

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

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- How do you think a person's social class might affect their chance to succeed in the arts?
- Can you think of any actors, musicians or writers who have talked about this issue?
- Do you think talent and hard work are enough to succeed in the arts or do money and connections matter more? 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.

accessible
banning
concept

current
diversity
earner

exclusive
funding
playwright

representation
stereotypes
talking points

1. _____: ideas or beliefs about a group of people that are too simple and often not true
2. _____: a person who writes plays for the theatre
3. _____: money given for a project or purpose, especially by a government or organisation
4. _____: saying that something is not allowed
5. _____: easy to reach, enter or use
6. _____: important topics that people discuss
7. _____: a mix of different types of people, ideas or things
8. _____: available only to a certain group of people
9. _____: an idea about something and how it could work in practice
10. _____: happening now; at the present time

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11. _____: the way a person or group is shown or included in something
12. _____: a person who makes money, especially in a job

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity.

1. A new law has been introduced _____ the sale of plastic bags in supermarkets.
2. Griselda Gambaro is a famous Argentinian _____ whose plays are performed worldwide.
3. The art gallery is now _____ to visitors in wheelchairs.
4. Banks could provide your small business with extra _____ to help it grow.
5. The news article used unfair _____ to describe the community.
6. Many people believe that better _____ of working-class people on TV is a good thing.
7. Equal opportunities help increase _____ in the workplace.
8. The main _____ in the meeting were climate change and pollution.
9. Only members of the club can book a table at that _____ restaurant.
10. Martin is the main _____ in his family and supports his parents.
11. The _____ of online learning has changed the way students study.
12. I prefer to read about _____ events rather than ones from the past.

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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 Studies show that the arts have become more exclusive over the past 40 years. The number of working-class actors, musicians, and writers has fallen by half since the 1970s. Today, less than one in 10 arts workers in the UK comes from a working-class background.
- 2 Research from the Sutton Trust found that people from wealthy backgrounds dominate creative industries. A Netflix report discovered that working-class parents don't see jobs in film and TV as realistic options for their children.
- 3 *The Guardian* found that about 30 per cent of artistic leaders attended private schools, compared to just 7 per cent of the general population. More than a third of organizations' executive directors also went to private schools.
- 4 Experts Dave O'Brien and Orian Brook say class remains one of the biggest dividing factors in British society. O'Brien explains: "Class is a difficult concept. It's one of the main talking points about identity."
- 5 While everyone agrees that class diversity in the arts is poor and getting worse, measuring class isn't simple. So, how do we decide who is working-class?
- 6 Many surveys ask what job the main earner in your home did when you were 14. But circumstances change over time.
- 7 Work used to be a clear sign of class: teachers and doctors were middle class, while miners and nurses were working-class. Although these job types have changed in the UK, about the same number of people today call themselves working-class as in the 1970s. In 2023, nearly half of people who identified as working-class actually worked in middle-class jobs.
- 8 Playwright James Graham believes class is about more than just money or jobs. "Class is part of the culture that formed you. It's part of your identity and sense of self," he said.
- 9 People working in arts and culture told *The Guardian* that class background greatly affects success in creative industries. Actors talked about feeling like they didn't belong, while playwrights struggled to finish work while holding full-time jobs to pay bills. The need to work for free when starting out is harder for those without family support.
- 10 Although working-class communities have become more diverse, stories about them often use simple stereotypes. Without working-class people involved in making decisions, cultural organisations often present a limited view of working-class life.
- 11 Marcus Ryder, CEO of the Film and TV Charity, argues that representation matters because culture is very important for a healthy society. "Film and television shape how we understand the world... that's why we need working-class representation."
- 12 The Sutton Trust has suggested ways to improve the situation. These include an "arts premium" for schools to pay for things like music lessons and banning state-funded arts institutions from charging money to attend auditions. The Culture Secretary recently announced £270 million for England's cultural buildings. However, Arts Council England funding remains unchanged, with no increase to match rising costs.
- 13 Making the arts more accessible will require a lot more funding and a strong desire to change the current situation.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Choose the correct answer.

1. According to the article, how has the number of working-class people in the arts changed since the 1970s?
 - a. It has increased by half.
 - b. It has decreased by half.
 - c. It has remained the same.
2. What percentage of artistic directors were privately educated according to the article?
 - a. 7 per cent
 - b. 30 per cent
 - c. 36 per cent
3. What does James Graham believe about class?
 - a. Class is only about how much money you have.
 - b. Class relates to the jobs your parents did.
 - c. Class is part of your identity and culture.
4. What challenges do working-class people face when starting careers in the arts?
 - a. They often need to work for free at the beginning.
 - b. They are not allowed to attend auditions.
 - c. They must study at private schools first.
5. What does Marcus Ryder say about film and television shows?
 - a. They are simply a form of entertainment.
 - b. They shape how we understand the world.
 - c. They should only show working-class stories.

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6. What solution has the Sutton Trust suggested to improve access to the arts?
 - a. to build more theatres
 - b. to reduce ticket prices for cultural events
 - c. for schools to pay for things like music lessons

4 Key language

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

1. elite

3. creatively

5. diverse

7. access

2. researcher

4. educational

6. representative

8. improvement

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

1. The arts have become more _____ in the past 40 years.
2. New _____ shows that climate change will harm coastal towns the most.
3. People from wealthy backgrounds control most _____ jobs.
4. Many arts leaders were privately _____ as children.
5. Having _____ teams helps companies solve problems better.
6. Good _____ in government should understand the problems of ordinary people.
7. Many people in small villages have poor _____ to doctors and hospitals.
8. Public transport _____ could help reduce pollution in cities.

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- What creative activities do you enjoy? How might a person's background affect their access to these activities?
- Why is it important to have different kinds of people telling stories in the arts? What happens if only one group controls film, TV and other creative works?

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 difficulties 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.