



FILE 07 · THE MEMBERSHIP

SAG-AFTRA & AEA Pathways.

Eligibility, costs, and the trade-offs of joining the unions. Plus the realistic paths actors actually take.

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The unions, plainly.

Two unions matter for actors in New York: SAG-AFTRA (film, television, commercials, voice-over, video games) and Actors' Equity Association (AEA) for theater. They cover different work, different contracts, and have different paths in.

SAG-AFTRA — FILM, TV, COMMERCIAL, VO

Screen Actors Guild — American Federation of Television and Radio Artists

sagaftra.org · NY Local: 1900 Broadway, 5th Floor

Eligibility (2026)

There are typically three paths to becoming SAG-AFTRA eligible:

- Working a SAG-AFTRA principal role on any union production. The production sends you a Taft-Hartley letter, and you have 30 days to either join or work non-union again
- Three union background vouchers. SAG-AFTRA productions issue background vouchers; collect three and you're eligible. NYC has fewer union background slots than LA, but they exist
- One year of membership in an affiliated performers' union (AEA, AGVA, AGMA) plus at least one credited role under that union

Joining costs (verify current — these change)

Initiation fee plus first dues period: typically several thousand dollars total at first join. Annual base dues plus working dues percentage on union earnings. Check the SAG-AFTRA website for current numbers before joining; they change.

What you give up

Global Rule One: once you join, you cannot work non-union film/TV/commercial/VO work in the U.S. or its territories. Period. This is the single biggest decision in joining: are you booking enough union work to replace the volume of non-union credits you can take? For most actors, the answer is "not yet" until they're booking semi-regularly.

What you get

- Minimum scale rates — daily, weekly, and theatrical minimums set by contract
- Health insurance eligibility — you must hit a minimum earnings threshold per year to qualify; in 2026 the threshold is in the low five figures (verify current)
- Pension contributions from union employers
- Residuals — the holy grail; you get paid every time the work re-airs
- Working conditions — meal breaks, turnaround, on-set protections
- Casting rooms that only union actors enter — many of the best CDs only do union work

Strategy: most NYC actors stay non-union as long as they're building credits (Backstage, indie, student film) and become eligible only when their union earnings make sense. Don't rush. The union isn't going anywhere.

AEA — THEATER

Actors' Equity Association

actorsequity.org · 165 W 46th St, 14th Floor

Eligibility — multiple paths

- Equity Membership Candidate (EMC) program — work at participating theaters, accumulate weeks (currently 25 weeks of work), and you become eligible
- Open Access — in 2021 Equity opened membership to anyone who can verify professional theater work, regardless of contract type. Check current rules; this changed how a lot of younger actors join
- Sister-union eligibility — one year of membership in an affiliated union plus principal contract work

Joining costs (verify current)

Initiation fee plus first dues. Check actorsequity.org for current amounts. Equity dues are lower than SAG-AFTRA on the year-over-year basis but the initiation fee is real.

What you get

- EPAs and ECCs — required-by-contract auditions for all Equity productions. Even when the show is essentially cast, the office must see Equity actors
- Minimum salaries by contract tier — LORT, Off-Broadway, Production Contract, etc. each have their own scales
- Health insurance and pension on a similar accumulated-earnings basis
- Workrules — rehearsal limits, hours, contract protections
- Equity-only auditions — many Broadway and major regional theaters cast almost exclusively from Equity

THE EMC YEARS — A REALISTIC PATH

The most common honest theater path: work at small regional and Off-Off-Broadway theaters as non-union, accumulate EMC weeks at participating houses, build credits, then convert to full Equity when the math (or your audition opportunities) makes sense. You don't need to convert the moment you're eligible. Many EMCs stay EMC for years to keep flexibility.

FI-CORE — RARELY THE RIGHT MOVE

"Financial Core" is a status that lets you work both union and non-union by paying a portion of dues but giving up voting rights and other member benefits. It's legal under labor law but contentious

within the unions. Going Fi-Core can damage relationships with members and reps. Most working actors never need it. If you're considering it, talk to an experienced rep first.

OTHER UNIONS YOU MAY ENCOUNTER

- AGMA (American Guild of Musical Artists) — opera, ballet, classical performers
- AGVA (American Guild of Variety Artists) — variety/cabaret/circus performers
- SDC (Stage Directors and Choreographers) — for directing/choreography
- WGA (Writers Guild of America) — if you also write

THE NYC SAG-AFTRA OFFICE — PRACTICAL

1900 Broadway (Lincoln Square area). Holds member orientations, financial-core counseling, and the foundation's programs. The Foundation runs free or low-cost programs for members (more in the free-resources guide). If you're a member, log in to the SAG-AFTRA app to track your earnings, dues, and pension/health hours.

THE AEA NYC OFFICE — PRACTICAL

165 W 46th Street, 14th Floor. The Audition Center is here. This is where EPAs and ECCs happen. Members can book rehearsal rooms. The Equity Audition Centre app shows the schedule and lets you sign up for the day's calls.

Joining a union is one of the most consequential decisions in an actor's career. Take a free counseling call with the union before you make the move — both SAG-AFTRA and Equity offer this. Talk to working members. Don't take advice from anyone with a financial stake in your decision.
