

THE ANIMATOR'S CHECKLIST



<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	THUMBNAILS
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	STORYBOARD
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	ANIMATIC
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	LAYOUT
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	KEYFRAMES
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	BREAKDOWNS
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	INBETWEENS
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	SHADING
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	CLEANUP
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	COLORING
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	COMPOSITING
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	EDITING
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	SOUND



INTRODUCTION

This checklist has been made to help anyone who is on the journey of making their own 2d animation. A journey without a map can be difficult and scary. I have based this list on my years of experience creating independent animations and from working as a commercial freelance animation producer.

I will be assuming that you - the reader - are working independently, without the support of a team.

There are many stages involved in the production of a fully fleshed out animation. Maybe you have gone through part of the process and you are now stuck. Maybe you are setting out to make an animated story for the first time. Maybe you have already made your animation, but something doesn't feel right. A problem you can't quite place your finger on. Working through this checklist can help you consider aspects of your animation you had not previously thought about.

Feel free to break from the order of the checklist wherever you need to. I break my own rules all the time. Art is about breaking conventions.

Quality animations are not made by talent, coincidence or being struck by a sudden inspiring muse (though these things can help). Quality animations are the result of persistent hard work, deliberation and an ordered process at the centre of it all.

PART 1

PRODUCTION CHECKLIST

This first half contains processes you can follow as you are making your animation.



PRE-PRODUCTION

Your pre-production stage is the time in your production before you animate. It mostly involves “bulking up” on relevant information and making certain design decisions ahead of time, so that when it comes to drawing your animation, you are doing it from a place of knowledge, without needing to improvise. Some also consider every process up to the final animatic to come under pre-production.

Story Ideation

1. **The Idea** – Visualise it in your mind’s eye. You can use word stacks to prompt ideas.
2. **A bullet point script** – Get the idea from your head onto the page or screen using words. From there you can improve it. This simple script might continue to evolve throughout your production as you learn more about your story.

Reference Library / mood boards

1. **Environment** – At least 20 saved images for what your environment is going to be like
2. **Characters** - At least 10 saved image inspirations for each character
3. **Lighting / colours** – At least 10 images for each location
4. **Effects references** – These can include reference videos, photos and sketch tests
5. **Character performances** – Shoot a live-action performance reference for each shot

Designs

1. **Character design iterations** – These can include colour and silhouette iterations
2. **Character turnaround designs** - Front, back, side, ¾ and more angles if you want them!
3. **Character line-up / height chart** - The characters all standing next to each other in an environment so that the relative scale is understood
4. **Character expression sheet** – A variety of expressions the character is likely to make
5. **Location map(s)** – A top-down map view of your location can be a great advantage for setting up camera angles, establishing a 180° line of action and making layouts which are consistent with the perceived 3d space. Constructing your location as a 3d mesh is another advanced alternative.

Bonus: fully rendered test scene – Find any problems ahead of time. Especially important if you are using a new multiple-software approach to your animation. It is also an effective step if you need to pitch your animation before it is fully developed.

PRODUCTION

Now that you are equipped with a reference library and designs, you have the necessary material for production to begin.

1. **Thumbnails** – The rough loose sketches which lead up to a storyboard panel
2. **Storyboard** - The panels which communicate what happens in each shot of the film
3. **Animatic** – The storyboard panels now assembled on a timeline, with timing and temporary sound
4. **Finalised animatic** - It is worth putting this here as an extra step as it is so important. I might make a dozen iterations of the animatic before I'm happy with it.
5. **Shot list spreadsheet** – This gives you a helpful overview of your animation's production ([example](#)). I recommend doing this even if you are alone on production.
4. **Layout** – Separating the layers of each storyboard panel and figuring out the practical ways the layers will interact ([Explained here](#))
5. **Keyframe animation** – The main defining poses of the characters / effects
6. **Breakdowns** – Extreme passing positions to further define the character movement
7. **In-betweens** – The drawings which connect the Keyframes and breakdowns, creating the smooth illusion of motion
8. **Shading** – Adding lines to your frames which divide areas of light and shadow
9. **Cleanup / second pass** – Neatening drawings to ensure frame quality is consistent
10. **Colouring** – Filling the lineart with colour
11. **Backgrounds** – Painting the background art from your layout drawings
12. **Compositing** – Bringing the layers of animation and background together
13. **Editing** – Assembling animated shots into the timeline ready to export the full video
14. **Adding final sound**

SOUND

Animators often overlook this vitally important stage of production. Some well-considered sound design can boost the perceived quality of your animation. Sound is also great for bringing out the emotions of your story and keeping the audience immersed in the world of the story. If you have no background of working with sound, it might be worth teaming up with an audio specialist.

1. **Foley** – These resemble frequent every-day sounds such as footsteps, clothes rustling, door handles. They are typically recorded all in one take by watching the video as they are making the sounds.
2. **Sound effects** – These are more special sounds, such as a magic spell sound effect or a gunshot. They usually need to be individually edited, maybe you need to combine multiple sounds together to make the right sound.
3. **Soundtrack** – Music tracks which might be featured in the animation.
4. **Score** – Customized music written specifically for the animation.
5. **Mixing and mastering** – This is the editing stage for adding effects like reverb, echo, creating stereo-sound and balancing the volume levels for a consistent overall sound.

PROMOTION

We're not finished yet! After you have made your animation, you still need to get it out there to the people. It would be a great shame if you worked a long time on an animation to then be let down from not promoting it properly.

This is the checklist I go through when I am at the end of a project, looking for some finishing touches before I upload it to the world.

1. **Thumbnail** – Very important. Aim for high contrast, leading lines, beauty, and curiosity
2. **Engaging title** – Trigger curiosity; provoke a question which the video promises to answer
3. **Tags** – Much less important than they used to be, but they can give you an edge, so why not make use of them? Max out the tags section of your video with niche search phrases.
4. **Social media** – Push the animation out to all your social media channels, and adapt the content to work natively where you need to (example of [adapting animation to gifs](#))
5. **Posting in forums** – Look for relevant niche forums and message boards. The [animator Guild community discord](#) is one example of a place where you can share a project you have recently made, but there exist many other related message boards: Google+, Facebook and LinkedIn all have a wide variety of groups. It only takes a few minutes to paste your link with some text introducing you and your film, and it's free advertising.
6. **Submitting to film festivals** (optional) – For this step I use [Filmfreeway.com](#). Here is [a video](#) I made about my trip to Kendal Film festival after my film was selected to be played there.

PART 2

PRINCIPLES CHECKLIST

This second half resembles less of a blueprint to follow along with, and more of a tool for self-evaluation. These following principle checklists can be used retrospectively to diagnose and edit problems you may be having with your animation.



STORY

Story is likely the most important core aspect of any animation you make. An audience will forgive flaws in every other aspect of your animation if the story is strong. An audience will fail to be impressed by every other aspect of your film if the story does not satisfy them. Everything you make is servant to the story, so it is worth taking the time to get this right.

Can people understand the plot?

Tip: sit someone down at your computer and play them your animation (ideally your rough stage animatic). Tell them nothing prior to this about what it is. When it has finished playing, ask them "what happened?". Their answer could be extremely revealing. They might have interpreted your film in a very different way to how you expected.

Is there "fluff" that could be cut away?

Most films are divided up into shots, every time there is a new cut, you can count it as another shot – a little packet of information. For a small independent animation production on a small budget, the optimal way to make an animation is to have one shot convey one essential piece of information about the story. The film is often improved by stripping it down to the shots that are essential to the story. Try taking out a shot that might not need to be in there: does the film still make sense?

Does the punchline land?

Show the animatic to someone who will give it a fair judgement. Pay attention to their reaction. Adjust from there.

Is there clarity in each composition?

Is every shot coherent with your established line of action? In film making they call this the 180 degree rule. If your characters are on the move, they should always be moving in the same screen direction (screen left or screen right) from shot to shot. If you break this rule, your footage can become very confusing to the viewer.

Is there clarity in the editing?

Check that each shot lasts for enough time to be understood. If you are finding it hard to judge how long a shot should last for, a good rule of thumb is to say what the character is doing. The shot should last for at least the length of time it takes you to say it in words.

ANIMATION PRINCIPLES

This checklist is here for when you have a problem with your animation, or your animation is lacking somewhere but you can't quite figure out why or where to start fixing it. For this list we go through the 12 principles of animation, established by Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston. These principles can be found in great animation everywhere.

1. **Squash and Stretch** – Creates a lifelike softness to the character / object
2. **Anticipation** – The build-up to perform the main action
3. **Staging** – Placing the animation in the right place in frame so that it can be understood
4. **Straight Ahead and Pose to Pose** – Choosing one of these two methods of drawing key frames in order
5. **Follow through and overlapping action** – Inertia – not everything stops or starts at once
6. **Slow in and slow out** – Suggests weight and momentum, makes movement feel natural
7. **Arc** – Almost everything in nature moves in arcing motions, rarely straight.
8. **Secondary action** – Extra independent movement to supplement the main movement
9. **Timing** – The relative speeds at which movements are made, changes in speed and moments where a character or object hits a certain queue
10. **Exaggeration** – Pushing the poses and drawings beyond what is realistic
11. **Solid drawing** – Consistency with the construction, considering 3d forms.
12. **Appeal** – The X factor in the performance which makes it enjoyable to watch



CONCLUSION

I find this checklist process be very comforting when I am producing a big animation project. I don't need to worry about everything at once. I can just focus on getting the next bullet point ticked off the list.

Hopefully these checklists can provide some structure to your animation process if you did not have any before. Maybe this can even reveal some optional stages of production that you weren't aware of before.

Use this checklist as a starting point to develop your own way of doing things, or cross-compare your method with mine. Adding or taking away steps in the process can lead to different results. Diversity in approaches is something I encourage. My way is not the only way.

I have held back on elaborating a lot of the steps in the checklist, in favour of a more concise and simple-to-follow list. You can google any of the terms used to learn more about them. Learning the animation process to the extend that these steps become intuitive takes a lot more time to teach and a lot of practice on your end. Fortunately, I am in the process of developing full educational courses which will cover everything from beginner to professional concepts. I will keep you updated on the progress of these courses via email.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I am an award-winning independent animation producer / director from London.

Graduated from Portsmouth University with a first-class Bachelor of Arts degree in Animation. I have produced animation for companies and individuals such as the BBC, Cancer Research UK, Vetpaw, DJI and Sam Kolder.

In my spare time, [I make music with a guitar](#) and dabble in a variety of extreme sports.

[My portfolio website](#)

[My animation blog](#)

[My YouTube channel](#)