

THE DRAWING PATH

Block-In & Straight Lines

A Complete Lesson Plan

BEGINNER

HOBBYIST

PROFESSIONAL

Lesson 3 · Proportions

Teach Yourself to See

thedrawingpath.com

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PROFESSIONAL

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SKILL LEVEL 1

BEGINNER

Structure before curves, always.



Block-In & Straight Lines — Beginner

What Is Blocking In?

Blocking in is the first stage of a drawing in which the subject's major shapes are approximated using straight lines and simplified forms — no curves, no detail, no texture. The block-in captures proportion, position, and overall structure before any refinement. It is the proportional skeleton of the drawing. The block-in answers: is the subject the right size? In the right place? Are the major proportions correct? Only when these questions are answered confidently should any refinement begin.

The most important thing about the block-in is that it comes first — always. Every curved line, organic edge, and refined detail that exists before the block-in is correct is a risk: if the block-in turns out to be wrong, the detail must be corrected too. Straight lines first because they are easiest to assess, adjust, and measure against.

[VISUAL EXAMPLE]

A portrait drawn in three stages shown side by side: Stage 1 (block-in with straight lines — a few large geometrics). Stage 2 (block-in refined — more straight-line subdivisions). Stage 3 (curves introduced and detail added). The stages show progressive refinement from angular to organic.

Using Straight Lines to Simplify Curves

Every curve can be approximated by a series of straight-line segments. A circle is approximated by an octagon; a face profile is approximated by 6–8 straight lines. The advantage of straight-line approximation: straight lines are easy to measure, compare, and correct. The transition from straight-line block-in to curves should happen gradually, increasing the number of straight-line segments until the approximation is close enough for the final curved refinement.

Common Mistakes

Block-in that is already curved

Drawing curved or organic edges in the block-in stage. The block-in must use straight lines, even for obviously curved subjects.

Block-in too detailed too early

A block-in that already has individual features placed before the overall proportions are correct. Major masses first, then subdivide.

Skipping the block-in

Drawing directly from the beginning with curved, detailed marks. This is the most common cause of proportion errors in finished drawings.

Block-in too light to see

Drawing the block-in so lightly that it cannot be assessed. The block-in should be light enough to erase but dark enough to see clearly.

Beginner Exercises

Straight-Line Portrait Block-In

30 min

TRAINS: Approximating the face with straight lines only

STEPS

1. Draw a portrait block-in using straight lines only — no curves.
2. The head is an irregular polygon (not a circle). The jaw is a zigzag of straight segments. The nose is a simple triangle. The eyes are small rectangles.
3. Check all proportions against the reference using comparative measuring.
4. Only after proportions are correct, introduce curves to refine the block-in.
5. The final drawing should show a clear transition from angular to organic.

SELF-EVALUATE:

Did the straight-line block-in catch proportion problems that you would have missed with a curved approach? At what point did the introduction of curves improve the likeness?

Object Block-In Series

30 min

TRAINS: Blocking in 5 objects in sequence

STEPS

1. Block in 5 different objects: a bottle, a shoe, a piece of fruit, a chair, and a mug.
2. For each: do the entire block-in before looking at it critically. Then check proportions. Then refine.
3. Time each block-in: aim for under 3 minutes per object.
4. The block-in stage ends when you are confident of the proportions — not when the object looks like itself.

SELF-EVALUATE:

Are your block-ins getting faster as you proceed through the series? Is there a consistent proportion error across all objects?

Curve from Straight-Line Steps

20 min

TRAINS: The straight-to-curve transition

STEPS

1. Draw a circle using progressively more straight-line segments: 4-sided square, 6-sided hexagon, 8-sided octagon, 12-sided, 16-sided.
2. Observe: at how many sides does the polygon look like a circle?
3. Apply the same principle to a profile: 4-line approximation, 8-line, 16-line, final curve.
4. How many straight-line segments do you need for the profile to be an accurate enough block-in?

SELF-EVALUATE:

At what number of straight-line segments does the curve approximation look convincing? Does this match your intuition about how much simplification is too much?

Figure Block-In Race

15 min

TRAINS: Speed and precision in blocking in the figure

STEPS

1. Set a 2-minute timer per figure.
2. Draw 5 figure block-ins from reference, each in 2 minutes, using straight lines only.
3. After all 5, check each against the reference for proportion accuracy.
4. Which block-in is most accurate? What made the difference?

SELF-EVALUATE:

Can you produce a proportionally accurate block-in in 2 minutes? Which proportions are most accurately captured at speed?

Beginner Resources

Proko — Portrait Block-In

youtube.com/user/ProkoTV

Proko demonstrates a clear portrait block-in process using straight lines. The most accessible free resource on this technique.

Andrew Loomis — Creative Illustration

archive.org/search?query=loomis+creative+illustration

Loomis's block-in methodology for figures and portraits. Free on Archive.org.

Atelier Drawing — Stephanie Kriza

youtube.com/search?q=atelier+block+in+drawing

YouTube channel demonstrating atelier-method block-in technique clearly. Free and accessible.

SKILL LEVEL 2

HOBBYIST

Complex subjects, discipline, and transition.

2

Block-In & Straight Lines — Hobbyist

Block-In for Complex Subjects

Complex subjects (the full figure, a crowd scene, a detailed architectural environment) require a multi-stage block-in: first the overall composition in 4–5 lines, then major masses, then secondary masses, then form refinements. Each stage adds specificity. The critical discipline is completing each stage before moving to the next — if the first-stage composition isn't right, no amount of refined secondary massing will fix it.

Transitioning from Block-In to Curves

The transition from straight-line block-in to final curved marks should be deliberate and gradual. The instinct is to introduce curves as soon as possible — resist it. Add curves only after you have measured and confirmed each straight-line approximation. When you do introduce a curve, it should be replacing a confirmed straight-line segment, not guessing at where the curved edge is. This disciplined transition prevents the block-in's proportional accuracy from being lost in the curving phase.

Common Mistakes

Block-in that grows organically

Starting a block-in cleanly but allowing it to become increasingly organic as confidence builds. The block-in phase must remain straight-line throughout.

Curving too quickly after correct block-in

Introducing curves as soon as the block-in looks roughly correct, rather than waiting for it to be fully verified. Measure before you curve.

Over-complexity in the block-in for complex subjects

A figure block-in that already has individual muscle shapes before the overall gesture is established. Gesture first, anatomy second.

Hobbyist Exercises

Multi-Stage Block-In

30 min

TRAINS: Four stages of progressive refinement

STEPS

1. Draw a complex subject (full figure, portrait, architectural scene) using four block-in stages.
2. Stage 1 (2 min): 4–6 lines only — overall gesture and bounding box.
3. Stage 2 (5 min): Major masses in straight lines.
4. Stage 3 (5 min): Secondary masses and feature placement.
5. Stage 4 (5 min): Final straight-line refinement before any curves.
6. Introduce curves only in Stage 5 (10 min), replacing confirmed straight lines.

SELF-EVALUATE:

Did the multi-stage approach maintain proportional accuracy through to the final drawing? Which stage was most valuable?

Block-In Discipline Study

45 min

TRAINS: Forcing complete straight-line phase

STEPS

1. Set a rule: no curves until 30 minutes have passed.
2. Draw a complex portrait or full figure for the full 30 minutes in straight lines only.
3. The drawing will look angular and geometric — this is correct.
4. At 30 minutes, assess proportions. Only then add curves.
5. The enforced delay should reveal whether your normal curve-introduction timing is premature.

SELF-EVALUATE:

Was the enforced straight-line phase longer than your usual block-in? Did the extended time reveal proportion issues you would normally have missed?

Architectural Block-In and Render

60 min

TRAINS: Building a complex scene from block-in to finish

STEPS

1. Choose a complex architectural interior or urban scene.
2. Block-in all major planes in straight lines only: walls, floors, ceilings, major shadows.
3. Verify all angles and proportions before any refinement.
4. Develop the full rendering from this block-in, maintaining the structural clarity throughout.
5. The final drawing should show the block-in's structural logic even after rendering.

SELF-EVALUATE:

Is the block-in's structural logic visible in the final rendering? Did the straight-line block-in produce a more structurally sound architectural drawing?

Fast Block-In Battery

25 min

TRAINS: Speed and discipline in short studies

STEPS

1. Draw 10 block-ins of 10 different subjects in 2 minutes each — straight lines only.
2. Subjects: seated figure, standing figure, portrait, building, car, animal, hand, still life, landscape, tree.
3. After all 10, evaluate each block-in for proportion accuracy.
4. Which subjects were easiest to block in? Which were hardest?

SELF-EVALUATE:

Is there a category of subject that consistently produces less accurate block-ins? What is the source of the difficulty?

Hobbyist Resources

New Masters Academy — Portrait Block-In

newmastersacademy.com

Paid video library. The block-in series with professional instructors is the best hobbyist resource on multi-stage block-in technique.

Watts Atelier — Figure Block-In

wattsatelier.com

Paid professional online atelier. The block-in methodology is a cornerstone of the Watts curriculum.

Proko — Portrait Drawing Full Series

youtube.com/user/ProkoTV

Proko's full portrait series shows the block-in process across multiple subjects and styles. Free.

SKILL LEVEL 3

PROFESSIONAL

Block-in as design and economy of line.

3

Block-In & Straight Lines — Professional

Block-In as Design Tool

At the professional level, the block-in is not just a measuring tool — it is a design tool. The configuration of straight lines in the block-in determines the structural dynamics of the entire composition. A block-in that uses diagonal lines for all major masses creates a dynamic, unstable composition; one that uses primarily horizontal lines creates stability. The professional's block-in choices are as considered as their composition choices — because they are the same choices.

Economy of Straight Lines

The master draftsman's block-in uses the minimum number of straight lines necessary to establish the structure. Each line must justify its presence: does it define a proportion relationship? An angle? A spatial boundary? Every unnecessary line increases visual noise and adds a decision point during the curve-transition phase. The ideal professional block-in is 8–12 lines for a portrait, 15–20 for a full figure, 20–30 for a complex scene. More than that suggests over-working the block-in.

Common Mistakes

Block-in that requires too many lines to fix

A block-in with 50 lines that have been repeatedly corrected. Each correction adds a line; if corrections exceed 30%, start the block-in again.

Block-in that doesn't translate to the final drawing

A technically accurate block-in whose structural logic is completely obscured in the final rendering. The block-in's structure should be visible beneath the finish.

Ignoring the block-in's compositional implications

Treating the block-in as a measuring exercise only, without attending to the angle and direction implications of each structural line.

Professional Exercises

Minimum Line Block-In Challenge

60 min

TRAINS: Using the fewest lines possible

STEPS

1. Draw 5 different subjects using the absolute minimum number of block-in lines for each.
2. Portrait: aim for 8 lines. Full figure: 15. Complex environment: 20.
3. Every line must justify its presence — if you cannot state what it establishes, remove it.
4. Compare your minimum-line block-in to a standard block-in of the same subject.
5. Does the minimum-line version maintain proportional accuracy?

SELF-EVALUATE:

What is the minimum number of lines needed to establish accurate proportions for each subject? Does reducing line count force more precise line placement?

Block-In as Compositional Design

90 min

TRAINS: Designing through the block-in phase

STEPS

1. Before beginning a complex illustration, design the block-in as an abstract line composition.
2. Ask: do the major structural lines create the directional energy the composition needs?
3. Revise the block-in for compositional strength before adding any subject specificity.
4. The final illustration should carry the compositional dynamics established in the block-in's abstract line arrangement.

SELF-EVALUATE:

Does designing the block-in for compositional line quality improve the final illustration's structural dynamics? Was there tension between compositional line design and proportional accuracy?

Block-In Masters Study

60 min

TRAINS: Analysing professional block-in approaches

STEPS

1. Find 6 process photographs or video demonstrations of professional artists' block-in phases.
2. For each: count the lines used, identify the sequence of mark-making, analyse what each line establishes.
3. Write a 100-word analysis of each artist's block-in approach.
4. Apply the most efficient approach observed to an original drawing.

SELF-EVALUATE:

What variations in block-in approach did you observe across professionals? Which approach was most efficient for your subject type?

Production Illustration — Block-In to Final

150 min

TRAINS: Full professional workflow

STEPS

1. Create a production-quality illustration using a rigorously documented block-in phase.
2. Photograph or scan the block-in before any curves are introduced.
3. Photograph or scan after the curve-transition phase.
4. Photograph or scan the final piece.
5. The three-stage documentation should demonstrate a coherent development from structural skeleton to refined finish.
6. The block-in's structural logic should be visible in the final illustration.

SELF-EVALUATE:

Does the final illustration's quality reflect the block-in's structural clarity? Does the three-stage documentation reveal your process strengths and weaknesses?

Professional Resources

Bargue Drawing Course

amazon.com/search?q=bargue+drawing+course

Bargue plates are the definitive block-in training. Rigorous straight-line-to-curve methodology. Used at the highest professional ateliers.

Juliette Aristides — Classical Drawing Atelier

amazon.com/search?q=aristides+classical+drawing

Advanced block-in methodology. The economy-of-line approach is central to the Aristides curriculum.

Richard Schmid — Alla Prima

amazon.com/search?q=richard+schmid+alla+prima

Schmid's painting approach starts with a definitive block-in. The block-in chapter is applicable to drawing as well.

Master Exercise Index

All exercises consolidated for quick reference.

Beginner

#	Exercise Name	What It Trains	Duration
B1	Straight-Line Portrait	Approximating face with lines	30 min
B2	Object Block-In Series	5 objects in sequence	30 min
B3	Curve from Straight Steps	Straight-to-curve transition	20 min
B4	Figure Block-In Race	Speed and precision	15 min

Hobbyist

#	Exercise Name	What It Trains	Duration
H1	Multi-Stage Block-In	Four stages of refinement	30 min
H2	Block-In Discipline Study	Forced straight-line phase	45 min
H3	Architectural Block-In	Complex scene to finish	60 min
H4	Fast Block-In Battery	10 subjects in 2 min each	25 min

Professional

#	Exercise Name	What It Trains	Duration
P1	Minimum Line Challenge	Fewest possible lines	60 min

P2	Block-In as Design	Compositional design phase	90 min
P3	Masters Block-In Study	Analysing pro approaches	60 min
P4	Production Illustration	Full documented workflow	150 min

Resource Directory

All recommended resources, consolidated.

Beginner

Resource	URL	Notes
Proko Portrait Block-In	youtube.com/user/ProkoTV	Best free block-in demo
Loomis Creative Illustration	archive.org	Free classic block-in text
Atelier Drawing Videos	youtube.com	Atelier technique walkthrough

Hobbyist

Resource	URL	Notes
New Masters Academy	newmastersacademy.com	Paid block-in series
Watts Atelier Figure	wattsatelier.com	Professional block-in curriculum
Proko Portrait Series	youtube.com/user/ProkoTV	Free multi-subject process

Professional

Resource	URL	Notes
Bargue Drawing Course	amazon.com	Ultimate block-in training
Aristides Classical Drawing	amazon.com	Economy of line curriculum
Richard Schmid Alla Prima	amazon.com	Block-in in painting practice