

Railway Shunter interview questions

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What to expect

Interviews for railway shunter roles focus on safety, process and your ability to work outdoors in a busy yard. Employers want to see that you can follow safeworking rules without being reminded and that you communicate clearly with drivers and other yard staff.

- **Process and procedure:** How you read shunt lists, plan wagon movements and apply safeworking rules in sequence.
- **Safety and risk:** Your approach to coupling, handbrakes, derails and working around moving rolling stock.
- **Behavioural:** Past examples of working shifts, weather, tight schedules and team coordination.
- **Scenario and judgement:** What you would do if something changes mid-shunt, such as a brake not holding or poor visibility.
- **Technical:** Your knowledge of brake and air hose connections, points, retarders and yard equipment.

Typically a phone screen with a recruiter, then a face-to-face interview with a yard supervisor and a safety officer. Some employers include a practical assessment in the yard, where you demonstrate hand signals, radio calls and safe movement around rolling stock. Medical and rail safety worker checks follow a successful interview.

1. Walk me through how you read a shunt list and plan a set of wagon movements for the day.

Why they ask

This shows whether you can turn a written list into a safe, efficient sequence of moves.

How to structure your answer

Walk-through: start with the list, identify priorities, check the yard plan, sequence cuts, communicate with the driver, then confirm each move before starting.

Example answer

"First I read the shunt list to see which wagons need to go where and which departures are time critical. I check the yard plan to see which roads are clear and where the points are set. Then I group wagons into cuts that can be moved together, starting with the ones blocking departure roads. I call the driver on the two-way radio, confirm the move, and use hand signals as they approach. After each move I check the wagons are coupled or secured before moving on to the next cut."

2. Describe how you apply safeworking rules when coupling and uncoupling wagons.

Why they ask

This is a core safety question. The interviewer wants to hear that you follow rules rather than shortcuts.

How to structure your answer

Rule-based sequence: state the relevant safeworking rule, explain the steps you take, name the risk points, and say how you confirm the move is safe.

Example answer

"I always work to the safeworking rules for the yard, which means I confirm the driver knows what I am doing before I go between wagons. I check the points and derails are set correctly, apply the handbrake on the wagon I am leaving, and make sure I have clear radio contact. When coupling, I

check the coupler is aligned and secure, then connect the brake and air hoses and test them. If anything looks wrong, I stop and report it rather than trying to fix it quickly."

3. Tell me about a time you had to work outdoors in poor weather or at night to keep a shunting job on schedule.

Why they ask

Shunting is outdoor shift work. This question tests your reliability and stamina.

How to structure your answer

STAR: situation, task, action, result. Focus on what you did to stay safe and keep the job moving.

Example answer

"During a wet winter night shift, we had a late freight departure and the yard was slippery. I was asked to marshal a set of wagons onto the departure road. I made sure my PPE was right, used my torch and radio to stay in contact with the driver, and took extra care with my footing around the points. I worked at a steady pace rather than rushing, and we got the consist coupled and secured in time for the driver to take it out. No one was hurt and the departure went ahead."

4. You're mid-shunt and you notice a wagon handbrake isn't holding on a grade. What do you do?

Why they ask

This tests judgement under pressure and your understanding of securing rolling stock.

How to structure your answer

Judgement under pressure: stop the move, secure the wagon, assess the risk, report, then decide next steps with the supervisor.

Example answer

"I would stop the shunt immediately and tell the driver to hold. I would apply a chock or a second handbrake if it is safe to do so, and make sure no one goes near the wagon until it is secure. Then I would radio the yard supervisor to report the fault and get advice on whether to move the wagon to a level road or wait for maintenance. I would not try to continue the shunt until the wagon is properly secured."

5. What checks do you make before connecting brake and air hoses between wagons?

Why they ask

This tests your technical care with a critical part of the train's braking system.

How to structure your answer

Systematic check: inspect, connect, test, confirm. List the specific things you look for.

Example answer

"I start by checking the hose and coupling for damage, wear or missing seals. I make sure the coupler is properly engaged and the wagon is secure before I go between them. Then I connect the brake pipe and the main reservoir hose, making sure they click into place and the seals are seated. I open the angle cocks and listen for leaks, then check with the driver that brake pressure is holding before I move away. If I find a leak or a faulty hose, I report it and tag the wagon."

6. How do you coordinate hand signals and two-way radio with a train driver when visibility is poor?

Why they ask

Poor visibility is common at night or in bad weather. The interviewer wants to know you can communicate safely.

How to structure your answer

Communication protocol: agree on signals, use radio as primary, repeat back, have a fallback, and stop if unsure.

Example answer

"Before the move, I agree with the driver on the hand signals and radio channel. I use the radio as the main way to communicate, speaking clearly and repeating back instructions so we both know the move. If visibility is poor, I position myself where the driver can see me and use a torch or hand signals as a backup. If I cannot see the driver or they cannot see me, I stop the move and we reset. I never assume a signal was understood without confirmation."