



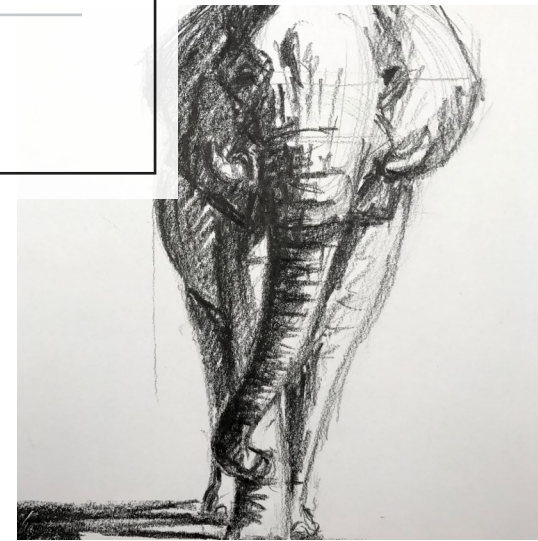
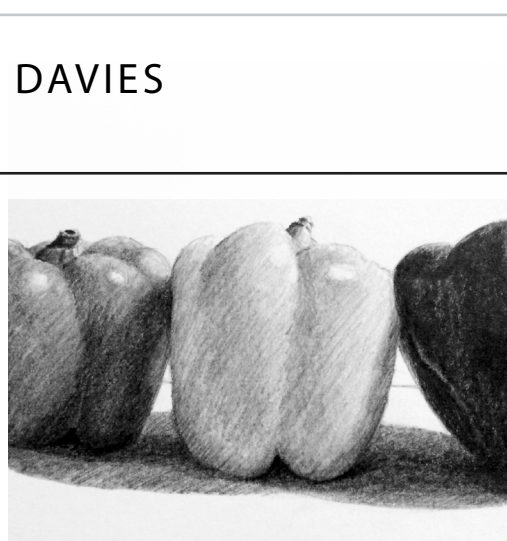
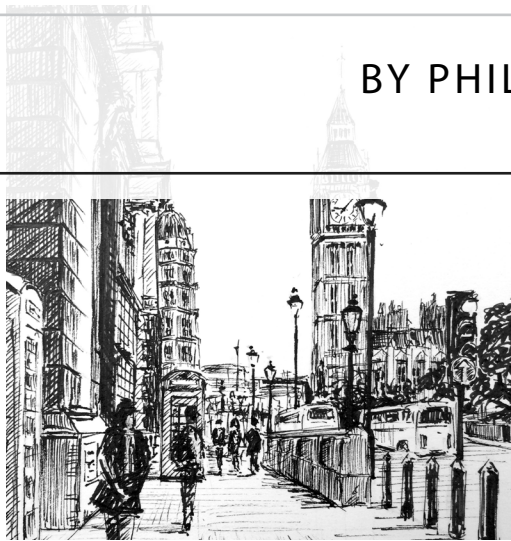
**Art**Tutor

# 101 Drawing Ideas

**& SKETCHBOOK EXERCISES**

Never be stuck for artistic inspiration again

BY PHIL DAVIES



# INTRODUCTION

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I've created this guide to save you time thinking of things to sketch and to give you some fresh inspiration. I'm also hoping you'll significantly improve your drawing skills along the way too :)

When I was looking for similar inspiration a while back, I found lots of lists of 'stuff to draw' on the Internet. But they didn't help me much...

They were either just a list of very general or stereotypical objects, or they were based around a creative challenge (such as draw your hand made out of robot parts). The creative challenge stuff is great for a more detailed portfolio piece, but you typically need to spend lots of time on research and prep.

And, if you're feeling stuck, a themed challenge like 'draw your favourite [fill in the blank]' isn't always specific enough to get you excited.

What is much more helpful when you're in a pickle over what to draw next, is very specific subject matter chosen from an artist's perspective, with an artist's eye.

That's what this cheatsheet gives you.

I've listed 101 interesting subjects that will make great sketches and drawings. I've split the ideas up into a few broad categories so it's easier for you to scan.

For each suggestion, I've provided links to a reference photo (or several). The photos are in the public domain so you can use them as you wish - no need to ask permission or give credit, even if you want to sell artwork based on them.

As an artist myself, I spend a lot of time looking at reference material. I know what kind of photos are great to draw and sketch from... and which ones are difficult and tedious!

Wherever possible I've gone for photos with a single or dominant light source. It creates those strong shadows and will make your drawing life much more enjoyable!

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# WHERE TO GET FREE REFERENCE PHOTOS FOR YOUR DRAWING IDEAS

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There are lots of sites now where generous photographers share their work under a CC0 licence (effectively placing it in the public domain). You can spend hours browsing each of these sites but to save time, just use these two...

**<http://www.pixabay.com>**

Pixabay scours all the other public domain image sites so you don't have to. Think of it like a mini Google just for public domain photos.

If you want to go straight for the very highest quality, most stunning public domain photos, then go to:

**<http://www.unsplash.com>**

Their images do show up in Pixabay but as a much smaller collection (and so quicker to browse), it's often my first port of call.

# 7 TIME SAVING TIPS FOR DRAWING & SKETCHING

Rightly or wrongly, hobby time is scarce for most of us. And certain forms of drawing can be very time consuming.

But sketching doesn't have to be. You can fill your sketch book with great-looking drawings in as little as 15-20 minute sessions.

I've had to learn to speed up my drawings so that they are more consumable as lessons on camera. Here's a random collection of tips that have helped me do that...

## 1 Use charcoal pencils

Don't become too reliant on graphite. Charcoal pencils have a very similar feel to their graphite cousins except you can block in large areas much faster. They also force you to be less obsessive over small detail because you can't keep them sharp long enough! Oh and you basically work with one grade - as opposed to switching between harder and softer pencils with graphite.



## 2 Make use of isolated studies

Draw an eye or a mouth study instead of a full portrait, or a tree and rock study instead of a full landscape. You get a sense of completion sooner. Plus, if you mess a small study up, it doesn't matter - mess up part of a full portrait and you're effectively throwing away hours of work.



## 7 TIME SAVING TIPS FOR DRAWING & SKETCHING (CONT.)

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### 3 When drawing portraits, consider zooming in

The most time-consuming part of drawing a portrait is shading and rendering the hair. If you crop your reference so that only part of the hair shows, it saves a lot of time. Alternatively, choose subjects with some kind of headwear or even just do one side of the face.



### 4 Go for the unfinished look

Some of the most eye-catching drawings you'll see contrast an area of higher detail with very loose sketchy marks around. You make the highest detail around the focal point and as you move away from that point things get looser and sketchier. This works so well because it pulls the viewer's eye to where you want it focused - and that is the most important element of strong composition. I use this technique a lot!

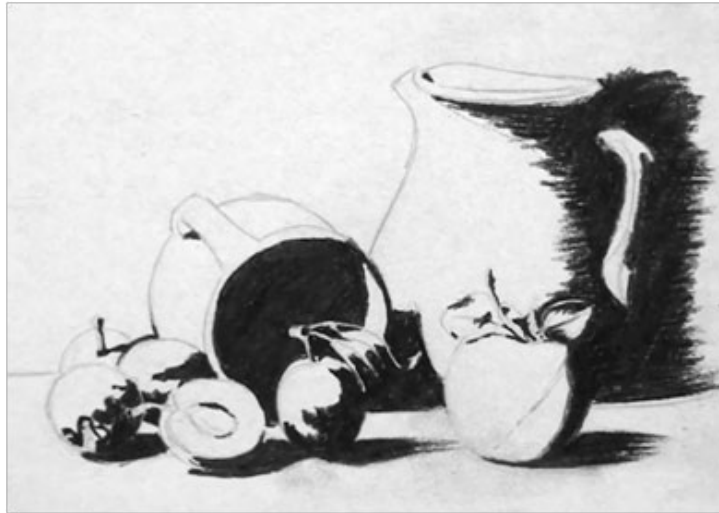


## 7 TIME SAVING TIPS FOR DRAWING & SKETCHING (CONT.)

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### 5 When rendering, block in large areas of shadow first

For a long time, I used to carefully shade my drawings one square inch at a time - looking at all the detail within that area and rendering it to completion. But when I loosened things up, I found that blocking in large shadow shapes (ignoring any details within those shadow shapes) really sped things up. Yes, you may have to use your kneaded eraser to lighten back areas and add detail later on, but it's a much quicker process. Just don't go too heavy when you block the shadow shape in initially.



## 7 TIME SAVING TIPS FOR DRAWING & SKETCHING (CONT.)

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### 6 Posterise your reference photos

Posterise means you reduce the number of pixels in your reference. Sounds complicated and technical to but it's simple! Here's what an image looks before and after it has been posterised:

This makes it much easier for you to see the various values. Recreating this 'blocky' feel and then gently smoothing out the transitions is great way to speed up the shading process.

Here's a quick guide for how to use a free online tool to posterise any image:

<https://www.arttutor.com/blog/201608/using-pixlr-create-posterised-reference-photos>



Before and after posterising. Notice how the image on the right has very definite edges to each of the values? While you will need to smooth these out for a photorealistic drawing, seeing them like this makes it much easier to create the overall form first.



## 7 TIME SAVING TIPS FOR DRAWING & SKETCHING (CONT.)

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### 7 Give yourself a time limit

One of the best ways to loosen up your sketching is to give yourself a time limit... and stick to it. I created a course for ArtTutor called Sketching Places Quickly, where the time limit was under 15 minutes for each sketch.

You can see one of those lessons for free on YouTube here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSUwJ7JSPqs>





# INTERESTING OBJECTS

You can find lots of everyday things around the house to draw and you can turn even the most mundane object into something very interesting. That's the beauty of art!

But sometimes you can do with something a bit out of the ordinary for spark your enthusiasm to create. Here are 10 items you won't typically find around the home, each taken in nice lighting to make shading and rendering more fun!

- 1 A pair of ballet shoes **like these** or **like these**  
(pretend you're Edgar Degás for a day)
- 2 These old **copper coffee pots** or **kettles** or just one of them **on its own**  
(another good exercise for seeing value and creating form)
- 3 This old **kerosene lamp** or this **similar one**  
(another one I'd like to have a go at)
- 4 Some **chess pieces like these**  
(perfect for practising 'turning of the form' and more interesting than drawing geometric shapes like cylinders and cones!)
- 5 A **human skull** or **this one** with strong shadows  
(skull makes for great pen and ink drawings - here's one I did for ArtTutor)
- 6 This **brown leather satchel**  
(lovely textures to render here)
- 7 An **old leather shoe** with some lovely shadows
- 8 An **old metal door handle** with strong shadows or a rusty padlock **like this** or **this one**
- 9 A stack of **very old books**  
(great perspective exercise and a chance to render some very interesting patterns)
- 10 A classic **Nikon camera**



# ANIMALS

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Drawing animals is trickier than drawing landscapes, florals of most still life compositions. But they're simpler than the human figure so they provide a nice middle ground for practising getting your proportions right.

Use basic shapes! Get the overall placement and proportion of the use correct first before you start sketching in detail. I have a video lesson on YouTube that will take you through the basic process - watch it [here](#).

- 11 A **pelican** with a fish in its mouth  
(superb image)
- 12 A **giraffe**  
(great for practising proportions that you actually see, not what you think you see)
- 13 This stunning **profile of a horse**  
(another one on my list with its beautiful shadows!)
- 14 A **stag** walking  
(use basic shapes and negative space to get the proportions correct)
- 15 A **flamingo**  
(a nice easy one with simple shapes)
- 16 This stirring portrait of a **fox**  
(don't worry about fur detail if it's a quick sketch)
- 17 This **white dove** at an interesting perspective or **this one** about to land  
(the lack of markings makes it a quicker sketch for you)
- 18 An **elephant** walking towards you  
(elephants are great for sketching with basic shapes and usually have nice strong shadows for creating form - here's a **10min sketch** of mine)
- 19 A **grey squirrel** eating a nut  
(simple shapes would make this relatively easy for the outline)
- 20 A **farmyard hen**  
(do the head in some nice detail and go looser for the rest of the body)



# FOOD

Food is not normally my favourite subject matter to sketch and I think it lends itself better to coloured mediums. But I've included ideas and photos below that I think would make terrific sketches or full blown drawings in pen, pencil or charcoal.

- 21 **Orange peel and segment**  
(make this photo black and white and look at all those interesting values for you to shade) **or this orange cut in half with the knife at the side**
- 22 **Breakfast cereal and milk**  
(keep the cereal flakes loose and sketchy to save time - focus on getting the shape of the milk container right)
- 23 **This burger with a knife through**  
(really interesting textures here and with the lighting you could go as sketchy or as detailed as you like)
- 24 A pair of **bell peppers** with dramatic lighting  
(great practice for looking at values - make the photo black and white if it helps you)
- 25 **Peas in a pod**  
(don't dismiss the simplicity of this image - I can see a really interesting and quite easy going drawing from this)
- 26 Close up of a **single raspberry**  
(this would make a good exercise for looking at reflected light, highlights and shadows and if you used a charcoal or very soft graphite pencil, it wouldn't take long)
- 27 A husk of **corn**  
(no need to draw every corn kernel - the trick here is drawing a few to tell the viewer what they are looking at and then giving an loose impression of the rest)
- 28 And here's a shot of **broccoli** in stark lighting. Creating the tonal values in the stalks is a good exercise in itself. Or you could go in quite dark with the broccoli florets then practice your skills with a putty eraser by pinching it to a point and lifting out highlights to create shape and form.





# FIGURES & FACES

Drawing random people from life is difficult and can feel a bit awkward. If you're not ready for that, then practice by drawing them from photos.

The problem with most stock photos is that they use studio lighting, stereotypical models and airbrushing. For us artists, the lack of shadow make it difficult to create form and, as beautiful as those models might be, it makes for very dull subject matter.

The suggestions below and the photos I've chosen for you are of 'everyday' people in everyday environments, and most of all, in interesting lighting. I think you'll really enjoy sketching some of these (I know I will!).

- 29 This **couple** riding bicycles holding hands
- 30 A front on **symmetrical portrait**  
(the hair is a silhouette with little detail making it ideal for a quicker sketch)
- 31 This **man on a plane** reading in an interesting light  
(I'll be sketching this soon!)
- 32 A partially obscured **face**  
(again, makes the sketch quicker and easier)
- 33 **A profile of an older woman** in a headscarf  
(headwear plus a profile is a great time saver)
- 34 This **lady looking thoughtful** in a cafe
- 35 A **woman outside** an interesting doorway
- 36 This graceful **ballet dancer**  
(trying getting the shape of the dress first, then the position of the head, then the length of the arms and legs - like a stick figure - then add the structure and mass)
- 37 Get someone to take a photo of you looking at yourself in the mirror and draw that. Something like **this**.
- 38 A **couple hugging**  
(a good reference if you want to avoid detailed faces and focus more on the pose)

# FIGURES & FACES

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- 39 This **front on portrait** with nice shadows down one side of the face  
(would make for a loose sketch where you can focus on the position, proportion and shape of the features)
- 40 A **figure study** from an interesting over-the-shoulder angle
- 41 A great **3/4 pose** with really interesting silhouette shapes all around
- 42 This curved back of a **young woman**  
(the hair could be quite simple if you focus on blocks of value)
- 43 A photo of yourself taking a photo of yourself in a car wing mirror  
(**here's an example**)
- 44 A **woman preparing street food**  
(notice the vignette effect of the photo - repeat that in your sketch by rendering the lady in detail and getting very loose and sketchy around the edges)
- 45 This **young man** playing the cello  
(personally I'd leave the tattoo - you could get a great sketch from this!)
- 46 A **profile of an old gentleman** with tons of character  
(don't get overwhelmed by the detail - go for a **simple sketch in this style** or just **a close up of the eye and nose** like I did for someone else)
- 47 A really interesting pose of a **ballet dancer**  
(definitely add some shading to this one to capture that dramatic lighting)
- 48 This beautiful **draped pose**  
(no detail needed here - it's all about getting the shape of the limbs and feet right)
- 49 This **amazing portrait**  
(with the added bonus of not having to render hair!)



# BUILDINGS & URBAN

Urban sketching is really in vogue right now. If you're not confident enough to sketch outdoors, with the potential for many peering eyes over your shoulder, then start with reference photos. I like sketching old, characterful buildings and townscapes best.

Oh, and sketching urban scenes often involves drawing figures (which I know can be daunting to many). We've got a two-part, step-by-step guide for adding simple figures to landscape scenes on our blog ([See part 1](#) - where to place figures compositionally and [part 2 here](#) - how to actually draw them).

- 50 A **lighthouse like this**  
(I did a sketch of [something similar](#) as a 10-minute exercise)
- 51 **The Golden Gate Bridge**  
(keep texture and detail to a minimum, focus more on blocks of value) or [Brooklyn Bridge](#) (here's a [fine liner pen version](#))
- 52 An interesting interior [like this one](#), or [this one](#), or [this one](#), or [this one](#)  
(great for practising your vanishing points)
- 53 This [traditional bicycle](#) outside old doors  
(these would make a great simple pen sketch)
- 54 Or just an [old wooden door](#) on its own  
(look at those strong shadows - I see another nice pen sketch here)
- 55 An old [Andalusian street scene](#)  
(focus on your perspective, keep the trees simple, no need for too much intricate detail on the tower)
- 56 An [old house](#) in 3-point perspective  
(3 point perspective means the verticals of the building are converging - they aren't parallel to one another)
- 57 These [window shutters](#) and old lamp in strong sunlight
- 58 The [face of the Statue of Liberty](#)  
(potentially tricky but you can do it!)
- 59 A [rustic café front such as this](#)  
(here's a [10-minute sketch](#) with a style you could replicate)
- 60 A [narrow street](#) with very dramatic vantage point  
(great for practising your 3-point perspective)



# HANDS & FEET

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Hands and feet are great to sketch. They stretch your ability to re-create correct proportion and shape but without being as daunting as a full figure study.

You'll find studies below that are very simple, all the way up to complex hand poses. The best tip I can give you for sketching hands and feet is to stick to basic shapes first and then split those shapes up into individual fingers or toes.

- 61 A **hand holding a cigarette**
- 62 **Sneakers and feet** from an unusual angle  
(add an impression of the reflection too)
- 63 A pair of **hands on a steering wheel** of a classic car  
(I love this one!)
- 64 A close up **profile of man's shoes**  
(or have someone take a similar shot of your foot)
- 65 A **hand picking up a daisy**  
(you could swap the dish for almost anything small)
- 66 A feet selfie **such as this** or take a selfie of your own feet, shoes on or off
- 67 A **hand on a saxophone**  
(do the hand in detail and keep the saxophone as a basic line drawing would make a great composition!)
- 68 This pair of **feet on tip toes**
- 69 **Hand tying a tie** or get someone take a photo of you tying your own tie or doing up a button on a blouse
- 70 A simple pair of **feet on rocks**  
(simple they may be but still a great sketching test)
- 71 A **hand holding some cherry tomatoes**  
(a terrific photo this!)



# HANDS & FEET

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- 72 These **legs and feet** hanging out a car window  
(what a great subject this is - you could easily re-create your own version of this with your camera phone)
- 73 A close up of **hands on a typewriter**  
(use basic shapes to block in the hands at first and just give an impression of the typewriter)
- 74 A **hand holding an ice-cream** or **holding a fishing rod**
- 75 These **four feet** hanging over a pool  
(great little sketchbook exercise this)



# TRANSPORT

There are some really interesting shapes within manmade vehicles. They will test your ability to draw with good perspective and proportion and the final result can be very satisfying.

You don't have to draw every intricate detail if you don't want to - if time is short, just focus on getting the overall shape and shell correct, and maybe a few key features.

- 76 An **old tractor** from a low vantage point  
(simplify the engine block and focus on the shadows of that big tyre tread)
- 77 The front of a **VW camper van** or one of my favourites - the iconic **VW Beetle**
- 78 A wooden **dinghy boat** in a nice landscape  
(focus on the boat and just add a very sketchy line drawing for the backdrop)
- 79 A traditional **red London bus**  
(worried about perspective and straight lines - go deliberately wobbly with a pen)
- 80 The front of a **classic Mercedes car**
- 81 An old abandoned **shipping boat** on a beach shoreline  
(this is crying out for a quick sketch) or perhaps **this one** instead
- 82 This **classic moped** in an Italian backstreet or this **slightly simpler one**  
(focus on basic geometric shapes - great practice for simplifying forms)
- 83 A **classic plane like this one** or **this one**  
(I've never actually drawn a plane so I might have a go at that first one)
- 84 Or go for a **modern fighter jet** instead  
(great angle on this photo showing the detail of the undercarriage and landing gear)
- 85 This **subway train** coming towards you  
(looks difficult and time consuming but you could use a charcoal or carbon pencil to add lots of the darks quickly - so the train is emerging out of very little detail around it)

# AROUND THE HOUSE

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No reference photos for this list - just everyday items you should be able to find and set up around your home.

Any item you choose from this list can be made much more interesting and dramatic with some simple lighting. Just place said item in a darkened room (it doesn't have to be pitch black by any means), then use an angle poise or desk lamp and light from one side. Play about with the position and angle until you get shadows that you like. Take a photo and work from that or try drawing it from life!

- 86 A screwed up piece of paper  
(lined paper will add an extra level of interest and will help you create really believable folds) or a crumpled paper bag
- 87 A close-up of any plant or flower in your garden or a potted plant from around the house
- 88 The inside of a drawer or your refrigerator
- 89 A DIY or garden tool or tools
- 90 A teddy bear or doll
- 91 A pile of dirty laundry or a stack of freshly ironed clothes
- 92 A glass bottle half full or a glass of water / soda / milk  
(add a straw for extra interest)
- 93 A collection of art supplies  
(like paint tubes, brushes, pencils, metal sharper etc.)
- 94 A musical instrument like a violin or guitar or flute
- 95 A children's toy  
(something geometric like a toy car rather than a soft toy)
- 96 Choose any bedroom with a window. Sit as far from the window as possible but still directly facing it. Draw the wall of the room containing the window, including what you can see outside. Make this sketch quite small so that it's quite quick (i.e. draw the wall no more than 6 inches wide)

## AROUND THE HOUSE

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- 97 A bunch of keys. Sounds boring but actually, with some nice light and a mix of traditional mortice lock keys and a modern car key, this would make quite a nice study.
- 98 A crushed soda can  
(empty the can and stand on it lightly or it will become too creased and complicated) or half empty (slightly deformed) tube of toothpaste
- 99 Your unmade bed focusing on large creases and folds in the bedding and the shape of the recently-slept-on pillows (unless you're as messy as Tracey Emin, then I'd pass on this one)
- 100 Your phone with your most used app open  
(and maybe a set of headphones if you use them)
- 101 Any hobby equipment that means something to you  
(set up a still life - it could be a golf club and ball with some tees, or knitting needles with your latest, unfinished knit and ball of wool, for example)



# 7 - DAY DRAWING & SKETCHING CHALLENGE

This week-long challenge is designed to improve your drawing skills by pushing you out of your comfort zone. You'll be tackling a variety of subject matter along with some sketching exercises.

You can take the challenge over seven consecutive days or one to two days apart (but no more than that or you'll lose valuable momentum!).

Ready? Let's go...

## DAY 1 ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

Draw a lamp or a pot or kettle. Add some basic shading to create form but focus on getting the shape right first. Spend no more than 20 minutes on this and use either a charcoal pencil or a very soft graphite pencil (8 or 9B) to speed up the shading process. Here are some photos to chose from:

**PHOTO 1**

**PHOTO 2**

**PHOTO 3**

**PHOTO 4**

## DAY 2 ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

Draw a facial feature study or two - an eye and a mouth for example. When you download an image from Pixabay or Unsplash, download the highest resolution (you need to sign up for an account at Pixabay to do this, but it's free). The high res version allows you to zoom in on the feature and still see enough detail to sketch from.

Here's a couple of photos you could use:

**PORTRAIT 1**  
(young man)

**PORTRAIT 2**  
(young woman)

**PORTRAIT 3**  
(older man)

A great tip for drawing anything with intricate curves (such as an eye) is to break those curves down into straight lines. Take a look at [my short blog post](#) on drawing an eye like this before you start.

# 7-DAY DRAWING & SKETCHING CHALLENGE

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## DAY 3 ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

Draw an animal using basic shapes. Watch **my video lesson first**, then choose a photo below:

**ANIMAL 1**  
(elephant)

**ANIMAL 2**  
(flamingo)

**ANIMAL 3**  
(giraffe)

## DAY 4 ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

Draw the **peas in a pod** or **broccoli** photo but really spend some time on shading to recreate some nice form. Give yourself an hour if possible. Quick tip: make the photos black and white to help see the values more easily.

## DAY 5 ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

Draw a figure focusing on proportion and shape rather than shading and detail. Here are three I recommend choosing from:

**EASY**  
(female's back)

**MODERATE**  
(woman at cafe)

**DIFFICULT**  
(ballerina)

## DAY 6 ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

Choose an item from the 'Around Your House' list and sketch it. If you're having trouble choosing, go for the bunch of keys and ideally sketch them from life with a table light lighting from one side (to create some nice strong shadows).

# 7-DAY DRAWING & SKETCHING CHALLENGE

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## DAY 7 ●●●●●●●

Draw a simple building, landscape or still life three times. For the first attempt give yourself a maximum of 15 minutes. For the second attempt give yourself a maximum of 12 minutes. And for the third attempt, a maximum of 10 minutes.

Have a visible stop watch (your phone will almost certainly have a built in app) that you can check on as you sketch.

Choose one these references or one of your own:

**EASY**  
(wooden door)

**MODERATE**  
(old boat)

**DIFFICULT**  
(reclining figure)