Film Industry Roles: Prop Master

What Is a Props Master?

The props master (short for "property master," also called the "prop master") is head of the props department (or is a senior position in the <u>art department</u>) on any film, TV show, or stage production. They are responsible for all props in the production—that includes acquiring them, keeping them organized, and making sure they're used safely. To do this, the props master leads a team of prop makers or props-department runners, and reports to the production designer.

What Are the Responsibilities of the Props Master?

The props master is considered the "MacGyver" of a film set—meaning they are expected to be able to do almost anything, and often with very limited resources. As such, their job description spans a significant range of tasks. Common responsibilities for props masters include:

- 1. **Make a list of props needed for the production**. The list is called the "properties list," and to make sure it's comprehensive, the props master goes through the script and also sits down in production meetings with various people—like the <u>art director</u>, technical director, stage manager, set designer, set decorator, set dressers, and/or costume designers—to discuss what props will be needed.
- 2. **Research appropriate props**. If a film is set in a specific time period or location, the props master will need to know what the props would realistically look like—from guns to cars to soup cans.
- 3. **Acquire all props, all within the budget**. The props master is responsible for making sure all props make it to the set—on bigger-budget films, they have a team of prop makers, but on smaller-budget films, the props master is usually making, renting, or buying all the props themselves. This includes backup props in case something gets broken on set, as well as finding animal vendors for any animal acting in the production.
- 4. **Monitor prop use for safety**. Once all the props are ready to be on set, the props master supervises all prop use to make sure props aren't broken. This includes making sure actors are using the hand props (any props handled by actors) safely, and that set props (props that are part of the set) hold up during takes. This even includes handling any firearms or testing any fake drugs that will be used in the production, to make sure they won't harm the actors.
- 5. **Keep all props organized**. The props master also keeps track of all props and backup props, usually in labeled bins on set, to make sure nothing goes missing and that everything is ready for each scene.

Of course, on smaller-budget productions, the props master is responsible for even more aspects of a film. Less common (but still possible) responsibilities for props masters are to:

- 1. **Care for animal actors**. On sets that can't afford to hire a full animal vendor, the props master will often be tasked with taking care of small animals appearing in the production.

- 2. **Style food**. Bigger-budget productions can hire a food stylist to make sure the food looks the way the director wants, but smaller-budget productions pass the task to the props master. The props master is responsible for making sure the food looks right, as well as having many backups to ensure it looks fresh for every take.

What Qualifications and Skills Do I Need to Become a Props Master?

Being a props master is a demanding full-time job and is not an entry-level position, so productions are looking for someone with education and experience. Many props masters have a degree in fine arts or design, and they started out working as a runner in the props or art department of smaller productions to learn how the industry works.

Aside from education and experience, there are a few key skills you'll need to be a good prop master:

- 1. **Research**. Props masters need to answer the demands of any production they're hired on to, so they need to feel comfortable absorbing a wide range of information during research—from tying knots to handling firearms to knowing what's considered contraband in prison.
- 2. **Organization**. Film productions can have hundreds of props, and the props master needs to be ready to keep all of them (and all of their backups) organized and ready for each day of filming.
- 3. **Leadership**. A props master is usually in charge of a crew of many other props positions, so it's essential that they're comfortable giving instructions and keeping morale high on long days.
- 4. **Certification**. One of the unique qualifications necessary to be a props master is to have firearms training and certification. This is mandatory of any props person in the union. Many films involve a scene with some type of gun or other weapon, and someone on set needs to know how to keep everyone safe.