# How to Succeed as a Freelance Illustrator

**If drawing for a living whilst being your own boss wouldn't look out of your place in the dreamier, happier end of your sketchbook, then read on for practical, less dream-laden steps on how to become a freelance illustrator.**

Illustrators Ana Jaks, David Doran, Emma Block, Rod Hunt, Sarah Tanat-Jones and The Association of Illustrators' (AOI) Derek Brazell explain how to start after graduating, build your portfolio and contact sheets, and what to do when you actually land that first client.

Being self-employed is not easy, loaded as it is with extra responsibility. As much as you'd like to lose yourself in your marvellous creations all hours of the day – taking a break to perhaps occasionally eat – you'll realistically have to spent time selling yourself, concocting spreadsheets and negotiating too.

But with that added pressure comes the freedom to take your career in whatever direction suits you. So, to help steer yourself through the choppy, exciting waters of the illustration world, here are some tips from people who've survived the struggle and enjoyed the successes of freelance illustration.

**Read more of our graduate series:** How to find and get your first graduate job

## How to become a freelance illustrator: Selling your work (and

## yourself)

“Above all doing great work is best advert,” says Rod Hunt. Your style will change over time and fashions, but techniques, craft and ideas are a foundation; if you’re a multi-talented illustrator who knows anything about buildings at all, you’ll understand foundations cannot be skipped.

To improve and keep improving those key skills, seek criticism, learning opportunities and advice from those more experienced. And remember that mistakes and failure are not time wasted, but time well spent.

That is all very noble, but just as important is the murky art of self-promotion. It might make you cringe, shudder and want to curl into a tight ball to avoid all of humanity, but if you don’t sell your talents and personality, you sell yourself short.

Even if you’re the greatest illustrator in the world, no one can appreciate your work if they can’t see it. So, you need a great portfolio that shows the full extent of your skill, techniques and ideas. And make sure it’s good to look at too (you are an illustrator, after all).

The internet is unavoidable and you should definitely be using it – or have a very good explanation otherwise. And there aren’t any I can think of. You are centring your career around visual communication, so why wouldn’t you be interested in social media and the teeming, simultaneously ugly and beautiful web surrounding it?

Twitter tends to best for news, Instagram best for sharing (and lusting over visuals) and Behance to show off to potential clients. If in doubt, use all – and any other platforms that you think you’ll be able to build connections on. The most unexpected contacts can be the most useful, if you just tell them what you’re doing and who you are. People

are a great resource.

Image: Rod Hunt
Websites like these can appear large and crowded, but there’s no need to be scared if you use them correctly. “Use all your available keywords, ones that a client might search for when looking for a specific artist or specialism,” say Rod. “Put up at least three images for a project and give some descriptive background text for each project. Think of each project like a case study.”

But don’t underestimate the pull of an internet base, which has your best work, contact information and a short bio. “It’s important to have a clear and concise website that is easy for a client that is to navigate – just using a blog won’t cut it,” continues Rod. “This is your main shop front so it need to look professional.

Social media is vital, thinks Sarah Tanat-Jones – but so is getting in touch with people in other, more personal ways. “It’s an effort and I quite often think that it’s almost like having a part-time job – just telling people about your work and trying to make new contacts and attract new business.

“It’s a process I’m still honing myself because I am not the biggest fan of sharing details of my life online, but people love to see what you’re up to so they can feel involved in your world.

“It takes longer that you’d think to get the results that are in your head, so you have to keep working, keep making mistakes and successes and you get better and better the more you draw.”

**Read more:** 10 best portfolio sites for artists and designers

Work is found in unexpected, weird places that are usually stumbled upon after hard searching – whether it’s asking the manager of some nightclub you like if you can design posters

for them, drowning a newspaper editor in mail or turning up to every possible networking event and then being that irritating cold-caller, dreams won't come true without hard work behind them.

If you want to stand out, sometimes it's as simple as reverting back to the old-fashioned method: prints. To a mailing list that he bought from Bikinilistsand using The AOI's Client Directories, Rod sent out a set of A5 postcards biannually and, more recently, produced a 28 page full-colour brochure of his work.

"It's an expensive exercise but it is proving to be fruitful, and just one job can pay for everything and more," he says – unsurprisingly, as Rod believes it's important to set aside money for self-promotion, budgeting up to 10% of his turnover for marketing.

Hard, dogged work is, of course, important – but work smart too.

"You need to do a thorough assessment of the industry and see where you might sit within it," says Derek Brazell, advising you look "at all the areas illustration is commissioned, from apps and book publishing to murals and fabric designs, and sending samples of your artwork to a named art director within the relevant organisation."

Emma Block thinks that the best place to find work varies from person to person – but, regardless, where you promote yourself, the content should be consistent with both your personality and your work. "My work is very personal to me," says says, "so it makes sense that I promote my work and myself simultaneously as a brand."

In the last term of her final year at Falmouth, Ana Jaks was encouraged to email potential clients, which was successful. "This didn't necessarily get me work to begin with, but it meant I was speaking to people in the industry and letting

them know, ‘this is me, I am here, lets keep talking,’” says Ana. “Luckily, one of the people I emailed was YCN and they welcomed me with open arms. They got me my first commission, which was for FT Magazine and I was flabbergasted. I did email a lot of

“Luckily, one of the people I emailed was YCN and they welcomed me with open arms,” she continues. “They got me my first commission, which was for FT Magazine and I was flabbergasted. I did email a lot of people though, and it was continuous, and it worked. Eventually.”

Social media is vital and well worth it, but never rely solely on it: “Send regular emails to clients telling them about new projects (don’t worry if they don’t reply), mail out postcards, enter competitions, be everywhere!

“The more places you can plaster your name and your imagery, the better. Be forceful and do it regularly, staying relevant is difficult and I think the promotion and marketing side of being a freelancer is very underplayed, it is so vital.”

## How to become a freelance illustrator: So, you have a client. Now what?

The need for smart, hard work doesn’t stop once you land a job. Client expectations are going to match that dazzling image you’ve tailored of yourself in your portfolio they fell for, so give them a soft landing – and don’t include any work there that you wouldn’t be happy reproducing.

Beyond the quality of your work, be a pleasant human, act professionally, deliver on time and keep to the brief.

“Every single client is different, and I don’t think you should ever expect the same thing from any one client – just

make sure you are prepared and professional enough to deal with the way that they work," says Ana.

Though there are some tricks to get into any client's good book. Sarah thinks that skills unrelated to your illustration are crucial. "I think that freelance illustrators are at their best when they are dedicated to the business side as well as image making, but it can be hard and timetabling a period of time each week to deal with professional practice can help."

After all, says Rod, "you are a business providing a service, so service the client's needs and make sure they have confidence in working with you."

And that includes the simplest of things. "I've heard tales from art directors contacting half a dozen illustrator about a job and they only ever hear back from one or two of them inside a day or two. Don't fall at the first hurdle."

Not falling at that first hurdle might be easier if you get an agent. "But remember that agents may get hundreds of submissions a week and may only take on a few new artists a year," says Rod. "So don't get disheartened if you don't get immediate success – keep them updated with your new work once or twice a year."

An agent is a bonus for now, not a necessity. Most illustrators get an agent later in their career – and it's much more important getting the right agent for you, than grabbing the first on offer.

"Agents like to know that you've some experience, although occasionally graduates will be taken on. So it's good idea to gain some understanding of the industry," says Derek.

Sarah approached her agent Handsome Frank after a couple of years of work.  "They were looking for a new artist so I was lucky that I picked the right time," she says. "I think that if you're looking for an agent it's good to ask for advice and

try to appraise your work neutrally and see it through commercial eyes, and keep persevering both with the work and the agent contact – there are so many out there to fit different types of artist."

Representation doesn't always mean an agent. Ana is represented by YCN, which is not an agency, but finds Ana work, deals with clients and takes a commission fee. Getting in touch with them after Ana exhibited at New Designers was "the best thing I ever did," says Ana. "They are so patient and understanding and will always be there if you have concerns."

For now, Ana is happy without an agent, as it gives her the freedom to grow in the industry without any external direction. "I have spoken to industry people that have said that they would be put off by an illustrator with an agent and vice versa, so to anyone considering it I wouldn't make the decision too lightly," says Ana. "I say graduate, find your feet, do it yourself for a while and then go get an agent if you want."

## How to become a freelance illustrator: Managing your finances



Image: iStock

Here comes the boring, irritatingly important bit – that is, if you want your work to get the attention it deserves (and that's a yes, right?). Whether it's spreadsheets, an account, apps or using all the help you can possibly get, everyone has a different way to keep on top of their finances, and they all share one important result: they do actually keep on top of them.

David doesn't hesitate with his advice: "Get an accountant! There's a lot to learn." After all, they are the experts and will take the pressure off. They might even save you money in the long run with shortcuts you wouldn't know about.

Most people agree on that point, though the differences come in when you should get one. Emma and Derek reckon that, when you start out, you should be able to keep up-to-date alone – and it's only when you start paying lots of tax when it gets complicated. Regardless, please don't leave filing your tax return to the last minute.

Emma uses a spreadsheet to keep track and so does Rod: “It’s vital to budget and live within your means. Save all your receipts from direct costs to your business – travel, materials, utilities, studio rent, equipment, etc, etc, and record everything,” says Rod.

Ana agrees that a spreadsheet is helpful and, since graduating, hasn’t used an accountant to help out. “I think it’s important to understand your cash flow and how it works – this is your business now, and as much as I struggle with numbers, I will deal with it,” she says. She keeps invoices in a folder, a seperate account for freelancing money and a fee in lace if the client doesn’t pay after a certain amount of time.“I keep all of my invoices in a folder and have a separate account for freelancing money, which I know a close friend of mine has too. I would also recommend having a fee put in place if a client doesn’t pay after a set amount of days, as it can take a pretty long time.”

Keeping your head above water might unfortunately mean getting a part-time job temporarily. This is clearly not ideal, but keep time for your work and your passion lit – and hopefully you’ll soon be able to shrug it off.

After graduating in illustration, Sarah took on other jobs to keep things ticking over. Until she gradually built a body of work that could sustain her, she was tired, but survived with some tips for others: “don’t give your money job your all, be strict with setting times to do the work you love in the evenings.

“It’s not easy but it’s so worth it. And it’s useful and valuable to experience that kind of pressure. It makes you more determined for illustration to be a success. I worked in offices for a good five years before going freelance and I learnt loads about working life, office politics, different skills. I actually really value that time.”

Putting time aside for the work you love is the most important advice, and Ana agrees. Working “full-time, non-stop and manically” to pay the rent, Ana never had time to draw and was miserable. But then she started balancing her time better, allowing herself even an entire extra day to draw and contacting people saying ‘I’m still here and ready to work’.

“It is *so* important to remain focused, determined, and have that drive to push through, and you do go through dry periods where you wonder “is there any point?” and then you check your inbox and you have an email and start drawing and it all feels alright again,” says Ana.

“I am very fortunate to have found a job where I can swap between working full and part time, so when the commissions drop I can pick up more hours,” she continues. “It takes a few long months to get used to a routine but it will be fine, remember you will be fine.”

Most importantly, living within your means requires you charge your clients the right rate: so you neither undervalue yourself nor scare them off with insane prices. The right number comes with practice and can be disorientating when you start out.

“We tend to underestimate the cost of work when we start out,” says Sarah. “I would just say that this is a tough one but it’s good to be brave and ask for what you deserve. Different countries have different price bands too – experience is the biggest factor here.”

Derek puts to rest a common misconception: illustration fees are not based on how long you should take to create it, but “ how the image is going to be used (e.g. T-shirt,book cover), what geographic area it will be used in (e.g. UK only, or EU), and for how long the client is able to use it (e.g. 1 year, 3 years).”

Thankfully, the AOI comes to the rescue again with

their pricing survey for members – and you can ring them for advice too.

## How to become a freelance illustrator: Avoid being exploited



Image: iStock

You might be the one being paid, but don't drop high standards of your clients either. Stay away from dicks essentially – though Rod puts it with more finesse:

"If the details of the job are a little thin on the detail, don't be afraid to ask questions," he says. "You need to be armed with all the facts especially when making a quote for a job."

Of course, there will be some to-ing-and-fro-ing of drafts, but you should expect only minor changes to the final work. All of the client's expectations should be clear from the start – or it's not fair on you.

“An ‘I’ll know it when I see it’ situation from a clients is not acceptable,” says Rod. “Asking for more money in these situations usually focuses a client’s mind.”

If the work moves beyond the original brief and licence agreement, either expect an additional fee or walk away (read ‘walk’, not ‘stomp’: keep emotion out of it and always remain professional).

“Ask for a kill fee,” says Rod, which is a fee you receive if your work is cancelled. “These kill fee percentages should already be in your contract.”



Image: David Doran

A contract is not a pleasant word for non-lawyers and anyone

scared of being exploited, which is why you need to be doubly sure you learn how to draw one up, what to include and be careful to understand one in its entirety.

“Always read your contract carefully before doing anything,” says Emma – and get it in first, before you start work. “If you haven’t signed a contract you can always try and to explain to the client that this isn’t working for you, though you probably won’t be paid for any work you have done so far.

“If a client is offering a low fee but asking for assignment of rights (complete copyright), that’s not good,” she says, and this includes maintaining strict ownership of your work. “You should always try to licence work, not assign copyright. If the client is offering no money at all and is promising exposure, it’s best to stay away.”

Derek says that – along with a fair contract, fee and licensing of your work – also expect “a professional attitude that treats you as an creative equal” from clients.

Or indeed as a creative superior. When it comes to illustration, you are the trained expert and qualified to educate your client. If they don’t trust you, or want to do the job for you, then why are they hiring talent at all?

“A client should have confidence in who they’re hiring and why they’re hiring them, in their ideas and in their ability to do the job well, and subsequently allow them the space to do the job well,” says David.

Beyond the niggly issues such as low pay, unclear contracts and kill fee percentages comes work that is totally unpaid. Sarah says: “The phrases ‘it will be great for your portfolio’, ‘good exposure’ – the usual suspects – avoid!

“There’s no reason why clients can’t pay a fair price for work, and it’s important to maintain solidarity with other illustrators and hold out for a proper fee.”

As well as contacting the AOI and friends for advice, “being straight and honest with your concerns often helps to clear the air. And if it’s a really bad situation that you can’t resolve, just file it under experience so you don’t have to go through it again.”

Ana agrees that those painfully common phrases are clear warning signs to stay away. “Unless this is for a good cause, or something you truly believe will benefit your career, I would say cut the cord straight away.

“A lack of communication and uncertainty when it comes to briefing is always slightly concerning too. Starting out I used to be so scared of being matter-of-fact but it is so important and if you realize half-way through that something isn’t right, then question it.”

## How to become a freelance illustrator: If in doubt, get help



Image: iStock
We've gone through a lot of shoulds and shouldn'ts that you're totally allowed to forget about, recheck or turn into an illustrated poster. Regardless, continue to ask for help if in doubt.

"I became a member of the Association of Illustrators as soon as I graduated and I can't recommend them enough," says David. "They helped me get a grasp of pricing, usage and contracts.

Anything David wishes he knew when he started? He would like to remind his old self, despite all the hard work and long nights, "how brilliant it is to be able to draw pictures for a living."

Ana wishes she knew how common struggling is. "If you'd told me a year ago the response to my work would have been so positive, I never would of believed you, and I think that's the issue – remember to believe in yourself!"

The timeless advice Emma wishes she knew but instead learnt from personal, painful experience is to back up files. "You never know when a client will want to publish some old work," she says – such easy advice to stick to that you'd better start doing it now. In fact, go for it and be that weirdo who saves four copies of everything they design.

Like much of what you have to do to be a successful freelancer – sending countless emails, knowing a weird amount about contracts and getting excited on twitter – it'll be worth it, despite any strange looks.

**For more great tips from Derek Brazell, check out his and Jo Davies' book *Becoming a Successful Illustrator*.**

https://www.digitalartsonline.co.uk/features/creative-business/how-succeed-illustrator/