

Animator

Your reel gets you hired, not your diploma. Great pay in a small number of cities, and the work comes in waves.

TYPICAL PAY

\$102,030

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$59k to \$177k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

2 to 4 years

after high school

DEMAND

Limited

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

No

anyone can do it

WHERE YOU WORK

Animation and visual effects studios, game studios, advertising...

How you get there

- 1 High school** Grades 9 to 12
Draw constantly, take art and film classes, and start animating. Free tools mean you can make finished work at 15.
- 2 Learn the craft** 2 to 4 years
A four-year degree, a two-year program, or a focused online school. What matters is the feedback you get and the work you finish.
- 3 Build a demo reel** Ongoing
Under two minutes, best shot first, only your strongest work. One weak shot sinks the whole reel.
- 4 Internship or first contract** 3 to 12 months
Studios hire from internships, student film festivals and online portfolios. Los Angeles, Vancouver and Atlanta have the most work.
- 5 Specialize** Years 2 to 5
Character animation, effects, rigging, lighting or motion graphics. Depth pays better than being broadly okay at everything.

Pros and cons

- + You get paid to make things people actually watch
- + No license, no gatekeeping exam, talent is visible
- + Median pay well above most creative fields
- Hiring rises and falls with studio spending, and layoffs between projects are common
- The best-paying jobs are in expensive cities
- Long crunch periods before a delivery date

Optional boosts

Character animation. Rigging and technical animation. Visual effects. Motion graphics.

Good to know

Animators have had a union since 1952

The Animation Guild, Local 839 of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), has represented animation artists, writers and technicians since 1952. It is one reason studio ani...

A feature film is about 130,000 frames

Film runs at 24 frames a second. A 90-minute movie is therefore roughly 130,000 individual images, every one of them checked by somebody.

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Special Effects Artists and Animators (27-1014.00)
The Animation Guild, Local 839
California Institute of the Arts

Numbers checked September 2026. Pay figures are typical full-time annual amounts in United States dollars, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics wage data and published pay scales. They vary by state, employer and experience. Tuition is for in-state students at public schools unless the card says otherwise. Sources, links and the click-through version: <https://career.help/us/careers/animator>



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