



How can I get into makeup effects? [by Stuart Bray](#)

A question I often get asked a lot by makeup students is “What is the best way to get into makeup effects industry”? It is a good question and deserves a thorough answer. For this reason I thought it would be useful to put together my responses into an article.

Special makeup effects and prosthetics is an unusual department as it draws on many different disciplines and no two jobs are the same. Often it seems a little mysterious because a lot of people outside of it can't picture the day to day work involved. If you tell someone you are in catering, lighting, construction or script writing then most people could imagine what that would entail.

Tell them you turned someone into a four hundred year old alien with silicone appliances, they probably wouldn't know where to start.

The amount and nature of work available to you, industry regulatory bodies (such as unions) and methods of getting a first foot on the ladder will vary depending on where you live and how much of a film or television industry there is around you. It may be that you have to move or travel to find training or get work, or you may be lucky enough to be nearby where it all happens. Whatever your circumstances, here are some points to consider when thinking about a career in this field.

Who does makeup effects?

Makeup effects and prosthetics is a branch of makeup which uses a lot of specialised materials and techniques to create makeups which are not possible with conventional methods.

Basic 'special effects makeup' is often done by the standard makeup department, limited only by the skill of the individual artists involved. When things require something more complicated, that is when a specialist department is brought in.

Most people who succeed in the field primarily are incredibly dedicated. They love the work and did it for fun before they made a living from it. This coupled with a natural ability and the capacity to work well individually *and* as part of a team are essential qualifications. If the idea of doing it for fun doesn't interest you, then this isn't the career choice for you.

Be aware that there are people ahead of you who are, and they naturally get better as a result.

It obviously helps to have a creative personality, and skills such as drawing and sculpture are useful but these are not as useful to an employer when starting out as an ability to listen, learn, work hard and be genuinely interested in the subject. It is unlikely that starting out as a trainee you would be responsible for making something from start to finish.



Baldcaps are one of those grey areas which may or may not require a specialist, depending of the skill of the makeup department. Students at [London Media Makeup](#) make and apply a plastic bald cap.



Most probably trainees would assist others with their jobs within the workshop whilst simultaneously keeping their eyes and ears open. Interested people will soak up what is going on around them, ask questions and make notes as they go about making themselves useful. There is also a lot of mess that constantly needs clearing as well as stock and supplies to check, replenish and sort. Oh, the glamour!

The Workshop Environment

The work inside a studio could include moulding, casting, sculpting, animatronics, specialist rigs, painting, hair work, fabrication and the creation of custom tailored under suits, finishing, seaming, design, prosthetic application, as well as using conventional makeup, developing materials and effects, testing ideas and attending trade shows, displays and exhibitions.

You could end up specialising in one particular area or be a 'jack-of-all-trades', which makes you more employable than if you have a very narrow skill base. *(To see an article which looks at these jobs in more depth, [click here](#)).*

What throws most people is the speed at which you are required to work in an industry setting. As with most things, time is money and the longer it takes to make something the more it is going to cost. This is a competitive industry and companies quoting on jobs will not want to spend more than they need to. Working faster comes naturally after experience-don't expect that to happen straight away.

Training & qualification

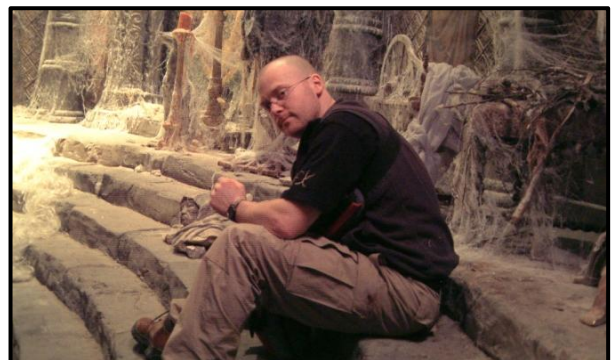
Unless you are already sufficiently skilled, you will either teach yourself through books, magazine, DVD's and internet resources or attend some kind of training. Many of the best old-school makeup artists working are largely self-taught over a long period of time and learned while working, mainly due to the lack of resources when they started out.

Nowadays there is lots of information available. The advantage of a course of some kind is that you will get information quicker, but you need to weigh that up against the cost. If time is less of an issue, it may be instead worth spending money on books, DVD's, some basic kit and just having a go.

There are a number of good makeup academies which may do special makeup effects as a part of the course or more specialised workshops of varying length. **Understand that simply completing a course and getting a certificate will not lead to work.** The quality of your work, combined with your personality is the real qualification you'll need-not paperwork.

Generally speaking no course, workshop or qualification will ever lead directly to a job-some kind of agreement has been made. The industry generally does not work like that, and it always pays to look into things and ask questions.

You may have to travel and stay away while you train, and these costs need to be factored into the equation, along with any work you will miss while you are training. If travel is an issue (because of family or health matters for example) understand that very often makeup artists need to travel with the jobs as part of their work.



Me on the set of Terry Gilliam movie *The Brothers Grimm* in 2004, filmed in Prague. The shoot meant many crew members were away for months at a time.

If you decide to take a course or workshop, look around to compare prices and research the tutors. Use sites such as the *Internet Movie Database* ([IMDB](#)) to look up credits and past work of tutors who specialise in teaching makeup for film and television. Visit and talk to as many as you can, compare notes and choose carefully. Some schools have visiting and specialist tutors for specific areas of work.



Once you have trained, you need to keep practicing. Very often on courses you will use new materials for the first time, and you can only improve with continued practice. Practice should be fun (if it isn't-well, there's a clue) and even if things go wrong I suggest you document everything-still photos and video if you can. You can look over your mistakes at leisure and get advice as to what went wrong.

There are online resources, communities, forums and groups which are dedicated to this area, and I suggest you join them and become familiar them. They will help you learn about what others are doing, and you will begin to learn where you sit on the scale-being able to genuinely gauge your ability is a useful thing to know, but it's impossible if you haven't seen what others are up to. Get to learn recognise good work from bad, and accept this is all going to take some time.

Also, see if any makeup courses require models for their students. If you can become a model for someone, you will be around makeup schools and tutors, and you'll see and hear some of what is being taught firsthand. Some may even pay a small fee or expenses, but in any event the free information and contacts may be invaluable.

Getting started & finding work

Getting started is hard, because people will usually hire people they already know. After all, if you need something doing, you will always first go to the trusted people. Imagine if your car needs fixing, or you need a dentist or a plumber. If you find someone who is great, always does the job when they say they will and comes in on budget-you'll go back. It may take time for potential employers and clients to feel confident in hiring you.

Once you are confident that you have some ability and have a folio of your best work, it's time to get in touch with potential employers. Spend some time researching; using the internet and going through media directories (list them?).

Start with a posted resume and a small selection of images of your best work. Request an interview with your folio, and follow this up a week later with a polite email confirming your interest and request if you have not heard anything. If you are feeling brave, I suggest a phone call-it is harder to make but also harder to brushed off.

Company	Date	Resume	Email	Call	Notes

As with any job application, everything you do to find work is going to be a little ambassador for you creating an impression, so spend some time developing your folio, resume, pitch, letters and calls. Think carefully about what you are going to say, and be clear about what you want.

Sometimes people are too busy to see you, other times they may have no work-often it is a matter of calling at just the right time, and you may never be sure when that is. Keep fresh in their mind, but avoid being a nuisance.

It is a good idea to keep a log of whom you have contacted and when, what you said and whether they replied. This means you will avoid repeating yourself, and you'll know how long it has been since you last contacted them.

Perhaps try asking companies directly if you can pop by to visit at a time to suit the manager or supervisor. I also suggest researching the company and who runs it. For example, if the company is run by an award winning artist then you should know that!



Actually seeing and smelling a workshop will fill in a lot of blanks in your mind. Ask questions, take notes and keep your eyes and ears open, and recognise what a great opportunity it is to be there and seeing it firsthand. Ask about schools, training and what they look for in a trainee and a portfolio.

It may be that you will not be able to take any photographs, as the things being made in the workshop could be for shows that are yet to air and as a result are subject to non-disclosure. It's nothing personal- if your camera gets stolen, and pictures of a new creature design end up in a tabloid newspaper then someone will get into trouble!

Employment status

Be aware that almost everyone who works in the film and television industry are self employed, and work on a freelance basis. This means there will most likely be periods when there is no work, and you will need to live off your earnings.

You will need to front the costs of kit, materials and equipment and insurance. You will also most likely need to attend to your own income and tax records to some degree, so it is worth learning about keeping simple accounts and being organised with your incoming and outgoing paperwork and receipts and consulting an accountant.

The nature of the industry is one where shows gradually come to fruition through months or years of negotiation and development, and then suddenly they are in a position to be made. There is a mad period of pre-production and production where things get made, actors get cast, locations, sets and studios are booked.

Stuff gets filmed, you get hired, then suddenly everything disperses and everyone goes off back to their lives, all looking to repeat the experience again on the next one.

As a result, there are few places that can afford to keep staff full time. The self employed live by their own abilities, reputation and contact network.

5. Digital future?

Digital effects are being used more extensively, and will improve, get cheaper and more commonplace. However, not everything will be done with computers. If there are actors, there will be makeup.

Often, computers create the things which are hardest to do with live action equivalent and vice versa, allowing for more incredible sequences and stories to be told which can help create a momentum for makeup effects to be required.

Also, makeup and digital elements are often combined to create amazing results. Look at some of the stuff in *A.I. (Artificial Intelligence)*, *Pans Labyrinth*, *Hellboy*-all make extensive use of live action and digital elements combined. Makeup artists that understand the requirements of other departments like digital effects are useful crew members.

Computers are often used within the makeup effects world to design live action creatures and makeups, as it is often easier and quicker to burn through a number of designs and variations by making virtual equivalents before spending money on materials on the final approved design.



Sculptor Martin Rezar (www.mudpusher.com/) created this Vampire design using ZBrush, a piece of digital sculpting software which has a very intuitive interface.

Martin has been sculpting in clay for many years prior to the advent of the software and the process of sculpting is essentially the same.



A commonly used sculpting programme which will run on an average computer is [ZBrush](#), and it is becoming more widespread in its use in the makeup effects world. It is relatively cheap to buy (£450.00 for single license) and has a very good online supportive community of experts and enthusiasts. Other digital sculpting packages include [Mudbox](#) and [modo](#).

It is important to bear in mind that the people doing the digital effects need to have skills in the area they are working in. The best digital sculptors and designers I know were all proficient in working with clay, pencil or paint first. After all, simply having a word processor will not make you a fantastic novelist.

In the meantime makeup and makeup effects are still being used as there have also been technological advancements in the materials used. With the advent of high definition television and big screens in the home, motion picture quality work is now necessary for TV shows.

All the best

Stuart

Free info sites and forums:

<http://www.learnprostheticmakeup.com/>
<http://www.makeup-fx.com/>
<http://www.theeffectslab.com/>
<http://www.makeupmag.com/>

Interesting related sites:

<http://philippefaraut.com/portrait.html>
<http://www.pixologic.com/home.php>
<http://www.avatarsculptureworks.com/index.html>
<http://www.evanpenny.com/>

Magazines:

Makeup artist magazine: <http://www.makeupmag.com/>
Cinefex: <http://www.cinefex.com/>
SFX magazine: <http://www.sfx.co.uk/>
Fangoria: <http://www.fangoria.com/>
Gorezone: <http://www.gorezone.co.uk/>

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