

CAREER KIT

Actor Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

How to Become an Actor

2026-10 edition

Inside: at-a-glance summary · step-by-step path · costs & requirements · 90-day action plan · documents checklist · exams · interview questions · resume bullets · common mistakes · 13-week tracker · resources

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At a glance

To become an actor, you train in acting classes or a degree program, build a résumé through student films and local theater, get headshots and a reel, and audition steadily until an agent or casting director takes notice. There is no license or required degree, but most working actors spend years building credits, and training can cost from a few hundred dollars to over \$100,000 for a BFA. BLS reports a median of \$29.05 per hour, and most actors work part time between jobs.

Timeline	1–5+ years to steady paid work
Typical cost	\$500–\$5,000 per year for classes and materials; \$40,000–\$200,000+ for a BFA or conservatory
Education	None required; classes, a BFA or conservatory training are common
License	None required; union membership (SAG-AFTRA, Actors' Equity) for most professional work
Median pay	\$29.05 per hour
Job outlook	0% (2025–35), little or no change

Step-by-step path

1. Start training

Time: Ongoing · Cost: \$200–\$600 per class session; BFA tuition varies

Take a scene study or acting technique class at a local studio, community college or theater. If you are deciding on college, compare BFA acting programs and conservatories. Add improv, voice and movement classes, because casting rewards actors who can take direction and adjust fast.

2. Get on stage and on set

Time: 3–12 months · Cost: Usually \$0

Audition for community theater, student films at local colleges and indie projects. Each role gives you a credit for your résumé and footage for your reel. Treat every set like a job: arrive early, know your lines and learn set etiquette.

3. Get professional headshots and a résumé

Time: 2–4 weeks · Cost: \$200–\$1,000

Book a headshot photographer who shoots actors, not portraits, and get a theatrical and a commercial look. Write a one-page acting résumé with credits, training and special skills. Keep your height, contact info and union status at the top.

4. Set up casting profiles and a self-tape kit

Time: 1–2 weeks · Cost: \$100–\$400 for gear; site fees vary

Create profiles on major casting sites such as Actors Access, Casting Networks and Backstage. Most first auditions are now self-tapes, so set up a plain backdrop, a light, a tripod and a decent microphone. Find a reader you can tape with on short notice.

5. Build a reel and audition every week

Time: Ongoing · Cost: \$0–\$500 for editing

Cut a 1–2 minute reel from your best on-camera work, starting with your strongest clip. Submit to several roles each week that fit your type. Track every submission and audition so you can see what is working.

6. Get an agent or manager

Time: 6–24 months · Cost: \$0 upfront; commission on bookings

Once you have training, credits, headshots and a reel, send short, targeted queries to licensed talent agencies, or meet them through showcases and referrals. A legitimate agent earns a commission, usually 10%, only when you book work. Never pay an upfront fee to be represented.

7. Join SAG-AFTRA or Actors' Equity when eligible

Time: 1–5 years · Cost: SAG-AFTRA initiation fee around \$3,000 plus dues

You can join SAG-AFTRA after working a principal role on a union project, three days as a union background actor, or a year in an affiliated union with principal work. The initiation fee is substantial, so join when union work is coming in steadily. Stage actors join Actors' Equity after working under an Equity contract or meeting its eligibility rules.

Costs & requirements

Estimated costs (USD)

Item	Low	High	Note
Acting classes (per year)	\$500	\$5,000	
Headshots	\$200	\$1,000	
Self-tape gear (light, tripod, mic, backdrop)	\$100	\$400	
Casting site memberships (per year)	\$0	\$400	
Demo reel editing	\$0	\$500	
SAG-AFTRA initiation fee	\$3,000	\$3,000	Approximate national rate; may differ by area. Confirm on sagaftra.org .
BFA or conservatory program (total)	\$40,000	\$200,000	Optional; public in-state programs cost far less than private ones.
Total	\$43,800	\$210,300	

Requirements

Education	No degree required; ongoing acting training is expected by agents and casting directors.
Headshots and résumé	Current professional headshots and a one-page acting résumé.
Reel and self-tape setup	A short demo reel and the gear to record quality self-tape auditions at home.
Work authorization	Legal right to work in the U.S.; minors need a work permit in many states, such as California.
Location	Most film and TV work is in Los Angeles, New York and Atlanta; regional markets also cast locally.
Flexible schedule	Auditions and bookings come on short notice, so many actors keep flexible day jobs.
Union membership	Not required to start, but needed for most major film, TV and Broadway work.

90-Day Action Plan

Tick each box as you finish the task. Do the phases in order; it is fine if a phase takes a little longer.

Phase 1: Train and get your first credits

Days 1–30

Goal: Be in class and land your first unpaid or low-paid role.

- ☐ Enroll in a weekly scene study or on-camera class.
- ☐ Read one actor's craft book and one play per week.
- ☐ Write a draft acting résumé, even if it lists only training and skills.
- ☐ Create free profiles on major casting sites.
- ☐ Submit to at least 10 student films and community theater auditions.
- ☐ Prepare two contrasting monologues (one comedic, one dramatic) under 90 seconds each.
- ☐ Join a local actors' group or online community to find readers and audition news.

Phase 2: Build your materials

Days 31–60

Goal: Have headshots, a self-tape setup and footage for a reel.

- ☐ Research three headshot photographers who shoot actors and book one.
- ☐ Set up a self-tape corner: backdrop, light, tripod, microphone.
- ☐ Record a practice self-tape every week and review it critically.
- ☐ Book at least one on-camera project and request the footage.
- ☐ Upload headshots and résumé to every casting profile.
- ☐ Define your type: 3–5 roles you could book tomorrow.
- ☐ Track every submission and audition in a spreadsheet.

Phase 3: Audition and seek representation

Days 61–90

Goal: Audition weekly and contact agents with a finished package.

- ☐ Cut a 1–2 minute reel, or a single strong self-taped scene if you lack footage.
- ☐ Submit to 5+ roles that fit your type every week.
- ☐ Research 15–20 licensed talent agencies that sign actors at your level.
- ☐ Send short query emails with headshot, résumé and reel link.
- ☐ Attend one showcase, workshop or networking event.
- ☐ Log which submissions led to auditions and adjust your type or headshots.
- ☐ Learn SAG-AFTRA eligibility rules so you know when union work makes sense.

Documents checklist

Gather these early. Keep originals in one folder and scans in the cloud.

- ☐ Theatrical headshot
- ☐ Commercial headshot
- ☐ One-page acting résumé
- ☐ Demo reel link (or self-tape scene)
- ☐ Two contrasting monologues, memorized
- ☐ Casting site profiles with current photos
- ☐ Self-tape equipment checklist
- ☐ Audition and submission tracker
- ☐ Photo ID and Social Security number for payroll (I-9 and W-4 or W-9)
- ☐ Minor's work permit and trust account info (for actors under 18 where required)
- ☐ Union eligibility proof (pay stubs, contracts, vouchers) when you get them

Interview questions

1. Tell me about yourself.

Tip: Keep it under 30 seconds: where you're from, your training, a recent project.

2. Can you do it again, but differently?

Tip: Make a clear new choice; they want to see that you take direction.

3. What have you worked on recently?

Tip: Name one specific project and what you learned from it.

4. Who are your favorite actors?

Tip: Pick someone with a career like the one you want and say why.

5. What's your type?

Tip: Give 2–3 concrete role types; it shows you know how to market yourself.

6. Are you available on these dates?

Tip: Know your schedule before the audition and answer honestly.

7. Do you have any special skills?

Tip: List only skills you can do on camera today, such as a sport, language or accent.

8. Are you union or non-union?

Tip: Answer clearly; if SAG-eligible, say so.

9. Who represents you?

Tip: If no one yet, say you are seeking representation and ready to work.

10. Why should we sign you? (agent meeting)

Tip: Show what you have booked, how often you audition and what roles you fit.

11. Can you self-tape by tomorrow?

Tip: Say yes only if your setup and reader are ready; then deliver on time.

12. Do you have any questions for us?

Tip: Ask one smart question about the project or the agency's client list.

Resume bullet examples

Adapt these to what you actually did. Use numbers wherever you can.

- Lead, "Title of Student Film," Dir. Name, University Film Program.
- Supporting, "Play Title," Community Theater Name, Director Name.
- Featured, regional commercial for a local business (conflicts available on request).
- Training: Scene study with Teacher Name, Studio Name (12 months).
- Training: Improv levels 1–3, Theater or School Name.
- Special skills: Conversational Spanish, stage combat, valid driver's license, soccer.
- Self-tape ready: professional home setup with 24-hour turnaround.
- Background actor, union and non-union television productions (3 days).

Common mistakes to avoid

1. Paying upfront fees to an agency or manager that promises work.
2. Spending on expensive headshots before you know your type.
3. Submitting for every role instead of the ones that fit you.
4. Skipping class once you start auditioning.
5. Sending a long reel with your best moment at the end.
6. Joining the union too early and losing access to non-union credits you still need.
7. Moving to a major market with no savings and no plan for income.

13-week progress tracker

Fill this in by hand each week.

Week	Focus	Done?	Notes
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			

Resources, salary & disclaimer

Resources

- **SAG-AFTRA: Steps to Join**

<https://www.sagaftra.org/membership-benefits/steps-join>

- **Actors' Equity Association**

<https://www.actorsequity.org/>

- **BLS: Actors**

<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/entertainment-and-sports/actors.htm>

- **FTC: Modeling and talent scams**

<https://consumer.ftc.gov/articles/modeling-scams>

- **Backstage casting calls and advice**

<https://www.backstage.com/>

Salary

Bottom 10%	Median	Top 10%
Less than \$16.50 per hour	\$29.05 per hour	More than \$143.68 per hour

Outlook: Employment is projected to show little or no change (0%) from 2025 to 2035. Work is irregular, and most actors hold other jobs between roles.

Source: BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook, Actors, May 2025 data —
<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/entertainment-and-sports/actors.htm>

Disclaimer. Requirements vary by state and change over time. Verify with the official sources listed. This guide is not legal or career advice.