



## Who's who on the set: below-the-line (part 3)

Jobs description in the  
art, VFX, location and  
sound department

by Michael Barmish



FREE



---

# Introduction

Visual Effects Designer, Production Designer, Costume Designers, Make-Up artists, Sound Operator, name it... Without all these talented people involved behind the scenes, films would not look real, films would not be credible, films would simply not exist.

In this guide, we focus on all these talented crew members involved in the Art, Sound, Location, VFX departments, experts in their craft that you don't see but who make films a reality on screen.

---

# Choosing your path

A career in the film industry brings with it many rewards. But it takes hard work and discipline, as well as the understanding that there is no set routine. You're often working on several projects and need to keep a look out for the next one. Relationships are key with advancing on set crews, as is gaining experience from lower level positions. Work is never steady nor guaranteed. But you do it for the love and excitement of a life in the film industry.

The wonderful aspect of a career on set is that no two productions are ever the same and there's always some new development, with advancements in equipment and technology that makes your job even more exciting. There's always something new to learn. You get to work with different people, produce new stories, even travel to new locations. But it also means long

hours and serious commitment. Things don't often go smoothly and you have to be prepared for anything, from equipment issues or that dreaded plane flying overhead.



Production jobs are defined as **Above-the-line** and **Below-the-line**.

The terms refers to the budget where a line was drawn to separate key players on a film production. Those who are above-the-line are involved in the creative direction of the project and have negotiated their pay prior to principal shooting. Below-the-line comprises the crew needed to complete the production once principal shooting begins.

## The Timeframes of Film Production:

**Pre-Production (Prep)** refers to the period prior to the shoot. It begins when the budget has been finalised and shooting dates are locked. At this stage, teams are built and preparation for the shoot begins. Depending

on the size of the production, the prep can last between 8 weeks to a few months.

**Production refers** to the actual shooting period. It lasts between 4 weeks to a few months, depending on the complexity of the movie.

**Post-Production refers** to the period which follows completion of the shoot. It includes all the post-production elements (editing, VFX, grading, music score, sound mix, etc) as well as the admin tasks, such as closing the accounts, archiving files, etc.

---

# Below-the-line: art department

## Production Designer

Head of the Art department and is responsible for all visual aspects of the production: sets, props, costumes and make-up. You will be working with the Director to ensure his/her key vision of the story comes to life. It's a fun, highly artistic job that requires a great deal of knowledge of all aspects of the visual elements of film, including designing sets to help tell the story and costumes that fit the period and location.

Being able to understand and research various points in history, as well as different cultures, is a key part of this job. You may need to bring the visual elements of Victorian England or post-apocalyptic Australia to life.

The process begins during pre-production in meetings with the Director to determine these visual elements. Reading and understanding the screenplay is a necessary part of this process. You and the director will determine if a set is better done on location or in a studio, with the budget constraints in mind. Once you break down the script, your research process begins and you'll build composition sketches to take to your staff.



While you may consider film school, a better avenue is a degree in Art Design, especially a Masters Degree. This will make you attractive to experienced Production Designers who will hire you as an Art Director or Set Designer.

## Key Qualities:

- **Ability to find that rare element** - Having a keen eye for the unusual, something that hasn't been seen on film before, will make you stand out.

- **Conveying a Vision** - Taking the visual elements of the script and the director's vision and ensuring your staff understands this concept is key.
- **Software proficiency** - Programs like Photoshop, Illustrator and other CAD programs are important tools. Learn them.
- **An aptitude for aesthetics** - Knowledge of visual arts, and especially visual art theory will help you with your research immensely.
- **Budgets and negotiation skills** - Understanding budgets and the ability to get the best deal for equipment and materials are vital.

## Other Art department jobs that will gain you experience for this position:

### | Art Director

Reports directly to the Production Designer and handles the implementation of the visual design. They are responsible for the personnel

in the various sub-departments, including scheduling and maintaining department budgets. Think of the Art Director as the team's project manager. Not only does this job require the art skills, but also the ability to be focused on all the details.

## | **Costume Designer**

Responsible for all actors' clothing that appears in the production. Depending on the size of the production, this could be by rent, purchase, or manufacturing. On small productions, the costume designer may ask actors to bring certain clothing they already own. Learning history and culture is an important aspect of the job as every detail of a costume will be scrutinized to make sure it's authentic to the time and place.

## | **Sets**

The physical rendering of the sets are handled by the Set Designer, who is the architect of

the sets, the Set Decorator, who decorates all the set furnishings and the Set Dresser, responsible for implementing the set objects and furnishings.

## | Property Master

Responsible for locating and managing all props used in production. You'll visit lots of flea markets and your grandmother's attic.

### **Other jobs under the Art Director:**

## | Make-up Artist

On a large production, the department head is known as the Key Make-Up Artist and has several personnel handling make-up, prosthetics and special effects.

## | Hairdresser

Works with the make-up artist to style the hair of all actors in a scene.



Rather than film school, consider an Art and Design and/or Architecture degree. For Make-up and Hairdressers, going to school for cosmetics and gaining a license will be better for getting jobs in the industry.

---

## Other key positions

### Visual Effects Supervisor

This job is responsible for any on-set special effects such as fake snow or props that must explode. The responsibilities of this position begin in pre-production by breaking down the script with the Director and the Production Designer to determine what effects are needed during production or what effects will be done in post-production.

From there, you will hire a crew of artists, such as concept artists, animators and modelers to simulate the effects and bring the vision to life. The VFX Supervisor also works closely with the Production Designer as these elements are important aspects of the sets and design.

The ability to learn and understand budgets is another important aspect of the job as effects can be expensive and must be incorporated within the constraints of a film's production budget. Knowing how to produce effects cheaper but no less effective will help make you successful.



Film School is a great way to learn and gain experience with visual effects. But also consider classes in art and design, including art history and theory. An art and computer background helps, taking smaller visual effects jobs such as model builder.

## Key Qualities:

- **Understanding cameras and movement**
  - How cameras move about the set and where the actors are placed are vital to producing effects efficiently.
- **Artistic vision** - This job is an art form unto itself. But knowing how it is incorporated into other areas of design, such as sets and make-up are key.
- **Willingness to challenge directions** - Directors have a grand vision. Sometimes that translates into expensive effects. Being able to challenge the director to meet their vision with smaller and less expensive effects will make you invaluable.
- **Attention to detail** - Visual effects are details. Every detail matters when designing them.
- **Calmness** - Things don't always go right with effects. Being able to remain calm and adjust on the fly is important.

# VFX / Software Graphic Designer

Software technology surrounding Special Effects has massively evolved over the last few years. It offers new routes for story telling, but also allows for the filming of complicated and dangerous scenes very cost-effectively whilst reducing the risk of injuries for stunts and crew.

Hence, it offers more job opportunities, whether it's working on a 3D animation movie, an action or sci-fi movie, a commercial or an art documentary.

Studying arts and graphic software is the best way to kick start a career in the VFX world, combining art and technology.

## Key Qualities:

- **Willing to embrace technology** - having an aptitude and a desire to learn new and keeping up to date with the latest software is a must for success in this job.

- **Understanding Film storytelling** - You're doing more than just building effects. You're part of the story.
- **Artistic vision** - It's important to develop your own visual culture and point of view. To do so requires a love and appreciation for art, especially paintings and photography.
- **Attention to detail** - Creating the perfect effect requires precision and accuracy. Audiences see everything.
- **Team spirit** - Creating great effects is a collaborative effort. Working well in a team will help you go far.

## Film Editor

The Editor is a storyteller unto themselves. They must be able to understand the script and be in total sync with the Director. You will work with the director during shooting and, of course,

throughout the entire post-production process, taking the raw footage and shaping it into a cohesive and comprehensive story. Editors and directors have, perhaps, the best and closest working relationship in film. Often, successful directors will work with the same editor on all their projects.

It's a job that can at times be tedious and requires long hours as you will sift through footage of takes and retakes and mold them into the product that will be seen on-screen. After weeks, maybe months, of pre-production and shooting, the editor can be a fresh perspective on the story. Maintaining the story elements, tone, mood, etc. need to be considered as the raw footage is pieced together.

Once a rough cut is completed, it's time to work with the Producer for the final cut. Sometimes this puts the Editor between the Producer and Director as they may have differences of opinion

as to what should be in the final cut. A measure of diplomacy is important during this process.



Successful Directors can negotiate for “final cut” of the film. This privilege is reserved for the top Directors in the industry. In most cases, it’s the Producer who determines the final cut.



While film school could be beneficial, learning editing software such as Adobe Premiere and Avid, then editing your own videos to create a reel is a great way to get you noticed. Consider writing a screenplay to improve your storytelling skills.

## Key Qualities:

- **Enjoy working with Directors** - Creating strong relationships with Directors will keep you working steadily.
- **Diplomacy** - At some point, you will be the bridge between the Producer and Director, especially when it comes to the final cut.

- **Understanding storytelling** - Read screenplays and consider writing one yourself. The more you appreciate story and structure, the better an editor you'll become.
- **Interpersonal skills** - A lot of creative voices will be coming at you. The ability to handle all these personalities is vital. Being tactful needs to be your strength.
- **Focus and efficiency** - Long hours of staring at the screen will be challenging. Maintaining focus and getting the job done as efficiently as possible will allow you to move between jobs more quickly.

---

# Location department

## Location Manager

This person is responsible for finding and securing locations to be used for the production

as well as handling logistics, such as permits. The Location Manager works closely with the Director to realize their vision, often with a Location Scout. Once a location is secured, it's up to the Location Manager to work with the production team to set up a basecamp and ensure there is minimal disruption to residents. This is known as "clearing the location" and involves other details such as obtaining necessary permits, insurance, sending film notifications to homes and businesses in the area, and working with local officials to ensure a smooth production.

The Location Manager often has a Location Assistant to help with letting personnel into a location and ensuring its cleanliness after the shoot.



The best education for this position is production experience as a Production Assistant and a Location Scout.

## Key Qualities:

- **Having a good aesthetic eye** - It's important to be able to understand the director's vision and translate that into actual locations that work within the framework of the story.
- **Understanding different cultures** - This is not only on international shoots but even domestic ones where cultures are different in different regions.
- **Good sense of geography** - The logistics of setting up and breaking down to get from one location to the next with minimal time loss is vital.
- **Ability to interact with law enforcement and local officials** - Police and politicians have their own agendas and that means pleasing the locals. It's important to maintain a good relationship with all parties.
- **Diplomacy** - Similarly, you'll be dealing with residents and businesses who may get upset with disruptions to their

routines. Handling this with calm will make everyone's lives easier.

## Location Scout

On smaller productions, the Location Manager will take on this role. But on large productions, it is a separate position, not usually on set.

The Scout researches and documents various locations during pre-production. More than just finding locations, the Location Scout has to be aware of the logistics of the area. So, it's not just the location itself, but the ability for the surrounding area to accommodate a production. This includes aspects such as how receptive the local community will be and if housing is needed for cast and crew, and is there a sufficient amount.

The qualities are similar to the Location Manager. The difference is if there is also a Location Manager on the production, this position requires less or no time on the set

during production. Having a good eye and attention to detail are key for this job, as well as having a mental repository of locations. Starting on small films and student productions is a great way to gain experience and move up in the industry.

---

# Sound department

## Production Sound Mixer

As head of the Sound Department, you will be responsible for all the sound recording and placing microphones on actors during production. The Sound Mixer often brings their own equipment rather than adapting to different equipment every time.

Sound is as important as the visuals. That includes silence. Any external noise can ruin

a shot. The best Sound Mixers not only hear everything, but anticipate everything. This can mean sirens in the distance, planes overhead. But it also means things like knowing weather. An area that is prone to winds and storms are factors that can wreak havoc on a production.



Film school is a great way to learn the equipment and work on small productions. Practical experience as a Boom Operator or a Sound PA will help you gain key contacts and the ability to advance.

## Key Qualities:

- **Calm under pressure** - Once a shot is finished, it's up to the Sound Mixer to listen back for any problems in the recording. Everyone is waiting for you in order to move on to the next shot.
- **Decisiveness** - Being able to quickly determine that a shot is a go with no sound issues is important. Likewise, if the sound

quality in a shot is no good, you must quickly let the director know.

- **Ability to work with actors** - You'll be miking actors and making them feel comfortable in the process.
- **Artistic** - Yes, this is an art unto itself. But more so, you need to be able to understand the director's vision when it comes to creating a tone or mood with sound.
- **Collaboration** - Sound Mixers have reputations for being more "loners". But this is very much a collaborative process with the director, actors and DP. Even though you may only be working with a Boom Operator in your department, you do not operate in a vacuum.

## Also in the Sound Department:

### | Boom Operator

This person holds the boom pole with microphone attached at the end to get as close

to the actors without the pole, or its shadow, getting into the shot.

## | Sound PA

A production assistant who works primarily for the sound Production Sound Mixer doing needed tasks.

---

# Conclusion

What an audience sees on screen is the result of a great deal of collaboration behind the scenes. Depending on the size of the production, there are lots of on-set jobs. Whether you go to film school or jump right into production, starting as an assistant in any of these departments is a way to gain valuable experience and move up to the job of your dreams. Today's Key Grip is tomorrow's Director of Photography.



Vidatech Ltd, 2020  
ISBN : 978-1-913580-05-6