HOW TO BECOME AN ANIMATOR

Your Guide for Evaluating Animation Jobs and Schools

ANIMATIONMENTOR.COM
The Online Animation School ®

How to Become an Animator

Your guide for evaluating animation jobs and animation schools

By Kris Larson

About the Author: Kris Larson was a senior marketing executive and hiring manager in the entertainment industry for many years. She currently works with Animation Mentor to develop eBooks and articles about the animation industry.

Learn Character Animation from Professional Animators Who Are Working at Major Studios

If you want to be a character animator, you'll need to know more than just animation tips and tricks. Bobby Beck, Shawn Kelly, and Carlos Baena cofounded the online character animation school in 2005 because many aspiring animators weren't learning the art behind animation. Animation Mentor teaches you the art behind animation under the guidance of professional animators who are currently working at leading studios. Our approach also prepares you with the skills and experience to succeed in a studio environment. At the end of the program, you graduate with a killer demo reel that's your resume for a job and connections to jobs at film studios and video game companies.

If you want to learn more about Animation Mentor, check us out. We can teach you everything you need to know to create a great demo reel and land a job in 18 months. We want to help you reach your dreams of becoming an animator.

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LETTER FROM
ANIMATIONMENTOR.COM FOUNDERS

Dear Aspiring Animator,

If you're reading this eBook, that means you're interested in becoming an animator, the coolest job in the world! We've been animators for a while now, working at Pixar Animation Studios and Industrial Light & Magic (ILM). We've fulfilled our dreams of becoming animators and want to help you fulfill your dreams too. This is why we created Animation Mentor. We wanted to share what we know about character animation with you so you can achieve your dreams. Our total enrollment is 900 students and growing, and we've seen our graduates go on to exciting careers.

We believe the keys to a successful animation career can be found in "The Three P's: Practice, Perseverance and Personality." We cannot give you any of the Three P's – you must bring these to the table on your own in order to become the best animator you can be. What's unique about Animation Mentor is that we provide you with unparalleled animation training and support so you learn animation and graduate with an awesome demo reel. Our 18-month animation program teaches you everything that we know about character animation.

We hope you enjoy our eBook on How to Become an Animator! This eBook is a guide to help you evaluate animation jobs and schools to find the best fit for your interests and talents.

Wishing you the best of luck in your animation journey!

AnimationMentor.com School Founders

Bobby Beck　　　　　　**Shawn Kelly**　　　　　　**Carlos Baena**

TESTIMONIALS

Check out what Animation Mentor students and graduates have to say about Animation Mentor's online program.

"Animation Mentor is a very professional school, but you feel like you're part of a big family. The staff makes you feel at ease the minute you talk with them about your goals in character animation. The mentors are hand-picked from the finest of studios. I recommend this school to anyone who is passionate about animation — and you will not regret one second of it."

- Lord Ryan Santos, Animation Mentor Student

"I have been at Animation Mentor since January '08 and it has been an amazing experience. It's a very professional school that likes to keep things fun and fresh. The students, mentors and staff members are all a very supportive bunch, and enthusiasm never runs short around the campus. The mentors are an experienced and talented group of industry professionals who commit themselves to getting the best out of you. It's a thorough program which is a step above the rest. Highly recommended for those wishing to pursue animation."

- Shane Richards, Animation Mentor Graduate

"It's an amazing school. I went from knowing nothing about animation to being someone that can actually make a character breathe and feel real. The school is very well organized and the staff and mentors work hard to deliver the best."

- Bruno Andrade, Animation Mentor Student

"I enrolled into Animation Mentor having no prior computer or art background almost two years ago. Since then I have learned the foundations of animation and how to use 3D programs. If it weren't for their great mentors, students and curriculum, I don't think it would've been possible for me to achieve my dream of being an animator. I think anyone who wants to learn to animate or sharpen their skills should strongly consider taking their courses. As many of their alumni will tell you, it would be well worth it!!"

- Miles Milton, Animation Mentor Student

"Animation Mentor is an awesome school. It changed my life in a way that I never expected. They really know the stuff that they are teaching. You can notice passion and willingness to help the students all over the place. They are also constantly looking for a way to make things better and stronger. I absolutely recommend Animation Mentor to anyone considering getting a quality education in animation."

- David Martinez, Animation Mentor Student

"What can I say...just the best learning experience I've ever had."

-Jure Prek, Animation Mentor Graduate

Quotes throughout are from professional animators who responded to this survey.
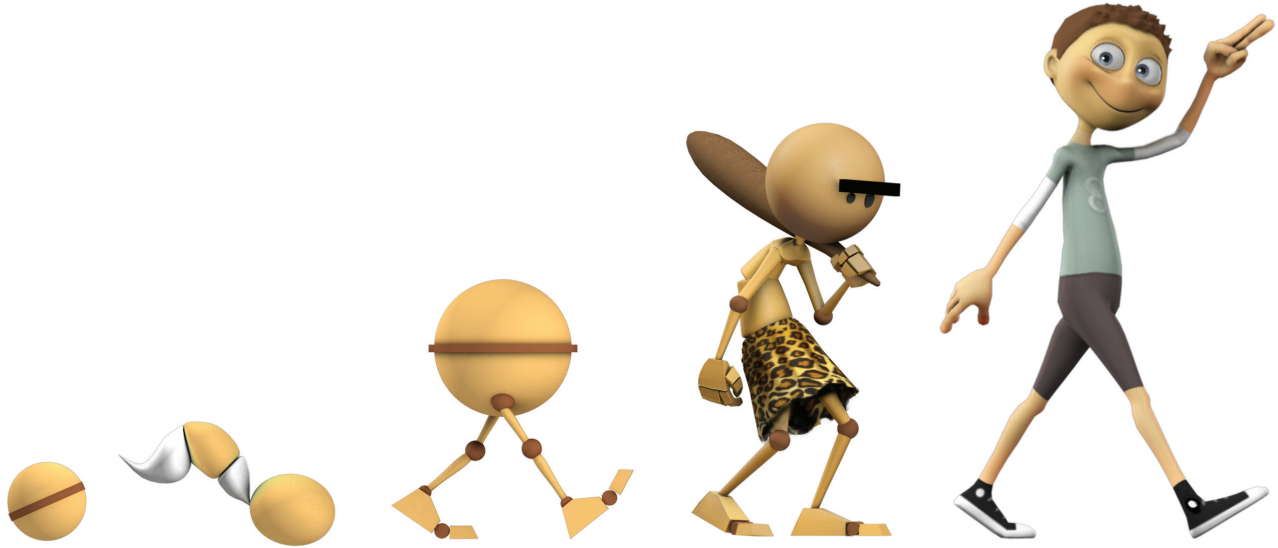
Other information from this survey was previously published as a

"Special Report: Behind the Characters"

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TIPS AND TRICKS FOR GETTING THE INFORMATION
YOU NEED TO SUCCEED

Step 1: Understand the types of jobs available in the animation industry and what skills are necessary to get them. Find the type of job that is the best match for your talent and interests.

Step 2: Clarify your personal and professional goals. What types of projects would you like to be working on over the next few years? Are you more interested in developing your artistic skills or technical skills? What type of work would give you the most satisfaction?

Step 3: Research schools and interview them about their curriculum, their teachers, their students, the work that they create, and what type of placement assistance they provide to students looking for jobs. You should also find out how much individual attention you will be getting from instructors, and the school's job placement rate.

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FIND THE TYPE OF ANIMATION
YOU WANT TO DO

There are a wide variety of jobs that require animation skills. These range from working in special effects on motion pictures, television and advertising, to doing medical illustration animations or 3D fly-throughs for architectural firms and product designers. Animation Mentor specializes in training people who want to do character animation, which is the art of bringing animated characters to life in animated feature films, TV shows and video games. In addition to character animation, other jobs in this industry include creating storyboards, building rigs, rendering and lighting scenes, illustrating backgrounds, creating hair and clothing, creating models and doing 2D or stop-motion animation.

> " **You can offer your ideas and thoughts to the world.**
> **You can make people feel better and smile and even cry with your work.**
> **I think that being able to touch people's hearts is the most**
> **fantastic thing about animation!** "

According to AP Benson, a Management Consulting Agency, animation straddles three strong and rapidly developing sectors:

1. Electronic Entertainment (Computer Gaming)

2. Broadcast/Film Industry

3. Professional Visualization and Simulation

Many jobs require both creative and technical skills, but some are exclusively creative and others are exclusively technical. Some people specialize in the art of animation, while others choose to become technical directors.

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Character animation, for example, focuses exclusively on making a character act. The job relies on the animator's creativity to create an acting performance and bring a character to life through movement and expressions. On the other hand, building rigs is almost exclusively a technically oriented job that requires the ability to create algorithms and handle complex programming.

In professional visualization and simulation, you may be doing things like architectural renderings for interior designs or landscaping for amusement parks and arenas. Another area of simulation is in medical animations that show how a pharmaceutical interacts with the body's circulatory system, or demonstrates surgical techniques. Another avenue is machinery and industrial design. Animation is used to show how all the gears and levers inside machinery work. Animators are also used in law enforcement for crime scene reconstruction to show investigators and juries how an event might have happened.

For any of these types of jobs, you will need to have detailed knowledge about the industry you want to work in and specialized training to develop the specific skill sets required for those roles.

Production work usually involves building, rigging and texturing models as well as animating characters, and creating and lighting the final scenes. Rendering is used to output animation sequences that are ready for editing and compositing.

Below is a brief look at some of the job titles and job descriptions you might encounter in a typical production type of environment in the animation world.

- **2D Animators** use drawing, composition, and perspective to create proportion, line of action, structure, and basic anatomy, while working in areas as varied as animation, character design, clean-up, doping, modeling, slugging, and storyboarding.

- **3D Animators** use software tools and rigs to accomplish many of the same things 2D animators do.

- **Character Animators** create an acting performance and bring a character to life through movement and expressions, regardless of medium

- **Character FX (hair/cloth/fur) artists** are responsible for the design of character effects such as cloth and fur simulations. They develop tools to enhance the pipeline. A knowledge of Maya, rigging tools and surface modeling techniques is helpful.

- **Lighting supervisors** create the lighting look, processes and techniques necessary to portray the art director's vision of the movie. They recommend lighting pipelines, tools and procedures for CG production.

- **Matte painters** design environments based on the story and script. They are painters and artists who can conceptualize and visualize ideas including complex backgrounds, landscapes and environments. They use tools like Photoshop, Maya and Renderman.

- **Modelers** create 3D models of characters and settings based on preliminary graphics.

- **Renderers** manage the "render farm," the group of machines that actually render the 3D models into working animation.

- **Roto artists** work to embed an animated character into a live-action scene and/or enhance the sense of depth (such as putting a character behind a tree).

- **Storyboard artists** interpret scripts into images that best convey the story. They plan and coordinate images from thumbnails for planning shots to final storyboards that visually demonstrate how the story will develop.

Other job titles include:

- Animation Director
- Animator
- Art Director
- CG Supervisor
- Character Designer
- Cloth Simulation Artist
- Compositor
- Concept Artist
- Creative Director
- Effects Designer
- Environment Designer
- Fur/Feathers FX Artist

- Layout Artists
- Layout Technical Director (TD)
- Modeling Supervisor
- Modeling TD
- Pre-Vis Artist
- Producer
- Production Assistant
- Rigging Supervisor
- Rigging TD
- Roto Artist
- Shading TD
- Shading/Texture Supervisor

- Texture Artist
- Video Game Animator
- Video Game Artist
- Video Game Designer
- Video Game Engineer
- Video Game Producer
- Video Game Programmer
- Video Game Technical Director
- Visual Effects Supervisor
- Water FX Artist

The best way to get information about specific skills and requirements for various types of animation jobs is to keep an eye on job listings. Most spell out the requirements in great detail along with any specialized training or experience that might be necessary. You can find job listings on Animation World Network's job posting section at http://jobs.awn.com/home/index.cfm?site_id=500. You can also find jobs on Creativeheads.net and on CG Society's job section: http://jobs.cgsociety.org/. Last, but not least, all the studios and game development companies post job listings on their websites. For specialized jobs in the medical, law enforcement or architectural industries, you will need to do some targeted keyword searches.

"The creative freedom is inspiring, enlightening and makes working as an animator that much more enjoyable. "

CLARIFY YOUR GOALS

When planning your future, it's a good idea to think about what it is you like and dislike about certain jobs before you spend a lot of time and effort trying to get one. You are about to invest your time and money in an education that will launch you into a career that you hope to enjoy. Now is the time to think about what you want to achieve in the next few years.

Most people have many types of goals, including professional, personal, financial, health and fitness and lifestyle.

Make sure that whatever career you choose will support and accommodate all of these areas of your life.

One good way to do this is to find people who are doing the types of jobs you are interested in, and read about them or interview them. Read books written by animators, go to seminars where you can ask questions, research them on forums and blogs and see what they have to say about what they do. If possible, find someone with the exact job title in the type of company or studio you want to work in and see if they will give you 10-15 minutes of their time for an informational interview. You can ask them specifically what they do and how they occupy their day in order to see if the reality of a particular job measures up to your expectations.
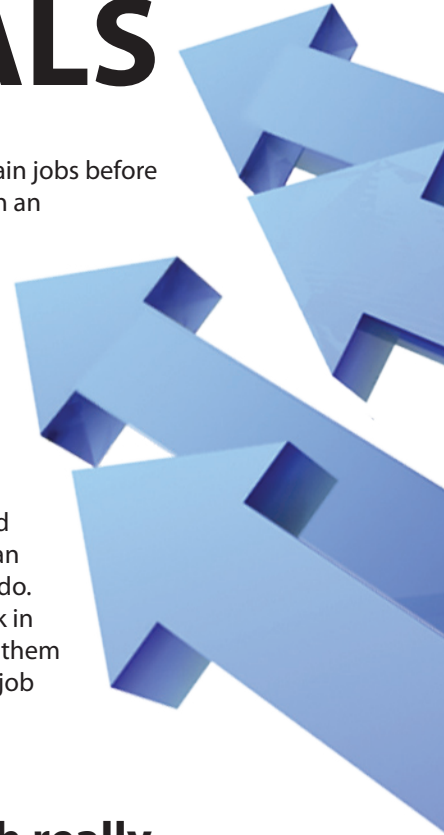
> **" The best thing about animation is working with really great, highly intelligent, fun and creative people. "**

It's always good to write down your goals and refine them as you gather more information and experience, and get clearer about what it is you want.

According to almost every goal-setting guru out there, writing down your goals gives you a much higher chance of achieving them.

A 1979 Harvard MBA program survey asked students, "Have you set clear, written goals for your future and made plans to accomplish them?" Only 3% of the graduates had written goals and plans; 13% had goals, but they were not in writing; and 84% had no specific goals. Ten years later, the members of the class were interviewed again, and the finding showed the 13% of the class who had goals were earning, on average, twice as much as the 84% who had no goals at all. And what about the 3% who had clear, written goals? They were earning, on average, 10 times as much as the other 97% put together.

Not all goals have to be about making money. They could also be about learning new skills, creating great art, or running a marathon. What goals have in common is a vision of what you want to be, do, or have in the future.

> **" I like working on interesting and exciting projects, and having the opportunity to learn and expand my skill as a designer/animator from colleagues. "**

LOOK AT WHERE YOU ARE NOW

Are you clear about exactly what type of animation you want to specialize in, or are you still exploring different areas of animation, art and design?

If you know exactly what you want to do, then find the school that offers that specific type of training.

If you are still not sure of the area you want to work in, perhaps a general animation university or art college that lets you sample a variety of art and animation classes would be a better step at this point in your education. In fact, this is often a great way to get a basic education that you can then expand on with specialized studies once you develop a focus and a passion for a specific area of expertise within the animation field.

SOME OTHER THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

What experience and education do you already have? Do you have a portfolio or demo reel? Some schools want to see your work – or know that you have some education and interest in an area – before they will admit you to their program. Can you show them work you've done in high school through hobbies or work experience? If you are just starting, you may want to consider working on a project or two on your own, or through a local adult education class to beef up your skills and also build your confidence in this area.

Are you willing to leave home to pursue your education? If not, an online school may be your best bet.

What is your financial situation? Will you need to work while attending school? Will the school you attend allow you the flexibility to do this while you study?
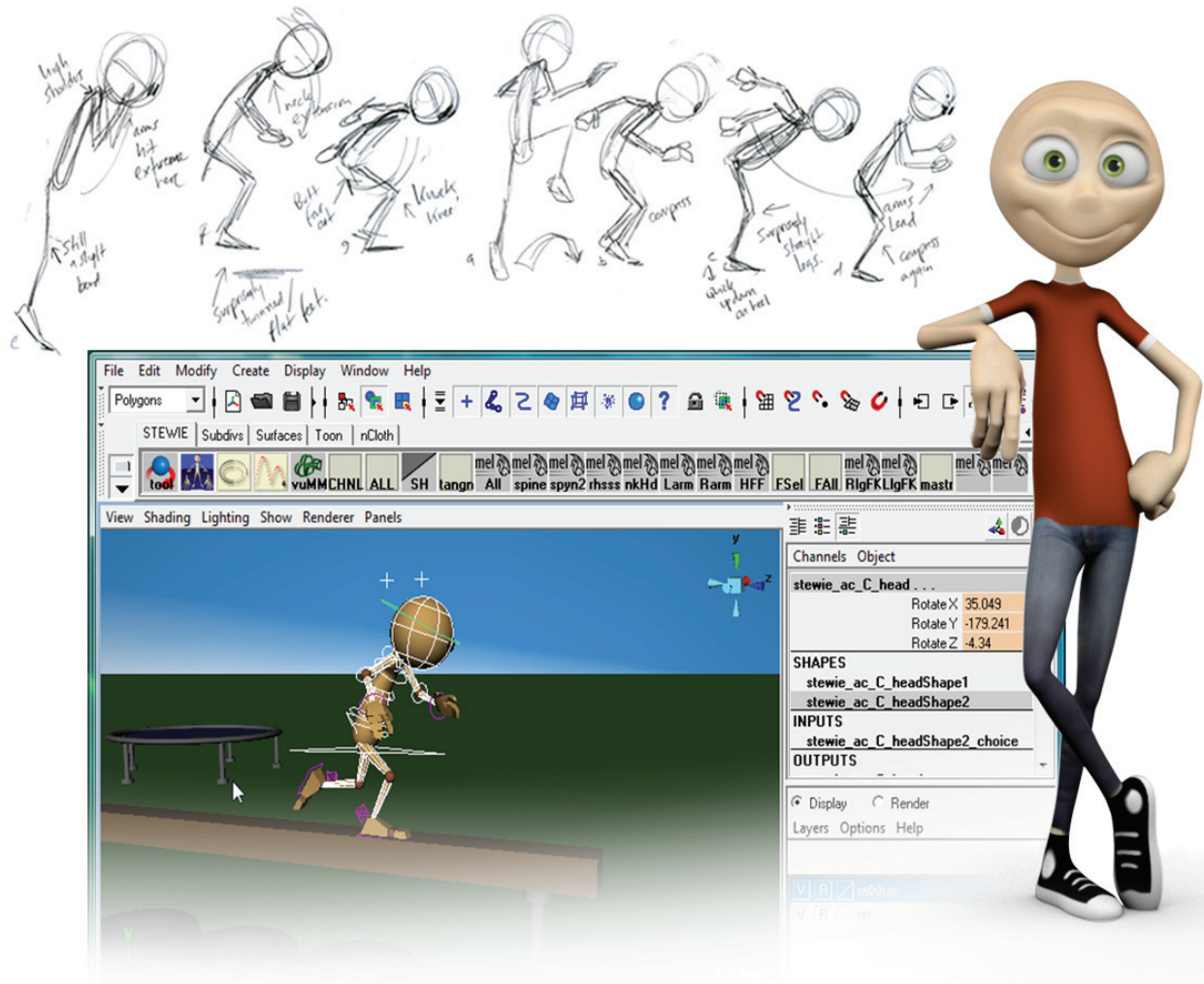
CREATE A PLAN

Now that you know what you want, and you understand where you are on your journey, you can create a map that will get you to your goals. The next step in the process is to create an action plan of specific steps you need to move closer to reaching your dreams.

Commit to taking action every day to move closer to your goals. Soon you will find that simply writing goals and action items, taking action, and keeping track of your results will help you focus on what you want, and you'll achieve more in your life.

You'll better understand your priorities and see which activities and pursuits are helping you achieve your goals and which ones are irrelevant, unimportant, or a distraction. You will also find a plan to be a source of motivation, and a way to build self-confidence as you see yourself getting closer to your goals.

RESEARCH SCHOOLS TO FIND THE
BEST FIT FOR YOU

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD ASK:

What skills does the school teach specifically?
As noted, there are many specific areas of expertise within the field of animation. Be sure the school you are considering teaches the specific type of animation skills you will need to succeed in your career choice.

### What is the school's focus?
Even within different areas of animation, you will find a variety of skill sets. Find the school that has the same focus you want to specialize in. For example, if you would like to work on animated features for a studio, you would want to specialize in character animation, and select a school such as Animation Mentor that specifically specializes in that art.

How good is the curriculum?
One way to judge a curriculum is to look at the student work and see where their graduates are working. If their graduates are working in the types of jobs you are interested in, and the student demo reel rocks, then you know this is the school for you.

Who teaches the courses – do they have real-world experience?
Make sure you are learning from professionals who are actually working in the type of environment you want to be working in. They will teach you the tricks of the trade and give you the skills you need to succeed on the job.
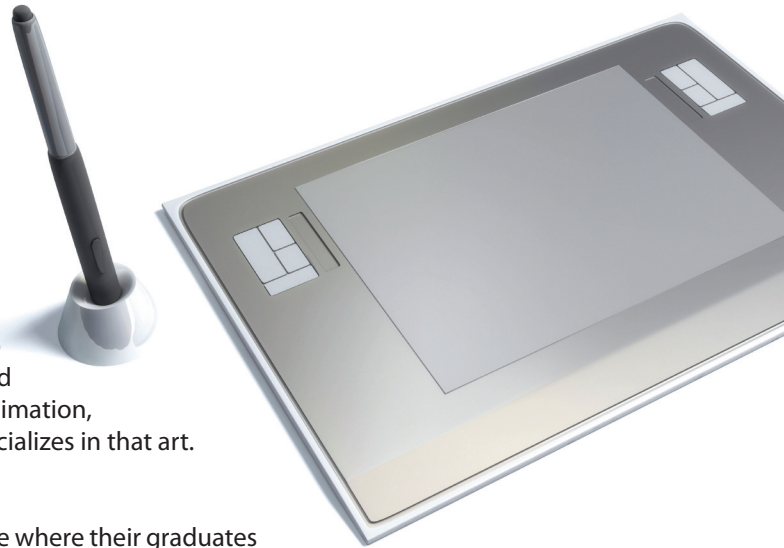
What is the learning/teaching model like?
Think about what the learning experience will be like. If you choose a brick and mortar college, you will have to physically attend class to get the live lecture that's only presented once. If you are sick or unable to get to class, you will miss it. You will also not be able to watch it over and over again until you thoroughly understand it. If you are attending an online school that uses video lecture and live Q&A technologies, you will be able to view lectures as often as you like and have one-on-one interactions with your instructors on a regular basis. In addition, look at the type of individual attention you get on your work. Will your work be regularly critiqued so that you can learn to improve it? Often in brick and mortar schools, the instructor only has time to critique one or two students per week. At Animation Mentor, each student gets an individual critique from a professional animator every week.

How long does it take to complete the program?

If you are looking for a degree and a general education, this may not be an issue for you. If you are looking for specific training that will help you land a job in the industry, you may want to complete the training in less than four years. Consider what type of program will best fit your lifestyle and finances.

Does the school help you find a job?

What type of job placement assistance does the school provide? Do big name recruiters visit the school and place graduates? Where do their graduates work and what are the typical entry-level jobs they are placed in? What is the school's job placement rate? These are all questions you should consider before making a final decision.

Will you graduate with a good demo reel?

The No. 1 requirement for landing a job in the animation industry is a good demo reel. This is a short video of all your best work. It can be as short as 15-30 seconds and should show only your absolute best work and the specific type of animation work you want to specialize in. For more specific information about what recruiters look for in a demo reel, please see Carlos Baena's Webinar and article on the subject. Regardless of the school you choose, be sure that the main focus of your studies is the creation of a strong animation-specific demo reel that will help you land a job.

> " When your work makes people laugh
> or smile or just gives them a few moments
> of uninterrupted joy, that makes it all worthwhile. "

ABOUT
ANIMATION MENTOR

Animation Mentor was founded with the sole purpose of providing the most fulfilling learning experience on the planet to students who want to learn character animation and work as animators on feature films.

MENTOR MODEL AND SOCIAL NETWORKING

In addition to teaching character animation skills, Animation Mentor believes the best way to learn is from a mentor who is working on the types of projects you want to work on. Their instructors are all working animators who work at studios like Pixar Animation Studios, Industrial Light & Magic (ILM), DreamWorks, Disney, and a variety of entertainment and gaming studios. In addition, the online campus is designed for maximum exposure to mentors and other students so that attendees can network, make friends, share work, and collaborate on ideas.

We conducted a survey in which professional animators said having a mentor is one of the best ways to grow as an animator. Our survey also recommends making industry connections, and gaining the skills to be production-ready so that you can go to work in the industry. Choosing the right animation school is an important investment in a student's future that can pay big dividends in the long run.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Given the high cost of education in today's market and the current economic climate, it's no accident that Animation Mentor places a high priority on keeping tuition costs affordable, and works to place students in jobs that will help launch themselves into successful animation careers. Animation Mentor's job placement rate is 78% worldwide.

Our online program connects students from around the world with top professional animators, with an emphasis on learning how to work in a production environment. Our goal was to develop an education that would make people job-ready in only 18 months at a cost they could pay back in just a year or two.

We think the onerous debt many college graduates are facing is overwhelming. Our goal is to get our graduates earning money and getting free of debt as quickly as possible.

WORKING WITH STUDIOS

Animation Mentor works with all the major studios, game companies, and independent studios to help place graduates into jobs. Because we spend a lot of time networking with recruiters and hiring departments, we've learned a few things about what they are looking for.

The big studios want to hire specialists who are excellent at one specific skill. They don't want generalists who are just "okay" at a lot of different things. Because they have teams of artists working on projects, each member of the team must be outstanding in his or her particular discipline such as animation, lighting, rigging, or texturing, for example. When applying to a large studio, be clear about your specialty or they won't consider you.

Independent studios, smaller studios and game companies who don't have large teams of people are more likely to seek someone who is more of a generalist and who has a varied skill set. For example, instead of just doing character animation all day, an employee may also need to be able to do rendering and lighting, too. This is usually a great fit for someone who is new and starting out in the industry and wants to explore a couple of different areas of expertise.

Studios and game developers alike are also looking for well-rounded people who have an interest and knowledge of the world around them. They want someone who can not only animate, but who can also bring something extra to the character or story. They like to see people who can draw references from movies, art, literature and current events, and who are informed, and well-read.

> **"The great thing about being an animator is that you never stop learning! "**
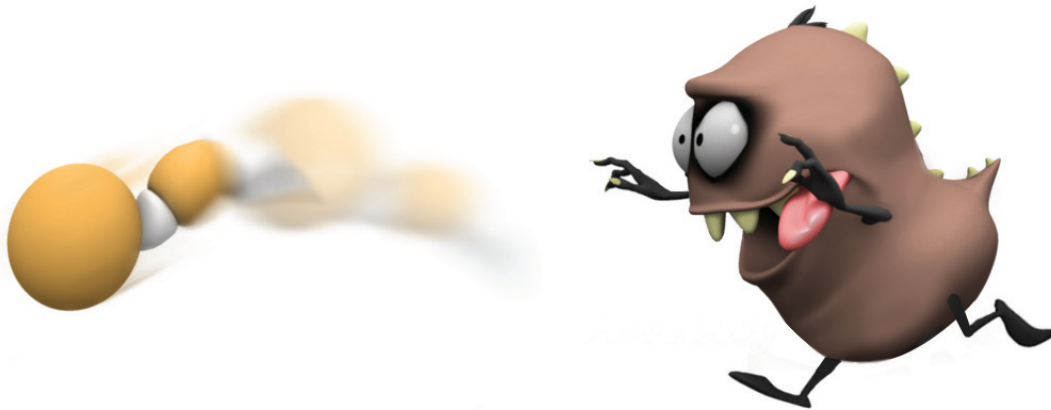
LEARNING RESOURCES

There are many great publications and websites available to learn more about animation and the animation industry.

AnimationMentor.com has a Resources section on its website with links to its favorite sites, along with industry reports and webinars for those exploring a future career in animation.

Some other great sites include:

- **www.11secondclub.com**
- **www.3dtotal.com**
- **www.animationarena.com**
- **www.animationmagazine.net**
- **www.animationpodcast.com**
- **www.animationtipsandtricks.com**
- **www.awn.com**
- **www.blendernation.com**
- **www.bobbyboomblogspot.com**
- **www.carlosbaena.com**
- **www.cartoonbrew.com**
- **www.cgsociety.org**
- **www.cgw.com**
- **www.digitalcontentproducer.com**
- **www.jasonryananimation.com**
- **www.postmagazine.com**
- **www.vfxworld.com**

SUGGESTED READING

ANIMATION CAREER REFERENCES

Animation Tips and Tricks Volume I by Shawn Kelly

Animation Tips ad Tricks, Volume II by Animation Mentor Founders and Mentors Shawn Kelly, Carlos Baena, Keith Sintay, Aaron Gilman and Wayne Gilbert

Cracking Animation: The Aardman Book of 3D Animation by Peter Lord and Brian Sibley

How to Get a Job in Computer Animation by Ed Harriss

GENERAL ANIMATION

Ray Harryhausen: An Animated Life by Ray Harryhausen and Tony Dalton

Animation: From Script to Screen by Shamus Culhane*

Cartoon Animation (The Collector's Series) by Preston Blair*

Cartooning: Animation 1 with Preston Blair (HT26) by Preston Blair*

Cartooning: Animation 2 with Preston Blair (HT190) by Preston Blair*

Character Animation Crash Course! by Eric Goldberg

Drawn to Life: 20 Golden Years of Disney Master Classes, Volumes I and II: The Walt Stanchfield Lecture by Walt Stanchfield, edited by Don Hahn

Inspired 3D Short Film Production by Pepe Valencia and Jeremy Cantor*

The Animator's Survival Kit by Richard Williams*

The Complete Animation Course: The Principles, Practice, and Techniques of Successful Animation by Chris Patmore

The Illusion of Life by Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston*

Timing for Animation by Harold Whitaker and John Halas*

Treasures of Disney Animation Art by John Canemaker*

ANATOMY, DRAWING, AND BODY LANGUAGE

An Atlas of Animal Anatomy for Artists by W. Ellenberger, H. Baum, H. Dittrich and Lewis S. Brown

Atlas of Human Anatomy of the Artist by Stephen Rogers Peck

An Atlas of Anatomy for Artists by Fritz Schider

Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain by Betty Edwards*

Manwatching: A Field Guide to Human Behavior by Desmond Morris *

Simplified Drawing for Planning Animation by Wayne Gilbert*

Teach Yourself Body Language by Gordon Wainwright*

The Artist's Complete Guide to Facial Expression by Gary Faigin*

The Natural Way to Draw by Kimon Nicolaides*

REFERENCE

Animals in Motion by Eadweard Muybridge*

Facial Expressions: A Visual Reference for Artists by Mark Simon*

Heads by Alex Kayser*

The Human Figure in Motion by Eadweard Muybridge

The Male and Female Figure in Motion: 60 Classic Photographic Sequences by Eadweard Muybridge*

PERFORMANCE AND ACTING

Acting for Animators: A Complete Guide to Performance Animation by Ed Hooks*

A Practical Handbook for the Actor by Melissa Bruder, Lee Michael Cohn, Madeleine Olnek, Robert Previtio, Nathanial Pollack, Scott Zigler and David Mamet*

Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre by Keith Johnstone*

Stanislavsky in Focus by Sharon M. Carnicke*

STAGING, LIGHTING, RENDERING AND COMPOSITING

Basic TV Staging by Gerald Millerson

Digital Compositing for Film and Video, Second Edition by Steve Wright

Digital Lighting & Rendering by Jeremy Birn

Digital Texturing and Painting by Owen Demers

Film Lighting: Talks with Hollywood's Cinematographers and Gaffers by Kris Malkiewicz

Lighting for Television and Film by Gerald Millerson

The Art and Science of Digital Compositing, Second Edition by Ron Brinkmann

MODELING

Stop Staring: Facial Modeling and Animation Done Right by Jason Osipa

The Art of 3D: Computer Animation and Imaging by Isaac V. Kerlow

3D Human Modeling and Animation by Peter Ratner

MAYA

Maya Character Animation by Jae-jin Choi

Maya: Secrets of the Pros by John Kundert-Gibbs and Dariush Derakhshani

The Art of Maya by Alias Wavefront

VISUAL EFFECTS

Visual Effects in a Digital World: A Comprehensive Glossary of over 7,000 Visual Effects Terms by Karen Goulekas

Techniques of Special Effects of Cinematography by Raymond Fielding

STOP MOTION

Stop Motion: Craft Skills for Model Animation by Susannah Shaw

Stop Motion Armature Machining: A Heavily Illustrated Construction Manual by Tom Brierton

Stop Motion Puppet Sculpting: A Manual of Foam Injection, Build-Up and Finishing Techniques by Tom Brierton

Tim Burton's Nightmare Before Christmas: The Film, The Art, The Vision by Frank Thompson

FILM AND CINEMATOGRAPHY

On Directing Film by David Mamet*

The Visual Story by Bruce Block*

The Five C's of Cinematography: Motion Picture Filming Techniques by Joseph V. Mascelli*

Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting by Robert McKee*

Cinematic Storytelling: The 100 Most Powerful Film Conventions Every Filmmaker Must Know by Jennifer Van Sijll*

Cinematography: Theory and Practice: Image Making for Cinematographers, Directors, and Videographers by Blain Brown*

Film Directing Shot by Shot: Visualizing From Concept to Screen by Steve Katz*

Film Directing: Cinematic Motion, Second Edition by Steven D. Katz*

Painting with Light by John Alton*

In the Blink of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing by Walter Murch*

*Recommendations for Character Animators from the Animationmentor.com Library List