

You are going to read an article about being a film and television drama extra. For questions 47 – 56, choose from the sections (A – D). The sections may be chosen more than once.

Mark your answers on the separate answer sheet.

In which section does the writer

describe how one advantage of the job didn't go according to plan?

47

mention experiencing a sense of guilt?

48

point out the possible consequences of breaking rules?

49

offer advice to people thinking of applying to work as an extra?

50

refer to times when the gap between actors and extras appears to narrow?

51

acknowledge how appropriate certain terms are?

52

explain a common motivation for taking on work as an extra?

53

mention gaining insights into hardships that actors experience?

54

explain the purpose of an anecdote?

55

refer to an incident when he was disappointed by people's behaviour?

56

## The life of an extra

*Most films and TV dramas require extras, those people we glimpse in the background behind the main actors. Mike Jones describes what it's like to be an extra.*

### A

During a break in the filming of a TV drama, I gravitated towards the table laden with hot coffee and biscuits. As I reached it, however, I was duly informed that it was reserved for the 'talent' – the real actors – and was directed towards a rickety table, on which sat an urn of hot water, some sugar packets, and nothing else. I tell this tale, not just to grumble, but because it sums up the stark divide between the cast and the little people in the background. Referring to us on set by our technical name of 'supporting artistes' is meant to make us feel more important, I suppose. 'Walking background' and 'human props' are common, faintly humorous labels for us, but they're fitting. Extras aren't supposed to say anything during a take; we aren't paid to talk. Nor are we allowed to talk between takes when everything is being reset. A gentle murmur of conversation will inevitably well up among some groups, at which point one of the assistant directors will immediately bellow for silence.

### B

There are other non-negotiables, and failing to obey them could result in you being fired and blacklisted from the industry. Your contract specifically orders you not to talk to any of the actors. On one production, I was introduced to the lead actor and told what my role would be in that particular scene. I smiled at him in a mild attempt at camaraderie and he stared right through me. Then, the expression on the face of the lead actress made it clear she had decided not to make an effort with me. I knew I was only an extra, but they might have at least feigned some interest. So why go through this? Well, when I first signed up, I, like many others I know, saw it as an interesting way of earning a second income. The far from generous fees, however, soon meant I regarded it as little more than a hobby, and had I had a family, I probably wouldn't have been able to do it.

### C

Occasionally, you're picked out to play a more substantial part in one scene, and you feel as if maybe the professional / supporting artist divide isn't so insurmountable after all. Then, when you're finally released to go home at 2 a.m., after walking up and down some stretch of pavement 50 times, and you realise that the actors still have hours more to go, their job no longer seems quite so glamorous or privileged. Actually, night shoots tend to be the worst, although the extra money you receive almost makes up for it. Once on the set of a blockbuster, a mix-up in the costume department resulted in me spending two nights in an aircraft hangar, drinking terrible coffee and reading books – and getting paid for it. Meanwhile, the other extras all ran around outside in the freezing drizzle for an action scene. Every time they trudged back in from a take, their very visible fatigue and discomfort made me feel somewhat fraudulent, aware as I was that we were all being remunerated at the same rate for our efforts.

### D

One of the bonuses of being an extra is the free catering. Getting up at 4 a.m. isn't so bad when you can go straight in for a large breakfast, and a filling lunch is always provided, though you obviously aren't allowed to eat anything before the 'talent' and the crew. For period dramas, you will also get a free haircut, although this can sometimes make things awkward. On one shoot, I had to phone in 'sick' to my day job, and then had trouble explaining to my boss the next morning why I now had a 1950s-style haircut. Another plus may be seeing yourself on screen, usually as a blurry outline to one side or a tiny figure in the distance. That's what extras do: blend into the background and not divert attention from the main characters. Would I encourage anyone to sample this life? Hardly, if the aim is to make money or get into the industry. If, however, you like the idea of dressing up, with the possibility of glimpsing yourself on the big screen for a few seconds, well, maybe.