

Watchmaker interview questions

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What to expect

Watchmaking interviews are unusually practical. Employers want to hear how you think through a fault, then watch you do it. Expect a conversation about your bench experience, a trade or bench test, and questions about how you deal with clients and their often emotional attachment to a watch.

- **Technical and diagnostic:** Questions about movement types, fault-finding logic, lubrication, regulation and the tools you reach for.
- **Practical bench assessment:** A hands-on task, such as a strip-down and reassembly, a battery and reseal, or diagnosing a movement that runs poorly. Assesses fine motor control and bench discipline as much as knowledge.
- **Behavioural:** Past examples of tracing a difficult fault, managing a comeback, or working under time pressure before a client deadline.
- **Client-facing:** How you explain options, costs and limits to a customer, particularly on vintage or sentimental pieces.
- **Process and quality:** How you ensure work leaves the bench to standard, including testing, documentation and parts handling.

Typically two stages. A first conversation with the workshop manager or owner covering your background, the brands and calibres you've handled, and your training path. Then a bench test or trial session in the workshop, where you'll be given a movement or a watch and asked to work through it while they watch and ask questions. Some employers follow up with a short paid trial day. Bring your own loupe and screwdrivers if you have them, and be ready to talk through what you're doing at each step.

1. Walk me through how you'd diagnose a mechanical watch that's losing time.

Why they ask

Tests whether you work from evidence or start pulling a movement apart on a hunch. Fault-finding order is the core skill of the trade.

How to structure your answer

Give a step-by-step walk-through. Start with the cheap and reversible checks, move to the timegrapher, then state what each reading points to and when you'd commit to a full strip-down.

Example answer

"First I'd ask the client when it was last serviced and whether it's been dropped or magnetised, because those change what I look at first. Then I'd put it on the timegrapher in a few positions. If the amplitude is low and the rate is all over the place, that suggests it needs a service and the oil has gone. If it's running fast and the beat error is fine, I'd check for magnetisation before anything else, since that's a two-minute fix. If the trace is erratic with a good amplitude, I'd suspect something in the train or a loose cannon pinion, and at that point I'd pull the movement, check the balance and hairspring visually under the loupe, then work through the train systematically rather than replacing parts speculatively."

2. Tell me about a time you traced a fault that wasn't obvious.

Why they ask

Looks for patience, method and the ability to explain your reasoning. Intermittent faults are where bench discipline shows.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR. Set the situation briefly, describe the symptom precisely, walk through what you eliminated and how, and finish with the outcome and what you learned.

Example answer

"A client brought in an automatic that would stop overnight but ran fine on the wrist. The obvious answer was low power reserve, but the mainspring looked sound. I wound it fully and let it run dial up on the bench, and it stopped again after a few hours. That told me it wasn't the winding, so I stripped the movement and found a tiny fibre caught in the train that was only binding at low torque. Cleaning it out and re-oiling the train solved it. It taught me to reproduce the fault on the bench before I touch anything, because guessing would have had me replacing a mainspring that was perfectly fine and still handing back a watch that stopped."

3. Here's a watch that keeps stopping. Talk me through what you'd do at the bench.

Why they ask

A scenario question with someone watching. They want to see calm hands, a logical sequence and safe handling of another person's property.

How to structure your answer

Narrate as you go. Describe your opening checks, what you'd record, and how you'd decide between a quick fix and a full service. Say what you would not do.

Example answer

"I'd start by noting the case and crown condition and asking what the fault feels like when it stops, whether it stops at a particular time or hand position. Then I'd check the crown and stem operation, open the case, and look at the movement for obvious signs like a bent rotor weight or a loose screw before removing anything. I'd check the balance swings freely with a puff of air. If it does, I'd run it on the timegrapher and monitor it in a couple of positions while I note the readings. I wouldn't dive into a strip-down on a watch I hadn't quoted on, not without the client's agreement, because the cause could be something minor like a loose hand touching the crystal."

4. A customer brings in a vintage watch with sentimental value and a limited budget. How do you handle that conversation?

Why they ask

Vintage and inherited pieces are a large part of retail repair work. They're testing your honesty and your ability to manage expectations without overselling.

How to structure your answer

Show the sequence you'd use: listen first, assess, then lay out options in plain language with likely outcomes, and let the client decide. Be clear about what you won't promise.

Example answer

"I'd ask what the watch means to them and what they actually want from it, because a client who wants it running safely is in a different conversation from one who wants it restored. Then I'd inspect it and tell them plainly what I can see: worn pivots, a cracked jewel, a case that won't hold water any more. I'd give them options, from a clean and oil to keep it running through to a full restoration, and be honest that some parts may not be available or that a restoration could cost more than the watch is worth on paper. I'd never promise a vintage watch will keep perfect time, and I'd put the recommended option in writing so there's no confusion later."

5. How do you make sure a watch leaves your bench to standard, particularly after a case reseal?

Why they ask

Quality and process discipline. Comebacks cost a workshop money and reputation, and water damage after a reseal is the classic failure.

How to structure your answer

Describe your routine as a fixed checklist, then give the reasoning behind the checks and how you record them.

Example answer

“Every job gets the same finish. I regulate it on the timegrapher across positions, let it run on the bench for a period to confirm it holds, then check the crown and pushers operate properly. For a reseal I replace the gasket rather than reusing it, check the caseback thread and crystal seating, and pressure test to the watch's rated depth before it goes back to the client. I write the readings and the test result on the job sheet so if there's ever a question later, there's a record of what was done. If anything falls outside tolerance, it doesn't leave the bench until I've found out why.”

6. Which brands and calibres have you worked on, and how do you approach an unfamiliar movement?

Why they ask

Calibre breadth matters in a workshop that services many brands, but how you handle the unfamiliar one matters more than the list.

How to structure your answer

Give an honest summary of your range, then explain your approach to a new calibre as a process: documentation, care with parts, and note-taking for next time.

Example answer

“I've done a lot of work on ETA and Sellita based movements, common Japanese quartz calibres, and a range of vintage Swiss pieces where you're often working without a parts diagram. I've also handled brand-specific training on a couple of lines. When I get a movement I haven't seen before, I take photographs at each stage of the strip-down and lay the parts out in order, because that's the only reliable way to get it back together correctly if there's no technical guide. I record the lubrication points as I find them. I'm careful with anything I can't source, and I'd rather tell a client a part isn't available than fit something that doesn't belong.”