

Art Fundamentals

A Practical Glossary for Drawing & Rendering

A shared vocabulary for talking about what you see, what you want to make, and how to get there.

Before choosing a technique, decide your goal. There is no single “correct” way to draw a tree, or anything else.

1. Representation: What Kind of Image Are You Making?

Representational / Figurative , Art that depicts recognizable things from the real world: people, trees, buildings, animals, and so on.

Realism — An attempt to represent something convincingly as it appears in observable reality. Realism does not require microscopic detail; broad painting can feel highly realistic when proportion, value, planes, edges and light are convincing.

Photorealism / Hyperrealism — A much more literal form of realism that reproduces very fine visual information.

Stylization — Deliberately changing or simplifying reality according to a visual language. Examples include elongating figures, flattening shadows, simplifying foliage, using outlines, or exaggerating proportions.

Simplification — Removing information while retaining what is important to recognition or communication. A tree might become trunk + branching gesture + three foliage masses rather than thousands of leaves.

Abstraction — Moving away from literal representation. A recognizable tree can still be highly abstracted into rhythms, shapes, colours and textures.

Non-objective / Non-representational — Art that is not attempting to depict recognizable objects at all.

2. Observation vs. Interpretation

Observation — What is actually happening visually: shape, angle, colour, value, light, proportion and edge relationships.

Interpretation — What you choose to do with that observed information. You might reproduce it carefully, exaggerate it, simplify it, flatten it or omit most of it. Observation can be complex. The artwork does not have to be.

3. Shape, Space & Silhouette

Shape — A flat, two-dimensional area. Instead of thinking “I am drawing a tree,” ask: “What is the large outside shape of the canopy? What are the major light and dark shapes inside it?”

Positive Shape — The shape occupied by the subject.

Negative Shape / Negative Space — The shape around or between objects. In trees, the sky holes between branches can be more useful to draw than each branch individually.

Silhouette — The overall outside shape of an object. A strong silhouette can communicate species, gesture, age, direction and character before detail is added.

4. Form & Construction

Form — Three-dimensional volume. A circle is a shape; a sphere is a form. A rectangle can become a box; a trunk can be understood as a cylinder.

Construction — Building a complex subject from simple underlying forms. Examples: head = egg/sphere, torso = box/barrel, branch = tapering cylinder, foliage = overlapping masses, rock = irregular box or wedge.

5. Gesture

Gesture — The overall movement, direction or energy of a subject. In a tree: trunk rises left, major branch sweeps right, canopy leans back left. Gesture helps prevent a drawing from becoming a collection of disconnected details.

6. Proportion, Measurement & Angle

Proportion — The size relationship between different parts of a subject.

Comparative Measurement — Checking one measurement against another: for example, the trunk may be about one-sixth the width of the canopy.

Angle — The direction of a line or edge relative to horizontal or vertical. Much drawing accuracy comes from observing angles and proportions correctly.

7. Perspective & Space

Perspective — How three-dimensional space appears on a two-dimensional surface.

Linear Perspective — How parallel forms appear to converge as they recede. Key ideas include eye level, horizon line and vanishing points.

Atmospheric Perspective — How distance affects value, colour, contrast and detail. Distant objects often appear lighter, lower contrast, less detailed, less saturated and sometimes cooler (blue or purplish).

Foreshortening — When a form points toward or away from the viewer and therefore appears visually compressed.

8. Value

Value — How light or dark something is, independent of hue. If you convert an image to grayscale, you are primarily looking at value.

Value Scale — A progression from white through greys to black. Beginners can work effectively with three values (light, middle, dark) or five values for more nuance. Also called notan.

9. Value Structure

Value Structure — The organization of the major light and dark masses in an image. A forest scene may fundamentally be light sky + medium distant trees + dark foreground trees. Details decorate the painting. Value structure holds it together.

10. Mass & Massing

Mass — A large grouped area of similar visual information.

Massing — Grouping many small elements into larger units. Instead of leaf + leaf + leaf, see one large foliage mass with a few interruptions.

11. Light Source

Light Source — Where the dominant light is coming from. It establishes which planes face the light and which turn away.

Light Side — Planes receiving direct light.

Shadow Side — Planes facing away from the light source.

12. Planes

Plane — A surface facing a particular direction. Different planes receive different amounts of light depending on their angle to the light source. Organic objects have planes too; they are simply softer and more complex.

Value changes because surfaces change direction relative to the light.

13. Turning of Form

Turning of Form — The way light changes as a surface curves away from the light source. A rounded form often moves through light, halftone, shadow and reflected light rather than jumping directly from light to dark.

14. Light & Shadow Vocabulary

Highlight — One of the brightest areas, often where light reflects strongly toward the viewer.

Light — The general illuminated side of the form.

Halftone — The transition area where a surface begins turning away from the light.

Terminator — The boundary where the form transitions from light into shadow. It is not necessarily a hard line.

Core Shadow — Often the darkest part of the shadow on a curved form.

Reflected Light — Light bouncing from nearby surfaces into the shadow side. It still belongs to the shadow family and is usually darker than the directly lit side.

Cast Shadow — A shadow created when one object blocks light from reaching another surface.

Ambient Occlusion / Contact Shadow — A very dark shadow where surfaces touch or where light has difficulty entering, such as under a rock or inside deep foliage.

15. Local Value

Local Value — How light or dark an object is as a material, separate from its current lighting. A white object in deep shadow may appear darker than a black object in bright light.

16. Local Colour

Local Colour — The object's perceived “normal” colour—grass is green, a trunk is brown—but observed colour changes with light, shadow, reflection, atmosphere and neighbouring colours.

17. Hue, Value & Saturation

Hue — Which colour family: red, yellow, blue, green, violet, and so on.

Value — How light or dark the colour is.

Saturation / Chroma — How intense or muted the colour is.

When a colour looks wrong, ask: Is the hue wrong? The value? Or the saturation?

18. Warm & Cool

Colour Temperature — The relative warmth or coolness of a colour. Reds, oranges and yellows tend to feel warmer; blues, blue-greens and violets cooler.

Temperature is relative: there are warm blues, cool blues, warm reds and cool reds.

19. Edges

Edge: Where one shape, value or colour meets another.

Hard Edge: A sharp transition.

Soft Edge: A gradual transition.

Lost Edge: A boundary that nearly disappears because neighbouring shapes become similar.

Found Edge: A boundary that becomes visible again.

Convincing realism depends heavily on edge variety: not on outlining everything.

20. Contour

Contour: The visible boundary or outline of a form.

Outer Contour: The exterior silhouette.

Cross Contour: Lines that travel across a surface and describe volume, like imaginary bands wrapping around a cylinder.

21. Texture

Texture: Surface character: rough bark, smooth glass, fur, shiny metal, matte stone, and so on.

Actual Texture: Physical texture on the artwork itself.

Visual / Implied Texture: The illusion of texture created through marks and value changes.

Texture should usually come after form. Bark marks cannot fix a trunk that does not feel cylindrical.

22. Reflectivity & Material Properties

Matte: Light scatters broadly; highlights tend to be softer.

Glossy: Reflections and highlights are often sharper.

Metallic: Strongly reflects the surrounding environment and may show abrupt value changes.

Transparent: Light passes through the material.

Translucent: Some light passes through and scatters within the material.

23. Detail Hierarchy

Detail Hierarchy: Choosing where the viewer receives the most information. A focal area may have more contrast, sharper edges and greater detail while secondary areas remain simplified.

A compelling image can communicate with 10% carefully selected information rather than 100% description.

24. Focal Point

Focal Point: The area designed to attract the viewer's attention. Emphasis can be created with contrast, detail, colour, saturation, sharp edges, placement or unusual shape.

25. Composition

Composition: How visual elements are arranged within the picture: placement, scale, cropping, positive/negative space, visual weight, rhythm, balance and hierarchy.

Visual Weight: How strongly an element attracts attention.

Balance: How visual weight is distributed.

Rhythm: Repeated shapes, marks, colours or directions that create movement.

Movement: How the viewer's eye travels through the image.

26. Thumbnail

Thumbnail: A very small preliminary drawing used to test composition, big shapes, value structure and cropping before committing to detail.

Before spending 45 minutes drawing the tree, spend 30 seconds deciding what the drawing of the tree actually is.

27. Rendering

Rendering: Developing visual information that makes a form, surface or scene appear convincing. Rendering can involve value, light, shadow, planes, edges, colour, texture, reflected light and material properties.

Drawing and rendering are related, but not identical. You can accurately construct a form and barely render it, or beautifully render a badly proportioned drawing.

28. Construction vs. Rendering

CONSTRUCTION

“What is it, and where does everything go?”

Shape
Proportion
Angle
Perspective
Structure

RENDERING

“How does that structure interact with light?”

Form
Value
Planes
Light and shadow
Edges
Colour
Texture
Material

If something feels wrong, ask: Is this a construction problem or a rendering problem?

29. Mark-Making

Mark-Making: The physical vocabulary of lines, strokes, dots, scribbles, washes, hatching and other marks used to build the image.

Hatching: Parallel lines used to describe value or form.

Cross-hatching: Intersecting sets of lines.

Stippling: Building value or texture with dots.

Scumbling: Broken, irregular marks or dragged paint that allow underlying information to show through.

Wash: A broad, usually transparent application of diluted colour or ink.

Glazing: Transparent colors over top of other colors

30. Symbol vs. Observation

Symbolic Drawing: Using a learned shorthand for an object: an almond for an eye, a green blob for a tree, a V for a bird. Symbolic drawing is useful in journals, illustration, comics, diagrams and graphic design.

Observational Drawing: Drawing from what is visually present rather than from the symbol you already know. This becomes essential when the goal is convincing realism.

For realism: draw what is visually happening, not what you know the object to be.

Choosing the Right Goal

Symbolic: "I need the viewer to understand that this is a tree."

Graphic / Minimalist: Strong silhouette + a few carefully chosen shapes.

Stylized: Recognizable subject filtered through a deliberate visual language.

Expressive: Gesture, colour and marks communicate the experience or feeling of the subject.

Observational: Careful study of the subject's particular proportions, shapes and relationships.

Realistic: Accurate structure plus convincing light, form, space and material.

Highly Rendered: Extensive description of value, edges, texture, colour and surface.

Photorealistic: Extremely literal visual reproduction.

None of these is automatically better than another. They are different jobs, requiring different choices.

The Core Realism Formula

Get the big shape right.

Get the proportions and angles right.

Understand the simple forms underneath it.

Establish the light source.

Group the big values.

Understand which planes face the light.

Show the form turning through light and shadow.

Control your edges.

Add material and texture information.

Add detail last.

SHAPE → FORM → LIGHT → DETAIL

Not: leaf → leaf → leaf → bark crack → leaf → leaf → leaf.

A Useful Question to Start Any Drawing

“What am I trying to communicate about this subject?”

Once you know the goal, you can choose the method that supports it instead of treating every drawing problem as if there were one universal technique.