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10 Tips from Master Cinematographer Roger Deakins

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BY JOHNATHAN PAUL

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CINEMATOGRAPHY



Award-winning cinematographer Roger Deakins shares his insight, wisdom, and experience. Learn from a true master with these top 10 tips.

Top Image via The Film Stage

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reason you're unsure of his legacy, Roger Deakins has earned **12 Oscar nominations** for his work on such films as *Shawshank Redemption*, *A Beautiful Mind*, *Skyfall*, and almost every Coen Brothers film since *Barton Fink*.



Image: Production Location for Skyfall, via Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Luckily for us, Deakins loves connecting with other cinematographers and giving advice whenever he can. He does most of this through his [website forum](#) where he answers questions and give tips, tricks, and general advice. Cinematographers from around the world flock to his site hoping to learn more about their craft.

We've pulled a few of our favorite cinematography tips straight from the cinema master's mouth. We believe these useful tips will aid you as you embark on your career or your next production.

1. Learn to Be Selective

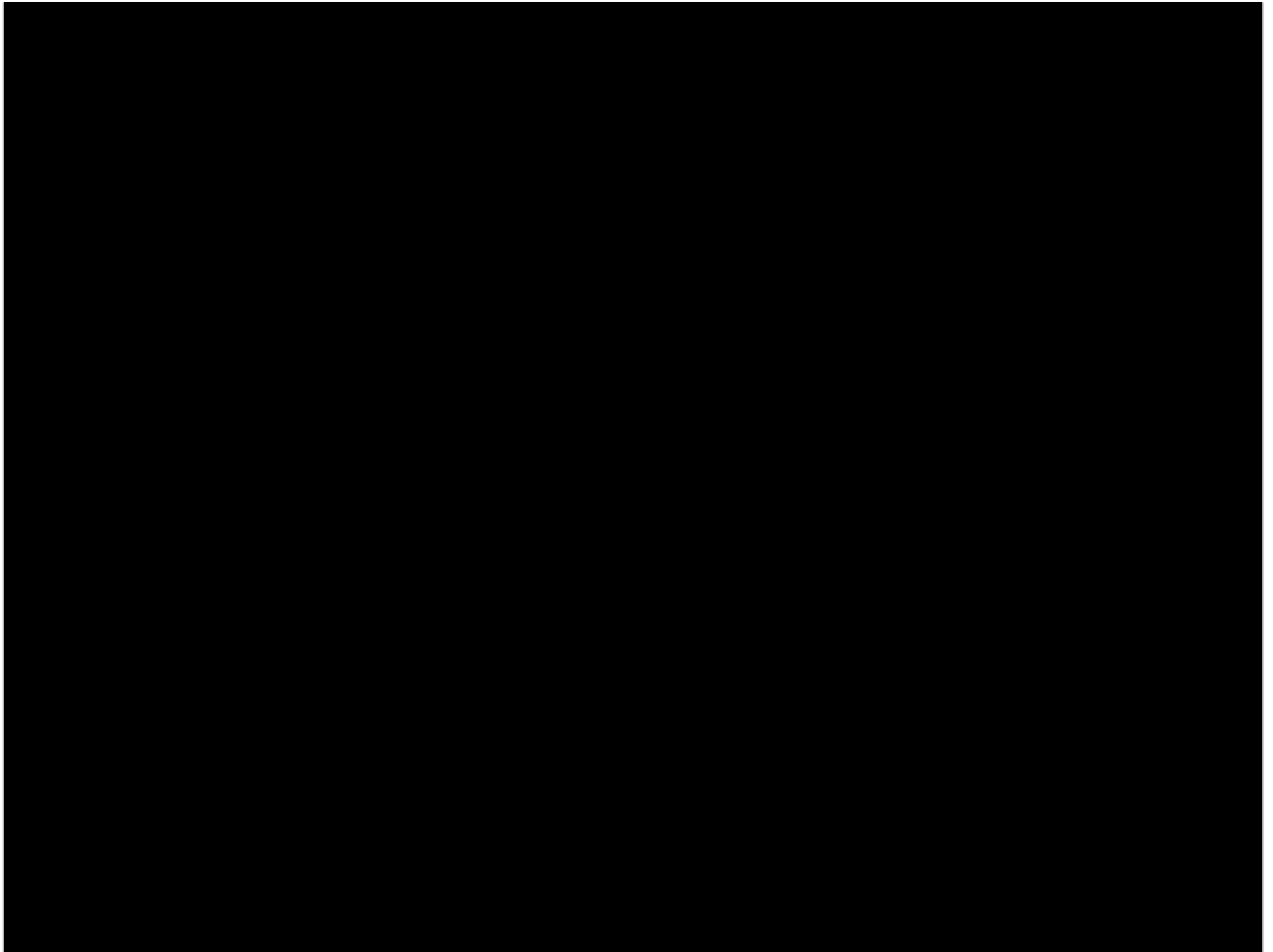


Image from [By The Dart](#)

Before you begin a new project, make sure this project is actually something you want to take on. Make sure it's something that you believe in. Be selective with any project you latch on to, because as Roger Deakin mentions in this [article from the BBC](#), you're going to be on this project for a long time.

- *I'm picky about the sort of material I want to work with, always have been. But usually I'm drawn to scripts that are about characters, I don't have a love of doing action movies. It is really important to choose which projects you are going to work on carefully. You are going to be on a film for a long time.*

Roger Deakins, what advice do you have for aspiring Cinematographers?



Video from *Cinefii Channel*

2. The Importance of Lighting



Image: *Fantastic lighting from No Country For Old Men via IMDb*

Lighting is king for cinematographers. The way you light a scene greatly effects how the audience reacts to that scene. In fact, Roger Deakins says that **great lighting begins with the**

script. Keep this in mind when picking your color and lighting. Discuss the scene with the director and find out what they want the audience to gain from the scene.

- *So, on the one hand, you need to light a space so you can see the actors – but, more than that, you are creating a mood, you are creating a world for those actors to inhabit and for the audience to get submersed in. Lighting is one of the most important aspects of any great film.*

3. Embrace Documentary

When working with documentary film, you have to be quick on your feet. You've got to find the action and frame it at any given moment. This is definitely something that **has aided Roger Deakins throughout his career.**

- *You work with the light that's available and create something with what you have at hand. It teaches you how to be quick in terms of setting the frame and finding the angle and reading what's happening – reading the development of what's going on in front of you.*

Roger Deakins on Cinematography at AFI FEST presented by Audi

Video from *AFIFEST*

4. Stay With the Character and Story



Image: *Jeff Bridges in True Grit via IMDb*

Not every shot needs to be a jaw-dropping exercise in masterful composition. Sometimes you need to reign it in and go back to the basics, allowing the characters and the story to drive the narrative and keep the audience engaged.

- *There's nothing worse than an ostentatious shot or some lighting that draws attention to itself, and you might go, 'Oh, wow, that's spectacular.' Or that spectacular shot, a big crane move, or something. But it's not necessarily right for the film — you jump out, you think about the surface, and you don't stay in there with the characters and the story. — Roger Deakins via *Screen Writing from Iowa**

5. Don't Compromise Performance



Image: Scene from Prisoners via Alcon Entertainment.

This is really an extension of the previous tip, but it's so vital that it needs its own spot on the list. The main idea: Don't compromise the actor's performance for a perfect shot.

Instead, capture the performance the actor gives you in the best way you can. You'll find (as Deakins has mentioned in past interviews) that a great performance can mask a bad shot.

○ *In the end a film can look lousy but work because of a great performance but not the other way round. That's something always worth remembering.*

Legendary filmmaker **Terrence Malick** has a reputation for filming the performance. He and cinematographer **Emmanuel Lubezki** allowed the actors on *The Tree of Life* to **move right into their performance freely**, and it was there they would capture the footage they needed. While some scenes were storyboarded, most of the footage was done in a very *cinema-verite* style.

THE TREE OF LIFE Featurette: Cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki



Video from *FoxSearchlight*

6. Find Your Style



Image: Deakins on the set of *The Village*

It's likely you have one or two master filmmakers that you just absolutely love, but make sure you aren't just copying what those filmmakers do. **Incorporate their techniques into your own**

style while working toward finding your cinematic voice.

- *You can't learn your craft by copying me or anyone else. I hope what I do can do is in some way inspire others but I would be appalled if I thought my work was being studied as 'the right way to do the job'. – Roger Deakins via [Rev18](#).*

7. Tech Is Good, but Don't Forget You're Telling a Story

Filmmakers need to be on the cutting edge of technology. But there's one thing more important than each and every piece of technology or equipment: **the story**. Without a compelling story, all of your amazingly composed shots will fall on deaf ears.

- *I know the visuals are vitally important, after all this IS a visual medium but it's not just about a little black box with a lens stuck on the front, it's about the skill of the person operating it but even more importantly it's the story and how you execute it that really matters.*

Roger Deakins has a very similar philosophy and has mentioned on several occasions that storytelling is still the most important thing you need to remember as a cinematographer. He has stated that while technology changes rapidly, the way **he frames and tells a story never changes**. This is an important lesson for any cinematographer.

Roger Deakins, what is the most important aspect of film making?

Video from *Cinefil Channel*

8. Choose Your Location Wisely



Image: Deakins on the set of [A Serious Man](#)

Location, location, location. Where you decide to film a scene is incredibly important to the final product on screen. If you're working with a small budget, then **finding optimal locations will be key for you**. But even if you have a large-scale budget, this same advice applies. The location will determine what lenses, lighting, and camera setup you use.

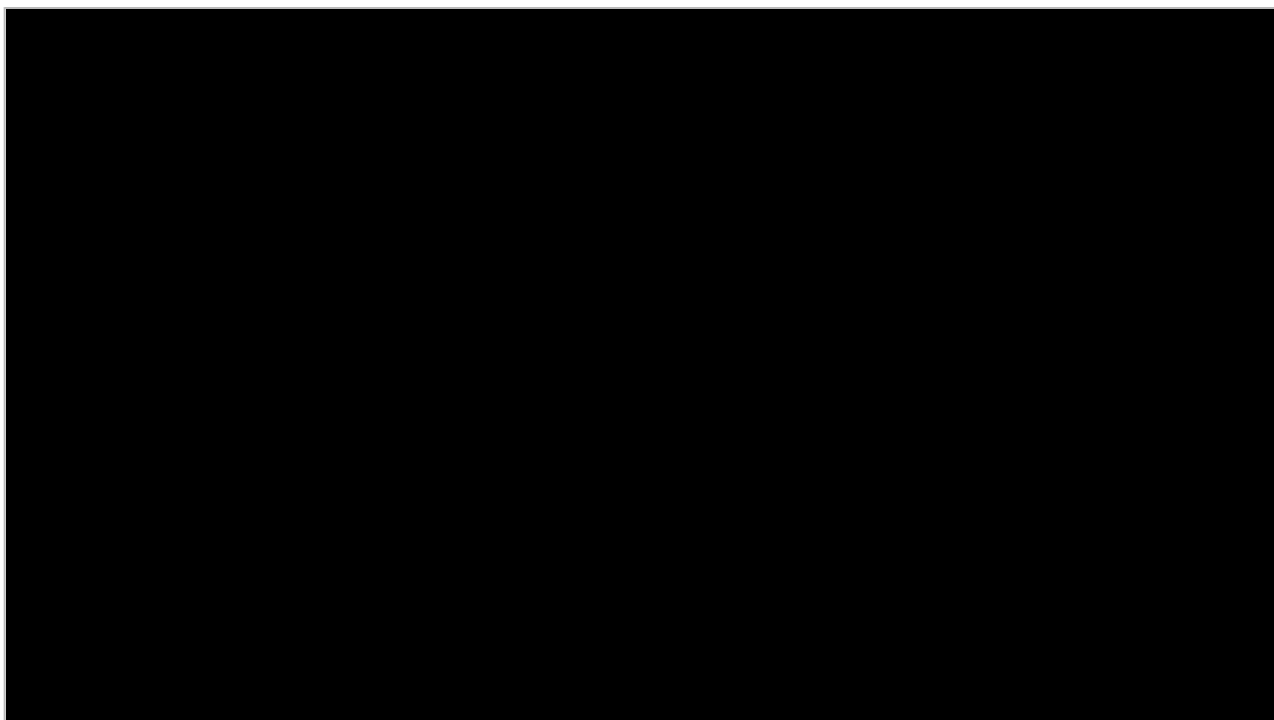
○ *I would suggest the choice of location is the most important one if you have little money in the budget for lights. You might consider the films of Terry Malick. They utilize very few artificial sources.*

9. The Film Is the Director's Film

First and foremost, cinematographers need to know that filmmaking is a collaborative art form. At the end of the day, they are responsible for framing the film as the director envisioned. Does this mean that a cinematographer needs to be silent and only do what the director asks? Absolutely not.

You should engage and offer opinions and suggestions, but as **Roger Deakins said**, "Every film

is the Director's film and we must never lose sight of that.”



Video from *Film and Digital Times*

10. Be Social and Get to Know People



Image From Left: *Brad Pitt, Joel Coen, and Roger Deakins via ASC*

Ever heard someone swear that “It’s all about who you know?” Well, it’s true.

As a cinematographer and filmmaker, you'll never be able to move your way up to bigger and better things on your own. You need to be social and connect with people. This practice will also help you when you're going into production. Because you have quality interaction with people, you can take those experiences and apply them to your project.

○ *All I've ever wanted to do is take stills of people, or take documentaries about people, and try to express to an audience how somebody lives next door. You know what I mean? Just how similar we all are as individuals.*

What are your favorite pearls of wisdom for cinematographers? Share your advice in the comments below!

... cinematography, filmmaking, Inspiration, Roger Deakins, video production

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This is a very good article, and not just for young DoP's.

My 2 extra cents:

- Always be humble, never get your ego or credit list get the better of you.
- Be open to learn every day from anyone, but know how to select good advice from the bad.
- Know what's important, don't complain about what isn't.
- Respect the other departments, but never let them dictate your shot.

- Take an apprentice, pass on your skills and professional wisdom. Don't let it die with you, or our profession will die soon

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