

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

Level 1: Elementary

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- What is a social class?
- What social classes are there?
- Do you know anything about the social class system in the UK?
- When you think about each social class, what jobs, lifestyle, fashion or arts do you think this class has?
- Do you think being rich or poor can change your chances of being successful? 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.

auditions
creative

playwright
population

private schools
stereotypes

the arts
the working class

1. _____ : ideas or beliefs about a group of people that are simple and often not true
2. _____ : a person who writes plays for the theatre
3. _____ : schools that parents must pay for (that are not free like public schools)
4. _____ : short tests where actors, dancers or musicians show their skills to get a role
5. _____ : the number of people living in a place
6. _____ : music, theatre, painting and dance
7. _____ : having new and interesting ideas, especially in art, music or writing
8. _____ : people who have jobs like factory workers, builders or shop assistants and who usually earn less money

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

1. Most _____ have great sports facilities and advanced academic programmes.
2. I want to go to a(n) _____ to try to get a part in the school play.
3. In the past, the _____ had to work extra hard to succeed.
4. The government should pay to support _____, such as theatres and art galleries.
5. The _____ of my city is growing every year, there are too many people everywhere!
6. This film challenges common _____ about teenagers.
7. The _____ Samuel Beckett wrote his first play in 1947.
8. Katie is very _____ and always has new ideas for her paintings.

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- 1 Studies show that fewer working-class people are working in the arts today. In the 1970s, there were twice as many working-class actors, musicians and writers as there are now. Today, fewer than one in ten people in the UK arts industry are working-class.
- 2 Many people in creative jobs come from rich families. A report from Netflix found that many working-class parents don't believe jobs in film or TV are possible for their children. Another study found that 30 per cent of artistic leaders went to private schools, while only 7 per cent of the UK population did.
- 3 Experts say that class is a big issue in society. But what does "working-class" mean? In the past, miners and nurses were working-class, while teachers and doctors were middle class. Today, jobs have changed, but many people still call themselves working-class. In 2023, almost half of working-class people actually had middle-class jobs.
- 4 Some believe class is not just about money. Playwright James Graham says it is also about culture and identity. Many working-class actors and writers say they feel like they don't belong in the arts. Some have difficulty trying to pay bills while starting their careers.
- 5 Another problem is that stories about working-class people often use stereotypes. If more working-class people worked in film and TV, they could tell more real stories. Marcus Ryder, CEO of the Film and TV Charity, says that films and TV help us understand the world. That's why working-class voices are important.
- 6 To help, The Sutton Trust suggests paying for music lessons in schools and making auditions free. The UK government has promised £270 million for culture, but some say this is not enough. If we want the arts to be fair for everyone, we need more money and real change.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Choose the correct answer.

1. What has happened to the number of working-class people in the arts since the 1970s?
 - a. It has gone up.
 - b. It has stayed the same.
 - c. It has gone down.
2. According to the article, what percentage of people in the UK arts industry are working-class today?
 - a. less than 10 per cent
 - b. more than 50 per cent
 - c. exactly 30 per cent
3. What did the Netflix report discover?
 - a. Working-class people don't like TV.
 - b. Many working-class parents don't think their children can work in film or TV.
 - c. Private schools teach more art subjects.
4. According to James Graham, class is about ...
 - a. money only.
 - b. education only.
 - c. culture and identity.
5. What does the Sutton Trust suggest to help the situation?
 - a. giving money to working-class artists
 - b. paying for music lessons in schools and making auditions free
 - c. building more theatres

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4 Key language

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

1. create

2. unrealistic

3. cultural

4. artist

5. two

6. helpful

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

1. If you find the task difficult, don't forget to ask for _____.
2. Serena worked _____ as hard as everyone else to finish the task.
3. Do you like the paintings by the _____ Salvador Dali?
4. London has many different _____ opportunities because of its rich history.
5. I helped Josh _____ new designs for his art project.
6. It is _____ to expect to finish the project in just one hour.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- What stereotypes do people have of each social class in your country? Why?
- Why is it important to have different kinds of people telling stories on TV and in films?

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?
- How are they remembered today?

b. Share any relevant or interesting information you find with your class.