

YMD MEDIA GROUP

The Creative Toolkit

8 Tools for Building a Creative Career

Informed by Adinkra philosophy from Ghana's Akan people, cooperative economics, real-world case studies, and hiring data from companies including Anthropoc, Nike, and Hermès.

With Milwaukee-specific salary data sourced from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Glassdoor, Robert Half, and PayScale. Case studies verified through published interviews, financial reporting, and industry profiles.

Built for high school students, college students, and early career creatives.

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How to use this toolkit: Each tool works independently but they connect as a system. Start with The Mirror to understand who you are, then use The Compass to set direction. The remaining tools build the specific skills, relationships, and structures you need. Take the Identity Map quiz at join.ymdmedia.co to discover which tools match your creative archetype.

TOOL 1

The Mirror

Creative Identity Self-Assessment

Sankofa — Learn from the past to build the future
"It is not taboo to go back and fetch what you have forgotten." — Akan proverb

Before you build a creative career, map who you already are. Not who you want to be — who you've been, based on what you've already been doing without anyone telling you to. Kyra Wells, founder of Seven Pillars Design Co. and president of AIGA Cleveland, started designing at age seven making election flyers for her father on Microsoft Word. Virgil Abloh's mother taught him to sew before he ever thought about fashion. Your creative identity didn't start today.

Part 1: Your Creative History

What's the first creative thing you remember making? (A drawing, a video, a song, a flyer — anything.)

What do people come to YOU for? (Designing things, filming, ideas, fixing things, making things look good?)

What do you create when nobody is watching and nobody asked?

Part 2: Your Creative Type

Check every box that fits. Most creatives are more than one type. Anthropic's Creative Director posting looks for people who work "across a wide range of formats." Nike's intern posting values "current and emerging trends and visual culture." The creative industry rewards versatility.

<input type="checkbox"/> The Visual	Design, photography, aesthetics, color, layout. Careers: Brand Designer (\$39K–\$120K+), Art Director (\$45K–\$140K+), UI/UX Designer (\$50K–\$130K+)
<input type="checkbox"/> The Storyteller	Video, film, writing, narrative. Careers: Video Producer (\$35K–\$150K+), Content Director (\$45K–\$120K+), Filmmaker (\$30K–\$200K+)
<input type="checkbox"/> The Connector	Social media, trends, community. Careers: Social Media Manager (\$52K–\$120K in MKE), Community Manager (\$40K–\$85K+), Content Strategist (\$50K–\$110K+)
<input type="checkbox"/> The Builder	Tech, code, workflows, systems. Careers: Creative Technologist (\$55K–\$140K+), Web Developer (\$45K–\$120K+), AI Workflow Designer (\$60K–\$150K+)
<input type="checkbox"/> The Performer	Music, hosting, on-camera, presence. Careers: Audio Producer (\$35K–\$100K+), On-Camera Talent (\$30K–\$200K+), Podcast Host (\$25K–\$150K+)
<input type="checkbox"/> The Thinker	Strategy, planning, directing, big-picture. Careers: Creative Director (\$65K–\$200K+), Brand Strategist (\$50K–\$130K+), Campaign Planner (\$45K–\$110K+)
<input type="checkbox"/> The Explorer	Multi-interested, cross-disciplinary. This IS the superpower. Tyler, the Creator built a \$17M fashion brand, a 50K-person festival, AND a Grammy-winning music career because he refused to pick one lane.

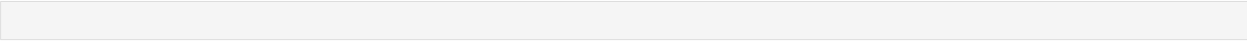
Salary ranges compiled from Glassdoor, PayScale, Robert Half, and BLS data for Milwaukee-Waukesha MSA and national averages (2025–2026).

Part 3: Honest Inventory

What are you GOOD at right now? Be specific — not 'art' but 'color palettes' or 'editing short-form video.'

What do you WANT to be good at but aren't yet?

What have you been avoiding? Why?



TOOL 2

The Compass

Goal Setting Framework

Nkyinkyim — Initiative, adaptability, and resilience
"Life's road is twisted." Make the best of every turn. — Akan proverb

Goals without structure are wishes. According to Robert Half's 2026 Demand for Skilled Talent report, 65% of marketing leaders plan to expand headcount in 2026, and 45% say finding skilled creative professionals is harder than a year ago. The opportunity is real — but you need a plan to capture it.

Step 1: Your Direction

In one sentence: what do you want to be doing creatively one year from now?

What would need to be true for that to happen? (Skills, tools, connections, portfolio, income)

Step 2: Your 30/60/90 Day Plan

TIMEFRAME	WHAT I WILL DO	HOW I'LL KNOW IT WORKED
30 days		
60 days		
90 days		

Step 3: Weekly Non-Negotiables

Tyler, the Creator uploads his own music, directs his own videos, and designs his own clothes — not because he has more time, but because he treats creative practice like a discipline. What will you commit to doing EVERY WEEK?

Creative habit — minimum 1 hour/week making something:

Learning habit — 1 tutorial, 1 article, or 1 conversation per week:

Sharing habit — post 1 thing publicly, even if it's imperfect:

Robert Half, "2026 Marketing Job Market: In-Demand Roles and Hiring Trends," February 2026.

TOOL 3

The Network Map

Relationship Mapping

Ananse Ntontan — Wisdom, creativity, and interconnection

"When Ananse is at home, we don't ask who wove the web." — Akan proverb

Virgil Abloh interned at Fendi alongside Kanye West for \$500/month in 2009. That relationship led to creative directing *Watch the Throne*, launching Pyrex Vision, building Off-White, and ultimately becoming Artistic Director at Louis Vuitton. Tyler, the Creator credited Virgil with helping build Golf le Fleur's supply chain. Opportunities come from people, not job boards.

Inner Circle — 5 people closest to your creative life

Name	What they do	How they help you grow
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

Aspirational Circle — 5 people you want to learn from

Name	Why them?	One way to connect
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

The Gap

Who is MISSING from your network? A mentor? A peer who challenges you? Someone in the industry?

One specific action THIS WEEK to connect with someone new:

TOOL 4

The Stack

Skills Tracker with Industry Benchmarks

Mate Masie — Wisdom through listening and learning
"The depth of wisdom is: I have heard and kept it." — Akan proverb

In March 2026, Resume.org surveyed 991 hiring managers: 6 in 10 said creative thinkers are now more valuable than coders. 48% of companies are actively upskilling their creative teams. But they're not hiring for everything — they're hiring for specific, demonstrable skills. Rate yourself: 1 = heard of it, 3 = can do with help, 5 = could teach someone.

Design Skills

Skill	1	2	3	4	5 + Next step to level up
Graphic Design (Canva/Figma/Illustrator)					
Typography and Layout					
Color Theory and Visual Hierarchy					
Brand Identity Systems					
UI/UX Fundamentals					

Production Skills

Skill	1	2	3	4	5 + Next step to level up
Video Editing (CapCut/Resolve/Premiere)					
Photography and Composition					
Audio / Music Production					
Motion Graphics / Animation					
Lighting, Sound, and Digital Workflows					

Strategy, Communication & AI

Skill	1	2	3	4	5 + Next step to level up
Writing (captions, briefs, pitches)					
Social Media Strategy					
Presenting / Pitching Creative Work					
Project Management (Asana/Notion)					
AI Tools (ChatGPT, Claude, Canva AI)					
Prompt Engineering					

Resume.org, "6 in 10 Hiring Managers Say Creative Thinkers Are More Valuable Than Coders," March 2026.

Top 3 Skills to Build in the Next 90 Days

1.

2.

3.

TOOL 5

The Blueprint

Business and Freelance Planning

Dwennimmen — Strength paired with humility

"It is the heart and not the horns that leads a ram to bully." — Akan proverb

A business starts when someone pays you for something you're good at. Not when you file an LLC. Black business owners have median business interests of \$70,000 compared to \$140,000 for white business owners (Urban Institute, 2024) — not because of less talent, but because of systemic barriers to capital, contracts, and networks. This tool helps you build despite those barriers by starting where you are.

What Are You Selling?

What can you do RIGHT NOW that someone would pay for?

Who needs it? Be specific — a barber, a church, a small business, a musician?

How much would you charge? (Start: \$25–50 small, \$100–200 medium, \$500+ packages)

Your First 5 Clients

The first 3 are free — portfolio pieces. The next 2 pay. This is how Tyler started Golf Wang: product first, audience second, revenue third.

#	Who	What you'll make them	Free or paid?
1			Free — portfolio piece
2			Free — portfolio piece
3			Free — portfolio piece
4			Paid: \$ _____
5			Paid: \$ _____

Cooperative Economics Check

Your success should create opportunities for others. Marshall Shorts (Columbus, OH) founded PitchBlack — a microgrant program that distributed \$22,000+ directly to Black creative projects through community-funded pitch events. When he built his design practice, he simultaneously built infrastructure for other creatives. That's the difference between hustling and building.

Who benefits when you succeed? (Friends you can hire, orgs you serve, creatives you refer)

How will you reinvest your first \$500? (Tools? Pay a collaborator? Take a course? Give back?)

Urban Institute, "Black Entrepreneurship and Education, Training & Workforce Development," July 2024.

TOOL 6

The Clock

Time Management for Creatives

Aya — Endurance, independence, perseverance
The fern grows in the harshest conditions. So can you. — Akan symbol

You have school, maybe a job, family, a social life. Creative work has to fit around all of it. Kyra Wells balances a full-time Art Director role at American Greetings with running Seven Pillars Design Co. and teaching as an adjunct professor. Tyler, the Creator built Golf Wang while touring and recording. The time exists — you just haven't claimed it yet.

Map Your Actual Week

Time	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
7–9 AM							
9–12 PM							
12–3 PM							
3–6 PM							
6–9 PM							
9–11 PM							

Find Your Creative Windows

Where are the gaps? Highlight at least 5 hours you can claim for creative work.

When do you do your BEST thinking? (Morning? Late night? Weekend afternoons?)

What steals your creative time? (Phone, TV, procrastination, other people's priorities?)

Your Weekly Creative Schedule

Day	Time	What I'll work on	Duration

TOOL 7

The Portfolio Builder

Portfolio Construction Framework

Nike's Innovation Brand Creative Studio Intern posting requires "3–5 projects illustrating your process from ideation to finished product." Anthropropic's Creative Director posting requires "a strong portfolio demonstrating creative vision, strategic thinking, and the ability to work across a wide range of formats." This tool helps you build exactly what they're asking for.

The Rule: 3 Projects Minimum

You don't need 30. You need 3 excellent ones that show the problem, your process, and the result. Each project should tell a story: what was the challenge, how did you approach it, what did you deliver, what did you learn.

Project 1

The problem — what needed to be solved or created?

Your process — how did you approach it? Tools used? What changed along the way?

The result — what did you deliver? What was the impact?

What you learned — what would you do differently?

Project 2

The problem — what needed to be solved or created?

Your process — how did you approach it? Tools used? What changed along the way?

The result — what did you deliver? What was the impact?

What you learned — what would you do differently?

Project 3

The problem — what needed to be solved or created?

Your process — how did you approach it? Tools used? What changed along the way?

The result — what did you deliver? What was the impact?

What you learned — what would you do differently?

Where to Host It

<input type="checkbox"/> Instagram Highlight	Free, fast, mobile-first	Best if audience is already there
<input type="checkbox"/> Behance	Free, professional, discoverable	Best for design, photo, illustration
<input type="checkbox"/> Personal website	Free via Cargo, Notion, Wix	Best for long-term professional brand
<input type="checkbox"/> Google Drive folder	Free, easiest to start now	Good enough for first applications

The 30-Day Rule: every 30 days, remove your weakest piece and add your strongest new one. Your portfolio shows your current best — not your complete history. Three excellent projects beat thirty mediocre ones.

Nike Innovation Brand Creative Studio Intern posting, careers.nike.com, 2026. Anthropic Creative Director posting, greenhouse.io/anthropic, 2026.

TOOL 8

The Proof

Case Studies: Three Paths to a Creative Career

Three real people who built creative careers through ownership, systems thinking, and craft. Study the decisions, not just the achievements. Each story maps to the toolkit's core principles: cooperative economics, creative excellence, and building infrastructure — not just products.

Case Study 1

Virgil Abloh

Architecture degree → \$500/month intern → Off-White founder → Louis Vuitton Artistic Director

Born 1980 in Rockford, Illinois to Ghanaian immigrant parents. Mother was a seamstress who taught him to sew. Father worked at a paint store. No fashion school. No design degree. Civil engineering at UW-Madison (2002), then architecture at IIT Chicago (2006).

2005	Co-ran THE BRILLIANCE blog with Chicago designers Benjamin Edgar and Chuck Anderson
2009	Interned at Fendi in Rome for \$500/month alongside Kanye West. Fendi CEO Michael Burke: "I was really impressed with how they brought a whole new vibe to the studio."
2009	Co-founded RSVP Gallery (Chicago) with Don C — retail concept mixing streetwear and high fashion
2011	Appointed Creative Director of Kanye's agency DONDA. Grammy nomination for Watch the Throne art direction
2012	Founded Pyrex Vision — bought Ralph Lauren flannels at \$40, screen-printed them, sold at \$550
2013	Founded Off-White in Milan. Streetwear meets high fashion. Quotation marks as design language
2015	LVMH Prize finalist for Young Fashion Designers
2017	"The Ten" Nike collaboration — deconstructed 10 silhouettes. Changed sneaker culture
2018	Appointed Artistic Director, Louis Vuitton menswear. First Black designer in the role at a major French house. Invited thousands of students to his debut show. Caption: "You can do it too."
2021	LVMH acquired majority stake in Off-White. Expanded Abloh's role across LVMH portfolio. Created LVMH Black Database and Post-Modern Scholarship Fund

Key principle: Virgil's "3% rule" — a new design can be created by changing an original by only 3%. He compared himself to hip-hop artists sampling other musicians. You don't need to invent from zero. See what exists and add your perspective.

Sources: Britannica, Business of Fashion, Highsnobiety, Dazed, Wikipedia. All quotes verified from published interviews.

Case Study 2

Tyler, the Creator

Self-taught → kept masters → \$17M fashion brand → 50,000-person festival → luxury rebrand → 3 Grammys

Born 1991 in Hawthorne, California. Raised by a single mother. Self-taught in music production, video direction, and design. No formal training in any of them. Every creative decision he’s made prioritizes ownership over access.

2011	Turned down traditional record deals. Structured Odd Future Records as a distribution deal with RED/Sony — kept masters, 100% creative control. Manager Chris Clancy: “Freedom and ownership was the whole point.”
2011	Goblin debuted at No. 5 on Billboard 200 with 45,000 first-week units
2011–13	Golf Wang launched as apparent merch, separated into standalone brand by 2013. Tyler: “When people call Golf Wang merch, it’s not merch. It doesn’t say Tyler, the Creator on everything.”
2012	First Camp Flog Gnaw: ~2,000 fans in a Nokia Theatre parking lot at \$50/ticket
2017	First Golf Wang flagship store, 350 N Fairfax Ave, LA. Included indoor skating bowl
2018	Golf Wang reached \$17M annual revenue. No outside investors. No venture capital
2019	Camp Flog Gnaw at Dodger Stadium: ~50,000 attendees. Won WSJ Music Innovator of the Year
2019	IGOR: first No. 1 album (165K units). Won Best Rap Album Grammy
2021	Launched Golf le Fleur as luxury lifestyle brand. Sweaters \$495, fragrances \$200, Schott leather jacket \$1,100. Virgil Abloh helped build the Italian supply chain
2024	CHROMAKOPIA: No. 1 debut with 299,500 units in 4 days. Released on a Monday — defying industry norms. 3rd consecutive No. 1

Career totals: 7M albums sold, 41M digital singles (RIAA). 3 Grammy wins. Stores in LA, NYC, London, Sydney. Est. net worth ~\$30M — entirely from owned businesses.

Key principle: Tyler never licensed his brand. Never gave free product to celebrities. Never went wide — he went deep. “I’d rather sell 20 shirts to people who actually want it.” Every venture feeds the others: music drives fashion, fashion drives festival, festival drives discovery.

Sources: Complex, Billboard, Business of Fashion, WWD, Trapital, Wikipedia. Revenue and sales figures from published interviews and RIAA certifications.

Case Study 3

Kyra Wells

Community college → state university → pandemic graduation → own design practice → AIGA president

Cleveland, Ohio. Homeschooled. Started designing at age 7–8 making election flyers for her father on Microsoft Word. Took college-credit design courses at Cuyahoga Community College while still in high school. No elite school. No family connections in the industry. No blueprint.

Age 7–8	Made election flyers for her father on Microsoft Word. His secretary's reaction was her first creative validation
High school	Homeschooled. Enrolled in creative programs: Cudell Fine Art Center, Cleveland Institute of Art pre-college, college-credit design at Tri-C
Community college	Associate degree in graphic design at Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C). Professor George Kopec recruited her into graphic design from a drawing class
University	BA in Graphic Design, Cleveland State University. Graduated March 2020 — into the pandemic
2020	Crisis. No plan. Sister pushed her: "You have the time right now. You might not have the time in the future."
2020	Founded Seven Pillars Design Co. — strategic brand design for women entrepreneurs. Named after Proverbs 9:1
Present	Art Director & Designer at American Greetings (day job). Adjunct professor at Tri-C (where she started). President of AIGA Cleveland
2024	Named to Crain's Cleveland Business "20 in Their 20s." Featured on Revision Path Ep. 539
Community	Hosts "You're Not an Imposter" workshops. Teaches 5-week creative career course. Curates Cleveland Art Wall

Key quote: "There's another Kyra out there. Another girl like me that wasn't sure what their future was. The creative arts — especially for people of color — you may not have a blueprint in your family of another person in the creative arts making a career out of it." You ARE the blueprint.

Sources: *CAN Journal* (Spring 2025), *The Vindicator* (February 2021), *Revision Path Ep. 539* (January 2024), *PRINT Magazine*, *Crain's Cleveland Business*, *AIGA Cleveland*.

Your Turn

Which case study resonates most with you? Why?

What's ONE decision from their story you can apply to YOUR creative path this week?

APPENDIX A

Milwaukee Creative Economy: Salary Data

The Milwaukee-Waukesha metropolitan area had an average hourly wage of \$31.18 in May 2024 (BLS). Below are salary ranges specific to creative roles in the Milwaukee area, compiled from multiple sources.

Design Roles — Milwaukee

Role	Entry Level	Mid Career	Senior / Top 10%
Graphic Designer	\$39,000	\$52,561	\$80,059–\$98,861
Art Director	\$48,000	\$75,000	\$110,000+
Brand Designer	\$42,000	\$63,000	\$95,000+
UI/UX Designer	\$50,000	\$72,000	\$110,000+

Glassdoor Milwaukee (March 2026), PayScale Milwaukee (2026), BLS Occupational Employment data.

Content & Social Media Roles — Milwaukee

Role	Entry Level	Mid Career	Senior / Top 10%
Social Media Manager	\$51,924	\$69,145	\$92,761–\$120,184
Social Media Specialist	\$42,400	\$54,964	\$79,234
Content Strategist	\$45,000	\$65,000	\$95,000+
Marketing Manager	\$52,000	\$75,000	\$110,000+

Glassdoor Milwaukee (March 2026), ZipRecruiter Wisconsin (2025–2026), Robert Half 2026 Salary Guide.

Production & Video Roles — Milwaukee

Role	Entry Level	Mid Career	Senior / Top 10%
Video Producer	\$35,000	\$55,000	\$85,000+
Videographer / Editor	\$32,000	\$48,000	\$72,000+
Creative Director	\$65,000	\$95,000	\$140,000+
Photographer	\$30,000	\$45,000	\$70,000+

BLS Milwaukee-Waukesha MSA (May 2024), Glassdoor, Indeed Milwaukee postings.

AI & Tech-Adjacent Creative Roles — National

Role	Entry Level	Mid Career	Senior / Top 10%
Prompt Engineer	\$70,000	\$100,000	\$150,000+
AI Creative Director	\$80,000	\$120,000	\$200,000+
Creative Technologist	\$55,000	\$85,000	\$130,000+
AI Content Strategist	\$60,000	\$90,000	\$130,000+

National averages from Glassdoor, LinkedIn Salary Insights, and Indeed (2025–2026). AI roles are emerging; salary ranges are rapidly shifting.

Context: The average annual salary in Milwaukee is \$68,342 (ReadySetHire, 2025). Creative roles span from \$30K entry to \$200K+ senior. The key variable isn't the city — it's the skill stack. AI literacy, portfolio quality, and cross-disciplinary capability are the multipliers that push salaries from entry to senior range.

APPENDIX B

Industry Research & Statistics

The State of Creative Hiring (March 2026)

Resume.org surveyed 991 U.S. hiring managers (March 4, 2026). Key findings:

- 6 in 10 hiring managers say creative thinkers are more valuable than coders in the age of AI
- 39% of companies increased hiring for creative roles in 2026 (vs. 36% for technical roles)
- 48% of companies are actively upskilling their creative workforce
- 34% laid off production-level creatives, but simultaneously hired strategic and AI-fluent creatives
- Industries growing creative teams fastest: Technology (52%), Manufacturing (47%), Financial Services (43%)

Resume.org via IBJ Online, "6 in 10 Hiring Managers Say Creative Thinkers Are More Valuable Than Coders," March 17, 2026.

Marketing & Creative Job Market (2026)

- 376,200 marketing and creative job postings in the U.S. in 2025
- 65% of marketing leaders plan to expand permanent headcount in H1 2026
- 45% say finding skilled creative professionals is harder than a year ago
- 88% of marketing leaders say staffing firms have been effective at addressing AI-related hiring challenges
- Strongest demand: digital marketing, content execution, analytics, and marketing automation

Robert Half, "2026 Marketing Job Market: In-Demand Roles and Hiring Trends," February 17, 2026.

What Top Companies Look For

Anthropic (Creative Director posting, 2026): "10+ years of creative leadership... a strong portfolio demonstrating creative vision, strategic thinking, and the ability to work across a wide range of formats... genuine editorial sensibility... you read widely, you care about how ideas are expressed in language."

Anthropic (Copy/Content CD, 2026): "First drafts are abundant and judgment is scarce — your job is curation, elevation, and the creative calls that require taste and stakes-awareness."

Nike (Innovation Brand Creative Studio Intern, 2026): "Must present a portfolio: 3–5 projects illustrating process from ideation to finished product. Passion and understanding of current and emerging trends. Proficient in Adobe CC."

Nike/Converse (Lead Brand Creative, 2026): "Deep connection to streetwear culture and trend. Familiarity with project tracking tools such as Asana."

Hermès (culture page): "Hermès gave me a chance, even though I didn't tick all the boxes. From leather-worker to workshop manager, I have had various roles within the house."

Anthropic: job-boards.greenhouse.io/anthropic and jobs.accel.com/companies/anthropic. Nike: careers.nike.com. Hermès: welcometothejungle.com/en/companies/hermes.

Black Entrepreneurship Data

- Black business owners have \$70,000 in median business interests vs. \$140,000 for white owners
- In H1 2025, nearly 300,000 Black women exited the U.S. labor force; many launched businesses in response
- Black women-owned employer firms had the lowest average revenue at \$650,000 (2025)
- 72% of surveyed Black-owned firms lacked essential business operations systems
- Entrepreneurship barriers: unequal access to capital, insufficient contracts, volatile economic conditions

Urban Institute, July 2024. Wells Fargo IWOB Report, 2026. Essence, March 2026. Building Black Business Report, 2024.

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This toolkit was created for The Lab creative residency, YMD internship programs, and any young creative ready to start building.
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