

Photographer

Snapshot

Career Cluster(s): Arts, A/V Technology & Communications

Interests: Photography; art; visual imagery; photojournalism; fine arts; media technology

Earnings (Yearly Average): \$36,280

Employment & Outlook: Decline Expected

OVERVIEW

Sphere of Work

Photographers capture images of various objects, people, and events using a film or digital camera. They must exhibit a solid understanding of technical camera operation and the fundamental processes behind photography, lighting, and the composition of an image. Most photographers focus on one area of photographic specialty. Photographic specialties include news, portrait, commercial and industrial, scientific, and fine arts photography. Because their profession is based on choosing image composition and creating unique images, creativity is a trait common among all types of photographers regardless of their area of specialization. Photographers can also choose to specialize in shooting certain subjects or environments, such as being a nature photographer, capturing images of wildlife both within the United States and around the world.

Work Environment

A photographer's work environment depends primarily on his or her area of photographic specialty. Some photographers, such as those who take studio



Taking photos of a giraffe in Kenya (pchoui via iStock)

portraits of children and families, work primarily out of comfortable, well-lit, indoor studios. Other photographers, such as those engaged in nature photography, work outside in a multitude of environments and are subject to various weather conditions, including harsh and potentially dangerous climates. Aerial photographers work in planes or helicopters to capture a scene, event, or location from an overhead perspective. Photographers who work for the government, advertising agencies, or private companies frequently maintain a forty-hour week. Freelance and newspaper photographers, or photojournalists, generally work irregular hours, travel often, and are expected to be on-call for last-minute projects or emergency events.

Profile

Interests: Data, People, Things, Animals

Working Conditions: Both Inside and Outside

Physical Strength: Light Work, Medium Work

Education Needs: On-the-Job Training, High School Diploma or G.E.D., High School Diploma with Technical Education, Apprenticeship

Licensure/Certification: Usually Not Required

Opportunities for Experience: Internship, Apprenticeship, Military Service, Volunteer Work, Part Time Work

Interest Score: AR

Occupation Interest

Potential photographers should demonstrate a passion for artistic creation. They should be compelled to tell stories through photographs and possess a deep desire to analyze, present, and offer a unique perspective on their photographic subjects. They should express a definitive opinion through their photographs, and that opinion should be easily discernible to an audience examining their photography. They should be able to lead and work with different types of people and personalities. Working with animal subjects requires a special skillset honed over time, through gained experience with different animals and in different environments and climates.

Duties and Responsibilities

- Marketing or advertising services to attract clients
- Analyzing and planning the composition of photographs
- Using various photographic techniques and lighting equipment
- Capturing subjects in professional-quality photographs
- Enhancing the subject's appearance with natural or artificial light
- Using photo-enhancing software
- Maintaining a digital portfolio to demonstrate their work
- Archiving and managing imagery

A Day in the Life—Duties and Responsibilities

Most photographers purchase and maintain their own camera equipment, lenses, and accessories, which can be costly at the outset. Photographers usually work independently or with an assistant. They are responsible for the physical positioning of subjects as well as the arrangement of lighting and camera angles, as well as choosing appropriate locations for in-the-field nature photography. If the

photographs are taken with film, the photographer develops the film and prints in either a darkroom or printing facility. Digital photographs may be edited and retouched prior to printing.

Photographers' specialties determine what they photograph and how those images are used. Portrait photographers specialize in photographing people or groups of people. They are generally self-employed and often travel to various locations for special events like weddings, school functions, and other special ceremonies. Commercial and industrial photographers travel to various locations to photograph landscapes, buildings, and merchandise. Their photographs are usually published in books, advertisements, catalogs, or other media. Scientific photographers make a photographic record of data related to science and medicine. These photographers usually have technical training in the sciences as well as the arts. News photographers, or photojournalists, take pictures of relevant people or events for publication in regular newspapers or periodicals, and can include nature photography in a news-oriented sense, such as chronicling endangered species or threatened habitats. Fine arts photographers are usually highly technically proficient, and may display their photographs in museums, art galleries, or private art shows.

Self-employed and freelance photographers must perform business and administrative tasks in addition to their creative work. Such tasks might include managing employees, processing billing and payments, setting appointments, and obtaining licenses, copyrights, contracts, and other legal documents as needed. They must also arrange their own advertising, marketing campaigns, and self-promotion.



Wildlife photographer (nicolamargaret via iStock)

OCCUPATION SPECIALTIES

Aerial Photographer

Aerial Photographers photograph segments of Earth and other subject material from aircraft.

Commercial and Industrial Photographer

Commercial and industrial photographers take pictures of subjects such as buildings, models, merchandise, artifacts, and landscapes. They usually go on location to take pictures for magazine covers, engineering projects, or other purposes.

Drone Photographer

Drone photographers operate unmanned aerial vehicles with an integrated camera to capture 360-degree imagery of buildings, landscapes, scenery, or events.

Fine Arts Photographer

Fine arts photographers sell their photographs as artwork. In addition to their knowledge of techniques such as lighting and the use of lenses, fine arts photographers need to have creativity and artistic talent.

News Photographer

News photographers, also called photojournalists, photograph people, places, and events for newspapers, journals, magazines, or television. In addition to taking still photos, photojournalists often work with digital video.

Portrait Photographer

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Scientific Photographer

Scientific photographers capture scientific or medical data or phenomena. Because they focus on accurately representing subjects visually, these photographers limit the use of software to clarify an image. Scientific photographers who take pictures of objects too small to be seen with the naked eye use microscopes to photograph their subjects.

WORK ENVIRONMENT

Immediate Physical Environment

A photographer's working conditions vary greatly depending on his or her specialty. Some photographers work in clean, comfortable, well-ventilated studios. Others work in unpleasant or dangerous outdoor environments. Photographers regularly travel to and from photographic sites. News photographers may travel locally or internationally and must be prepared to work in uncomfortable or even dangerous surroundings. For example, a news photographer may be sent to a war

zone to capture images. News photographers often work irregular schedules and must be available on short notice.

Human Environment

Photographers work with numerous clients, customers, and subjects. They must interact easily with others, and they should be comfortable directing, evaluating, and occasionally comforting their photographic subjects. Photographers sometimes collaborate with graphic designers, journalists, reporters, and editors. Some may report to a supervisor or direct an assistant.

Wildlife/Animal Environment

Photographers specializing in natural or wildlife photography may choose their own locations, or be sent on assignment when working for a publication or website. They may be required to travel around the world for such projects, and when on-location be required to navigate all kinds of terrain, in all kinds of weather, in order to get the required photographs. Animal subjects may be illusive, requiring great patience when trying to locate them. Depending on the species of animal being photographed, such as wild predators, there may be physical danger present, so great care must be taken.

Technological Environment

Nowadays, most photographers use digital cameras instead of traditional film cameras, although some photographers use both. Digital cameras capture images electronically, so the photographer can edit the image on a computer. Images can be stored on portable memory devices, such as flash drives. Once the raw image has been transferred to a computer, photographers can use image processing software to crop or modify the image and enhance it through color correction and other specialized effects. Photographers who edit their own pictures use computers, editing software, and high-quality printers.

Some photographers use unmanned aerial vehicles, commonly known as drones, to capture shots. The drones are equipped with an integrated camera to capture 360-degree imagery of buildings, landscapes, scenery, or events.

EDUCATION, TRAINING, AND ADVANCEMENT

High School/Secondary

High school students interested in becoming photographers should devote time to the study of communications, mathematics, chemistry, art, photography, and

technology. Some high schools also offer photography courses specifically. Aspiring photographers should also engage in extracurricular activities (like the school newspaper or yearbook) that allow them to practice taking pictures, editing their work, and developing or printing their best photographs. If animal or nature photography is of interest, extracurricular work such as school newspaper could provide an opportunity to photograph animals on assignment. Interested students should pursue part-time work with a photographer or store and consider applying to postsecondary photography programs.

Suggested High School Subjects

- Arts
- Chemistry
- English
- Mathematics
- Photography

Related Career Pathways/Majors

Arts, A/V Technology & Communications Career Cluster

- Visual Arts Pathway
- Journalism & Broadcasting Career Pathway

Postsecondary

Most photographers find it helpful to have an undergraduate degree or certificate in photography from a university, community college, private art school, or vocational institute. Many vocational education programs offer courses in visual imaging technology as well as in the fundamentals of photography. Other postsecondary programs teach students the practical and technical aspects of photography. Coursework may include the history of photography and cinema, camera maintenance, photojournalism, composition, color printing and print finishing, lighting, retouching, and other related subjects. Prospective freelance photographers may benefit from studying courses in business, including marketing, public relations, and business management. Many schools also have at least one student newspaper, where prospective photographers can gain experience.

Skills and Abilities

Artistic Ability

- Using colors, shadows, shades, light, and distance to compose aesthetically pleasing photographs

Business Skills

- Planning marketing or advertising strategies
- Reaching out to prospective clients
- Anticipating seasonal employment

Computer Skills

- Using computers to do postproduction work and maintain a digital portfolio

Customer-service Skills

- Understanding the types of shots clients want, agreeing on suitable alternatives for ideas that may be unworkable

Detail Oriented

- Focusing on details, especially in postproduction
- Maintaining accumulated photographs in an orderly fashion

Interpersonal Skills

- When photographing human subjects, achieving the desired composition through communication and flexibility

Related College Majors

- Commercial Photography
- Educational/Instructional Media Design
- Educational/Instructional Media Technology
- Fine/Studio Arts
- Photography

Adult Job Seekers

Many prospective photographers find positions as assistants to local, professional photographers after receiving their formal education. Assistants gain valuable technical experience, on-the-job training, and the practical skills needed to start their own businesses. Other job seekers apply for full- or part-time positions at camera shops, local newspapers, or photography studios. Candidates can also participate in apprenticeships, mentorships, or internships through their schools or photography training programs.

Many photographers subscribe to photography newsletters and magazines in order to make contacts in the industry. Networking, mentoring, and professional development opportunities are also often available through professional photographer associations.

Professional Certification and Licensure

Photographers are usually not required to obtain professional certification or licensure in their field; to an extent, this is because the work is highly visual, so photographers can easily provide samples of their work to others. Some professional photography organizations offer voluntary certifications, which may enhance a photographer's marketing and job-seeking efforts. To become a Certified Professional Photographer (CPP) through the Professional Photographers of America, candidates must pass a written exam and provide images for critique. Continuing education is typically required for certification renewal.

Photographers who commercially operate drones, commonly known as unmanned aerial vehicles, must obtain certification from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). They must be at least 16 years old; be able to read, speak, write, and understand English (exceptions may be made if the person is unable to meet one of these requirements for a medical reason, such as a hearing impairment); be in good physical and mental condition to operate a small drone safely; and pass the initial aeronautical knowledge exam at an FAA-approved knowledge testing center.

Additional Requirements

Photography is a well-respected form of artistic expression. Therefore, aspiring and professional photographers should be naturally artistic and able to understand the fundamentals of photographic composition. Because the field is intrinsically subjective, photographers should maintain the integrity and conviction necessary to present effective artwork and subject analysis, without reacting negatively to criticism. Photographers should be patient, have great eyesight, possess boundless imagination, and demonstrate impeccable communication skills when dealing with clients and subjects. Animal and nature photography requires additional patience, particularly when photographing in the wild, where subjects may not be forthcoming, and conditions may be harsh.

EARNINGS AND ADVANCEMENT

Earnings of photographers depend on geographic location, type of photographic specialty, number of hours worked, photographic skills, and marketing ability. Most salaried photographers work full-time and earn more than the majority of self-employed photographers who usually work part-time, but some self-employed photographers have very high earnings. Unlike photojournalists and commercial photographers, very few fine arts photographers are successful enough to support themselves solely through this profession.

Median annual earnings of photographers were \$36,280 in 2019, or \$17.44 an hour. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$9.92 an hour, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$38.19.

Photographers may receive paid vacations, holidays, and sick days; life and health insurance; and retirement benefits. These are usually paid by the employer. Freelance and self-employed photographers must provide their own benefits.

EMPLOYMENT AND OUTLOOK

There were approximately 133,500 photographers employed nationally in 2019. Sixty percent were self-employed. However, employment of photographers is projected to decline 4 percent from 2019 to 2029. The decreasing cost of digital cameras and the increasing number of amateur photographers and hobbyists will reduce the need for professional photographers. In addition, stock photographic

services available online give individuals and businesses access to stock photographs for a fee or subscription, possibly dampening demand for photographers.

Photographers will face strong competition for most jobs. Because of the relative ease with which photographers may enter the occupation, there will be many qualified candidates for relatively few positions. In addition, salaried jobs may be more difficult to obtain as companies increasingly contract with freelancers rather than hire their own photographers. Job prospects will be best for candidates who have a strong portfolio and related skills, such as in editing photos and capturing digital video.



Wildlife photography can bring one closer to nature (DieterMeyrl via iStock)

The application of newer technologies, such as drone photography, may contribute to increased demand for these workers. For example, drone photography in the commercial sector enables the capturing of images and information for agricultural land, real estate, and new construction projects. In addition, drone photography enables the photographer to create visuals of tall structures, such as cell towers and bridges that are in need of repair. Drone photography at weddings or special events also captures scenic aerial portraits.

Employment of self-employed photographers is projected to grow. Demand for portrait photographers will remain as people continue to want new portraits. In addition, corporations will continue to require the services of commercial photographers to develop compelling advertisements to sell products.

Related Occupations

- Architect
- Art Director
- Craft/Fine Artist
- Desktop Publisher
- Fashion Designer
- Film/Video Editor/Camera Operator
- Graphic Designer
- Industrial Designer
- Model
- Reporter/Correspondent/Broadcast News Analyst

Related Military Occupations

- Audiovisual/Broadcast Technician
- Broadcast Journalist/News writer
- Diver
- Photographic Specialist

MORE INFORMATION**American Society of Media Photographers (ASMP)**

P.O. Box 1810

Traverse City, MI 49685-1810

877-771-2767

asmp@vpassociations.com

www.asmp.org

American Society of Photographers (ASP)

info@asofp.com

asofp.com

Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)

800 Independence Avenue SW

Washington, DC 20591

866.835.5322

www.faa.gov/uas

Information about testing and obtaining certification to operate commercial drones or unmanned aerial systems (UASs)

National Press Photographers Association, Inc. (NPPA)

info@nppa.org

www.nppa.org

NPPA's Best of Photojournalism:

bop.nppa.org

Sponsors photojournalism competitions:

competitions.nppa.org

The NewsGuild-CWA

Research and Information Department
501 Third Street NW, 6th Floor
Washington, DC 20001-2797
202.434.7177
guild@cwa-union.org
www.newsguild.org

Professional Photographers of America, Inc. (PPA)

229 Peachtree Street, NE, Suite 2200
Atlanta, GA 30303
800.786.6277
csc@ppa.com
www.ppa.com

University Photographers' Association of America (UPAA)

P.O. Box 433
Califon, NJ 07830-0433
908.335.0157
carpenter@morainevalley.edu
www.upaa.org

Briana Nadeau; updated by Stuart Paterson