

COSTUME ROLES IN FILM & TV



Costume Designer

- The Head of Department, involved from pre-production, working with the director, cinematographer and production designer to help tell the story through the costumes.
- The Designer breaks down the script, undertakes research, hires crew (as needed by the department), and manages the department budget and schedule.
- Designers may be less involved in the day-to-day of the shoot on set, especially on large projects - they will be busy planning several shooting days in advance.

Costume Supervisor

- A logistical role. Often working from a base truck, they make sure the shoot runs smoothly. Duties include the scheduling fittings and booking dailies (crew members hired on a day-to-day basis).
- On very large productions, there will be separate supervisors for the background actors ('crowd') and the lead actors ('principals').

Costume Design Assistant

- supports the Costume Design in prep and during the shoot

Costume Maker

- construct, fit and alter custom garments

Breakdown Artist

- makes costumes look aged, worn and torn as required by the story

Costume Buyer

- source materials, accessories and (as applicable) off-the-shelf clothing for productions

Dresser/Standby

- on-set role involving monitoring costumes and continuity

Runner/Costume Trainee

- **entry-level role**, providing assistance to the the department. Role may involve making teas/coffees, helping making garments or fittings, and collecting, cleaning and returning costumes.

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Required soft skills

Whilst roles in the costumed department involve high-level craft work, **soft skills** are essential to develop to gain (and retain) employment:

- People skills are key in costume design, including:
 - Communication: being able to communicate clearly, to make small talk and good eye contact is crucial. Confidence is also important to develop.
 - Costume roles often involve long hours on set, so a sense of humour is very useful.
 - Collaboration: not just within your department, but synchronising with other departments. In prep everyone works in their own studios, then on set everything comes together.
 - Politeness and respectfulness: some roles involve working in very close physical proximity to the cast, in fittings for example. Actors will be changing in front of you, which puts them in a vulnerable position. Treat them well, make them feel comfortable.
 - Diplomacy: you might work with people you don't get along with, but remember that everyone is working towards the same goal.
- Initiative: eg. if you are asked to go buy items and you come back with something extra you think might work
- Organisation skills
- Research skills: particularly for roles involved in pre-production
- Creativity
- Being able to give and take feedback. Do not force through your ideas or perceptions, listen to your team.
- Problem solving: thinking outside the box, suggests alternatives
- Resourcefulness and awareness of sustainability: second-hand stores are used a lot. Good ones in the UK are Traid and Oxfam Online, as well as your local charity shops.
- Passion! Costume design is a very exciting job, but the work-life balance can be hard to maintain.

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Required hard skills

- for roles such as Costume Maker, sewing skills will be very important. For other roles, it won't be as essential but still useful: both machine and hand sewing (eg. for quick fixes and alterations)
- a knowledge of terminology with regards to garment and fabric (eg. if are asked to go source a polycotton shirt)
- period/history of fashion knowledge
- for assistant/supervisor/designer roles: a basic understanding of budgets (eg. percentages, VAT, net, gross)

Designing for different media

- **Music videos** are a great place to cut your teeth. You will likely be working to very tight deadlines and budgets, and they are a good way to get an insight into the entire process. You will also see the results of your work much faster than in film, for example, which might be released a year (or more) after shooting.
- For **commercials** you are answering to, and have to manage, a wider variety of opinions including the director, producer and - ultimately - the client. There is generally more money in advertising than music videos, but the work is also very fast paced, with a lot of last-minute changes.
- **Ballet, opera and theatre** will likely have longer research and prep periods, and the designer is not involved once a show begins. Scale is a key difference between stage and screen: costume in film/TV is seen a lot more close up than in theatre, and detail matters more. Functionality is also key for the stage: costumes need to account for quick changes, and be easily washable.
- **Film and TV** also have have longer prep time. Continuity will be hugely important for a TV show, in particular, if a second series is commissioned. A designer will be involved in documenting and storage.

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Finding your first job... and the next one

- Take stock of your skillset, and where your strengths are:
 - If you are a good communicator and enjoy being on set, a role like Costume Dresser might suit you very well
 - If you have strong organising and team-management skills, consider roles like Costume Supervisor
 - If you have a good eye and are good at shopping, consider a Costume Buyer role
- Word of mouth is key: keep in touch with former colleagues regularly, and hone your people skills.
- Be curious and ask questions - but know how to time them.
- For interviews, come prepared to talk about a film/show you have seen recently, and what you like about the costumes in detail.
- Getting experience across a range of different media (eg. advertising, film, theatre) will not harm your skillset, on the contrary.
- Portfolios are needed for art foundations/HE courses, but not afterwards. Websites are also not required, but agents may create one for you.
- Instagram has become key to finding work: treat it as your digital portfolio and post pictures of your work regularly (this will also allow you to keep a record of your work all in one place). Use it to connect with other creatives: research who has worked on projects that you love, follow them and send them a message.
- You don't have to have screen credits to post your work: if you draw regularly, post pictures of your drawings, for example.
- Keep personal and professional accounts separate, but if you have special skills that look good on a CV (eg. if you speak several languages) that can be a good thing to add to your bio.
- For new entrants, a good place to start is by getting involved in student films: contact film schools local to you, and see if their students are looking for designers for their projects. A good place to search is the [ScreenSkills Select courses list](#).
- Facebook is less used now, but there are lots of active groups where people post job opportunities. A list of film crew groups is available via the Film & TV Educators Network's [Careers Resources Directory](#).

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For educators: teaching costume design

Students often don't realise the range of roles available in the costume department, or how many steps it takes to get to costume designer.

Advice for teachers to support aspiring designer:

- if you can, bring in guests doing a range of roles to speak to your students (if your school is based in the English regions, a good place to find local film/tv crew is the [Filming in England crew directory](#))
- introduce entry-level roles and skills in your schemes or work, eg. make communication a specific LO, or emphasise developing communication both visually (through drawings, sketches and designs and mood boards) and verbally, through in-class presentations. You could scaffold this, particularly as students can be shy about presenting artwork, start in pairs and build up to small groups and then large groups.
- if numbers allow, introduce a variety of roles in your practical projects, and get students to rotate through different roles: one day dressing, one day standby, one day supervising
- this also allows students to realise the range of skills they can draw on. For example, a student who is not the strongest at designing or sewing may be great at organising, or getting people in order or dressed quickly.
- teach students how to give and respond to feedback, both positive and negative
- teach resilience: sets are stressful environments, and sometimes people snap
- time management: emulating, as much as possible, a real set environment, with early call times
- develop projects a range of media, eg. TV, advertising

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