



ARDENT WORKSHOP

A FREE ARDENT WORKSHOP STARTER

Contractor Reference Check Questions

24 questions to ask a contractor's references before you hire them.

24 questions · one phone call



CHECK THEM PROPERLY BEFORE YOU TRUST THEM

ardentworkshop.com

How to use these questions

Call, don't email. A written reply gets revised before it reaches you; a voice on the phone hesitates in places an email never will, and the hesitation is often the truest part of the answer.

Ask it close to as written, then stay quiet. Every question below is written to open a topic, not to close one — “walk me through what happened” gets you a story, “was everything fine?” gets you a yes. The temptation is to fill the silence right after you ask. Don't. The answer that matters is often the one that comes after the pause you didn't fill.

Work down the stages in order, and save the four closing questions for last. By the time you get there, most references have relaxed into the conversation — and that is exactly when the most candid answer tends to show up.

THE TWO RULES THAT MATTER MOST

Two rules make the difference between diligence and a legal problem. First, ask everyone in the same category the same questions — asking everyone the same things is what makes their answers comparable, and it keeps you from deciding on grounds you would not want to explain. Second, never ask a reference about age, race, religion, national origin, disability, pregnancy, family or marital status, or medical history; if a reference volunteers any of it, do not write it down and do not act on it. Everything in this question bank is about documented conduct: what the person did, when, and what happened next.

Structured verification — not legal advice, and not a background-check service. This page runs no searches and holds no records of its own; it only gives you the questions to ask and space to think about what you hear.

The 24 contractor questions

All 24, grouped by the stage of the call they belong in. Each one gives you three things beyond the question itself: why it matters, what a reassuring answer sounds like, and what should worry you. You won't ask all two dozen on a single call — pick six to eight from this bank, keep them in stage order, and ask that same set of every reference. The six fixed probes on the call sheet that follows are separate, and shorter: they are the ones you record an answer to every time, so that the sheets can be compared afterward.

OPENING

ID	Ask it like this — and what it is testing	Reassuring sounds like	What should worry you
C01	Before we get into specifics, can you tell me what the project was and about how long it took from the first day to the last? This sets the scene and calibrates everything else — a two week paint job and a four month addition test a contractor very differently, and it tells you how much weight to give the rest of the call.	The client gives a clear timeline and can describe the scope specifically — three bathrooms, a kitchen gut, a roof tear-off — without hedging on what was actually included.	Vague answers about what was done, or a reference who has to stop and think hard about basic facts, suggest the relationship was short, distant, or not entirely genuine.
C02	What was your very first impression when they came out to give you the estimate, and did that impression turn out to be accurate? The estimate stage is the one stretch this reference watched before any money changed hands. How someone behaves while they are still winning the work is worth knowing on its own, because nothing about it gets easier to raise once the deposit is paid.	The reference recalls a specific, professional first meeting — on time, measured the space, asked real questions — and says the crew that showed up matched that impression.	A shrug, or a story about a rushed walkthrough and a quote that arrived by text an hour later with no real inspection of the property behind it.

ID	Ask it like this — and what it is testing	Reassuring sounds like	What should worry you
C03	Was the person who bid the job actually the person — or the same crew — who showed up to do the work? A polished owner or salesperson often bids the job while a different, unvetted crew performs it. This question separates who you were sold on from who actually did the work in your home.	The reference confirms the estimator or owner was present for at least the key stages, and the same lead carpenter or foreman ran the job start to finish.	A different crew than the one who bid, with the reference never once seeing the owner again after the contract was signed until the final invoice.
C04	Looking back, is there anything about how they described the job or the price during that first meeting that turned out not to be true? This surfaces bait-and-switch behavior that happens right at the sale — a lowball number, a promised material, a timeline that was never realistic — before you have even seen the contract.	No, the price and scope described up front matched the contract and the finished job, with any changes clearly explained and priced along the way.	A number that grew before the contract was even signed, or a material or brand that quietly changed once the deposit was already in hand.

THE WORK

ID	Ask it like this — and what it is testing	Reassuring sounds like	What should worry you
C05	How would you describe the quality of the actual workmanship once you got past the finished, staged look of it? References tend to praise the visible result reflexively. Pushing past the surface — fit, finish, whether corners were cut where you cannot easily see — is where the real answer lives.	Specific praise for details most people never notice — tight seams, matched grain, clean caulk lines — not just a general 'it looks great.'	Praise that stays entirely at the surface, or a pause followed by 'well, we had to have a few things redone' offered a little too casually.
C06	What was it like having their crew in your house day to day — noise, mess, timing, whether they respected the space? Crew conduct is a daily-life question the price sheet never answers, and it predicts what living through your own project will actually feel like far better than the estimate does.	The crew swept up daily, protected floors and furniture, kept music and noise reasonable, and generally treated the home like someone still lived there.	A house left in construction-dust chaos between visits, workers who came and went with no warning, or a reference who says they dreaded weekdays.

ID	Ask it like this — and what it is testing	Reassuring sounds like	What should worry you
C07	Did they use subcontractors for any part of the job, and if so, how much oversight did the main contractor actually provide? Hiring one company does not always mean one company does the work, and how much hands-on supervision the subcontracted trades got is what separates a managed job from an outsourced one.	The reference knew which trades were subcontracted, met them, and saw the main contractor on site regularly checking their work rather than disappearing between crews.	Strangers showing up unannounced with no introduction, or a reference who never once saw the person they hired after the contract was signed.
C08	Was a permit pulled for the work, and did an inspector actually come out to sign off on it before the job was called finished? Skipping a required permit saves the contractor time and paperwork, but it becomes your problem at resale or in an insurance claim, and it's a fast way to gauge how they cut corners.	The reference remembers a permit posted or filed, an inspector actually visiting the site at least once, and a final sign-off before the balance was paid.	A vague 'I think so' about permits, or work that clearly required one — electrical, structural, a new bathroom — with no inspector ever mentioned.

TIME & MONEY

ID	Ask it like this — and what it is testing	Reassuring sounds like	What should worry you
C09	Did the final price match the original bid, and if it didn't, walk me through what actually drove the difference. A bid is only as useful as its relationship to the final number. This question gets past the headline price to whether overruns were the contractor's doing or genuinely unavoidable.	The final number was close to the bid, and any gap traces to changes the client actually chose and approved along the way, not surprises sprung on them.	A final bill meaningfully higher than the bid with no clear explanation, or changes the client says they never actually agreed to in writing.

ID	Ask it like this — and what it is testing	Reassuring sounds like	What should worry you
C10	When something came up mid-job that required a change order, how was that handled — did they explain it and get sign-off before doing the work? Change-order discipline is where fixed-price jobs quietly stop being fixed, and it's the clearest test of whether extra work became a real conversation with a price attached, or simply appeared later on an invoice you never agreed to.	Every added item was explained, priced, and signed off before work began, and the client always knew what an extra would cost before saying yes.	Extra charges that showed up after the fact with no discussion, or a reference who says they just started trusting the invoices without checking.
C11	How closely did the actual timeline match what you were originally told, and what caused the biggest delay if there was one? Every job runs long sometimes, so the goal is not a perfect timeline but an honest one — whether delays were communicated as they happened or only became visible when you asked.	The job ran close to schedule, and when it didn't, the contractor called ahead of time to explain why and gave a realistic new date, not a moving one.	A job that dragged on for weeks past the promised date with silence in between, and updates that only ever came when the client chased them down.
C12	Did payments ever go out ahead of the work that was actually completed, and did that ever make you uncomfortable at the time? Payments running ahead of visible progress is the pattern that leaves you holding the least leverage, and a client who lived through it will usually remember the exact moment they noticed.	Payments tracked visible progress on the job — money followed completed stages, never the other way around, and the client always felt in control of it.	A payment schedule that outran the work, or a moment the reference describes as feeling pressured to pay before they were satisfied with the progress.

WHEN IT WENT WRONG

ID	Ask it like this — and what it is testing	Reassuring sounds like	What should worry you
C13	Tell me about a time something went wrong or didn't go as planned — how did they find out, and what did they do about it? Every job has at least one problem; the question is never whether one occurred but how it was handled. This is the single most revealing question you can ask a reference.	The reference describes a specific problem and a contractor who owned it without an argument, fixed it at their own cost, and followed up to confirm it held.	Excuses, blame shifted onto the client or the materials, or a fix that had to be requested two or three times before it actually happened.
C14	Was there ever anything discovered mid-project that changed the scope — like rot, old wiring, or a structural surprise — and how was it handled? Discoveries behind walls are common and not automatically a red flag — what matters is whether the contractor showed you the problem, priced it honestly, and let you decide before proceeding.	Photos or a walkthrough of the actual problem, a written price for the extra work before it started, and no pressure to decide on the spot.	A surprise that appeared on the invoice with no photos, no advance warning, and a number the client had no real way to question or verify.
C15	Once the main work was done, how did they handle the punch list — the small leftover items — and did they actually come back to finish them? The punch list is where the incentive to return disappears once the final check has cleared, which makes it the best test of whether a contractor's word still means something after they've been paid.	A short list of remaining items got scheduled and finished within a few weeks, with the contractor following up without being chased for it.	A punch list that never got finished, or that took months of calls and texts to close out after the final payment had already gone through.
C16	If something failed after the job was finished — a leak, a crack, a fixture coming loose — did the warranty actually mean anything in practice? A written warranty is only as good as the willingness to honor it once the job is long finished and the crew has moved on to other work, and that willingness is exactly what a callback tests.	A callback got a real response, someone came out and fixed the issue at no charge, and the client didn't have to fight or repeat themselves to get it.	Calls that went unanswered once the job was done, or a warranty claim that turned into an argument about whether it was really covered.

THE PEOPLE

ID	Ask it like this — and what it is testing	Reassuring sounds like	What should worry you
C17	How did they communicate day to day — did you usually know what was happening, or did you have to chase them down for updates? Communication habits during the job predict communication habits during a dispute, and a client who had to chase updates during good times will not get better answers during bad ones.	Regular check-ins, a quick reply to texts or calls, and a clear point of contact the client always knew how to reach without going through anyone else.	Long silences between updates, calls that went to voicemail for days, or a client who says they always had to be the one to reach out first.
C18	What was the crew actually like to have around your family or your neighbors — respectful, professional, easy to have in the house? The crew, not the salesperson, is who actually occupies your home for weeks or months, and this question gets at the daily texture of that arrangement that a contract can never capture.	Polite, punctual, mindful of noise and language around kids, and generally treated as trustworthy enough to be left alone in the house.	Complaints from neighbors, a client who felt they had to stay home to supervise, mess left in living space, or conduct the client had to raise more than once.
C19	Was there ever a moment they were less than fully honest with you, even about something small — and how did you find out? Small dishonesty — a fudged material, an inflated hour, a corner cut and not mentioned — is the kind a client actually witnesses first-hand, and it is the part of the record an estimate cannot show you.	A clear no, or a small honest admission volunteered without being asked — either way, a straightforward answer instead of a defensive pause.	A long pause before answering, a story that only comes out with prompting, or an admission that they found out about a lie after the fact.
C20	Did you ever feel pressured by them — to sign something quickly, add extra work, or make a decision before you were ready? Pressure tactics during the job usually mirror pressure tactics at the sale, and a reference is often more candid about this after the relationship has already ended than they were during it.	No real pressure — decisions were presented with time to think them over, and the client never felt rushed into a choice they weren't ready to make.	Being told a price only held for today, or being talked into an upgrade or a change order on the spot without time to think it over.

CLOSING

ID	Ask it like this — and what it is testing	Reassuring sounds like	What should worry you
C21	Knowing everything you know now, would you hire this same contractor again for a bigger, more expensive project than the one they did for you? It asks for a commitment rather than a description, which is a harder thing to offer out of politeness — and a yes given for a bigger, riskier job carries more than any specific detail earlier in the call.	An unhesitating yes, often followed by a reason — they trust the pricing, the communication, or how problems got handled — not a pause before agreeing.	A qualified yes full of conditions, a long pause before answering, or a straightforward no they're clearly reluctant to explain further.
C22	Is there anything you wish you had asked them, or asked a past client of theirs, before you signed the contract? References often only realize what mattered in hindsight, and this question hands you their hard-won knowledge for free instead of making you discover it the same expensive way they did.	A genuinely specific tip — ask about the allowance items, get the change-order process in writing, confirm the crew before the deposit — not a shrug.	A blank 'no, not really' with no reflection at all, which usually means the reference hasn't actually thought hard about the relationship.
C23	Is there anyone else — another homeowner, a supplier, an inspector — you think I should talk to before making this decision? A single reference is one data point, and a contractor who selected it hand-picked it to be favorable. A willingness to name someone unprompted signals confidence the reference is genuine.	A name offered readily, sometimes even a phone number or an introduction, showing the reference is confident enough to vouch further on their own.	A flat no with no names offered, or hesitation that suggests this reference may have been the one carefully chosen exception to a rougher pattern.
C24	Is there anything else about working with them that I haven't asked about but that you think I really ought to know? This open door catches whatever your questions missed, and references often save the most candid detail for last, once they sense the call is winding down and the pressure is off.	A genuinely new detail — something about scheduling, personality, or how disputes got resolved — offered freely once the formal questions are done.	A quick 'no, I think that covers it' with no pause to actually think, especially right after a call that felt hurried the whole way through.

Print this and take it to the call

Print this page and the next one, once per reference — you want at least three, filled in the same way. Mark one bracket per probe while they're talking, then write their actual words on the notes page.

Reference name	Their relationship to the contractor	Date of call

THE SIX PROBES — MARK ONE PER ROW

Ask every reference the same probes, and never ask about age, race, religion, national origin, disability, pregnancy, family or marital status, or medical history. Yes and Qualified are answers you can act on; No and Wouldn't say both read as concerns. Mark Not asked rather than guessing.

Probe — read it as written	Yes	Qualified	No	Wouldn't say	Not asked
Dates & scope confirmed? Can you confirm roughly when they worked with you, and what they were responsible for?	()	()	()	()	()
Would use them again? Knowing everything you know now, would you use them again?	()	()	()	()	()
Delivered on time? Did things happen roughly when they said they would?	()	()	()	()	()
No surprises on cost? Did the final cost land where you expected, or were there surprises?	()	()	()	()	()
Handled a problem well? When something went wrong, how did they handle it?	()	()	()	()	()
Nothing to warn you about? Is there anything you would want to know if you were in my position?	()	()	()	()	()

NOTES — WHAT THEY ACTUALLY SAID

Their words, not your summary. The specific phrase somebody uses is the part you will want a week later, and it is the first thing memory smooths away. If a reference volunteers anything about age, health, religion, family or another protected detail, don't write it down and don't act on it.

Reference name	Date of call

Their words, and anything worth following up

What a worked call sheet looks like

Kesslebrook Roofing & Exteriors (fictional) — Full tear-off and roof replacement, including deck repair.

Of the four references Kesslebrook Roofing & Exteriors (fictional) offered, three actually picked up the phone; the fourth number had gone to a disconnected line, which is worth writing down rather than skipping past. Here is what the three who answered said, side by side, on the six probes from the call sheet.

Every name and every answer in the table below is invented for illustration — this is a demonstration, not a record of a real reference call.

Probe	D. Achterberg (example)	R. Nkemdirim (example)	T. Villaseñor (example)
Dates & scope confirmed?	Yes	Yes	Yes
Would use them again?	Yes	Yes	No
Delivered on time?	Qualified	Yes	No
No surprises on cost?	Yes	Yes	Wouldn't say
Handled a problem well?	Yes	Yes	Qualified
Nothing to warn you about?	Yes	Yes	Qualified

Reading it: Two of the three references say they would use this contractor again without hesitation — call that a majority yes — and on three of the six probes one reference gave an answer you could act on while another raised a concern. Those three probes — Would use them again? / Delivered on time? / No surprises on cost? — are where the three part company. That is the whole point of asking every reference the same six questions: not whether one reference liked them, but where two people who both dealt with the same contractor landed in different places.

The contractor, the references, and every answer on this page are invented for illustration.

You have the questions. The comparing is the other half.

This page gets you through one call, for one type of person. Three references who all say the same thing tell you one thing; three who disagree tell you something far more useful — but only if every one of them was asked the same six questions, and only if something is actually keeping track of where they landed differently.

WHAT THE FULL TRACKER ADDS

These 24 questions are one of five vetting types — 24 of 120 curated questions. The **Reference & Vetting Tracker** adds the other four — care provider, landlord, key hire, and tenant — and their 96 further questions. It also adds what a printed sheet cannot: a Reference Log that asks every reference you reach the same six probes, so it can compute how many of them **disagreed** with each other, and a Verification Ledger that checks every license and certificate against the day your job, tenancy, or engagement actually finishes, not against today.

[See the full Reference & Vetting Tracker](#)

Or type it in: ardentworkshop.com/products/reference-and-vetting-tracker/

See the full range at ardentworkshop.com.

Structured verification, not advice, and not a background-check service. This file gives you the questions to ask and a place to record what you find; it runs no searches, holds no records, and makes no determination about anyone. Employment, tenant, and care screening are regulated, and the rules differ by country, state, and city — what you may ask, what you may consider, what consent you must get in writing first, and what you must do if you turn someone down because of what a report said. Before you run a background, credit, or driving check, use a screening service that complies with the law where you are, get written consent, and apply the same criteria to everyone. For anything with legal or financial consequence, take professional advice in your own jurisdiction. All names, figures, and answers in the worked example are invented for illustration.

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