

Portfolio Essentials

Whether you are a traditional character animator or a character animator who uses the computer (remember, it's just a tool) you will need a portfolio. All companies whether they are feature film producers or video game producers want the same basic stuff. Here are guidelines to putting together a portfolio that will help you get interviews. Remember a portfolio is a sales tool, like a resume and demo reel. The purpose is to get you an interview which could lead to a job.

I often hear the following questions - "I know traditional animators need portfolios to get jobs. But do I need a portfolio if I am going to be a computer animator? And if I do, what should I put in there?"

Portfolio tips:

1. Label every piece of artwork and the portfolio case with your name, phone number and email address.
2. Limit your portfolio to 25 pages total (a sketchbook or video reel counts as one page).
3. Never send original artwork. Photocopies are fine.
4. Don't include loose artwork.

Contents:

1. Several pages of current life drawing from live subjects.
2. Sketchbooks (or mounted pages from sketchbooks) with gesture-style drawings of people and animals in motion.
3. Head drawings--both quick sketch and long poses.
4. Some samples reflecting color and design sense.
5. Some figurative drawings reflecting knowledge of lighting.
6. A few samples that display cartooning skills. Do not include copies or interpretations of classic cartoon characters. Show samples of your own cartoon creations.
7. No more than two or three samples of comic-strip, comic book or fantasy illustration.
8. Some work based on imagination.
9. If you are interested in character animation it is not necessary to include graphic, advertising, industrial, jewelry or textile design. Character design would be more relevant.

Other tips:

1. You may want to label your sketches and poses with the length of time of the pose.
2. Remember that character animation is all about acting. If you can convey an attitude in your sketches and life drawing it will stand out.
3. You don't need a huge case to showcase your work. A simple presentation book with sleeves for 8 1/2 x 11 pages is fine.
4. Make several copies of your portfolio so you can have it in circulation at more than one company at a time.
5. Include several copies of your resume in your portfolio.
6. Remember, include only your best and recent work. One time an artist nearly didn't get a job at a video game company I worked for. He had included a piece he had won awards for--back in 7th grade. The man was in his 40s. The piece belonged on the wall of his house--not in his portfolio.
7. Your portfolio is a sales tool--it should be designed to get you the job you want. Be sure that it showcases you in the best possible way. Emphasize the areas that you want to get work in. For example, if you are interested in storyboarding, include samples of storyboards.

Remember - if your resume and portfolio don't work, neither do you!

Portfolio and Demo Reel Tips

Never send your only copy to anyone. Your reel won't be returned.

Put your best material first.

Always include a résumé and breakdown.

Label your portfolio and demo reel with your name, current phone number with area code, and email address.

Include slates with your name and contact info on your reel in case your label falls off.

Put several copies of your résumé inside the first page of your portfolio and label every page in your portfolio with your name and contact info.

Your portfolio and reel should represent your recent and best work.

A portfolio should include a variety of styles.

Industry newcomers can include studio tests and should show versatility in their portfolio.

Don't wait until a convention to submit your work. At a show like SIGGRAPH employers are inundated with reels from all over the world. Submit your reel, portfolio and résumé several months before a show, so they can be viewed under the best possible conditions.

How to Research Companies via the Internet and Other Tools

The Internet can help identify potential employers, or provide research on a company interested in interviewing you. There are scores of useful websites that list animation and visual effects companies. One of the best is aidb.com. You can search the site by company name, location, or use shortcuts such as visual effects companies or animation specialty. For example, selecting “visual effects companies” gives you a list of countries. Clicking on the United Kingdom brings up a list of companies. Choose Framestore and you will see their phone number. Clicking on the Framestore name shows you a link to the company website. The jobs category on Framestore’s website indicates that they accept portfolios on DVDs and that they are always looking for runners.

Besides job openings, company websites often feature portfolio requirements. Disney’s website has information on both traditional and CG portfolio requirements. Many companies have similar submission requirements.

Researching specific companies on the Internet is easy. Some worthwhile search engines include Google and Dogpile. Just type in what you are looking for such as “Company Name” and click to search. You can search anything, including people’s names.

If a company is public, the annual shareholders report is a good source of information. Companies are also listed in a myriad of directories. Ask a reference librarian at your local library to help you in your research.

Congratulations: You Have an Interview

After weeding through a stack of résumés and portfolios and many candidates, the employer has decided he wants to meet you. Getting an interview means you are a finalist. To confirm their already positive impression of you, you must:

Do your homework. Know what the company is doing and how you can contribute to its efforts.

Make yourself irresistible. Tell them something that is not on your résumé to enhance their view of you. Give them something extra.

Avoid doing anything stupid.

On interview day, be confident, on time and don’t do anything stupid.

Before the Day of the Interview (Do Your Homework)

Brush up on information about the company and the particular position you are being interviewed for. Prepare questions to ask about the company and the job.

Decide what you want the employer to know about you. Prepare a pitch of your five most marketable skills or accomplishments.

If possible, drive to the location of your interview to find out how long it will take you to get there. Allow for traffic.

Try to determine what the dress code is at the company and dress accordingly. Make sure the outfit you plan to wear is clean, pressed and still fits.

It's Interview Day

(Confirm Their Positive Impression and Make Yourself Irresistible)

Arrive a few minutes early. Greet the receptionist or security person cordially. Employers look for how well you deal with others. Be pleasant and professional to everyone. The art director you meet with might ask the receptionist or security guard about your interactions with them. Your interview starts the moment you enter the company's grounds.

While it may be true that your life history is in your résumé and your work is in your reel and portfolio, the reason someone wants to meet with you is to learn what's not on your résumé, and answer three basic questions: Can you do the job? Will you do the job? And will you fit in? The last question is the most important and your homework and research will help you know how to convince them you are the perfect choice. If you've done your homework, you know how you can contribute to what they are doing. Prepare in advance to tell the interviewer how your skills can enhance the company's work on a specific project. Show them you are a problem solver, can take initiative and are a team player. Use "we" or "our team" when talking about group accomplishments.

Be confident and competent but not arrogant. Demonstrate a positive attitude and show enthusiasm. Be prepared to explain your work. Be honest and stick with facts.

Explain why you want to work for their company — what makes their company so special to you. Establish a connection with the company, a specific project, or the type of material they deal with.

Thank the interviewer for his or her time and leave a card with your contact information. Demo

Reels are Key to Opening Doors to Employment

What Should You Show?

Before you create your reel, assess your strengths, skills and interests. There are many different jobs for artists. Make sure your demo reel and portfolio are relevant to the job you want. If you want a job as a character animator, your reel should emphasize acting and performance, not compositing. Your demo reel should reflect the very best you can do. Keep it short — make them want to see more.

Many studios have the same basic requirements for submission: a résumé, a cover letter specifying your area of interest, a portfolio (samples of hand skills), a demo reel and a demo reel or shot breakdown.

The shot breakdown briefly describes your contribution to each shot and the tools used. Shot Breakdown Example: Shot 1: Witch Melting — animated the witch melting using Maya; created the textures using Photoshop. If you did everything on your reel, say so. Never claim anyone else's work.

Everything you submit should be labeled clearly with your name, phone number and email address. Use a font where it is easy to distinguish a numeral 1 from the lower case letter l and in a large enough typeface to be easily read (at least 10 point).

What Format is Acceptable?

Check the company's website to see what formats are acceptable. For example, Hybride, a company in Canada, will accept reels in DVD format, VHS 1/2" NTSC or PAL. Hybride does not want to receive CD-ROMs or website addresses. Most companies will not open attachments. DreamWorks will not look at jpg files or website links. Check company websites to find out what the specific demo reel and portfolio requirements are for the areas that interest you.

How are reels usually reviewed? At a group meeting, artists review many reels. This means that you must catch their attention from the start so put your best work first. The weakest part of your reel will also get their attention. If you have five years experience in the industry, work you did as a student should not be on your reel or in your portfolio.

A portfolio showing your foundation in fine art and training in aesthetics is advantageous for any aspiring CG artist.

When Should I Submit?

Companies accept submissions year round. If you submit your materials to companies at SIGGRAPH or any other conference, it may be a few months before your work is reviewed as companies get swamped with submissions during this time. It's better to submit your reel three to four months before a conference. Be patient and keep working at improving your skills. It's okay to submit new work every six months, as your skills improve.

Quick Tips

For artists, a demo reel and portfolio are more important than a résumé.

Always include a résumé and a shot breakdown with your reel. Your shot breakdown should always include your name and contact info. Your shot breakdown is a written outline that describes each shot and what you did for that segment. You could slate each shot on the reel with this information instead.

Put the very best segment first.

Remember your audience sees lots of demo reels and portfolios. Keep it moving.

Demo reels will not be returned so never send your only copy to anyone.

Don't include color bars or shrink-wrap your reel.

A label with your name and contact info (phone and email address) and a screenshot of work from your reel helps it stand out from a sea of black video boxes or generic DVD cases. Remember to label the spine of your reel and portfolio as well.

Include slates on your reel or superimpose graphics with your name and contact information in case the label falls off. A recruiter at Animal Logic in Australia once bemoaned the fact that his office had piles of fabulous reels that he couldn't bear to part with even though there was no contact information on them. He had no idea how to find those talented artists.

A portfolio of life drawing, illustration, photography (if you are interested in lighting), sculpture (if you are interested in modeling), character design or color design is a big plus. A foundation in fine

art and training in aesthetics is advantageous for any aspiring CG artist. List these skills or education and training on your resume and include samples of traditional work on the end of your reel.

Include an end slate on your reel with your name and contact info.

Your demo reel should:

Contain only your best work and be of high caliber.

Be representative of your recent work and show your skills and talent.

Be no longer than three minutes. It can be shorter. People have been hired on 15 seconds or less. It's better to be impressive than excessive so take out anything that is not top quality.

Be labeled with your name and phone number and email address.

Be a 1/2" VHS cassette in NTSC format unless the company accepts other formats. (This is the format almost all companies can deal with in the United States. If it's a PAL tape, be sure the company has a way to view it.) Everyone has a VHS machine — not everyone has a DVD, even today!

If you submit a DVD, keep the DVD menu simple to understand and easy to navigate. Test your DVD in several machines before you send it to ensure it will work.

Remember, the purpose of the résumé, portfolio and demo reel is to get you an interview with someone who can hire you. They are marketing materials — prepare them with care. Have others take a look at them and give you feedback before you send them out.

Demo Reel DOs and DON'Ts

A demo reel is a vital marketing tool for animators. The purpose of the demo reel is to get you an interview with someone who can hire you. Prepare your demo reel with care and have someone else look at it and get feedback on it before you send it out. As a recruiter, I have seen many demo reels. Here's how to make sure yours does the job--to get you that job.

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DEMO REEL DOs

Emphasize your strengths. Make sure your demo reel is relevant to the job you want. If you want a job as a character animator, don't show only compositing work on your reel. Focus on your strengths. If you are not good at modeling, get stock models and concentrate on animation.

Keep your reel short--no longer than 3 minutes. Quality is what counts, not quantity. An animator was hired at a major studio on the merits of his 15 second reel. It had only one shot--but it was incredible. Make sure yours is amazing too.

U.S. companies want VHS reels in NTSC format. Everyone knows how to run a VHS cassette player. Many people don't have the latest and greatest computer so often they are not able to view CDRoms and other media. Not everyone has a DVD player or 3/4 inch machine. VHS in NTSC format is still the preferred format for everyone.

ALWAYS include a resume and a reel breakdown/credit list with your reel. A demo reel breakdown sheet is mandatory and should clearly spell out your involvement with each piece. The breakdown sheet should include a title/description of each shot, what the applicant was responsible for, software used, and any special extenuating circumstances. However, never include "works in progress." You will be judged based on the work on your reel, not what someone might conjecture you can be capable of. A demo reel breakdown is simple with a short sentence for each shot. For example, Shot 1: Project: Wizard of Oz feature film- Modeled melting witch with Maya. Animated witch melting using Softimage. If you did everything on the reel, enclose a note stating that. If you worked on a group project, be clear about your specific role on each shot.

Always include your name, phone # and an email address on your resume, reel and reel breakdown. Include a head and tail slate with your name and phone number and email address on the reel. Make sure your tail slate is at the end of the reel or people will eject it and not see the stuff behind the end slate.

Start with your best work. If you don't impress the viewers in the beginning, they will move on to the next tape.

Customize your reel to the job and company you are applying to, if possible.

Divide your reel into sections and label them with a brief slate: "Character Animation", "Modeling", "Logos", etc.

Include life drawing or other fine art work such as sculpture, painting or photography at the tail of your reel. (strong traditional art or photography, tending towards representational styles with an excellent understanding of 3d form, perspective and quality of light and texture is a plus)

Update your reel every six months and remove old work & don't expect to get your reel back. Never send your only copy to anyone.

DEMO REEL DON'Ts

Never send masters or originals.

Don't put your best stuff last. The viewer may never get to it.

Don't do a chronological work history. We don't care how you improved.

Don't include early tests or tutorials.

Don't include mediocre work.

Don't use loud, obnoxious music or elaborate sound. Many people turn off the sound when they view reels.

Minimize erotica, satanic and violent material. It limits the companies you can submit to.

Don't include live action film without animation or computer graphics.

Don't send work in progress.

Don't ask for feedback by phone.

Fancy packaging is unnecessary.

Don't shrink wrap your reel. Color bars are not necessary. Don't do countdowns between each shot. Don't repeat shots unless you are showing a "how to" (how elements were added to the shot)--there is a rewind button on the cassette player so don't repeat. I repeat. Don't repeat.

Don't ask prospective employers to view samples or a resume on a web site or email images. Don't send them a web address if you want them to see your resume. Don't make them do the work to give you a job. If you want them to see your resume, email it to them as a message rather than a download. Better yet, fax or mail it to them.

Don't expect your reel to be returned.

Don't send the exact same reel in 6 months later. We have very good visual memories.

Demo Reels, Portfolios and Interviewing

Whether you are new to the industry or an experienced veteran, this article will give you tips on portfolios, demo reels, and interviewing, as well as how to research a company using the Internet.

Both new grads and seasoned pros seeking employment must submit work for review. Prospective employers view portfolios, reels, and résumés to determine whom they want to interview. For artists, a demo reel and portfolio are more important than a résumé. Prepare these materials carefully and get feedback before you send them out.

Contact employers before submitting your work to find out what format they accept. Some companies view demo reels only on VHS tape while others are open to portfolios on DVDs or websites. On line portfolios should load quickly, be easy to navigate and show effective visual layout.

The portfolio and demo reel shows how your mind works. Express your personality. Don't copy other people's work. Show you are creative and original.

Demo Reels

Your demo reel and portfolio should be relevant to the job you want. If you want a job as a character animator, emphasize character performance on your reel. A standout demo reel generally shows an understanding of animation basics, such as timing and weight, with strong storytelling skills.

If you are a generalist (a person who has many skills), you could design your reel to highlight different skills in different segments (i.e. modeling, lighting, effects animation). Slates work well to identify the sections. If shots you select show multiple skills, include a breakdown, which indicates

what you did on each shot. This could be written on a separate sheet or displayed as slates preceding each scene. For example: Wizard of Oz, melted witch, effects animation and compositing, used Software A and B.

Portfolios

Portfolios should include life drawing that shows expression and line style, as well as examples of the kind of work you are interested in such as conceptual design or storyboards. If you are interested in lighting, a portfolio of photography is a plus. Modeling applicants should include a portfolio of sculpture. Divide your portfolio into different sections emphasizing your various skills (i.e., character design, background design, storyboards).

Your portfolio should contain drawings that express a sense of weight, character, and attitude. Gesture drawings should communicate three-dimensional solidity, and more importantly, expressions of emotions through posture and pose. Let your animal drawings convey some personality and imagination. Why not have a rhino mow the lawn? Or a dog walk a frog? Include pieces that might make a reviewer laugh.

Do you have an expressive line? Put something to make the reviewer think, "That's a beautiful line." Expressive communicative design is key to a good portfolio.

The artwork you present in a portfolio and demo reel should express your personality. Put your best work first and show you are creative and original.

After the Interview

In the thank you letter, include any information you forgot to relay at the interview. Let the interviewer know you are open to more questions and look forward to hearing from him or her. Include your phone number and to sign the letter.

Interview Pitfalls (Avoid Doing Anything Stupid)

Don't wait until the end of the interview to make your strongest points. The first 30 seconds of the interview are the most crucial; when the interviewer decides he's going to listen to you. Use that research you've done to establish that you fit in by demonstrating your knowledge of the company or person. If you know about a project your interviewer has worked on, or that the company has done, bring it up.

Don't assume your résumé will get you the job. You have to sell your skills throughout the entire interview. Assume the interviewer hasn't read your résumé. Throughout the interview demonstrate your skills and abilities, with examples of work you've done in the past.

Don't assume the person with the best education, skills, talent or experience will get the job. A person who has a cooperative attitude, someone you want to work with day after day is the person who will be hired.

Don't assume the interviewer is an expert. It's up to you to guide the interview to effectively make your points. Clearly tell the employer the skills you will bring to the job. Be specific, detailed and concise in your answers.

Don't appear desperate. The employer will think that you want any job, not their particular job.

Don't provide a reference who says negative things about you. Choose references carefully and ask a friend to call a reference and find out if what they say is positive.

Don't denigrate former or current employers or co-workers.

Don't complain about former or current work conditions. With these tips on demo reels, portfolios, interviewing and Internet research you'll soon find a job that's a good match for your skills and abilities.

Typical questions to prepare for:

Why are you interested in working for this company?

Why are you leaving your current job?

What are your career goals and objectives?

How do you keep up with changes in the industry?

What are some of your other interests?

What was your greatest challenge?

What are you proudest of?

What is your biggest professional mistake?