



the
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Human Figure Drawing:

A TWO-PART GUIDE

by Sadie J. Valeri



Human Figure Drawing, Part 1

Use the classical, straight-line block-in method to create accurate angles and proportions for contour drawings of the human figure.



ABOVE: Valeri uses a straight-line block-in method to begin her classical figure drawings. In *Study of Torrey* (charcoal and white chalk, 18x14), she's left the lower portion in its simple contour drawing stage and built up values and modeled form in the upper portion of the drawing.

FINDING CORRECT PROPORTIONS is the most important part of creating a convincing figure drawing. Humans have an infinite variety of proportions, but that variety falls within a very narrow range. It's very easy to make your figure drawing look distorted or even alien if the proportions fall outside the range of human possibility.

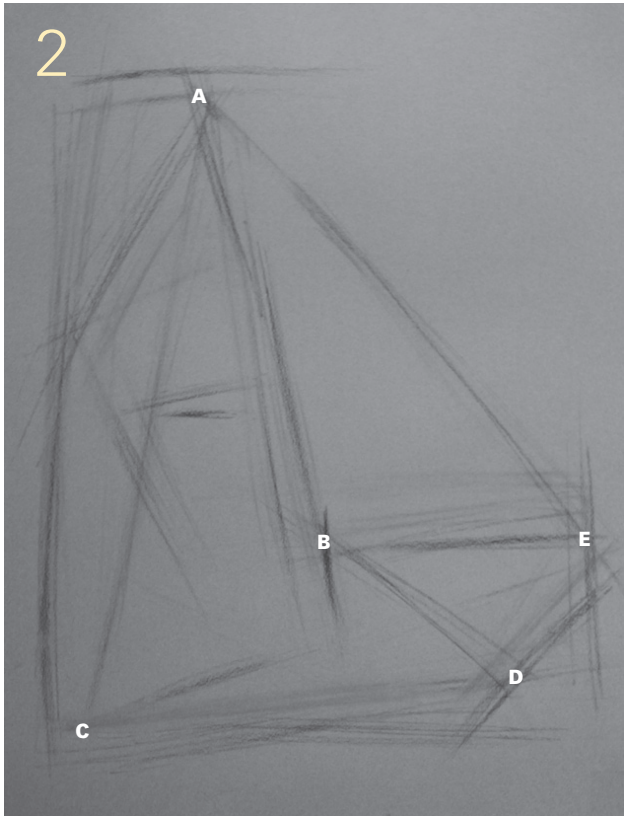
The best way I've found to avoid potential proportion problems is to use the straight-line block-in technique to create accurate angles in the figure. If all of the angles in your drawing are correct, the proportions will be correct and the drawing will fall into place. One way to illustrate the importance of accurate angles is to picture a capital "A". We can imagine a wide "A" or a narrow "A" or a normal, well-proportioned "A." The only aspects of the letter "A" that change in these three scenarios are the tilts of the two sides.

In this article I'll demonstrate how I complete a straight-line block-in for the human figure—with accurate angles—which will prepare you to later complete a precise drawing of the figure.

1. Draw the Envelope

First I construct an "envelope"—a multisided box constructed out of long, straight lines. The lines are like beams leaning against the outside points of the model. Depending on the pose, I'm referring to the most exterior points of a shoulder, a knee or a forehead, for example. This envelope places the figure on the page and establishes general proportions.

Using my whole arm, moving from the shoulder, I draw long, soft



lines that are easily erased. If you're a beginner, you can use a knitting needle to hold up to the model for checking the angles. You can do this by measuring the degree of tilt each line has from the vertical or horizontal axis, which you establish with the knitting needle. However, do try to match the angles using only your eyes. The less you rely on tools, the more sensitive your eye will become. (When you measure angles using a knitting needle, be certain to use a straight arm to keep a consistent distance from the model.)

The envelope I drew for this demo corresponds to the model pose in step 5 (page 5).

2. Build a Web

When I can clearly imagine the entire figure fitting comfortably inside the envelope, I start constructing interior lines with a "web." I look for the longest, straightest relationships I can find, cutting across the form from side to side.

This step shows a line (**AB**) from the model's forehead to the tip of her nose, down her left shoulder to her rib cage and abdomen. Another long line (**AC**) travels from the top of her forehead down the front of her neck to the outside of her right hip to the tips of her right toes. A long horizontal line (**CD**) runs from her toes along the front edge of her right shin to just under her knee. Another horizontal line (**BE**) runs along the top of her left thigh.

Finding these long, straight lines in the figure trains the eye to scan all across the form instead of focusing on small details. I use each step in the drawing process to go back and correct the earlier steps. When I'm really struggling, I often go all the way back to the envelope stage to solve a problem. If I find a problem with a small section, it usually means there's a problem with the larger shapes.

3. Establish Midpoints

I try to rely on measurements as little as possible but, early on in the process, I do establish midpoints. First, looking only at my paper and not at the model, I measure and make a short mark on my paper at

Materials

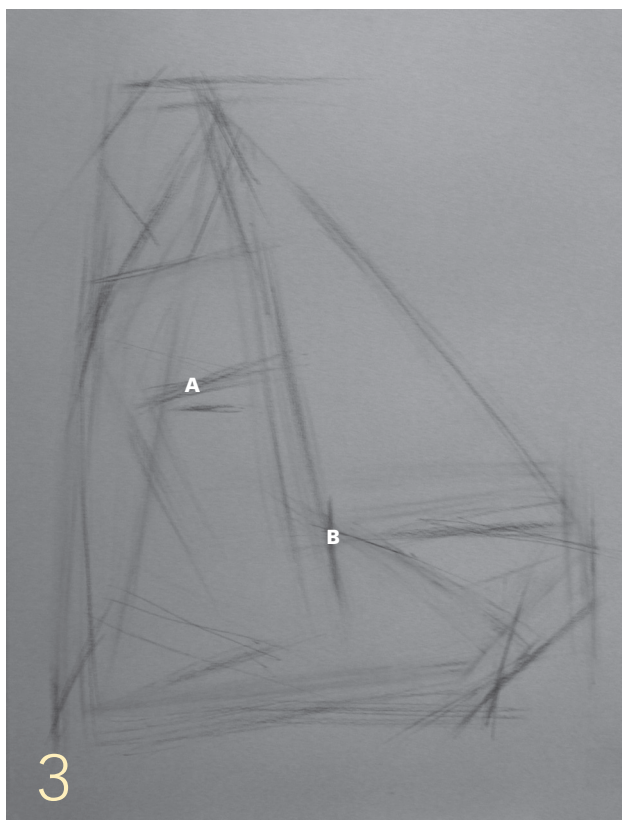
Surface: Daler-Rowney Murano Textured Fine Art Papers, the color Storm

(I love this paper for charcoal. It's toothy enough to hold the charcoal, but smooth enough so I'm not fighting against a texture. And the paper holds up to a lot of erasing. Tape three or four sheets to a hard drawing board for an ideal surface.)

Charcoal: Winsor & Newton vine charcoal, medium

Other: chamois cloth, kneaded eraser, Sanford Paper Mate Tuff Stuff retractable eraser

drawing board



the halfway point (**A**) from the top of the head to the bottom of the lowest point, the tips of the right toes, in this case. If the pose is also wide, like this one, I mark the horizontal midpoint (**B**) as well—along the line from the tips of the fingers to the tip of the left knee in this drawing.

Holding up a knitting needle vertically in front of the model, I then find the vertical halfway point between the top and the bottom, mark that point on the needle with my thumb and make a mental note of a visual landmark on the model. I do the same for the horizontal halfway point. I hold my arm straight, elbow locked, so the needle is always the same distance from my eye.

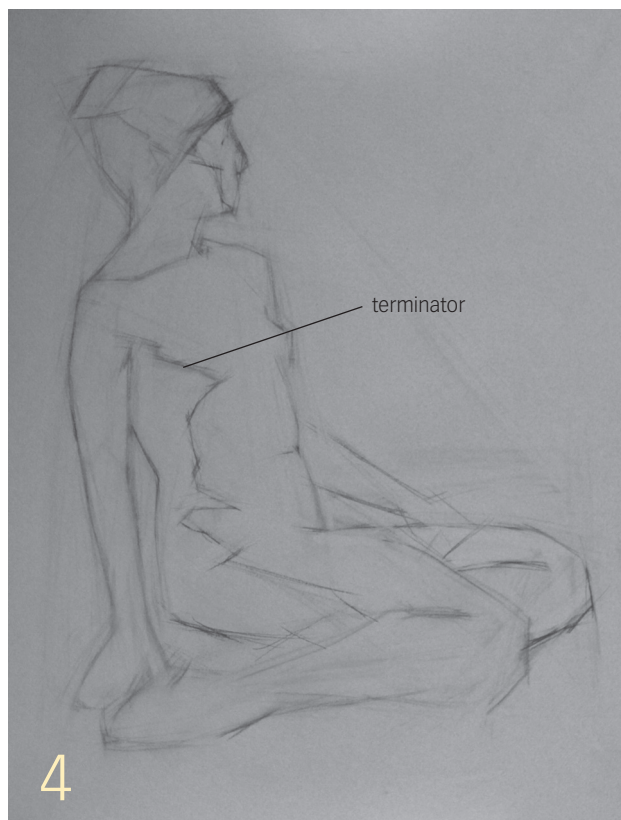
Throughout the life of the drawing process, I can recheck that the midpoint marks on the paper are hitting the correct landmarks on the model so that the major proportions will fall into place.

At this stage, as I'm drawing in the lines for the contour of the figure,

using the straight-arm method with my needle to measure the angles correctly, I'm creating the major angles in the figure: the angles created by the head, neck and shoulders, by the bent knees and respective shins; the angle between the two thighs, the one between the body and the right arm, and so on. I'm careful to remeasure and recheck the angles before and after drawing them on my paper.

4. Draw the Terminator

When the figure has started to take shape, I start to block in the shadow mass. The line between light and shadow is called the “terminator” because this line is the termination, or the ending, of the light and represents the precise line beyond which the light can no longer touch the model. We only see the terminator as soft and fuzzy because the light grows slowly darker as the form turns away from the light. In fact, this line is the “horizon” of the form



(as it would be seen from the point of view of the light source)—a contour line, just as important as the exterior contours of the form.

Sometimes it's difficult to see the terminator, especially in diffused light. One trick is to approach the model (with his or her permission) and hold up a knitting needle to cast a shadow across the skin. Where the cast shadow of the needle disappears into the shadow on the model is the specific point where the light ends and the true shadow begins.

5. Finish the Contour Drawing

The drawing can look geometric and blockish for quite a while with this method. I only start to refine the contour when I'm sure my major shapes are as correct in proportion as possible. I never use curved lines; I just keep segmenting the straight lines until they are smaller and smaller. If a knee, elbow or shoulder feels too sharp, I resist the urge to round it off. Instead, I use a straight line to “slice”



The Next Step

For successful contour drawing you need to repeatedly recheck midpoints and go back to readjust portions of the drawing, but with practice this straight-line block-in method really pays off in accurately proportioned figures. Once my contour drawing is completed, I move into shading with black and white General Pencil charcoal pencils.

Special Note

In the next section, I'll complete this piece and share my techniques for building up values, modeling form and creating dramatic lighting effects in a classical drawing. ■

SADIE J. VALERI has taught graduate students at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco and is co-founder of the blog womenpaintingwomen.blogspot.com. She currently teaches workshops and classes at Sadie Valeri Atelier in San Francisco. Visit her website at www.sadievaleri.com.

off a corner. This method requires a careful, drawn-out process (no pun intended) with small, incremental adjustments and refinements.

As I use smaller segments, and add detail, often errors appear—a leg or a head or a foot won't fit in the space I've made for it. As soon as I feel the urge to "stretch" or "squish" body parts to make them fit, I stop, put down my charcoal and just look. The only way to fix the error is to go back and correct the larger shapes. I always tell my

students, "If you find a problem with an arm, don't look for the solution in the arm: Go back to the beginning and check your envelope and your midpoints." The most grievous errors in figure drawing are often made due to an unwillingness to go back and to correct previous decisions. In order to progress, we must always be willing to go back to previous steps, sometimes to the beginning, and do what I call "major surgery."



Human Figure Drawing, Part 2

Learn to mass in values and model three-dimensional form to create convincing, light-enhanced nudes.

TO CREATE an image that's an accurate depiction of light falling on form, we must have a very organized approach to analyzing light and shadow. Otherwise we tend to exaggerate and distort, destroying the feel of the light and the structure of the form.

The human eye can see a huge range of values, much darker shadows and much brighter highlights than any art material can capture. Even with the broad value range of charcoal pencil and white chalk on toned paper, we still must interpret what we see—not just copy it—to capture a true feeling of the light.

The untrained approach to shading is to compare two patches that are right next to each other and evaluate how similar or different they are to each other. However, because our eyes see such a huge range of value, we see a big difference between any two adjacent areas. As a result, we tend to make the differences too great, with huge jumps of value.

The more accurate way to evaluate how light or dark an area is, is to compare it to the lightest light in the whole composition, and to the darkest dark, scanning our eyes across the whole scene.

In the previous article about drawing the contour of a figure, I used the straight-line block-in method to create accurate angles and proportions for contour drawings of the human figure. I emphasized how important it is to move the eyes so they scan the whole figure, instead of zooming in on small details too soon. In like manner, we see more accurate value relationships when we scan our eyes across the whole image.



5. Finish the Contour Drawing

This is the last step (see page 7) in our contour drawing from the previous article. The drawing can look geometric and blockish for quite a while with the straight-line block-in method. I only start to refine the contour when I'm sure my major shapes are as correct in proportion

ABOVE: To depict accurate value relationships and shapes in a figure, as in *Study of Christina* (charcoal and white chalk on toned paper, 24x18), Valeri scans her eyes across the entire image.

as possible. I never use curved lines; I just keep segmenting the straight lines until they're smaller and smaller.

If a knee, elbow or shoulder feels too sharp, I resist the urge to round it off. Instead, I use a straight line to “slice” off a corner. This method requires a careful, slow investigation of the shapes, with small, incremental adjustments and refinements.

6. Fill in Shadow Masses

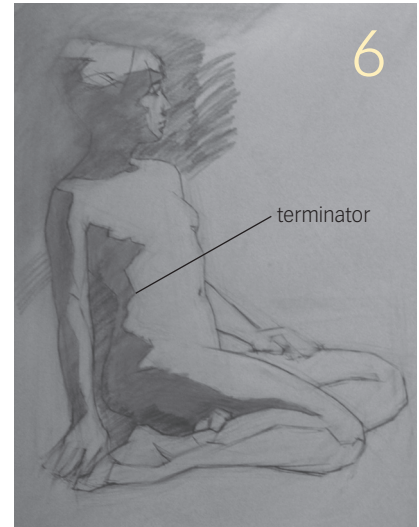
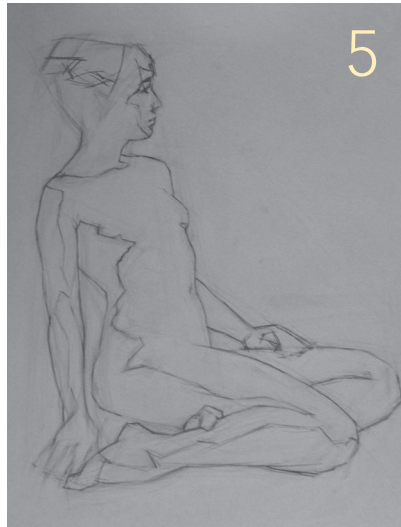
To keep my shadows and lights organized, I repeat one mantra to myself over and over: Keep the shadows simple! To remember to do this, I first use soft vine charcoal to fill in all the shadow areas with one flat, even tone of value, as rich and dark as I can make it. This will make a very flat, graphical image with a sharp, clear delineation between the shadow and the light, which I think of as separate countries.

In my previous article, I spoke about the edge of the shadow mass or the ending of the light, which we can call the “terminator.” This line separates light and shadow, so for now it appears as a sharp, hard edge. It can be disconcerting to see the area on one side of this line filled in with shadow on what should be a soft, rounded form! But we’ll find the form gets soft and rounded easily later on.

7. Mass in All Values

To start creating the feel of the light in the whole image, I mass in values across the whole composition. I use a chamois, paper towels, blending stumps and anything I can find to blend and rub the charcoal. I was captivated by the brilliant light on my model Christina, so I darkened the entire background a bit so that later on the lights would really pop.

I make my shadows nice and dark by building up a layer of medium or soft charcoal and rubbing it gently into the surface with a stiff, inexpensive paper towel. Then I build up more layers of vine charcoal and rub again. I do this over and over until the surface is velvety and dark. When I’m shading, I mix and layer



Keep Drawing Tools Sharp

Work with only very sharp pencils because a sharp point gets the pigment deep into the crevices of the paper and creates a smooth, even surface. A blunt tool leaves too much texture because it skims over the the tooth of the paper.

Sharpen your charcoal pencil first with a knife to cut away the wood, and then rub the point on sandpaper, turning it constantly, to create a needle-sharp point.

Be careful not to break the pencil while sharpening; this can take some practice! Sometimes pencil leads are broken every inch or so inside the pencil. These pencils were probably dropped and are impossible to sharpen, so it's better to start with a new pencil.

To sharpen vine charcoal, just rub it on sandpaper to create a point.

all different hardnesses of charcoal. A harder charcoal over a softer layer can sometimes work like a blending stump. Notice that I keep my shadows simple, even allowing the back contour of the model's arm to melt into the shadow cast on the wall behind her.

8. Model Form With White

The fun begins! I always start with the area that has the most interest; in this case, the light falling on her upper chest is brightest and also captures the drama of the whole picture. Using a very sharp white charcoal pencil (actually a chalk), I work to build up the lightest light and then shade gently down toward the shadow.

When I've used the white chalk for a while, I switch to the black charcoal and work in the opposite direction. I work from the shadow up toward the light with a very hard



charcoal and a light touch. With this technique, the white chalk and black charcoal never touch or mix. The cool midtone of the paper acts as the value between them.

I always model across the form, moving perpendicular to the terminator, the line separating light from shadow on the figure (see step 5, page 7), imagining each plane turning toward or away from the light. Often problems arise when we work along the form, or parallel to the terminator. We might see a ridge of light falling across a rib and draw a bright crescent shape in white. This makes a rib look garish and harsh, as if the model has been injured. I see

this often when inexperienced artists draw the neck and clavicle area of a model. Sometimes the clavicles look like straight, harsh rods jammed under the model's skin!

When we work across the form, we notice some edges are harder and some are softer, and sometimes the rib or clavicle disappears completely before re-emerging. We observe all the subtle nuances that make organic form look soft and alive, instead of dead, damaged or mechanical.

I think about the light coming down in beams from the source, hitting the surface of the model's skin at the highlight, and then undulating across the surface until the light



Materials

Surface: **Daler-Rowney** Murano Textured Fine Art Papers, the color “Storm” (This paper is toothy enough to hold the charcoal, but smooth enough so I’m not fighting against a texture. Also, the paper holds up to a lot of erasing. Tape three or four sheets to a hard drawing board for an ideal surface.)

Charcoal: **Winsor & Newton** vine charcoal—soft, medium and hard

Charcoal pencils: **General Pencil’s** medium, hard and extra-hard (Soft breaks too easily.)

Chalk: **General Pencil’s** “white charcoal” pencil (This is actually a chalk, not a charcoal.)

Other: Retractable box cutter or **X-Acto** knife for sharpening charcoal pencils, 120-grit sandpaper for sharpening charcoal, blending stumps (reserve some just for charcoal and some just for chalk), chamois cloth, kneaded eraser, **Sanford Paper Mate** Tuff Stuff retractable eraser, paper towels (the scratchy, inexpensive kind)

fades and dims toward shadow. Then I go back to an adjacent highlight and make the journey to the shadow again. I think of modeling as a series of expeditions, traveling across a changing terrain.

Slowly, the sharp, hard edge of the terminator melts away, and the form becomes rounded. In fact, sometimes we find that we have to darken the shadows significantly once we’re deep into the process. That’s because the shadow, which is blocked in with hard edges, looks very dark and severe, but as the form is rounded, we realize the shadows can afford to be much richer and darker.

9. Refine the Shading

To complete the image (see larger image, page 6), I continue to shade across the whole composition by working in small areas, bringing one area to a high finish before moving on. I work with a soft touch, building up layer after layer to achieve values, instead of pressing into the paper and potentially damaging the surface. The tooth of the paper is very important to protect because it grabs the charcoal and chalk. If you press too hard, the tooth is pushed down and you can’t build up more value range.

Capturing the feel of the light requires knowing when to edit—when to “collapse” values. Collapsing values means making the lights group together and the shadows group together. So when working with the chalk, I keep all the values in my light areas very close to each other.

If we notice a big jump between the highlight and the general light area, we shouldn’t be alarmed. We need to scan our eyes across the whole scene, and we’ll find that, in comparison to the deep, dark shadows, the highlight and the light are very similar. The highlights will actually look brighter if they’re supported by almost-as-light areas surrounding them.

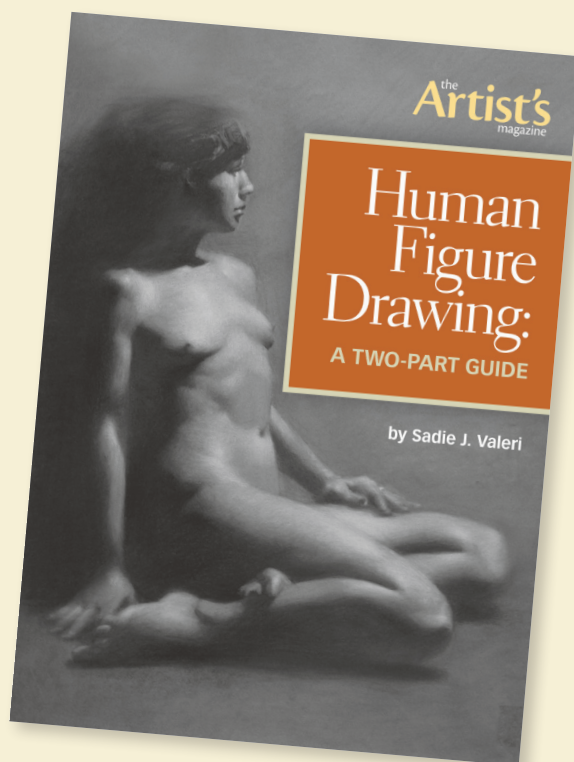
If we just copy values and hope

for a facsimile of three-dimensional form, our drawings will look empty and disorganized, but if we internalize a deep and sensitive understanding of the three-dimensional shapes of the forms, and of the direction of the light, that understanding will show up in our drawings. We want our drawings to evince the intelligence of a highly functioning, thinking and feeling human mind, both in the model and in the artist. ■

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