How to Draw People

A Free Excerpt From Life Drawing: How to Portray the Figure with Accuracy and Expression

BY ROBERT BARRETT
Mapping the Figure

This model had great anatomical definition, which made mapping his figure easier. He also had lots of energy and found it difficult to sit still. Consequently, I gave him frequent breaks.
Using a grid to measure and map the figure is not a new process; in fact, there are many historical examples of gridding. Renaissance artists Leonardo da Vinci and Albrecht Dürer used the device extensively. Though some examples of gridding may seem complicated or complex, this measuring process is, nonetheless, a useful tool for adding objectivity to a drawing. Other tools used to eliminate unwanted subjectivity include mirrors, compasses and framing devices such as a viewfinder. I suggest using a simple form of gridding to plot points and angles when completing a traditional drawing because it will help you establish the correct position and dimension of proportional relationships.

Through my years of teaching, I have concluded that the practice of measuring establishes accuracy in a drawing and instills both confidence and conviction in the artist. If you know that a certain point in your drawing is accurate and that other points are correct in their relationship to that point, you’re well on your way to adding conviction to the drawing process.

**Create an “Envelope” Around the Figure**
A first step in gridding the subject is placing an “envelope” around the outside edges of the figure. It’s helpful to use only straight lines during this process because landmarks will occur at intersections where the angle of each line changes direction.

**Plot the Inside Landmarks**
After you establish the envelope and create the outside angles and proportions, look for inner landmarks. These are often located at points where two angles intersect or at “hard places” where the skeleton is close to the surface.
**Materials List**
- Kneaded eraser
- Nupastel stick
- Paper towels
- Sanding block
- Sketch paper

**1 Start with the Angles and Big Shapes**
As you begin drawing, place large areas of value lightly on your paper. Look for the big shapes and the overall silhouette of the figure. Pay particular attention to the angles of the shapes.

**2 Define the Angles and Shapes**
After you’ve ghosted in the figure in Step 1, begin to define the specific angles and shapes. At this point, look mainly at the outside contours and assess the relative distances between your points.

After setting up an initial gesture drawing, use a grid to help establish relationships and proportions. This process includes using landmarks and either lines or angles. As you begin, look for the strongest angles or lines on the outside of the model. Then try to duplicate those general angles as closely as possible with lines. Simultaneously, note the points where lines change direction. It’s helpful to hold your charcoal or pastel up to the model to assess the exact angle of an outside surface, then transfer it directly to your drawing surface. Assess the length of the line as much as possible. Lines don’t actually exist in space but are a contrivance to help separate spaces and boundaries between objects and values.
3 **Focus on the Inner Landmarks**

As you move from the outside angles and shapes to the inner ones, carefully locate and place these landmarks relative to the outside ones. The form shadows on the inside of the figure are important to consider as you connect your inner landmarks to each other.

4 **Strengthen and Adjust ▼**

Continue to strengthen and clarify your drawing as you define each shape and contour line. Look closely at the negative shapes or "windows" between the arms and the torso, for example, and make sure these are correct. As you work from larger units to smaller ones, add more detail.
Vertical and Horizontal Plumb Lines

As you check the relationship of one form to another, it’s helpful to use a series of vertical plumb lines.

Check Your Points
When you’ve completed the lines around the figure, you’ll have an envelope from which to make other measurements. It’s also useful to check your landmarks (where the angles change directions), by using vertical and horizontal plumb lines. Plumb lines are vertical or horizontal lines that remain constant and are another objective device that will help you determine if your proportions and relationships are correct.

Don’t hesitate to locate the same point by using more than one angle or measurement to assess its placement; the old adage, “measure twice, cut once” holds true here. Sometimes the technique of locating the same point with more than one angle is known as triangulation, where three lines intersect at a common location. This might be the point where a vertical, a horizontal and a diagonal line intersect, or it may be where three separate diagonals intersect. This principle could be utilized in determining landmarks where as few as two lines intersect or where many intersect, as with the center of a wagon wheel.

Vertical Plumb Lines
As you check the relationship of one form to another, it’s helpful to use a series of vertical plumb lines.

Horizontal Plumb Lines
Notice how different landmarks appear along the same line.

Diagonal Lines and Triangulation
Use diagonal lines to locate landmarks and establish the distances between them. Points where several lines intersect are important and can act as the point from which you can establish the location of other landmarks.
The care you give to the measuring process is critical as it will influence each decision that follows. Moving from one correct area (landmark or angle) to another helps ensure that all parts are related in their accuracy or correctness. The envelope you’ve created implicitly contains the ratios and proportions of your model. The specific subdivisions of the model can, in turn, be determined as they relate to the envelope and to your initial lay in.

Precision Counts

Connecting the Points
As you identify and connect your landmarks through the use of a grid, you’ll accurately place the component parts of the figure. Measuring and gridding are devices for creating accuracy in your drawings—not necessarily tools for creating art.

Using What You Know
All the angles and landmarks you identify in the process of drawing may not be apparent in your finished work. They will, however, be sensed by the viewer. Good drawing is a combination of what you know and what you see.
Now that you’ve located the outside landmarks and angles and checked that they’re correct, it’s time to work on those inside. In the case of the human figure, the landmarks are often designated as points on the skeleton. Simply put, these are points where the skeleton is close to the surface. Some knowledge of simple anatomy and an understanding of the skeletal structure underneath is helpful in knowing which landmarks to look for and in assessing whether or not they are in the right locations. These landmarks or hard places—where the bone is close to the surface—are excellent points from which to make measurements. Again, you’ll determine the precise angles, and check the vertical and horizontal plumb lines to articulate these locations. These points can then work as the hub of a wheel from which other landmarks can be determined.

Skeletal Landmarks
Consider the skeleton underneath as you identify important landmarks of the figure. It’s helpful to think of your own anatomy and take note of the hard places, where your bones are close to the surface.
Whether you draw an undraped figure or a draped one, using landmarks and angles establishes relationships and proportional accuracy. It’s a useful way to translate a three-dimensional object onto a two-dimensional surface.

Measure and Map Shadow Edges

Another obvious place inside the figure from which to make measurements is the edge of the core shadows that run between the light and shadow side of the model. Sometimes this edge is called a form shadow. The edge of the cast shadow is likewise a helpful place to continue mapping. Notice that the edges of the core shadows are much softer than those of the cast shadows.

Draped Figure

In this diagram of the draped figure three types of plumb lines are used simultaneously (notice this is another example of triangulation). As you become familiar with the tools for measuring, you’ll find you can easily alternate using vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines. Also notice that some shadow edges have been mapped out as well.
Contour Lines

After you accurately locate and place the landmarks, draw the contour lines. Because the landmarks are accurate, you can draw the contour lines with great conviction and "lock in" additional shapes with relatively little effort. Draw the lines carefully on either the outside or the inside of the figure to add a sense of authority and an element of detail to your drawing.

Practice Leads to Understanding
The most important element of learning to grid is practicing the process in everything you draw. It's much easier to understand the concept than it is to develop the habit of implementing it consistently.
As you continue to use the tools associated with gridding and measuring, you can try different variations, such as working from the inside out or both inside and outside at the same time. Eventually, you should be able to use these tools in various orders of succession. The process becomes not mere drudgery but both entertaining and exciting as you develop your skill in establishing and refining important relationships.

Pulling It All Together
As you practice and internalize the processes of measuring, try varying the order. Work from inside out as well as from outside in. Look for big angles and small angles at the same time, and be specific with your shapes and contours.
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