

Foreshortening

BEGINNER

Foreshortening happens when a form is angled directly toward or away from you, making it appear compressed. A finger pointing straight at you looks short and stubby; a leg stretched toward the camera looks like just a foot with some knee behind it. It is visually strange and counterintuitive — your brain knows the arm is long, but the drawing should show it much shorter. Trust what you see, not what you know. Beginners instinctively compensate by lengthening foreshortened forms — resist this completely.

HOBBYIST

Foreshortening is a measurement problem as much as a visual one. Two things help: using a plumb line or horizontal reference to measure the actual height-to-width ratio of the foreshortened limb — it is almost always far squarer than it feels; and looking at the negative shapes around the foreshortened form. In dynamic figure drawing, foreshortening creates a sense of action leaping off the page. The leg kicking toward the viewer, the fist extended in a punch — all rely on correctly drawn foreshortening to communicate energy.

PROFESSIONAL

Foreshortening is fundamentally a perspective problem: a cylinder viewed end-on is a circle with a receding ellipse for the cross-section. Understanding the underlying geometry allows constructing foreshortened forms from imagination at any angle, which is what comic artists, animators, and concept designers need to do daily. Jack Kirby's foreshortened fists were not copied from reference — they were constructed from deep spatial knowledge. At a professional level, you also manage foreshortening across a full composition: convergence must be spatially consistent or the entire scene loses credibility.