

ENG 210 Professional Narrative: My Illustration Career

Student Name

English Department, Missouri State University

ENG 210: Writing Across Disciplines

Dr. _____

Due Date: July 7, 2024

Professional Narrative: My Illustration Career

I can still picture it clearly: paintbrush in hand, I sit at the short, colorful desk in my kindergarten classroom. I'm painting a watercolor fish, and my teacher, Mrs. Londeen, has given me and a classmate permission to stay and work on it longer while the kids who had raced their way through the project had left for indoor recess. While some students would've certainly viewed this as a punishment, I was perfectly happy with the chance to take my time on my picture and make it look exactly how I imagined.

For most of my childhood, I was confident that I would grow up to be an artist. When I entered high school, I examined my choice more closely as college loomed. Although I researched many other options, I eventually chose graphic design as my major when I registered for school and changed it to illustration in my first week of classes. Illustrating picture books had always been a dream of mine. I would consider myself a highly practical person, so committing to a less "safe" career option was not an easy decision and came only after much deliberation and encouragement from others.

Now, I am entering my senior year in the illustration program, where I will be preparing my professional portfolio, finishing up my studio classes, and working on my senior exhibition project. I will soon be contacting art directors, publishers, and agents. It won't be easy in the beginning, but I can't wait to get started.

Professional Overview

In this section I will explain some basic information and terms concerning this job, though it is subject to variation.

1. Title of desired position: illustrator.
2. Education required: a bachelor's degree in illustration, graphic design, or fine arts is helpful but not required ("Professional Illustrator," 2022).
3. Certification(s) required: none.

4. Job summary: illustrators use design skills to convey ideas, tell stories, or add visual appeal to books, magazines, advertisements, digital media, and more (“What Does an Illustrator Do?” 2024).
5. Average hours per week: Around a 29% of working illustrators are full-time artists, while 71% of illustrators only pursue this career part time (“What Does an Illustrator Do?” 2024).
6. Environment: this varies since many illustrators are self-employed and work on a contract basis, which means they can choose to work from home or in a studio. Most illustrators reported satisfaction with their work environment (“What Does an Illustrator Do?” 2024).
7. Stress level: this position is relatively low stress, which contributes to high ratings of job satisfaction (“What Does an Illustrator Do?” 2024).
8. Prospective starting pay: entry level illustrators in the U.S. make an average of \$59,345 a year (“Entry Level Illustrator,” 2024).
9. Benefits besides salary: freelance illustrators are responsible for securing their own benefits such as health insurance. If they are employed in-house, they will have access to the benefits provided by that company.
10. Location: illustrators can work remotely from home, in a personal studio, or in-house for a company, which means they can live and work from anywhere in the world (“What Does an Illustrator Do?” 2024).

Below are a few important terms to understand in the illustration field, specifically for picture book illustrators, as explained by literary agent Mary Kole (n.d.):

1. Manuscript: the text of a picture book, which is written before the illustrator is brought onto a project.

2. Storyboard: the roughly sketched plan of the story's visual progression from page to page.
3. Book dummy: the unfinished version of a picture book that is submitted for consideration by publishers.
4. Roughs: loose sketches of pages before color is added.
5. Mock finishes: full-color illustrations that may not be finalized. A few mock finishes may be included in a book dummy.
6. Portfolio: an illustrator's representative body of work used to promote their skills to potential clients.
7. Literary agent: someone who works with authors, illustrators, and publishers to make connections, find projects, and negotiate contracts.
8. Agency: an organization of agents.
9. Author illustrator: an author who illustrates their own books.
10. Editor: editors manage and oversee book projects by working with authors and illustrators and reviewing manuscripts.

Defining Moments

When I was 8 years old, I made a copy of a story I had written along with some accompanying watercolor illustrations. It was about a boy who followed his sheep into a magical world in the woods. I mailed them to the Stone Soup office, a magazine that publishes stories and artwork by kids ages 8-13. They didn't end up choosing my story, but I was overjoyed when I received a response saying they liked my artwork and would contact me in the future to illustrate a story. I ended up illustrating five different stories for the magazine over the years and was even chosen for the cover artwork once. This experience led me to believe in my own

artistic skill and made me realize how much I enjoyed getting to work with authors and bring their stories to life.

Another moment that helped cement my decision to pursue illustration was more recent, when I met with my illustration professor/advisor one day in their cozy, cluttered office. They told me that they had no doubt I would be able to make it in the illustration field, which was so encouraging to me since it's not easy to be a successful illustrator with the oversaturated job market. I value their opinion highly since they have been hired to work with several major companies over the years, and I will definitely remember their encouragement from that day.

Obstacles

One obstacle I have faced in my career choice so far has been paying for my education. As an illustrator, I won't receive any tuition reimbursement from employers, and I will likely have a low starting pay. For this reason, I did not want to graduate in debt. Thankfully, I qualified for academic scholarships, but I have also worked during my entire time in college so that I will graduate debt-free, which has been incredibly stressful at times.

An obstacle that I expect to encounter in the future is the effect of new AI programs on my field. Many illustrators today are worried that AI will replace or devalue our work (Horton et al., 2023). In addition, AI models are being trained on the work of illustrators without their consent and are copying them in increasingly specific ways. I worry that our capitalist society may not be set up to fully protect the employment of human artists.

Personal and Professional Identity

Illustrators tend to be people who enjoy the opportunity for self-expression in their work ("What Does an Illustrator Do?" 2024). In the past, I worked as a server in a restaurant, where I had no opportunity for self-expression. Now, I work in a library where I get to be creative on

projects like designing displays and doing research, and I am much happier at my job. I know that I will enjoy the opportunity to be creative and explore new ideas every day as an illustrator.

Illustrators also tend to be people who work well in a job that involves hands-on work (“What Does an Illustrator Do?” 2024). I relate to this as well. I love getting lost in a project for hours at a time and find it incredibly peaceful to be in the “flow state” of a piece. I also appreciate how illustrators get to have variety in their work. They may be creating artwork, doing research, collaborating with others, doing school visits and workshops, or doing digital work such as editing or working on a website or product. I love having variety in my day, so this makes illustration a great fit for me.

Problem of Practice

As I touched on in a previous section, many illustrators are worried about how they will be impacted by new AI technologies. There is debate currently on whether AI art will devalue the art of human illustrators and potentially replace them.

Side One of Problem: Beliefs, Approaches, and Suggestions

Some claim AI art will replace human artists, citing the capabilities of new technologies in producing artwork that looks similar to what humans create (Horton et al., 2023). They also point to the efficiency of time and cost in using AI rather than employing illustrators. Their arguments focus on how companies will opt for the cheaper option in a capitalist society.

Side Two of Problem: Beliefs, Approaches, and Suggestions

The opposite argument is that while AI art can create images that look similar, it will not devalue art because people are interested in what other people make and not what computers make. They advocate for the heart and originality that is present in human artwork and which

will never be replicated by machines. In fact, when presented with a choice between AI work and human work, people assign more value and creativity to human work (Horton et al., 2023).

My Beliefs, Approaches, and Suggestions to the Problem

While I do believe the introduction of AI programs will impact the art world, I think it will mostly just replace jobs where there is a need for speed over connection. But illustration, specifically picture book illustration, is such a personal type of work that people want to recognize the individuals behind the stories they read. Schools want real people to come and talk to their students about their books. And publishers do not want every book to look the same. A team of Oxford researchers commented that “artists ultimately work to address human – rather than technical – questions” (2022, Eynon et al., para. 12). I’m sure AI will replace some types of design jobs, but art is fundamentally a human expression, and I don’t foresee a world in which people no longer care about art made by their fellow humans.

Outside Voices and Mine: Conclusion

As I look forward to my approaching graduation, the possibilities and challenges of my illustration career are at the forefront of my mind. A goal of mine for this year is to finish creating my professional portfolio and website. In addition, I would love to someday write and illustrate my own book. I would be overjoyed if I could walk into a bookstore and hold a story of my own in my hands. One of my favorite illustrators, Marla Frazee, described the realization she had upon reading *Where the Wild Things Are*: “The moment I saw Max’s bedroom turn into a forest in just three page turns, well... it sealed the deal. I just wanted to learn how to make that sort of magic happen” (Van Cleave, 2021). I’m excited to see what sort of magic I get to make happen in my career as well.

Word count: 1933

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