



FILE 09 · THE MONEY

Survival Jobs & Money.

Flexible NYC work that pays the rent without giving up the audition day. Hourly ranges, trade-offs, and the financial discipline that lets you stay in the game.

NEPA·PRO TALENT

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Pay the rent without giving up the work.

Every working New York actor you admire had a survival job at some point — most still do. The trick is finding work that pays NYC rent, leaves your daytime free for auditions, and doesn't physically or emotionally wreck you. Below: the categories actors actually use, with honest pay ranges and trade-offs.

FOOD & HOSPITALITY

Restaurant serving / bartending

Pay: \$25 - \$80+/hour with tips at strong NYC restaurants. Senior bartenders at high-volume bars can clear \$100+/hour on a busy night.

Schedule: evenings and weekends, leaves daytime free.

Trade-off: physical, late nights, hard on auditions the next morning. Best if you can bartend (higher pay) and find a four-shift week that gives you three full days off.

Catering

Pay: \$20 - \$35/hour, often with tips. NYC has dozens of catering companies that specifically hire actors and dancers (Great Performances, Restaurant Associates, Olivier Cheng, etc.). Pickup-shift model — you take what fits your schedule.

Schedule: on-demand, very flexible. You can decline shifts.

Trade-off: physical, irregular hours, no benefits. But unmatched flexibility.

Coffee shops & cafes

Pay: typically minimum wage plus tips (\$18 - \$25/hour effective). Less than serving but easier work and earlier shifts.

Schedule: mornings; can leave afternoons open.

Trade-off: wages are tighter; works better as a supplement than a main income.

FREELANCE & CREATIVE

Brand ambassador / promotional work

Pay: \$25 - \$50+/hour for brand activations, trade-show staffing, samples programs.

Schedule: per-event, very flexible.

Trade-off: inconsistent volume; some weeks dry. NYC agencies that hire: TalentHQ, Hello Promo, AtomicNYC, GMR Marketing — sign up with several.

Voice-over / narration freelance

Pay: highly variable. Small commercial reads, \$200 - \$1,000. National spots, much higher.

Audiobooks, \$100 - \$250 PFH (per finished hour, the industry standard) for working narrators. Build a

home setup, list yourself on Voices.com / Voice123, and pursue agency representation when ready.

Stand-in / photo double work

Pay: SAG-AFTRA scale (\$200-300/day) for union; non-union usually less. Match a lead's height, build, and skin tone for camera/lighting setups.

Trade-off: long days on set; specific look required.

Background / extras work

Pay: \$150-200/day non-union, scale plus for SAG-AFTRA. NYC has steady volume on shows that shoot here (LAW & ORDER, BLUE BLOODS, FBI franchise, multiple streamer shows).

Trade-off: 12+ hour days, not glamorous. But you're on professional sets, you can earn SAG-AFTRA vouchers, and you sometimes get bumped to featured.

KNOWLEDGE / WHITE-COLLAR FLEXIBLE

Tutoring

Pay: \$50 - \$200+/hour. Test prep (SAT, ACT, GRE, MCAT) is the highest-paying. Big agencies: Noodle Pros, Bespoke Education, A-List, MyGuru, Wyzant for individual freelance.

Schedule: very flexible; usually after-school and weekends.

Trade-off: you need credentials; top agencies want elite-college grads. Wyzant and similar marketplaces are more accessible.

Babysitting / nannying

Pay: \$25 - \$40+/hour for babysitting; full-time nannying \$25 - \$35/hour with benefits in NYC.

Schedule: highly flexible if babysitting; less so for full-time nannying.

Trade-off: physically and emotionally demanding; great families recommend you forever.

Personal training / yoga / fitness

Pay: \$50 - \$150/hour. Requires certification (NASM, ACE, RYT-200 for yoga).

Schedule: flexible; you build your own client base.

Trade-off: physically demanding; voice can take a hit if you're shouting through classes daily. Many actors find this synergistic with audition fitness.

Virtual assistant / freelance admin

Pay: \$25 - \$60/hour. Remote, flexible, can be done from anywhere.

Schedule: very flexible; client-dependent.

Trade-off: requires you to actually be reliable and organized; isn't passive.

Copywriting / editing freelance

Pay: \$40 - \$150+/hour for established writers. Junior content work, \$25 - \$50/hour.

Schedule: deadline-driven; remote.

Trade-off: takes time to build a portfolio.

GIG / ON-DEMAND

Dog walking

Pay: \$20 – \$30 per walk (30 min). NYC apps: Rover, Wag. Build a private client base for higher pay (private clients pay \$25 – \$40 a walk).

Schedule: mid-day flexibility. The dog-walking lunch hour and evening pickups are the heaviest demand.

Trade-off: weather, physical, stairs. Actors love it because you walk and run lines simultaneously.

Bike delivery / messenger / rideshare

Pay: \$15 – \$30/hour effective for bike delivery (DoorDash, Uber Eats, Grubhub); rideshare similar with car-related costs deducted.

Schedule: entirely on-demand.

Trade-off: volatile pay, weather, NYC traffic, car wear-and-tear. Not most actors' first choice but works for some.

TaskRabbit / handyperson / moving

Pay: \$30 – \$80/hour depending on task and skill. Setup-heavy first (background checks, profile building); pays well once active.

Trade-off: physical work; client volatility.

FOCUS GROUPS & MARKET RESEARCH

Pay: \$75 – \$300+ per session, occasionally higher for medical or financial-services research.

Schedule: per-session, often single-day.

Trade-off: infrequent and screening-dependent. Sign up with NYC market research recruiters: Schlesinger Group, Murray Hill National, Fieldwork, Adler Weiner, Focus Pointe Global.

Acting note: Don't lie on the screening surveys to qualify. They will check, and you'll get permanently blacklisted from the recruiter's system.

THE FINANCIAL PRINCIPLES

- Have at least two income streams. One job that goes away in NYC will not break you if you have a second
- Pay quarterly taxes. 1099 income means you owe self-employment tax. Set aside 25 – 30% of every freelance check. The IRS does not care that you're an actor
- Track your expenses obsessively. Headshots, classes, mileage to auditions, union dues, agent fees — all tax deductible. See File 13 for the full list
- Have an audition fund. When a great opportunity calls and you need to fly to LA next week, you need cash on hand, not credit card debt
- Don't take a survival job that kills your voice or your face. Hot, smoke-filled bars destroy voices over time. Dish-pit shifts wreck hands. Pick survival work that protects the instrument

“The actors I see make it are the ones who can pay rent without panic. Panic in survival jobs becomes panic in audition rooms.” — long-time NYC casting director

