How to Learn Contour Drawing to Train Your Eye and Hand

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Train steady observation and confident hand control with daily blind and modified contour drills — one shoe, one pencil, fifteen minutes at a time.

Things you will need

- Newsprint pad, 18 by 24 inches
- Ream of bond printer paper
- 2B graphite pencil
- 4B graphite pencil
- 0.5-millimeter black fineliner pen
- Portable pencil sharpener
- Worn sneaker with laces
- Small leafy houseplant
- Kitchen jug with a handle
- Round mirror for self-portraits
- Adjustable desk lamp for one-direction light
- Rolling masking tape for sheet corners
- Kitchen timer or phone timer app
- Binder clips or a folder for dated sheets

Set Up the Materials and the First Subject Once

1. **Tape Down Cheap Paper You Will Ruin**
   Buy a pad of newsprint in 18-by-24-inch sheets, roughly $8 to $14, or a ream of ordinary bond printer paper for about $6 to $10, and choose paper that is worth nothing so you can afford to fill it.
2. **Choose a Soft Pencil or a Fine Ink Pen**
   Pick one tool for the whole two weeks: a soft graphite pencil in 2B, 3B, or 4B, at 50 cents to $2 each, or a fine waterproof ink pen with a 0.3-to-0.5-millimeter tip, usually $2 to $4 apiece.
3. **Pick One Simple Object with Many Edges**
   Choose one object with complicated, bumpy edges: a worn sneaker on a chair is the classic first subject, followed by a houseplant with three or four leaves, a kitchen jug with a handle, or your own hand.
4. **Set One Steady Light and Comfortable Seat**
   Light the subject from one fixed direction — a north-facing window, or a desk lamp 40 to 60 centimeters to one side — so the bumps you trace cast small shadows that tell your eye where the edge turns.
5. **Date Each Sheet Before the Pen Lands**
   Before you start a drill, write one line in the margin: date, subject, drill name, and length in minutes, because a stack of 40 anonymous sheets teaches you nothing when you try to review it at the end of fortnight.

Week One: Run the Blind Contour Rules

6. Lock Your Eye onto One Real Edge

Blind contour has three rules: your eye travels along a real edge of the object, your pen travels at the same speed on the paper, and neither one stops, backtracks, or peeks at what the line is doing.

7. Move the Pen at One Slow Even Speed

Let the eye set the pace and the hand copy it: wherever your gaze slows down — a frayed lace tip, the notch where sole meets upper — the pen slows with it, and long smooth stretches get long smooth marks.

8. Draw Your Non-Dominant Hand Blind First

Begin with the hand you draw worst: prop your non-dominant hand in front of you, fingers spread wide, and give it 5 full minutes of pure blind contour with your dominant hand and pen.

9. Draw a Blind Contour Self-Portrait in a Mirror

Once hands bore you, set a mirror at arm's length and draw your own face blind for 5 to 8 minutes, letting the eye wander from eyelid to nostril to the crease beside the mouth.

10. Narrate Each Bump and Notch while Tracing

Say what you see as the pen goes, out loud or under your breath: bump, dip, sharp turn, long curve, tiny wave, stop.

Week Two: Add Glances, Timers, and Cross-Contour

11. Split Attention Eighty-Twenty Between Subject and Paper

Modified contour keeps the eye on the subject about 80 percent of the time and allows a quick glance at the paper the other 20 — long enough to place the next line, never long enough to judge it or fix it.

12. Run the Timed Ladder from Thirty Seconds

On one sheet, draw the same plant leaf four times at four lengths — 30 seconds, 1 minute, 3 minutes, and 5 minutes — as continuous contour, pen never lifting between rounds.

13. Trace the Whole Silhouette in One Journey

Choose the outer silhouette of the shoe — the boundary where the object stops and the room begins — and follow it as one unbroken journey, starting at the toe and returning to the toe in 3 to 5 minutes.

14. Wrap Cross-Contour Lines Around the Volume

When the outline feels loose, add cross-contour lines: imaginary paths that travel over the surface like ribbon wrapped around a gift, arcing across the toe box of the shoe, curving around the belly of the jug, and bending under the sole to suggest the part you cannot see.

15. Redraw the Same Object Every Other Day

Leave the sneaker exactly where it sits and draw it again, blind or modified, on day one, three, five, and seven — one 10-minute visit per session, same chair, same light.

Read Your Lines, Handle the Frustration, and Move On

16. Judge the Weekly Stack by Line Quality

Once a week, spread your dated sheets on a table and grade them on exactly three things: did the line slow down at the bumps, did it keep traveling without restarting, and did it wander honestly where the attention wandered?

17. Expect Ugly Lines Because the Ugliness Works

Every adult in week one says some version of: this looks nothing like a shoe, have I ruined my

drawing?

18. Add Measured Drawing Once Contour Feels Easy

After 10 to 14 days, when a 5-minute modified contour no longer makes you wince, start ending each drill with one measured drawing of the same object: compare heights against widths with your pencil held at arm's length and a thumb on the shaft, place the biggest shape first, and allow yourself to check and correct.

19. Move from Contour into Short Gesture Sessions

Gesture drawing is contour's fast sibling: 30-to-60-second whole-object or whole-figure sketches that capture direction and rhythm rather than edge accuracy, and the patience you built in contour is exactly what keeps gesture lines from dissolving into scribble.

20. Follow the Two-Week Daily Practice Schedule

Run 14 consecutive days at 15 to 20 minutes a day: days one to three, two blind hands and a 5-minute blind shoe; days four to seven, blind self-portraits plus full-silhouette walks; days eight to ten, the 80/20 modified version and the timed ladder from 30 seconds to 5 minutes; days eleven to thirteen, cross-contour plus one measured drawing; and day fourteen, one cafe session sketching a stranger's silhouette with modified contour, exactly as our cafe sketching guide describes.

Sources

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