

SO YOU WANT TO BE A TATTOO ARTIST? 20 TIPS TO BECOMING A TATTOO ARTIST...

By Sunny Buick

1. You should already have several medium or large tattoos- you should know if you like the ambiance of the tattoo shop, you should know if you like the people involved in the tattoo industry, you should be comfortable with blood. You should have good social skills. Many artists are shy. You should be able to talk to clients and be sympathetic to their pain. If you detest humanity, tattooing may not be for you.



2. Never contact a shop by telephone or email, asking for an apprenticeship. This is why: I know why you contact me by email, it's because you are afraid of rejection. It doesn't matter how well you draw or how nice your email is, asking about apprenticeships by phone or email shows disrespect.



3. First person you should ask: your tattoo artist. Why don't you already have a tattoo by the person you want to ask to teach you how to tattoo? You don't have any money? Well, you will need to have money saved up for when you start to learn. You will not be earning anything for at least a year. Your tattoo equipment is going to be very expensive. Get another job and get some tattoos, and save your money. Meanwhile, you build up your drawing skills. These are investments in your future. It's not going to be easy.



4. Do not show up for your first tattoo appointment with your idol and announce that you want to learn how to tattoo. Get to know your tattoo artist and let them get to know you. When you feel that a bond has developed, you can start asking questions, then ask if you can show them your portfolio.

5. You should have a strong portfolio. There are already too many tattooers out there who are mediocre. There are all levels of tattoo skills out there, everything between childlike scratches to the Leonardo Davincis of tattooing. Don't make the mistake of seeing the most basic and saying "I could do that". It may look easy, but it is not. Tattoo artists today, willing teach others to tattoo, are looking for young people with potential, people who are humble enough to take direction and criticism. Someone who they can depend on, that will show up on time and work hard to become the best that they can be. Someone who already shows a lot of talent.



6. Tattoo schools are frowned upon, this is why: Anyone can apply to a tattoo school. The tradition of the tattoo apprenticeship is that the tattoo artist can hand pick who they want to transmit their knowledge to. We tattooers can control how many competitors we are putting out into the world. Because it is true, every tattooer that I form, will go on to be my competitor in the marketplace. If you ever become a tattoo artist you will understand this concept.

Why should a tattooer want to teach you everything they know? It is an exchange. You must do something for them. You can pay a tattoo school, but afterwards you will have a hard time finding a tattoo shop who wants to hire you. Unless it is a business owner who is not a tattoo artist, someone who just wants to make money. These shops are called factories.



7. The apprenticeship: What it is, what will be expected of you. You will be expected to work for free for a long trial period. You will probably not touch a tattoo machine for the first year. You should have some money saved. You will be expected to clean and do errands. You may be asked to not only clean and run the shop but also paint the shop, go to court with your boss, filter who gets to talk to your boss by telephone (like I was expected to do

during my apprenticeship with Henry Goldfield).



8. This is not the best time to get into the tattoo business. It is totally saturated, there are hundreds of shops in each city and hundreds of thousands of extremely talented tattoo artists already out there. (See No. 4).

9. Explore all the other options for a career in art. Some artists make illustrations based on tattoo designs and never touch a tattoo machine. They make t-shirts, prints, they have web shops or work in screen printing. Explore all your options. If you want to make a living as an artist, there are many possibilities, other than tattooing. Discover all the artists out there doing something similar to what you do and figure out how they make their living at it.

10. Paid apprenticeships. This used to be frowned upon in the past, but I think it may be a great way to accelerate your learning. The tattooer will be guaranteed that you won't leave as soon as you get the basics. The exchange is more transparent, it is a contract between two people. The tattooer offering to teach you for money should have a clear lesson plan and you should get some kind of guarantee in writing.

**NO PAIN
NO GAIN**

11. Learning on your own: the dangers. You can do a lot of damage when you don't know what you're doing. You can give your client a disease. You could get a disease from your client. You could even kill someone if their tattoo became infected. You could scar a lot of skin before you figure out what you're doing wrong. Having someone watching what you do, who has experience, will ensure that none of this happens.



12. You can learn many things online today for free. Many people don't want to have to pay someone with hard work or money in order to learn. **I learned the hard way**, through a six year apprenticeship and I can tell you **I was respected by all my colleagues** because I proved myself and didn't just take, take, take. I recently paid a coach to help me take my art to the next level, and I don't regret it. The fact that I paid a lot of money for this class, I worked my ass off to get the most out of it.

13. Does your art look like tattoo art? Many types of art are not tattooable. You may argue that anything can be tattooed. Unfortunately, many beautiful photos of hyper realistic tattoos look great when they are fresh. One year later they look like shit. Not to mention 30 years later when even a simple old school pinup just looks like the silhouette of a woman.

14. Exchange. What will you be expected to do to learn: What you put in is what you get back. The person who teaches you is giving you an enormous gift, a way to make money, travel, meet lots of interesting people and make a living as an artist. What are you going to do for them and for tattooing in return? Why should this person turn you into the competition? What's in it for them?



15. Why do you want to be a tattoo artist? I encourage you to write out at least a page of reasons why you want to tattoo. This will help you to discover your own motivations and whether or not they are worthy.

16. Are you ready to torture people day in, day out for the rest of your career? To deal with their blood, their whining, their wiggling? Are you ready to be of service to your clients? Ready to guide them to make good choices, ready to listen to their problems and be a friend to them? Are you ready to get married to tattooing?

17. A lot of young people see the tattoo artist as a rock star, someone with lots of admirers, lots of potential sexual experiences, a lot of money and prestige. You don't have to get up early in the morning and you don't really have a boss. It is true that there may be some tattooers who party a lot and who are treated like rock stars, but **all the best tattooers are very serious, extremely disciplined and work 12 to 14 hour days.** They are married to tattooing and sometimes their home life suffers because they give it all to tattooing. At the end of the day, after talking all day long with clients and colleagues, sometimes there's not much left for the ones they love. You must be someone who can find the balance.

18. What are your hygiene habits? Are you clean? Do you know about germs and take good care of yourself? If you don't take good care of yourself, your house, your room, you shouldn't be trusted to do a clean tattoo on someone else. You probably won't understand or care about the hygiene necessary to keep your clients safe. Tattooing is probably not for you. And you probably shouldn't get tattooed by someone who seems to have questionable hygiene.

19. If anyone ever helps you with advice or gives you direction for your career; you should buy them lunch or some flowers. If someone offers you an apprenticeship, you should do everything in your power to pay back this enormous gift. Work hard, be loyal, don't talk shit about your teacher.

20. Choose your mentor carefully. That way you will learn from someone who has something worthwhile to teach and you will be more likely to be treated well, with respect. You must be someone who can be respected and so should your teacher.

