



FIELD GUIDE / 2026 EDITION

Water Is the Hardest Thing in the **Frame**

What makes a pool render convincing or amateur, the specification to supply before anyone models it, and the tell-tales to check the moment images arrive.

[START HERE](#)

Everyone can tell, and nobody can say why

Show a bad pool render to someone who has never opened a 3D application and they will tell you immediately that something is off. They will not be able to name it. It is almost always the water — because every person looking at it has stood beside a real pool and knows what one does, even if they have never thought about it.

A wall can be slightly wrong and read as a stylistic choice. Water cannot. It is transparent, reflective, refractive and moving at the same time, and all four have to agree with each other and with the light in the rest of the frame. Get one wrong and the surface turns into a sheet of blue plastic.

AI helps most where nature carries the frame — greenery, water, planting. It helps least on a bare urban block. Which tells you something about where the difficulty actually sits.

DIM KUZMENKO, CO-FOUNDER, MAVERICK FRAME STUDIO

The assistance is real and it is not the same as the craft. A tool can enrich planting around a pool. Deciding how the water reads at 1.2 metres against a pale tile, under this sun, is still a judgement someone has to make.

What a pool image is sold on

Temperature and depth. A buyer is reading whether they want to get in. That is a feeling produced by colour gradient, clarity and light — not by geometry, which is the easy part of the job.

What gives it away

Uniform colour from end to end, a surface with no reflection or nothing but reflection, a waterline that cuts through tile like a knife, and caustics that are either absent or scattered everywhere at once.

STEP 01

Seven things that decide whether water reads

Not a technical manual. This is what to look at, so that when you review an image you can say what is wrong rather than that something is.

01	Depth gradient	Water gets darker and less clear with depth because there is more of it between the eye and the floor. A pool that is the same colour in the shallow end and at 2 metres is the most common single error, and it is instantly readable.
02	What the floor does to the colour	Most of a pool's colour comes from what is underneath it. Pale tile gives the bright turquoise people expect; dark grey or black gives a mirror that reads as depth; a sand-coloured finish goes green. Specify the finish, or the studio picks one and you get a pool you did not order.
03	Caustics	The moving net of light on the pool floor. Wrong or missing and the water stops being water. Overdone and it looks like a screensaver. They should follow the sun direction and be strongest where the light hits cleanly.
04	The waterline and the tile junction	Where the surface meets the wall there is a band — a meniscus, a slight darkening, usually a tile course and a waterline that is never perfectly level with it. A hard clean edge here is the fastest tell of an inexperienced render.
05	Reflection against transparency	These trade off with viewing angle. Look across the surface from low down and you mostly see sky and surroundings. Look down into it and you see the floor. An image that shows both equally everywhere is wrong at one end of the pool or the other.
06	Movement, or perfect stillness	Glass-still water is a real and beautiful choice, and it reads as early morning. Ripple reads as use and warmth. Pick one deliberately. The failure is a light, even, generic ripple applied everywhere — which looks like a default setting, because it is one.
07	Everything around it, wet	Coping darkens where it is splashed. Stone changes colour when damp. Planting near a pool reads differently from planting in a dry garden. Dry surroundings around used-looking water is a mismatch people feel without identifying.

STEP 02

What to supply, before anyone models

Most pool renders that come back wrong were briefed with a plan, a depth and the word “blue”. Fill this in and the first version is usually close.

INTERIOR FINISH — TILE, PLASTER, PEBBLE, LINER: PRODUCT NAME AND COLOUR REFERENCE

WATERLINE TILE — PRODUCT, SIZE, COLOUR, AND THE COURSE HEIGHT

COPING AND SURROUND — MATERIAL, FINISH, EDGE DETAIL, JOINT WIDTH

DEPTH PROFILE — SHALLOW END, DEEP END, WHERE IT CHANGES

EDGE TYPE — INFINITY, DECK LEVEL, SKIMMER, WET EDGE: WHICH, AND ON WHICH SIDE

WATER TREATMENT — CHLORINE, SALT, MINERAL, NATURAL POOL OR POND

UNDERWATER LIGHTING — POSITIONS, COLOUR TEMPERATURE, ON OR OFF IN THE IMAGE

DECK AND TERRACE — MATERIAL, LAYOUT, FURNITURE, SHADE STRUCTURES

PLANTING — SPECIES OR CHARACTER, AND HOW CLOSE IT COMES TO THE WATER

TIME OF DAY AND SEASON FOR EACH IMAGE, WITH THE NORTH POINT ON THE PLAN

Why the treatment line matters

A natural swimming pond and a chlorinated pool are not the same product visually. One is clear and bright, the other reads softer and greener with planting in and around it. Clients who build natural pools and brief them as pools consistently receive the wrong image and cannot explain why.

Why the lighting positions matter

A dusk shot is usually the strongest image in a pool set, and it is entirely built on the underwater lights. If their positions are invented, the glow lands in the wrong place, the pool looks lit from nowhere, and the one image that sells the project is the one that fails review.

STEP 03

The shots, and the check on delivery

Five shots that sell a pool

- 01

Low and across the surface, from the shallow end. The reflection shot — sky, building, planting lying on the water.
- 02

Elevated three-quarter, showing the whole pool in its setting with the depth gradient visible.
- 03

Dusk, underwater lights on, the surroundings just holding light. Almost always the image people remember.
- 04

The edge detail — coping, waterline, the junction. Close. This is where a builder is judged by another builder.
- 05

From the water looking out, or from the terrace looking in. Sells the experience rather than the object.

Tell-tales to check on arrival

- ☐ Same colour at both ends — the depth gradient is missing
- ☐ A hard, clean line where water meets tile
- ☐ Caustics absent, or spread evenly with no sun direction
- ☐ Reflection identical near and far across the surface
- ☐ Ripple the same size and strength everywhere
- ☐ Dry coping and dry stone around water that looks in use
- ☐ Underwater lights glowing where none were specified
- ☐ The floor pattern crisp at 2 metres as if through air
- ☐ Sun on the water and shadows pointing a different way

Use the right-hand list as your comments. **“The shallow and deep ends are the same colour and the floor is too crisp at depth”** is a note a studio can act on in one pass. **“The water looks fake”** costs three rounds and usually ends up somewhere neither of you wanted.



Maverick Frame production render.

WORKING WITH A STUDIO

Cost, and how to brief it

Two things people ask us before anything else. Both answers are short.

COMMISSIONED WORK	FREELANCER	STUDIO
Single exterior still	\$100 – 300	\$250 – 600
Single interior still	\$120 – 350	\$300 – 700
Package, 5–8 views	\$600 – 1,500	\$1,500 – 4,000
Animation, per minute	\$1,000 – 3,000	\$3,000 – 8,000

Market ranges we are willing to publish. Turnaround and revision-round figures are deliberately not in this table: ours vary too much by project type to state as a benchmark, and an invented number here would be worse than none.

How to brief it — shorter is better

This is the opposite of what most people assume. Four things:

- What you need — **how many images, and of what**
- The plans and elevations, as they are
- A few reference images for mood and light
- One clear line on what the images are *for*

Inflating a small job into a fifty-page specification backfires: taken literally it comes out ugly, and it misleads the people doing the work. Tell them the intent and let the team that does this daily handle the detail.

The mistake that costs the most

The biggest failure we see is not choosing the wrong vendor. It is **timing**. People start looking only after the first supplier has already failed and the deadline is on fire, then choose in a panic.

Line up and vet rendering partners **before** you need one. One, ideally a few, briefed and ready to take work. It costs an afternoon now and saves a project later.

10+

YEARS RENDERING
VISUAL STORYTELLING

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CLIENT
SATISFACTION RATE

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OF OUR COMMISSIONS NOW
INCLUDE MOTION OR 360

When the image has to hold up, **talk to us**

We are a CGI studio: architectural and product rendering, 3D modelling, animation, 360 tours and VR. Ten years, 350+ brands and agencies, and the kind of work that still looks right when somebody counts the windows.

Send us the plans and a line on what the images are for. You get a scope and a price, and no obligation to use either.

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Maverick Frame production render. · Cost ranges are market ranges as of 2026 and are not a quotation.