

Animation



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Animators can work in various branches of the media, from feature films to websites or computer games. While a very talented few become animators by building on an amateur interest, most start by taking an appropriate higher education course.

What is animation?

Animations are film sequences containing moving images. They may be constructed by running together thousands of separate photographed images, to convey an impression of movement. Traditionally, each image is hand drawn. Models or puppets may also be used by placing them in a set and moving them individually, photographing each movement. Sound effects, including speech, may also be incorporated into the final film.

Nowadays, animations are often produced much more quickly using specialist computer software. Images of models or drawings can be scanned and manipulated, or computer-generated images (CGI) can be used. Digital animation has developed rapidly in recent years, with lots of well-known cartoon films, such as the *Toy Story* and *The Lego Movie* series, made using advanced digital technology. CGI animation techniques are now being used for all sorts of films, from *Paddington* to *Prometheus*.

There are various types of animation techniques and styles, including:

- **2D drawn animation** - traditional hand-drawn pictures (think of *The Snowman* and some of the original Disney cartoons)
- **2D computer-generated animation** - animations using computer programs
- **3D computer-generated animation (CGI)** - three-dimensional images
- **stop motion/stop frame animation** - using models or puppets - as seen in things like *Shaun the Sheep*.

Most animation production studios are very small, and many are based in London and other major cities. Studios often specialise in one of the above areas and, within that area, may focus on producing animations for a particular purpose, e.g. children's media, visual effects (VFX) for computer games or video production. Some specialisms may be extremely niche, such as producing realistic water effects in video games!

When is animation used?

In advertising

Adverts need to be attention grabbing, memorable and appealing, and animation is well suited to achieve this. In fact, advertising is a major area of employment for animators. Animated banners and sequences are commonplace on the internet, not only as adverts but also as website features. Although a few specialist advertising agencies employ in-house animators, most use the services of animation production companies or experienced freelance animators.

For entertainment

- An increasing number of animated programmes are being made for **TV**. For children, animation may be used for entertainment or to get an educational message across, while

animated shows and short films aimed at adults may have dramatic, comedic or satirical themes.

- With new digital technology, it has become easier to produce animated **short** and **feature-length** films.
- Animated content created for entertainment on **social media** may reach a different audience to TV programmes and films, and is often funded through advertising or sponsorship from supporters.
- Animation is used extensively in **computer and video games** (see the leaflet on [Games design and development](#)).
- Commercial **music videos** can be completely animated or cartoon animation mixed with straight video footage of the band or artist.
- **Title sequences** for films and programmes, and TV channel '**idents**' (short videos that identify the channel between programmes) often feature animation.

For education and training

Animated sequences often work well within the field of education and training, when sensitive or thought-provoking treatments of a subject are needed. Hair-raising or funny images help convey messages that stick in the memory.

What jobs are there?

If you look at the credits at the end of any animated film or video, you will see how many people are involved in its production. Jobs range from those concerned primarily at the development and pre-production stages, through to post-production. Roles and job titles vary depending on the area of animation (computer animation, stop motion etc, as described earlier). They include:

- the **director**, who is in overall charge, responsible for the creative planning and quality; they may be supported by an **assistant director** and the **producer** and **art director**
- the **scriptwriter**, who works alongside a **character designer** and the **actors** who provide the voice dialogues
- the **concept artist**, who interprets the script and comes up with ideas and first sketches, the **storyboard artist** who creates a sequence of illustrations to show the story, and the **layout artist** who, in CGI, converts the storyboard into photo shots, helped by the **background designer**
- **key animators** (sometimes called senior animators) develop the main characters in a production; in 2D animation, they may provide the first drawings that are filled out and completed by **assistant animators** and **inbetweeners** and, in 3D animation, work on screen to create and position the images
- **modelmakers**, who make the models or puppets for stop motion animation (you can find out more in the leaflet on [Modelmaking](#))
- the **VFX animator**, who can have an important role in adding a further dimension to the sound and imagery of the animation; you can find information on careers in this area in the leaflet on [Special and visual effects work](#)
- the **compositor**, who, at the end of the production process, brings together all the material, such as computer animation, VFX, live action, graphics etc, to create the final image
- in post-production, music and sound effects are added and editing is done by the **editor**, assisted by the **edit assistant**.

New entrants to the animation industry may be employed as **runners** or **production assistants**, who undertake a wide range of supporting tasks, but can gain useful experience and, occasionally, on-the-job training for more specialised careers in animation.

What does it take?

To be successful in the animation industry, depending on your role you may need:

- creative and artistic ability
- a high level of technical skills
- a good eye for composition, motion, perspective etc
- storytelling skills
- a flexible, adaptable approach to work
- patience and good powers of concentration
- the ability to meet deadlines
- to be able to take direction and work well with other people.

How to train as an animator

All creative animators start out with an interest in art and design, 3D effects or modelmaking. Many show design talent from an early age. To help develop your skills, it's best to take your education and training to degree level, if possible; most animators hold higher education qualifications. **Training in relevant software packages**, such as Blender or Maya, will be beneficial.

There is a range of **higher education courses** (e.g. leading to degrees, HNDs and foundation degrees) in animation, 3D animation, computer animation, animation production and related subjects. Graduates of more general art and design or computing/technical degrees may specialise in animation through postgraduate study. For pre-production artist and design roles, higher education courses in graphic design, illustration or fine art may be suitable; some degree courses combine illustration with animation.

Check the content of different courses - some are more technical, others more creative. You need to decide which sort of course best matches your interests and skills. ScreenSkills endorses a number of animation courses at various higher education institutions - see www.screenskills.com/education-training/screenskills-select.

For entry to a degree course in animation, you generally need A levels or equivalent, such as a relevant BTEC Level 3 National qualification. Progression to a degree in animation may also be from an art and design foundation course. Many courses require you to present a portfolio or showreel of your creative work, as part of the application process. **Check course entry requirements carefully with individual institutions and through www.ucas.com, as they do vary.**

***Adults:** Academic qualifications for entry to higher education courses may be relaxed for those with relevant experience, but a good portfolio of artwork or a showreel is vital.*

Apprenticeships can provide an entry route to certain roles within animation; these offer structured training with an employer. In England, there are Apprenticeships at level 4 for junior animators and Apprenticeships up to level 6/7 for those who want to train in, for example, VFX. In Wales, Apprenticeships at level 3 in creative and digital media can provide suitable training for work as an animation assistant or a runner. For more information on Apprenticeships, see the ScreenSkills website, or view:

www.apprenticeships.gov.uk
www.careerswales.gov.wales

The **NextGen Skills Academy** - www.nextgenskillsacademy.com - is backed by major employers to provide alternative training routes for young people wanting to enter games design, animation and VFX work. The Academy offers a Level 3 Diploma in games, animation and VFX skills through a network of further education colleges, and can provide information on Apprenticeships.

The **British Film Institute (BFI) Academy** offers residential specialist courses for 16- to 19-year-olds in subjects such as animation and VFX; for details see: www.bfi.org.uk/bfi-film-academy-opportunities-young-creatives.

Employers will expect you to provide practical evidence of your interest and commitment to working in animation. Gain as much relevant experience as you can through **work experience** (perhaps through a sandwich course or a residency) and developing your own **portfolio/showreel**. The ScreenSkills website has advice on how to build an animation portfolio: www.screenskills.com/careers/building-your-portfolio/build-your-animation-portfolio.

ScreenSkills operates **Trainee Finder** for those keen to get experience in the industry. For details, refer to the leaflet on *Working in the media* and see: www.screenskills.com/education-training/trainee-finder.

Prospects

British animators are amongst the world leaders. Just think of the international success of Aardman Animations based in Bristol. Despite skill shortages in some technical areas, competition for jobs is stiff, as animation is a very popular career choice. Many of the new jobs are in the creation of computer games. As the industry is global, there may be opportunities overseas.

Progression is possible from an entry-level position to more responsible, technical or creative roles. Many people working in the animation industry are self-employed, working on a freelance basis or on short-term contracts, as work becomes available with different organisations.

Some animators work as independent film makers - trying to win commissions from bodies such as TV companies, to fund the production of short films.

Pay

Rates of pay vary but are often low to start. Experienced animators might expect to earn around £25,000; successful, very experienced animators can earn £35,000+. Self-employed animators set their own rates. For those working in film and TV, BECTU - the media and entertainment union - sets recommended minimum pay rates for freelancers; see <https://bectu.org.uk/get-involved/ratecards>.

Further Information

ScreenSkills - the skills body for the screen-based industries, including animation. For career profiles and information on entry routes, training, careers events, bursaries, mentoring etc, view: www.screenskills.com

Animation UK - the website has a directory of member animation production studios and advice on finding work: www.animationuk.org

Discover! Creative Careers - to explore careers in the creative industries, including in animation, and to find out about events, work experience etc, view:

<http://discovercreative.careers>

The Knowledge - an online directory of some of the companies providing services in the film and TV production industries. To find animation production companies, enter 'animation' in the search box at:

www.theknowledgeonline.com

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