



Studio Assistant Guide Getting Started

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Intro

Full time photography assistants in a studio are few and far between. Most studios have a long list of assistants and use them as needed and per job. It's simply far cheaper to do so and commercial jobs can often have long gaps in between shoot days.

Today, many assistants are photographers themselves pursuing a career in photography while gaining valuable industry experience from photographers that have been in the industry a long time. Being an assistant for multiple photographers is one of the fastest, and most affordable, ways to learning the industry language, shoot anatomy, gaining contacts, making friends, and learning the tricks behind a photo shoot. This is easily a replacement for photography school if you work at it hard enough and are lucky enough to have a great mentor to show you the way.

While assistants are photographers, others have certainly made a career out of commercial photography as just assistants, PA's, digital techs, and other roles on set. Working for yourself can be one of the most liberating things in the world. It can also be one of the scariest during the slow times. Having a well built network of friends and not burning any bridges will help during these slow times.

The one thing that all successful assistants have in common, is that they are hard working, they know their place on set, and are great to get a long with. They know when to speak, how much to talk, and are always anticipating what needs to be done next. At the end of the day if a photographer looks back and remembers how hard you were working to keep the job going, you are almost guaranteed to get asked back and referred to other crews. If you were loud, talked a lot (especially to clients), and were just standing around waiting to be told for something to do, then most likely that will be your only encounter with that photographer and their crew.

If you pursue the career of a photo assistant, or digital tech, there are only a few things that you will need to know to be successful on set and be at the top of the list of every photographer. Yes, you will need to be knowledgeable on equipment, software, lighting, and photography, but more importantly you will get further in the business by having the strongest work ethic on set, great positive attitude 110% of the time, and the ability to foresee potential problems and have a practical solution already thought of when it does happen.

If you plan to approach a photography studio, it's often best to call the studio manager or producer, quickly state the reason you are calling, and then politely request a meeting, an opportunity to send in your book/work, or an opportunity to assist on a test photo shoot. If you have worked as an assistant before, it's best to list people you have worked with as a reference. In some situations a studio may already have a well developed team of assistants and it may be hard to get a call back. In situations like this, occasionally send letters addressed to the photographer or studio manager with your intent. Printing your work never hurts either.

-Gary W. Martin
RGG Photo, Studio Manager

Assistants

The First Assistant

The First Assistant is closest to the photographer and typically the most trusted asset on set. This position typically goes to experienced assistants familiar with their style of work, their camera systems, their computer systems, their style of lighting, and their work ethic.

The first assistant is a type of "job insurance" at the commercial level. They are there to constantly check camera settings, check focus, monitor lights, anticipate problems, prepare files, backup files, provide suggestions they may see, and make sure the photographer can concentrate on the task at hand without distraction. The first assistant should run the crew and have what the photographer needs before he/she asks for it. Always anticipate what the photographer will ask for next. It's your job to know.

Typical Pay \$150-\$450/day depending on experience and market.

Digital Tech

The Digital Tech, or DT, is the armored car of the photo shoot. They are handling the most important assets of the job and preparing files as needed by the clients. They must have a solution to any problem of software, hardware, and file types. There must be a backup plan to every problem that may happen.

The best DT's that I've seen arrive with their own computer loaded with all software needed, are fluent in MAC OSX, Lightroom, Photoshop, Bridge, Phocus, Capture One, Photo Mechanic, RAID, and are experts in duplicating and triplicating blocks of data quickly and efficiently. You need to be impeccable at data organization, file labeling, and computer troubleshooting. You should be up to date on the latest in everything tech.

Typical Pay \$200-\$600/day depending on experience and market.

Second and Thirds Assistants/ General PA's

The Second/Third/PA assistant are generally managed by the First Assistant and/or Producer. They may also be given to a stylist or other person on set if they need to. They will handle any work including moving gear, setting up stands, holding flags, setting up diffusion, keeping the set clean, holding lights, holding reflectors, cleaning up, ordering food, and running and getting odds and ends for the photo shoot. If you are in charge of ordering food YOU MUST verify the order, have the person on the phone repeat it back to you, and also verify the order is correct in person. Don't mess up a client's lunch!

If you are new to the industry, and new to assisting, this is generally where you will want to start, even if you are already a photographer and run your own business. You should work exceptionally hard at this position (harder than the first assistant) and make sure you know your place, not speak to clients, and focus on jumping on jobs when asked to do them.

Typical Pay \$150-\$300/day depending on experience and market.

What's Expected Of You - Starting Out

- Prior to accepting the job, make sure you have an understanding with the photographer on working hours, fees, and payment terms prior to accepting the job. Always ask what is expected of you that day and what's in your scope.
- Each Shoot will vary on what's expected of you, so make sure your time commitment is conveyed to you and you do not have to leave early and can potentially stay late.
- If you can't be on time, be early. We hope you to arrive 15 minutes before your call time. If you experience an issue and cannot be early, please notify the studio manager ASAP with a time frame of arrival. Not calling is not an option.
- Dress appropriately, comfortably and professionally. Sandals should not be worn.
- Never leave set without notifying the producer, studio manager, or photographer.
- Leave your phone on silent. Please no texting, or phone use while on set.
- Always have a positive "can do" attitude; and be enthusiastic and willing to learn.
- Never assume anything. If you have any questions, ask before you act. Always ask if you don't know something and write it down in a book if it's something you may forget.
- Always handle all photo equipment with care and with 2 hands when possible.
- Always observe the person that works the hardest, and then work harder than they are working.
- Always listen carefully and pay attention to where equipment is, where equipment came from, and the proper storage procedures when putting the equipment away.
- Always speak softly and be discrete when talking to the photographer, especially in front of the client. Discuss concerns you may have about any shot, piece of equipment, or problem you may see discretely with the photographer.
- Please refrain from asking questions about "how to" with the photographer.
- As an important member of the production team, focus, concentrate, anticipate, and support.
- Anticipate any problem that you foresee that could slow down production and have a practical solution in place.
- Answer phones professionally. If you are unfamiliar with the caller, politely ask what the call is regarding. Get correct names, spelling, agency/company information, contacts, and phone/fax/e-mail numbers as needed. The impression you give is extremely important.
- Always define reimbursement: vehicle use, mileage, tolls, overtime, your own gear rented to the photographer.
- Always have your invoice ready with the shoot's job number, reference and date. Bill studio within 24hrs of shoot date.
- Keep the work space clean. Whenever possible, clean up clean up clean up.
- Food will be provided however please arrive ready to work on a full stomach.
- Do not mention your work, or pitch work to clients, ever.
- Never ever ever discuss personal problems on set. You are positive 110% of the time.
- Remember that you are representing the photographer, so be professional, courteous, and positive to everyone on set.
- Take ownership of mistakes. It's okay to make a mistake. It's not okay to blame others or act like it wasn't your fault. Own the mistake, apologize, and make it right quickly.

Shoot Prep - The Pre Light

Prior to the shoot with actual clients, you are expected to know the camera system the photographer is using, the software, the grip gear, the lighting, and power supply settings. If you are able to see the studio and work with a photographer before an actual shoot, then do the following:

- Acquaint yourself with equipment and supplies and where they go. If there is no digital tech on set, familiarize yourself with the software used by the photographer. Most likely you will need to know Phocus, Capture One, Lightroom, Bridge, and a general understanding of Photoshop.
- If you are new to the studio, take photos of where equipment goes before you build a set. This will help you once we've made a mess and equipment needs to go back on the shelf.
- Understand the procedure for job receipts and paperwork pertinent to the assignment. If you are sent out to purchase something, save all receipts.
- Review and understand the assignment needs and schedule. If appropriate, study the job layouts or comps the photographer is working off of and understand the scope of the job.
- Check what lighting, camera, grip equipment, set materials, and expendable items are needed for the assignment. Check condition of all cameras and lighting equipment. Test computer and capture/imaging software for consistency and accuracy.
- Always make sure to have backup batteries ready, or charging, for anything that may need batteries.
- If you are asked to find additional assistants, confirm expertise and level of experience, availability, and fees. Get references with other photographers if needed and call as many references as you can. A bad, loud, or obnoxious assistant can completely change the mood and tempo of a shoot and will not be tolerated.
- Set-up studio shoots, lights, camera, rigs and test in for photographer approval.
- (if asked) Check with make-up artists, stylists, production coordinators, set designers, other crew members and talent to confirm schedules and call times as required by photographer. Always test strobes, pocket wizards, slaves, etc before telling the photographer the set is ready.
- Always keep equipment safe and organized. All cords and cables should be taped down to the floor with gaffer's tape and coiled properly when put away, etc.
- Check with photographer on procedure for filenames, capture folders, and digital backup if you will be in charge of data at any time.
- If picking up rental equipment, manually inspect all equipment before leaving. Take photos immediately of any equipment that doesn't seem 100%.
- Clean studio or location space as often as possible. Clean as your work.
- Confirm food and beverage requirements for the shoot. Arrange for catering if required. Triple check orders to ensure correct meals are delivered.
- Coil cables neatly with velcro ties.

Production - Shoot Days

On production days with clients its imperative you anticipate any problems that may arise and address them directly with the photographer discretely. It's imperative that you focus on what the photographer is doing and anticipate their next move. A good assistant will know what the photographer needs before they ask

- Always alert photographer to any and all legitimate concerns. The need for discretion, particularly with clients on the set, cannot be overstated. Act as a second set of eyes and ears at all times without being heard.
- Discuss the day's schedule before the clients get there.
- If booked as 1st Assistant, manage 2nd & 3rd Assistants. Your job as first assistant is to be close to the photographer at all times. Send your 2nd and 3rd assistant on tasks that are away from set.
- Maintain a safe, clean, organized and professional set at all times.
- Verify that all equipment is functioning properly and strobes are firing. Have backup batteries available for all equipment at all times.
- Have gaffers tape and clamps ready to go at all times.
- Monitor camera and light settings at all times. Help the photographer maintain consistent camera settings.
- Work with photographer to light and organize the set. Be ready to move lights at a moments notice.
- Secure all cables into camera, computer, and power packs. Watch out for tripping hazards and prevent them at all costs.
- Keep digital assets organized on shoot days.
- Monitor critical focus at all times. Discretely mention focus if you feel an image is soft and out of focus.
- Watch for the needs of art directors, clients, and others on the set.
- Occasionally check in with clients and make sure they feel at home. Offer refills of tea, coffee, or beverages occasionally.
- **ANTICIPATE AND COMMUNICATE ON THE JOB:** Always anticipate problems, and/ or items your photographer might need -- be steps ahead. While you are on the job, be patient and actively learn the ropes; once you feel more confident, try to anticipate the photographer's next need. Don't wait to be asked to do everything, but check first if you are at all unsure about something. Communicate tactfully, clearly, and directly to the photographer, but also let the photographer focus on what they are doing. Remember, creating sophisticated contemporary photos can require a great deal of concentration, so always be respectful of the photographer's time and energy.
- Always be ready to help other crew members/production professionals even if it's not your job. Pitch in at all times, for any job.
- Photograph production and set stills (behind-the-scenes) if asked to do so and if time and the setting allows.
- Document lighting setups with power settings before changing sets. It may be your duty to make sure the photographer can replicate this set with an accurate and detailed PDF.
- Personal breaks should be made during slow periods only. Always look busy; there is always something to do.

Production Wrap - End of Shoot

- Verify that all files are copied onto second and third drives. Dump onto server if in the studio.
- Record lighting diagram on reverse of "Job Folder Worksheet" for each set-up. Write a written description of the set, with power settings, and referenced photos.
- Don't strike the set until instructed by the photographer.
- Upon striking set, return all equipment to its proper storage space and make sure it is free of dirt, dust, and crap.
- Put away all props. Check with Prop Stylist on what props are rented, purchased, and where they should go. Many props may be returned to rental houses, stores (if not used) and to their original owners.
- Clean the studio and any dirty equipment prior to storing.
- Plug in camera batteries or other rechargeable photo gear batteries.
- Tidy and clean all areas used for production (set, client area, kitchen, catering, talent area, props & wardrobe, hair and make-up).
- Check with producer if they need anything.
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- Empty all trash bins/cans into alley dumpster.
- Report any damaged equipment or equipment in need of repair.
- Note any and all supplies requiring replenishment.
- Return all rental items. (Track return times and avoid unnecessary charges.) Properly file all receipts.
- If given petty cash, obtain receipts for all purchases and return with balance of money.
- Give the file to the photographer when all job related paperwork has been completed.
- Promptly deliver your invoice to the photographer. Itemize reimbursable expenses and attach all appropriate receipts. Include job reference.

Common Items In An Assistant Kit

Leatherman
Allen Key Set
Tape measure
Pocket Knife
CF Card Reader
Black Gaffers tape
AA batteries
Flashlight
Silk/microfiber cloth to clean lenses
Sharpie
Grip-gloves (for hot-lights and cold weather)
Clothes pins/small A-clamps/bull-nose clips
2-3 plastic trash bags
A couple optical slaves
White/Gray gray card
Small level
Lint roller
Blue Goo Modeling Clay
Velcro cable-ties
A few band-aids
Ibuprofen/aspirin, Tums
Bandana
Gel Collection
Ziplock Bags
Multi Outlet Adapters
Tethering Cable
iPhone Apps:
Google Earth & Google Maps
Sun Seeker
Photosynth
Capture Pilot
Phocus for iOS

Top Ten Ways To Get Ahead

1. Always Be Early

Being late is unacceptable. Set 2 alarms in separate parts of the room. Study traffic at certain parts of the day and understand your route to the studio/site and get there early. Know if being too early is okay, and if not, then wait in your car until you are 15 minutes early. Know where to park, alternative routes, and public transportation methods. There is no excuse for being late, and if you are, notify the studio and your approximate time of arrival without excuses.

2. Do What's Not Expected Of You

Find the hardest working person on set, learn from them, and then work harder without rubbing it in anyone's face. Production sets are fast paced, high stress environments that experience frequent problems. Be the first person to pitch in and provide a solution, offer help, and understand what needs to be done. Be quick about it without being careless or breaking anything. Your attitude will not go unnoticed and you will quickly make it to the top of the list of producers/studio managers rosters.

3. Do Things Without Being Asked

If you see dishes piling up then do them. If you see cords not taped down, tape them down. If you see C stands not sand bagged, then secure them. If camera gear is laying out then organize it. If the photographer is out of coffee, then offer to refill it. Take the pressure off of others like producers and photographers with the minutiae of the shoot and bust your ass to make the set as smooth and problem free as possible.

4. Anticipate What The Photographer Will Need Next

Study the photographers lighting methods, workflow, and habits. Sooner or later you will be able to think like them and anticipate their next move. If you anticipate another light being added to the set, then silently get one ready. Knowing the next step before the photographer does will get you at the top of their roster. Be careful suggesting things, though, as you may look foolish if you are way off base. For instance, don't suggest a major change in lighting without having done it 10 times before.

5. Have a 110% Positive Attitude

Sets can be stressful. Many times the photographer and clients are meeting for the first time and tensions are high, deadlines are looming, and many months of planning are coming together inside of a short timeline. Nothing can go wrong in these settings but often times something does. Do not let this phase you and stay positive. One negative person can spread the negativity to others and hurt the morale of the set. Leave all of your troubles at home and say only positive things to others. Never speak ill of other sets you've worked on, other photographers, or personal problems.

Location Checklist

Take an aerial picture of any and all gear bags and note their contents before unpacking and building a set. Nothing gets left behind!!

6. Ask Other Crew Members If They Need A Hand

If you notice a food stylist, prop stylist, wardrobe, or crew member “in the weeds” or in need of a hand and you are able to help then offer a hand. No one likes the “that’s not my job mentality” (unless its a Union Crew on bigger productions) and offering help to others will not go unnoticed. Be flexible and always be busy.

7. Take Ownership Of Mistakes

If you make a mistake, forget to do something, break something, melt something, lose something, or create any sort of problem then quickly take ownership and come up with a solution to fix it. No one likes excuses or reasons why something wasn’t your fault. On a production set the only thing a producer, manager, or photographer want’s to hear is a practical solution and that you are on top of fixing it. If you can’t fix it, or don’t know how, then ask for help. Learn from your mistakes and try not to let it happen again.

8. No Task Is Too Little

If you are asked to do something, no matter what it is. Do it better than it has ever been done before, and quickly. But refer to #3 of this top ten and hopefully you will never be asked to do it.

9. Take Notes Constantly

Learn everything you can about set dynamics, workflow, client relationships, lingo, and lighting. Learn the gear, the tricks, the workflow, and take notes. Always keep a small moleskin of notes with you and write down things that might be technical or easy to forget. Study what the photographer is doing without asking him/her about what they are doing. This will help you anticipate what the photographer will do next.

10. Study Study Study Grow Grow Grow

Identify your weak spots in your technical knowledge, problem solving skills, interpersonal relationship, or even conversation skills and improve upon them constantly. Your growth should be your number one priority in this industry. Just remember that there will always, no matter what, be someone that does the job better than you. If you approach the job this way with a constant attitude towards learning then you will be on your way to a successful career in commercial photography.

GRIP

- C-stands
 - Light Stands
 - Hi Rollers
 - Super Clamps, Magic Arm, etc.
 - A-Clamps
 - Gaffers Tape
 - Paper Tape
 - Extension Cables
 - Sand Bags
 - Backgrounds, Seamless, etc.
 - Apple Boxes
 - Step Ladder
 - Plates, arms, etc
 - Generator
 - Flags
 - Scrim
-

CAMERA

- Camera Body
 - Camera Batteries and Charger
 - Lenses
 - Light Meter
 - WB Card
 - Compact Flash Cards
 - Camera Sensor Cleaner
 - Tripod
-

COMPUTER

- Computer
 - Power Cable/Extra Laptop Battery
 - Hard Drive for Backup
 - Surge Protector/Power Strip
 - Compact Flash Card Reader
 - Sun Shade for monitor (if outside)
 - Data Recovery Software
 - Extra Firewire Cables
 - Blank Media and Cases
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LIGHTING

- Strobe Packs
- Strobe Heads

- Power Cords
- Strobe Head cords
- Slaves, Syncs, Pocket Wizards
- Soft Boxes
- Small Bank

- Medium Bank
 - Large Bank
 - Extra large Bank
 - Ocobank
 - Strip Bank
 - Umbrellas
 - Grid Spots
 - Scrim
 - Flags
 - Gels
 - Extra Modeling Lights
-
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MISCELLANEOUS

- Pen and Sharpie
 - Notepad
 - Multi-tool, Tool kit, or Pocket Knife
 - Extra Batteries (AA's)
 - Thomas Guide or GPS Device
 - Trash Bags
 - Broom
 - Ladder
 - Steamer
 - Ironing Board and Iron
 - Garment Rack
 - Model and Property Releases
 - Call Sheet
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Resources:

Membership Organizations

[APA](#) -American Photographic Artists

[PPA](#) - Professional Photographers of America

[ASMP](#)- American Society of Media Photographers

[NPPA](#) -National Press Photographers Association

Web Development We Use

[SquareSpace](#) - Web Site Building. Try it for Free.
One of the best website building platforms that exists, period.

Learning Photoshop

[Phlearn](#) - Best Online Resource for Learning Photoshop

Blogs We Read:

A Photo Editor

Fstoppers

ISO 1200

Phlearn Newsletter

Must Have Software

Carbon Copy Cloner

Must Have Light Modifiers

ROSCO Diffusion #3008 & #3001 via BH Photo