

Cinematographer interview questions

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What to expect

Cinematographer interviews are usually a mix of reel review, craft discussion and a practical read on how you behave on set. Employers are weighing up your eye, but just as heavily your prep habits, your crew manner and whether you can protect a look when the day gets difficult.

- **Reel and portfolio review:** You walk through selected shots and explain the choices behind light, lens and movement.
- **Process and prep:** How you read a script, build a shot list and lighting plan, and work with a director before the shoot.
- **Behavioural:** Past situations involving pressure, disagreement, reshoots or a change of plan.
- **Scenario and problem solving:** A location, weather or schedule problem dropped on you mid-shoot, testing judgement under pressure.
- **Technical:** Camera formats, sensors, lenses, filtration, exposure and post workflows, including colour grading handover.
- **On-set leadership and safety:** How you run a camera and lighting crew, delegate, and keep people safe around rigs, cable runs and hot lights.

Typically one or two conversations: a portfolio session where you screen and discuss work, often with the director or producer, followed by a shorter chat with a line producer or production manager about availability, rates, kit and how you'd fit the crew. Some productions ask for a short paid or unpaid test, either a scene or a lighting test, before confirming. Expect questions about your own kit, insurance and travel to location as well as craft.

1. Take us through two or three shots from your reel and explain the decisions behind them.

Why they ask

This is the core of the interview. They want to hear your thinking, not just see a good-looking frame, and to check you can articulate your choices to a director.

How to structure your answer

Pick a small number of shots. For each one, state the brief or problem, then the light, lens and movement choices, then the result on screen. Keep it short enough to invite follow-up questions.

Example answer

"The first shot is a wide of a farmhouse kitchen at dawn. The director wanted it to feel like the family was holding on to something that was already gone, so I kept the room mostly dark and let one practical above the table do the work, with a soft top light to hold detail in the faces. We shot on a 40mm so the room felt full rather than pretty. The second is a corridor walk in a hospital. That one was about compression and dread, so I went to a longer lens, hand-held, and let the fluorescent tubes stay green rather than correcting them. We shot a plate of the corridor with no actors and matched the takes against it so I could push the walk further in post. In both cases the look came out of what the scene needed, not out of a style I wanted to try."

2. Walk us through how you go from reading a script to arriving on set with a shot list and lighting plan.

Why they ask

Prep habits separate a cinematographer who survives a tight schedule from one who burns the day solving problems on set. Employers want to hear a repeatable method.

How to structure your answer

A chronological walk-through: first read, conversations, research and references, location scout, technical tests, then the documents you hand to the crew. Finish with what you change on the day and why.

Example answer

"First read is for story, and I mark anything that creates a visual problem, day or night, interior or exterior, crowds or effects. Then I sit with the director and talk about tone and references, and I try to land on three or four images we both agree on. After that I scout every location, ideally at the same time of day we're shooting, and I write down where the natural light falls and what power is available. I build the shot list with the director and first assistant director, marking which setups are essential and which can go if the day tightens. Then I write a lighting plan the gaffer can work from, with a rough kit list so the producer can see what we're spending. On the day, if something isn't working, I change it, but I change it in the order that costs the least time."

3. Tell me about a time a shoot was falling behind and you had to protect the look without losing the day.

Why they ask

Every production runs into this. They want evidence you can make decisions under schedule pressure rather than defend a plan that no longer fits.

How to structure your answer

STAR. Set the situation and the specific pressure, describe what you were responsible for, the action you took with the crew and director, and the outcome on the day and in the final cut.

Example answer

"We were shooting a night exterior on a suburban street, and we lost about two hours to a neighbour complaint and a generator fault. We still had three scenes to cover. I sat with the director and the first AD and worked out which scene carried the emotional weight of the sequence, then we consolidated the other two into fewer, wider setups that could be lit from one position. I kept the key light on the lead actor consistent with the earlier takes so the coverage would still cut, and dropped the backlight and the atmospheric haze on the scenes we compressed. We finished the night with the sequence intact. The director told me afterwards the compressed scenes cut better than the original plan would have, and I've used that consolidation approach on tight nights since."

4. You arrive at a location and the light is nothing like what you scouted. The director still wants a warm, soft look. What do you do?

Why they ask

This tests judgement under pressure, communication and how quickly you can generate and rank options without panicking the room.

How to structure your answer

Show your order of thinking out loud: assess what you actually have, list the realistic options, weigh each against time, power and crew, put the recommendation to the director, then commit and move.

Example answer

"First I'd stand in the space and look at what the location is giving me, the direction of the sun, the colour of the walls, whether there's any bounce. Then I'd give the director two or three options rather than a problem. One might be leaning into the existing light and shaping it with negative fill and a warm bounce, which is fast and cheap. Another might be cutting the ambient light with nets or flags and rebuilding the key with a large soft source, which takes longer but gives more control. I'd tell them what each option costs in time and how it affects the rest of the day. If the schedule is tight, I'd recommend the first and explain how I'd keep it consistent for the coverage. Once we agree, I stop deliberating and brief the gaffer clearly so the crew isn't waiting on us."

5. How do you choose a camera format, and how does that choice flow through to lenses, filtration and post?

Why they ask

Technical fluency matters, but the real test is whether you connect the camera choice to the whole pipeline rather than picking a favourite body.

How to structure your answer

Reason from the project outward: what the story and schedule need, then format and sensor, then lenses and filtration, then the workflow and post implications. Name the tools you actually use.

Example answer

"I start with what the project needs, not the body. If it's a dialogue-heavy drama with long takes, I'll lean towards an ARRI Alexa because the highlight handling and the skin tones suit faces and the workflow is well understood by post houses here. If it's a commercial with heavy VFX or high frame rate work, a RED can make more sense for resolution and frame rates. From there the lens choice does most of the visual work. I'll pick a set with the falloff and contrast the story wants, then use filtration to take the edge off digital sharpness or to help match older glass. In prep I test the combination with the colourist, agree on a working LUT, and make sure the camera settings and the post pipeline line up so nothing is baked in that we can't undo later. I grade in DaVinci Resolve myself on smaller jobs, so I'm always thinking about what the colourist will need."

6. How do you run a camera and lighting crew on a fast-moving location shoot, and how do you handle a director and producer who want different things?

Why they ask

The job is as much leadership as it is operating a camera. They want to know you can keep a crew safe and moving, and manage competing priorities without turning it into a conflict.

How to structure your answer

Cover two parts: how you brief, delegate and keep the set safe, then how you handle disagreement. For the second part, describe a real approach rather than a hypothetical, and show you protect relationships on both sides.

Example answer

"On set I brief the gaffer and the camera crew before the day starts so everyone knows the plan for each setup, who owns which task, and where the cable runs and hot lights are. I keep the floor tidy, I don't let anyone move a stand without calling it, and I check power loads before anything gets rigged. That discipline is what lets us move fast. When a director and a producer want different things, I try to find out what each of them actually needs. Usually the director is talking about tone and the producer is talking about time, and those aren't opposites. I'll say what I can achieve in the time available and offer a version that gets most of the look, then let the producer decide whether it's worth buying more time. If it goes to the producer, I give them a clear trade rather than an argument. I'd rather be the person who presents options than the person who adds to the tension."