

Film industry roles DP

What Is a Director of Photography?

The director of photography, also known as the DP or cinematographer, is the person responsible for creating the look of a film. A good DP will elevate a director's vision, and introduce ideas and concepts the director may not have considered. It's no coincidence many directors and cinematographers work together repeatedly, such as Steven Spielberg and Janusz Kaminski or Spike and his NYU classmate Ernest Dickerson, who shot six of his films.

The DP controls everything that affects what the camera is able to capture (i.e. composition, exposure, lighting, filters, and camera movements). The director of photography is the head of the camera and lighting crews on set, and also selects the cameras, lenses, and filters to be used on a shoot.

What Does a Director of Photography Do During Pre-Production?

During pre-production the DP spends a lot of time conceiving the visual look of the film.

- **Brainstorm:** The DP works closely with the director, the production designer, and the rest of the art department leaders to brainstorm the look and feel of the film. During this phase, the cinematographer raises questions like: What is the tone of the film? What is the color palette? What other films inspire the look of this film? What visual effects do we need? Directors and cinematographers often communicate with each during this phase using mood boards or look books. (Learn how to make a look book with our complete guide [here](#).)
- **Scout Locations:** The director of photography will accompany the location manager or location scout as they search for locations to film. The DP will survey the location for its natural light (or lack thereof), its space and set up, and whether or not it is in line with the aforementioned visual look of the film.
- **Gather the Camera Equipment:** The DP will give the line producer a list of required equipment (which includes cameras, lenses, filters, and film stock) to rental or purchase.
- **Assemble the team:** Many DPs have built a team they can trust through working on many different projects, and will often work with the same camera and lighting crew from film to film. They also work with the line producer to hire and fill out the team. The primary positions that interact with the DP the most, include:
 - The camera operator works the camera. On smaller budget films, the DP might also be the camera operator. The DP will compose the shot and instruct the camera operator how to hold and move the camera to get the shot.
 - The Steadicam Operator sets up the Steadicam system (if the film has one), which stabilizes the camera while moving. The DP will compose the shot and the Steadicam operator will manage the Steadicam system to accommodate the shot.
 - 1st and 2nd assistant camera
 - 1st Assistant Camera is also the “focus puller” because their primary job is to make sure whatever subject or action is being filmed is in sharp focus. As

actors move towards or away from the camera, they focus and refocus the camera lens. They will also build the camera at the beginning of the day and make sure everything gets put back in its place at the end.

- 2nd Assistant Camera is also the “clapper loader,” which means they identify each new take on a slate. This allows the editor to sync the sound with the picture. They also work with the 1st AC to mark the actors positions during rehearsal which helps the 1st AC know when to change focus.
- The gaffer oversees lighting and electrical on a film. The DP creates the overall lighting design and relies on the gaffer and his team to implement his vision.
- The key grip maintains the camera and lighting equipment and operates the dolly, cranes, and any other non-electrical equipment. The DP creates the vision, communicates it to the key grip, and the key grip (and his team) do whatever it takes (i.e. operate a dolly or provide the gaffer with the necessary lighting equipment) to make the DP’s vision a reality.

What Does a Director of Photography Do During Production?

The director of photography does the majority of their job during production, which is when the film is actually being shot.

- Block Shots: The DP will work with the director to decide how to shoot a particular scene
- Shoot: During production, the DP directs the camera and lighting crews, paying attention to the following areas:
 - Composition and framing: How everything is arranged within the frame.
 - Exposure: The amount of light being captured by the camera and how a scene is lit.
 - Lens and filters: The DP chooses the camera lens and must consider a number of factors like the story they are telling (emotional scenes might need a lens specific for close-ups), how far they are from the subjects (is there enough depth of field for certain lenses), how much light do they have (certain lenses are better for capturing natural light than others), etc.
 - Camera movements: The DP instructs the camera operators where to put the camera and how to move it through the scene.
- Go over dailies: Dailies refer to the raw, unedited footage that was shot that day. Dailies are reviewed by the director and DP to ensure that everything is aligned with the original vision.

What Does a Director of Photography Do During Post-Production?

The DP’s job is nearly done during post-production, except for one final process that affects the look of the film.

- Coloring Grade: Color grading tweaks the look and color of the film. The DP is responsible for the film’s color palette, so they advise the colorists on how the color palette should appear.

5 Things Every Cinematographer Needs

A director of photography is a visually creative, but technical role, and one must also be comfortable managing a large team. There are many skills a cinematographer should have to succeed:

- Artistic vision and eye for photography. The DP sets the visuals for the film and as such, should have a natural eye for capturing moving images.
- Ability to both give and follow instructions. The DP has to understand the director's vision and then communicate that message to many people across two entire departments.
- Technical camera skills. The DP must know how to operate a camera, what different cameras do, how to use many lenses, how to expose a shot, etc.
- Work experience: Work your way up the ranks by starting as an assistant in either the camera or lighting department. You can then become a lighting technician or camera operator and eventually as the camera assistant of a noted cinematographer. Networking with the line producer and assistant director are also helpful as they can hire you as the DP on their next projects.
- Strong portfolio: Build your portfolio by working on lower level camera department jobs on paid film shoots and climb the ranks, while also working as the cinematographer on unpaid film shoots. The strength of your portfolio is crucial to getting a job as a cinematographer, regardless of how far you've climbed up film production ladder or where you went to school.