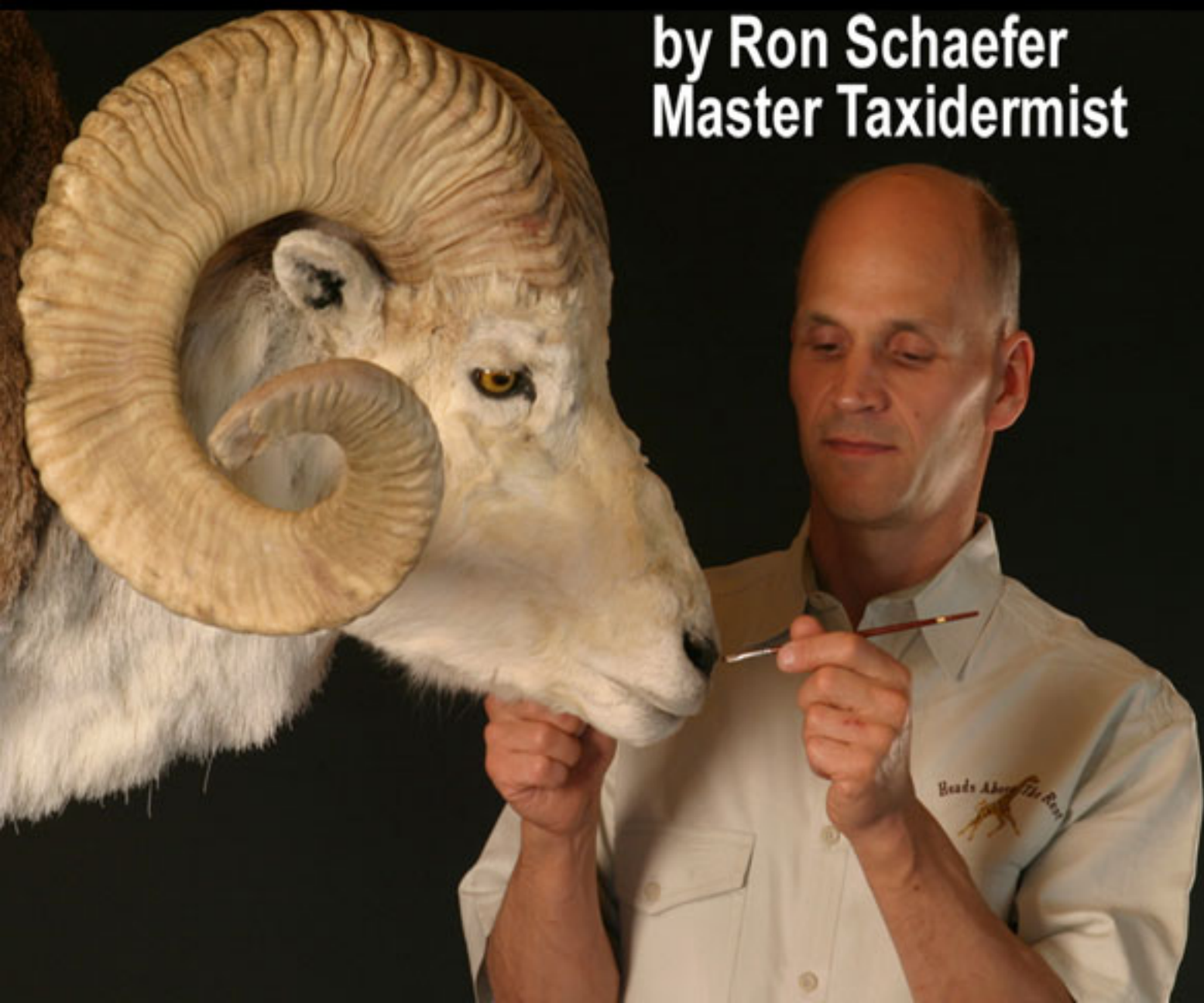


**INSIDE INFORMATION REVEALED**

# How to Choose a TAXIDERMIST

by Ron Schaefer  
Master Taxidermist





Website: <http://www.HeadsAboveTheRest.com>

Email: [headsabovetherest@peoplepc.com](mailto:headsabovetherest@peoplepc.com)

## How to Choose a Taxidermist

Written and Photographed by Ron Schaefer

So many hunters spend endless hours researching an outfitter or an area to hunt. Some plan for years. Hunters spend endless hours talking with their friends, checking referrals and dreaming. They even spend an enormous amount of money on hunting gear, new rifles and equipment to collect the trophy of a lifetime. Some spend quite a bit on hunting leases and hunting licenses, there are hunts that cost more than some people earn in a year's time. Some hunters save their entire life for just one hunt. They plan to take time off from work, threaten their jobs, some even threaten their marriages or get into huge arguments with their spouse over their hunting. Nothing seems to stop them in their pursuit. Yet upon arrival from the hunt, many will choose a taxidermist by simply looking in a phone book for who is the most convenient, or a taxidermist being the least inexpensive! This results in unrealized expectations.

You should take as much time planning a hunt as choosing a taxidermist! Most often times even more! The investment you made collecting your trophy is a memory you want to remember for a lifetime. This is why you should carefully choose a taxidermist. What the taxidermist gives back to you is what you have to reflect back upon for the rest of your life. When walking through different trophy rooms it is shocking, what the hunter has to remember their hunts for the rest of their lives. The time to look for a taxidermist is long before hunting season or the hunt you plan to go on. If you wait until after the hunt, you do not have the time to shop around. Panic sets in and you usually will leave your trophy with the first taxidermist who is most convenient or least expensive without completing your research on them. If you ask a friend or a hunter, what taxidermist do you use? They may give you a referral to a taxidermist of lower quality; you may want a better quality of mount then referred.

Taxidermy is an art form. *As with any artist*, some are better than others.. Some people cannot draw a stick person. Some can draw something that looks like it can breathe. Some draw abstract and some can draw just...Okay. The same holds true in a taxidermist; not all taxidermists are artists. What each taxidermist sees through their eyes or mind is what they will give back to you. As you are looking and talking to different taxidermists, you will see many different opinions, some much stronger than others. These opinions may be one sided, or not what you imagined and you will also find some truly talented people. All of these opinions can be acceptable as long as this is what you are looking for. Here are some questions you need to ask yourself before choosing any taxidermist:

1. What exactly are you looking for in a taxidermist?
2. What exactly are you expecting from a taxidermist?
3. How much will price affect your decision?
4. How far are you willing to travel?
5. How much hassle are you willing to put up with in a taxidermist? Should you have hassle?

Try not to make a decision over the phone or price shopping without stopping in and seeing what you are actually buying. This is strongly encouraged that you visit as many studios that you can because there is a difference between all taxidermists! If you want quality in return then you will have to look for it. If you are at an outdoor convention or hunting show chances are there will be a taxidermist advertising at these events. You can ask questions and look at their work being displayed but do not make a decision until you visit their studio.





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## Difference between Commercial Mounts (Client Mounts) and Competition Mounts (Display Mounts)

Trade shows and show rooms could be mounts they worked on just for show or something that have purchased from another taxidermist. That may not be what you get back. This is a very common. No matter how smooth the sales pitch is and what they say they can do. You want to see finished client mounts. Their finished work in the back room before it hits the display room is most likely what you will receive in return. Have the taxidermist point out what are their client's mounts and what are display mounts or competition mounts. When visiting a taxidermist ask why I should choose you over a different taxidermist. Let them tell you what they offer. You want someone to explain to you how they separate themselves from the rest. Then they can show you around their showroom that most likely is mixed with display pieces and pieces that are ready to be picked up by their clients. You can compare if their display is equal to the quality that leaves their studio. You may or may not want that type of quality. Ask if you can use a flashlight to check the quality of their work around the eyes and if the pupils are level, inside the nostrils, inside the ears or any shaded areas. After all most sales pitches are that, their quality supersedes the rest. Have them prove it. Have them point out their quality, not you trying to find it. If a taxidermist knocks quality, they most likely do not have a lot in their mounts. Some may say you need to view it from 15 to 20 feet back. All though this may be true, you are just trying to determine if you are paying for the quality and not receiving it.



### You will need to know the difference between a commercial mount vs. a

[competition mount](#). A commercial mount is what you the consumer will receive back. Your trophy is mounted and finished in a certain period of time in order for a taxidermist to earn a profit.

**Find out the taxidermist's completion time they are quoting you.** There is a possibility a taxidermist can use in their favor by telling you a shorter time than you want to hear, never intending to meet that time. However, when the period is due, the excuses begin and continue for sometimes six months to a year later if not longer. There are horror stories about people quoted six months delivery and had to wait 2-3 years. Some taxidermists do this intentionally and some do this due to poor organization.

**Do not assume because you are dealing with a taxidermist that means they are qualified in all aspects of taxidermy.** Many taxidermists are only good in specific areas. Some do all aspects of taxidermy and are not specialists. Find the taxidermist specializing in the field you need and a [qualified taxidermist](#). In the taxidermy field, [African game is different from North American](#). Look for a taxidermist that is experienced and is not [stylized](#). Failure to do this may be an expensive mistake. Anyone experienced should have photos to back them up. If they do not, they are not!

**Be very careful on low prices.** Lower prices can be a lack of experience and the taxidermist may be experimenting and trying to gain experience on your animals. Lower prices also could be a sign of [production taxidermy](#). Beware of [short cuts](#) intentionally made and [angles of deception](#).

**Ask the taxidermist how they preserve their animals.** You will need to know the difference between [commercial tanning](#), [home tanning](#), [wet tanning](#) and [dry preserving](#).



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**Observation is very important.** Your first impression says a lot. Horns and antlers have to be identified in a taxidermist's studio. Are all of them identified or some of them? There maybe five or six in a pile in a corner of the shop that are not. If not this is a major disaster waiting to happen.

**Is there a lot of light?** This is a key factor! The more light a taxidermist has to work in a better chance in seeing mistakes. If there is low light or shadows, you can count on mistakes getting by.

**While visiting different studios look around at their working conditions, especially in their working area.** This is where your work is completed. How clean is it? Do they look organized? Are there just piles and piles of clutter? Messy and disorganized is a good indication this is how your mount will be put back together and how you will be treated in customer service.

**Is the taxidermist just a good ole boy?**

**Are there uncomfortable odors, if so why?** Are there any decomposing body parts, is so why? There should never be any. How comfortable would your spouse feel walking in to the studio your visiting? Is it very clean, organized, professional atmosphere, no odors or decomposing body parts. If you are married lets be serious here. The better impression your spouse has walking into a taxidermy studio, the better chance in receiving a warmer response when bringing home your animal. Taxidermy studios smelling like decomposing parts is easy to think this is what you will receive in return.

**Be sure to look for reference material laid out next to the mount they are working on.** Are they actually using them? A taxidermist should feel proud to show you photos of how close their work reflects the live reference photo unless they do not use references. In addition, they should try to educate you with references because the more you know the better decisions you will make.

**Ask for references.** If the taxidermist responds with, "I have been in business X amount of years. I know what I am doing." With this kind of attitude that taxidermy studio does not believe in references and most likely are stylized. It is always good to ask for client references! Keep in mind they will not refer clients whom are not happy. This is okay. Ask the referrals important questions. Here is a [list of questions to ask client referrals](#). You want to know specific answers. An answer like "I used him for years" or "I do not let any other taxidermist touch my stuff" does not answer anything, find out why? Just because someone likes a particular taxidermist that referral client may have thirty years of old out dated mounts, and they may not want newer mounts to show how old the older mounts look compared to a better quality. On the other hand, the client may only be five minutes from the taxidermist and have cheap prices; you may not want a stiff and unnatural lifeless mount back or you may want your skull boiled clean prior to mounting or your skin tanned into leather. A sales man will tell you what you want to hear not educating your self could be costly.

**Anyone can do up to 80% of the taxidermy process.** What separates good from bad and better to exceptional is the last twenty percent of the mounting and finishing process. This last twenty percent is what ALL taxidermists are looking for the rest of their carrier. Most never find it, some struggle but only succeed by a few percentages. There are four reasons why the last twenty percent is so hard to master; the first is how much time the taxidermist is willing to put into completing your mount. Not the sales pitch they tell you but actually how long they want to work on your mount. Second is knowledge of anatomy and how much of the anatomy they will correct on the manikins (many taxidermists are very limited on anatomy knowledge). Third is the lack of references and/or using them. The best way to describe the fourth way is look into a mirror and notice how many different facial expressions you can make by moving very little; from happy to mad, angry, confused, pouting, bored, crying, bitterness, dumb founded, snickering etc.. This last twenty percent will make or break an average mount from an exceptional piece.





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## Quality –

What is quality, quality is defined as distinguishing features or characteristic. Quality in taxidermy is the degree of accuracy and how accurate a taxidermist wants to make your mount. Quality can be an accurate eye set using live references and photos or a generic guess. You can have nostrils that have proper shape, nostril wings, contour, height and proper depth according to nose cast references or you can have round holes that you can see in three to four inches. You can have sewing seams that are not detectable or stitches you can see three to four feet away. You can have a skin that is tanned into leather or you can have a [dry preserved mount](#). Quality will vary from shoulder mounted animals to life size, fish, reptiles, birds, and small game or large game animals. There is also good and not as good quality on habitat recreations your animal is mounted on. Some taxidermist's think that over detailing muscles is better quality. These taxidermists go in hand with the hunters who want this inaccurate anatomy and the over muscled look.

Quality and detail is a strong opinionated area. How much should you have? How much do you want? This is one reason you need to visit as many different taxidermists you can. Have them explain to you what their meaning of detail or quality is. You will see this will vary drastically from shop to shop you visit. The taxidermist can also over detail muscular and skeletal anatomy. This is why you want to use live reference photos. These references will keep a taxidermist true and not stylized. Examples: A longhaired northern deer or elk will not show a vein in their face. Nine times out of ten, will either a shorthaired deer or elk. The facial veins only show for about ten seconds, how this happens is when the animals head is low feeding and suddenly lifts their head up. When the head is low, the blood rushes into the head then when the head is raised the amount and weight of the blood bulges the facial veins only for a few seconds. You can see this clearly in the summer time when the animal has short hair.



On the other hand, a life size African lion or cape buffalo will not have every muscle cut and budging although many believe they do. If the eyes were wide open and alert, then you would not have a relaxed nostrils or ears. Always try to educate yourself with live reference photos before visiting a studio. If you visit, a studio and you see something you are not sure about, ask questions. Ask the taxidermist to show you a reference photo explaining this.

On habitat bases how real does it look? Is any of the habitat falling or flaking off if you move or tilt the base? Does the habitat look out of balance? Did the taxidermist try to do too much on a little base? Can you see any leg support rods underneath the hoofs connecting to the habitat? If you do this is very sloppy work. Have you ever been told by a taxidermist the bases takes away from the mount. Most likely, that taxidermist does not have the artistic eye and balance coordination. A habitat should enhance your mount. Look one hundred percent natural and express involvement. If you see a habitat, that over powers or does not look natural or is too busy, the taxidermist may lack this artistic ability of coordination to put your mount in balance. Plants, grasses, rocks and driftwood should look natural. Grasses should look soft and bushy, not tight and strategically placed.

If the taxidermist recreates these types of habitats this does not mean they are bad people; they are just lacking the skills you are looking for. Be careful of [short cuts](#) that can be made.



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### Qualified Taxidermist –

Do not assume because you are dealing with a taxidermist that means they are qualified in all aspects of taxidermy. Many taxidermists are only good in specific areas like fish, birds, small mammals like squirrels or a raccoon, just deer heads not exotic game. They may mount North American game but lack knowledge in African. They may do several hundred shoulder mounts a year, but know very little about life-size mounts. African game is much different from North American. In the taxidermy field, most taxidermists want to do African taxidermy even if they have little to no experience, but they will tell you different. The African manikins you have to choose from are not as available and what is available are stylized from sculptor to sculptor. You also have many problems in the hides compared to North American animals. Find the taxidermist specializing in the field you need. Failure to do this may be an expensive mistake. Any one experienced should have photos to back them up. If they do not, they are not!

Taxidermy is a lifelong practice. Someone who just started taxidermy and has been in business for two or three years will not have the experience as a twenty year veteran will have. Although there are many twenty year plus veterans, consumers still have to be careful what to look for. The longer you're in business the easier it is for a taxidermist to become stylized. Look for signs the veteran is stylized.

If a taxidermist competes in taxidermy competitions and won ribbons. Make sure they are ribbons in the field you are looking for. Example; if they won a ribbon in birds division, this does not mean they are qualified in game animals. If they won a ribbon in for deer, this does not mean they are qualified in reptiles, etc...

I started out in taxidermy in 1975 and still to this day I am learning. I want to learn more every day; this means I am still interested in growing and becoming a better artist. When you have the attitude you do not need or want to learn taxidermy any more then you will fall by the way side. When this happens your competition will soon pass you and you are on the edge of being out dated, stylized, burned-out and picking up a pile of short cuts.

A true artist will be easy to see. Their work expresses it. The true artist always has ideas and expresses it in many ways. A good salesperson will talk about ideas, but rarely do you ever see these great ideas. Check their abilities. Do they draw? Do they paint? Do they carve birds or fish out of wood? Do they carve stone? Do they sculpt in bronze? The degree of detail in these other creations will tell you the degree of passion and the precision they will portray in the quality of their art. Chances are this will reflect back to the quality of their taxidermy they offer you. If a taxidermist sculpts or paints with a loose or very simple detail, their taxidermy will reflect the same – will look good on the surface, all else is secondary. If the Artist is defined or very detailed their taxidermy work will most likely reflect the same – Extra good quality and pays attention to detail and craftsmanship.

### African Game Different From North American –

The question is asked so many times of why is the cost of African game so much higher then North American game? There are a few reasons.

1. Is the availability of the manikins offered to taxidermists to mount on. North American game animals have far more to choose from. African game is still limited in all sizes, turns and sub species. To better understand the manikins available to taxidermist read Forms on the Market. ([Long Version](#) or [Short Version](#)).





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2. North American animals are skinned and salted under better supervision, better condition and is processed faster for tanning. On African animals the salt used to dry the skins is a courser salt the fine granulated salt used in the United States. The courser salt pull less moisture and at a slower rate than the finer granulated salt. Then the skins sit in holding for so long before they are sent back to you. Your African shipment can be held for one, two or three years before shipped back to you. If a dry salted skin stays dry for some time the harder it is to re-hydrate them for tanning. The natural oils and fat cells in the epidermis never seem to soften back up. If the skins are kept too hot (over 100 degree) the fat and natural oil cells kind of melt together making the tanning chemicals harder to penetrate. If this happens this causes a laundry list of problems.



3. The skin and body make up is different then North American. African animals are used to severe drought conditions. In return this causes a tighter woven epidermis make up compared to North American game. This again in return causes tanning issues on top of the courser salt being used, how the skins are dried, if the skins been placed in the sun and stored in over 100 degree temperatures for a year or longer.
4. African animals look different and do not have the North American characteristics. These different characteristics are supposed to be put back on your mount, manikins need more adjusting and changes made. To better understand the manikins available to taxidermist read Forms on the Market. ([Long Version](#) or [Short Version](#)).

## Angles of Deception to Get Your Business –

- A. **The first deceptive angle is the completion time** a taxidermist quotes to the client. The taxidermist will tell you a short time that you want to hear, never intending to meet that time. However, when the period is due, the excuses continue for sometimes six months to a year later if not longer. Yet the clients put up with this year after year, mount after mount. I hear horror stories about people quoted six months delivery and had to wait 2-3 years. Some taxidermists do this intentionally and some do this due to poor organization. Do not let this continue. When you do not wish to wait any longer, remove all your trophies and take them to someone who has a better reputation. This would be a good question to [ask client referrals](#).
- B. **A taxidermist who claims to compete in taxidermy competitions**, this taxidermist brags about competing and display all their awards, ribbons and competition pieces in their studio so when you visit you see beautiful competition pieces that took hundreds and hundreds of hours to complete, you think this is what you will be getting back in return with your trophy. On the other hand, you may see a taxidermist at a sport/hunting show displaying big first place ribbons and with a competition mount they can impress you with and you may think a competition mount is what you will receive in return. In actuality, you are getting a much lesser mount back. A taxidermist could have won a ribbon in reptiles and you may think they are good at



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everything. This just is not so. You could be bringing in a life size deer mounted and the taxidermist won a second place in fish division.

One of the biggest shockers in my life was when I visited three different world champions' studios that I looked up to and respected very well. How low the quality they are giving in return to the client with their show room covered in first place ribbons. I asked them "why you are giving this lower quality back to your customers". All three answered with the same response. "My customers do not know the difference."

- C. **Be very careful on lower prices.** Lower prices can be a sign of inexperience or [production taxidermy](#). Low prices can mean lack of experience and the taxidermist may be experimenting and trying to gain experience on your animals. If the studio has been around for 20-30 years or so and their prices are still low, then this can suggest strongly of a high volume production. The only way a taxidermist can earn a living with lower prices is sheer volume or speed. Example: On an average size deer head mount, production studios in Texas have to produce two shoulder mounts per day per employee. With an average working day of eight hours, divide that by two mounts, minus lunch breaks and all the holes in the skins. This leaves little time per mount to complete, or to make any alterations that are needed. Always keep in mind on lower prices. In the mounting process, somewhere the taxidermist has to cut costs in order to have a profit. Where do you want them to cut costs on your mount? Unfortunately, you do not have a decision where.
- D. **A warning to hunters who ask for discounts,** at one point in my career I was a traveling taxidermist before I opened my studio, I worked for over one hundred different taxidermy studios across the United States. One hundred percent of the time an invoice to be mounted at a discounted price, the owner of the studio instructed me specifically not spend a lot of time on the mount the shop was losing money on the mount and the hunter was going to get what they paid for.
- E. **Number of employees.** Working in several large firms and production/volume studios, my job was to produce so much each day. The client is lead on to think each employee takes as long as he or she needs to finish your mount. What is not said is "They have all the time they need as long as they still meet their daily, weekly or monthly quota". A hired taxidermist is paid either by the hour or by commissions. If paid by the hour the employer is on the employee to produce faster. If paid by commissions the commissions were low enough you did not spend too much time on a mount. All employees are interested in quality and detail but everyone is more interested in keeping their job and making a better paycheck. This is why I moved on from working in these studios. In these environments, the taxidermist gets detached from the client and your trophy becomes another mount or just another number. Taxidermy studios get away with this because to the untrained eye this type of quality is acceptable. I am not intending every larger firm of high volume produces lower quality. Just the ones I know or had experience with.

## Domestic Beetle or Moths

This is a moth that lives outside around birds or in bird nests. The moth eats the bird nest over time. The moth lay larva, as the birds travel in and out of their nest they carry the eggs or larva on them. These hitch hikers fall off during flight in your back yard. As you walk in and out of your home you will track these moths into your home on your shoes or they will fly into your home when you open a door or window. As explained by an exterminator, "It is not if you will get them, but **when** you will get them".

Everyone has insects in their home and don't even know it. When you notice them in your home is when they are on your taxidermy mount or in the closets on your clothes. This is what they feed on in your home. If you have no taxidermy or if you kill the moth before it gets into your closets the moth and larva just simply die. But give them a food source and they will thrive.





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The beetle – The beetle also lives outside and these insects can travel in and out of your home by simply opening and closing your doors. The moth or beetle are attracted to light so usually at night if you open or close your doors the insects come in to your home or trophy room. These beetles will either live in your carpets or on your taxidermy. The beetles are very hard to exterminate due to their small size and borrowing techniques the poisons used are very hard to get in contact with the beetles, eggs or larva. They will borrow their way under the hair or feathers and will eat the hair or feather root as it touches the body. They can also live in wool carpets. They are so small most of the time they go undetected until your home is infested with them.

### Forms on the Market

There are so many forms available on the market today, but this does not mean in any way the manikin the taxidermist buys will most likely fit. It will be solely up to the individual taxidermist to have the knowledge to recognize, find, alter, correct inaccurate anatomy and make the proper alterations for their client's subspecies they happened to have collected. If the taxidermist lacks the knowledge or just does not want to take the time to correct the time consuming alterations then they will just make the skin stretch over the manikin and give a mount that was rushed, inaccurate and is full of flaws back to their clients. The hunter has to educate themselves and visit as many taxidermy studios as they can to see the different styles of taxidermists and the different quality they will receive in return. There definitely is a difference from taxidermist to taxidermist, do not fool yourself in thinking there is not.



Read more about Forms on the Market: [Long Version](#) or [Short Version](#)

### Good Ole Boys –

What is a good old boy? It is a term for a grouping of people with similar habits or traits. They are friendly and social. They love to have their friends over all the time and reminisce about hunting or fishing and most of the time drinking beer. These are great times to share but eventually the work level slows down considerably. This is all good however; would you want to go to a doctor with all his friends hanging around, sitting in a disorganized room, spitting tobacco in a trash can, with a waiting room that has not been cleaned or dusted in 2 – 3 years? You would not accept these conditions from a doctor, CPA, restaurant or a grocery store or any other profession. Why is this expectable for a taxidermist?

It always fascinates me why hunters and fishermen want to or congregate in a taxidermist studio? You can call ten taxidermists and eight will complain that their clients will stop by and want to hang out for a few hours, several times a week. Who started this rude tradition? Why do taxidermist put up with this absurd tradition? This could be a result of the good ole boy syndrome, possibly on both ends. I don't know any of my clients where I can stop by unannounced and hang out for a few hours several times a week.

Do they look professional? You should be looking for a taxidermist that is operating a professional business in a professional manor. Organization and work focused atmospheres produces better quality and more likely to meet deadlines in a timely fashion.



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The majority of taxidermist's who are here today and gone tomorrow with your deposits and trophies shut down due to [poor money management](#) and being just too slow resulting in lower profits. Do they look like they have little to lose or do they look clean and professional here to stay. It is best to stop by unannounced. This way you see the everyday disorder that can go on. Choose carefully if this is how you want your trophy handled. You may need to travel out of your hometown to find someone trustworthy, qualified, honest and professional.

### Poor Money Management –

Another reason that also reflects back to business education are low prices and as hard as this is to believe most taxidermists do not realize how time consuming it is to complete a mount from start to finish and make a profit. This most likely is due to there are so many steps in the total process that is stretched out over six months or a year depending on their delivery date that they lose track of how much time they spend on a mount. A perfect example is many taxidermists removed the ear cartilage and put ear liners back in the ears. I always ask how long this process of taking out ear cartilage from African animals will take you. Every time the taxidermist respond immediately back with an answer of twenty minutes. The fastest twenty minutes I seen was four hours. I have confronted many taxidermists and mentioned I timed you and it took four hours again, they say "no it did not take that long".



### Production Taxidermy –

Everyone opens his or her business with the best intentions. They try hard, advertise and produce a good work. This persistence will eventually pay off. Work starts to come in faster than the business can produce. Now the business has to make a decision, stay small or grow big. When choosing to grow big you start to create a monster. You have to hire help, more supplies, insurances, taxes, disability, pay roll, build on or build bigger. Now you went from little overhead to big overhead. Big overhead means you have to produce so much revenue every month in order to stay in business and keep your hired help. Now instead on quality you are interested in quantity. With taxidermy being a very hand on and labor-intensive profession, it becomes difficult to keep quality control. Volume usually pushes you to over look mistakes and cut corners.

Production taxidermy is stream lining the work process. Producing work in higher volume results in; limiting the amount of time on each piece produced, lowering material costs and rushing the completion process.

In higher volume situations, the taxidermist is always pressed for time. Taxidermy is a skilled trade and a taxidermist has to be an artist in order to produce exceptional work consistently. Not every person working in every taxidermy studio can be an artist. There just are not enough gifted artists to go around.

Training yourself on live [reference or reference photos](#) will help you determine higher quality from lower quality. A salesman will tell you what you want to here. Not educating yourself could be costly.

Some factors that could lead to production taxidermy are:

1. The taxidermist is simply not interested in high quality but interested in a lower quality.





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2. Getting in too much work in a calendar year and the taxidermist trying to produce a low turnaround time.
3. Having employees resulting in having to produce so much every month to meet overhead and payroll.
4. Paying employees low wages or low commissions, therefore employees will not take the adequate time to correct the manikin inaccuracy or take the time needed to produce a high quality product.

Example - I had a taxidermist come into my studio looking for a job that was very highly recommended. He lived in Alaska working in a studio up there. He was looking to relocate to Texas. He was bragging on how fast he was. He mounted four Dahl sheep heads a day. I asked how good they could be mounting so many in a single day. He responded laughing, I was paid piece work and the customers could not tell the difference between good or bad quality, my boss was happy with me producing so much I received good bonuses.... I did not hire him. It is hard to know if the taxidermist mounting your trophy cares about your animal as much as you do. The taxidermy studio in Alaska this particular taxidermist was working for has been in business for 25 years and still is open.

### References –

Using references is very critical to accurate recreations. They help in proper eye set, anatomy, bone placement, feather or hair placement, feather or hair patterns, colorations of body parts such as fish, bird heads, eyes, ears, nose and inside mouths. Without references you are only guessing at what you think. References consist of measurement sheets and medical books, live reference photographs, wildlife books and magazines, skeletal bones or skeletal armatures, portions of facial features casted from deceased animals; examples - nose casts, eye casts, facial castings,. These all help a taxidermist in recreating and fixing manikins that will be used on your animal being mounted.

Are there reference photos out in the studio you are visiting? Do they have reference photos; facial castings or nose casts out on what they are actually working on, or are there some out on a wall somewhere in the work shop just for decoration? If a taxidermist just mounted an animal their reference material and photos would be very easy to find if you ask to see it. If you ask to see reference material, pay close attention to what the taxidermist's reaction is. Do they get defensive? Some taxidermists may not want you to know what is accurate or you will be able to see their mistakes or short cuts. Do they have time to look for reference? Will they have time with your mount to look for some? Do they say "I mounted a hundred of these animals I do not need any." On the other hand, do they make a half stitch effort to look and say, "They are around here somewhere" and cannot find any. They may luck out and may find one.... photo after a while of looking and the animal is real far away in the photo. This kind of photo is useless. If there are no reference photos out what they are working on at that moment then they do not use any.

A bookshelf full of wildlife books are good to have only if you use them. However, how will you remember every page every animal in every position in every book? Many will say they have all the references they need. Test a taxidermist who says the comment if they use references. Ask the taxidermist to see a specific animal pose. How long does it take to find the pose? If finding a reference photo is difficult, chances are they will stop using what is difficult in their daily work activity. Out of sight is out of mind.

### Questions to Ask Client Referrals –

1. How long did the taxidermist quote for completion?
2. How long did it take for completion?
3. Did you have to stay on the taxidermist to make sure it was completed in the period quoted?





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4. How was the quality? Was the quality meeting your expectations? What kind of quality do you like? How high are your mounts hanging in your trophy room?
5. Choose a taxidermist that you know is expensive and ask if they would ever use them, why or why not?
6. Choose a taxidermist that you know is inexpensive and ask if they would ever use them, why or why not? (Note: Try to determine on #6 & #7 if price was a factor, price can make you over look a lot that you normally would not over look.
7. How far are you willing to travel? - Distance or convenience will also make you over look a lot that you normally would not over look.
8. Did you ever get back a position you did not ask for?
9. Are any of your mounts fading? Have you checked if seams are pulling apart? When was the last time you checked especially on higher mounts hanging on the wall? (If it was a long time or they are displayed higher then you can see on top of the mounts without a ladder then most likely they do not check their mounts.)

Visit as many taxidermists that you can in their studio and educate yourself so you will be prepared in choosing the proper taxidermist. Be true to yourself. If you have a lower budget let the taxidermist know up front so they can let you know if they can accommodate your needs. Choose wisely, so you do not end up with unrealized expectations. Anyone can be good once you want someone who is consistently good!

### Short Cuts –

- **Just get it done attitude** – Taxidermists are a tight-knit group of craftsmen. We all talk amongst each others about problems in the trade, problems when faced with in the mounting process, technical issues, tanning questions or just to try to pick another taxidermists brain of what they know. I personally get about five to ten phone calls a week. The phone call usually starts out with, what are you working on? It is shortly followed by either how your mounting it or the problems you have mounting whatever your working on and it always astonishes me when I hear a taxidermist say, why are you spending so much time on the mount? I couldn't spend that much time or I would lose money. I have heard many times "you're going overboard, you don't need to do all that my customers would never know the difference." All short cuts are fast ways to cut cost or save time.
- **One short cut is the glue** – Some taxidermists do not use glue! The purpose for glue is to hold the skin to the manikin. This keeps the skin from drumming and holds in place to keep proper body and anatomy definition. The favorite inexpensive glue to use is dextrin glue. Dextrin is an additive taxidermists add in the glues for adhesion. Dextrin mixed with water make a very sticky paste. Dextrin cost is pennies per mount compared to other glues offered in our industry. Dextrin is a baking or cooking additive. It is sweet like sugar. Unfortunately, dextrin also is a great bug attractor, especially the [Domestic Beetles](#). Some taxidermists add a fiber or a paper pulp for filler, stretching the cost even more. This adds nothing for the adhesion; just add bulk to stretch the glue further. Dextrin glue worked well forty years ago sticking to the paper on paper manikins used in those





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days but not that good on the polyurethane foam manikins used today. In the paper manikin days, they added a potent bug proofing inhibitor called Edilin-U in the glue. Edilin-U is no longer on the market do to it causes cancer and the USDA banned this product.

Some taxidermist may use better quality glue but will not spend the time sanding the outer slick shell of the manikin for the glue to adhere, which is also absurd. The outer shell has mold release to release the manikin for molding purposes. This mold release makes glue very hard to stick to. Dextrin glue dose not stick to this slick surface at all.

- **What is drumming?** Why is this important? Drumming is a process when the skin separates from the manikin. If drumming is not repaired this can cause problems down the road. As the years add up with the constant changing humidity mold will start to grow in these drummed voids more so with dextrin glue, this is a perfect breeding ground bug infestation.

Several reasons can cause drumming. An in-superior tan can cause drumming, very little or no glue used, the manikin not properly altered to fit your skin or the taxidermist may not have the knowledge how to alter manikins properly which effects about 80% of all taxidermists. Fixing drumming when it occurs will take some time. Repairs may not be in the taxidermist's budget to fix. If you ask for discounts, you can almost bet drumming will not be fixed. Taxidermists get away with this because the clients are not aware of these flaws.

Areas that are a big concern for drumming are all low areas underneath the jaw, along both side of the esophagus, the muscles going down both sides of the throat, where the neck attaches to the brisket. Around the armpits, inside the ears, just above the lip line, on the side of the face and forehead, or any detail on the face, the rear hocks on the back legs, in front of the hams on the back legs where they meet the belly or any over detailed muscle are a common area for drumming.

There are times when you completed a mount just as if you should and you can have some minor drumming depending on how fast the animal dries in the taxidermy studio. If this happens, the taxidermist should find it if they are doing their job properly and fix this flaw before the mount leaves their studio. Not fixing drumming is a fantastic way to save on time.

- **Not to boiling the meat off the skull of your horns!** Many taxidermists just scrape the meat and brains off somewhat with a knife. Not boiling the skull is a great bug attractor!
- **Spend the least amount of time on your mount.**
- **Using low-grade glass eyes.**
- **Not fix any bullet holes or cut holes, skinning or scars in any skin.**
- **Not spending a lot of time to sew the animal up, take big stitches that leaves unsightly seams.** Look at the seams where the taxidermist sewed. On a shoulder mount, this is usually on top of head and neck between the ears down a few inches or it can continue all the way down to the shoulders. Do you see stitching, you should not. Hair standing up on the mane usually is a sign of not spending a lot of time sewing up your mount. This is a common short cut.
- **How is the hair folded around the back board of the mount?** Is it just gathered in bunches (like - I do not care) or is it laid out flat clean looking (I took the time and do care).



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- **On a life size mount** look at the sewing on top of the head as you would on a shoulder mount as well as underneath the animal, behind all legs and the belly area. Looking underneath the belly area is there sloppy tucking of excess skin, the skin should lay flat in the pelvis area. Are there horrible sewing techniques and gaps in the skin where the legs meet or gaps that show the manikin, if so this is horrible quality. You should not see any gap or separation or any part of the manikin. The hair should lay flat! If the hair is not lying flat the sewing was rushed along.
- **Not tanning the skin.** Many taxidermists claim to tan but do not. Tanning turns your skin into leather. Some who claim to tan may only pickle your skin. Pickling is one-step in the tanning process. This is not a tan although many taxidermists will argue this absurdity.
- **Some may use a dry preservative.** I urge you to avoid this method! How a dry preservative is used is the taxidermist takes your raw skin, trims a lot of the meat and fat off and rubs a dry preservative on your skin. You are receiving a raw skin back with a little borax mixed with crushed mothballs on it. This is another fantastic bug attractor! Some taxidermists use a liquid rub on tan. This method is a dry preserve in a liquid state. Dry preservative or rub on tan methods are pennies on the dollar.
- **Look around where the hair meets the horn or antler.** If you carefully pull the hair (using a pin or a long needle), back from the horn or antler and check if there is a gap or a big crack there. Can you see the skull? You should not see any skull showing underneath the hair or feel any staples or nails around the horns or anywhere on the mount. The skin should be right up against the horn without any gap. If there are nails or staples the taxidermist does not have the time to remove them. Removing staples or nails makes a cleaner looking trophy and eliminates rust over time and any discrepancy in trying to take short cuts.
- **Check for symmetry.** Step back from the mount and take an overall view. Are the eyes level? Are both eyes at the same angle? Is one eye out further than the other? Use a flashlight to check if the pupils are level and both are looking in the same direction. Is the skin around the nose slightly twisted? Are the horns level? Are the ears level? A great portion of all ears and ear butts are in correct. Are both ear butts the same shape? Looking at the shoulder mount head at eye level do the ear butts come lower than the lower eye socket, they should not. If you level the brisket, is the head still level? Is there any hair patterns pulled more to one side? On all antlered game (animals that shed their horns) if you look at the outside edge of each antler burr and draw an imaginary line straight up and down, along the outside edge of the antler burr. Dose either eye come out past that imaginary line. They should not.
- **Finishing work.** After tanning your animal loses all epidermal color and this color has to be put back onto your mount. All mounts either life size or shoulder mounts have to be finished after mounting. Finishing consists of repairing seems, scars or blemishes in the fur, repairing drumming, completing the epoxy work around the eyes, nose pad, inside the ears, lips, open mouth, inside the nostril, around the horns or antlers for it to look natural and life like. Did the taxidermist remove all the paint from of the hair especially around the eyes, lips, nose and ears? On thin haired African animals, did they paint the epidermal loss? On a life size, you also need to look underneath the pelvis area where the legs touch the body. Are there any gaps?







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There should not be any. Check to make sure this is also painted under there, is there skin gathered up or wrinkled underneath? There should not be. The finishing on any mount will take up quite a bit of time; in this area of detailing if the taxidermist wants to they can make tremendous shortcuts. Less time finishing increases profits.

Look around the hoofs. You should never see the attachment rods from the animal to the habitat. Shake a life size animal to see if the mount is attached solid, or is it attached flimsy or wobbly. It is easier to use a cheaper thinner attachment rod on the life size to save on costs then to take the time to put larger rods back into the manikin.

- **On habitat bases how real does it look?** Is any of the habitat falling or flaking off? Is the habitat over done? Did the taxidermist try to do too much on a little base? Can you see any leg support rods underneath the hoofs connecting to the habitat? If you do this is very sloppy work! If you ever were told by a taxidermist the bases takes away from the mount the taxidermist obviously does not have the artistic eye for balance coordination. A habitat should enhance your mount. Look one hundred percent natural and express involvement. If you see a habitat that over powers and does not look natural or is too busy or is weighted too much to one side, the taxidermist may lack this artistic ability of coordination to put your mount in balance. This does not mean they are bad people; they just lacking the skills you are looking for.

If a taxidermist knocks quality, they may not have a lot of it in their mounts. Some may say you need to view it from 15 to 20 feet back. All though this is be true, you are just trying to determine if you are paying for the quality and not receiving it. The majority of the reasons why the taxidermist will not alter the manikins is alterations are time evasive. This repair may not be in the taxidermist's budget to fix. Taxidermists get away with this because the clients may not know this.

## Stylized –

Stylization happens from several reasons:

1. The taxidermist adding their opinion of what they like. Not what is right or wrong but what they want. All their mounts transform into the same look or style. The stylized taxidermist will have the same eye setting regardless of the species, all their nose's the same and always add or take away the same muscle anatomy. They often say "I mount it this way because this is what my clients want or expect". If you have heard a taxidermist say this, they are stylized.
2. Not using live references on a consistent basis or at all. The taxidermist could have used references in the past as they started out but no longer do. Without using references every time you mount an animal you will fall back into a routine of being stylized and not what is anatomically accurate. References that are out of site are out of mind.
3. The taxidermist does not care. They just want to produce production taxidermy.





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4. The taxidermy studio has employees and the studio has to produce a certain look rather than ten different looks from 10 different taxidermists.
5. Years of doing the same thing over and over, shoulder mount after shoulder mount, deer after deer. Years of mounting the same few animals over and over make taxidermy boring. This boredom causes stylization.

### Understanding Tanning –

This section will only touch the surface tanning in lay-mans terms. To understand how tanning is accomplished read the [chemistry of tanning](#).

The tan is the lifeline of your mount. No matter how good the taxidermist is, it will not matter if you have an inferior tan. This will determine if your mount will last 3 – 5 years or 60 years. This is an extremely difficult subject. Tanning is complicated and there can be many different versions. I am only going to touch upon the surface of this subject.

Tanning is like a rubics-cube. Every step you take prepares you for the next step. If you cut out steps or take short cuts, this shortens the life of the tan. In actuality the skins are not tanned in taxidermy mounting process, they are only fur dressed. The difference is a true tan is taking a skin full of protein into a non-protein state. The commercial fur industry (CFI) uses a true tan for leather clothing, fur coats and bikers leather etc. The CFI is set up for this tanning with millions of dollars of machinery, labs and chemical analysts testing the skins constantly to make sure they have a non-protein skin and their own water treatment plant all on site to purify the water. The CFI does not tan for the taxidermy industry (TI). The commercial fur companies are almost 100 percent fully automated. They are not too concerned about the thinness of a hide in the facial areas, feet, or the stretch-ability of a hide as much. Their machines cannot thin the face, eyes, nose, mouth and ears thin enough for a taxidermist. The TI uses many of the same techniques but they are much more hands-on with each hide being tanned/dressed. Many of the chemicals used in the CFI by law are illegal to be disposed of in the sewage system. This is why the CFI spend millions on a treatment plant before disposing back into the sewage. The TI does not raise these kinds of funds so they use environmentally friendly chemicals safer to dispose of in sewage. This is good for the environment but not as good for the longevity of the skin. The fur dressers in the TI do not take the hide to a 100 percent non-protein state. They try to get as close as they can. However, if you start to use inferior chemicals or cut some of the steps out to increase profits, the further you get away from the 100 percent state the shorter the life of the tan/dressing will be.

If a Taxidermist says, they tan their own skins. The equipment-needed is costly and takes up a lot of room. Ask them to show you their tanning equipment. To fur dress properly they need at least one soak up vat, a wet drum at least 6 to 8 foot round, a sawdust tumbler at least 6 to 8 foot round, a centrifuge, a cager at least 6 to 8 foot round and a staker machine to tan all skins properly. Two fast questions to ask someone who tan their own skins are, what bate do they use. If they crack a joke about fishing, or do not know what that is, and they do not use it. Then ask them how long you neutralize your skins. If they say, they do not, or about 20 – 30 minutes. This is another improper tanning procedure. Unfortunately, the only way to recognize if the dressing is tanned properly is over time. On a lesser quality tan as age accumulates, the mount will slowly deteriorate. The color the hair will start to fade, the seam where your animals sewn together will start to pull apart and continue to, the skin around the mouth and eyes will also start to pull out or apart, the hide will drum, hair may even start to fall out over time.

### Dry Preserving –

A dry preservative application is after the animal is skinned off the carcass and all meat and fat is taken off the skin, then this preservative is rubbed on to the skin and it is ready to mount. The skin is actually raw and the taxidermist rubs a mixture of borax and crushed mothballs on your skin. This method still practiced by major percentage of taxidermists. This method would last a very short time depending on the conditions in your home and humidity in the air.



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There is a "brush on tan" available on the market that some taxidermists use, this so-called tan, or at least it is because it is written on the side of the packaging. This is supposedly a tan you rub on a skin; wait one hour, then mount. This so-called rub on tan, or brush on, or soak in, in my opinion is today's version of a liquid dry preservative.

You do not want a dry preserved mount. Dry preserve mounts are not stable and years of humidity will cause the rawness to become soft, shrink, fade colors, pull seems apart, cause ears to crack, and attract bugs! The [chemistry of tanning](#) will explain how these products are not stable.

### **About the Author**

Ron Schaefer offers full spectrum [Taxidermy Services](#), [Bronze Sculptures](#) and [Wildlife Drawings](#). Ron Schaefer, a Master Taxidermist, located in Texas, is founder and artisan for [Heads Above The Rest](#), Inc.® and has been studying the fine art of moving and adjusting skin since 1975. He specializes mainly in life size African and Exotics with his passion being Cats.

Heads Above The Rest, Inc.® is not a large production firm. Ron Schaefer strives for low volume, accepting a limited number of clients each year, enabling him to maintain high quality craftsmanship and customer care. He leads the industry in higher standards and you will see a definite difference when working with Heads Above The Rest, Inc.®.

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