

THE DRAWING PATH

Simple Shapes Method

A Complete Lesson Plan

BEGINNER

HOBBYIST

PROFESSIONAL

Lesson 3 · Proportions

Teach Yourself to See

thedrawingpath.com

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SKILL LEVEL 1

BEGINNER

Every complex subject is made of simple shapes.

1

Simple Shapes Method — Beginner

Breaking Complex Subjects into Basic Shapes

The simple shapes method (also called blocking-in or constructive drawing) is based on one principle: every complex visual subject can be described as a collection of simpler geometric shapes before any detail is added. A face is an oval with simple triangles for the nose and small shapes for the eyes. A car is a series of rectangles and trapezoids. A tree is a large irregular blob atop a cylinder. By drawing these simple approximations first, you establish the overall proportions and composition before committing to any detail.

The critical discipline: do not add any detail until the simple shape version is complete and correct. Every detail drawn before the shape is right is wasted effort — it will need to be corrected or erased. Simple shapes first, always.

[VISUAL EXAMPLE]

A human head drawn in two stages: Stage 1 — a simple oval, angled rectangle for the jaw, circles for the eye sockets. Stage 2 — the same structure with refined detail added. The simple-shape stage is visible in blue beneath the final drawing.

Shape Hierarchy

Shape hierarchy means building complexity gradually: start with the largest, simplest shape (the overall bounding box or primary mass), then subdivide it into the next level of shapes, then the next. For a figure: first the entire silhouette bounding box, then the major masses (head, torso, pelvis), then the limbs as cylinders, then the hands and feet, then fingers. Each stage must be correct before proceeding to the next.

Common Mistakes

Adding detail before the shape is right

Drawing the eyes before the head oval is correctly placed and proportioned. Detailed eyes on a wrong-shaped head cannot be fixed without starting over.

First shape too complex

Starting with a shape that has too much specificity (drawing the silhouette of the head's exact bumps rather than a simple oval). Simple means simple.

Skipping shape levels

Going from bounding box straight to fingers, skipping the major masses. Each level of subdivision must be resolved before the next.

Beginner Exercises

5-Shape Subject Study

25 min

TRAINS: Describing a complex subject in just 5 shapes

STEPS

1. Choose a complex reference: a figure, an animal, or a vehicle.
2. Draw the subject using EXACTLY 5 simple shapes — no more.
3. Each shape should describe a major part of the subject.
4. Compare your 5-shape version to the reference: does it capture the subject's character?
5. Now describe the same subject in 10 shapes, then 20.

SELF-EVALUATE:

Does adding more shapes improve the likeness or just add noise? How few shapes can adequately describe the subject?

Shape Hierarchy Figure

30 min

TRAINS: Four-stage figure construction

STEPS

1. Stage 1: Draw the figure as a single rectangle (overall bounding box).
2. Stage 2: Inside the box, draw 3 shapes for head, torso, and pelvis.
3. Stage 3: Add 4 cylinders for the limbs.
4. Stage 4: Add simplified hands and feet.
5. Each stage must be correct before proceeding. No detail until Stage 4 is right.

SELF-EVALUATE:

Did completing each stage before moving to the next prevent errors that would have compounded? How does the final figure compare to your normal approach?

Still Life Shape Block-In

35 min

TRAINS: Blocking in a complex scene

STEPS

1. Set up or photograph a still life of 5 objects.
2. Block in the whole scene as simple shapes before adding any line quality, texture, or tone.
3. Check all proportions and positions against the reference before proceeding.
4. Add detail only after all shapes are correctly placed.
5. Compare the final drawing quality to your pre-block-in approach.

SELF-EVALUATE:

Did the block-in stage catch any proportion problems before detail was committed? Did the final drawing benefit from the systematic approach?

Architecture from Simple Shapes

30 min

TRAINS: Building a scene from rectangles and triangles

STEPS

1. Draw a street scene using only rectangles (buildings, windows, doors) and triangles (roofs, signs).
2. No curves, no irregular shapes.
3. After completing the simple-shape version, add controlled detail within the established shapes.
4. Does the final drawing maintain the proportional accuracy of the simple-shape stage?

SELF-EVALUATE:

Does the simplified version capture the character of the architecture? Does the detail stage improve the drawing or introduce new errors?

Beginner Resources

Proko — How to Draw the Figure Using Construction

youtube.com/user/ProkoTV

Proko's figure construction playlist is the best free resource for the simple shapes method applied to figures.

Andrew Loomis — Figure Drawing for All It's Worth

archive.org/search?query=loomis+figure+drawing

Loomis's block-in methodology is clearly explained. Free on Archive.org.

Draw a Box — Form Construction

drawabox.com/lesson/2

Drawabox Lesson 2 introduces organic form construction from simple primitives. Free.

SKILL LEVEL 2

HOBBYIST

Organic decomposition and shape refinement.

2

Simple Shapes Method — Hobbyist

Organic Shape Decomposition

Geometric shapes (rectangles, circles, triangles) work perfectly for man-made subjects. Organic subjects (the human figure, animals, plants) require organic shapes — irregular blobs, curved wedges, ovoid masses. The skill is finding the simplest organic shape that adequately describes each major mass. A shoulder is not a circle (too regular) but an irregular flattened sphere. A torso is not a box but a curved wedge. The discipline: use the simplest organic shape that accurately describes the form, then refine.

Multiple Shapes as One Functional Unit

Sometimes several shapes function as one unit in the composition: the ribcage and shoulder girdle together form one mass in the figure; the roof, upper floor, and lower floor of a building form one visual tower unit. Learning to see these functional groupings — which shapes to combine into a single block-in unit — is a hobbyist-level skill that accelerates the blocking process and prevents over-subdivision.

Common Mistakes

Organic shapes that are too geometric

Approximating a hip as a rectangle instead of an organic ovoid. The shape must match the actual surface character of the form.

Too many shapes in the block-in

A block-in that already has 30 shapes before any refinement has begun. The block-in should have fewer than 10 shapes for most subjects.

Functional units subdivided unnecessarily

Treating each rib as a separate shape in the torso block-in. The ribcage is one shape at the block-in stage.

Hobbyist Exercises

Animal Shape Decomposition

50 min

TRAINS: Organic shapes for complex fauna

STEPS

1. Choose 3 different animals (e.g., horse, bird, cat).
2. For each, draw the primary mass shapes using organic forms only — no geometric primitives.
3. Horse: torso barrel, neck wedge, head box, leg cylinders.
4. Bird: teardrop body, triangular wing shapes, cone beak.
5. Cat: rounded box torso, small sphere head, tapered cylinders for limbs.
6. Add detail only after all shapes are convincingly placed.

SELF-EVALUATE:

Do the organic shape block-ins capture the characteristic body type of each animal? Which animals were hardest to reduce to organic shapes?

Urban Scene — Shape Grouping

45 min

TRAINS: Functional units in architecture

STEPS

1. Choose a dense urban scene photograph.
2. Draw the scene in two stages: Stage 1 — group buildings into 5–7 large functional shape units (foreground building cluster, middle-distance row, background towers). Stage 2 — subdivide each unit into individual buildings.
3. Verify: does the grouped block-in capture the general layout and depth hierarchy of the scene?

SELF-EVALUATE:

Does grouping into functional units help establish the spatial hierarchy before adding individual building detail?

Portrait Shape Block-In

40 min

TRAINS: The face from organic shapes

STEPS

1. Draw a portrait using only the following organic shapes: 1 cranial mass oval, 1 jaw/chin wedge, 2 eye socket shapes, 1 nose wedge, 1 mouth area, 2 ear ovals, neck cylinder.
2. This is the complete block-in — 9 shapes for the whole head.
3. Check all shapes' positions and proportions before adding any feature detail.
4. Develop the portrait from this block-in.

SELF-EVALUATE:

Does the 9-shape block-in accurately predict the final portrait's proportional accuracy? Did any shapes require significant adjustment?

Speed Shape Studies

25 min

TRAINS: Rapid decomposition of varied subjects

STEPS

1. Set a 3-minute limit per subject.
2. Block in 8 different subjects as quickly as possible: a figure, a car, a landscape, an animal, a face, an interior, a plant, a machine.
3. No detail — shapes only. Each study should have fewer than 8 shapes.
4. After all 8: which subjects were easiest to decompose? Which were hardest?

SELF-EVALUATE:

Which subjects resist reduction to simple shapes? Is the difficulty a shape vocabulary gap (not knowing which shapes to use) or a perception gap (not seeing the shapes)?

Hobbyist Resources

Ken Hultgren — The Art of Animal Drawing

amazon.com/search?q=ken+hultgren+animal+drawing

Organic shape decomposition for animals. Classic Disney-era animal drawing reference.

Will Weston — Constructive Figure Drawing

youtube.com/search?q=will+weston

Will Weston's free videos on constructive figure drawing are exceptional for hobbyists.

Scott Robertson — How to Draw, Ch. 1–3

howtodrawa.com

Systematic shape construction methodology. Professional-grade treatment of the shapes method.

SKILL LEVEL 3

PROFESSIONAL

Shape as design and silhouette as language.

3

Simple Shapes Method — Professional

Shape Design

At the professional level, shapes are not just descriptive — they are designed. The shape of a character's silhouette communicates personality before any feature detail is visible. A wide bottom-heavy shape communicates stability or threat; a tall thin shape communicates elegance or vulnerability; a dynamic diagonal shape communicates energy or aggression. Professional character and environment designers make shape decisions at the earliest thumbnail stage, treating the shape itself as the primary design element.

Silhouette as Shape

The silhouette test — does the design read at 100% black with no interior detail? — is the professional standard for shape clarity. A design that requires interior detail to be understood has a weak shape. Strong designs read instantly as recognisable silhouettes. This principle applies to character design, logo design, environment design, and game asset design equally. The silhouette test is applied at the thumbnail stage: only designs that pass are developed further.

Common Mistakes

Complex shapes at the thumbnail stage

Using intricate, detailed shapes in thumbnails before the overall design direction is established. Thumbnails must be simple.

Designs that only work in full detail

A character design that requires colour, texture, and prop detail to be understood. The shape itself must communicate the character at every level of detail.

Generic shape vocabulary

All characters or environments using the same basic shapes, producing undifferentiated designs. Each design should have a distinct and specific shape language.

Professional Exercises

Silhouette Character Design

90 min

TRAINS: Designing from shape outward

STEPS

1. Design 6 characters (hero, villain, mentor, trickster, innocent, monster) as pure black silhouettes only.
2. No interior detail — only the outer shape.
3. Each silhouette must communicate the character's role and personality.
4. Silhouettes are refined until each is instantly distinguishable from all others.
5. Then develop full designs from the silhouettes.

SELF-EVALUATE:

Does each silhouette communicate its character's personality without any interior detail? Are all 6 instantly distinguishable from each other?

Environment Shape Design

90 min

TRAINS: Location silhouettes and spatial character

STEPS

1. Design 4 environments (safe home, dangerous zone, mysterious area, imposing stronghold) as shape studies.
2. Each environment's shapes should reinforce its emotional character: soft rounded shapes for safety, sharp angular shapes for danger.
3. Draw thumbnail shapes studies (5x5 cm) before any detailed rendering.
4. Develop the strongest thumbnail to a finished concept design.

SELF-EVALUATE:

Does each environment's shape language communicate its emotional character? Would a viewer identify "safe" vs "dangerous" from the shape studies alone?

Shape Simplification Study

60 min

TRAINS: Reducing complex reference to shape essence

STEPS

1. Choose a complex reference photograph (a crowd scene, a dense cityscape, a forest).
2. Draw the scene in three simplification levels: 5 shapes, 15 shapes, 40 shapes.
3. For each level, evaluate: what information is gained or lost at each stage of simplification?
4. Identify the minimum shape count that retains the scene's essential character.

SELF-EVALUATE:

At which simplification level does the scene lose its essential character? What determines the "minimum viable shape count" for this subject?

Stylization as Shape Decision

90 min

TRAINS: Moving from realistic to stylized shape language

STEPS

1. Take a realistic reference (portrait, figure, environment) and redesign it in three stylization levels: realistic shape, mid-stylized, high-stylized.
2. Each level should have a distinct and consistent shape vocabulary — the stylization should feel intentional, not arbitrary.
3. The high-stylized version should still be recognisably related to the realistic version.
4. Document: what shape decisions define each stylization level?

SELF-EVALUATE:

Is each stylization level internally consistent? Does the progression feel like a coherent family of shapes, or do the levels feel unrelated?

Professional Resources

The Silver Way — Disney Character Design

amazon.com/search?q=the+silver+way+character+design

Disney character design methodology. Shape design and silhouette are central to the method.

Gnomon Workshop — Character Design for Production

thegnomonworkshop.com

Industry-level character design instruction with strong shape design curriculum.

Master Exercise Index

All exercises consolidated for quick reference.

Beginner

#	Exercise Name	What It Trains	Duration
B1	5-Shape Subject Study	Max 5 shapes per subject	25 min
B2	Shape Hierarchy Figure	Four-stage construction	30 min
B3	Still Life Block-In	Complex scene blocking	35 min
B4	Architecture from Shapes	Buildings from rectangles	30 min

Hobbyist

#	Exercise Name	What It Trains	Duration
H1	Animal Shape Decomposition	Organic shapes for animals	50 min
H2	Urban Scene Grouping	Functional shape units	45 min
H3	Portrait Shape Block-In	9-shape face construction	40 min
H4	Speed Shape Studies	Rapid varied decomposition	25 min

Professional

#	Exercise Name	What It Trains	Duration
P1	Silhouette Character Design	Shape-first characters	90 min
P2	Environment Shape Design	Location emotional character	90 min
P3	Shape Simplification Study	Reducing to essentials	60 min
P4	Stylization as Shape	Consistent shape vocabulary	90 min

Resource Directory

All recommended resources, consolidated.

Beginner

Resource	URL	Notes
Proko Figure Construction	youtube.com/user/ProkoTV	Best free shapes-method videos
Loomis Figure Drawing	archive.org	Block-in methodology free
Drawabox Form Construction	drawabox.com/lesson/2	Organic form from shapes

Hobbyist

Resource	URL	Notes
Hultgren Animal Drawing	amazon.com	Organic shape for animals
Will Weston Constructive	youtube.com	Free hobbyist figure construction
Scott Robertson Ch.1-3	howtodrawa.com	Professional shapes system

Professional

Resource	URL	Notes
The Silver Way Disney	amazon.com	Disney shape design method
Gnomon Character Design	thegnomonworkshop.com	Industry character design
Feng Zhu Design Cinema	youtube.com	Free pro shape design lectures