

# ***SKETCHING WITH LINES AND WORDS***

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“Sketching is fun because you try  
and you get better at it.”  
Shawn, 5th grade

## MEMORIES AND SKETCHES. . .

People have a way of reshaping memories of the past to conform to the day-to-day changes in their lives. Journaling is an excellent way to record observations, ideas, and reflections in the present moment for use in the future. (Figures 1A and 1B) This is especially useful in the fields of science, history, and gathering information for writing stories. Observations can be recorded as pictures or written words, in the form of sketches with lines or words. Use of the term “**sketches**” is quite intentional. Many people tense up when asked to draw or write. “Sketching” gives permission to change one’s work, make mistakes, and most importantly, experiment. Experience with many students has shown that starting by sketching with lines helps to improve students’ ability to recognize and record what they observe.



FIGURE 1A: Cliff rose, Utah, 1977 FIGURE 1B: Bottles of gasoline, Guinea, West Africa, 2005

Students should be given a bound journal in which to record their observations. The advantage of bound journals is the general reluctance to tear pages out, as almost all students, regardless of age, are tempted to destroy their early work. By keeping all their work sequentially organized and in one place, students quickly become aware of how their work improves over time. This is especially true if students use consecutive pages rather than skipping throughout the journal. Students should put the date and location where they are sketching in the upper right hand corner of each page. In some cases it is also useful to include other important information such as the topic of the sketch or names of people involved. Younger students often require lines on one page to facilitate writing. The best configuration tested to date is to have the left page

lined, and the right page blank. If a specific type of data is to be recorded regularly, an appropriate table can also be included on the left page. Spiral-bound journals are easiest to use since they can be folded back flat on themselves and rarely fall apart.

### TO BEGIN SKETCHING

Initially each student is given a single object to observe. Simple objects, such as leaves or even their own pencils, are best. (Figure 2) Students begin by sketching the object with lines on the blank page. Once the line sketch is complete, students are asked to label them as clearly as they can. Labels are words, phrases, and measurements that describe and quantify the object. Emphasis is placed on using as many senses and descriptive words as possible. Color, texture, smell, size, shape, number, sounds, and temperature can all be used to factually describe an object in detail. Often it is important to discuss the difference between what the students actually see and what they infer. Many students fail to recognize and understand this difference. Students are asked to produce at least one label for each year they have been in school. Each label then provides a starting place for a complete sentence. The sentences then provide the foundation to a cohesive paragraph descriptive of the object. Often the sentences flow together quickly and easily.

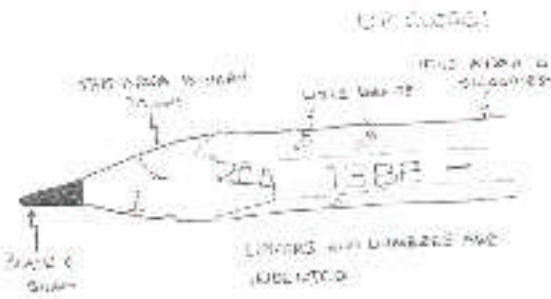


FIGURE 2: Pencil

First sketches and their descriptive sentences are often a disappointment. People tend to see things only after they become aware of them, and sketching helps them become more aware. Like reading and writing, sketching with lines and words involve skills that require practice. Requiring students to remain silent while sketching often improves their work through increased concentration. Another strategy is to allow only 5 minutes for a sketch and its labels. Have students look closely at both their sketches and the objects, and then sketch the object again, this time for 15 or 20 minutes. Then using the labels from both sketches, students write a descriptive paragraph about the object. As teachers and students become comfortable sketching with both lines and words, vary the length of time allowed for each sketch, the number of times the object is sketched, and the complexity of the objects sketched. In addition to the curriculum focus, it can be fun to vary the artistic focus too, such as using specific techniques or looking for specific colors.

### MODIFIED AND BLIND CONTOUR WORK

Modified and blind contour drawing will help students more closely observe what they are sketching. Both techniques require rendering the object with a single line, never lifting the pencil from the paper. Modified contours allow looking at one's paper while working. (Figure 3) Blind contours are done while looking only at the object being reproduced, without ever looking at the paper. (Figure 4) These methods help students capture the form of an object, and are especially useful when drawing animals, which may move at any time. Short timed sketches of 5 seconds to 1 minute work well. Interestingly, these methods tend to produce similar results with both beginning and experienced sketchers.



FIGURE 3: Modified contour, red oak leaf



FIGURE 4: Blind contour, red oak leaf

“I like sketching because it’s  
fun to look at something and draw it”  
Miguel, 5th grade

#### PENCILS AND TECHNIQUES

Pencils, especially soft pencils, are usually the best implements for beginning sketchers. They have a simple versatility accessible to almost any one. One can easily make marks with many different values, the degree of lightness or darkness, simply by increasing or decreasing pressure on the pencil point. (Figure 5) Lines of differing thickness can be made by using the side of the point instead of the tip or through using a blunt tip. Texture can be added by making different kinds of lines.

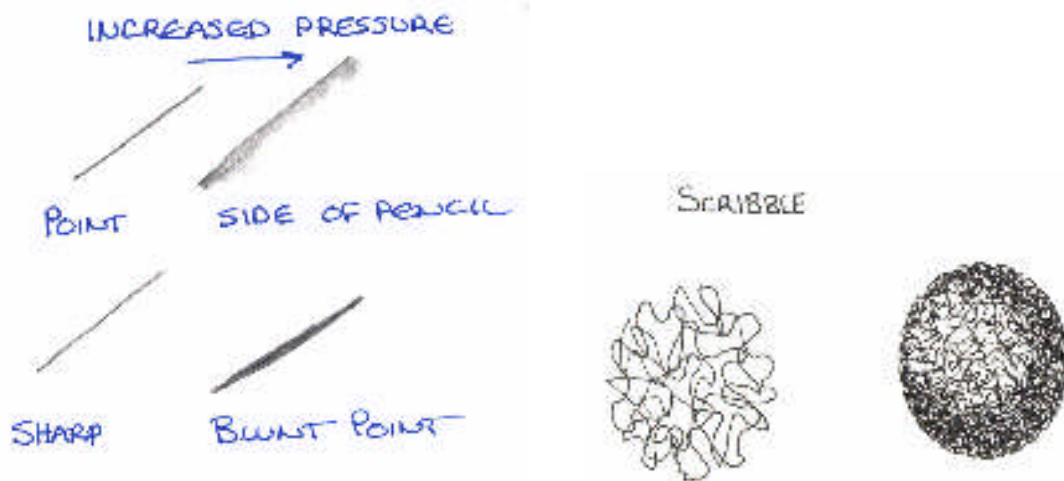
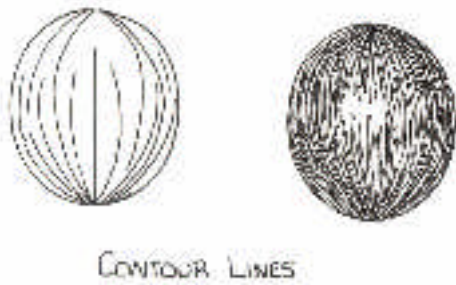


FIGURE 5: Pencil line values

FIGURE 6: Scribble lines

**Scribble** lines loop and twist, appearing thickly matted. These can be easily used to represent foliage. (Figure 6) **Contour** lines are smoothly flowing lines that fit the shape of the Figure 7) **Crisscross** lines create a furry or grass-like texture. Short hair-like lines, each at a slightly different angle, are put close to each other so that they overlap in a random manner. (Figure 8)



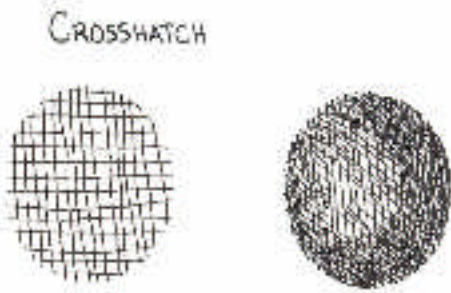
CRISS-CROSS LINES



FIGURE 7: Contour lines

FIGURE 8: Crisscross lines

**Crosshatching** is made with two or more sets of intersecting contour or parallel lines, each set laid down in a different direction. Length and precision of lines can vary widely. (Figure 9) **Parallel** lines are straight lines sketched in the same direction and help give a distant or misty look. (Figure 10)



PARALLEL LINES



FIGURE 9: Crosshatching

FIGURE 10: Parallel lines

**Stippling** is a series of dots created with the pencil point. The dots may be dark or light, and size may vary. (Figure 11) **Wavy** lines can be used to create the grain-like patterns in wood or the motion of water. (Figure 12)

STIPPLING



WAVY LINES



FIGURE 11: Stippling

FIGURE 12: Wavy lines

In addition to using the texture techniques above, a sense of depth can also be created by shading. A blunt point or the side of the pencil point can be used to darken or shade an area. The edges of darkened areas can be feathered by smearing with your finger or another piece of paper. (Figure 13) Using an eraser to lift some of the darkened area is a way to show highlights. Parallel lines and crosshatching can also be used to shade an object. These methods are most effective when the lines follow the contours of the object. Varying the distance between the dots in stippling will also create a sense of depth.

Many naturally occurring objects are bilaterally symmetrical. Therefore much information can be collected through sketching only one half of the object. This technique allows time to concentrate on half of the object with the understanding that the other side is similar. Leaves, trees, many flowers, and animals tend to have this kind of symmetry. (Illustration 14)

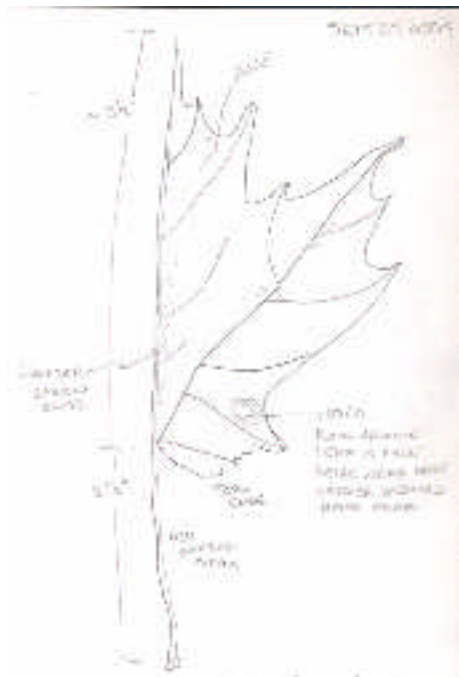


FIGURE14: Bilateral symmetry of a maple leaf.

#### WHY ADD COLOR . . .

Color can be added to journal illustrations using colored pencils and/or water colors. Many younger students prefer to use colored markers. There are several problems with using markers in most journals. Often marker lines will bleed through the paper, rendering one or more pages unusable. More importantly, when given markers, many students tend to draw stereotypical icons of what they are asked to sketch rather than what they actually see. Using a different medium helps overcome this problem.

Colored pencils are easy to use both indoors and out. For outside use it is helpful to keep the pencils in some kind of container, such as a box or tin can. Colored pencils can be used the same way as regular pencils and/or be used to color in sketches. Varying the pressure on the pencil will affect color density. (Figure 15) Colors can be mixed on the paper by layering one color over another. The order in which the colors are put down and color density will change the resulting color. (Figure 16) Coloring the layers in different directions will also influence the resulting color. The books of author-illustrator Bill Peet are well worth showing students interested in learning how to use colored pencils. Good ones to use include ,

*Farewell to Shady Grove, The Gnats of Knotty Pine, Chester the Worldly Pig, Ella, and The Caboose Who Got Loose.*

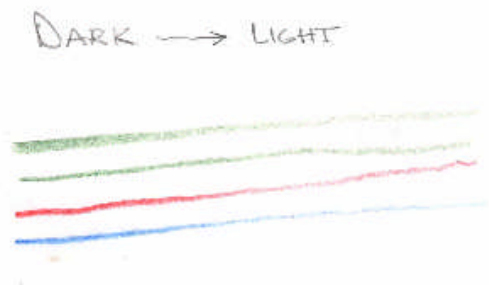


FIGURE 15: Color density with colored pencils.



FIGURE 16: Layering colors with colored pencils.

### TRY WATERCOLORS

Although watercolors require a little more care and attention, they also work well both inside and out. Paints, brushes, water, a blotting cloth, and paper need to be attended to simultaneously. Inside it is easy to work at tables or desks. Outside, it is best to sit on the ground and spread your materials around you. Watercolors affect paper very differently than do pencils. Most journal papers will buckle and warp even when gentle water colors are applied. So it is important not to over-saturate your paper with water or overwork the paint. Both will cause the paper to disintegrate. Much of the frustration of using watercolors comes from using inferior quality paintbrushes. Inexpensive brushes tend to shed their bristles. The expense of good brushes, preferably sable hair, is quickly offset by the superior quality of the work produced. Colors can be used straight from the paint cup; however, richer colors can be created by careful mixing. Wet both the cup of paint and the brush, then transfer some of the desired colors to another surface for mixing. It is important to blot or clean the brush when moving from one color to another in order to keep the paint in your paint cups clean. Mixing complementary colors, (green and red, yellow and purple, blue and orange) will create greys and earthy browns. Once the desired color is mixed, test it on either the journal page or a scrap of paper.



FIGURE 17: Flat wash.



FIGURE 18: Graded wash

All the methods described here are for use on dry paper. A **flat wash** is applied quickly and evenly with a fluid brush to create an area of even color. (Figure 17) A **graded wash** is created by applying a band of color and then adding water to the brush and drawing the color down or across the page. (Figure 18) Colors may be layered on top of one another creating new colors. It is important to allow each layer to dry before the next is added. Failure to do so will turn the colors muddy. Excess color may be blotted up with the blotting cloth or paper towel. A **drybrush** can be applied directly to dry paper or layered on top of other colors often creating a rough texture. It is accomplished by blotting a paint filled brush to remove most of the moisture. Keeping the paint cups dry, as apposed to saturated, helps facilitate this method. (Figure 19)



FIGURE 19: Drybrush

“This is my best sketch because I took a lot of time on it.”  
Cameron, 5th grade

REFLECTIONS

Near the end of each work session it is good to write a reflection. Seven minutes of silent writing seems to work well for most ages. Older students and adults often request a longer time to write. The purpose of the reflection is to gather together both one's thoughts and what one has learned. The form of this written work can vary from phrases, to an essay, to poetry, to a stream of consciousness. Sometimes this written work reflects answered questions, other times the chance for reflection brings up new questions. Once reflections are written, it is valuable to share both the written reflection and favorite line sketches. Line sketches can be shared in a circle or set out on a flat surface. The sharing of reflections by reading aloud often leads to very interesting discussions, can help clarify what has been learned, or highlight misunderstandings. Through the process of trying to explain what has been learned, the speakers must find a way to organize and clearly state their thoughts. By doing so, both they and their instructor discover what the speakers really understand and what is still confusing or uncertain.

#### MORE THOUGHTS. . .

This process is very flexible and can be used with most curricula. It has been successfully used to study vernal pools, stonewall archeology, local architecture, geology, history of land settlement, and writing fairy tales, as well as other topics. Feel free to experiment with what you do and how it is done. Play with ideas, determine what works best for you and your students. Results are most striking when students sketch frequently and consistently throughout the school year. Making the process part of the daily or weekly routine helps immensely. One teacher keeps all the journals, pencils, colored pencils, and watercolor supplies together in a crate. When the class needs a change of venue or when they go on a field trip, the teacher picks up the crate and they head outside. Several teachers have had great success incorporating journaling into all their field trips. Students are given a list of things to sketch and questions to answer either at the start of the trip, or at each stop. Both students and teachers report more attentiveness during the trips and better recall of important topics afterward.

#### THE GENERAL PROCEDURE

1. Give students a bound journal in which to record their observations.
2. Each student is given an object to observe and sketch with lines on the blank page.
3. Once the line sketch is complete, label the sketch with words.
4. Look closely at both the sketch and object. Using what is seen in combination with the labels, write a descriptive paragraph about the object.
5. Vary the length of time given to sketch the object (5 seconds to 45 minutes), the number of times the object is sketched, and the complexity of the objects being sketched (a single object to a landscape).
6. Near the end of each work session it is good to write a reflection. Seven minutes of silent writing works well for most ages.

#### SOME USEFUL RESOURCES

Estrin, Nona Bell, and Charles W. Johnson, *In Season: A Natural History of the New England Year*, University Press of New England, 2002.

Franck, Frederick, *Zen Seeing, Zen Drawing, Meditation in Action*, A Bantum Book, 1993.

Hinchman, Hannah, *A Trail Through Leaves*, W.W. Norton and Company, 1997.

Leslie, Claire Walker, and Charles E. Roth, *Keeping a Nature Journal*, Storey Books, 1998.

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Nice, Claudia, *How to Keep a Sketchbook Journal*, North Light Books, 2001.

Nice, Claudia, *Creating Textures in Pen & Ink with Watercolor*, North Light Books, 1995.

Nice, Claudia, *Sketching Your Favorite Subjects in Pen & Ink*, North Light Books, 1993

