

Who is 'working class' and why does it matter in the arts?

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- How do you think a person's social class might affect their chances of success in the arts?
- Can you think of any examples of actors, musicians or writers who have spoken about this issue?
- Do you believe talent and hard work are enough to succeed in the creative industries, or do financial background and connections play a bigger role? Why?

2 Key words

a. Find the words from the wordpool in the article. Read the definitions and match them to a word from the wordpool.

affluent	impostor syndrome	prominent	tricky
clichéd	imprecise	roots	tropes
deemed	infrastructure	social stratification	viable
elitist	landmark	static	
forged	private schools	crying out for	

1. _____ : not exact or accurate
2. _____ : common themes or ideas that are often repeated in literature, films or media
3. _____ : capable of working successfully; possible or practical
4. _____ : difficult to deal with or understand
5. _____ : schools that charge fees and are not funded by the government
6. _____ : the way society is divided into different social classes based on wealth, education or status
7. _____ : supporting or favouring a small, privileged group over the majority
8. _____ : being in great need of something
9. _____ : the basic physical and organisational structures needed for a society, such as roads, schools and communication systems

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10. _____: well-known and important
11. _____: not changing or moving; staying the same
12. _____: a person's family origins or cultural background
13. _____: very important or significant in history or development
14. _____: created or developed something with effort, often over time
15. _____: a psychological pattern where someone doubts their achievements or feels they are not good enough for a role
16. _____: considered or judged in a particular way
17. _____: having a lot of money or wealth
18. _____: overused and lacking originality; predictable

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity in the correct form.

1. Sasha is a(n) _____ figure in the Italian fashion industry.
2. Many well-off families send their children to _____.
3. Defining one's social class is _____ because there are many factors to take into account.
4. The working-class 'hero' is a common _____ in British cinema.
5. The education system is _____ more investment in creative subjects.
6. Despite his success, Danny often experienced _____ and questioned his abilities at work.
7. Some critics argue that the arts industry has become too _____ and is only of interest to the middle classes.
8. The government is investing in the country's digital _____.
9. Data in the report on climate change was too _____ to draw clear conclusions.

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10. Arts funding has remained _____ for years, despite rising costs.
11. A career in the arts is not always a(n) _____ option for people from low-income backgrounds.
12. The playwright Alan Bennett takes pride in his working-class _____.
13. Ebony _____ a successful career in catering.
14. The book was _____ too controversial to be included in the curriculum.
15. It's common for _____ families to want to live close to the best private schools.
16. The court's _____ decision changed the way discrimination cases are handled.
17. The movie's storyline was full of _____ characters and stereotypes.
18. _____ can make it harder for people from lower-income backgrounds to succeed in certain careers.

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Prominent figures in the arts say class is key factor that determines who can make it in the creative industries

Lanre Bakare and Nadia Khomami
21 February, 2025

- 1 In recent years, a string of academic reports have shown just how elitist the arts have become over the last four decades. The proportion of working-class actors, musicians and writers has shrunk by half since the 1970s, according to one piece of research, while another study found fewer than one in 10 arts workers in the UK had working-class roots.
- 2 Sutton Trust research released last year found the creative industries were dominated by people from the most affluent backgrounds, which it defined as those from "upper middle-class backgrounds", while a Netflix report claimed working-class parents did not see film and TV as a viable career for their children.
- 3 Guardian analysis has found that almost a third (30 per cent) of artistic directors and other creative leaders were privately educated, compared with a national average of just 7 per cent. More than a third (36 per cent) of the organisations' chief executives or other executive directors went to private schools.
- 4 Dave O'Brien and Orian Brook, two of the authors behind landmark studies on class and culture, say class is still one of the great dividers in British society. "Class is a tricky concept. It's one of the great talking points around identity and how the UK is divided," says O'Brien. "You see comparisons with race in the US or caste in India, it's one of these great identity and social stratification devices."
- 5 But while it is agreed that class diversity in the arts is inadequate, and by some measures going backwards, the ways we measure class are always imprecise. How do we decide who is working class?
- 6 Many academic surveys ask what job the biggest earner in your household did for a living when you were 14 years old. But circumstances can change and so too does the person bringing in the largest wage.
- 7 Work used to be another indicator of class: teachers, doctors and lawyers were firmly middle class, while miners, dockers and nurses were working class. But even though fewer of those types of jobs exist in the UK now, a similar number of people today consider themselves to be working class as did in the 1970s. In 2023, the British Social Attitudes survey found that nearly half (46 per cent) of those who identified as working class were actually employed in middle-class jobs.
- 8 For the playwright James Graham, whose MacTaggart lecture at the Edinburgh TV festival in August last year was devoted to this subject, class is about much more than income and profession. "Class isn't just money, or your parent's listed job when you were 14, it's part of the culture that forged you. In other words, a key part of your coding," he said. "Your sense of self."
- 9 Prominent figures in arts and culture have told the Guardian that whichever way you measure it, class background is a key factor in whether or not you're successful in the creative industries. Actors spoke of the impostor syndrome they had felt; playwrights struggled to finish scripts while balancing full-time work in order to make ends meet. The requirement to work for free or for very little when starting out can be harder for those with no parental safety net.
- 10 Despite working-class communities becoming more diverse, the stories that are told about them can often pull from a small set of tropes. If working-class people are not involved in the decision-making process, cultural institutions can be guilty of presenting cliched portrayals of working-class life.
- 11 Marcus Ryder, the CEO of the Film and TV Charity, argued that representation in the arts matters because culture is a crucial part of a healthy society. "It is not an 'act of charity' to employ more people from working-class backgrounds," he said. "Film and television is how we understand the world. From dramas to current affairs, even quiz shows – they all illustrate which information is deemed valuable in society ... that is why we need working-class representation."

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- 12 The Sutton Trust recently put forward ideas about how the situation could be improved, so that the arts become more representative of the UK population. It called for a range of measures to improve access to the arts, introducing an "arts premium" meaning schools would pay for arts opportunities such as music lessons, and ensuring that conservatoires and creative arts institutions that received state funding were banned from charging for auditions.
- 13 The playwright Beth Steel says current schemes aimed at supporting early-career artists lack funds. This week, the culture secretary announced £270 million funding for England's "crumbling" cultural infrastructure. But Arts Council England funding is still static, with no sign of a real-terms increase, and schools are crying out for more support for creative subjects. Making the arts more accessible will take plenty of money and even more determination.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Choose the correct answer.

1. According to Dave O'Brien and Orian Brook, what is one of the most divisive aspects of British society?
 - a. caste
 - b. gender
 - c. race
 - d. class
2. What proportion of artistic directors and other creative leaders in the UK were privately educated, according to the Guardian analysis?
 - a. 30 per cent
 - b. 7 per cent
 - c. 50 per cent
 - d. 36 per cent
3. Why do working-class individuals often experience impostor syndrome in the arts, according to the article?
 - a. Their upbringing did not prepare them for creative success.
 - b. They lack professional training.
 - c. They are often isolated from their communities.
 - d. They have to balance writing scripts and full-time work while others have parental safety net to support them.

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4. What does the Sutton Trust suggest as one measure to improve accessibility to the arts?
 - a. government-funded art competitions
 - b. a ban on charging for auditions at state-funded institutions
 - c. a ban on private school admissions
 - d. free access to art galleries and museums

5. Why is representation in the arts important according to Marcus Ryder?
 - a. Culture helps us understand the world.
 - b. It boosts economic growth.
 - c. International collaboration can be improved
 - d. New art forms can be created.

6. How has the proportion of working-class individuals in the arts changed since the 1970s?
 - a. It has slightly decreased.
 - b. It has remained the same.
 - c. It has decreased by half.
 - d. It has doubled.

4 Key language

- a. Find a form of these words in the article.

1. accessibility

3. dominance

5. immeasurable

7. precise

2. diversify

4. elite

6. imposition

8. represent

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b. Complete the sentences with the correct form of the words from the previous activity.

1. The arts industry needs to _____ its workforce to include people from all backgrounds.
2. Research shows that privately educated individuals _____ the creative industries, which limits opportunities for others.
3. There is no _____ way to measure social class, which is why income was typically used as a guide.
4. Only the most _____ athletes qualify for the Olympic Games.
5. The survey results were _____ of the entire population because only a small group of people were interviewed.
6. The _____ entered the palace using the staff entrance.
7. Improving the _____ of arts education will help create a more inclusive industry.
8. The long-term benefits of exercise and healthy eating are _____.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- According to the article, what are some of the main barriers that prevent working-class people from entering the arts industry?
- Do you think creative careers are accessible to everyone in your country? Have you or someone you know ever faced challenges related to social class when pursuing a career or education?
- Do you think government intervention (such as free auditions or arts funding) is necessary to create more equal opportunities, or should the industry regulate itself? Why or why not?

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6 In your own words

- a. Select a 'working-class' historical figure, activist, artist or character from literature, film or TV. Research online to find key information to answer these questions:
- Where did they come from? What was their social class?
 - What obstacles did they face?
 - How did they succeed or make an impact?
 - How are they remembered today?
- b. Share any relevant or interesting information you find with your class.