Demo Reels; Resumes; Cover Letters - Tips and Suggestions
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The best piece of general advice I can give to someone when submitting a demo reel is this: Imagine that the people who are going to review your work are the busiest, most disorganized and most inconsiderate folks on the planet. You want to make it as easy and painless as possible for them to look at your stuff. Try to avoid anything that might contribute to them being less able (or less willing) to review your materials.

Cover Letter:
(1) Make it short and to the point. (See previous paragraph).
(2) If you are applying to a particular department, indicate this so we know who should be looking at the tape.
(3) If you were referred by someone, definitely mention this.
(4) Include a list of references. Most of us have had at least one or two bad experiences with colleagues in the past. If you don't steer your prospective employer toward folks who like you, they might stumble upon someone who doesn't.
(5) Avoid adjectives. I'm always suspicious when someone butters up their cover letter by telling me how good their work is. I want an applicant to convince me of their talents with their animations, not their words.
(6) Check your spelling, grammar, punctuation & typos. This may not matter to some people but keep in mind that your cover letter is often your very first introduction to a prospective employer. Don't let your first impression indicate that you don't check your work and that attention to detail is not a priority for you.

Resume:
(1) Try to avoid listing irrelevant experience in the previous employment section. (But consider carefully what is and what is not potentially relevant.)
(2) At the bottom of the page, however, do list skills/hobbies/interests that might be relevant (or otherwise attractive to your potential employers). If you're applying for a job at an interactive studio that makes fighting games and you've studied karate, indicate this. Acting/mime/dance/gymnastics/etc are good skills to mention when applying for a job as an animator. You never know what might be relevant. Sometimes an interviewer might notice that, like him, you are an experienced rock climber. Perhaps there aren't any other rock climbers in the building and your potential boss hates the fact that he can't share stories about his weekend adventures over lunch with anyone. Believe it or not, sometimes a little detail like that can actually have a big impact on whether or not you get the job.
(3) Accentuate but DON'T LIE! If you were a janitor, say "custodial engineer". If, however, you were a grunt animator at a particular shop & you once made a suggestion to a co-worker and they took it, don't call yourself an animation supervisor.

Demo Reel:
(1) VHS! NTSC! Every place has a standard VHS deck. But they might not have a 3/4 deck or a PAL converter. Don't send CD's, floppies or zips unless you've called ahead and confirmed that they can view such formats.
(2) Put your best stuff first. Because of the volume of tapes we look at, if we're not "grabbed" in the first ten seconds of a reel we tend to watch the rest in fast-forward mode until we see something that looks interesting enough to stop and look at in normal speed. Don't let us miss your best piece.
(3) Don't repeat animations. Please don't assume that we wanted to see that particular piece again. We do have a rewind button on our VCR. Also, repeating animations implies you have a limited quantity of work and it looks like "filler".
(4) Keep it short. 3 minutes is a general target length.
(5) Include a reel breakdown. Unless EVERYTHING on the tape is 100% yours, it is essential that you include a descriptive list of your contributions to each shot. If you don't, we are assuming that you are claiming that everything is all yours. If you have collaborative work on your reel, it is dishonest, annoying and potentially plagiaristic to not include a reel breakdown.
(6) DO NOT PUT OTHER PEOPLE'S WORK ON YOUR REEL! This should be the most obvious thing in the world but it happens. I recently received a reel without a breakdown that had work I recognized because it belonged to a friend of mine! After requesting a reel breakdown, the dishonest submitter admitted to "having had little to do with" certain pieces on the reel. Since this information was not initially volunteered I had been led to believe that he was claiming to have done those pieces himself. I do not make a habit of hiring deceitful people. Also, do not include any tutorials or demo/stock scenes which came with the software on your reel.
(7) Don't send inappropriate work. A place that does children's educational software does not want to see blood and guts. Don't send a creature-shop a demo reel full of spaceships and camera fly-throughs. This shows that you didn't take the time to find out about the company to which you are applying. Why then should they take the time to find out about you?
(8) Label your tape clearly and put your contact information in the body of the tape. Sometimes tapes get separated from their resumes. Make it easy for us to re-organize our piles.
(9) Pop your tabs. Remember, we are busy, disorganized & inconsiderate. We might accidentally hit the "record" button.
instead of the "play" button on our remote control.
(10) Rewind your tape. We WILL charge you $1.00!
(11) Include drawings on your tape ONLY if you truly think they will help your case. I will certainly be more inclined to want to interview someone whose tape has borderline-quality animations but there are really good figure drawings at the end. Strong fundamental skills are a good indication of someone's overall aesthetic sensibilities. However, don't include bad figure drawings just to demonstrate that you've taken a figure drawing class. Now, I'm not saying that you have to show figure drawings in order to get hired as a character animator, but don't go out of your way to show your weaknesses. It tells me that you aren't a good judge of your own work and will therefore need a lot of supervision.
(12) Show "acting". Let's face it, walk/run/flight cycles alone will not get you hired as a character animator anymore. This is mainly because such motions can be easily copied from a variety of sources. Your animations need to convey emotions and thoughts through body language. Example: Don't animate a kid eating a bowl of peas. Animate a kid who hates peas but his mother is making him eat them anyway. If you can tell such a story through timing, posing and facial expressions alone, you will get hired. (I actually rarely have the volume turned on when watching tapes).
(13) Avoid large, cumbersome packages that are difficult to catalogue, file and shelve. I've seen them bent to fit into boxes. Which of course brings up: Don't send original artwork. It WILL get damaged.
(14) Don't send stuff you don't want to be asked to do.
(15) Wireframes with solid motion are better than fully textured renderings with mediocre motion. (You might accidentally get hired to do lighting!)
(16) Be careful when including work that isn't supposed to be publicly viewed yet. If you are showing me clips from a film that has not yet been released, you are telling me that you'd be willing to show OUR work before it's released as well. Make sure your interviewer knows that you've cleared it with your current/previous place of employ first.
(17) Be careful when including animations of your potential employer's characters. I understand that Disney absolutely never wants to see any of their characters on a reel. You're opening yourself up to the same level of scrutiny that goes on in daily reviews. If they had not yet been released, you are telling me that you'd be willing to show OUR work before it's released as well. Make sure your interviewer knows that you've cleared it with your current/previous place of employ first.
(18) Make sure your tape really shows what you're capable of. I get a lot of tapes from ReBoot/Beast-Wars folks who mention that they have very little time to do a shot and the style is dictated very strictly. Given such restrictions I can't really judge their skills by seeing this work alone. When I get such tapes I immediately request additional work. Include personal stuff as well as professional work. I like to see what you can do on your own as well as what you can do on a team.
(19) Be honest with yourself. If your entire demo reel is limited to demonstrating that you've managed to pull off a couple of walk cycles, you're probably not quite ready to offer your services as a lead character animator in a full fledged animation studio. Only apply for a job that you truly feel you're capable of handling. However, this doesn't necessarily mean that you have to have done that particular job before. In most cases you WILL in fact be expected to rise above your current skills. Just don't bite off more than you can chew.

Interview:
(1) Be on time. Remember, first impressions are lasting impressions.
(2) Dress appropriately. You don't have to wear a suit, but error on the side of over-dressing rather than under-dressing. Don't worry. You're not going to insult a prospective employer if you are better dressed than they are. Chances are you will be...after all...they already have the job!
(3) Project a positive attitude but don't go overboard and act like a used-car salesman. Show that you are interested in working there. Compliment their work. Just try not to make it too obvious that you're "buttering" them up.
(4) Bring another copy of your reel/resume. Remember, we're really disorganized. We might not have it handy.
(5) Bring some additional work. Don't let us believe that your reel comprises everything you've ever done.
(6) Be very careful when speaking negatively about a former job/boss/co-worker. This is a small industry. There's a chance your interviewer knows the person/place of which you speak. I lost a job opportunity once myself because of this mistake.
(7) Watch for trick questions. "Oh...come on...you can show us those shots from that movie that isn't out yet...we won't tell anyone!" Or: "Hmmm...I see you have 3 months to go before finishing your current project...we could really use you sooner...are you sure you can't just abandon your current team and join us now?" If you do it to them, you'll do it to us.

Follow up:
Keep in mind it often takes a while before a demo tape gets reviewed. If you haven't heard anything for 3 weeks or so it is okay to call and make sure your tape was received. But don't be a pest. After an interview, it is a good idea to send a follow up letter thanking your prospective employer for taking the time to meet with you. Don't call unless you haven't heard anything for a little while. And do not contact the company repeatedly. If you don't get hired, resubmit your materials every 6 months or so. Their needs and criteria change all the time. Your skills/style might not have been appropriate for last year's project, but they might be right for this year's.