

Camera Operator

Run the camera on film sets, live events and news. Hired on your reel, not your diploma.

TYPICAL PAY

\$74,990

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$39k to \$135k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

up to 4 years

after high school

DEMAND

Limited

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

No

anyone can do it

WHERE YOU WORK

**Film and TV sets, news stations,
live events, freelance jobs**

How you get there

- 1 High school** Grades 9 to 12
Shoot constantly. Your phone is enough to learn framing, light and editing. Take media arts if your school has it.
- 2 School, or not** 0 to 4 years
A film degree or a 2-year video production program buys you gear access, crew friends and a first reel. It is optional and many working operators skipped it.
- 3 Production assistant** 1 to 2 years
Coiling cable, moving carts, being useful. This is how you get known, and how you find out whether you like sets.
- 4 Camera assistant** 3 to 6 years
Second assistant camera loading and slating, then first assistant camera pulling focus. Years here are normal and this is where the craft is learned.
- 5 Operator** After the assistant years
You run the camera for the director of photography. On smaller jobs you are both at once.

Pros and cons

- + No license, no exam, no required degree
- + You can start learning today with the phone in your pocket
- + Union work on film and television pays well with health coverage and a pension
- Freelance income is unpredictable and the first few years are lean
- 12 hour days, night shoots and long stretches away from home
- The federal projection is slower than average growth, around 2,900 openings a year nationally

Optional boosts

Steadicam and gimbal work. Drone flying. Lighting. Color and editing.

Good to know

It is a small field

The federal data counts about 36,400 camera operators across the whole country in 2024, with roughly 2,900 openings a year projected over the following decade. Compare that with over a million manage...

The degree is expected, the reel decides

In the national worker survey, 61% of camera operators said an associate degree is expected for the job. Hiring still happens off a reel and a phone call from someone who worked with you last month.

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Camera Operators, Television, Video, and Film (27-4031.00)

O*NET OnLine: Camera Operators, wages and outlook

International Cinematographers Guild, Local 600

University of Southern California, School of Cinematic Arts

Numbers checked September 2026. Pay figures are typical full-time annual amounts in United States dollars, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics wage data and published pay scales. They vary by state, employer and experience. Tuition is for in-state students at public schools unless the card says otherwise. Sources, links and the click-through version: <https://career.help/us/careers/camera-operator>



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