

A person with dark hair is holding a black camera with a lens. The camera lens has text on it: "18 ZOOM LENS" and "24 MM". The person's face is blurred in the background. The text "A GUIDE" is overlaid on the top left of the image.

A GUIDE

ON HOW TO

FIND WORK

IN THE

FILM INDUSTRY

Intro

This is a mini guide to finding work in the film industry.

When I first started to look for work in film over 5 years ago I found that there was little help online. I founded my blog amyclarkefilms.com at the time originally as a personal diary to note down my experiences of working in film.

4 years later I decided to make my blog look more professional as it began to find a larger audience. From the very start my blog was to be a place where I could share my experiences of working in the film industry.

To date I have now worked on around 50 film sets (only 15 were paid!). Although I no longer work in film I have learnt a lot about finding work in the film industry. Working within a film crew is long and tiring work, it is not for everyone but it gets your foot in the door of the film industry and is great experience for any aspiring filmmaker.

There are 3 important factors to finding any type of job.

- You must know what specific job you want
- You must have experience/express passion for that role
- You must apply correctly and in the right places

When I first started out working in film I worked for free as a Runner. When I wanted to get paid I decided upon a specific job role and it was only then that fully paid work started to come my way.

This guide will not just be my own experiences but will use Case Studies from others who have worked in the film industry and address just how they specifically found work.

Feel free to get in contact with me if you have any further questions.

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Working for Free / Paid work

When you first start searching for work in film you will find that the majority of jobs are not paid. It seems only a fraction of the film industry has a budget.

Do you already have a few credits and experience of working on film sets?

If you have zero experience of working on sets then working on a few student or low budget films for free will give you the credits and experience to move on to paid work.

It is OK to put student films down on your CV as experience. If you are applying for a runner job it would be best to not put yourself down as a director on your CV - even if you directed the student films you have worked on. Try to keep all credits relevant to the job you are applying for. Find low budget films to gain experience on by looking online.

Paid runner jobs do exist but I personally found that I was only paid when I decided to focus on a specific job role. For myself this was Script Supervision but being an assistant to any of the many departments within a film crew will do.

Case Study 1 – A UK Based Focus Puller talks about how he began his career -

I'm a UK based 1st AC/Focus Puller. I've been working in the industry in various roles for roughly 10 years, the last 5 years I have been a Focus Puller.

My very first job was as a Runner on a short art-house film. This was unpaid, but it meant I got to experience a film set and work out which department I most wanted to join. I did various running work, still unpaid, whilst I was at College, which gave me plenty of on-set experience.

When I went to University, I continued to work for free on micro budget productions, sometimes my expenses were paid, sometimes I even had to provide my own food whilst on set. By this point, I had decided that I wanted to be in the camera department. The good thing about helping out on micro budget productions is that you have a bit more freedom to attach yourself to your chosen department.

The more jobs you do, the more crew you meet and people will recommend and bring you onto other jobs. Some of these jobs will be paid, some won't. But it's important to do the same high standard of work regardless of the pay scale or budget.

It's tough to get your foot in the door in this industry, I did free jobs for many years before I started getting paid. The tough part is trying to earn a living whilst working for free. I got around this by doing night work. I would work on set during the day, and at night I would do night shifts in hotels or in bars. I would have to nap whenever & where ever I could, but that's the only way I could pay my rent and do the thing I love.

But after many years of doing work for free and not sleeping a lot, you eventually get to a stage where you are earning enough through film work to do it full time.

Deciding upon a specific job role

A problem I believe entry level employees have is that they are uncertain on what job role to go for. Trying to find paid work in the film industry when you have no experience is hard but need not be impossible. However having a specific job/department in mind will help with finding work.

If you are unsure on what job role to do working at the bottom as PA/Runner allows you to see it all, talk to everyone and get an understanding of which direction is right for you.

It is likely before you get paid you will need to fill your CV up with experience. Feel free to list any student films you have worked on or any experience that might show your passion for film. You probably won't want to work as a PA/ Runner forever so when you decide on a specific job/department start to fill your CV up with experience within that specific job role.

This could mean working for free on several student/low budget films for a year but once your CV is full (say 5 credits plus within one specific role) then you will stand out amongst everyone else who applies. I see by looking back at my CV I only started to get paid job roles as a Script Supervisor when I had worked on 5 short films sets and one feature film for free within this role.

At the time I was a student so I was able to take time off to pursue this work experience, still if you have to work full time try to get a flexible job and work on student films in your spare time. Listing any experience you have on your CV is better than none.

After working on several films sets you should start to get an idea of what department you want to work within. Having a specific job role/ department in mind and experience within that role will make it easier to find work. Say 100 people apply for the runner position on a feature film, 30 apply to be in the art department and 5 to be the art director. The more specific you are the more chance you will get in finding work.

Making your CV say you're the man for the job

At the top of your CV/Resume put the job title you are after. Show confidence. If you wish to be a Runner put Runner at the top of your CV, if you are after a Camera Assistant job put that as your job role. The line producer or who ever is hiring you will get many applications, mostly from people with little experience. Be confident and stand out.

- Keep CVs 1-2 pages long
- list your credits neatly down the page
- Include the name of the film, production company, date and any famous or well known people who appear/work in the production (this works believe me)
- Try to keep everything on the CV relevant to film experience

Case Study 2 – A Lighting Technician talks about finding work in Hollywood -

My film industry career began on a decidedly humble note, as an unpaid Production Assistant -- a runner -- working on an extremely low-budget feature. Having come to LA three months earlier clutching an utterly useless college degree, I hadn't managed to land any sort of film-related job. With the money running out, it was time to set aside my fears of failure and humiliation, and say "yes" to the whatever opportunity might arise.

Translation: I decided to lie if need be. When push comes to shove, you do what you have to do.

Following a tip from one of my college film teachers, I called the production office and was "hired" to work on the film -- they'd buy me lunch and put gas in my car, but pay me nothing at all. That seemed fair enough. After all, I didn't know the first thing about making real movies, so why should they pay me? Besides, I'd come to Hollywood to learn, and knowledge comes at the price of paying your dues. So when the first question the UPMasked was "Do you know how to drive a five ton truck with a two-speed axle?" (in effect, a ten speed transmission), I didn't hesitate. "Sure," I said, despite never having been behind the wheel of anything larger than my parent's station wagon back home. In telling my first Big Hollywood Lie, I'd crossed the Rubicon -- there was only one way to go now: forward.

We picked up the truck at the rental yard, where I confessed it had been a while since I'd handled a two-speed axle. The clerk sat me in the cab and showed me how -- which was simple enough -- and armed with that thirty second tutorial, I set out on the streets and highways of Los Angeles. Over the next two weeks of pre-production, I drove that big truck all over LA for the set-dressing department, then to the set on our first day of filming... where I became a set PA, delivering coffee to the director (black, no sugar), and picking up cigarette butts after the first unit moved to a second location.

I learned a lot on that film, working as a PA and an extra before moving up to assistant editor for the munificent sum of fifty dollars a week (\$200 in today's dollars). I was earning an actual pay check at last, for working on a film -- and if I was just as clueless about editing as I'd been about driving that five ton truck, I knew I'd figure it out.

Which I did.

That movie introduced me to a production secretary who several months later helped me get my next PA job on a much bigger movie (for \$125/week -- a nice raise), a grip who eventually hired me to work as his Best Boy on another feature -- my first non-PA job -- and a gaffer who hired me on many jobs over the next few years, including television commercials and a one hour TV special. Each of those jobs widened my base of contacts, leading to more work in years to come, every job building on the last. That's how the film industry works -- and how I built a career that spanned four decades.

It all started with taking a job as an unpaid PA, then finding the courage to tell the right lie at the right time. I don't advocate lying willy-nilly -- the wrong lie (or one too many lies) can destroy the credibility a newbie is trying so hard to build -- but my own experience demonstrates that a calculated lie (one you can actually back up) told at a crucial moment can work out well.

Location

You must be up for travelling whilst working on film sets.

In the UK the majority of film work will take place in London however shoots with a budget will provide accommodation. I found that putting *willing to travel anywhere* on the top of my CV helped. I have worked all over the UK and have never had to pay for accommodation.

On most job ads they will ask for local crew to save money on accommodation. However local crew don't always apply and if you have more experience they may choose you over a local person regardless. So apply to every job you find, show up for interviews (if not Skype), be pushy and don't let the location you live in stop you.

How to apply

Apply to jobs in the bulk at first expect to get 1 out of 10 jobs you apply for. As you get more skilled and more credits you will start to get more jobs you apply for. After working in film for a few years you will meet many contacts and start to be called up for work offers every month.

I found that the winter months were quieter than the summers for work. At first find jobs online, talk to people on set and find out if they know of any other productions jobs you can work on. As you get more experience you will find people will start to contact you with work. Apply to jobs with a cover letter, Keep this short (3 sentences long) and straight to the point. Attach your CV to the cover letter in PDF format.

Example of a cover letter I would use:

Hello,

My name is Amy Clarke and I am freelance Script Supervisor from Liverpool. I would love to be part of your production I am free all of June, July and August to work on your film.

Please find my CV attached.

Thank you,

Amy

Case Study 3 – A UK based Film Grip talks about finding work in film -

The way I got into the industry is a long and complicated story, and unless you're rich or your parent is in the industry, then that is basically the only way it will happen.

I'm from a working class family, dropped out of school after failing most of my GCSE's and ended up in warehouses and pubs, until one day, when I was 22ish, I decided to do something with my life. So I decided I should follow my love of film, something that the 90's Midland school system didn't promote. So I enrolled in college to get the qualifications for university.

In Leicester there wasn't a major film industry (it's growing now) but what there was I joined which helped me get into university. When it came to choosing a university I choose to go South Wales, the now home of a lot of BBC Drama. From there I had the chance to try different departments but also get connections, which is what this industry is all about. I ended up being asked to Grip because of my past labouring experience, so I accepted and was happy to be labelled as a Grip. This label meant that over a couple of years I got more and more offers not just from Wales but London as well, and finally I found I was being contacted by more London productions than Welsh, so I finally moved down to London where I live now.

It wasn't instant, I worked temp jobs in Leicester in between film jobs, I've had to move back to my parents a few times because otherwise I'd be homeless but finally, 8 years after I graduated, I can support myself and have a half decent life living in London with just my film work income.

The Reality of working on Film Sets

As an aspiring film director I thought I would work my way up the ladder of a film set and learn as I go. I found that film work did not suit me in the end, and even though I don't work on film sets anymore I know the experience I have gained will help me hugely with my future as a film director. Some people find the hustle of a film sets works well for them but for others the long and unpredictable work flow is too much.

There is no magic to finding film work its all about hard work and sticking with it long enough to see the paid work come by. It is defiantly possible to make a living in the film industry and many people do. When I started looking for work I had no idea what to expect, my education *a degree in film production* did little to prepare me for the real work world.

I would advise if you wish to work in film in some way - gain some experience of working on film sets, even if you don't stick with it, it is great experience to have.

Case Study 4 – A UK Based Production Assistant talks about the struggles of Finding Paid Work in London after Graduation –

When I was asked to write about my experience in the film industry, I must admit that it threw up a few hurdles and mixed emotions and in all fairness, I'm still unsure how I feel about the time spent.

Working in the film industry was all I wanted to do whilst growing up, so I geared all my education towards this industry and made sure I was as ready and employable as possible when those opportunities did rise.

The road to getting into the film industry was daunting; how do you break into it and get that first job? You have to be prepared to put yourself out there and in some cases, work for free in order to gain experience and contacts. I did all of this and through, persistence, eagerness and a giant stroke of luck, I got the break.

My first job – and it was a huge opportunity as this was a TV series written and directed by the Wachowski siblings (The Matrix). The role was Production Assistant and the location was London. I'm Birmingham born and based, this is where I had built my life and long term relationship so it was a pretty big deal to up root and move to London within the space of a month, leaving everything behind. After several delays to the start of the production and having already financially committed to the new house share in London, the dream had begun and it was not what I expected.

A Production Assistant is a stressful job as you pretty much do everything except for the film itself, for example, if the actors need picking up, you organise it. They need passports, you organise it. You are the first in and the last to leave which results in 11+ hour days. We spent 3 months preparing for a 1 week shoot before the team moved onto Iceland and to be honest, the only moments I truly enjoyed were the first day, the shoot week and the wrap. Being a Production Assistant was not for me, but it was the best key to all the doors as you had access to every single worker as well as all their contacts, you just had to ask.

Once the production wrapped in the UK it was time to look for other jobs and since our production was delayed, we missed the start of a lot of productions and this forced me to relocate back to Birmingham due to finances.

Unless you live in London or have contacts in London, it's a huge struggle and a massive leap to make and hold down. On top of this, getting into the industry for the first time is near impossible and really does require persistence, initiative and a lot of hard work. Most jobs are passed on to people who know people and you have to somehow get into that circle

London is the place for film, and unless you have the finances or already live there, you will struggle as you can't be guaranteed a job after the production. I'd also recommend being single as it takes up the majority of your life.

Recap

- Before being paid you may have to do a few jobs for free. It can take a few years to get into the swing of things.
- Decide specifically what job you are looking for. If you are unsure do an entry level job and then decide from there which direction to choose
- Keep CVs short, clear and to the point, same with cover letters
- Apply for many jobs expect to have to travel to find work
- Take what you can from your experience, learn as much as possible, film crew work is not for everyone but can be great experience for those who wish to work in the film industry.

When I started writing this guide I wanted it to be an honest reflection into finding work in film. I hope that my own experiences and those of the case studies show the reality. The work is hard and it is becoming more difficult for people starting out to make their way - and put in those first few years of low paid work that seems unavoidable.

London is becoming so expensive that even supporting yourself on a minimum wage is near impossible. It is not my intention to put people off seeking work in film but understand that it is not an easy ride. It worries me to have emails from people all over Europe telling me that they are making plans to move to London to find work in film. This Dick Wittington dream does often not end well. I would advise people to get experience from their home towns first before relocating to London or LA - and it would be best to do so with some experience, savings and knowledge.

It is possible for work to be found in film once you have experience and contacts. You can see that 3 of my case studies have made careers in film within the Camera, Lighting and Grip departments all of whom I know now work for industry rates, make a living from their jobs and no longer have to prove themselves on low budget productions. All of whom did a few years low paid work before finding the right job for them.

I hope you have found this guide helpful. Feel free to get in touch with me via my blog. If you wish to share your own experiences within film I allow guest posts. There will be more guides and resources for filmmakers coming over the next few months.

Thank you for reading,

Amy

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