

# Life through a lens

It is worth researching what the content of a course is, whether you get a showreel and what agents and channels are actually looking for, writes expert **Kathryn Wolfe**

With so much training on offer, it can be difficult to choose the most effective route. Presenting courses vary from one day to a week to a year, some include a showreel, some don't, and the reel may be raw footage or a glossy, edited DVD. But does a course have to include a showreel to be worthwhile and what content do you really need?

Before you start your search for training, identify the techniques and qualities a successful TV presenter should possess. Obviously performance skills are crucial – a good voice, clear diction, awareness of posture, relaxation and breathing techniques, and the ability to talk to an audience. These are basic tools which actors should be familiar with. Look for a course which is taught by people with TV directing or presenting backgrounds, who will give you honest feedback on your delivery. Check if the tutors record and play back your work with constructive criticism – the best way to learn is by watching yourself back. Ask if you will get the

chance to review your work and to analyse and assess what is working. Being self-critical helps you to progress.

You will need to learn the technical side of TV presenting, such as looking at the lens, talking to time, using in-ear talk-back, reading autocue, handling props, interviewing techniques, walking and talking, ad-libbing and working on location and in multi-camera studios. These skills can be taught relatively quickly, but you will need to practice. Look for a course which can offer you at least some of these technical facilities. If there are several people per course, you will each have less on-camera time, but on a longer course that may not matter. Sometimes it can be useful to have a larger class to learn from others and see how they approach the exercises before you have a go.

TV presenting is more than looking good and reading autocue. To make yourself as employable as possible, you will need to develop a journalistic brain. This does not necessarily mean

taking a journalism course, although that is incredibly useful, but you should be able to research information, assimilate it, tease out the most important points and communicate them to the viewer. Common presenter tasks are to script links, prepare interview questions, shape material on the spur of the moment and make sense when you do not have a script. Journalistic skills can be taught, but not overnight. Find out which presenter training courses give you practice and feedback on scripting, interviewing and creating content.

Check with agents and channels and see what showreels they really want. Many would prefer to see potential in a presenter than a 'factory'-style reel. Val Horton, casting agent at New Faces, favours a self-made reel featuring a piece to camera and an interview. Five's children's programming department suggests a one to two-minute video, including talking straight to camera. Watch out for some showreel courses that include an 'interview' set-up, consisting of

the presenter asking questions and nodding, with no interviewee. What does that tell you about the presenter's interview technique or their ability to react to interviewee's answers?

If a course includes a showreel, ask how many people are shooting a reel on the same day. There may be a trade-off between the numbers on the course, your on-screen time, the amount of takes you are allowed and keeping script content unique.

Some intensive courses try to squeeze all the above training and a showreel into one or two days, leaving you little time to find your feet. The kind of training that pays off is that which gives you the skills to evaluate your performance yourself, so you can continue to improve even after you have left the course and entered the industry.

*Kathryn Wolfe is a senior lecturer in Media Performance at the University of Bedfordshire. She has extensive TV directing experience at BBC and ITV, and has directed dozens of established TV presenters, including Chris Tarrant, Danny Baker, Penny Smith, Nick Ross, Selina Scott, Paul Ross, Justin Fletcher and Hermione Cockburn. In 2004, Kathryn set up Pukka Presenting to train presenters, coaching hundreds and launching countless careers. [www.pukkapresenting.co.uk](http://www.pukkapresenting.co.uk)*

## Ebooks

### The Stage Guide to TV Presenting

As part of our ongoing commitment to providing practical and up to the minute career advice, we are pleased to announce the publication of *The Stage Guide to TV Presenting* later this year.

Like its companions in our popular backstage ebook series, this publication – which will be available for instant download – will offer a unique insight not only for beginners considering entering this area of work, but also for performers from other backgrounds who may be considering adding presentation skills to their portfolio.

Edited by *The Stage's* career advisor John Byrne, an experienced broadcaster in his own right, this guide will draw on the input of a wide range of industry experts to provide advice on training, showreels, agents, career development and many other important factors which are vital in helping aspiring presenters stand out from the crowd, in what is a growing, but competitive market. [www.thestage.co.uk/ebooks](http://www.thestage.co.uk/ebooks)

## Course of action

So you want to train as a TV presenter?

First, be aware of one key distinction. Some potentially quite useful introductory training is offered within degree courses (usually with 'media' in the title) at universities or higher education institutions. If you enrol on one of these three-year courses, it will be state-subsidised, like any other degree programme, and you will be eligible for the usual student loans to pay for your fee contribution and accommodation.

The other main source of training is through the private sector. These are often short courses – sometimes just a single day – and you have to pay for them yourself, unless you are lucky enough to have an employer willing to invest in your training.

There are more than 70 degree courses running at universities which have 'television' – or something closely akin to it, such as 'communication' – in the title. Use the course search facility on the UCAS website to find these ([www.ucas.ac.uk](http://www.ucas.ac.uk)).

The BA (Hons) Media and Communication at Birmingham City University, to pick an example at random, is a three-year, full-time course which claims that 5% of its graduates have gone on to work in TV presentation and 20% have gone into related fields such as journalism or editing. Capital Radio and Channel 4 presenter Margherita Taylor graduated from this course in 1993 and remembers the course fondly – especially the work placements, which she found very useful.

"I loved the mixture of theory and practice," she says, adding that: "It can take time to get the job you really want. Be open to all opportunities, even if they are not in your plans." ([www.bcu.ac.uk](http://www.bcu.ac.uk))

Fairly typical of training in the private sector is Presenters Inc, which runs a two-day course to give a maximum of six beginners a bit of inside knowledge about what real TV filming in a studio environment is like. Alternatively, for those with a little experience, the company offers a hands-on, tailor-made training day for two people on location in London ([www.presentersinc.co.uk](http://www.presentersinc.co.uk)).

A number of other companies offer one to one training which doesn't come cheap, but may be what you need. Tellyfaces, for example, is directed by Rod Lucas, who worked as a network producer for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in the nineties. It offers a one-day training course, during which you create a showreel demo so that you have something to show to potential employers. The cost is £365 (no VAT) ([www.tellyfaces.com](http://www.tellyfaces.com)).

Another one-day course (£240-329, depending how much coaching you need) with one to one tuition and including making a showreel is offered by Screen Debut and includes practical work, improvisation, rehearsal, location filming and street interviews. And because it's individual, you can specify pretty much what you want – or you can opt to be taught in a pair,

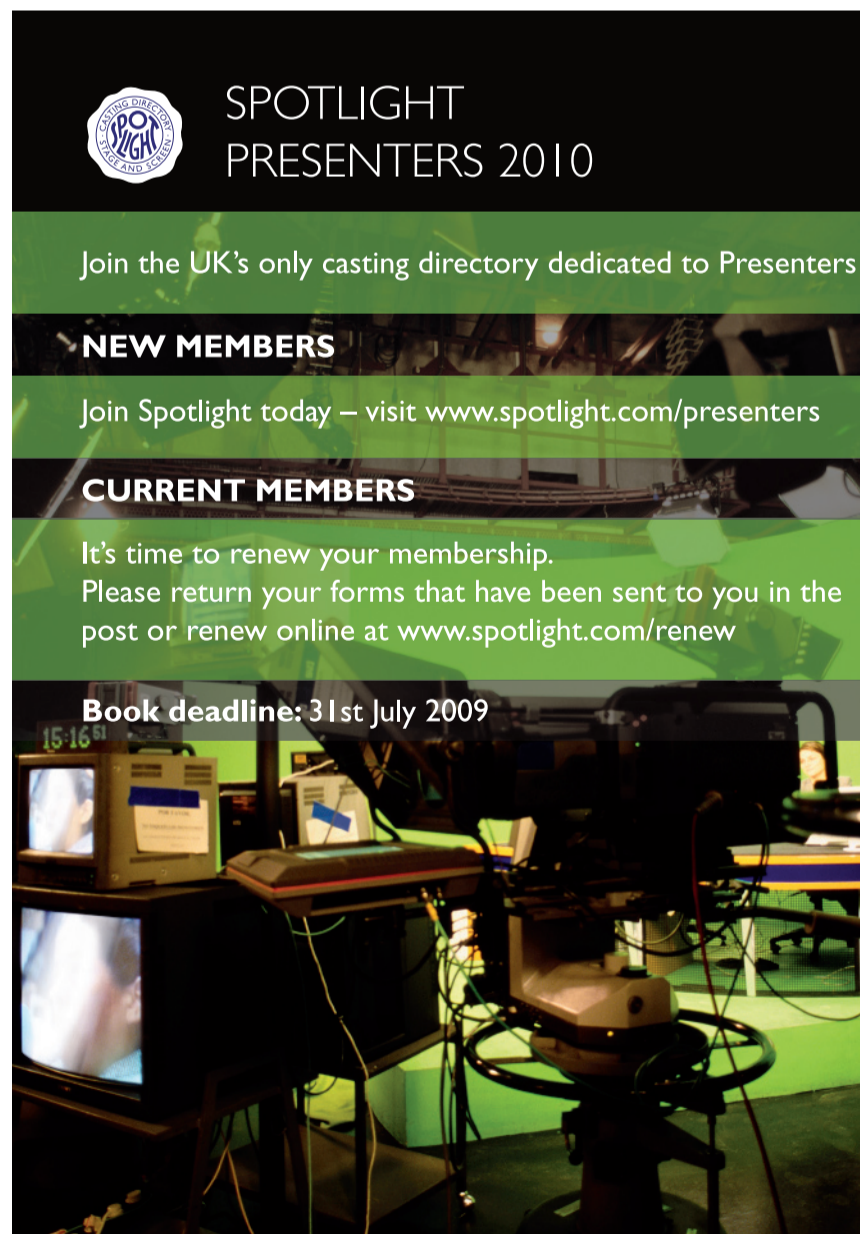
rather than one to one, which drops the cost to £190.

Some universities offer short courses too – which makes them, in effect, part of the private sector, because you have to pay the full cost. Bournemouth University runs a one-day introductory TV Presenting Workshop in its professional-standard studio and location facilities. The course costs £190, with reductions for current or former Bournemouth University students (course reference PSCTVP, <http://onlineservices.bournemouth.ac.uk>).

Or, if you want something more sustained, but part-time and fairly short, there are courses such as the TV Presenter Foundation Diploma at Hampton Court Studios Limited. For £395, you get class tuition and plenty of practical work, including reading from autocue, studio interviews, pieces to camera and street interviews, spread across four weekends ([www.hchstudios.co.uk](http://www.hchstudios.co.uk)).

And if you have finished a degree and want to hone skills further with academic underpinning, you might consider an MA as part of your TV presenter training. There are, literally, hundreds of TV presenter course available in all shapes and sizes, and I have looked at only a tiny sample here. Do your research, ask questions and think carefully about what you want to achieve to find the right training.

*Susan Elkin, education and training editor. See [thestage.co.uk/education](http://thestage.co.uk/education) for more information and advice*



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