

Drawing Fundamentals Guide

Observational Drawing · Mark-Making · Tonal Value

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Introduction

This guide introduces the core principles of observational drawing - the foundation of all great art, from IGCSE portfolios to professional commissions. Whether you are a complete beginner or building toward an exam, these principles apply at every level.

■ *'Drawing what you see, not what you think you see' is the single most important shift any student can make. Most errors in drawing come from drawing symbols rather than observations.*

1. The Five Elements of Observational Drawing

1.1 Edges

Edges define where one shape ends and another begins. They are never just lines - they are hard (sharp), soft (blended), or lost (invisible). Training yourself to see different types of edges is one of the most powerful skills in drawing.

- Hard edges: strong contrast, clear boundaries (e.g. a sharp shadow line)
- Soft edges: gradual transitions (e.g. the curve of a cheek in light)
- Lost edges: where two tones blend so closely the edge disappears

1.2 Negative Space

Negative space is the area around and between the subject. Drawing the negative space rather than the subject itself is a powerful technique that forces you to see shapes, not symbols.

■ *Exercise: Choose a chair. Instead of drawing the chair, draw only the spaces between and around its legs and back. The chair will appear naturally.*

1.3 Tonal Value

Value refers to how light or dark something is. A strong tonal range (from very light to very dark) gives a drawing depth and three-dimensionality. Most beginners work in the middle tones and avoid strong darks and pure lights - this is the primary reason drawings look flat.

- Create a tonal scale from 1 (white) to 9 (darkest black)
- Identify the lightest light and darkest dark in your subject before beginning
- Work across the whole drawing rather than finishing one area at a time

1.4 Proportion & Measurement

Proportion is the size relationship between different parts of a subject. The most reliable technique is 'sighting' - using your pencil as a measuring tool held at arm's length to compare measurements across the subject.

- How wide is the head compared to its height?
- Where does the elbow fall in relation to the waist?

- Use the pencil method: close one eye, align the pencil tip with one point and mark where another falls with your thumb

1.5 Perspective & Space

Even in non-architectural drawings, an understanding of perspective gives your work a convincing sense of depth. Objects appear smaller as they recede into the distance, and parallel lines converge toward a vanishing point on the horizon.

2. Mark-Making Vocabulary

A strong mark-making vocabulary separates skilled artists from beginners. Every mark you make is a decision - about direction, pressure, speed, and tool. BravArt students are encouraged to explore a wide range of marks before settling into habits.

- Hatching: parallel lines to build tone (lighter = lines further apart)
 - Cross-hatching: two or more layers of hatching at different angles
 - Contour lines: lines that follow the surface of the form
 - Gestural marks: loose, expressive marks that capture energy and movement
 - Stippling: tone built through dots (patient, meditative)
 - Blending: using a finger, tortillon, or tissue to merge marks
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3. Recommended Exercises

Exercise 1: The Blind Contour

Look at your non-drawing hand. Without looking at the paper, draw a continuous contour line around every edge you see - as slowly as possible. Trains your eye-to-hand connection.

Exercise 2: Upside Down Drawing

Take any line drawing (or print an image). Turn it upside down and draw what you see. Because you cannot recognise the subject easily, your brain is forced to draw shapes and relationships, not symbols.

Exercise 3: The Tonal Strip

Create a 9-box strip. Box 1 is left white (paper). Box 9 is as dark as you can make it with your pencil. Fill in the 7 boxes between in even gradations. Do this in pencil, then try it with charcoal, then pen.

Exercise 4: Negative Space Still Life

Set up 3-5 objects on a table. Instead of drawing the objects, draw only the spaces between them. Outline only the negative shapes. The objects should appear by the end.

4. Applying This to Your IGCSE Portfolio (AO3)

AO3 in the Cambridge IGCSE 0400 specification asks for direct observation from real sources. Examiners specifically look for evidence that students have drawn from observation rather than memory or copying. Strong observational drawing - demonstrating real looking - is one of the most reliable ways to score highly in AO3.

■ *Always work from real objects where possible. Photographs can be a secondary source for reference, but primary direct observation drawings carry significantly more weight with examiners.*

