

Ten Top Tips For Private Investigators

Working as a [title="hire a private investigator" >private investigator](#) is a fascinating but endlessly challenging occupation. In this article I have set out ten top tips that may make life a little easier for those new to the profession.

1. On surveillance operations, take something to fill the long hours when nothing is happening but you don't want to fall asleep. Books and newspapers provide cover, but have the drawback you might find them so interesting you forget to concentrate on the job in hand. Cassette tapes, either music or spoken word, can be the best solution.
2. Always have plenty of spare cash with you so that you don't risk waiting for change when you need to get somewhere quickly. Take plenty of banknotes, too, in case you want to buy information or bribe your way out of an awkward situation.
3. An investigator's best ally is a [good lawyer](#). In good times he (or she) can be a steady source of work and practical day-to-day help, and in bad times — e.g. when you are accused of breaking the law — he may be able to offer support and legal representation. It can make sense to initiate a straightforward barter arrangement where parties exchange advice and skills in line with a simple debit/credit running total. Obviously, before trying to set up such an arrangement, ensure you like and feel comfortable with the solicitor concerned.
4. Similarly, it pays to get on the right side of the local police. PIs who are former officers will have an advantage here, of course. Although officially to the police you are simply just another member of the public, as they get to know and (hopefully) respect you, they may sometimes be willing to pass on the benefit of their knowledge and experience. Despite the prickly relationship between the police and private investigators often depicted in TV dramas, much of the time your interests will coincide, and it's therefore in everyone's interests to co-operate. In addition, the police themselves sometimes engage private investigators — another reason to establish a good working relationship with them.
5. Perhaps more controversially, it can also help to have contacts on the other side of the law. One PI who specializes in security work says his best friend is a convicted housebreaker who points out weak spots in properties which burglars could benefit from, reveals the latest 'word on the street', and much more. Obviously it is wrong to fraternize with known criminals for dubious purposes, but sometimes their 'professional' expertise can be undeniably helpful.
6. While they will never entirely replace cameras, a camcorder can be a useful tool for a PI to possess. They can be used for a wide range of purposes, from gathering evidence in a divorce case

to taking pictures of a child, believed to have been abducted, for the mother to identify. Modern camcorders are little larger than ordinary cameras. They can be concealed beneath a coat or in a handbag and brought out to be used without attracting undue attention. You might also consider having one fitted in your car. As well as gathering evidence, a camcorder here can provide useful information that isn't always obvious to the naked eye. It is also invaluable if you are driving but still want to keep a permanent eye on your subject.

7. Another tool well worth the modest investment required is a pocket torch or flashlight. This is obviously essential when working at night or in darkened rooms. A compact model will do, but always have plenty of back-up batteries on hand. As well as providing illumination, a flashlight can be used to dazzle an assailant or even in the last resort as a weapon. Some have built-in defence mechanisms such as sirens and sprays designed to immobilise an attacker.

8. Like private individuals, the investigator can use reasonable force in some instances, such as when threatened or to safeguard other people whose lives and property are endangered. The force must be appropriate to the degree of danger and its imminence, however. So if you are hired to watch for trespassers over a piece of land it might be acceptable to approach and warn such individuals, but it will almost certainly be wrong to threaten violence against them.

9. Libel and slander laws cover the investigator as much as any other private individual and must be considered at all times, both in verbal and written communications. Be sure of the accuracy of everything you say, do and write.

10. Remember that, while a degree of subterfuge may be necessary from time to time, you should always aim to remain on the right side of the law. One thing you should never do is impersonate a police officer, as this is always illegal and regarded as a serious offence.

(Mark Gustaffson is the author of the [Professional Private Investigator Course](#) from Maple Academy (UK), a leading correspondence course in this field.

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