

Illustrator

Draw for a living: books, games, magazines, packaging, anything that needs a picture doing a job.

TYPICAL PAY

\$55,490

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$32k to \$144k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

up to 4 years

after high school

DEMAND

Limited

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

No

anyone can do it

WHERE YOU WORK

Home studios, publishers, game and animation studios, freelance

How you get there

- 1 High school** Grades 9 to 12
Draw constantly and keep the work. Art, design and any digital media class. Start building a portfolio now, not in your final year.
- 2 Training, in some form** 0 to 4 years
A four-year illustration degree, a two-year community college art program, an intensive atelier, or self-teaching with online courses. All four produce working illustrators.
- 3 Build a body of work**
15 to 20 finished pieces aimed at the kind of client you want. A portfolio full of unrelated personal drawings does not get hired.
- 4 Get your first paid jobs** 1 to 2 years
Small publications, local businesses, book covers for indie authors, art director directories and social posting. Low pay, real credits.
- 5 Specialize** Ongoing
Children's books, editorial, concept art, comics, medical, surface pattern. Illustrators who are known for one thing get called for that thing.

Pros and cons

- + You can start with no degree and no debt if you are disciplined
- + Work from anywhere, for clients anywhere
- + You own your copyright and can keep selling the same image
- The federal profile rates the outlook as below average with employment expected to decline
- Income is uneven and nobody pays you to be sick
- Image generators have wiped out much of the cheap end of the market

Optional boosts

Concept art for games and film. Character design. 3D modeling. Storyboarding.

Good to know

There is a museum just for illustration

The Society of Illustrators in New York, founded around 1901 and now celebrating 125 years, runs a museum on East 63rd Street. In 2025 alone it held 11 exhibitions and over 100 programs and drew nearly 53...

Illustration is defined by purpose, not by medium

One of the top illustration schools in the country describes the field as being about what an image is for, not what it is made with. Paint, photography, film, code and 3D all count if the picture does the job.

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Fine Artists, Including Painters, Sculptors, and Illustrators (27-1013.00)

Society of Illustrators

Rhode Island School of Design: Illustration

United States Copyright Office

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/illustrator>



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