plan and conduct a surveillance operation from start to finish?

Why they ask

This shows whether you can manage logistics, legal boundaries and evidence collection without supervision.

How to structure your answer

Walk-through: break the operation into stages: client brief, risk assessment, site survey, equipment check, surveillance itself, recording observations, and post-operation reporting.

Example answer

"First I clarify the client's objectives and any legal constraints. I check my licence conditions and confirm what surveillance devices I can use. Then I do a site survey to identify vantage points and escape routes. Before starting, I test my equipment and set a communication plan. During surveillance, I record times, locations and descriptions in a log, using video or stills where lawful. I avoid anything that could be seen as harassment. Afterwards, I secure the evidence, write a factual report and brief the client on what was observed."

2. Tell me about a time when you had to interview a reluctant witness or subject. How did you get them to provide information?

Why they ask

Interviewing is a core task, and employers want to see you can build rapport without crossing ethical or legal lines.

How to structure your answer

STAR: describe the Situation, Task, Action and Result. Focus on your approach and the outcome.

Example answer

"A witness in a workplace investigation was afraid of repercussions and initially refused to speak. I explained my role was to gather facts, not to take sides, and that their statement would be handled confidentially. I started with open questions about what they had seen, and gradually they described the events. I wrote a statement, read it back to them and had them sign it. The statement became key evidence, and the matter was resolved without going to a full hearing."

3. You are conducting surveillance and the subject becomes aggressive and approaches your vehicle. What do you do?

Why they ask

This tests your safety awareness and ability to de-escalate while preserving your cover and evidence.

How to structure your answer

Judgement under pressure: prioritise personal safety, avoid confrontation, withdraw if necessary, and document the incident.

Example answer

"My first priority is safety. I would lock the doors, stay calm and avoid any gesture that could be seen as confrontational. If the subject continues to approach, I would drive away slowly and call my supervisor or the police if I felt threatened. I would note the time, location and what the subject did. I would not engage in a conversation that could compromise the investigation or my licence conditions. Later, I would write an incident report and review whether the surveillance plan needed adjusting."

4. What are your obligations under Australian privacy and surveillance laws when gathering evidence?

Why they ask

Licensing and compliance are non-negotiable. Employers need to know you understand the legal limits of the role.

How to structure your answer

Technical explanation: cover the Privacy Act, state or territory surveillance devices legislation, and your licence conditions. Give examples of what you can and cannot do.

Example answer

"I must comply with the Privacy Act 1988 and the Australian Privacy Principles when handling personal information. For surveillance, each state and territory has its own surveillance devices legislation, so I always check what is permitted where I am working. I cannot trespass or install devices unlawfully. I also follow my licence conditions, which vary by jurisdiction. When in doubt, I seek advice from my supervisor or a legal adviser before acting."

5. How do you handle a client who is unhappy with your findings because they contradict what they hoped to hear?

Why they ask

This is a client-facing role, and you need to remain objective while managing expectations.

How to structure your answer

Client-facing: acknowledge their disappointment, explain the factual basis of your findings, maintain neutrality, and offer to clarify any points.

Example answer

"I would listen to their concerns and acknowledge that the result is not what they expected. I would then walk them through the evidence I gathered, step by step, and explain how it led to my conclusion. I would remind them that my role is to report facts, not to advocate for a particular outcome. If they had questions about specific observations, I would clarify. If they wanted additional enquiries, I would discuss whether those were feasible and within scope."

6. How do you ensure your reports and statements are accurate and suitable for use in court?

Why they ask

Report writing is a major part of the job, and courts require clear, factual and reliable documents.

How to structure your answer

Process: describe your writing method, verification steps, and how you handle legal admissibility.

Example answer

"I write reports in plain English, sticking to what I observed or verified, not opinion. I record times, dates and locations precisely, and I cross-check my notes against any recordings or documents. Before finalising, I review the report for consistency and ensure it meets the client's brief. For court statements, I follow the rules of evidence and avoid speculation. If I am unsure about admissibility, I consult with the legal team. I also keep my original notes in case they are needed."