

What Is a Film Makeup Artist? The Role of Makeup Artists on Film and Television Productions

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Last updated: Nov 8, 2020 • 3 min read

Like many behind-the-scenes professionals in the entertainment industry, movie makeup artists know they've done a good job when their work goes unnoticed. The goal of the hair and makeup department is for moviegoers to see a terrifying army of undead zombies rather than an army of extras wearing pounds of makeup and prosthetics. This doesn't mean that the job of a movie makeup artist or special effects makeup professional is easy—it takes years of training and incredible dedication to work consistently and successfully as a film makeup artist.

What Is a Film Makeup Artist?

Film makeup artists devise and apply the theatrical makeup designs for actors in feature films and television. The complexity and type of design will vary depending on the production and character but good makeup artists can execute a wide array of looks across genre and period.

The 4 Different Movie Makeup Artist Roles

There are four main job titles in the makeup department that dictate what responsibilities a makeup artist will have on a Hollywood set:

1. **Key makeup artist:** The key makeup artist is in charge of designing each individual actor's makeup. Key makeup artists apply makeup to lead roles and actors, and execute any particularly complicated designs. The key makeup artist delegates and oversees the makeup artists and makeup assistants, always checking to ensure the continuity of makeup throughout the film shoot.
2. **Makeup artist:** Makeup artists are responsible for applying makeup to non-lead actors and the supporting ensemble. Makeup artists are under the supervision of the key makeup artist and are responsible for executing the key makeup artist's original designs.
3. **Makeup assistant:** Makeup assistants organize makeup kits and assist makeup artists with body makeup application (including any body art or body painting) and other small tasks. A makeup assistant may also be tasked by the key makeup artist with photographing cast makeup to ensure consistency in the case of reshoots.
4. **Special effects makeup artist:** Special effects makeup artists (sometimes abbreviated as SFX makeup) are responsible for any special make-up effects, like applying prosthetics or using foam latex (a special compound used for three dimensional prosthetic effects).

The entire makeup department operates out of a designated makeup trailer and are on set throughout the duration of filming in case any touch-ups or changes are needed during the shoot.

What Does a Special Effects Makeup Artist Do?

Special effects makeup artists use makeup and prosthetics to reproduce wounds, deformities, wrinkles, or supernatural features. SFX makeup artists combine mastery of basic film makeup with knowledge of advanced SFX makeup techniques for more dramatic effects. The job of an SFX makeup artist is challenging in its diversity—one day an SFX artist might be using spirit gum to apply a bald cap and wrinkles to an actor to artificially age them, while the next day they might be using liquid latex and prosthetic makeup to transform an actor into a zombie.

What Is in a Special Effects Makeup Kit?

Special effects makeup artists use tools specific to their work:

- **Bruise and abrasions wheel:** A makeup wheel containing colors specifically suited to creating the coloring found in bruises
- **Liquid latex:** Used to create the 3-dimensional texture of various skin injuries and prosthetics
- **Spirit gum:** A basic, safe adhesive for attaching prosthetics and wigs to actors' heads and faces.

Skills and Education Needed to Become a Movie Makeup Artist

Professional film makeup artists come from a variety of backgrounds and take many different paths into the entertainment industry. That being said there are some core skills and qualifications that most film makeup artists have.

- **Cosmetology school.** Accredited cosmetology and beauty schools offer makeup courses that last from one to eight months and can help with licensing requirements and professional placement after coursework is completed. Most of the top makeup schools for those interested in film makeup are located in Los Angeles.
- **Experience.** Makeup school will acquaint students with basic makeup artistry technique, but for those interested in a career in the film industry, additional production experience is also necessary. Oftentimes this means working for free on small budget films or film school student projects while you build up experience and credits.
- **Portfolio.** Aspiring makeup artists should have a portfolio of photographs showcasing some of the signature looks they've created. A good portfolio will show a range of makeup designs.
- **Full professional kit.** It's vital that any aspiring makeup artists maintain a basic makeup kit with at least the bare essentials.
- **Good attitude.** Beyond technical makeup skills, successful film makeup artists are able to work well on a team and check their ego at the door. Makeup trailers are very tight quarters and working with other makeup artists and actors can be a stressful experience with early call times and tight deadlines.