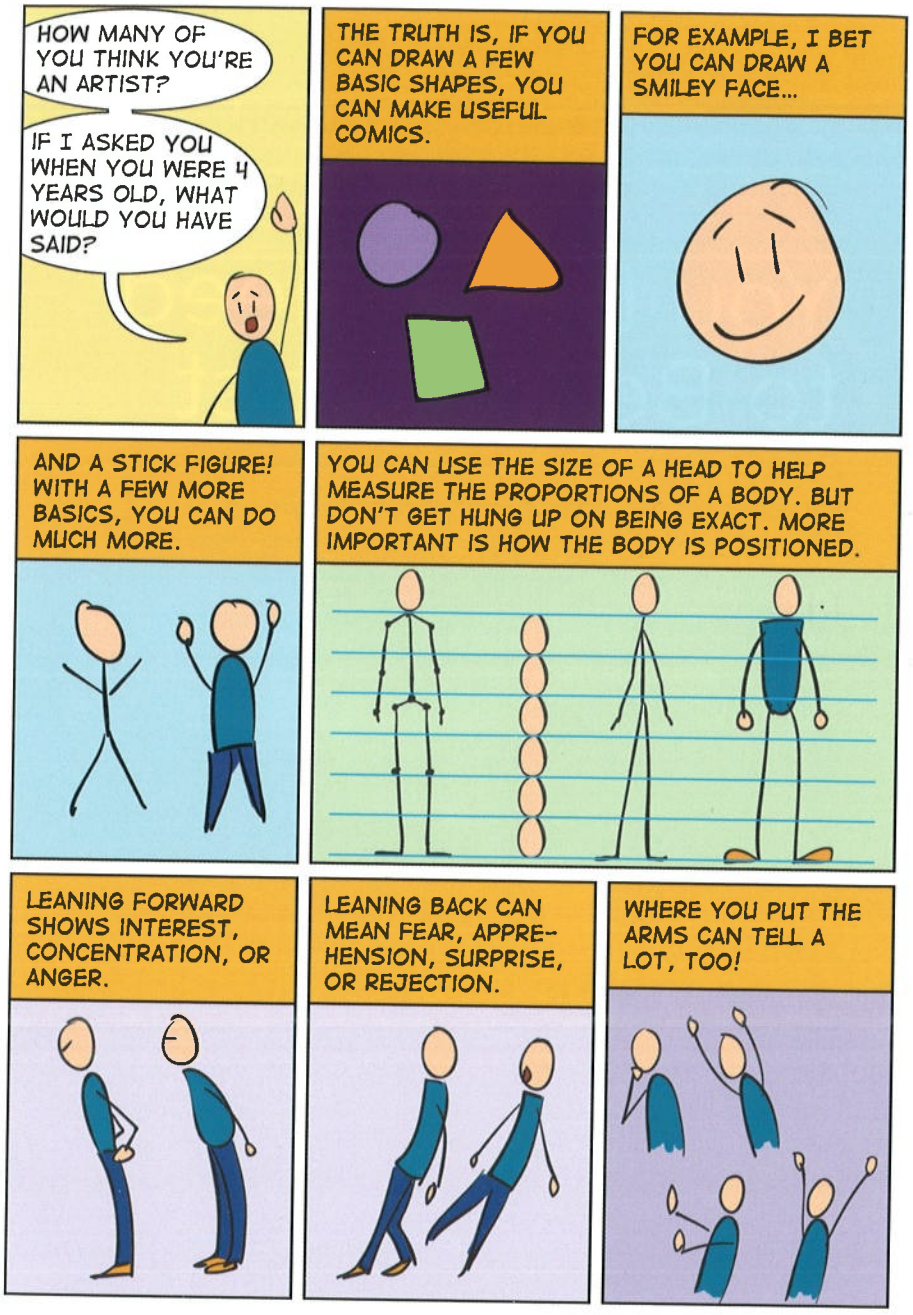
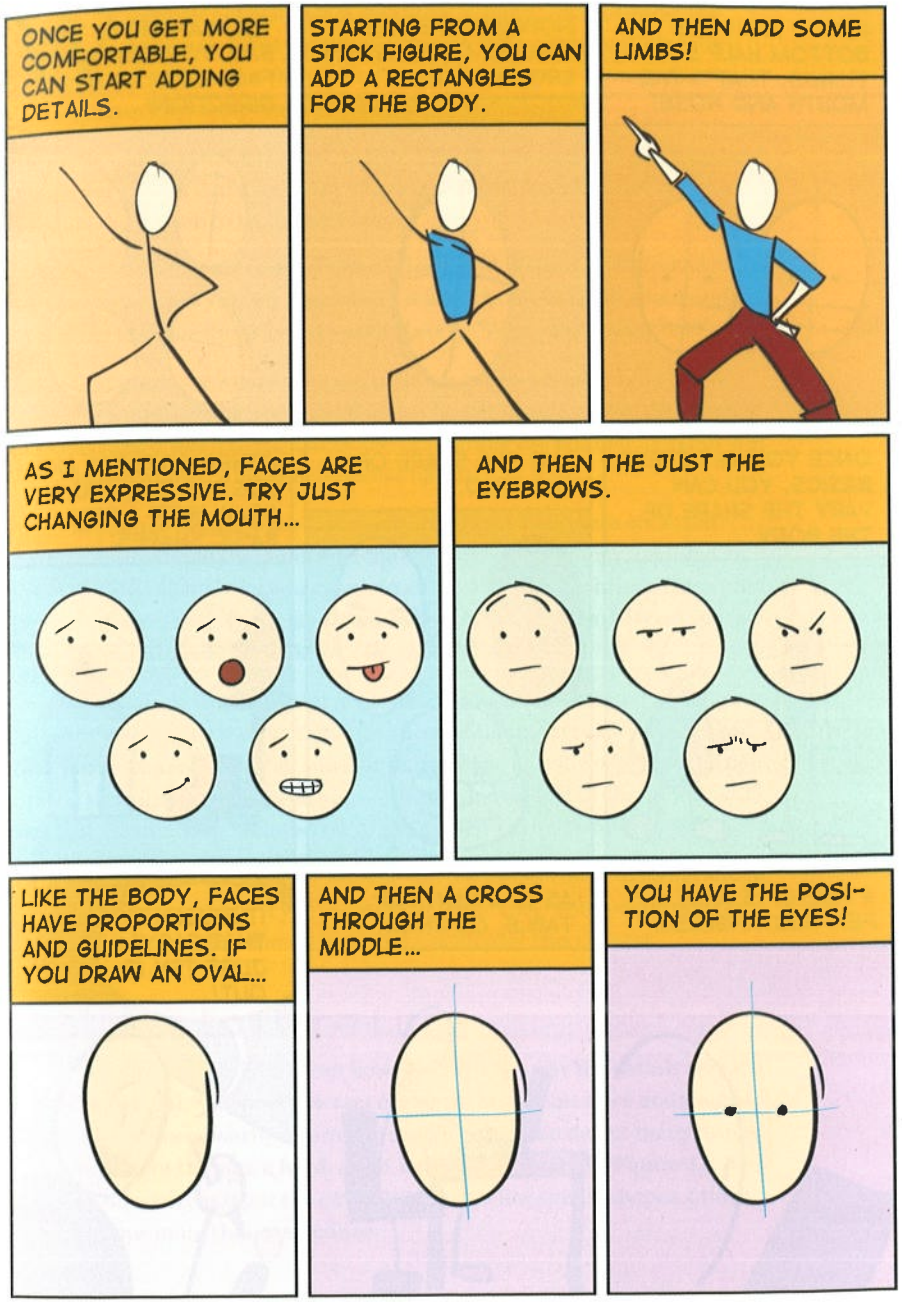
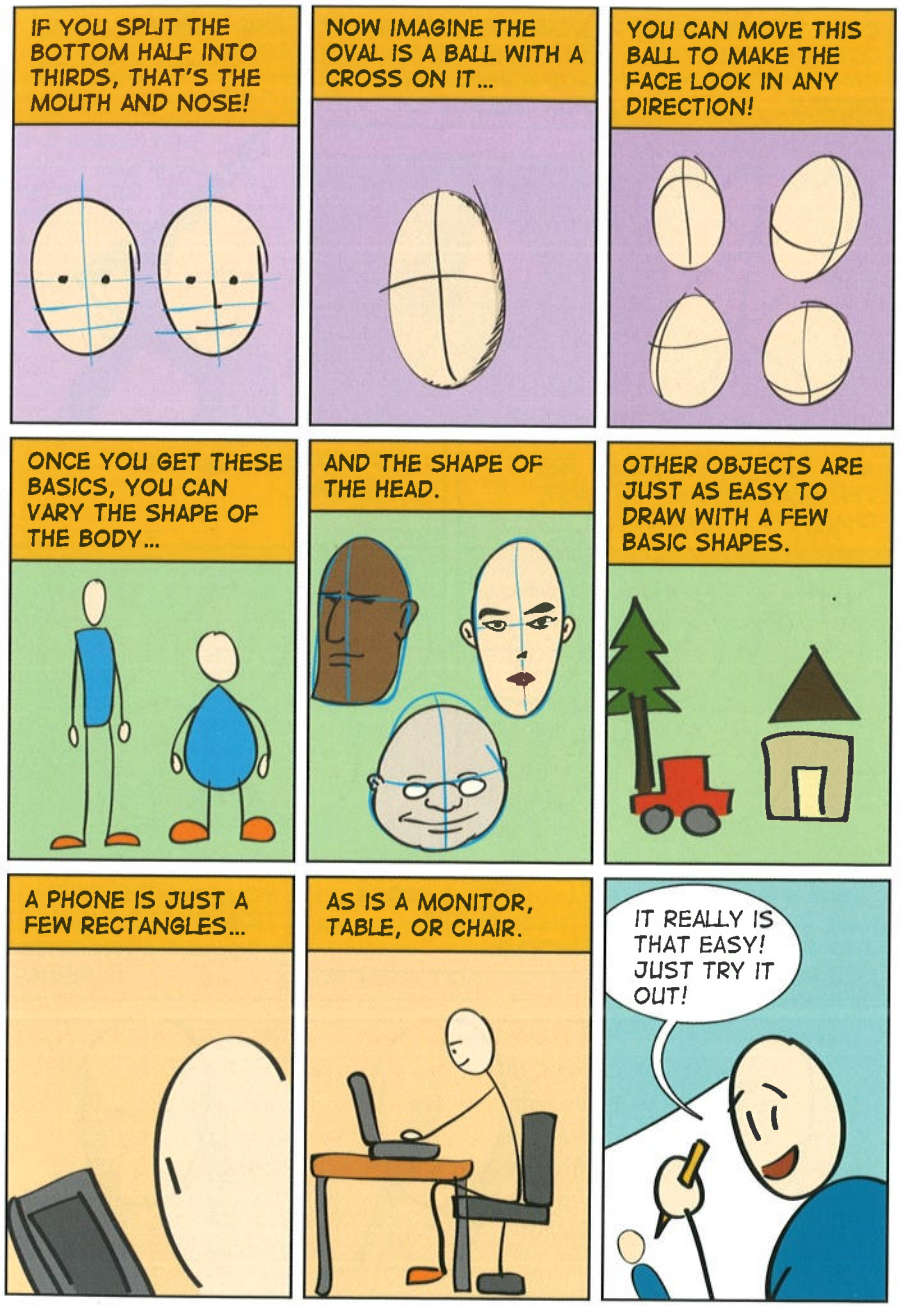
CHAPTER 3

You Don't Need to Be an Artist


HOW MANY OF YOU THINK YOU'RE AN ARTIST?
IF I ASKED YOU WHEN YOU WERE 4 YEARS OLD, WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE SAID?
THE TRUTH IS, IF YOU CAN DRAW A FEW BASIC SHAPES, YOU CAN MAKE USEFUL COMICS.
FOR EXAMPLE, I BET YOU CAN DRAW A SMILEY FACE...
AND A STICK FIGURE! WITH A FEW MORE BASICS, YOU CAN DO MUCH MORE.
YOU CAN USE THE SIZE OF A HEAD TO HELP MEASURE THE PROPORTIONS OF A BODY. BUT DON'T GET HUNG UP ON BEING EXACT. MORE IMPORTANT IS HOW THE BODY IS POSITIONED.
LEANING FORWARD SHOWS INTEREST, CONCENTRATION, OR ANGER.
LEANING BACK CAN MEAN FEAR, APPREHENSION, SURPRISE, OR REJECTION.
WHERE YOU PUT THE ARMS CAN TELL A LOT, TOO!


ONCE YOU GET MORE COMFORTABLE, YOU CAN START ADDING DETAILS.
STARTING FROM A STICK FIGURE, YOU CAN ADD A RECTANGLES FOR THE BODY.
AND THEN ADD SOME LIMBS!
AS I MENTIONED, FACES ARE VERY EXPRESSIVE. TRY JUST CHANGING THE MOUTH...
AND THEN THE JUST THE EYEBROWS.
LIKE THE BODY, FACES HAVE PROPORTIONS AND GUIDELINES. IF YOU DRAW AN OVAL...
AND THEN A CROSS THROUGH THE MIDDLE...
YOU HAVE THE POSITION OF THE EYES!



Whenever I explain what this book is about, I typically get the response, "That sounds really cool, but I can't draw." To which I explain that the method doesn't require any formal artistic training, save for a few pointers that I give.

Notice that I didn't use the word "artist," though. The reason for this is that I believe very much that everybody should consider himself or herself an artist, and I don't seem to be the only one.

In his book *Orbiting the Giant Hairball*, Gordon McKenzie gives an anecdote about how he visits various elementary schools to teach them about crafts. One of the first questions he asks each class is, "Who here is an artist?"

In the first grade, he would see a sea of hands raised and reaching for the sky. *Everybody* in first grade was an artist. By the second grade, the number of hands raised was halved, and by the third grade the number of hands was down to less than a handful of tentative hands.

What happened between the first and third grade? Was there an "artist exam" administered that informed the children whether they qualified as artists? Did somebody leave a memo to all the kids that informed them all to please put away their Crayolas unless they could make a half decent imitation of a human face? The answer, of course, is, "no."

Through some invisible societal pressures, the kids learned that the label of "artist" carried with it some minimum level of talent. In reality, I'd suggest that you're an artist whether you call yourself one or not. So long as you can draw a stick figure, you're well on your way to being able to create simple stories that explain your ideas better than any well-crafted words could.

I'm going to spend this chapter helping you feel comfortable drawing simple figures and expressions. If you feel pretty comfortable with your drawing skills already, then you should feel free to skim past this chapter.

Getting a Lot for a Little

In the last chapter, I talked about how abstracting away the details can actually be beneficial. The most abstract drawings are simple lines and shapes. A circle, and not necessarily a perfectly drawn circle, can depict many things. It can represent the sun, a head, a tire, or a ball, as shown in Figure 3.1. It all depends on where you put the circle. With just a few simple shapes, I think you can draw more than you realize.

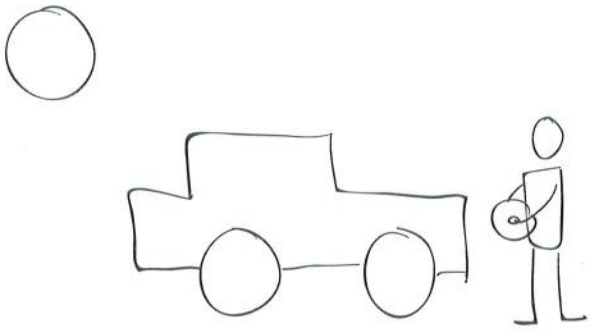


FIGURE 3.1
A circle can represent many things.

For much of this book, I will be encouraging you to try sketching various things as we progress. Of course, I can't actually see if you've got a pencil and paper with you or not, but if you want to find out just how easy it is to create simple comics to communicate ideas, you definitely should get a pencil for this chapter. Before we go further, I'll pause so you can go get yourself a pencil (not so subtly shown in Figure 3.2). A pen will work just as well since the things we're drawing are drawn so quickly that you can just redraw them instead of erasing.

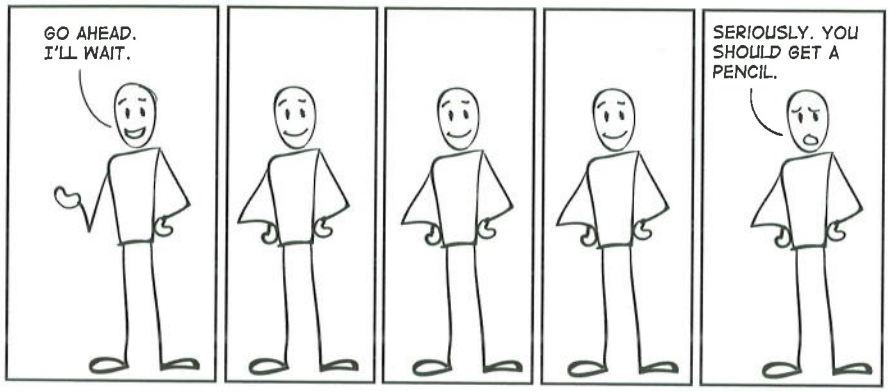


FIGURE 3.2
Get a pencil!

All right, now that you have the tools in hand (I'm trusting you here), let's start with a few basic shapes. These will be your building blocks to draw almost anything. Let's start with a circle, a straight-ish line, a curved line, a rectangle, and a triangle. I say "straight-ish" because none of these shapes need to be perfect. Nobody ever draws a perfect circle or a perfect straight line. For the purposes of drawing these comics, yours don't need to be perfect either. I suspect your circle will look much like mine in Figure 3.3: more like an oval and not meeting at the ends. That's perfectly fine!

FIGURE 3.3
Basic shapes: circle, lines, rectangle, and triangle.

With these basic shapes, and a few additional tricks, you'll be able to draw almost anything. To give an incredibly simple example, think about how a smiley face is constructed. There's a circle for the face, followed by two dots or lines for the eyes, a curve for the smile, and finally, if you're feeling fancy, two lines for eyebrows. When deconstructed this way, it seems a bit silly because the smiley face is already a fairly easy thing to draw, as shown in Figure 3.4. But anything that you think is hard to draw can actually be deconstructed in the same manner.

FIGURE 3.4
Deconstructing a smiley face.

People Are People

Now that we've deconstructed a smiley face, let's do the same for a basic figure. As you might suspect, there are a lot of different ways you can draw people, ranging from the classic stick figure to much more photo-realistic figures. With everything but the head, you can choose whether to draw the body part with a shape or a line.

For example, the body can be represented with a rectangle, a cone, or a rounder shape. The hands and feet can be represented as lines, or you can draw circles to give them more definition. What level of detail you choose to do is entirely up to you. I'm showing a number of different types in Figure 3.5, but let's use the simplest stick figures for a little bit and then I'll show how we can take that to make the more complex figures.

FIGURE 3.5
Some ways to draw a figure.

Proportions

When you draw a person, there are a few things to keep in mind in terms of proportions. Often, art books will suggest you use the size of the head as a way to measure the other proportions. This system is great for explaining the proportions, but in practice, you likely won't be measuring them exactly every time. Remember that this isn't a science, and you don't need to be exact to get your point across. As long as you get the proportions roughly correct and other people can recognize that you're drawing a person, you've accomplished your mission.

With that said, the proportions of a human body can be measured as two head heights for the chest, one head height for the hips and groin area, and three head heights for the legs. The elbows should come just below the waist and the knees halfway along the legs. I've drawn the proportions in dotted lines (each one represents the approximate height of the figure's head). Try it out! You can be exact with a ruler just to experiment, or you can try approximating the proportions. For now, feel free to just draw your figure standing straight facing you as I've shown in Figure 3.6.

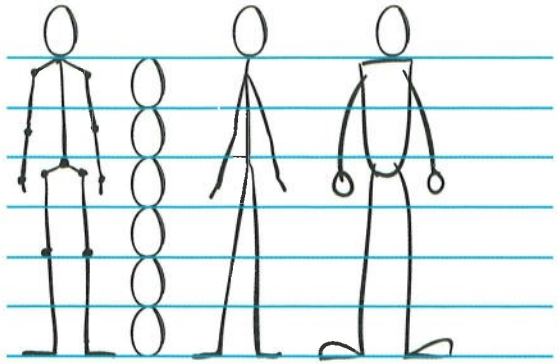


FIGURE 3.6
Proportions of a figure.

Body Language

Once you feel comfortable drawing a standing stick figure, we can start exploring the versatility of this simple construct. I mentioned earlier how comics, as a combination of words and pictures, can give more meaning to each area on its own. Depending on what action is taking place in the panel, the words can take on a completely different expressive meaning. In the example I gave, I used facial expressions to illustrate the idea, but it's equally powerful with just the body language.

You can tell a lot from the way a body is shaped. As you read the book right now, try adjusting your own body. If you lean your head down in front of you and hang your shoulders forward, how do you feel? How does that change if you hold your arms or put them in your pockets? Compare that feeling to raising your head above your spine and pushing your shoulders backward. Every day, we're subconsciously conveying and reading messages through body language. The direction you're leaning, where your hands are, how your feet are positioned, or even how far your head tilts all tell a story about how you're feeling.

In comics, we exaggerate expressions to get these messages across. It's remarkably easy to convey this body language with stick figures. Here are a few guidelines that will help you, with accompanying illustrations in Figure 3.7.

- **Leaning** forward can be used to show interest, concentration, or anger. The difference between interest and anger can depend on context but also on the arm position. Leaning backward can represent fear, apprehension, surprise, or rejection. Again, the difference between them is often just the context. You can also not lean at all, but curl the spine inward to show shyness or outward to show confidence.
- **Arm positions** can tell much of the story. If you are lifting a single arm overhead, you're representing anger or intimidation, while a hand on the chin indicates interest. Hands in front of the body may be guarding or fearful if leaning back, or anticipatory (like shaking a hand) if leaning forward. Scratching the head may represent puzzlement...but both hands up there may represent frustration! It's all about how you put these together.
- **Head positions** don't vary as much, but you can tell a lot both from the facial expression and where the person is looking. Whether the person is looking at the object or not indicates the level of interest or indifference. Even when indifferent, looking up and away is much more "I don't care," as opposed to looking down and away which suggests, "I'm shy or unsure."

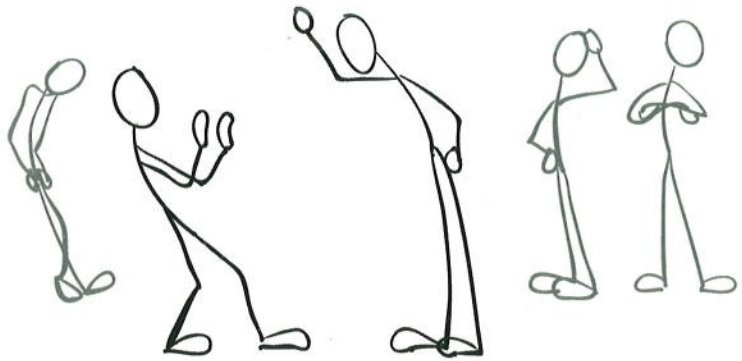


FIGURE 3.7
Examples of body language.

One trick you can use to help figure out how a stick figure should look is imagining the emotion yourself. If you're angry, how do you act? What if you're *really* angry and yelling at somebody? Exaggerate the emotion and look at how your body reacts. I use this technique all the time. If you were sitting here watching me draw the examples in this chapter, you'd see me raising my arm, contorting my face, or scratching my head, trying to simulate whatever I'm drawing. Alternatively, take a picture of a friend in a pose, and then draw from that.

Drawing More Complex Figures

You don't have to draw anything more complex than stick figures to tell stories about people, but once you've mastered the stick figure poses, you'll be surprised how easy it is to do more. The stick figure drawing acts as a great foundation for the next step.

When most artists draw, whether they are drawing people or animals or cars, there is always a skeleton or guide that's drawn to help set proportions and perspective. These stick figures, much like the ones we just drew, define the shape and expression of the character. We can then add detail on top of the skeleton. Figure 3.8 shows two of the poses we drew earlier, with additional details added.

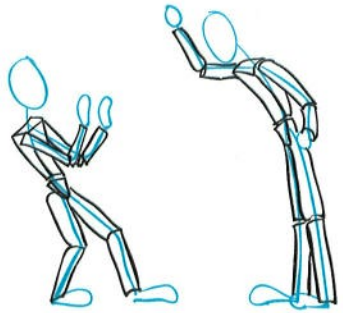


FIGURE 3.8
Adding definition to the stick figure.

The level of detail you choose to add is up to you. Even creating blocks and cylinders out of the chest, hips, arms, and legs can make the character come alive. From there, you can take it one step further and add muscles and other details, as shown in Figure 3.9.

You can see how, no matter how complex the art, it always starts with the most basic components, with additional layers of complexity added one at a time.

FIGURE 3.9
Adding meat to the skeleton.

Faces

Psychologist Paul Ekman is known for his work in categorizing expressions—in particular, facial expressions. He created a system called the Facial Action Coding System (FACS) to categorize all the facial expressions possible. The manual is a 500-page tome. As expressive as body language is, it doesn't hold a candle to facial expressions. Luckily, drawing faces may be even easier than drawing stick figures.

Expressions

Drawing recognizable facial expressions isn't difficult. You only need to change two properties to create an enormous combination of expressions: the eyebrows and the mouth. Ekman's FACS has 46 base descriptors that are combined to categorize expressions. These descriptors include names such as "inner brow raiser," "lip corner puller," and "tongue show." Of the 46, 25 of them describe some action with the mouth and 11 of them describe an action with the eyes or eyebrows.

Not only are the expressions easy to create but they're also universally understood. In his studies, Ekman also found that many expressions, such as anger, joy, and sadness, are universally understood and didn't differ between cultures.

Let's start with a couple of basic expressions: joy and sadness. What's the difference between these expressions? The eyebrows are the same but the mouth has changed (see Figure 3.10). As the saying goes, "turn that frown upside down."

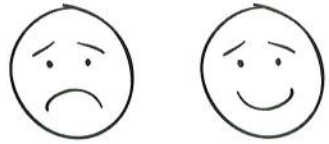


FIGURE 3.10
The two most basic faces.

Changing the mouth alone can create a dramatic difference in the emotion that's expressed. Let's explore what other ways we can draw the mouth. What if the mouth is flat? What does raising one side of the mouth higher than the other do to the expression? How about opening the mouth? Or showing the teeth? What changes occur if we stick out the tongue? None of these are hard to draw, and each one can change the emotion depicted, as shown in Figure 3.11.

FIGURE 3.11
Different mouth shapes.

Now try varying the eyebrows in a similar fashion. You can adjust the arches, make them flat, uneven, or furrowed (lots of eyebrow shapes in Figure 3.12).

FIGURE 3.12
Different eyebrow shapes.

Once again, the best way to understand what a face looks like for any given expression is to try it yourself. Look in a mirror and pretend to be happy, sad, angry, confused, shocked, or surprised. Exaggerate these expressions as much as possible and pay attention to your eyebrows and mouth. You're not going for the subtle acting that wins Academy Awards; you're aiming to make the expression as obvious to the reader as possible, and comics are excellent at exaggerations (see Figure 3.13).

FIGURE 3.13
Some other expressions: angry, confused, shocked, concentrating, and surprised.

Proportions

Let's do another quick exercise. Try to draw a face right now—not a smiley face, but a more realistic face with eyes, nose, and mouth. You can look at yourself in the mirror if you want. It doesn't need to be too detailed; your goal is just to have a face with all the features.

Now look at your sketch and look at where the eyes are relative to the top of the head. Are they a quarter of the way down? A third? What about the nose? Is that about halfway down? And the mouth?

For those who don't sketch often, it's common to draw a face with the nose around the center of the head and the eyes roughly a third of the way down from the top. In fact, for most faces, the eyes are in the middle.

If you draw an oval to represent a head, you can draw a cross to bisect the head in both directions. The horizontal line is where your eyes would be. If you split the bottom half into thirds, you'll roughly get the lines for the nose and the lips. That's all there is to drawing a face! Check out Figure 3.14.

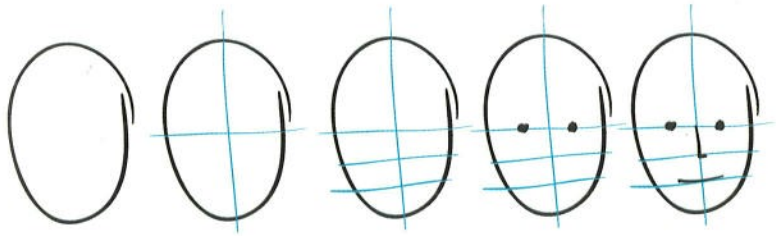


FIGURE 3.14
The proportions of a face.

This oval-and-cross method is how I start all of my drawings. Once you know how this works, you can draw heads and faces in any direction! Imagine the oval head as a three-dimensional ball and draw the cross over it in different ways, as shown in Figure 3.15. Even before you draw any of the facial features, you can already tell which way the face is facing!

FIGURE 3.15
Changing the direction of the face.

Settings and Objects

In many cases, you'll be using comics to tell the story of one or more people and how they relate to your product or service. Unless your service is another human, that means you'll need to draw the person interacting with some objects, as well as the environment.

As I said at the beginning of the chapter, drawing only requires the most basic shapes. I can't teach you to draw everything under the sun, but I can give you a few examples of common objects you might need to draw and how to deconstruct them to just a few basic shapes.

Shapes and Sizes

After you get the hang of drawing figures and faces, you can vary the shapes and sizes of them to create more variety. Everyone is built differently, so why not show it? If you keep the relative proportions in mind, it's pretty easy to stretch or squash a shape to create different body types.

Try drawing longer or shorter stick figures. Try using different shapes to represent the body—rounder shapes to add more body fat and more rectangular shapes to show more muscular builds, similar to Figure 3.16.

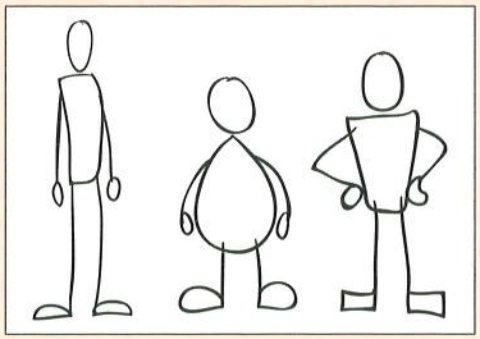


FIGURE 3.16
Different body shapes.

You can do the same with faces by adjusting the shape of the head. Try varying the shape of the oval or varying how rectangular the face is. You can also vary intersection points such as where the jawline meets the ears or the shape of the chin. And, of course, the shape of the facial features can be adjusted, too. Try changing the shape and size of the eyes, nose, and mouth (as shown in Figure 3.17).

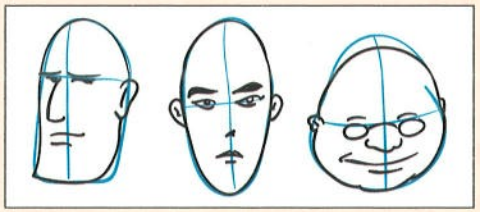


FIGURE 3.17
Different face and head shapes.

Even the rules we learned earlier on where to position the facial features can be broken to exaggerate the character. Rules are made to be broken, but you have to know the rules before you can break them!

Look around you, and you'll start seeing faces in a completely different way. I take the bus to work every day, and I sometimes find myself looking at people and observing the shapes of their heads, noses, lips, and more. It really changes what "people watching" means when you start paying attention to the details of how people lean, how they hold their book, or how they stand.

If you're reading this book, there's a good chance what you're building or designing involves computers or phones. Let's look at how you might draw a person at a computer or using a phone, similar to Figure 3.18.

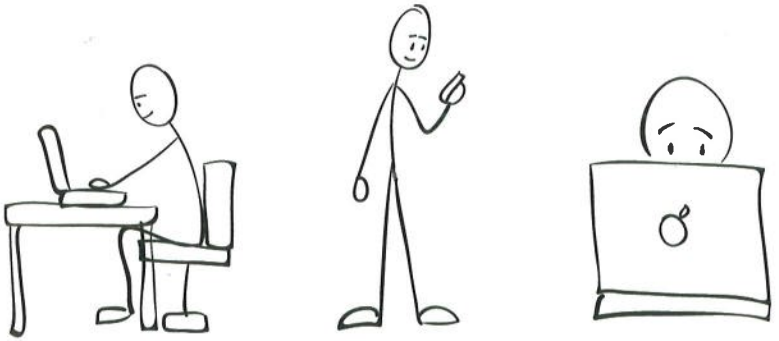


FIGURE 3.18
Almost anything can be represented with basic shapes.

See how simple the shapes can be? Most objects can be represented with a few well-placed rectangles! It's all about where you see the rectangle that informs the reader of what it is. The "phone" I drew is nothing more than a rectangle, yet its size and the way it is held gives enough indication of what it is.

Sometimes, you'll want to show part of the screen itself, as shown in Figure 3.19. While it's tempting to just take up the entire panel to show the screen, it's also possible to still show part of the person using the computer or phone to keep the panel interesting.

FIGURE 3.19
You can still show the person when looking at a screen.

In addition to the objects your character interacts with, there's also the background to consider. Backgrounds help set the context for the story, telling the reader where the character is. They can also act as a point of reference. I might draw a door in the background and, through subsequent panels, change the position of the door to show that the character is walking (see Figure 3.20).

FIGURE 3.20
Using the background to show movement.

But that level of detail is rarely necessary if you're just trying to get an idea across. Quite often, you don't need to draw any background at all. It can make the comic look fuller, but remember your goal: to quickly communicate an idea. You should only draw backgrounds if you feel you need to set context.

For example, maybe it's important to show that your character is shopping, and to indicate that, you draw the character walking past a storefront. Or perhaps it's important to show the character is outdoors, say, in a park. Whatever the reason, if you do feel you need to draw backgrounds, don't fret too much over the details. Just make sure to get enough detail for the reader to recognize the scene. One trick you can use to help differentiate the background from the foreground is to use a thinner pen so that the foreground stands out, as shown in Figure 3.21.

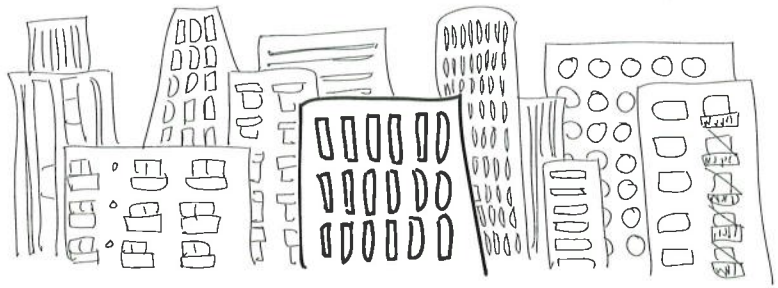


FIGURE 3.21
Differentiating the background with line thickness.

How to Show Action in Your Cartoons

How to Draw It (http://howtodrawit.com) *is a fantastic website containing many tutorials on how to draw cartoons and animals. It's published and maintained in Santa Fe, New Mexico, by Pam Neely. This is one of her tutorials about showing action. I recommend you check out her entire series on cartooning on her site.*

Get ready for good long periods of wilting fatigue, muscular exhilaration, heart-throbbing suspense, agonized tension, aching jaws, and stiff, seemingly immovable joints. Because, when you draw human figures in any action, physical or mental, you are bound to feel the action intensely.

You cannot draw without feeling. And the more strongly you feel, the better cartoonist you are sure to be, provided you can effectively transfer your feeling to paper.

Draw a man running like mad, fist clenched, jaw set. What happens to you? Try it. Put yourself wholeheartedly and deeply into the action you are drawing, and I guarantee you will feel it. You will be exhausted when you finish drawing a man running hard—if you put yourself into it. But when you finally do produce a drawing that is really convincing, it compensates you for the pain you felt when you were drawing.

Never draw any action without taking the pose yourself. Even if you have a model to pose for you, you must get the feel of it first yourself. Whether you look at yourself in a mirror or not does not matter. You will unconsciously draw convincingly if you are thinking how it feels while you draw.

Use the stick figure or any other rough-in method you like and draw as many action figures as you can. Learn to exaggerate the action much more than would normally be probable in any figure. This is another secret of good cartooning (Figure 3.22).

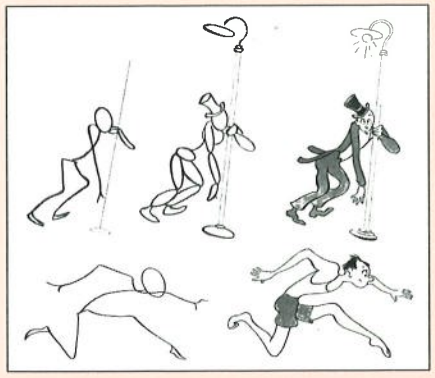


FIGURE 3.22
Exaggerate the action.

Summary

We've come a long way in just a few pages—from circles and rectangles to human figures and facial expressions. Here are some things to keep in mind as you draw:

- Everything is composed of simple, basic shapes such as circles, triangles, and lines.
- Focus on the eyebrows and mouth to make a face expressive.
- You can measure a body proportions as "heads." The chest is the height of two heads, the hip another, and the legs three more.
- Which way the body leans or poses can communicate as much expression as whether the face is smiling or not.
- Once you have the basic skeleton down, you can add more complexity as you please.

Even if you haven't been drawing along through the chapter (I know, that pencil is so far away), I hope you feel pretty confident that you can at least draw a stick figure and smiley face that represent the emotion and action you want to convey.