The Five Basic Skills of Drawing
by Dan Johnson

A free guide for improving your drawing skills, originally published on Right Brain Rockstar
http://rightbrainrockstar.com/the-five-basic-skills-of-drawing/
In her classic book, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, Betty Edwards identifies five basic skills of drawing, as follows:

- The Perception of Edges
- The Perception of Spaces
- The Perception of Relationships
- The Perception of Light & Shadow
- The Perception of the Whole or Gestalt

The following pages explores each of these basic skills in turn, expanding on their use in drawing, and suggesting some specific techniques to help you master the five basic skills.
1. The Perception of Edges


If you want to improve the accuracy and realism of your artwork, be it drawing, painting, sculpture, whatever, the best thing you can do is study the basic skills of drawing.

Let’s take a look at the first of those skills – The Perception of Edges – and see how it can help improve our drawing.

**What is an Edge?**

In drawing, an edge is a boundary that separates two areas.

We are all introduced to the concept of edges in drawing from an early age, when we draw lines to make simple shapes to represent people, houses etc.
a simple line drawing – Each line is a boundary (or edge) between two areas

The problem is, when viewing reality, very few edges actually appear as a solid line, like you would get from drawing a line with a pencil. Edges vary in their sharpness from very soft to very sharp, and we need to pay attention to that in order to achieve a realistic drawing.
Look at the range of softness to sharpness in the edges of this drawing

Of course, much of the realism is achieved through the use of value (light and shadow), which we will come to later. The accurate representation of lights and darks creates the illusion of depth which makes a drawing look realistic.

But even a drawing with perfectly accurate values will not look as convincing if all of the edges are equally sharp.

**So what determines the sharpness or softness of an edge?**
Sharp edges can be found in areas of high contrast, such as the sharp edge indicated above where the dark eyebrow meets the light skin. They are commonly found in cast shadows caused by strong, direct light, such as the shadow under the nose in the image above.

Soft edges are found on gentle curved forms, such as the cheek, and areas of low contrast, such as the edge where the hair meets the background. Soft edges are often seen when the light is not as harsh.

**Creating focus through edges**

We can use this knowledge of sharp and soft edges to create a more convincing illusion of depth, by softening certain edges to make them appear out of focus.

In reality, when we focus on a person’s face at talking distance, for example, only the area we are looking directly at will be in focus. The rest of the face is seen in our peripheral vision and will be slightly out of focus.

We can recreate this sense of focus to some extent in our drawings and paintings, by drawing sharp edges in the area we want as the focal point, and softening edges in the surrounding areas.
Look at the hard edge in the image above, where the light side of the face meets the dark hat, compared to the soft edge of the shoulder on the right, which blurs into the background, so that our eye is drawn to the face and not the shoulder.

Start paying more attention to the edges when you draw and paint. Don’t just draw everything as a solid outline, but look for sharp edges and soft edges, and think about what you want the viewer to focus on in
your drawing.

If you have any questions on the perception of edges, you can leave a comment on the original post at http://rightbrainrockstar.com/art-instruction/basic-drawing-skills-perception-edges/
2. The Perception of Spaces


**The Power of Negative Thinking**

When we talk about spaces in drawing, we are usually referring to ‘negative spaces’, which are the shapes that surround the ‘positive forms’. I touched briefly upon this in my [3 handy tips for learning to see like an artist](http://rightbrainrockstar.com/art-instruction/basic-drawing-skills-perception-spaces/).

In simple terms, if you are drawing a figure, the positive forms are the shapes that make up the form of the figure, and the negative spaces are the shapes created by everything outside of the figure (i.e. the background of the drawing and the gaps in the figure where the background shows through.)
Positive form in blue (left) and negative spaces in green (right)

The reason we are taught to focus on negative spaces when drawing, is that these are usually abstract shapes, and it’s much easier to draw them accurately, because our brain has no language-based concept of how these shapes should look.
If someone drew a random shape on a piece of paper, and asked you to copy it, you’d probably do ok, because you would be forced to copy based purely on the appearance of the shape.

But if someone gave you a picture of a person and asked you to copy, say, the shape of the right leg, you would probably find it harder, because you’d naturally refer to your preconceived knowledge of what a leg should look like, which would lead to an inaccurate drawing.

So we focus on negative spaces to remove the left-brain tendency to draw what we think we see instead of what we actually see.

The magic part is that by accurately drawing all of the negative spaces, we are automatically drawing all of the positive forms too, without realising it (as the edges of every negative space form a boundary with a positive form).

So for example, you can draw a series of 11 abstract shapes, and before you know it, you’ve drawn a bench, without even trying to draw a bench!
How Do You Draw an Eye? Simple, You Don’t!

A common question I’m asked by beginner artists is ‘how do I draw eyes?’, ‘how do I draw faces?’ ‘how do I draw XYZ?’

The best answer I can give, other than ‘just draw what you see’ (not helpful), is don’t draw eyes, faces or whatever, but draw the negative spaces. In effect, draw everything you see except for the thing you’re trying to draw, and you will find it magically appears, looking more convincing than you believed possible!
Let me know how you get on with drawing negative spaces, and if you found this lesson useful, I’d love to hear from you and see your drawings.

If you have any questions about the perception of spaces, you can leave a comment on the original post at http://rightbrainrockstar.com/art-instruction/basic-drawing-skills-perception-spaces/
3. The Perception of Relationships

Optical Illusions

When we create a drawing (or painting), we must remember that every area of the drawing has an effect on its surrounding areas, so that sometimes a **change in one area can create the illusion of a change in another area**.

For example, if you draw a square in pencil on white paper, and shade it in with a medium value, you might judge that the square is quite dark.

But if you then surround the square with a very dark background, suddenly it seems much lighter.
Which grey square is darker? In fact, they are exactly the same value

This is because the relationship of values has changed. The original square seemed dark against the white paper, but now it seems quite light relative to the darker background we added.

We need to understand this kind of optical illusion in order to know where our drawing needs to be adjusted.

Sometimes you may be working on a shadow area which seems quite dark, so you try to darken the value in your drawing accordingly, when in fact what you may need to do is to lighten the surrounding values, which makes the shadow appear darker in relation to the lighter values.
But anyway, lights and shadows are for the next lesson...

**Everything is Relative**

It’s not just values that have relationships. We need to consider the relationships between edges and spaces too.

For example, when drawing a face: ‘what is the angle of the mouth, relative to the jawline?’

‘How big is the ear shape compared to the length of the nose, what angle does it make, and how far away is it?’
Consider the relationships between edges and shapes as well as values

It’s only by seeing, and accurately describing these relationships, that we will get a convincing drawing.

**How Do You Measure Up?**

A common way to accurately judge these relationships is by measuring.

There are many different ways of measuring in drawing, but one of the most common is the concept of
the basic unit.

The basic unit is a measurement decided upon by the artist, which is used as a reference against which everything else is measured.

If you’ve ever watched artists drawing, you may have been puzzled to see them, from time to time, holding their pencil in an outstretched hand, while closing one eye. What they are doing here is measuring with a basic unit.

*Taking the nose length as a basic unit*
For example, when drawing a portrait, the width of an eye is often used as a basic unit. Here’s how it’s done:

Hold your pencil out in your fully outstretched arm (to make sure the distance is the same every time), and position the tip of your pencil in line with one corner of the eye on your model (or reference photo).

Now slide your thumb along the pencil, away from the tip, until it is in line with the other corner of the eye.

You now have your basic unit, which is one eye width. Keeping your thumb in position, you can now move around the face, comparing the length of other features to your basic unit.

So you might discover that both eyes are the same width, and there is exactly one eye width between the eyes too. Perhaps the length of the nose is one and a half times the width of the eye, and the ear is the same length as the nose.
Once you have these measurements, you can transfer them to your drawing. Make marks for the corners of the first eye, and then, keeping the measurements you made earlier in mind, make marks for the other eye, the bottom of the nose, the ear etc.

You can then measure the eye you have drawn, again using your pencil and thumb, and then use that measurement to check that your other marks are in the right place, adjusting them accordingly.

**Always make your marks first**, and then measure and correct if necessary. This will help to train your eye to judge relationships more accurately. If you measure before you make each mark, you will come to rely
on the measurements and you won’t learn to judge relationships without measuring.

This is a pretty simplified account of how to use a basic unit for measuring relationships, and there are plenty more techniques you can use, but this covers the basic concept, and should help you to draw more accurately.

If you have any questions about the perception of relationships, you can leave a comment on the original post at [http://rightbrainrockstar.com/art-instruction/perception-of-relationships-the-five-basic-skills-of-drawing-part-3/](http://rightbrainrockstar.com/art-instruction/perception-of-relationships-the-five-basic-skills-of-drawing-part-3/)
4. The Perception of Light and Shadow

Originally published at http://rightbrainrockstar.com/art-instruction/basic-drawing-skills-light-shadow/

It could be argued that the perception of light and shadow is the most important skill in drawing and painting.

Often, when you look at a drawing that doesn’t quite look convincing, the problem is an error in the lightness or darkness (the value) of certain areas.

These errors can cause problems because when we look at an object in reality, we see the shape of it as described by the way the light falls upon it. If we draw this light incorrectly, then the shapes will look wrong.

If light is shining on a face from the right, then shadows are formed to the left in areas where the light is blocked. If we make these shadows too dark or too light, it changes the appearance of the surface, making the drawing appear inconsistent with reality.
Inaccurate values (right) make a drawing appear inconsistent with reality

Drawing accurate values (often referred to as *shading*) is the key to achieving a convincing three-dimensional illusion in your drawings.

**Limitation of media**

When we talk about accuracy of values in a drawing, it doesn’t mean that you have to draw the exact values that you see in reality.

In fact it’s almost impossible to do so, because no drawing or painting medium can represent the full range
of values that we see in reality.

What we are really talking about is accurate value relationships.

What this means is that we need to focus on the relationships between the values, rather than the values themselves.

For example, if you’re drawing with an HB pencil, and trying to represent something which, in reality, is very dark, almost black. The pencil simply doesn’t allow you to draw such a dark value, so instead, we focus
on the value relationships.

Use the darkest value you can get out of your pencil to represent the darkest dark of your subject. And let’s say the lightest light will be represented by the white of the paper (which again is not as light as the lightest light in reality).

Then, if you see a value in reality, which appears to be midway between the darkest dark and the lightest light, then you would draw that value as midway between the your dark pencil tone and the white paper.

All the values of your drawing will be scaled in this way, to keep the value relationships accurate.
By focusing on value relationships, you can draw or paint accurately in any medium, no matter how limited the value range.

**Learning to see values**

I spend a lot of time just doing value studies, where the only purpose of the drawing is to practice seeing value relationships. Here’s a value study I did as an assignment for [Jason Seiler’s Schoolism class](http://schoolism.com). The painting was done in Photoshop over the top of an original sketch by Jason.
Value study painted over a sketch by Jason Seiler
The best technique for learning to see values and value relationships accurately is **squinting**.

By narrowing your eyes, you remove a lot of detail, allowing you to more easily see the values. When I’m blocking in values, I do most of it with my eyes squinted when looking at the subject (make sure you open your eyes when looking at your drawing though!)

If you have any questions about the perception of light and shadow, you can leave a comment on the original post at [http://rightbrainrockstar.com/art-instruction/basic-drawing-skills-light-shadow/](http://rightbrainrockstar.com/art-instruction/basic-drawing-skills-light-shadow/)
5. Perception of the Whole, or Gestalt


The previous skills have focused on identifying and drawing different parts of an image, requiring us to focus on small sections at a time.

The perception of the whole or gestalt (gestalt means ‘unified whole’), requires us to take a step back and look at every part of the picture at the same time.

As a beginner artist, it’s all too easy to get wrapped up in one small area of a drawing, and focus solely on that, before moving onto the next small area. When you finally take a broad look at the whole drawing, you will often find that although the individual parts may be quite accurate, it doesn’t quite work together as a whole.

This is why it’s very important to constantly step back from the detailed work of defining edges, spaces and shadows, and focus on the whole picture, making sure that all the individual elements of the drawing work together to create a coherent and harmonious image.

**Keep the Whole in Mind at All Times**

In part 2 of this series, I said that the best way to draw an eye is to not draw an eye, but draw everything
except the eye and watch the eye magically appear.

That advice still stands, but at the same time as you’re focusing on not drawing an eye, and instead just drawing the edges and shapes that will eventually come together to form the eye, you also need to be aware of the entire drawing at once, and making sure that what you are drawing does in fact look like the eye you’re trying to draw.

That may sound like a contradiction, but it’s really just a case of regularly stepping back from your work to take in the overall image, and make sure that it’s progressing in the right direction.

Perception of the whole is really about learning to use the other four skills effectively while still keeping in mind the overall effect of the entire drawing.

**Drawing in Broad Stages**

The best advice I can give for practicing the perception of the whole, is to keep your whole drawing at roughly the same level of completeness throughout.

A common mistake that beginners make is to focus on a single area, say, the nose, and work on this part of the drawing until it is finished to a high level of detail before moving on to start the mouth.

This method can work, and I’ve seen some great drawings made this way, but I find it much more effective to build up the detail gradually over the whole drawing. First block in the main outline of the whole face (or
whatever you’re drawing), then refine the shapes around the whole drawing, add some shadows to the whole drawing, and so on, so that the drawing progresses at the same rate in every area.

This way it’s much easier to keep the whole in mind, and make sure the different elements of your drawing work well together throughout.

If you have any questions about perception of the whole or gestalt, you can leave a comment on the original post at http://rightbrainrockstar.com/art-instruction/perception-of-the-whole-or-gestalt-the-five-basic-skills-of-drawing-part-5/

Thanks for reading!
I hope you’ve found this guide useful. If you liked it, I’d really appreciate it if you would share it with anyone else who might find it useful.

You can either email it to them directly, or send them to the original post, where they can download it themselves - http://rightbrainrockstar.com/the-five-basic-skills-of-drawing/

I’d also be very grateful if you would tweet this link or share it on Facebook. Thanks!

Dan