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HOW TO DRAW STYLIZED CHARACTERS

BY MITCH LEEUWE

YOU'LL LEARN:
HOW TO DEVELOP
YOUR OWN STYLE



BOUGHT AT [GUMROAD.COM/MITCHLEEUE](https://gumroad.com/mitchleeuwe)

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HOW TO DRAW STYLIZED CHARACTERS

BY MITCH LEEUWE



Hi THERE!

Let me introduce myself. I'm Mitch Leeuwe and am an illustrator from the Netherlands. I always drew a lot as a kid. I even had the childhood dream to become an animator at Disney. During my teenage years, I lost that dream. Luckily, I slowly started drawing more and more. When I was 19, I began to do some freelance work as a graphic designer, which made me consider picking up drawing again. I attended several drawing programs at schools, but I learned most from online resources. Now, I'm a freelance artist working on visual development. This means I design characters, props, and backgrounds for games, animation, and toys. However, you probably know me from my Instagram account, where I release tutorials and more. My goal is to create a place where people can learn what I wanted to learn when I started out.



LET'S GO!

One of the frequently asked questions I get is, “How do I develop my own style?”. When I can only give a short reaction, I’d answer, “style will develop itself”. With this, I mean that I believe it’s essential to learn to know and apply the basic drawing principles first. For me, this is drawing with construction and the line of action. You can learn this from tutorials and by studying great artwork. By doing so, you’ll learn to understand how it’s built and how the artist applied the drawing principles.

But understandably, you also like to have fun with creating original artwork from yourself besides your studies. So, although I advise you to start learning drawing principles first, it’s also great to experiment and develop your style.

What is style?

One way of thinking about it that I rather find quite funny, is that style is the mistakes we make when drawing. That may sound a bit negative, but by ‘mistakes’ is meant: the things we do differently. Think of it as handwriting, it’s very personal, and you can tell a lot by someone’s handwriting.

In this ebook, I go in-depth about learning to draw and how to find your style. You can develop your style by not thinking about it and let it grow on you, like your handwriting. Or you can discover some basic rules and choose how you want to use these rules or bend them however you like.

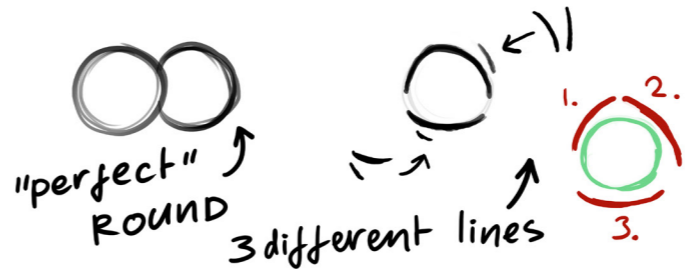
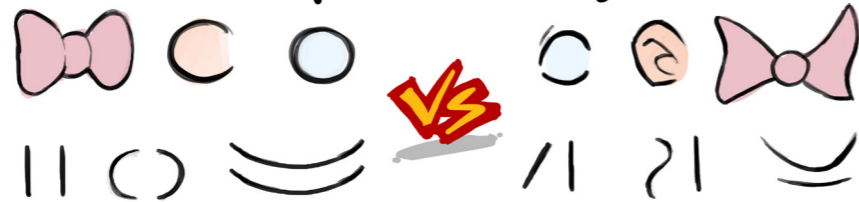
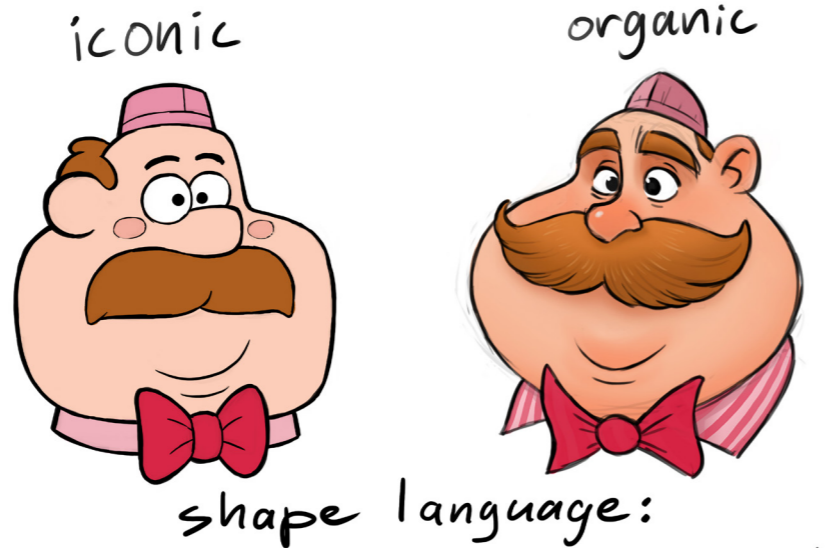
Anyway, let’s just start! The best way to learn from this tutorial ebook is to follow the steps I show and to copy them. Don’t simply copy it but try to think why each step is made and understand why the choices are made. When you practice it this way, it will help you when you create your own designs later.

Best, Mitch Leeuwe

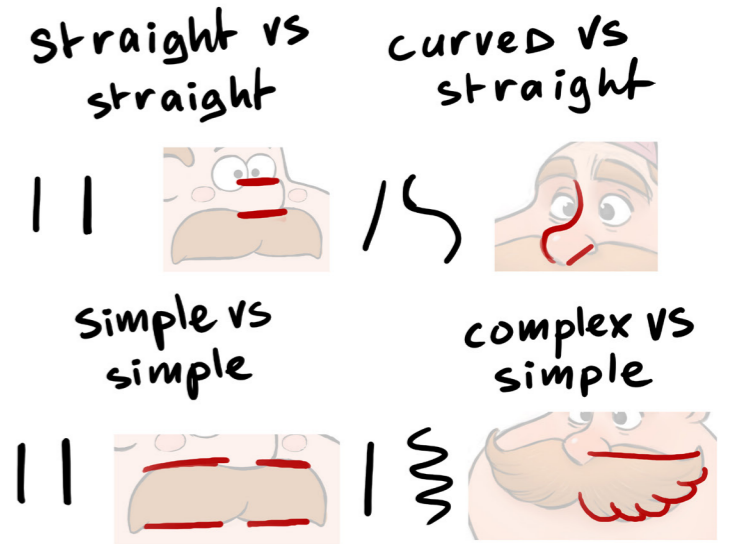
2 STYLES COMPARED

In this image, you can see two different styles. The iconic style often seen in television shows, and the organic one is more common in animated features. However, nowadays, the trend is the other way around: more and more movies pick up the iconic style for feature. At the same time, tv tries out shows in a more organic style. As you can see, this changes from time to time.

Both styles have their purposes. Mainly, the iconic style is used for more comic relief and the organic for more serious stories with more drama. Of course, this is not set in stone, but it seems to be the case in general.



Here I tried to show some of the differences between the styles. The iconic style is more graphical and uses a lot of symmetrical shapes and parallel lines. Almost like they are logos or icons. The organic style uses more contrasts. For example, unsymmetrical shapes and lines. It's more natural because, in nature, perfect round or square shapes are rare.

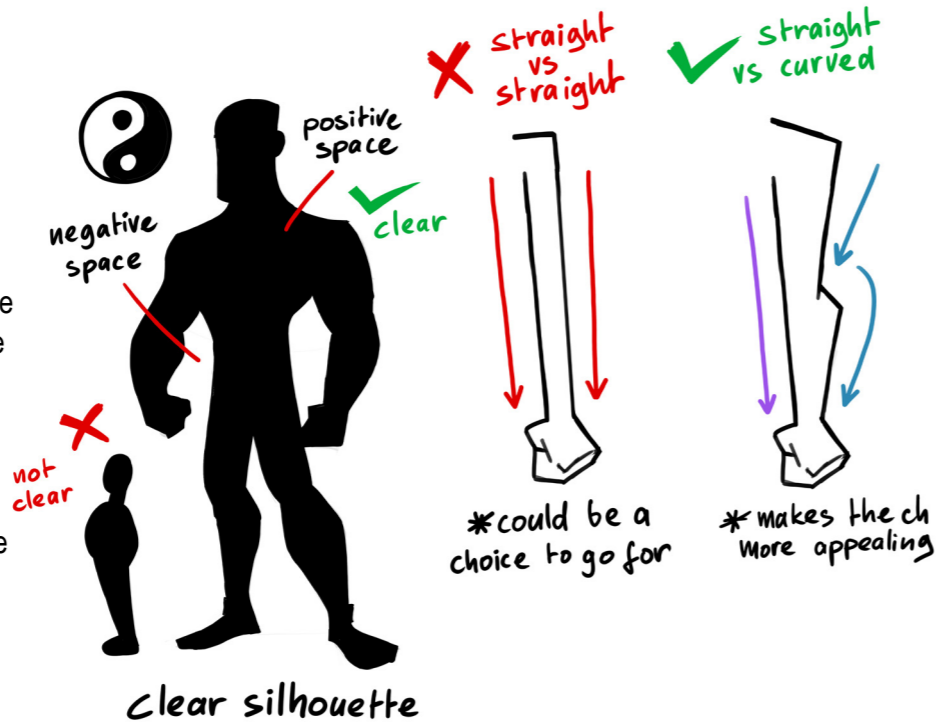


EXERCISE
Go watch some animated productions and try to tell what style they have and ask yourself why it's that way.

SILHOUETTE

When drawing a character, it must have a clear silhouette. The silhouette is the shape of the character. Think of it as a shadow. It consists of positive space (the character itself) and negative space (the space around the character).

As you can see in the example, your character will be clearer and better readable when the positive and negative spaces are in balance. To create a silhouette, you simply color your whole character with one color (black is often used). Then you will have a silhouette, and you can judge if it's readable.

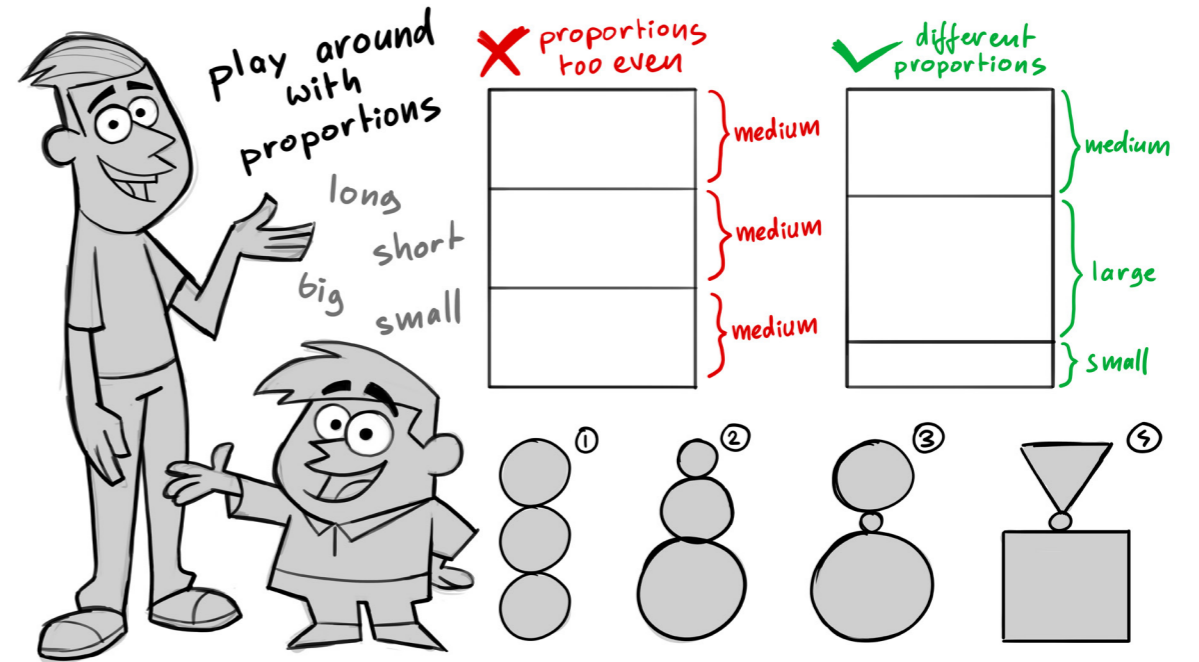


EXERCISE

Find an image of your favorite cartoon characters. Create a silhouette of it and see if you can still recognize it as the character. What makes it so recognizable?

PROPORTIONS

Another great way to create interesting characters is to use different proportions. I'll explain more about this later on in this ebook. It is not required to follow these guides, and you can even ignore them. But when you do know them, at least you can ignore them on purpose.

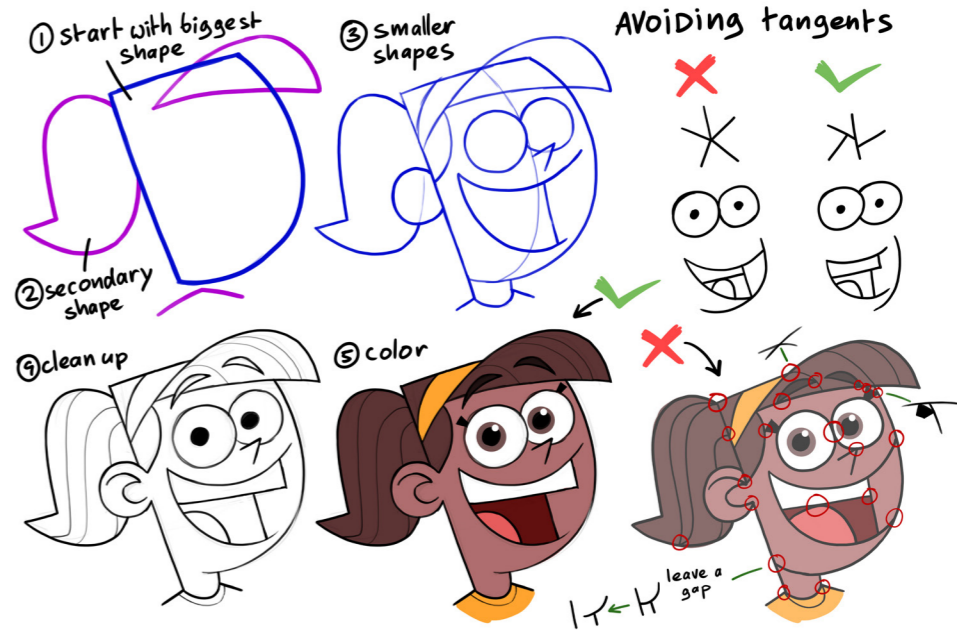




Here is an example of two characters of different sizes. Both have the same order of shapes—medium, big and small. You can experiment with this by changing the order of the shape sizes, like big on top, small in the middle, and

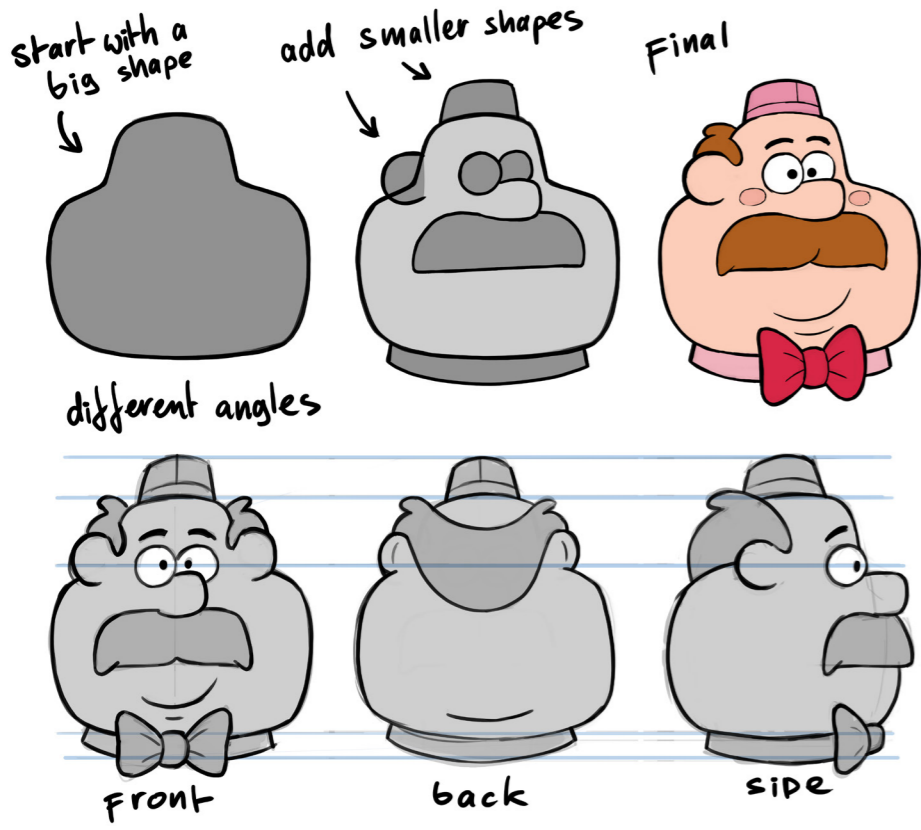
medium at the bottom. Play around with this and see what kind of designs you can create.

TANGENTS



When drawing a character, I try to avoid tangents. Tangents are multiple lines that end at one point, see the image since it's best explained visually. Because of the intersection of lines, the shapes look like they are connected, which looks strange and causes a loss of depth in the illustration.

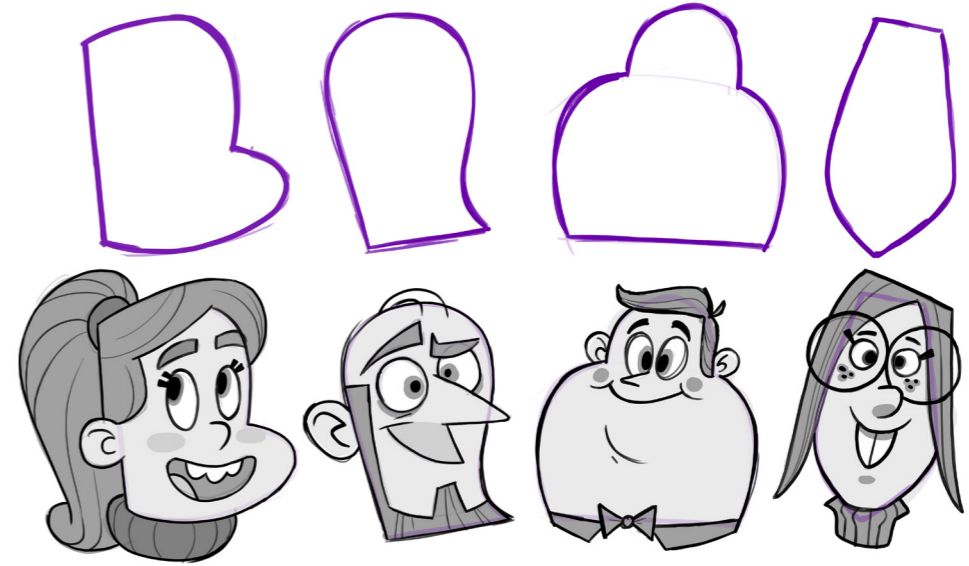
Besides that, tangents grab a lot of unintentional attention. Our eyes are drawn towards them because of the intersection(s). Whatever style I'm drawing in, I try to avoid tangents. Try to look at your art and see if you can spot some tangents.



SHAPES

In this example, I've started drawing a shape first and filling that shape with smaller shapes. This is basically how I always work: from big to small. Once I have found the right proportions and shapes, I will draw the final lines and color them. You can also see that I drew this head from some different angles; this is called a turnaround. Notice how I used some guidelines to get everything in the same place.

I like to play around with different shapes too, for example, with these heads. Whenever I'm having an art block or don't know what to draw, I start drawing some random shapes and fill them with faces. This is great to give your creativity a boost.

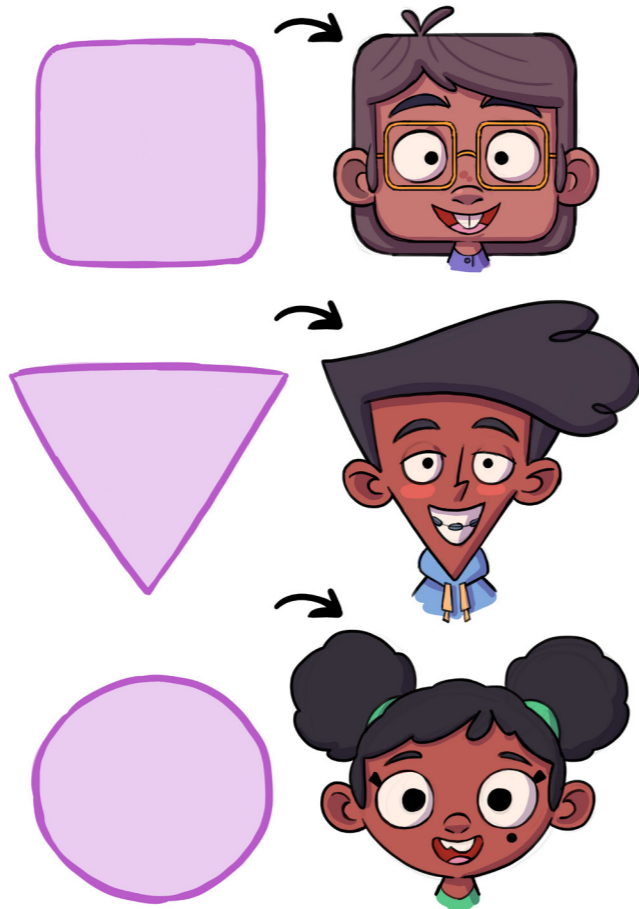


EXERCISE

Use the shapes in this example to create your own faces. Try to make multiple faces with each shape. Can you come up with some other random shapes?

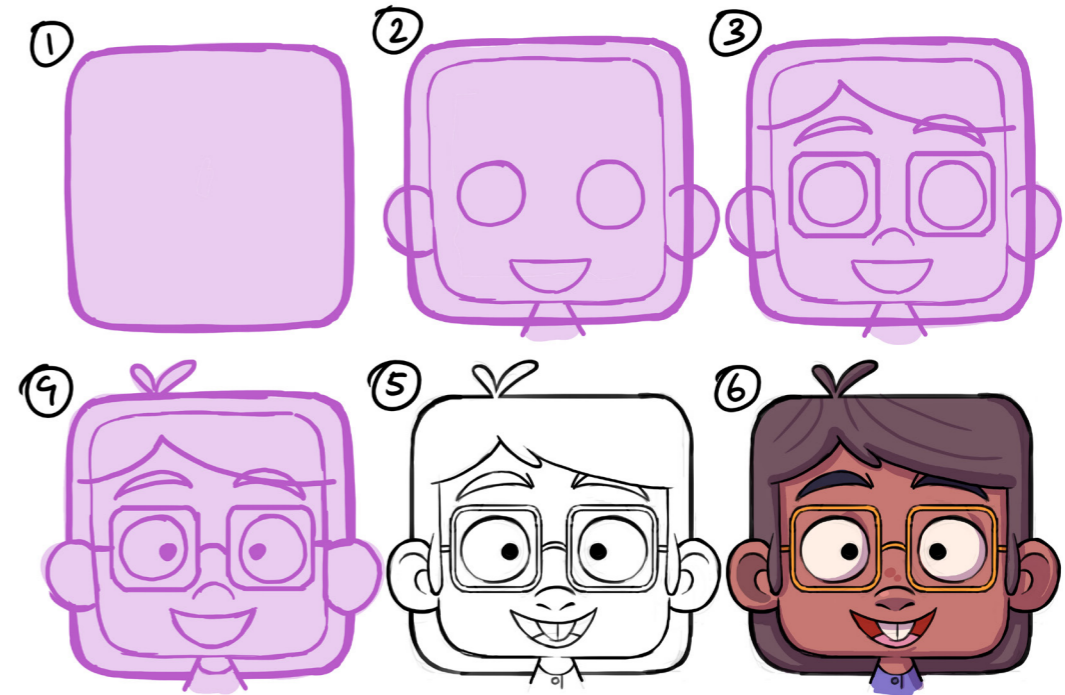
SHAPE LANGUAGE

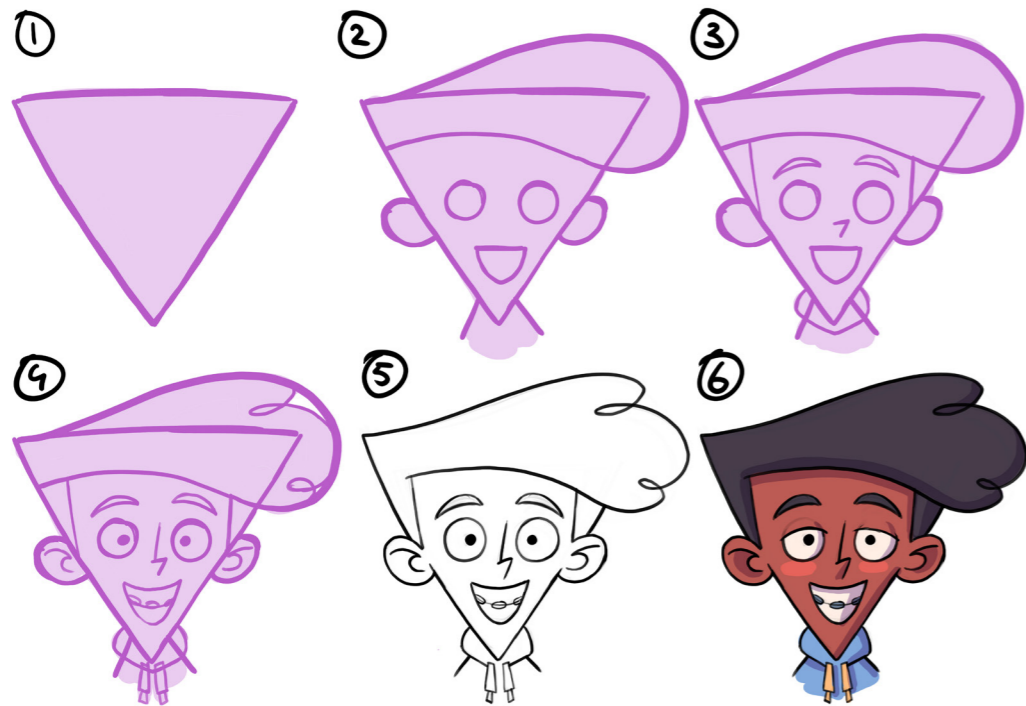
Let's draw with basic shapes! There are three basic shapes: the square, a triangle, and a circle. They can be used for different purposes. From the concept of shape language, there is a theory of the meaning of these shapes. Often, a square is seen as stable and strong, a triangle fast and dangerous, and a circle cute and friendly. You can draw anything you want with these three shapes because you can combine them and create any shape you'd like. More about this later.



EXERCISE

Here is a step-by-step tutorial of this square-faced character. Try to draw some square-faced characters by following these steps.



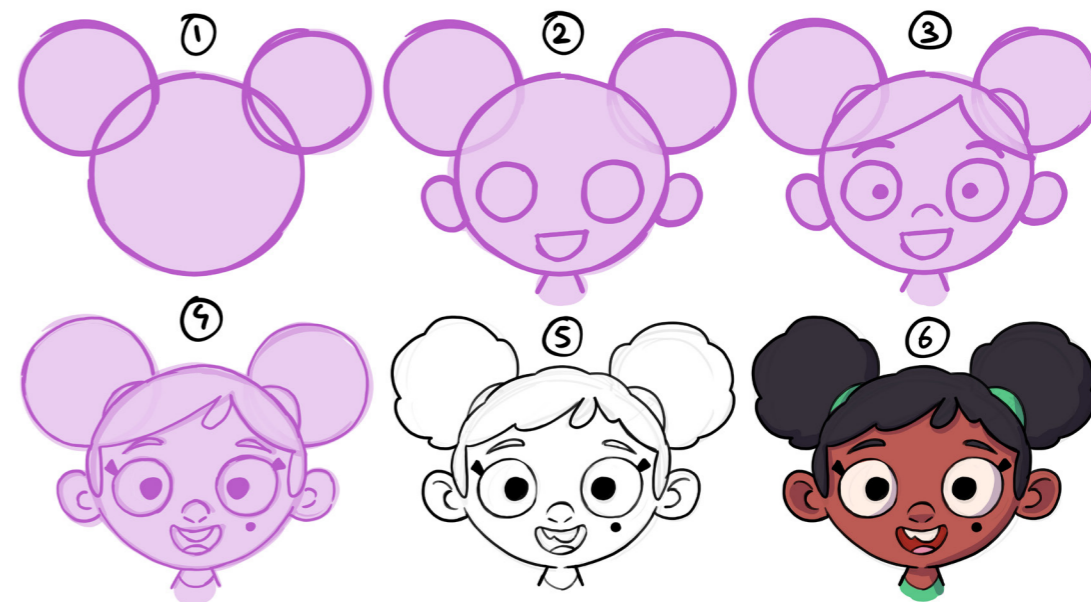


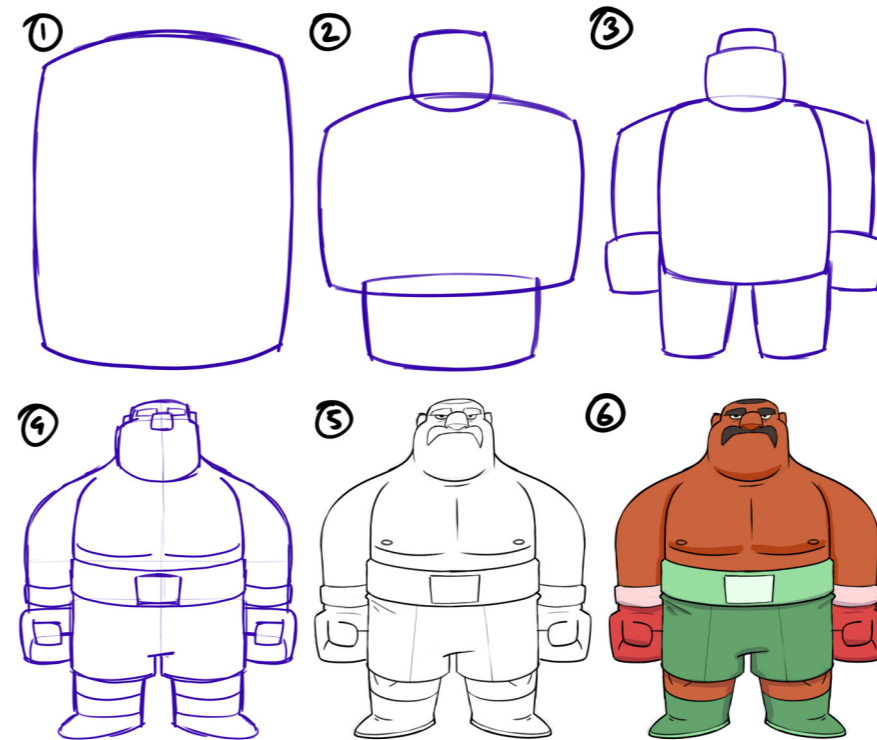
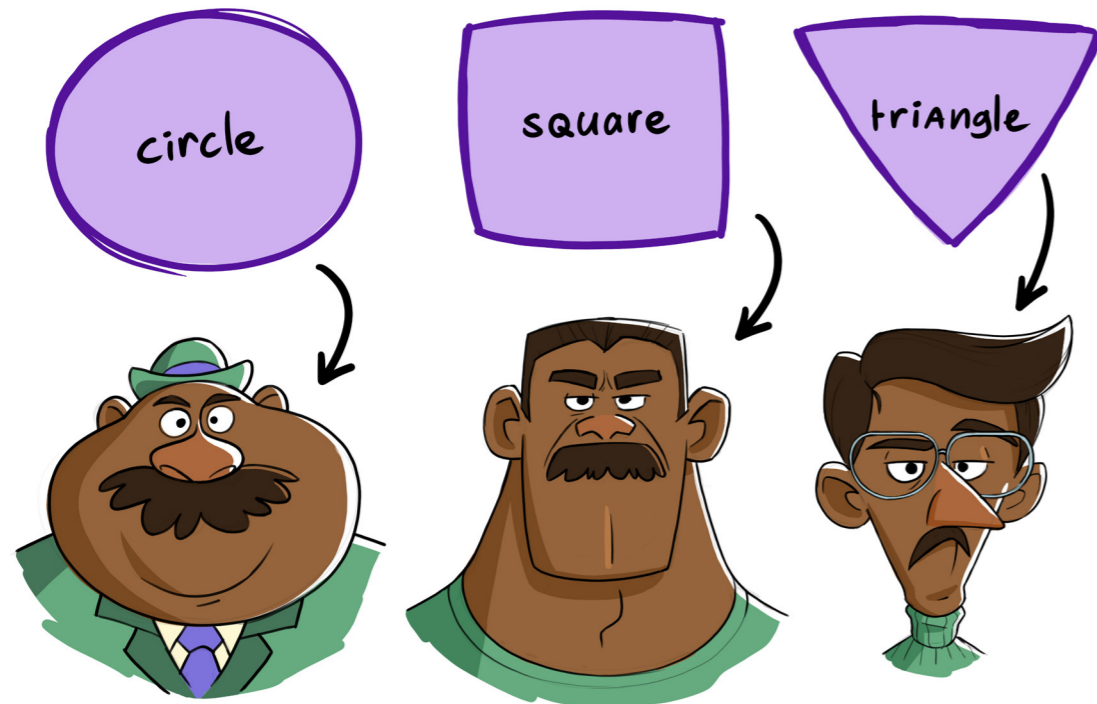
This character has a triangular head. Triangles are often used for dangerous or villains but can also be applied for intelligence. In this case, sharpness refers to intellectual sharpness. As you can see, the shape's meaning is defined by the shape itself and the context it is used in.

Round shapes are often used for cute characters. I think that worked pretty well for this character. Sometimes you can mislead the audience by adding round shapes to your villain. This way, they don't expect the character to be dangerous. They will be surprised when its true identity is

revealed later. Round shapes in villains are also used to add some weakness to the character.

This underlines that if you know the 'rules', you can break them on purpose.

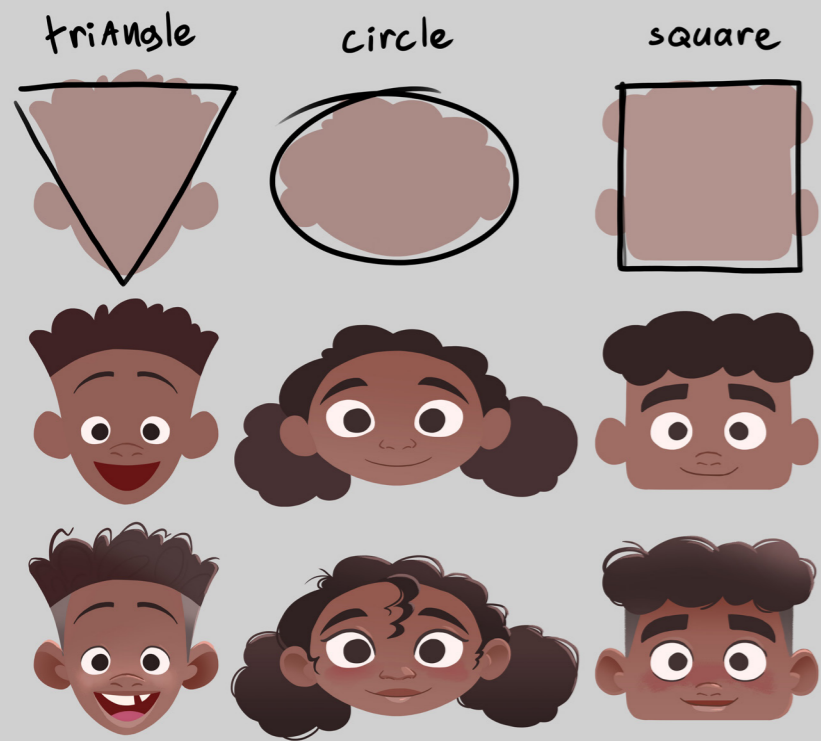




This concept of shape language also applies to the whole body of the character. You can start with a box, breaking it basically down into smaller blocks. While defining the character more and more, keep in mind maintaining the square shapes to keep its identity.

EXERCISE

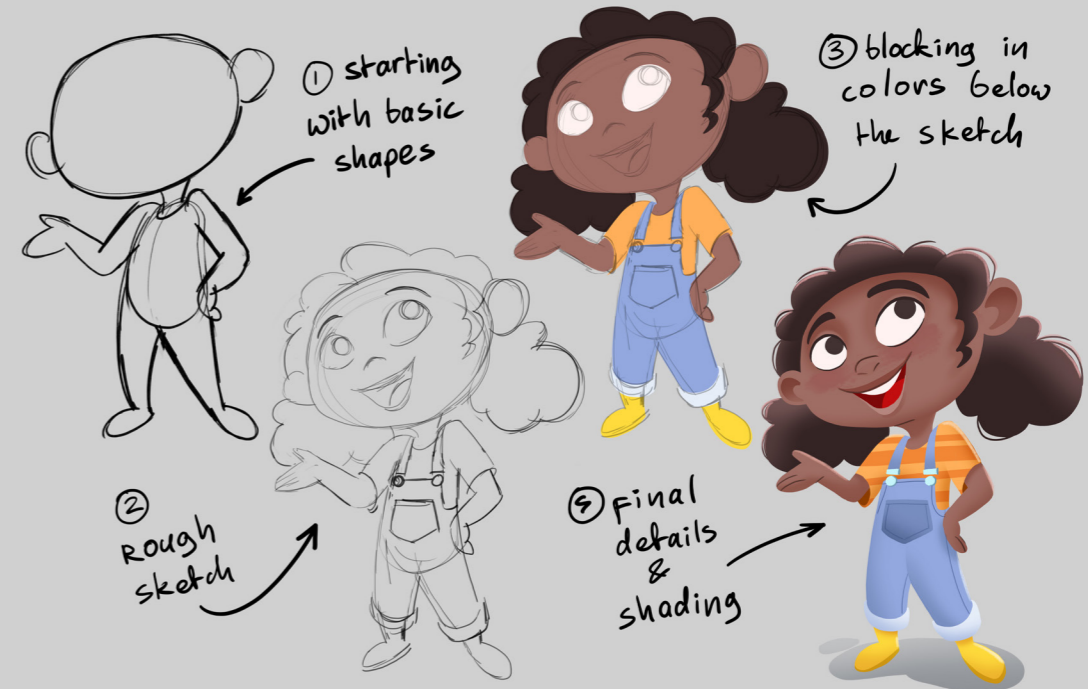
You can also apply this shape technique to adult characters. Use the same steps as I showed on the kids' tutorials with the shaped faces. Or try to make some variations with these characters.



Here I've used the same technique with the shapes but applied a different style without lines to it. You can use this technique for every style.

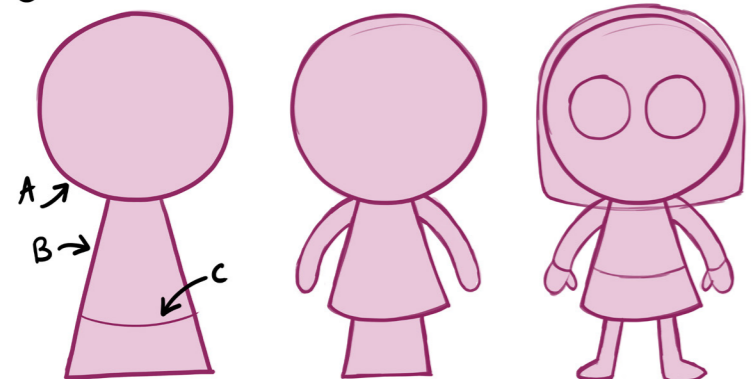
EXERCISE

Draw these heads in a different style. Try to vary with more organic and more iconic styles.

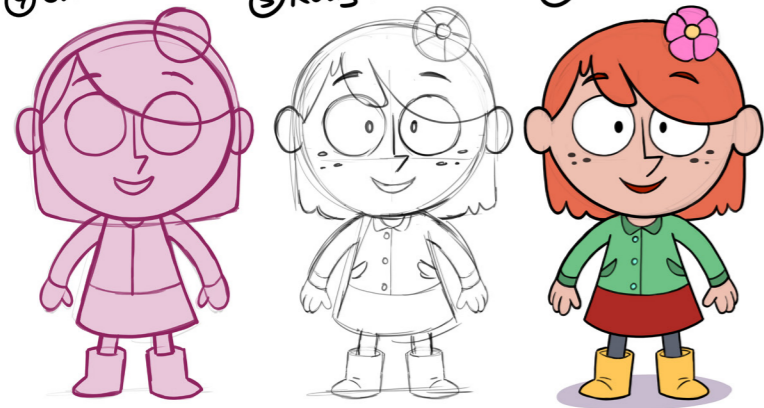


In this image I'm showing a mix between a flat and a more three-dimensional style. This is a style you often see in illustrations or children's books. Later I'll show some more examples of this style.

① main shapes ② ARMS & legs ③ smaller shapes



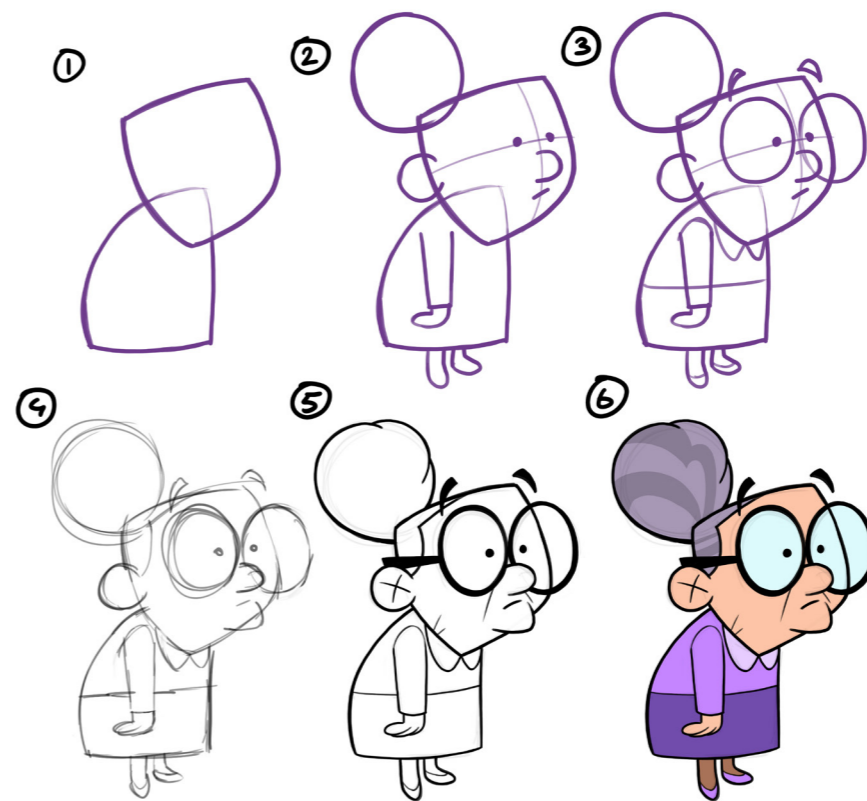
④ even smaller ⑤ rough sketch ⑥ ink & color



FULL CHARACTER CONSTRUCTION

Let's start with a simple character! First, draw the main shapes, approach it first with some basic shapes. It almost looks like abstract art in this stage—the head a circle and the body a triangle. We break the triangle down into two shapes. Once we have done that, we add some smaller shapes and even smaller shapes—work from large to small.

It helps to first make a sketch with the basic shapes to find the right proportions and shapes. In this stage you can play around until you have the design you like.



Now let's try the same technique but with a character from a $\frac{3}{4}$ angle this time. You'll learn how this works by copying this character by following the steps. This way, you'll learn to understand the process and why I'm using specific shapes. After a while, you can apply these skills to your characters.

Here is an example of how to draw a character with the three basic shapes combined. You can see how I stack them together to make the final design.

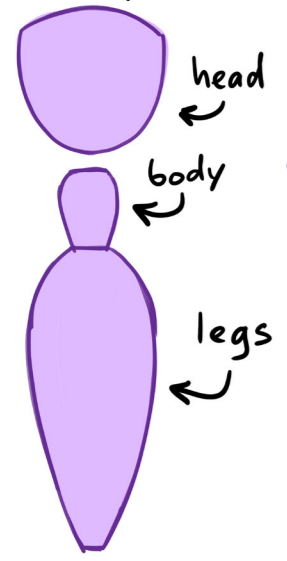


Here is another one. I've used the same shapes, but in different order and sizes.

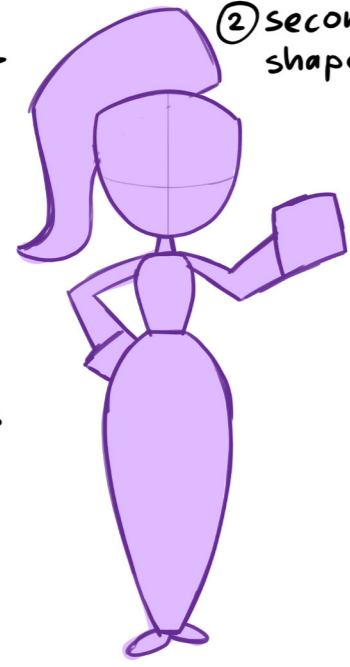
EXERCISE

Try it out yourself. See if you can come up with a new character by using these shapes.

① main shapes first



② secondary shapes

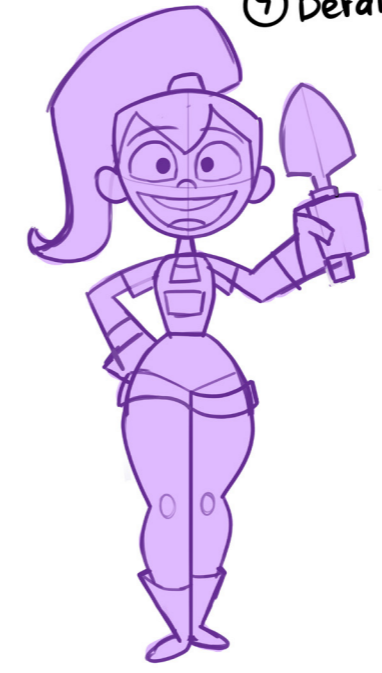


③ eyes, mouth & more



A step-by-step example of how to draw a character from the front. In the first steps of drawing a character, I like to put down the character in some basic shapes. These first shapes often look pretty abstract. Later you'll give them more details and design.

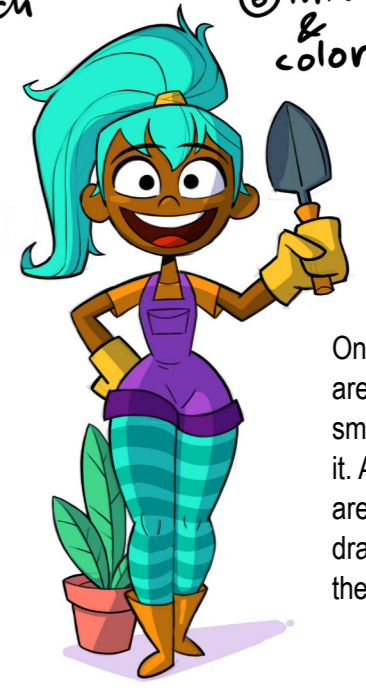
④ details



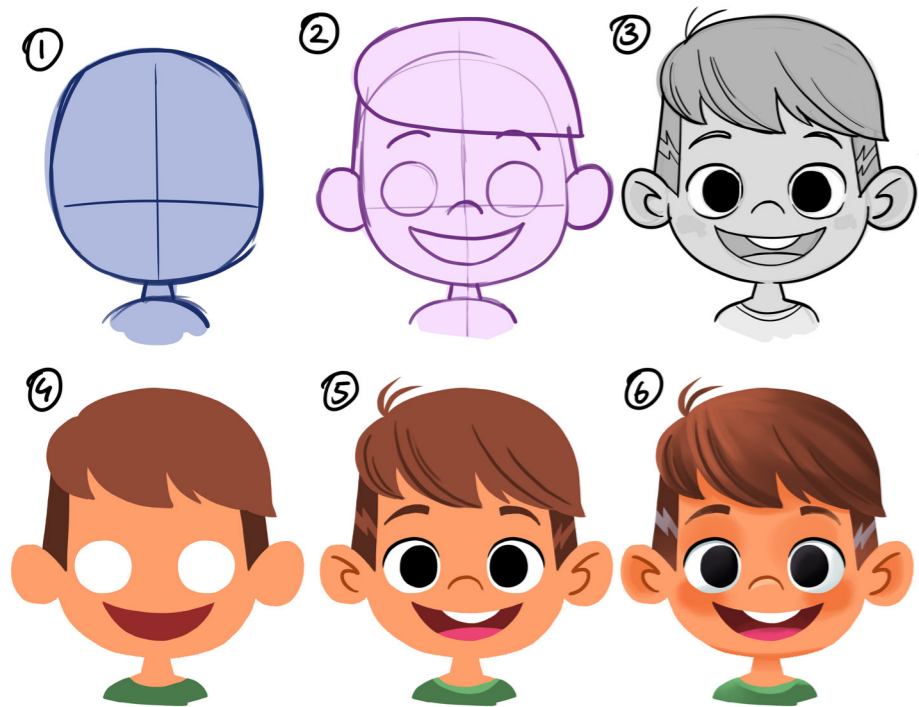
⑤ sketch



⑥ ink & color

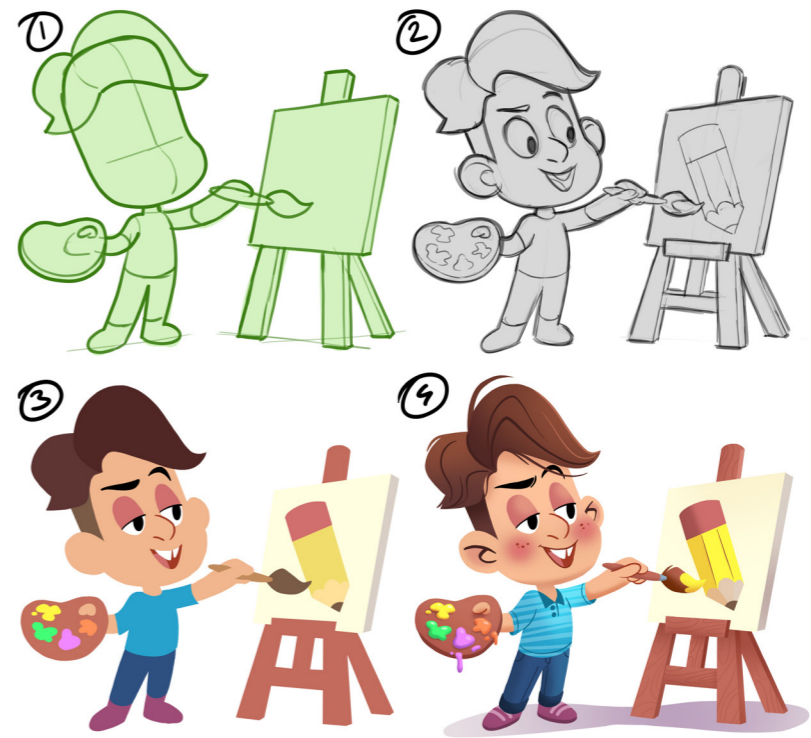


Once those main shapes are put down, I start to add smaller shapes on top of it. After that those shapes are drawn, I clean up the drawing and begin to add the colors.



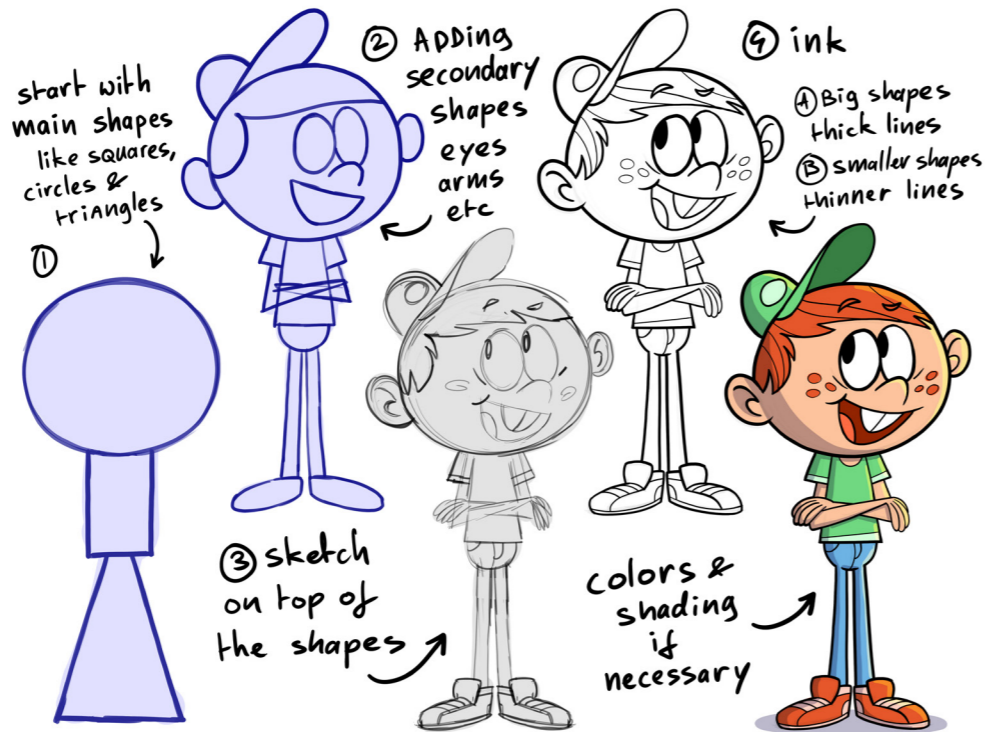
OTHER STYLES

For this illustration, I picked a more children's book style to finish the drawing. Up to step 3, I just draw as I would do with any drawing. But at step 4, I drop the linework and applied minimal shading at step 6. By experimenting with different styles to finalize your illustration, you can create different versions of the same illustration!



I've applied the same children's book style to this creative character. Notice how I slightly changed his expression in step 3. Don't be afraid to make these changes if it makes your illustration better.

As you can see, you can apply the same principles but vary in the style you pick to finalize it. I chose a more tv-show style for this character, but you could also give this character the same look and feel as the two on the previous pages!

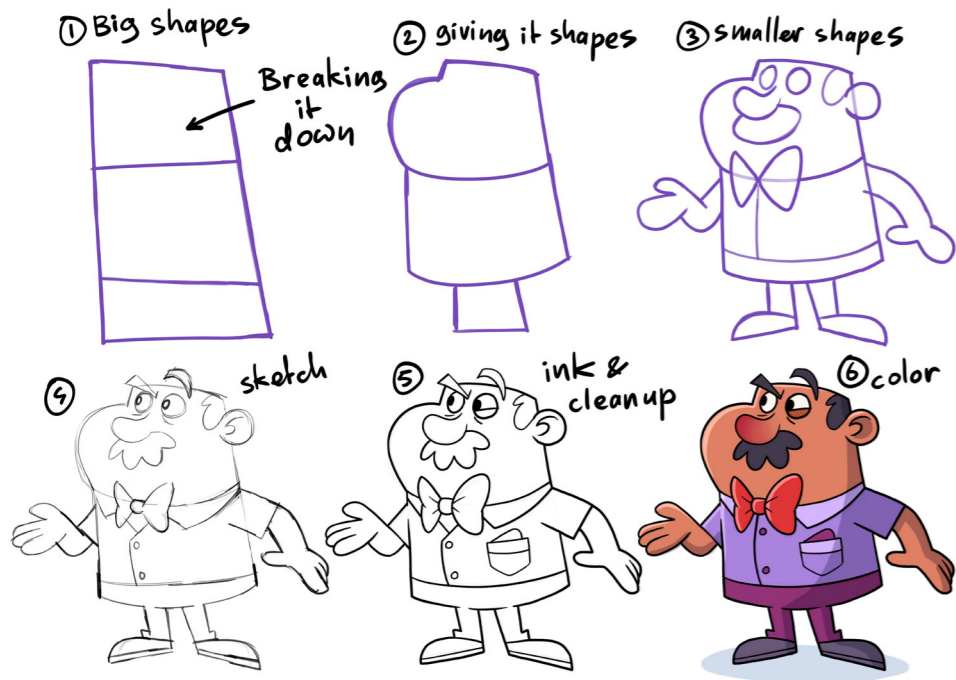


EXERCISE

Take this character and give it the children's book's style of the previous pages, or an other style!

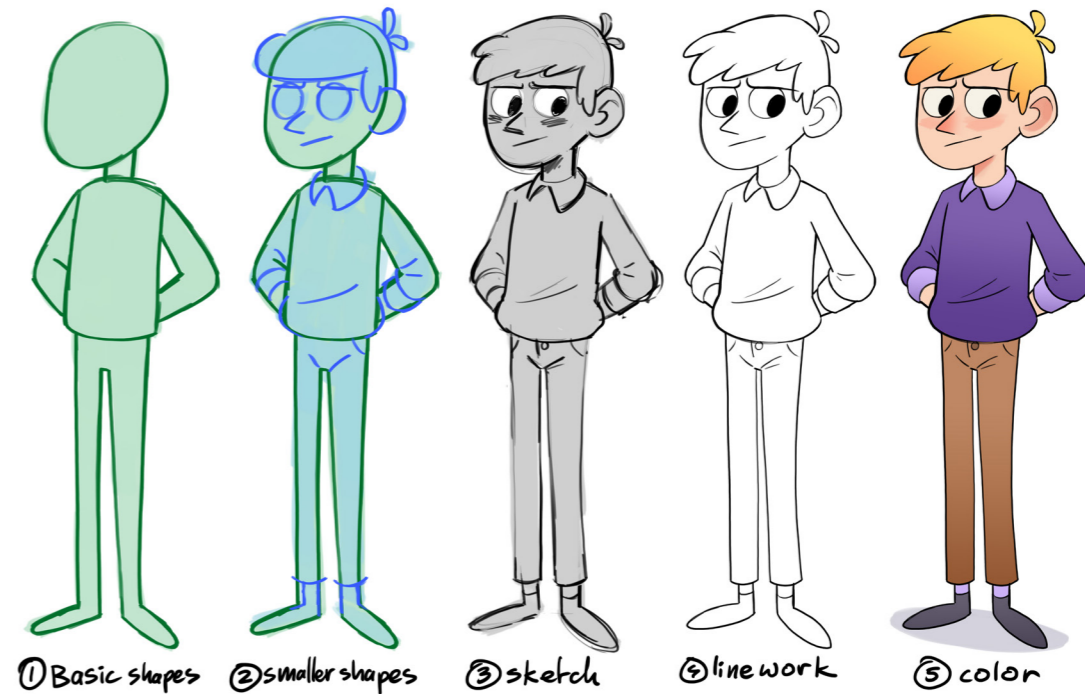


As I showed a few pages earlier, you can create heads from funny shapes. You can do the same for a whole character! Try to come up with some other odd shapes. Try to experiment with this, and it's also not a problem when something doesn't work out as you imagined. It's a good thing to make mistakes because you learn the most from them!



For this silly cartoony style, I start with an abstract shape and break it down into smaller shapes. Remember I told you about playing around with big, medium, and small. I also did that here.

This character has a stylistic style but more realistic. When using these separate shapes, starting with big shapes, try to maintain a flow and keep the shapes “connected”. That’s why I like to start with a line of action or a single shape.



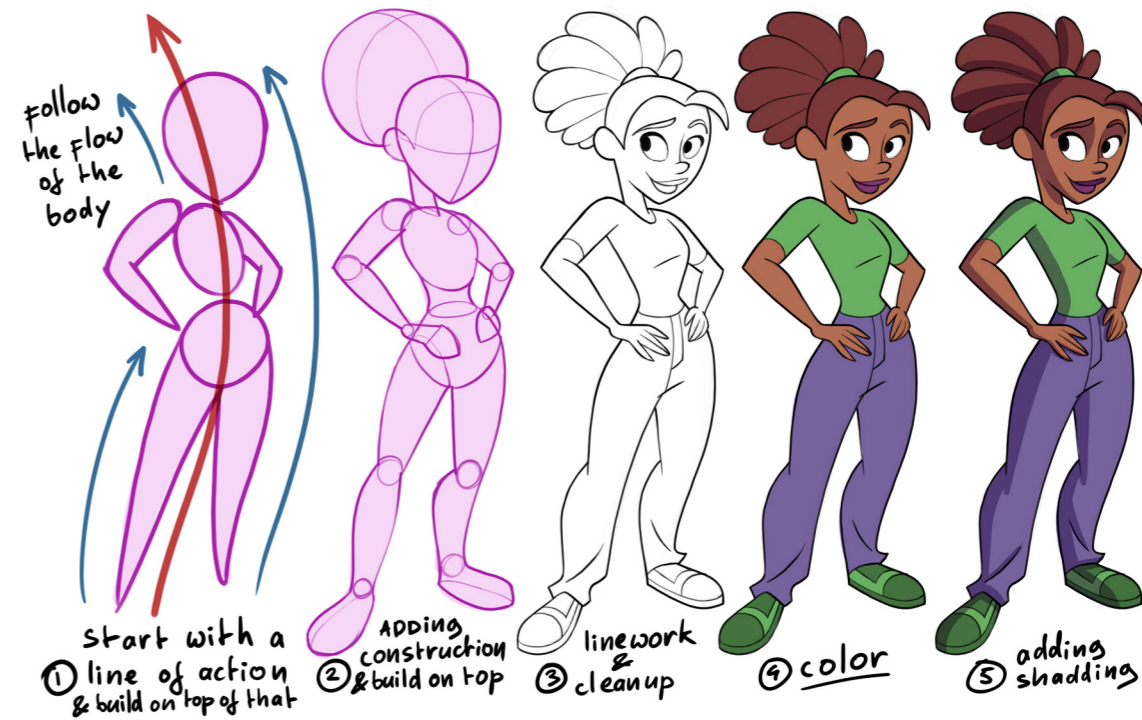


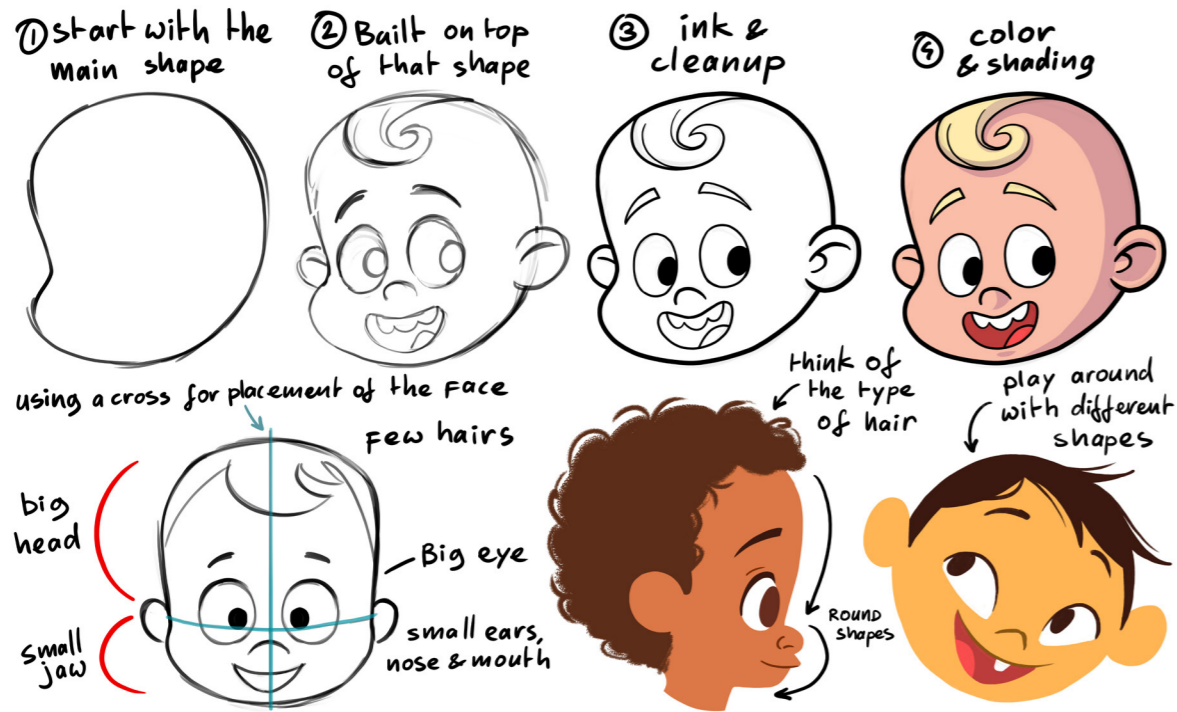
Here is another excellent example, in a different style, of having separate shapes but maintaining a connection and flow between the shapes. This way, the overall body still feels connected as a whole.

EXERCISE

Try to see the line of action in the other characters in this ebook.

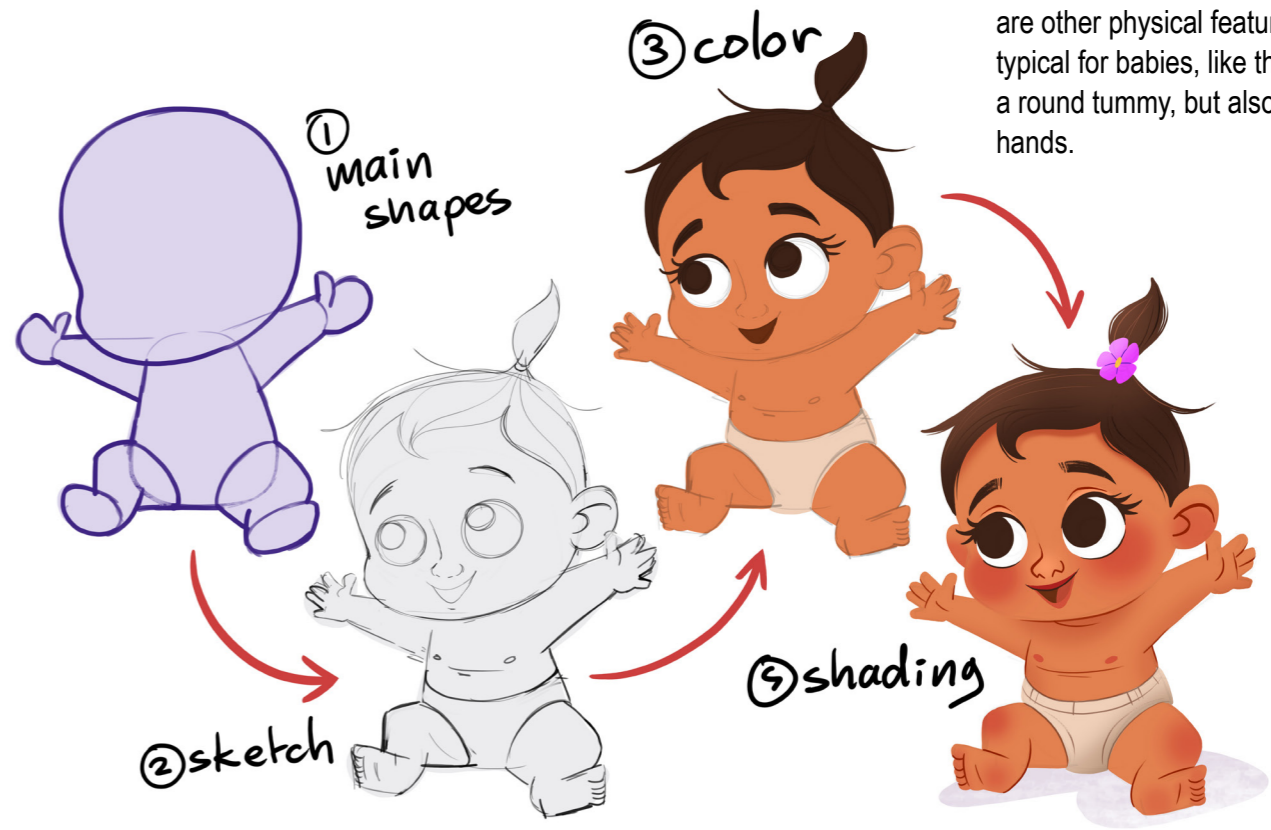
The red line is the line of action. See how all the shapes follow that line. It gives the character a dynamic pose and makes it feel alive. You can even use the line of action with a flat style.



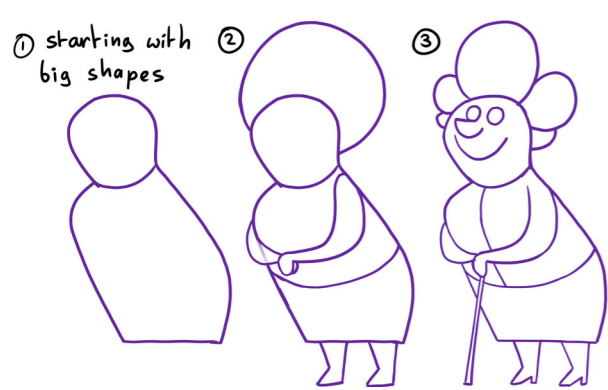


BABIES

You can learn a lot from drawing babies! It's really fun to study them because it let you discover what we humans find cute. Experiment with the size of the forehead, the eyes, nose, and mouth to see how this affects the character's cuteness.



Besides these facial features, there are other physical features that are typical for babies, like thick limbs and a round tummy, but also tiny feet and hands.



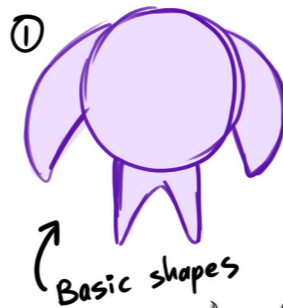
GRANNY

EXERCISE

This granny is ready to go for a stroll! Try drawing a different grandma or a maybe grandpa. Use the same steps as I'm showing here. See how the character leans forward and has old-fashioned clothing.

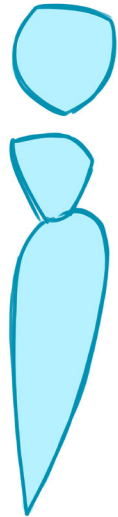
OTHER THEMES

When I have an art block and draw something for myself, I pick some cool themes and start drawing some fun characters. Like a Viking! Pirates, cavemen, or other crazy themes are also well suited for this.



EXAGGERATIONS

① shapes



② smaller shapes



③ sketch & details



④ ink & cleanup



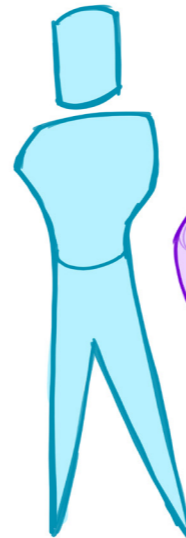
⑤ color



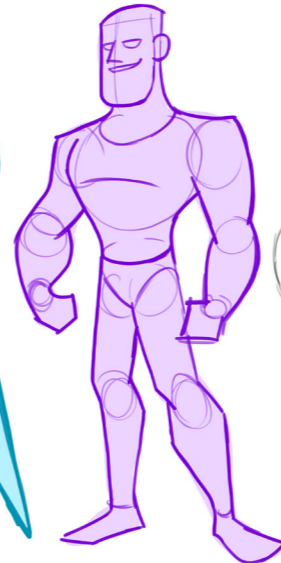
This lady is drawn in a stylized style. See the type of angles and shapes I used for the design. I've also exaggerated certain body parts like the eyes and the hips. By exaggerating some features, it becomes more cartoony.

⑤ color

① shapes



② smaller shapes



③ sketch & details



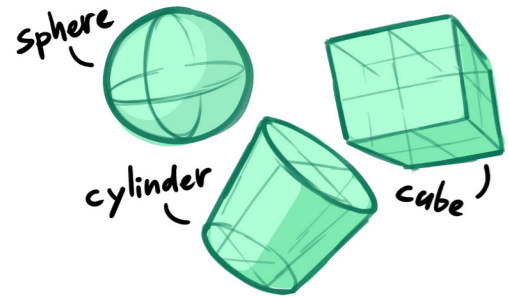
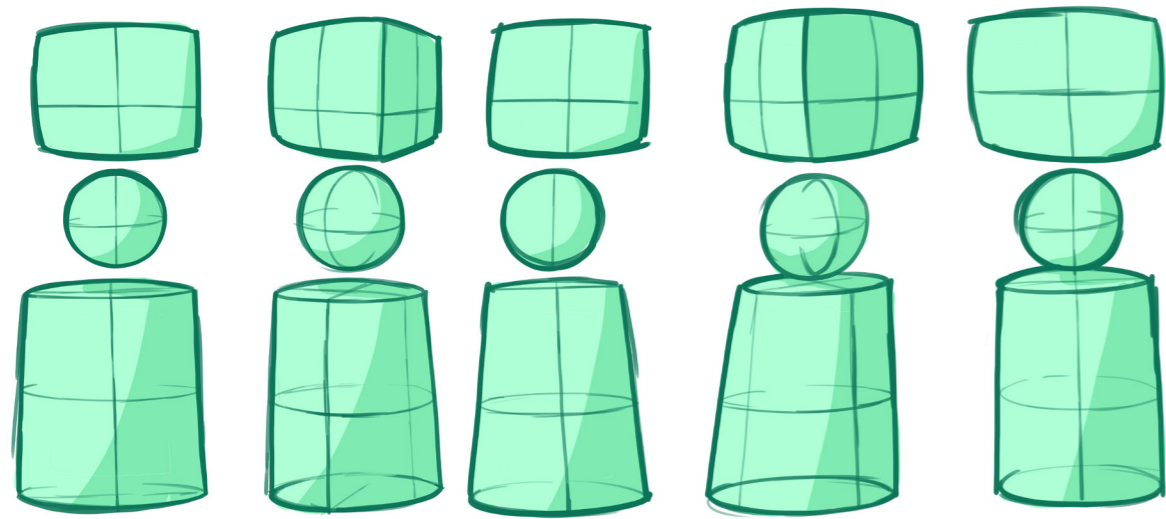
④ ink & cleanup



⑤ color

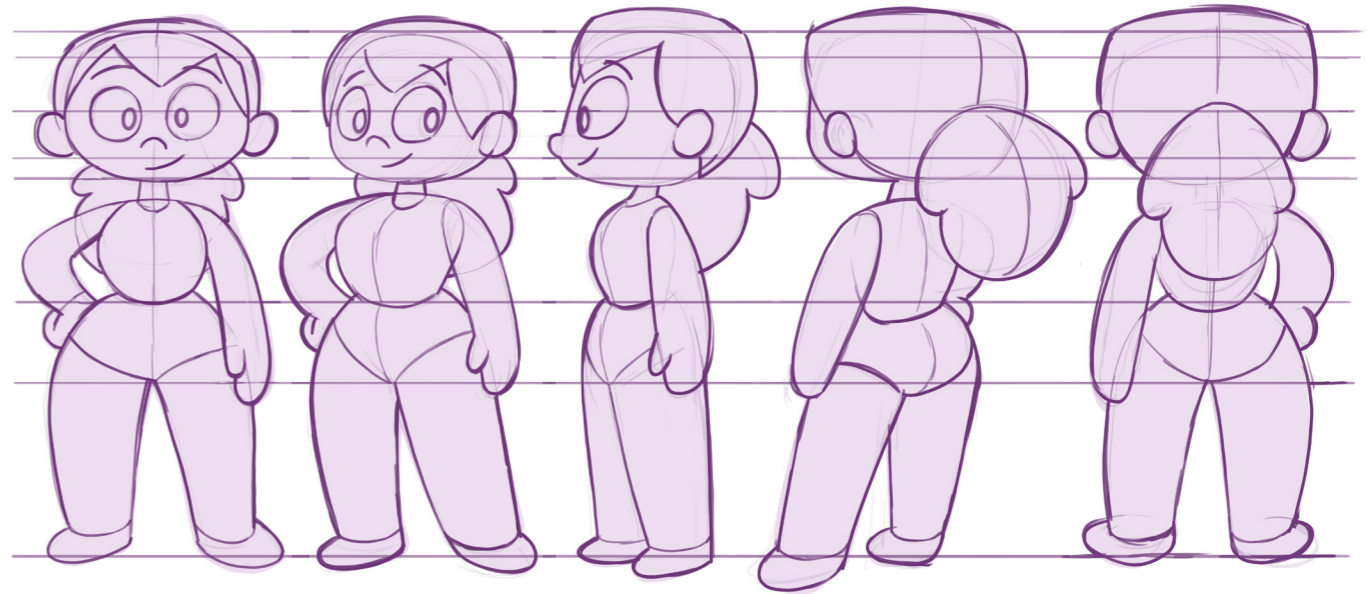


In this example, I've exaggerated the chest of the character to emphasize its strength. Use these exaggerations to create a convincing character.



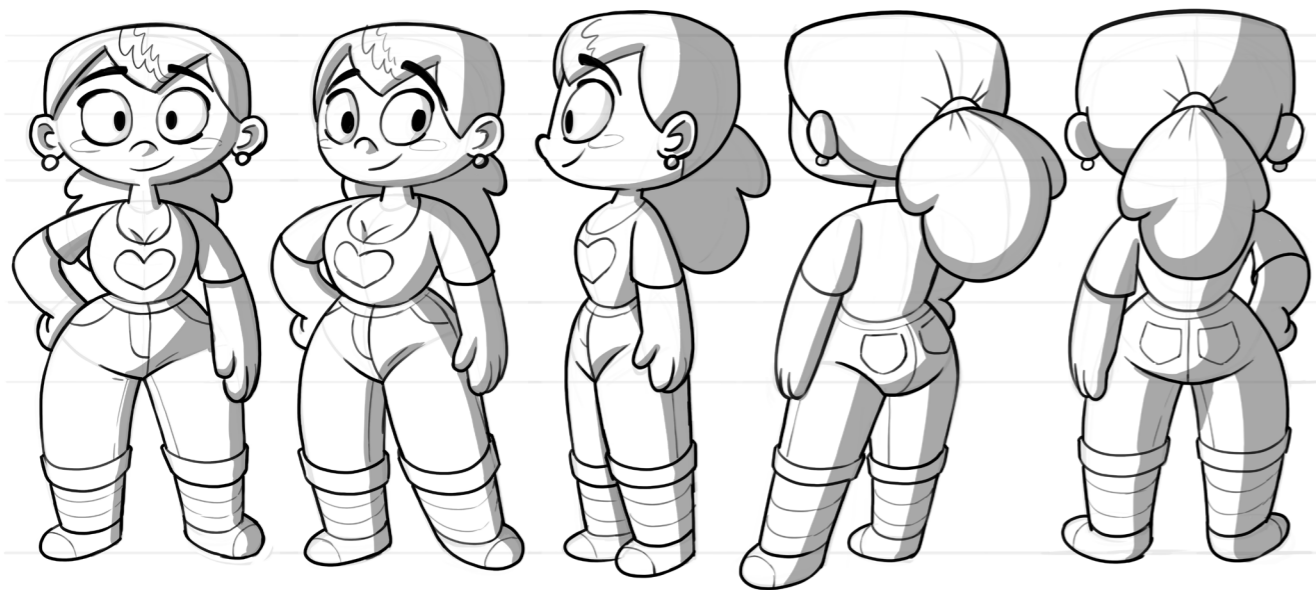
TURNAROUND

Let's draw a turnaround! Turnarounds are used in production to show a character from different angles. Using basic shapes can help a lot to draw a character from different angles. Look at this example to see how I used these shapes to draw this character from different angles.



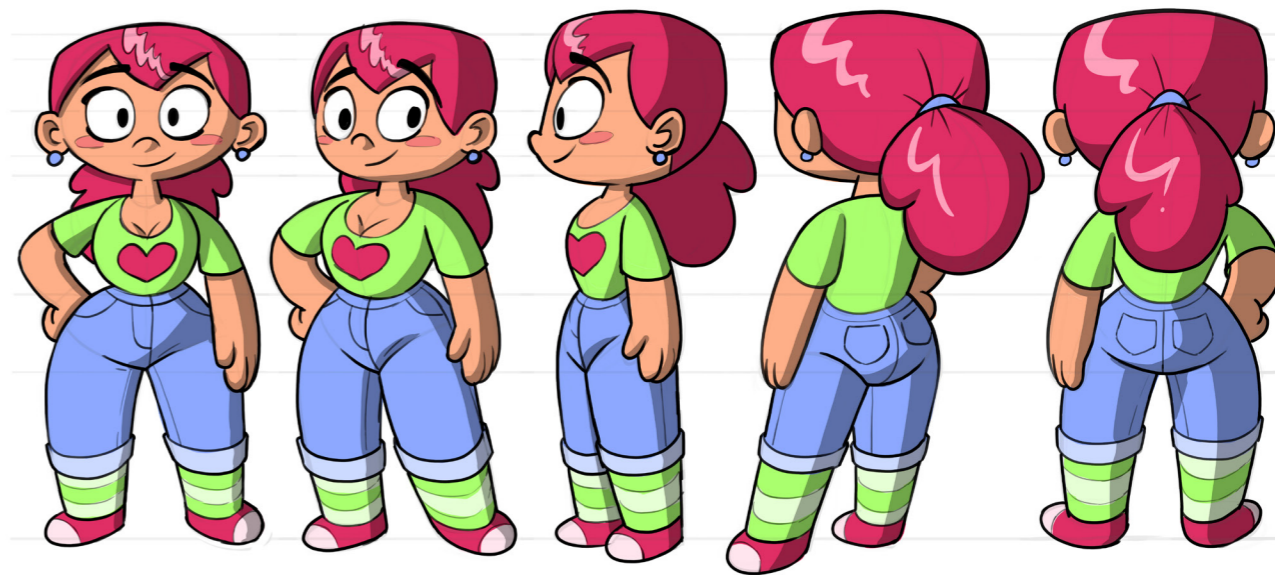
Here I used those basic shapes and started to define them more into a character. Can you still recognize the basic shapes I used on the previous page? They are just a bit morphed and refined. For example, the arm is actually a cylinder.

Now I have cleaned up the sketch and added the shadows. For this, I start by inking the drawing. Thickest lines for the biggest shapes and thinnest lines for the small details. After the linework is done, I pick a location for the light source and start adding the shadows. In this case, I use a multiply (semi-transparent) layer for the shades.

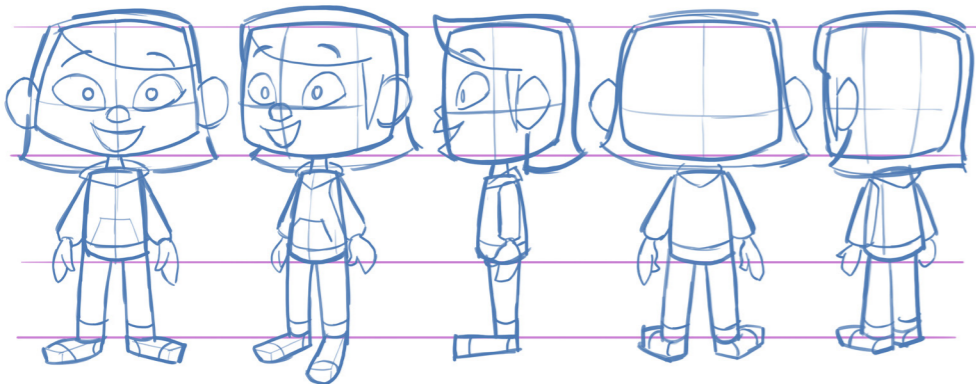
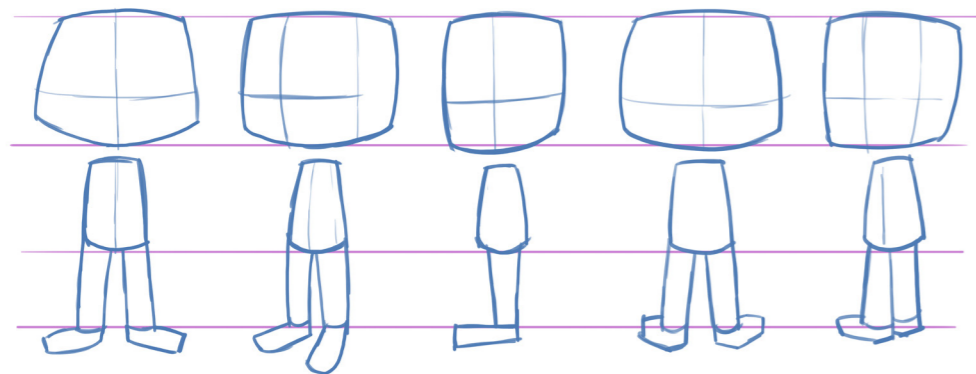


EXERCISE

After practicing with this character, go-ahead and try to create a turnaround with one of your own characters. Don't forget to start with the basic shapes!

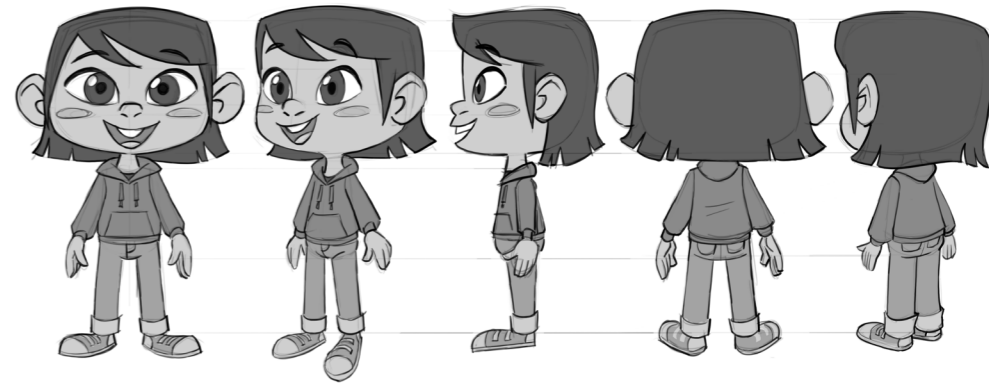
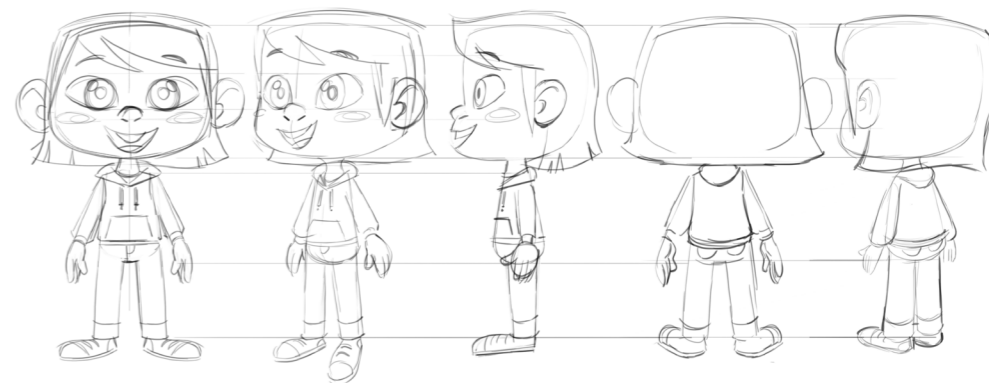


To finalize the drawing, I've picked a color scheme and colored the character with it. I've also added some highlights, as you can see in the hair. I choose the colors by looking or a color scheme that fits the character's appearance. This character is bold, brave, and cheerful. By sticking to the color scheme, you also avoid using too many different colors.



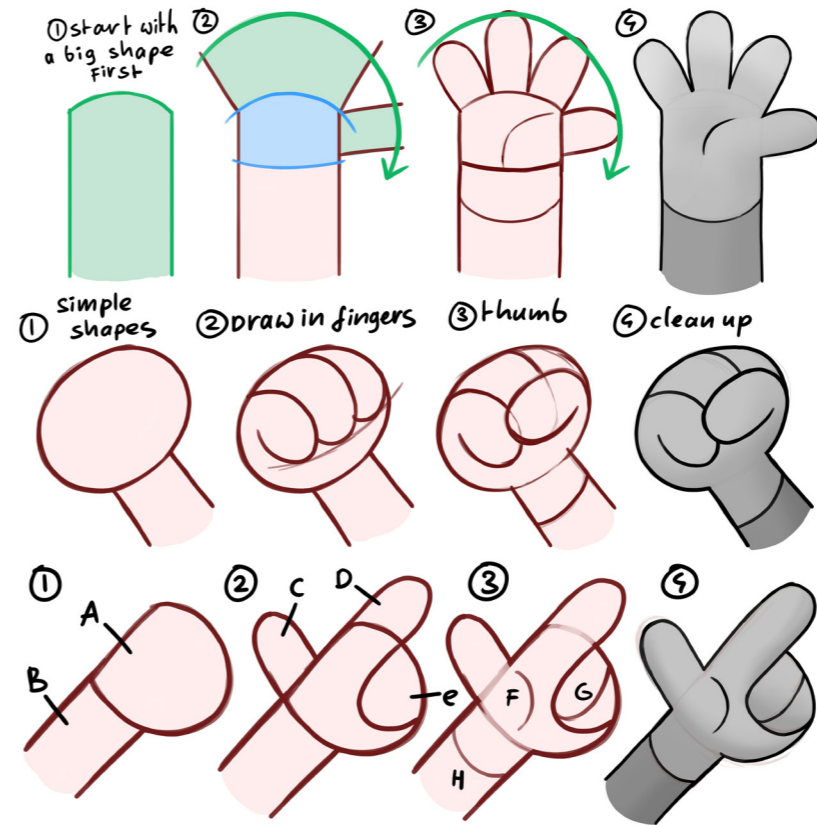
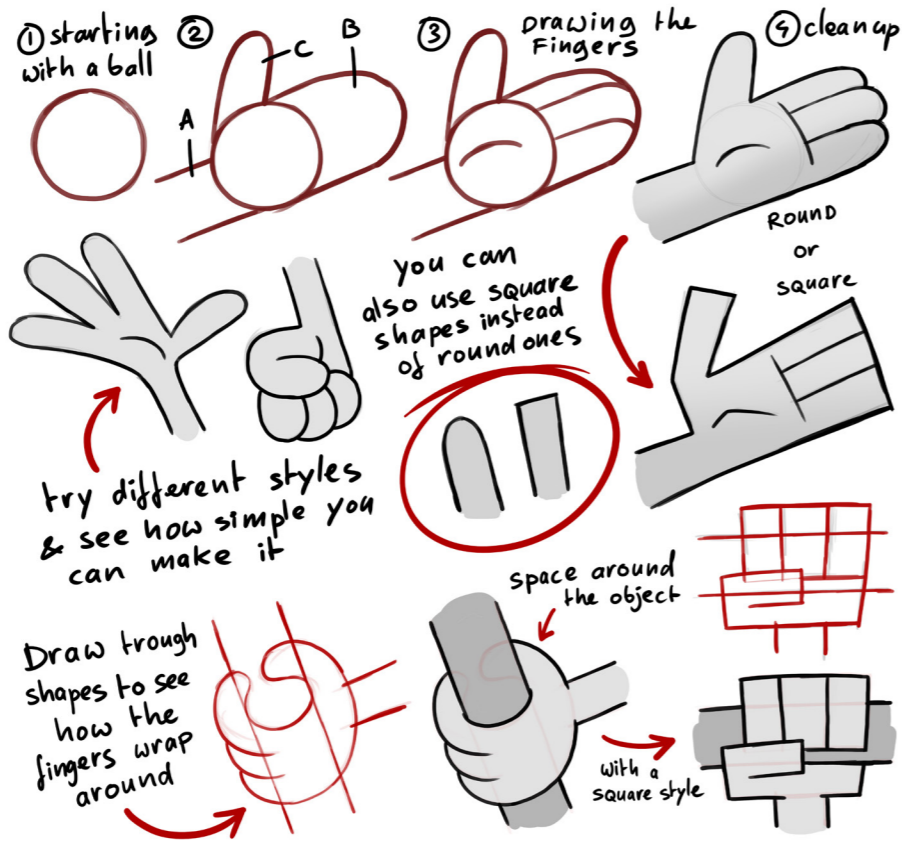
Another example of drawing a turnaround. Starting with basic shapes helps me with getting the proportion right in all the different angles.

Once the construction is made, we can start drawing the sketch on top of it and add the details. When cleaned up, you can also start adding values. When you don't have time to color everything, using values is a good substitute for it.



HANDS

Drawing stylized hands is actually the same process as drawing hands in any other style. It's just more simplified and a choice between straight and curved lines.



Here I show step by step some examples of drawing the hand. You can use these steps for other hand gestures.

EXERCISE

Try to draw some different hands using these tips.



In this style, the hands have many straight lines and sharp corners. Try to break these hands down in the construction shapes from the two previous pages to understand it better.

To show the complete opposite, these are hands with mostly rounded shapes, curved lines, and soft corners. Try to break down and study these hand's construction.

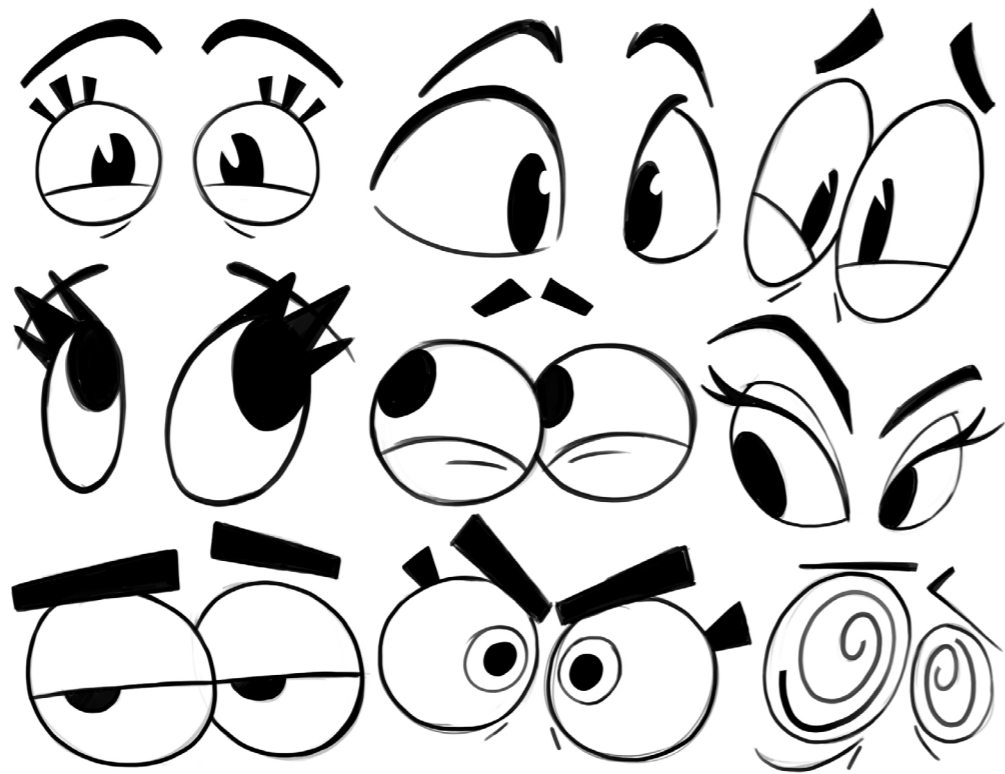
EXERCISE

Redraw these hands in the more stylized style with sharp corners and straight lines for practice.



EYES

Drawing eyes! Here I drew a bunch of different eyes. See how many kinds of stylized eyes there are. It's an excellent exercise just to fill a whole page with some random eyes and try to see what you can come up with.

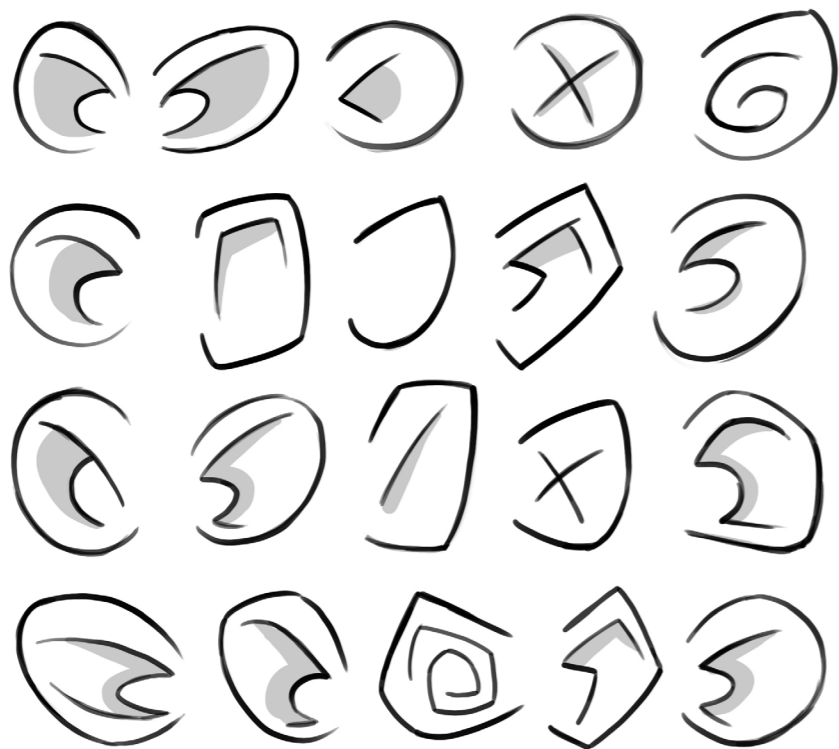


MOUTHS

Drawing mouths! There are also a lot of possibilities with drawing different mouths in different shapes and with other expressions. Can you come up with more?

EARS

Drawing ears! Even with some subtle changes, you can create endless possibilities for different designs for the ears. It's excellent to force yourself to fill a page and push yourself to keep coming up with different designs.

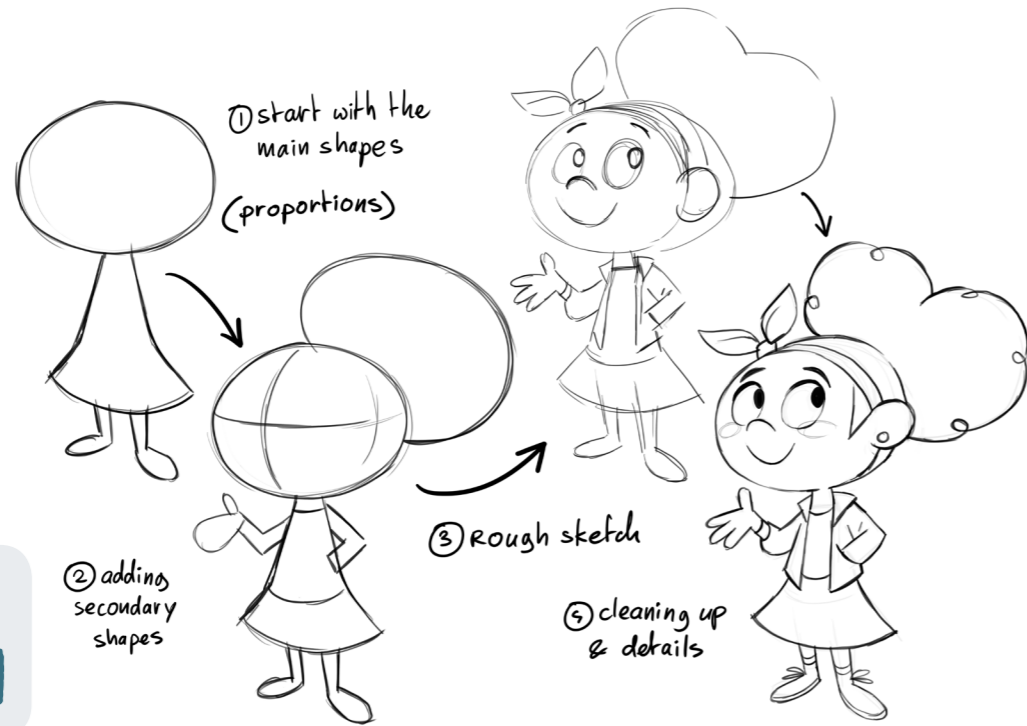


NOSES

Drawing noses! Sharp, soft, big, small, there is so much possible with drawing the noses. Try to think in different lines and shapes. Also, try to think about how many details you want to give it.



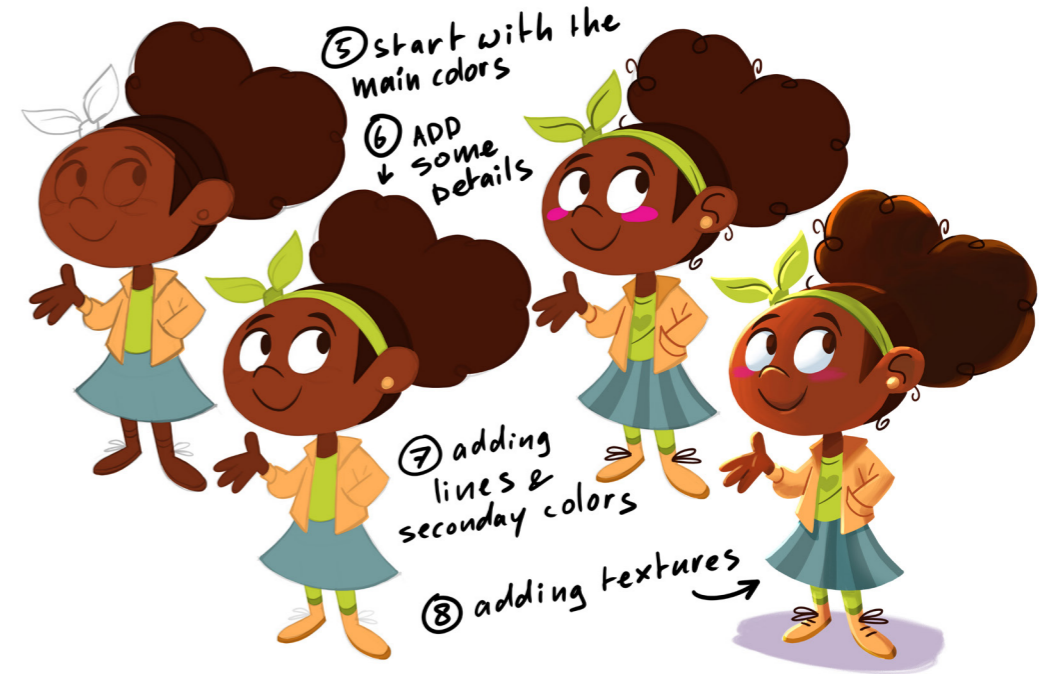
FROM SKETCH TO FINAL DESIGN



To sum it all up, here is another example of drawing a character and finally color it.

I started with the basic shapes. And work your way through first the big shapes to eventually the minor shapes.

These are the steps of how I color it. There are many ways of coloring and polishing this character. This character could also be drawn with thick ink lines or in a vector style or something completely different! Think about what kind of final style you want to use for your character. What is the purpose of the illustration? How is it going to be applied? And what is the target audience? This all can influence your choice.





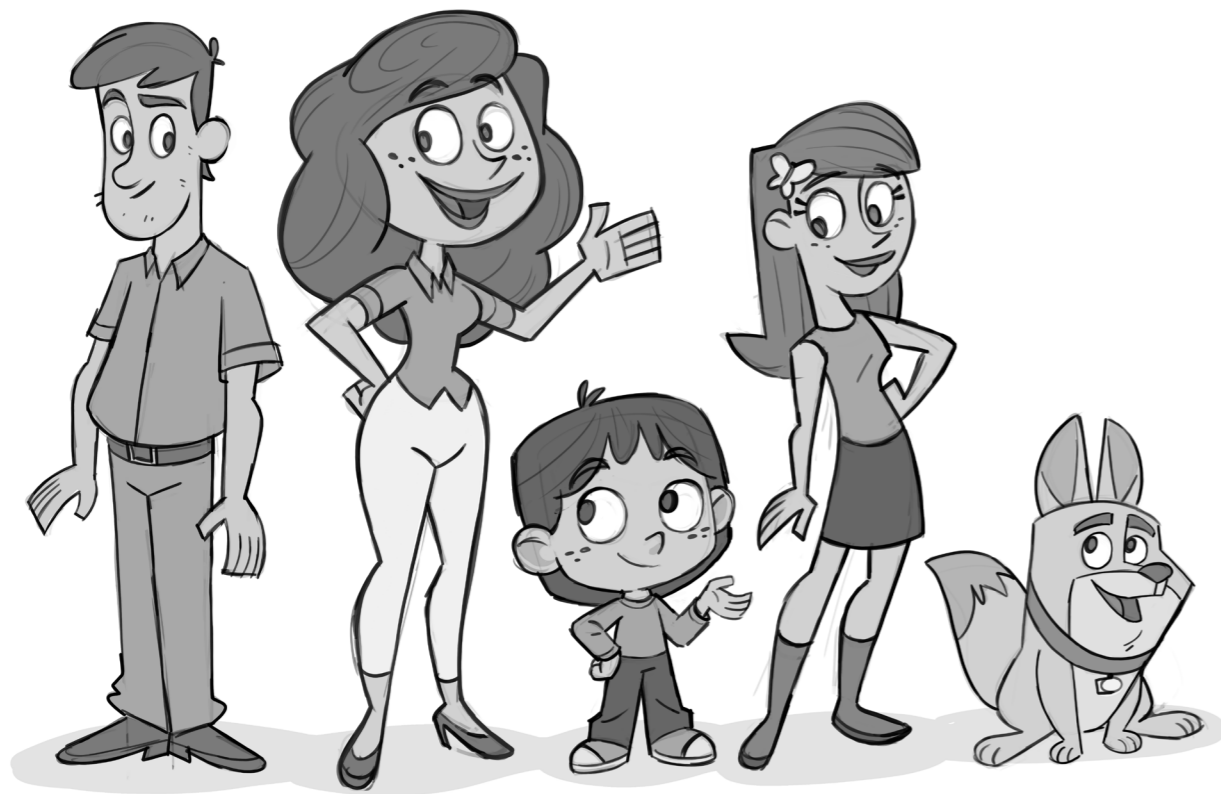
PICK UP YOUR SKETCHBOOK

Finding your own style takes a lot of time (and pencils). A sketchbook is great to experiment with shapes and designs. So grab your sketchbook and scribble, draw, and experiment as much as you can, to figure out new styles and designs.

Having a sketchbook with you is an excellent way of getting that drawing mileage because you can bring it with you wherever you go in your daily life. This allows you to draw whenever you feel inspired with real-world references all around you!

Drawing expressions by using references from your favorite TV show or movie can also be fun! For bonus

points, draw your roommate, family, friends, or partners (trust me, they love it!) when they are around. You can also take your sketchbook to a public place and see if you can find some interesting expressions from the people around you. Whatever you choose to do, remember to pick up your sketchbook regularly as a practice is the only way you're going to become the illustrator you want to be. Have fun with it and let the creative juices flow.



THAT'S IT!

I hope you liked this ebook about drawing in style and hope it helped you. I want to emphasize that you can draw however you like, and I hope you find a style you enjoy drawing. Also, try to ask yourself what your goal with drawing is. Is it for fun? Or would you like to become a character artist for a studio, or something different? Once you know that, you can start thinking about how to achieve

your goals. At least, that is how I like to approach it. Once you know your goal, you could also decide what style fits best with your plan. For my career, I learned it's helpful to know different styles and be flexible. Because that will help me to get bigger chances of being hired. When you want to draw in only one style, that's fine too, and it could even be the case that people want to hire you

for that specific style. Some people are even famous because of their particular style. Sometimes these artists get their own animation shows or make their own comics. That can be a goal too.

All roads lead to Rome; you need to find and/or create your own path.

I also get asked a lot about I developed my style. I think it's a great goal to aim for having your own style, and if you want it, you definitely should pursue it. But at the same time, you should realize it can take a long time before you can develop your style.

I would recommend you to focus on the drawing principles first. Learn about the line of action, construction, and guides I share in this ebook. Eventually, you will find your style by your preferences and what your goals are. So be patient, work hard and have fun!

Best,
Mitch Leeuwe



