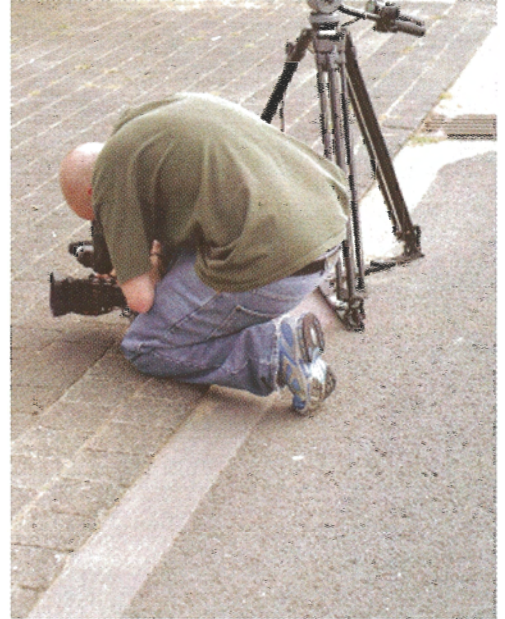


Camera Department: How to Get Your Foot in the Door

18 Key Questions You Should Ask During a Job Interview

by David E. Elkins, S.O.C.



One of the most frequently asked questions I am asked by my students is, *what is the best way to get that first job?* Getting your first break in the film industry can be easy for some, and almost impossible for others. There are a few key things all beginning filmmakers should know in order to get that first big break. This article is geared toward the camera department since that is my area of experience, but you can apply the basics to any department or position.

One of the first things you should do is prepare a resume. If you have recently graduated from film school, you will most likely have some experience on student productions. A beginning resume should list any production experience that you may have.

Your resume should include your personal contact information: name, address and home phone number, cell phone and fax numbers and E-mail address. As a freelancer, prospective employers need to be able to get in touch with you.

Next, list your production credits. These are most often listed in reverse chronological order, which means that the most recent job is at the top of the listing. The exception to this is if you have production credits from well-known, recognizable productions. In this case, those credits should be listed first. As someone reads your resume, these names will jump out at them and indicate that you are qualified for the job.

The format that you use for the resume is up to your personal preference. Most resumes contain the same basic information, but the layout is what may be different. This includes the title of the production, type of production—feature film, television show, commercial, and so forth; whether the job performed was that of a 1st A.C., 2nd A.C., or Loader; the name of the D.P.; and sometimes the name of the Director, Producer, or Production Company.

I currently work as both a Camera Operator and First Assistant, so I list all of my production credits for these positions as well as my past experience as a Second Assistant. I have listed my credits in sub-categories based on the type of production—television series, feature film, commercial, music video, and other credits.

Following your listing of credits, list any special skills or equipment knowledge that relates to your experience. You may also list any industry related organizations or unions that you belong to. Following this, you should list your education, including the name of the school, years attended, and degree earned. At the end of the resume, the following statement should be included: "References available upon request." Don't volunteer reference information unless it is asked for. When giving names of references, be sure that you have permission from the person whose name you are giving out, beforehand. Don't lie on your resume because if you do it will eventually be discovered and will only cause you problems.

Send it out to as many production companies as possible. There are many excellent publications and that contain the names of companies where you can send your resume. You may also list your resume or experience on many web sites that are geared toward the film industry.

If you have friends or colleagues in the film industry you may also ask them for any job leads. Remember, a great deal of the film industry relies on networking to learn about upcoming work. Don't be afraid to ask people you have worked with if they know of any future jobs. Also, don't be afraid to tell other crew people about jobs that you may know about.

Now that you have prepared your resume and sent it out, you are ready to go on that first job interview. Arrive a little early for the interview and be prepared. Have additional copies of your resume with you in case anyone asks for one. An important part of the

interview is asking the right questions. There are many things that you need to know about the job before starting, and you have the right to ask these questions. The following are some key questions that you should ask when interviewing for a job on any production. They are listed in no specific order.

These questions are geared toward the camera department and can be modified for other positions.

1. What format is the film being shot in—16mm, 35mm, Video, HD?
2. What camera system will be used?
3. Is it a union or non-union crew?
4. What is the daily rate for the position I am applying for?
5. Is the daily rate based on 10 hours or 12 hours or more?
6. Is this a flat rate, or is there overtime pay after a specific number of hours?
7. How often will I be paid, or how soon after the completion of production will I be paid?
8. Will I complete a time card, or will I be required to submit an invoice for payment?
9. Does this rate include prep and wrap days?
10. Do you pay a box or kit rental?
11. Is the shooting local or on a distant location?
12. If it is a distant location, do you pay travel expenses, per diem, and lodging?
13. Are meals provided?
14. How many weeks of shooting will there be?
15. Is the workweek 5 or 6 days? (Never work a 7-day week.)
16. How many hours per day do you anticipate shooting? (Twelve is good; anything over 12 is usually too much.)
17. What are the scheduled start and end dates of the shooting schedule?
18. Are there any other crew positions still available?
Recommend other crew members that you have worked with in the past.

The most typical jobs that a beginning filmmaker will encounter will be on non-union productions. Many of these are independent, low-budget productions and are often first-time productions by a company or individual. But there are many non-union productions that may be done by established individuals or companies that have just not signed the agreement with the various production unions. These can include feature films, television pilots, commercials, music videos, educational and industrial films and more.

A non-union production doesn't mean that it is not a reputable production, just that they are not required to abide by the union rules and regulations with regards to the crew. But they still must abide by the basic state and federal guidelines regarding employment and fair treatment of their workers.

One of the main differences between union and non-union work is the pay scale. Often on a non-union production you will be asked to work for a flat rate per day. What this means is that no matter how many hours you work in a day, your rate of pay is a specific amount. I try to avoid these types of jobs whenever possible. When speaking with a producer or production manager about my daily rate I always quote a rate based on a ten or twelve hour day with overtime to be paid after the specific number of hours at a specific rate, usually time and a half. The producer will often negotiate, but I almost never will accept a flat rate deal, and whatever deal I do accept, I get it in writing on a deal memo or contract. Be sure to obtain a copy of all paperwork that you sign so that if there are any problems or questions later on you can refer to it.

When you first start out working on non-union productions, you must decide what your daily pay rate is going to be. When I started working in this industry I worked for anything from \$50 to \$200 a day as a second assistant cameraman, depending on how much experience I had at the time of the production, the type of production and finally what the company was willing to pay.

Once I started working as a first assistant cameraman, my daily rate went up because I had much more experience and felt comfortable quoting a higher rate. Each person's situation is going to be a bit different. If and when you join the union, your pay rate will be determined by your classification and the current rate for that classification as established by the union.

It's not impossible if you are willing to put in some time and effort to get that first job. If you want it bad enough you will get it. Good luck and happy shooting.

Check out my personal web site and resume at www.davidelkins.com.

David E. Elkins, S.O.C. is the Interim Dean of the North Carolina School of the Arts' School of Filmmaking. He has worked professionally as a motion picture camera assistant and camera operator for film, television (*The Wonder Years* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*), music videos, and commercials. He is the author of *The Camera Assistant's Manual, Fourth Edition* (Focal Press) and a member of the Society of Camera Operators.