

What is a camera assistant?



The camera assistant sets up equipment and operates the clapper board

Australia has a long and proud tradition of great cinematographers working both in Australia and internationally, including Academy Award® winners John Seale (*The English Patient*), Dean Semler (*Dances with Wolves*) and Andrew Lesnie (*The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*). Most of these talented cinematographers started their career as a camera assistant and worked their way up through the ranks of the camera department.

Like all other departments on a film, the camera department has a hierarchy. The director of photography, usually referred to as the cinematographer, is head of this department. They work collaboratively with the director and production designer to devise and maintain the “look” of the film. The lighting department and the grips work under the direction of the director of photography. The DOP works closely with other departments as well, especially the visual effects department if the film contains a high proportion of computer generated imagery. The DOP is employed for most of pre-production to work with the director.

The DOP selects his or her team very carefully, on the basis of skill and work ethic. Most major films have one, perhaps two camera operators, who physically handle the camera during each shot, while the director of photography has the overall view, usually on a video monitor. Each camera has a focus puller whose primary responsibility is to maintain a sharp image of the subject or action being filmed. This may involve changing the focus as an actor moves from place to place within a shot.

The camera team includes the camera assistant, a video split operator and a data wrangler. During the final week before shoot the team conduct technical and creative tests. Technical tests are carried out on the camera, lenses and filters to ensure everything is working. The creative work can involve makeup and costume tests with the cast, and also tests of any in-camera effects planned for the film. The camera crew needs to pack and ready the camera truck for the shoot and purchase any expendables required, such as tapes, gels or reflectors.

During the shoot, the duties of each team member are very clearly defined so that the workflow is as smooth and accurate as possible.

Additional casual camera crew may be required for some scenes, such as stunts, large crowds, action scenes or when specialist camera crew are needed to meet the demands of the script, such as underwater photography or steadycam shots.

The camera assistant has two main responsibilities. First, they make sure the required camera equipment is available for each shot and in peak working condition. Second, they mark each shot with a clapper board so that everyone concerned, and especially the editor, can easily locate any given set-up and take.

When they are on set, some of their other duties include keeping track of equipment, putting down marks for the actors to stand on so the camera can be focused appropriately, keeping camera notes and maintaining equipment.

On top of all of this, it is expected that a decent assistant will be able to anticipate a number of those demands before they become problems.

[Click here to view interview with camera assistant Jack Mayo](#)

Useful resources:

- [Ultimate Guide to a Camera Assistant's Toolkit](#)
- [Creative Skillset: Camera Assistant](#)



Marking shots with a clapper board makes them easy to locate

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