Career Outlook

BLS

Careers for creative people

Dennis Vilorio | June 2015

This article has been updated.

If you think creativity is only for artists, think again. People use creativity every day in all kinds of ways, whether to tell a story about that time your car broke down or to develop a mobile app.

For some people, creativity is an essential part of their work. “To be creative is the most exciting thing you can do,” says Chris Triola, owner of a textile design studio in Lansing, Michigan. “It’s as necessary to me as eating and breathing.”

But making creativity your job typically requires practice, risktaking, and trial and error. For workers who do it on their own, it also means learning how to market themselves and run a business.

This article covers selected careers in which creativity is key. It discusses the creative process, highlights selected occupations that require creativity, and offers employment and wage data for these occupations. The article also

explains some of the rewards and challenges of creative work, describes how to get started in a creative career, and lists resources for more information.

The creative process

Creativity can be defined as the ability to produce something of value that did not exist before. You could harness creativity to design a product, make a blueprint, or write a script, for example. The outcomes of creative work may be wildly different among individual people or disciplines, but there are often similarities in the process.

The creative process often starts with a spark of inspiration: An idea. It can come at any time and from anywhere, such as from nature or people. When thinking of ideas for a fabric pattern, for example, Triola looks in unexpected places, including cracks in ice or the lines on a cabbage leaf.

But inspiration alone is not enough for creating. Creativity requires hard work and patience to turn ideas into viable output. Workers increase their chances of success through planning, assessing, revising, and reflecting on their work.

Planning is important because it helps creative workers find focus and use their time wisely. By setting aside time for practice and research, for example, workers can improve their craft and connect ideas.

Planning can also make a project seem less daunting. For example, workers may break up a project into several small tasks and schedule time to create every day. Steady effort often leads to noticeable results. “When I look back, I realize that my art is constantly evolving,” says freelance illustrator Daniel Dufford of Cincinnati, Ohio. “As long as you keep working, you’ll keep getting better.”

Throughout the creative process, workers should assess and revise their work. For example, a writer proofreads an article draft to ensure that its message is clear with no gaps in logic. Making a timeline and requesting feedback from clients, collaborators, and others may help workers stay on track.

After completing creative tasks, successful workers reflect on what they’ve learned during the process. They may review, for example, how often they practiced and what helped them do so more consistently. By applying these lessons to future creative endeavors, workers can improve their efficiency in finishing tasks.

Occupations for creative workers

Most occupations involve some form of creativity. A retail salesperson, for example, might design a more engaging product pitch, and a physicist might devise some new way of understanding nature.

In some occupations, creativity is an integral part of the job. Among these occupations are those for artists and related workers, designers, and media and communication workers. (For a list of other occupations that may involve creative skills, including some that you might not expect, see the box.)

Artists and related workers

Artists and related workers create aesthetic pieces that try to capture certain beliefs, feelings, or ideas. For example, a painter may try to express happiness through a watercolor landscape of a summer day. These workers typically develop a unique style.

The occupations described in this category include art directors, craft artists, fine artists, and multimedia artists.

Art directors. Art directors design the vision for a product or work of art. They decide which artistic styles and elements to use, and they supervise artists. Art directors work primarily in visual communications media, including advertising, publications, video games, theater, and film.

Craft artists. These artists create handmade arts and goods using a variety of raw materials, such as wood, metal, and fabric. Craft artists may sell their work at craft fairs, in art studios, or to customers directly on commission. Examples of these artists are quilters, woodworkers, potters, and jewelers.

Fine artists. Fine artists use visual techniques to as a form of creative expression. These artists study traditional art disciplines, such as painting and sketching. Fine artists showcase and sell their works at galleries and studios, through a broker, or to customers directly. Occupations include illustrators, painters, cartoonists, and sculptors.

Multimedia artists. These artists combine visual art with a variety of forms, such as sound, storytelling, or animation. With the help of film, cameras, computers, and other tools, multimedia artists create video games, commercials, music videos, and more. Examples of occupations are special effects artists, 3D animators, and game designers.

Designers

Designers make original creations that have practical or aesthetic purpose. Businesses in nearly all industries rely on designers to develop and implement ideas for products or services. Designers may start a project by sketching ideas on paper or creating a computer prototype. Feedback from clients and staff members helps refine the ideas into a final product.

The following design occupations described are commercial and industrial, fashion, floral, graphic, interior, and set and exhibit designers.

Commercial and industrial designers. These designers focus on how customers interact with technical products and services, such as cell phones and online marketplaces. By researching and collecting data on customer behavior and market needs, these workers improve artistic design and ease of use, and ensure integration with existing products or services.

Commercial and industrial designers usually work on teams with engineers, managers, and other designers.

Fashion designers. Fashion designers create clothing, accessories, and footwear. For each product, they choose fabrics, colors, and patterns that are practical and have aesthetic appeal. They may develop original designs or adapt fashion trends. Some products have a recurring theme, such as a similar color palette or style, and are designed as part of a collection.

Fashion designers may oversee production of the garments, ensuring that workers such as seamstresses follow the designs. Often, they market their products to retailers and customers at fashion and trade shows.

Floral designers. These designers create arrangements with live and dried flowers and foliage. For each arrangement, they must consider the occasion—such as a wedding or birthday—and the customer's needs, budget, and preferences.

Floral designers may order flowers from wholesalers or grow their own. They must learn each flower's properties, including its season and colors, the sentiment it conveys, and how to care for it.

Graphic designers. Graphic designers visually communicate ideas and messages for commercial or promotional purposes. Using words, images, and symbols, these designers tweak style elements—such as color and typography—to create posters, logos, packaging, and other products.

Graphic designers usually work for an art director or for a client directly. They also may work closely with people in advertising, communications, and marketing.

Interior designers. These designers plan and furnish the insides of residential, commercial, and industrial spaces. They consider the aesthetics, safety, and function of each space, as well as the client's needs and budget.

Interior designers create a plan to specify design elements, such as lighting fixtures, furniture, and flooring. The plan also estimates the project's cost and timeline.

Interior designers often work with architects, engineers, and builders. They may specialize in a particular style or field, such as sustainability, renovation, or kitchen design.

Set and exhibit designers. Set and exhibit designers develop and prepare displays and spaces for theater, film, museum, and industry events. They coordinate with clients and consider the design's budget, timeline, and purpose.

Designers collaborate with workers in charge of lighting, special effects, props, and construction. They also consult with experts to understand elements from a style or period, and they inspect the finished set or exhibit to ensure that it matches their design.

Media and communication workers

Media and communication workers use words or images to convey information and ideas. Some write fictional stories, and others capture information or actual events, such as breaking news.

Among these creative occupations are editors, photographers, technical writers, and writers and authors.

Editors. Editors plan, review, and revise written material for publication. They coordinate with writers to explore ideas, establish a schedule, and maintain style standards. When reviewing and revising drafts, editors try to preserve the author's voice while verifying facts, correcting grammar, and reorganizing content to improve readability. Examples include technical and managing editors.

Photographers. Photographers use cameras, lenses, computers, and other equipment to produce images. They photograph people, landscapes, architecture, food, merchandise, or other subjects, depending on their specialty or the type of project for which they are hired.

Many photographers are freelancers, but others work for an employer, such as a newspaper or magazine. Photographers are often grouped by the type of images they create. Examples are news, medical, and portrait photographers.

Technical writers. These writers communicate complex information to a general audience. They write instruction manuals, supporting documents, and other types of explanatory text. Increasingly, they incorporate graphics and, in electronic resources, sound and video to improve readers' comprehension.

Technical writers often collaborate with other workers, such as product designers, engineers, and customer support specialists. These other workers help writers understand the product and obtain data for diagrams and charts; they also offer feedback on drafts and the final product.

Writers and authors. Writers and authors compose materials for print and online publications, films and television shows, advertisements, and more. They may write fiction or nonfiction pieces, and their work might include scripts, novels, or articles.

To get started, writers often research their subject matter. They also brainstorm ideas to create an outline that gives their draft structure. With the help of editors, writers and authors revise a draft until it is ready to be published.

Examples of writers and authors are screenwriters, biographers, playwrights, novelists, copy writers, and bloggers.

Wages, employment, and outlook

Wages, employment, and outlook vary among creative occupations. In most of the occupations described in this article, data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) show that wage and salary workers earned more than the $35,540 median annual wage for all workers in May 2014.

But those data do not include wages for the many self-employed workers in nearly all of these occupations. And, although employment growth is projected to be slow for most of them, the need to replace workers who leave the occupations is expected to result in opportunities.

Wages

According to the BLS Occupational Employment Statistics survey, wages were higher than the overall median in nearly all of these occupations in May 2014. (See table 1.) However, these estimates do not include wages for self-employed workers, whose incomes may vary more widely than those of wage and salary workers overall.

Table 1. Wages for selected creative occupations, May 2014

Occupation	Median annual wage, May 2014
Artists and related workers	
Art directors	$85,610
Craft artists	31,080
Fine artists, including painters, sculptors, and illustrators	43,890
Multimedia artists and animators	63,630
Designers	
Commercial and industrial designers	64,620
Fashion designers	64,030
Floral designers	24,750
Graphic designers	45,900
Interior designers	48,400
Set and exhibit designers	49,810
Media and communication workers	
Editors	54,890
Photographers	30,490
Technical writers	69,030
Writers and authors	58,850
All occupations	35,540

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics survey (excludes self-employed).

Wages varied by geographic location, with workers in some metropolitan areas typically earning more than those in other cities. For example, graphic designers in the San Francisco metropolitan area earned a median annual wage of $74,930, compared with the median annual wage of $49,110 earned by graphic designers in the Chicago metropolitan area.

Wages also varied by industry. For example, technical writers in the specialized design services industry earned a median annual wage of $86,990, compared with technical writers in the newspaper publishers industry who earned a median annual wage of $54,600 per year.

Employment and outlook

According to data from the BLS Employment Projections (EP) program, employment size was relatively small in 2012—the base year for the most recent projections data—in many of the creative occupations discussed in this article. Employment projections data include self-employment, which was common in these occupations. Job openings are projected to vary between 2012 and 2022. (See table 2.)

Table 2. Employment and self-employment, 2012, and job openings, projected 2012-22, for selected creative occupations

Occupation	2012		Projected 2012-22
	Employment	Percent self-employed	Job openings due to growth and replacement needs
Artists and related workers			
Art directors	74,800	57	20,000
Craft artists	11,200	58	3,000
Fine artists, including painters, sculptors, and illustrators	28,800	57	7,900
Multimedia artists and animators	68,900	57	20,600
Designers			
Commercial and industrial designers	39,200	25	12,100
Fashion designers	22,300	25	5,900
Floral designers	62,400	26	16,500
Graphic designers	259,500	24	86,000
Interior designers	54,900	25	21,500
Set and exhibit designers	11,400	23	3,700
Media and communication workers			
Editors	115,300	10	28,000
Photographers	136,300	60	20,300
Technical writers	49,500	5	22,600
Writers and authors	129,100	64	31,800

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections program.

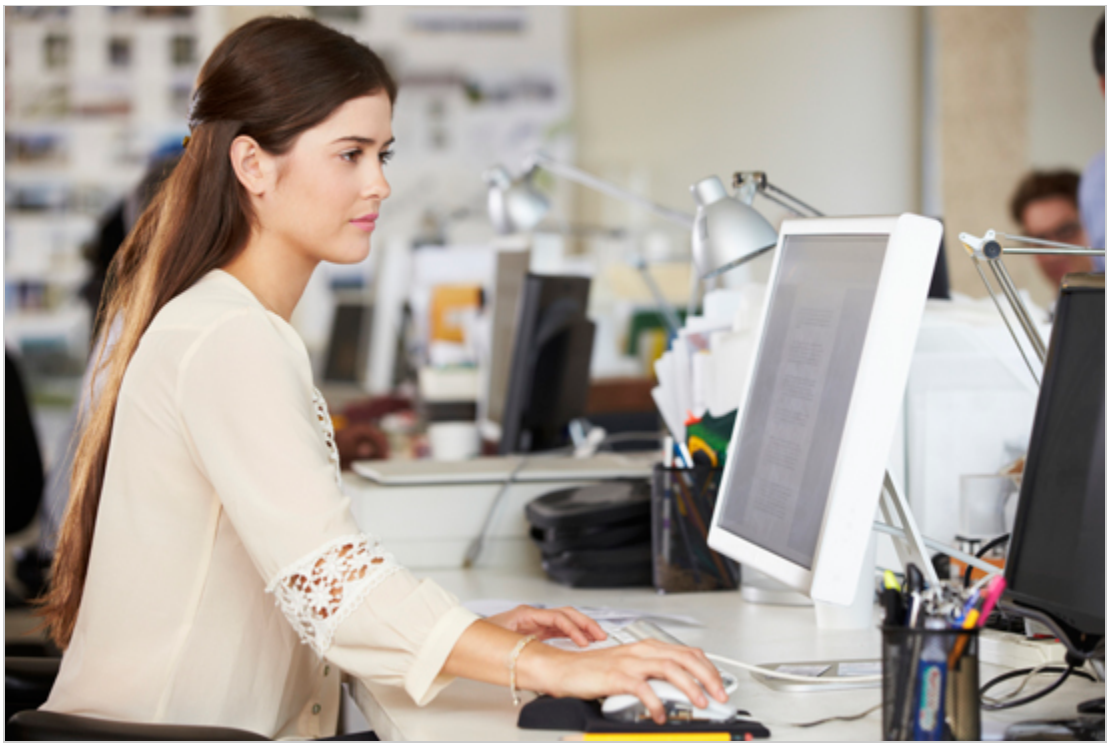
In 2012, employment for the occupations in table 2 was almost 1.1 million. Employment by occupation varied across industries. For example, nearly half of all floral designers were employed by florists. By comparison, editors' employment was less concentrated in a single industry: 18 percent worked for newspaper publishers, 10 percent were self-employed, and the rest found work in numerous industries, including advertising and TV broadcasting.

Most occupations listed in the table had a significantly higher rate of self-employment than the 6.5 percent rate for all occupations. This may be because many creative occupations lend themselves to self-employment, which

includes freelance workers and business owners. For example, writers and authors, photographers, and craft artists—occupations listed in the table with the highest rates of self-employment—may be able to generate enough income working for themselves if they can successfully sell their creative product.

Employment growth is projected to be slow for most of these occupations over the 2012–22 decade. Reasons for slow growth may vary among occupations but include foreign competition and the decline of related industries such as publishing media.

Employment for technical writers is expected to be faster than the average for all occupations. But even in occupations that have limited growth, job openings are projected because of the need to replace workers who retire or leave for some other reason.



Rewards and challenges of creative work

As with any career, working in a creative job has pros and cons. This section outlines some of them.

Rewards

There are some rewards that are common to most creative work. These include the outlet for being creative, the flexibility of the work, and the opportunity to collaborate with others.

Being creative. Engaging in a creative activity is, for many workers, its own reward. Workers do interesting or unique projects while adding their own style.

Producing something that didn't exist before leads to a sense of accomplishment. "Being creative is really fulfilling," says wedding photographer Kyle Carnes of Portland, Oregon. "You can express yourself and take pride in what you create." News editor Gerri Berendzen of Columbia, Missouri, agrees, adding that she enjoys the adrenaline rush that comes with trying to break a big story—and getting the facts right.

Flexibility. Compared with workers in some other career fields, creative workers may have more flexibility in choosing tasks or setting schedules—especially if they are self-employed.

Often, workers have the creative freedom to explore a project or topic as they like. For example, a cartoonist sketching a new superhero character might decide to combine existing ideas, such as a cape, with his or her own elements, such as the idea of a child superhero. For many workers, exploring and remixing interesting ideas is part of the fun.

Collaboration. Creativity often benefits from collaboration, and many people enjoy working with others toward a common goal. "I find it really satisfying to help an author's writing get better," says Berendzen.

Even when working alone, people in creative occupations often learn from others. Freelance illustrator Dufford, for example, browses online art communities and blogs, taking elements of others' art ideas and reinterpreting them in unique ways. "If you surround yourself with good art," he says, "you'll be inspired to create good artwork."

Challenges

As with almost any career, creative workers may face challenges in their jobs that they need to overcome. To succeed, they must be able to handle stress and frustration, accept criticism and failure, and learn to persevere.

Stress and frustration. Creative workers may feel pressure to constantly produce new or better ideas, sometimes immediately. But inspiration doesn't arrive on demand—and the added stress may inhibit creativity even more.

It also may be common to work on tight deadlines for long stretches of time or to work at odd hours. And because competition for these jobs is often intense, workers may have a hard time finding enough creative work to earn an adequate income.

In some jobs or on certain projects, artistic freedom may be limited. "You have to remember that you're creating for other people, not yourself," says Dufford of working for a client. And restricted autonomy may be even more frustrating when a client changes project requirements without sufficient notice or compensation.

Self-employed workers usually face additional frustrations, including managing staff problems, assessing financial risks, and balancing work–life demands. Deciphering complex laws related to business ownership is also difficult. "I have to pay business, art, and local taxes on top of commercial photography and business licensing fees," Carnes says. "It can be hard to figure out what you're supposed to pay."

Criticism and failure. Creative workers imbue a little of themselves in their creations. Some workers may have difficulty separating from their work, which may make them more sensitive to criticism and prone to self-doubt.

But in many creative careers, criticism is necessary. Feedback from clients, friends, and peers is often part of the creative process. Among that feedback may be negative comments that could lead to a different approach.

And creativity takes a lot of trying—and failing—before an idea comes to fruition. "You have to risk failure and rejection to find success," says Triola.

Workers should be prepared to put hours of thought or effort into an idea, only to have nothing come of it. "Out of 10 ideas, only 1 might make it," says industrial design firm owner Austen Angell. "You can't get attached to an idea. Keep an open mind."

Perseverance. Often, the polished end product of creativity belies the struggle that went into achieving it. Turning an idea into a finished product doesn't happen overnight: creativity takes a lot of work and perseverance.

By focusing on the end result, workers can learn to push themselves. "Creative people are all about ideas, but that's the problem: it can be hard to finish one," says Carnes. "I really enjoy the feeling of accomplishment I get when I complete a project."

Getting started

You'll need some combination of skills, education and training, and experience to get started in a creative career. Networking and promoting your work are also important.

Skills

Creative workers need technical skill relevant to their occupation, which may involve use of certain equipment. For example, a craft artist who specializes in woodworking needs to be able to make bevel and groove cuts with a saw and a chisel, among other tools.

Communication skills are also important for creative workers. Having ideas is not enough; workers must be able to share those ideas through writing or speaking. "The single most important skill in a creative field is to learn how to use words to describe what you're doing so others can understand your vision," says Triola.

And for many people in creative occupations, business skills are pivotal to success—especially for those who are self-employed. "A lot of artists struggle because they're more concerned with their art than their accounts," Carnes says.

The Small Business Administration and the nonprofit SCORE offer information for small business owners through free or low-cost resources and services, including workshops, networking events, and one-on-one mentorships.

Education and training

According to BLS, most creative workers typically need a bachelor's degree to qualify for entry-level jobs. And workers in about half of these occupations receive on-the-job training to help them hone their craft. (See table 3.)

Table 3. Education, work experience, and training for selected creative occupations

Occupation	Entry-level education	Work experience	On-the-job training
Artists and related workers			
Art directors	Bachelor's degree	5 years or more	None
Craft artists	High school diploma or equivalent	None	Long-term on-the-job training
Fine artists, including painters, sculptors, and illustrators	High school diploma or equivalent	None	Long-term on-the-job training
Multimedia artists and animators	Bachelor's degree	None	Moderate-term on-the-job training
Designers			
Commercial and industrial designers	Bachelor's degree	None	None
Fashion designers	Bachelor's degree	None	None
Floral designers	High school diploma or equivalent	None	Moderate-term on-the-job training
Graphic designers	Bachelor's degree	None	None

Table 3. Education, work experience, and training for selected creative occupations

Occupation	Entry-level education	Work experience	On-the-job training
Interior designers	Bachelor's degree	None	None
Set and exhibit designers	Bachelor's degree	None	None
Media and communication workers			
Editors	Bachelor's degree	Less than 5 years	None
Photographers	High school diploma or equivalent	None	Long-term on-the-job training
Technical writers	Bachelor's degree	Less than 5 years	Short-term on-the-job training
Writers and authors	Bachelor's degree	None	Moderate-term on-the-job training

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections program.

Getting an education helps workers build a solid technical and artistic foundation—and may improve employment prospects, even in occupations that don't typically require a formal program. "My college education really helped me," says Dufford. "It taught me how to have the discipline to sit down and work on something continuously."

The more technical the occupation, the more important a college degree may be. For example, beginning art directors, multimedia artists, and industrial designers typically need a bachelor's degree in a field related to their specialty. Additional coursework in math, the sciences, information technology, and other disciplines—such as psychology and sociology—may help jobseekers stand out from other candidates.

Creative occupations that usually require a high school diploma at the entry level, such as craft and fine artists and floral designers, also typically require on-the-job training. For example, a fine artist might work under the supervision of a master painter for several years to learn a variety of styles and techniques.

Creative workers in a few of these occupations, such as illustrators and photographers, may gain experience by starting out as assistants or apprentices. "Journeying with different people is really useful because you get to see how they work," says Carnes.

Still other creative workers learn from library or Internet resources or by studying others' work.

But whatever path creative workers take to their career, a common bond is the need for lifelong learning. As with workers in many fields, workers in creative jobs need to keep up with changes in technology and styles, such as by acquiring new skills, taking classes, or following blogs. "You have to constantly work on improving your skills," Dufford says. "Keep learning until the day you die."

Experience and networking

As table 3 also shows, most creative occupations don't require work experience in a related occupation to qualify for entry-level positions. Among the few who do need experience are editors, who typically gain experience by working in a related occupation, such as editorial assistant, writer, or reporter.

Even if experience is not required, however, creative workers usually benefit from hands-on learning, whether paid or unpaid. For example, some workers start out as hobbyists, then turn their passion into a career after discovering a market for their work.

More importantly, gaining experience helps workers gain professional connections. Creative workers must often take the initiative to network with peers and employers. This process is often difficult in the beginning, when these workers don't have a large portfolio or many professional connections. But networking gets easier as they build a reputation.

And networking should include potential clients as well as employers. "You must constantly market yourself," says Dufford. "I mail out promotional posters to studios and then try to make appointments to meet people at those studios. Ninety-nine percent of the time I won't hear back, but I live off the work that I get from the 1 percent of people who do respond."

Having an online portfolio and a social media presence may help potential clients find your work. Keep in mind that developing a solid career might take years, so be proactive—and patient. "Each year builds on the one before," Triola says. "It doesn't happen overnight."

For more information

To learn more about the creative occupations in this article—and hundreds of others—see the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (*OOH*). Each *OOH* profile includes information about job duties, employment, wages, job outlook, and more.

The National Endowment for the Arts promotes and funds creativity and art through grants for people and organizations in artistic fields. The endowment also offers a variety of resources, including podcasts, webinars, and events.

Professional associations offer additional career information and resources, such as job boards and networking events. Some occupations may have related associations that cater to a specific industry or group, such as minorities or residents of a particular state. The main professional associations for the occupations discussed in detail in this article are listed below.

Artists and related workers

For information about art directors, visit:

- Art Directors Guild
- Art Directors Club

For information about craft artists, visit the American Craft Council.

There is no single association that caters to fine artists as a whole. Instead, look for associations that cater to a specific type of artist. For example, illustrators may visit the Society of Illustrators and sculptors may visit the International Sculpture Center.

As with fine artists, no single association represents multimedia artists, but there are associations for specific types of artists. For example, graphic designers may visit the American Institute of Graphic Arts. And workers in interactive entertainment, such as computer animators and game designers, may visit the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences.

Designers

For information about commercial and industrial designers, visit the Industrial Designers Society of America.

For information about floral designers, visit the American Institute of Floral Designers.

For information about graphic designers, visit:

- American Institute of Graphic Arts
- Graphic Artists Guild

For information about fashion designers, visit the Council of Fashion Designers of America.

For information about interior designers, visit:

- American Society of Interior Designers
- Council for Interior Design Accreditation

For more information on set and exhibit designers, visit:

- United Scenic Artists Local USA 829
- Exhibit Designers and Producers Association

Media and communication workers

For information about editors, visit the American Copy Editors Society.

For information about photographers, visit the American Society of Media Photographers.

For information about technical writers, visit the Society for Technical Communication.

And for information about writers and authors, visit:

- Writers Guild of America
- American Society of Journalists and Authors

More creativity at work

The article discusses a few selected occupations from the hundreds available to creative people. Other creative occupations include:

- Anthropologists and archeologists
- Art therapists
- Chefs
- Composers
- Foley artists
- Font designers
- Glaziers
- Grant writers
- Machinists and tool and die makers
- Online sellers
- Public relations and fundraising managers
- Solar photovoltaic installers

Visit the *Career Outlook* archives for a list of articles about careers that use creativity.

And for a list of nearly 300 occupations that require creative skills, visit the O*NET OnLine database.

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