

# Illustrator

## Job Description

An illustrator uses creativity and the technical skills of painting and drawing to communicate ideas, sensations, facts, feelings and emotions. Illustrators work to commercial briefs to inform, persuade or entertain a client's intended audience, adjusting the mood and style of images accordingly.

Work is predominantly freelance. Possible markets include:

- editorial (magazines, newspapers and comics);
- books;
- advertising (posters, story boards, press);
- fashion (forecasting);
- merchandising (greetings cards, calendars, t-shirts, ceramics, etc.);
- corporate work (brochures, catalogues);
- multimedia (video games, websites, animation).

Specialisms include scientific, technical and medical illustration. In these fields, illustrators create illustrations for text and reference books that may show new products, processes or techniques.

## Typical Work Activities

Work activities typically involve:

- liaising with clients, editors and authors in order to understand and interpret their business needs;
- building an understanding of what styles are appropriate;
- negotiating pricing and deadlines;
- analysing a brief's specification and the text to be illustrated as well as researching sources;
- thinking creatively and using imagination to produce new ideas;
- creating images and designs by using the traditional hand skills of drawing and painting, alongside other techniques, to meet design briefs;
- using computer-aided design (CAD) packages to scan images and change size, colours and other elements;
- providing roughs for approval;
- redefining a brief through further consultation with the client to include new ideas or text as appropriate;
- running the business, when working freelance;
- speculatively approaching potential commissioners to seek new sources of work;
- working to a brief within a set timescale, often to tight deadlines;
- creating original pieces for self-promotion;
- researching appropriate galleries to find suitable venues to exhibit work.

## Work Conditions

- Most illustrators work freelance, so salary figures are hard to estimate. Advice about rates of pay can be found on the Association of Illustrators (AOI) ([www.theaoi.com](http://www.theaoi.com)) website. The a-n The Artists Information Company ([www.a-n.co.uk](http://www.a-n.co.uk)) website has an interactive artist's toolkit which helps artists calculate how to price their work in order to generate a reasonable income. It is suggested that it is sensible for artists to aim at a similar income to teachers.
- Sample rates of pay for editorial work are: half a page: £250 - £600; one page: £350 - £800; cover: £500 - £3,000. Rates vary depending on the type of newspaper or magazine and whether the work is in black and white or colour. Publishing rates are £300 - £2,000 for a book cover.
- Advertising can pay well: £1,500 - £3,500 for a full page in a magazine; £2,000 - £10,000 for a billboard poster.
- In merchandising, a flat rate may be paid (e.g. £150 - £500 for greetings cards) with royalty payments being agreed in addition (all rates of pay collected Dec 08 from the AOI Report: Illustration Fees and Standards of Pricing 2007, which is based on 2005 data).
- Design studios occasionally employ illustrators on a permanent basis, but the majority of illustrators are freelance, working from home or a small studio and negotiating sales via an agent or directly with clients.
- Freelance work, usually paid per illustration, tends to be more lucrative than working for an employer, but agents may take up to 40% commission. Some illustrators also sell work through 'stock houses' who may take a substantial commission.
- Luck plays a part. Some illustrators soon discover a market for their talents and so receive plentiful commissions; others may have many rejections before securing work. Workloads may fluctuate, from none to too much.
- Pay may be low and irregular, according to the state of the market. Earnings during the first years may be patchy and many illustrators take part-time jobs.
- There are currently more women than men working in this area.
- Jobs are available in most areas but proximity to a city is an advantage, especially for illustrators without an agent.
- Keeping to deadlines is imperative to maintain a good reputation, and this may sometimes result in working long hours during weekends or evenings to deliver a brief.
- There will sometimes be travel within a working day to meet clients, but absence from home at night and overseas work or travel are uncommon.

## Entry Requirements

Although this area of work is open to all graduates and Diplomates, the following subjects may increase your chances:

- graphic design/illustration;
- fine art/visual art;
- fashion;
- printmaking.

Entry without a degree, HND or foundation degree is commonly possible.

A pre-entry postgraduate qualification is not needed, but a diploma or MA in Graphic Design or Illustration may be advantageous, especially for illustrators who are interested in teaching as well.

Qualifications and subject of study are far less important than a talent for illustration, promotional skills, and the ideas contained in your portfolio. Prospective illustrators who do not have published work should create a portfolio that demonstrates they can work to a brief. This might include designs for a book cover, a set of illustrations for a well-known book, a series of greetings cards, CD covers, or illustrations for a car manual.

In order to embark on a career as an illustrator you need:

- the ability to market your skills;
- professionalism;
- imagination;
- knowledge of computer-aided design (CAD) techniques and printing processes, including computer graphics;
- research skills.

The ability to produce work in multimedia format is becoming increasingly important.

In order to secure commissions, you will need to promote your work to art directors, publishing editors and design studio managers. Organise an appointment to show your (targeted) portfolio or picture library to clients you think would be likely to use your type of work and leave a business card or send samples of your work in advance. Identify potential clients using the Writers and Artists Yearbook ([www.writersandartists.co.uk](http://www.writersandartists.co.uk)), Willings Press Guide, The Directory of UK and Irish Book Publishers, Directory of Publishing: United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, and the Advertisers Annual: The Blue Book.

Many illustrators use agents to secure commissions. They will look at portfolios, advise clients and try to secure work for you, although this will be at a cost (up to 40% of your fee). Lists of agents are available from the Association of Illustrators (AOI) ([www.theaoi.com](http://www.theaoi.com)).

Investigate and take advantage of business start-up schemes to set up a studio and establish sound working practices. Join the AOI or a local group. Ensure you have sound business and management skills.

In an increasingly global market, a web presence is becoming an essential tool for illustrators. A number of sites host searchable databases (the AOI online database is popular) providing links to websites for potential commissioners to search, although you should research the management/marketing of each site carefully before registering for these services. It may also be possible to advertise your work directly via directories such as The Creative Handbook ([www.chb.com](http://www.chb.com)) and Images.

It is illegal for employers to discriminate against candidates on the grounds of age, gender, race, disability, sexual orientation or religious faith. For more information on equality and diversity in the job market, see Handling Discrimination ([www.prospects.ac.uk/links/discrimination](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/discrimination)).

## Training

Students with a good honours degree may continue to postgraduate degree level before starting full-time work. Courses last from one to three years and may be followed part-time while you are developing freelance work. Most postgraduate degrees include a series of studio-based modules, self-directed learning and individual research, as well as professional practice. Studying at postgraduate level may offer the opportunity to specialise in areas such as children's book illustration, sequential design and illustration, or medical illustration.

Evening classes, competitions and workshops, such as those offered by the D&AD ([www.dandad.org](http://www.dandad.org)), are a great way of keeping portfolios up to date and varied; they can also generate extra exposure for applicants.

The Association of Illustrators (AOI) ([www.theaoi.com](http://www.theaoi.com)) offers one-day professional practice courses which provide practical advice and information on survival skills for new illustrators. One-to-one portfolio advice is also available for a small fee to AOI members. This can be invaluable in identifying potential clients and targeting portfolios effectively.

It is useful to consider part-time training to update skills in using computer-aided design (CAD) packages, such as Illustrator, QuarkXPress, Freehand and Adobe Photoshop. This may help generate more work. A good knowledge of digital media and web marketing skills will be helpful.

Business skills are as important as creative skills. Short self-employment courses offered at local careers services and enterprise agencies can be useful for understanding all aspects of business and marketing.

## Career Development

On average, it takes illustrators a good five or six years to build a reputation and become established in the industry.

Setting up as a freelance illustrator is risky, and many people decide to build up contacts and clients gradually, whilst doing other paid work.

Career progression is relatively limited. The majority of illustrators will remain freelance illustrators and may enjoy a highly successful career. Some will successfully combine illustration with teaching. Others may progress from freelance illustrator to art director with a firm of publishers, and a small number may work as agents for other illustrators.

The Association of Illustrators (AOI) ([www.theaoi.com](http://www.theaoi.com)) is staffed by practising illustrators and provides invaluable help and advice to its members, including advice on career development issues. Other membership benefits include a regular newsletter, the opportunity to attend seminars on useful issues, help with portfolios and advice on invoicing and pricing. A directory of members is published with examples of their work, together with an excellent online discussion board covering all areas of practice.

## Typical Employers

Most illustrators work as self-employed freelance artists, although trend forecasting (fashion) and computer games companies do provide a limited number of opportunities for full-time employment.

Illustrators need to market their work to potential employers. The market base will depend on the type of work an illustrator does, and illustrators may be employed in a number of different areas. Freelancers are increasingly using illustrator agents to generate and market their work.

Advertising agencies and design consultancies can provide very lucrative work. In the past, it was common for them to only commission well-established illustrators, but there is now an increasing trend towards finding fresh, new ideas amongst new graduates.

Corporate communications remains a viable market for illustration, although it is a competitive area and there is a slight trend (reflecting the current economic environment) towards firms using in-house design solutions to keep costs low, rather than turning to freelancers.

Another significant market is the children's book industry, which can be especially lucrative and satisfying for those with a talent for writing as well as illustrating. Anyone interested in this area of work should check [childrensillustrators.com](http://childrensillustrators.com) ([www.childrensillustrators.com/content.cgi/index](http://www.childrensillustrators.com/content.cgi/index)) for exclusive interviews with industry professionals worldwide.

Other markets include film posters, billboards, greetings cards, packaging, fine art posters, animated commercials, animated TV shows and short films, and government information services (including health and education).

## Sources of Vacancies

- Creative Review ([www.creativereview.co.uk](http://www.creativereview.co.uk));
- Mad ([www.mad.co.uk](http://www.mad.co.uk));
- Creative Opportunities ([www.arts.ac.uk/student/careers/creative-opportunities.htm](http://www.arts.ac.uk/student/careers/creative-opportunities.htm));
- a-n Magazine ([www.a-n.co.uk](http://www.a-n.co.uk));
- Artshole ([www.artshole.co.uk](http://www.artshole.co.uk));
- childrensillustrators.com ([www.childrensillustrators.com/content.cgi/index](http://www.childrensillustrators.com/content.cgi/index));
- The Creative Handbook ([www.chb.com](http://www.chb.com));
- D&AD ([www.dandad.org](http://www.dandad.org));
- Children's Writers and Artists Yearbook;
- Medical Artists' Association of Great Britain (MAA) ([www.maa.org.uk](http://www.maa.org.uk)) careers literature;
- Writers and Artists Yearbook ([www.writersandartists.co.uk](http://www.writersandartists.co.uk));
- The Guardian ([www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk)).

Recruitment agencies include Careers in Design ([www.careersindesign.com](http://www.careersindesign.com)), Profiles Creative ([www.profilescreative.com/](http://www.profilescreative.com/)) and Creativepool ([www.creativepool.co.uk/](http://www.creativepool.co.uk/)).

## Related Occupations

- Animator
- Fashion illustrator
- Games developer
- Graphic designer
- Medical illustrator
- Multimedia specialist
- Picture researcher/editor
- Printmaker

## Information Sources

### Bibliography

AGCAS and Graduate Prospects products are available from higher education careers services.

#### AGCAS Publications

[Advertising, Marketing and PR Sector](#), AGCAS Sector Briefing

[Creative Arts Sector](#), AGCAS Sector Briefing

[Handling Discrimination](#), AGCAS Information Booklet

[Options with Combined Arts](#), AGCAS Options Series

[Options with Fine Art](#), AGCAS Options Series

[Self-employment](#), AGCAS Information Booklet

#### Other Publications

*Advertisers Annual: The Blue Book*, [Hollis Publishing Ltd](#), Annual

*a-n Magazine*, AN Publications, Monthly

*Children's Writers and Artists Yearbook*, [A & C Black](#), Annual

*The Creative Handbook*, Centaur Media plc, Annual

*Creative Review*, Centaur Media plc, Monthly

*Directory of Publishing: United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland*, [The Continuum International Publishing Group](#), Annual

*The Directory of UK and Irish Book Publishers*, [The Booksellers Association of the United Kingdom and Ireland Ltd \(BA\)](#), Annual

*The Guardian*, Guardian Newspapers Ltd, Daily

*Images*, [Association of Illustrators \(AOI\)](#), Annual

*Rights: The Illustrator's Guide to Professional Practice*, Association of Illustrators (AOI), 2004

*Survive: The Illustrator's Guide to a Professional Career*, Association of Illustrators (AOI)

*Willings Press Guide*, [Willings Press Guide](#), Annual

*Writers and Artists Yearbook*, A & C Black, Annual

### Websites

Artshole, [www.artshole.co.uk](http://www.artshole.co.uk)

Careers in Design, [www.careersindesign.com](http://www.careersindesign.com)

childrensillustrators.com, [www.childrensillustrators.com/content.cgi/index](http://www.childrensillustrators.com/content.cgi/index)

Creative Opportunities, [www.arts.ac.uk/student/careers/creative-opportunities.htm](http://www.arts.ac.uk/student/careers/creative-opportunities.htm)

Creativepool, [www.creativepool.co.uk/](http://www.creativepool.co.uk/)

D&AD Talentpool, [talentpool.dandad.co.uk](http://talentpool.dandad.co.uk)

Imagine Animation, [www.imagineanimation.net](http://www.imagineanimation.net)

Mad, [www.mad.co.uk](http://www.mad.co.uk)

Profiles Creative, [www.profilescreative.com/](http://www.profilescreative.com/)

Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI), [www.scbwi.org/index.htm](http://www.scbwi.org/index.htm)

Stock Illustration Source (SIS), [www.images.com/](http://www.images.com/)

theispot.com, [www.theispot.com/](http://www.theispot.com/)

The Visual Creators' Index, [www.vci-uk.com/](http://www.vci-uk.com/)

### Addresses

a-n The Artists Information Company, First Floor, 7–15 Pink Lane, Newcastle Upon Tyne NE1 5DW Tel: 0191 241 8000  
URL: [www.a-n.co.uk](http://www.a-n.co.uk)

Association of Illustrators (AOI), 2nd Floor Back Building, 150 Curtain Road, London EC2A 3AR Tel: 020 7613 4328  
URL: [www.theaoi.com](http://www.theaoi.com)

D&AD, 9 Graphite Square, Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5EE Tel: 020 7840 1111 URL: [www.dandad.org](http://www.dandad.org)

International Animated Film Association (ASIFA - Association Internationale du Film d'Animation), UK Group, 94 Norton Gardens, Norbury, London SW16 4TA URL: [www.asifa.net](http://www.asifa.net)

Medical Artists' Association of Great Britain (MAA), Medical Illustration UK Ltd, Charing Cross Hospital, London W6 8RF  
Tel: 020 88467165 URL: [www.maa.org.uk/](http://www.maa.org.uk/)