

UNIT ONE: Photography as a Career

Do you enjoy taking photos and think that you might make a good photographer? Becoming a professional photographer has its advantages as a career—but it also has



German Nature Photographer Ingo Kirschner

important disadvantages that you need to be aware of before entering the profession. In this unit, we will consider aspects such as what photographers do, the education and experience that photographers often have, and some of the challenges in working as a photographer.

Many professional photographers enter the field because they enjoy taking photographs and because they want to use their creativity in their career. For individuals who enjoy using their imagination, creativity, and technical skills, photography can be a great career. However, a photographer must also possess patience, self-discipline, and a business plan in order to be successful within the profession. Many professional photographers specialize in a particular area of photography, but even so, the field is highly competitive and new photographers must be ready to compete for jobs and

customers.

What does a professional photographer do?

Photographers take photographs of people, events, and objects.

Professional photographers do the same thing, only they receive the majority of their income from photography. The definition of a professional photographer has shifted a bit in recent years. Today, it is common for amateur photographers to gain some money from selling images on microstock websites or from taking photos of friends and family. The advances in



English portrait photographer in his studio, 1850s.

camera technology mean that even fairly inexpensive cameras can take images which can be sold or used for portrait purposes. The difference between an amateur and professional photographer, then, is a fine line.

For professional photographers, photography is only one part of their business. In some cases, it may even be a fairly small part of their daily or weekly activities. Professional photographers often have to be able to run a business in addition to being skilled at taking photographs. More than half of all professional photographers own their own business. For those self-employed photographers, a significant portion of their time is spent marketing their services, editing the photos that they take, and selling their

work to potential or actual customers.

Freelance professional photographers have some advantages over those who work for someone else, whether that is the government, a large corporation, or a specific publication. They often have more freedom in choosing the type of photograph that they'd like to take as well as greater freedom in setting their own schedule.

Types of Photographers

As a professional photographer, one of the first tasks is often figuring out which area of photography you wish to specialize in. Most professional photographers focus on one area of photography, allowing them to develop specialized skills and build a name for themselves. While professional photographers may step out of a particular area of photography from time to time in their professional work, it often makes good business sense for a photographer to focus on one area. Given this, what are some of the areas that a photographer might specialize in?

Portrait photographers take photographs (usually posed) of individuals or groups of people. They generally work in their own studios, but they may also travel to other locations to take portraits. These other locations may include private homes, gardens, beaches, or other outdoor settings. A subcategory of portrait photography is the area of pet photography, which involves taking portraits of dogs, cats, and other pets.

Photojournalists take photographs of events and settings of social issues. They may be employed by newspapers, television stations, or magazines. In other words, photojournalists take the photos that we see when we open up the Sunday paper as well as the photos in some magazines. They

photograph news events such as accidents, elections, protests, rallies, and other important happenings. In some cases, a photojournalist may specialize in a particular type of news, such as a sports photographer or a war photographer.



Photographers at Oxbow Bend in Grand Teton

Commercial photographers take photographs of models, buildings, products, equipment, landscapes, and many other subjects for use by companies and businesses. Their work appears in books, magazines, advertisements, and business publicity such as brochures. Commercial photographers can be hired to work for a particular company or they may work as a freelance photographer. In many cases, the photographer will specialize in a particular area of commercial photography, such as fashion photography or product photography.

Fine art photographers take photographs that are sold as art. You may have encountered photographs like these at a gallery, museum, or art fair, or in books. The subject matter for fine art photographers can be varied,

although the photographers often have to blend a strong knowledge of the technical aspects of photography with their creativity.

Forensic photographers work in criminal justice settings to help record crime scenes and evidence. They also can be responsible for presenting their work in court cases. The ability to take high-quality images is a must for forensic photographers, as blurry photographs or those with other issues may present problems for investigators as they try to solve the crime. Forensic photographers use a number of photographic techniques as they capture not only entire crime scenes, but also close-ups of small pieces of evidence, often in situations with poor lighting or other obstacles.

Scientific photographers use photographs to capture and record medical and scientific information. For example, they may photograph the physical symptoms of a disease for inclusion in a medical textbook, or they may photograph the behavior of bacteria in a petri dish. Due to the technical aspects of the work, scientific photographers often need a strong knowledge and understanding of science and medicine.

Working as a Photographer

The conditions of any job help to determine whether or not someone will enjoy the work. While you may enjoy taking photographs for fun, not everyone will enjoy the actual work of a photographer. Knowing more about what a typical photographer does can help you to determine whether the career choice is for you or not. In addition to reading about the tasks that photographers do and the situations that they often work in, you may want to talk to a few professional photographers who already work in the area that you are interested in. There is nothing like firsthand information from

someone knowledgeable to help you understand whether the career might be a good fit for you too.

Not surprisingly, given the wide range of types of photography that professionals do, the working conditions can vary quite a bit from photographer to photographer. Some photographers, particularly those working for larger companies, may work a standard forty-hour work week with regular hours. Other photographers, however, may work more irregular hours. For example, forensic photographers photograph crime scenes as soon as possible after they happen, which can be at any time of the day or night. Wedding photographers often have to work on weekends since that is when most weddings happen.



Professional Photographer

The location of
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photographer's work will also vary widely. Some portrait photographers have their own studio that they use for photographing people or objects. Other photo-graphers work outdoors or in a location chosen by their clients. Many photographers work within a given area, but some photographers travel

around the globe taking photographs. As you can imagine, each of these different working conditions has both pros and cons. Photographers who travel frequently may get to see exotic sights, but they are also away from their family and friends for long periods of time. Studio photographers may have the stability and security of working from a set location, but they also have to pay the upkeep and insurance on their studio.

It is also important to note that while most photographers work in relatively safe conditions, not all photographers do. Forensic photographers may be called in to crime-ridden areas or places that present physical dangers, such as decaying buildings. Photojournalists may find themselves caught up in the events of a war, natural disasters, or other events that have the potential for violence, such as a protest or rally that gets out of hand.



Photographer at Plumpton Rocks

Even photographers who work in relatively safe conditions often have long periods of waiting, sometimes in bad weather, in order to get the photograph they need. Some photographers, such as news or magazine photographers, will have tight deadlines that they must meet. In addition, photographers can encounter situations where they will need to carry their equipment over long distances to the location for the photo.

Owning a photography business can bring with it its own set of challenges as well as perks. On the plus side, those who own their own photography business can have greater flexibility in their work and schedule. Many aspiring photographers may seek out their own business for these reasons. However, it is also important to note that the work (and thus, the pay) can be irregular and it is not guaranteed to occur, which is why marketing the business becomes so important. Likewise, although being self-employed may bring with it an increased sense of artistic freedom, the photographer may still be constrained by the types of photographs that his or her client wants. If a bride wants a photo of the wedding party in a certain location or in certain pose, the photographer often has to try to make that photograph work, even if it would not be his or her first choice.

Whether the photography career involves working for a company or publication or involves working as a self-employed portrait photographer, the actual work that a photographer does involves more than just snapping pictures. While taking the actual photographs may be what draws individuals to a career in photography, it is important to note that most professional photographers only spend a relatively small portion of their time on this task. Other tasks that photographers generally undertake include talking with clients, setting up photo shoots, and editing the photos with computer software. Additional tasks include marketing the photographer's business,

selling the photos, and maintaining equipment. These tasks can take up the majority of a professional photographer's time. To be successful, individuals who enjoy taking photographs and want a career as a professional photographer need to be prepared to spend time doing these other important tasks.

Steps to Becoming a Professional Photographer

The first step in becoming a photographer is having an interest in photography. Generally, the best photographers are those who have a passion and interest in taking photographs and using them to express their creativity. If you are considering a career in photography, you probably already have a passion and interest in taking photographs, although it is important to remember that the work of photography can be a different experience than a hobby in photography.



View of a group of photographers out on the circuit during practice session of Formula One in Bahrain.

An aspiring photographer will also want to determine which type of photography he or she wants to work in. This will often be determined not only by your interest in a particular type of photography, but also your skills in a particular type. In most cases, it is important to like the type of

photography that you do. So if you hate weddings or don't think you could handle the blood at a crime scene, you might want to specialize in a different type of photography than wedding or forensic photography. Likewise, if you love to take portraits of children or pets, this might be a great type of photography for you to focus on. Focusing in a particular area doesn't mean that you can't venture out and do other things, but it will give you a more defined idea of how you should market a business or where you should look for a job.



Photographers waiting by the Red Carpet

Practicing different types of photography can help you determine which areas you like and which ones you do not. Not only will you gain a better understanding about the different types of photography, but you will also build your skills as a photographer. As you practice and think about the different types of photography, study the techniques used by professional

photographers in the area you are interested in. It is often helpful to look at published photography books to help you find new perspectives and ideas for your own work. Photography manuals and courses can also be helpful ways of building up your skills in a particular area.



Die Gartenlaube (1888)

The next step in becoming a professional photographer is to receive a university degree or other training. There is no uniform educational path for professional photographers. It often depends on the type of photography that you wish to do. All photographers will want to receive some training in their particular area, although this may not always require a university degree. For example, working as an assistant to a wedding photographer can help you

learn to photograph a wedding. There may also be certification programs available in your chosen area of photography, although these are generally not required to start a business or receive a job in a particular area.

However, many professionals do receive university degrees. For example, if you wanted to become a forensic photographer, you might consider obtaining a degree in criminal justice or a related area to help you understand how a crime scene would be processed and the role that your

photographs would play. Likewise, scientific photographers often find science degrees helpful in their work. Yet, degrees are not limited to those who wish to do more technical photography. Individuals who wish to be self-employed photographers may find that taking business courses can help them prepare for running their own business. Many aspiring photographers focus on the photography aspect of their career, but the business side can be just as important in starting and maintaining a successful business.

Working as an assistant to a photographer can often be a helpful step in learning the business of photography, although it is not required. If you think this might be helpful for you, try to find a photographer who works in the area of photography that you are interested in and contact him or her. Depending on the photographer, you may be able to obtain a paid position as an assistant or you may be able to help out on a volunteer or intern basis. Either way, you'll gain valuable experience. Be aware that not all photographers will be open to the idea of an assistant, so be prepared to ask several photographers about interning or assisting them.

In preparing for a career in photography, it is important to develop a strong **portfolio**. This is a collection of examples of your work that you will share with prospective clients or employers in order to show them that you have the talent and ability to do the work that they need done. Some photographers also submit their photographs to contests and magazines in order to build a name for themselves. It is important when doing this, however, to understand what will be done with your photograph and how it will affect your rights to the photo. Some so-called contests take the copyright from the photographer when the photograph is entered, so it is important to pay close attention to the fine print if you wish to retain your copyright to the photo.

Even once you've begun a photography career, whether through starting a small business or accepting a photography position with a company or the government, you still need to continue to hone your skills and knowledge. Many photographers spend hours practicing and experimenting with different ideas that they have. They may also continue to attend seminars and workshops aimed at improving their techniques and inspiring their creativity. Professional photographers will also need to find ways to stay up to date on new advances in camera and editing technology.

Professional photographers will also want to continue to improve other aspects of their careers as well in order to be successful. This may include everything from taking additional business or marketing courses to staying current on how to build and run their own websites. Improving their writing and communication skills can also come in handy when working with prospective clients and making sure that everyone understands what will happen during a photo shoot. Many photographers also find it helpful to work to improve aspects such as patience, hand-eye coordination, creativity, and working well with others, as these can also impact their work as a photographer.

The Job Outlook

In 2008, there were over 150,000 professional photographers in the United States. This number reflects those whose primary income comes from photography, so add part-time and semiprofessional photographers and the number is even greater. The number of photographers and the need for people in this area is expected to grow over the next decade as the population also increases. As more and more magazines, newspapers, and

companies develop a digital position online, the need for images will also increase.



Fotografand São Paulo

Photography will continue to be a competitive field, however. As camera and digital processing technology has advanced, it has become increasingly easy and affordable for more individuals to enter the field of photography, particularly on a part-time or semiprofessional basis. Individuals are also better able to take their own photographs of family and friends, somewhat reducing the need for professional photographers.

Those seeking a photography job with a company, publication, or the government will also see increased competition for jobs. With the growth of online news sites, many newspapers are folding, taking with them the photojournalism jobs that had been available. Likewise, many companies

and publications are relying more on freelance photographers, who often cost the company less overall, and stock image agencies for their photographic needs. In some cases, it may help individuals find a salaried job if they can combine their experience in photography with another area, such as information technology or the ability to speak a different language.



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In May 2008, the average photographer earned about \$30,000 per year, with most earning between \$20,000 and \$43,000. Those who work full time in a salaried position with the government or another company typically earn more than a freelance photographer. It is important to keep in mind that freelance photographers incur the cost of purchasing, maintaining, and updating their equipment, which can get quite expensive. These individuals are also often responsible for marketing costs and health insurance, which salaried individuals may receive as part of their position. Those who own studios are also often responsible for the overhead and maintenance of the

studio itself, as well as any wages that an assistant or receptionist might earn.

Stock Photography

One area of photography that has been growing in recent years and offering opportunities for amateur and professional photographers is stock photography. Stock photography is a set of photographs that have licenses for specific commercial purposes. With the growth of the Internet, many stock photo agencies have developed online or have moved at least some of their operations online. With more and more businesses using online websites in addition to traditional advertising, stock photographs are a necessity for businesses since most businesses do not have the time or resources to have their own photographs taken for their advertising and websites. While some stock agencies continue to have strict requirements about the photographers that they use, other stock agency websites accept submissions from anyone, as long as the photos meet their requirements.

In some cases, photographers may focus exclusively on stock photography. These individuals often work for one of the more established stock agencies. Other photographers who work in a particular type of photography may also submit photographs to stock agencies to supplement their income. Finally, many people use stock agency submissions as a part-time or semiprofessional photography job.

Stock photography includes photographs of almost everything imaginable. Think about the photos that you've recently seen in magazines and online. Chances are that many of them are stock photos. Stock photographs include photographs of people, places, objects, and so on. For example, a photo of a bowl of stew might be used on a cooking website. A photo of a child playing

with blocks might be used by a daycare. A photo of the ocean might be used on a travel website. The possibilities for taking stock photos are almost endless, which can be great for individuals starting out in photography as well as established professional photographers.

With today's digital cameras, there are few barriers to earning money as a photographer. You will generally want to have a digital SLR that is at least eight megapixels. You'll also want some quality lenses (although you don't need to spend a fortune on them). The better your photographs are coming out of the camera, the less work you'll have to do to prepare your photographs for submission to a stock agency. Photo editing software is an important part of the stock photography process, as any dust, hairs, or dirt will need to be edited out of the photo. Each stock agency has its own set of requirements for submission that stock photographers have to pay attention to as they photograph and edit.

In this unit, we began to explore the field of professional photography. In doing so, we examined what makes a photographer a professional, what professional photographers do, and the job outlook for photographers. We also examined the types of photography, the area of stock photography, and the steps that many professional photographers take in establishing their careers. Professional photography can be an interesting and rewarding career choice, but it is also important for individuals to recognize the various tasks and activities that professional photographers do in addition to taking the actual photographs.