

LAB REPORT

AN IRON LIGHT LABS PRODUCT

How To Become a Movie Director

DR. ROBERT M. CARPENTER

03 INTRODUCTION

04 5 STEP PROCESS

05 STEP 1: LIVE A WORTHWHILE LIFE

06 STEP 2: READ LOTS OF STORIES

07 STEP 3: WATCH YOUR FAVORITE MOVIES

08 STEP 4: START VOLUNTEERING ON FILM SETS

10 STEP 5: LEARN THE BUSINESS OF ENTERTAINMENT

11 JOIN THE DISCUSSION

11 ABOUT US



DR. ROBERT M. CARPENTER
AUTHOR & FILMMAKER



Introduction

I'm often asked, "How did you become a Hollywood filmmaker?" When I hear this question, my eyes light up—not because I want to go endlessly into my personal story, but because I know the process of becoming a director is much simpler than many people have been led to believe.

Quick side note: just because something is simple does not necessarily mean it is easy; it means that it is more straightforward, tried-and-true, and formulaic than artistic types would care to admit. What artistic types usually do admit about the process of becoming a director is "you should just shoot stuff" and "put yourself out there"—which is true, but also not helpful for folks who are truly wanting a specific step-by-step understanding of the process.

Instead of offering you the usual advice about breaking into the entertainment industry (i.e., shoot stuff, put it on YouTube or in a film festival, cross your fingers and hope to get lucky), I'm going to give you the roadmap that I used as I broke into Hollywood that perhaps you can use too.

"I DIDN'T START OUT WANTING TO BE IN HOLLYWOOD"

Before I provide you with this roadmap, I need to share something important with you to put everything in proper context. The truth is, I didn't start out wanting to be a director—or even wanting to be in Hollywood. In fact, I had exactly zero interest in Tinseltown (outside of wanting to watch some of the shows and movies it created).

Instead, my interests and ambitions lay in more "practical" things, so I initially pursued an entirely different path altogether. I was a professor at a university, startup CEO, and even a commissioner for the City of Los Angeles, so the idea of yelling "action!" and "cut!" on a movie set was extremely remote—almost foreign—to me.

Then, something started to happen in my life. As I was watching more movies and shows over time, I started to ask myself, "Why hasn't Hollywood made this type of show?" "Why hasn't it made that type of movie?" Over and over again, I would get these little fragments of ideas that I thought Hollywood should pursue.

But as this went on year after year, I did nothing about my ideas. I just assumed that they were fleeting thoughts at best and unrealistic fantasies at worst. However, the ideas kept coming and I couldn't stop thinking about the stories I conjured up in my head.

When I finally did think that maybe I should do something about this—without knowing what that something would be—I experienced a mixture of excitement and trepidation. I was excited because I knew I was going to try to find out how I could possibly get into the entertainment industry but also nervous because 1) I knew nothing about it; 2) I knew nobody in it; and 3) I had bought into the lies, legends, and misconceptions that Hollywood was an invite-only party with the strictest—and most intense—gatekeepers.



ROB CARPENTER
AUTHOR AND FILM DIRECTOR

5 Step Process

HOW TO BECOME A MOVIE DIRECTOR



1



LIVE A WORTHWHILE LIFE OUTSIDE OF THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY FIRST

As I battled my mix of emotions, yet more thoughts and emotions started to pop up. Questions crept in like “am I good enough for Hollywood?” “Will they laugh at my stories and ideas?” “Will they accept me even though I have no experience in the industry?” “Is it too late for me to start over considering I’m not twenty-one and don’t have a film degree or film internships under my belt?”

Although these were natural questions—and natural fears—to have, over time I realized that I couldn’t get hung up on what I didn’t have. I realized that I should only get hung up on what I did have.

For me, I concluded that I had some pretty incredible life experiences, travel experiences, and diverse work experiences that gave me a deeper and broader understanding of the world which I figured could help me in Hollywood—even if I had a non-traditional background. I concluded that my experiences—and resulting idiosyncratic worldview—could be unique and that I should lean into this hard as a way to market and position myself in Hollywood.

Interestingly enough, it worked. When I started to meet a few Hollywood types—I just asked friends or friends of friends if they knew people I could have coffee with to pick their brains about the industry—these people found my background unusual and refreshing compared to the people they knew who had a more linear path into entertainment and, as a result, it made me stand out more to them. And so my unusual background—my different life experiences—started to open doors (as small and few as they were) which helped me build a bit of the network I felt I needed to somehow get into the industry.

This experience later led me to the conclusion that the most important first step I took—and that I believe that you can take as well—is to recognize that your life BEFORE entering Tinseltown can be a powerful key to get past its initial gatekeepers. It will make you unique and give you a competitive marketing edge in an industry where so many people seem like carbon copies—or simple echoes—of each other.

2



READ LOTS OF STORIES

Moreover, even as I was expanding my Hollywood network through informal coffees and introductions, I started to do something else too: I started to get more interested in the stories that were being made into shows and movies, and I started to get more interested in how these stories were being told.

What this translated to in practical terms was me beginning my process of trying to gain an understanding of stories—of the structure and principles behind them—that I was previously unfamiliar with. Because I was a big believer in trying to identify patterns within things, I had an inkling that stories (or at least the good ones) probably follow some sort of step-by-step roadmap and so I took a deep dive into books like Joseph Campbell's *Hero with 1,000 Faces* that directors like George Lucas had said inspired and shaped their practical understanding of how to tell their own stories.

By doing this, I came to understand that there is a formula to stories and that all I had to do was learn as much as I could about this formula to become a storyteller. Other books like *Save the Cat!* helped me with this, too.

So, step two in the process of becoming a director, for me, was learning about the patterns behind stories and their structural similarities. If you decide to become a student of stories, my belief is that this will give you the knowledge—and confidence—you need to see that you don't have to reinvent the wheel as you begin your Hollywood journey to learn how to become a great storyteller.

3



WATCH YOUR FAVORITE MOVIES OVER AND OVER AGAIN FROM A TECHNICAL POINT OF VIEW

The next thing I did after learning the structural written patterns behind stories was watch them on screen so I could identify the visual patterns behind them too. I went on various YouTube channels (there are countless ones dedicated to filmmaking like StudioBinder and FilmSkills, for example) that had recommended this approach and what to look for from a technical point of view, so I dove into this as well. And as I did, it opened my eyes to a whole new world of the “tricks behind the Hollywood trade” so to speak.

I learned about lighting techniques, camera angles, production design (for example, props, sets, etc.), color theory, the emotion of music, costume design, and so on. By watching more and more of these online videos, it made it much easier for me to then start to watch my favorite movies from a technical standpoint to see the elements they employed. And, true to form, what had previously looked to me like “Hollywood magic” or “creative genius” was really reduced to formulaic craft. In other words, I was starting to see that the movies I loved—and the directors who made them—relied on tools they had learned from others and had just put a minor creative twist on these tools that made their stories so visually moving.

For me, this process went on for years because I was just so fascinated by it and only had so much time I could dedicate to self-education. But my ad hoc, makeshift film school gave me a great foundation even before I ever went behind the camera myself. (The funny thing about this is that I later realized that many of the great directors did the same thing—that is, they didn't attend film school themselves but instead were self-educated.)

I remember for my first movie the producer kept asking me, “What’s your style?” I had no idea. So it forced me to go and actually look for what I want my style to be. And a lot of people say, “Study what's good and bad.” I disagree. Time is limited; I want to study the best. So I studied Steven Spielberg, David Fincher, Christopher Nolan, and other great filmmakers of our time. Jurassic Park, Minority Report, The Social Network, Fight Club, The Dark Knight, and many other films really inspired me, specifically from a technical filmmaker perspective. As I've made films, both documentaries and narratives, I've incorporated lessons I've learned from being an audience member and student of other films.

By beginning your technical education using resources accessible to you right now, you can start with no knowledge and become an expert quickly if you are willing to put in the time. All it takes is a little bit of discipline and commitment, but you are more than capable of doing it.

4



START VOLUNTEERING ON SMALL, LOCAL (STUDENT OR INDIE) FILM SETS

But while I was gaining this theoretical and head knowledge about filmmaking, I still needed to get hands-on experience and I wasn't exactly sure how to do that. As previously mentioned, I didn't know anyone in the entertainment industry when I started and I didn't want to leverage the connections I had just made with the Hollywood types I was being introduced to when I didn't have any "real" entertainment experience yet.

However, this is when an idea struck: I thought to myself, why shouldn't I try to get on student film sets or indie film sets to at least get some kind of experience? I thought these people—especially the students—probably wouldn't be too demanding or judgmental about my lack of experience and expertise and maybe even might appreciate an extra set of hands to help them out.

I was right.

I went on social media and started to see if there were any student filmmaking groups I could join. And when I did, I saw that there were student films always posting volunteer positions for short movies they were making. When I saw an opportunity for my first one, I pounced and messaged the person posting—and they enthusiastically welcomed me to the set.

I started out as a "Production Assistant" (or "PA")—the lowest person on the totem pole who is essentially the person responsible for assisting every single crew member and department on set. What this meant in practical terms was fetching coffee for eighteen-year-olds, setting up lunch, taking out the trash, and getting to watch the technical process for how to make a film up close and personal for many hours at a time.

Every time I joined a set as a PA—I could only volunteer on weekends—I learned more and more. I did one to two sets every single weekend for around four months in a row, and I gained more and more confidence each time. It put me in the position to think I had the chance to leverage my new "resume" for trying to get paid—on indie sets and eventually the bigger Hollywood sets.

What I realized is that the same exact work that I was doing on a student set was happening on the indie film sets and studio sets, and so my momentum built fast and I started to get more and more paid opportunities to learn and—GULP—show that I actually had something to offer.

Over time, this led me to getting on many sets working with many different directors, producers, crews, set departments, and so on, which expanded my network in Hollywood and led me to gradually get more and more responsibilities on set.

First, I was offered expanded PA roles to drive celebrities around, then I was offered roles to “associate produce,” then I was offered roles to “produce” (small projects) and, finally, I was offered directing opportunities. All within the span of two and a half years.

As I was offered new opportunities and moved up the ladder in production, the constant driving force was my eagerness to contribute positively to each set, no matter how “small” the task I was given. I remember towards the beginning, often being tasked with heading up the crafty table, which is the food and refreshment table on a production set. I remember thinking to myself that because I was in charge of it, it would be the most beautiful looking crafty table you’d ever seen. I thought if the director comes, if the actor comes, if anybody comes to the table, they’re going to see that I did an amazing job with that crafty table. And that’s what got the attention of higher-ups, especially of producers. My eager energy and enthusiasm landed me new opportunities.

Of course, I’m skipping over many of the details and conversations that allowed my ascension but the most important thing for you to know—that you can use in your own life to ascend in Hollywood—is to show up, have a positive attitude, say yes to every assignment and opportunity, and use momentum as your friend. What once looked like “overcoming the odds,” “luck,” or a “fairy tale” as it relates to working in Hollywood will be revealed for what it really is: being a hard worker who puts in consistent time to get consistent results for yourself. When you do this, magic will start to show up in your life like it did in mine.

5



LEARN THE BUSINESS OF ENTERTAINMENT

Finally, the last thing I did to break into Hollywood was begin to learn about the business side of the industry. After all, it is “show business” and not “show art.”

The interesting thing I realized is that 1) Hollywood has certain unspoken “rules” that govern it; 2) Hollywood is very conservative and risk-averse (they make very safe bets on people and projects with prior industry experience); and 3) as a director, Hollywood will only allow you entry into its highest echelons if you first prove yourself on the indie scene (even if it is with one project—be it a movie, short, or commercial).

The other interesting thing I realized is that most aspiring (and even very talented) directors I have met never made the effort to learn about the business of entertainment. And as a result, they held themselves back because they didn’t know how to position themselves as marketable professionals based on the business criteria Hollywood studios and producers were looking for. But you don’t have to do the same.

Studios want to know the answer to five questions before taking a chance on a director:

- Have they filmed projects?
- Are they in a specific niche?
- Can they communicate with the crew?
- Can they bring in a project, on time and on budget?
- Are they going to be open-minded and willing to work with folks, not just insist on their own ideas?

You can learn not only about the technical side of filmmaking but also the commercial side of it by simply watching videos, reading articles, reading books, and talking to producers. A good book I recommend for this is *Television Development* by Bob Levy (which is the best business book on how studios greenlight TV shows and movies and decide on the people who make them).

As somebody who wants to become a director—or who is simply curious about what it takes—using this simple five-step process will help you understand what’s necessary to be successful as a Hollywood director. Of course, every person’s journey is different—and this is the process that worked specifically for me—but I believe it can be replicated and tailored to your specific circumstances to produce powerful results in your life. You have the power to make your own Hollywood dreams come true. Now, all you have to do is follow some variation of this formula to do it.

Join the Discussion

Master these topics for your organization with upcoming in-depth Lab Reports. Every topic will include a download with detailed steps, case studies and a virtual training lab.

[VISIT OTHER LAB REPORTS HERE](#)

ABOUT



IRON LIGHT LABS

Iron Light Labs is an award-winning nonprofit focused on R&D for social impact. We are called "Labs" because we experiment, innovate and test to discover the best way to drive change. We are building a future where storytellers leap out of the echo chamber, creators partner with effective messengers, changemakers experiment with emerging media, and everyone measures what matters.

ABOUT

Rob Carpenter

Dr. Rob Carpenter is the #1 international best-selling author of "Red Carpet Manuscript: How Authors Can Bring Their Book to the Big Screen" as well as the author of The 48 Laws of Happiness. He received his doctoral degree from The University of Southern California, where for 4 years he worked at the 2x Emmy Award winning USC Media Institute for Social Change (MISC) at the USC School of Cinematic Arts, home to the creators of Star Wars, Back to The Future, Apollo 13, Transformers, and beyond.

Dr. Rob has directed feature documentary American Dropout, overseeing a crew of nearly 100 across multiple states and interviewing members of the Kennedy family among others, and he has directed the world's number 1 voiceover actor James Arnold Taylor in a commercial entitled 2 Grandpas, 1 Baby. Dr. Rob is partnered with Academy Award winning producer Andrew Carlberg on a historical thriller limited series in development, as well as Emmy Award winner Kayona Ebony Brown on a sports docuseries in development.