



10 STEPS TO DRAW A REALISTIC HORSE

by Darrel Tank

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Adapted by the 5-Pencil Method Team from Darrel Tank's *Burdock: Your Guide to Drawing a Realistic Horse* series of Art Studio drawing classes.

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You'll Never Think of Drawing a Horse the Same Way Again...

Your childhood dream awaits! Bring a beautiful horse to life on paper with these 10 easy-to-follow steps

by Darrel Tank



No one should miss out on the fun of drawing! But most of us still need to know where to start. And how to progress through each step.

In other words... we need a plan!

So here's the plan you need to turn your wish to draw amazingly realistic horses (and a lot more) into...

...a gratifying set of skills that will afford you the unwavering control over your pencils that you've dreamed of for years!

You'll soon discover that the reason these drawing techniques work so well is because they are based in a unique way on the very same visual rules that create the world around us.

Of course, we're also going to have to deal with the big lie that has circulated for decades (and probably centuries)...

...the lie that says drawing is one of those innate skills that you're either born with or you aren't.

That could not be further from the truth!

Just like none of us is born knowing how to read, write, ride a bike, play the piano, or put one foot in front of the other, drawing is also a skill we have to learn!

Sadly this destructive misconception of "you're just born with it" has been perpetuated by many of my fellow artists. (Is it a way to set themselves apart? To cope with insecurity? I like to think it's not malicious.)

Yet... sadly, this has kept millions of people (maybe even you) from experiencing the life-changing self-confidence and sublime joy that come from flexing your creative muscle.

(Promise yourself that you won't let this lie rob you of reaching your potential!)

So let's get going on what I think you'll find to be a very exciting journey...

FREE Drawing Class!

Register for a free drawing class from Darrel Tank showing the process for drawing this horse. Register for this free class now. [Learn more...](#)

Step 1: Draw a clean layout with your 4H pencil.

Here's the horse drawing that I'll walk you through in the following steps.



NOTE: [Get a printable version of the horse reference images](#) so you can follow along with the upcoming steps.

How you begin mastering the art of drawing depends largely on you.

Can you already whip out a freehand layout accurately?

(Congrats! You're a rare bird if you can. Of course, just free-handing an outline accurately won't achieve a drawing with

“realism.” So, you’re welcome to go on and discover more on how to do that starting in step 2.)

For the rest of us...

I am a firm believer that drawing a “layout” (the light outlines that define the edges of the shapes we plan to draw) is not the best place for most folks to start—even though it needs to be the first thing you put on your paper.

As a very quick side-note, once you’re ready to “dive in” and start learning how to see the shapes and angles that make up a drawing, my favorite assisted layout method is called the straightedge & divider method. You can [see this article if you want to learn more](#).

It is, quite simply, a really easy place to get bogged down. And that can defeat the entire purpose of “having fun drawing!”

That’s why I always teach my students to work on mastering this step later.

So how do we proceed without freehanding?

We still create a layout, of course, but I encourage you to use the approach that feels most comfortable to you for now.

In fact, you might even consider using one of these two methods to create your outlines:

- [Lightbox-Style Tracing Guide](#)
- [Graphite Transfer Method Guide](#)

This is just so you can quickly get started and move on to the “fun” part, where you can see some results. You’ll have plenty of time later to master the unique skill of constructing, or even freehanding your layout.

(Hey, if you really prefer, and own the equipment for, another method—such as the grid method or using a projector—that is certainly fine for now. Let’s just get something on the paper!)

The important points to remember while drawing a layout, no matter the method, are:

- Use your 4H pencil so the lines are very light. This helps you avoid the heavy “coloring book outlines”.
- Make sure overall relationships between features and shapes are accurate.
- Be deliberate and precise with the lines.
- Draw lightly enough that any stroke could be erased.
- Don’t leave any unnecessary lines to confuse you later in the process.

Your paper should look about like this when you’ve finished this step...



Want to jump-start your layout?
Get a [printable version of this layout](#) emailed to you now

Step 2: Create smooth “contour patches” in the darkest areas.

Since a horse is mostly hair and fur, we’re going to begin this drawing a little bit differently than I normally would.

After creating your initial layout and overall sketch with the 4H pencil, we are going to begin using the HB pencil.

The HB pencil is a softer, darker pencil, which means that it will put more graphite down on the paper. This will be useful in an upcoming step.

What types of pencils work the best? [Here’s a review.](#)

Now, the first major visual rule is this: Everything that is left the same value in any one area, will appear flat. So, to create contour, depth, and dimension, the value must increase as it goes to where there is less light, or decrease as it goes to where there is more light.

Take the horse’s curved, dimensional face, for example. As the light source strikes the face, that area that reflects the light the most will be the brightest, demonstrated by a lighter value. But, as the contours of the face gradually curve away from the light, the values will reflect that by becoming progressively darker.

So, in other words, because the face is contoured (or gently rounded), and more and more light is blocked as that contour curves farther away from where the light is shining.

A gradation looks like this...



Since a horse is anything but flat, values will be constantly shifting, getting darker or lighter, as the light confronts changes in contour. A fancy term for this is “gradation.”

So, at every step along the way, we want to create and maintain “gradation,” or contour, in our drawings. Otherwise, they will become flat and lifeless!

Take a look at these reference images and see if you can spot all of the “contour” in them...

NOTE: [Get a printable version of the horse reference images](#) emailed to you so you can follow along with the upcoming steps.



photo: Flickr/Steven Lilley

Since you're working with white paper, the first pencil marks (even though they are lightly drawn) will appear much darker and will contrast with the paper right away. So, in order to accomplish this constant gradation, we need to start adding the first pencil strokes in the darkest places.

This allows you to maintain the correct balance between light and dark from the start.

In other words...

If you were to start by adding value in a brightly lit, high-lighted area, that value would be darker than the white of the paper. You'd have dark in a light place, and the darker places would all still be white (the paper color.)

In other words, your drawing would start with the values out of balance. It would set up all kinds of optical illusions that create conflicts and contradictions that make it much harder to end up with a great result.

Did you get all of that?

I know that's a bit of a brain teaser, so let's put it another way, too...

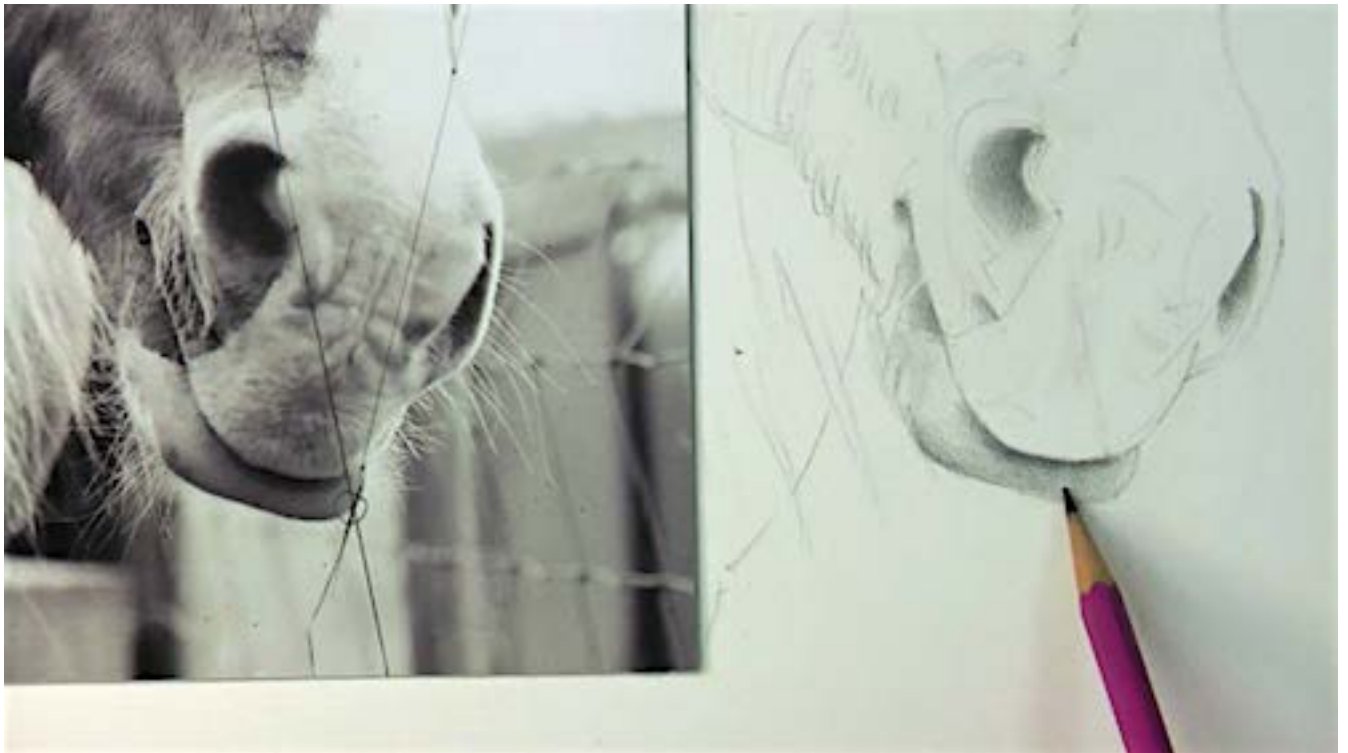
Since value (darkness and lightness) is relative to its surroundings, any value that you put down first is going to appear to be the darkest place in your drawing!

That means that it's much easier (and safer on your drawing) to start adding your first value (even though it's a light value) in the dark areas and then progressively work toward and into the lighter areas of your drawing.

It's a process of building up the layers to "stay in balance." As you add each layer in the following steps, you will continue to increase the value in these dark areas first to maintain the balance.

So here's the first thing to do with your HB pencil...

After locating one of the darkest portions of the drawing within your layout, start laying down your pencil strokes in the same direction as a portion of the outline you created in step 1, repeating and blending strokes until the layout line becomes a part of this gradient "patch" you're drawing.



Take note of how I've started my strokes in the darkest place under the lip and moved over the contour on the lip, getting lighter (reducing the pressure on my pencil) as I move out of the shadow.

[See the pencil in action...](#)

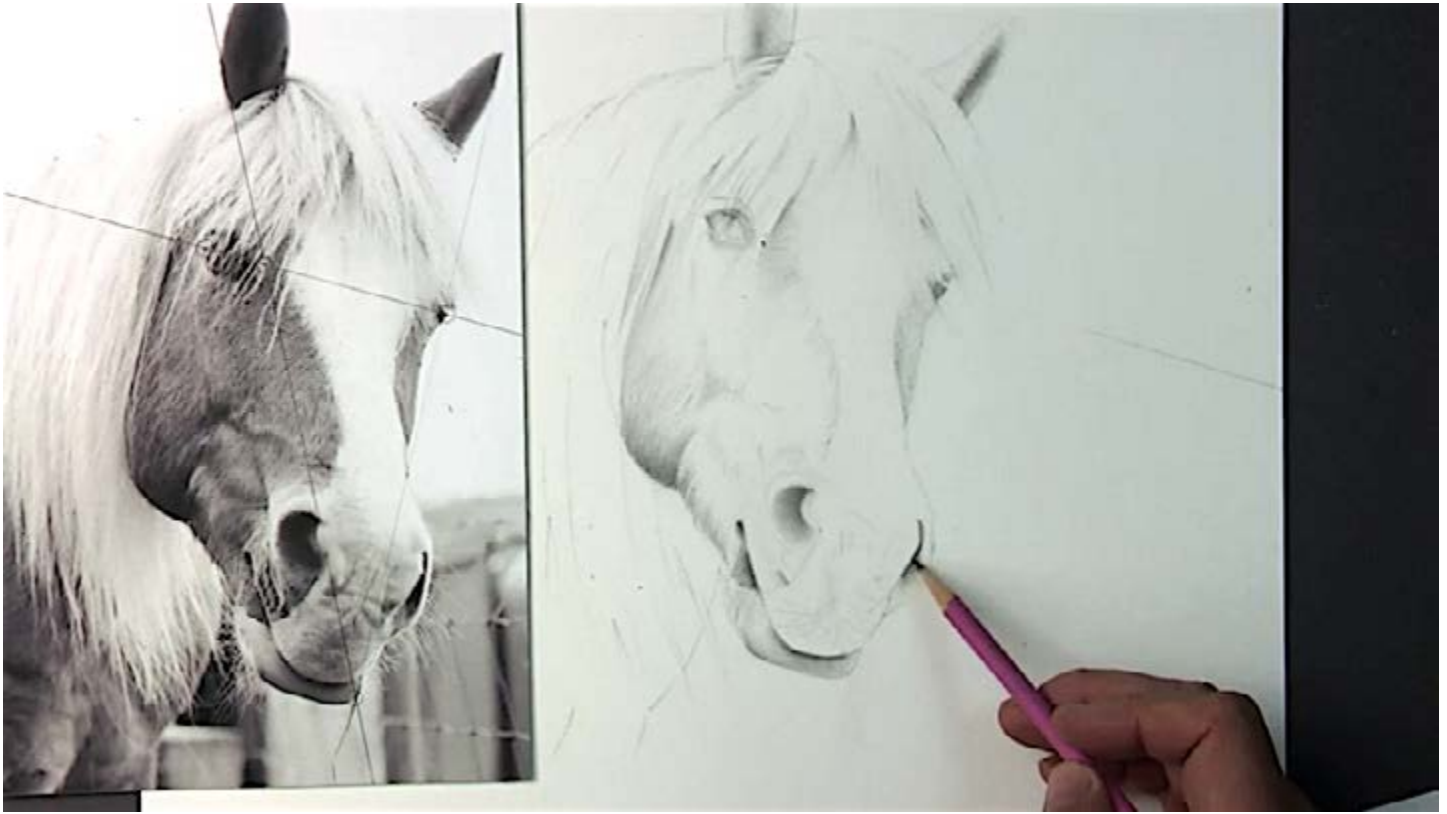


You will need to repeat this process in each of the darkest portions of your drawing. It's a lot easier to see exactly where the darkest places are if you look at the lightest version of the reference images that I provided. By lifting the exposure, you can see that any place that still retains its shadow has to be dark!

In the ears, you can see that I'm not necessarily sticking with my traditional stroke. I want to build up the value, but the short, mix-matched hairs are going in all directions. For this, I used more of a crosshatching technique to overlap strokes and create a nicely textured dark value.



Remember, you are moving from dark to light in stages. Lighten the pressure of your pencil on the paper as you move away from your initial strokes and closer to the highlights. This is where my mantra of “lighter, lighter, lighter” comes into play.



Repeat this step in all of the darkest portions of your drawing.

Only extend the value out from the shadow as far as the value goes for that contour.

Always use a light touch so that your pencil lines can still be erased. (You'll see more about why coming up.)

Blend the edges of each "patch" together. Because the patches are made up of the tapered strokes, they naturally have a lighter and softer edge, which allows them to blend together when they are overlapped one next to the other.

Fill in the gaps to make sure that each patch stays as smooth as possible.

Here's where the saying that "professionals are just those who have mastered the basics" really rings true. None of this is really that hard.

And yet...you can perfect your drawing game for years to come just by improving your skills on this one basic exercise.

And don't let that discourage you!

Because even if you feel you can do this only at a very basic level, this technique can give you surprisingly great results even at those basic levels.

Step 3: Begin drawing the fur using this trick.

Here's the one thing most people don't know that messes them up when drawing fur (and also hair and grass.)

The secret is that you don't draw the hairs; you draw the spaces between the hairs!

If each pencil stroke represented a hair, you'd have a huge mess of dark lines with light spaces between them which creates a negative. Using those lighter gaps between the pencil strokes, you can replace them with a darker value suggesting deeper spaces through the hair between those original pencil strokes, which now become the color of the hair.

But, if you look at the hair as a whole, you will start to see "groupings" or "clusters" of light hair, divided by those darker gaps you can see in the reference.

Your job is to draw those gaps, which in turn will create the groupings of hair and create the illusion of volume!

The strands of hair are the LIGHT parts, and it's the spaces between the hairs that are DARK. Read that again. It's really important!



Even in the first layer of strokes, we are already seeing a pattern that resembles fur because the dark lines (the pencil strokes) are in a shape that feels like they could be between hairs.

It will even get a lot more impressive in the next steps!

Fun facts:

- There are occasions when individual light hairs will actually be drawn (erased, really), such as when you have stray hairs falling over the horse's face or a dark background with light hair in front of it. (We'll cover this in a bit.)
- It is also true that a hair will be darker if it's over a lighter background, such as stray hairs sticking out over a light background or where part of a scalp is showing through or a dark hair overlaps a patch of light hairs, for instance.

So what does this mean for drawing fur?

Well, let's just logically think about what kind of shape would be created between groups of hairs that start next to each other and go out in different directions. (Remember, the dark part is between the hairs.)

Can you visualize that shape? (Hint: you can look at that last image.)

This space is a sort of upside down "V" shape, isn't it? And with the fairly short fur hair that covers a horse's face, can you imagine how this would create quite a lot of small, upside down "V" shapes throughout the fur?

[See the "V" stroke in action...](#)

Now, remember in step 2 where we talked about contour and how that creates the "shape" of an object?

Well, another technique for creating the shape of the horse (which is an illusion, of course, since it's all done on a flat

sheet of paper) is the direction and length of the hairs within the coat of fur.

Take a good look at how the hairs change direction as the shape of this horse's head changes...



Notice how the hairs get shorter and change direction as we look toward the side of the face—as part of the face moves farther away from our view—rather than looking at it straight on.

Can you imagine how the apparent direction of those hairs would change as we looked at this horse's head from different positions?

For now, you can just remember to pay attention to the direction, length, and shape of the fur patterns you see in the [reference photos](#) and follow those in your drawing.

The exciting thing that will happen for you is that the more you notice these things and apply them in your drawings, the more you will build up a “library” in your head so you’ll have a strong grasp of how the visual world works and how to naturally create these illusions in any of your drawings.

Step 4: “Cast a tone” to add dimension to the fur.

We now get to the reason for using the HB pencil in our previous steps.

But first...if you're like most of my new students, you probably feel that drawing a realistic, 3-dimensional object on a flat sheet of paper could be done by simply scrubbing in graphite quickly with the side of your pencil, then adjusting your pencil pressure to go lighter or darker until the drawing is all “filled” up. Then, with a tortillion (blending stump), you could smooth out and blend all of that graphite as you see fit.



(Some folks do draw this way, but I find it messy and prone to error and that it never creates the realistic textures that artists can achieve by drawing in layers. Also, using a tortillion mashes down the tooth [the tiny ridges in the paper that hold graphite] of the paper changing the paper's texture, creating inconsistent tones, values, gradations, and limiting the range of value and details you want to achieve later on in your drawing. Adjustments and alterations can become difficult if not impossible, because the graphite becomes imbedded in the paper.)

The HB pencil is dark and soft enough that we can use a very soft, natural-hair brush (I like a 2" inch camel-hair) to lightly smooth over the hair textures created in graphite in order to “cast a tone.”

[Get a free 2" camel-hair brush](#) mailed to you (limited-time offer). Click for details.

This works because the brush picks up a very small amount of the graphite from the darker areas and evenly covers the surrounding paper with a very even, light layer of graphite.

So what has learning how to “cast a tone” done for us? As we said in step 3, hair comes in groups. Those groups are made up of many hairs lying on top of each other.

That means that you can see...

...the second layer of hair under the top layer...

...and the third layer under the second layer...

...and the fourth layer under the third layer...

...until there are enough layers of hair that you can't see down any further.

Now think of this first layer of fur we just drew on the paper as that last visible layer—the one on the bottom.

When we brushed this layer to “cast a tone,” it caused the hairs to become softer and have less contrast. This same thing happens to the appearance of hairs in a layer of fur that have several more layers of hair on top, which are blocking the light.

So we are now ready to create a beautifully realistic fur texture in the next steps.

Step 5: Create highlights in fur using an eraser.

The beauty of always using a light-enough touch with your pencil is that you can easily “draw white” with an eraser.

For this you’ll need an eraser that is thin enough and stiff enough to remove hairs. (Remember that the hairs are the lighter part!)

There are a couple of different ways to do this.

[See an animation of how to form a teardrop with a “blade”](#)

A large kneaded eraser is one option. This is a must-have tool for drawing in graphite. I form it into a “tear drop,” which allows it to be used for a variety of situations.

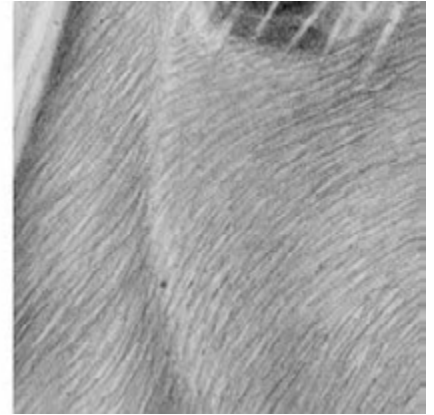
I’ve also used an electric eraser for “reversing out” the very fine lines.

However, in the last couple of years I’ve switched to an eraser called the Tombow Mono Zero®. I’ve found that it has some big advantages. One of the biggest is that it’s much closer to the size of a pencil. Plus, it’s a rather inexpensive tool compared to an electric eraser, which costs \$100 or more.



Of course, most of the time we won’t try to take out the width of a single hair with this eraser. Drawing every individual hair would be crazy!

Rather, we will emphasize light groupings of hair like this...



Now we do want to show a few individual hairs within the texture of our horse's fur coat. This is one of those “magic tricks” that makes the mind think it sees more than what's really there.

As you can see below, by showing some of the hairs (in this case extending outside the bottom edge of the mouth), it feels like we can see all of the individual hairs, even though we are really just using light and shadow to create “groups” of hair.



Back in step 4, we talked about how fur is a complex structure because the hairs all lie on top of other hairs.

To create this illusion, we are going to continue repeating steps 3, 4, and 5 several times on top of each other to build up the complexity of the fur. You won't draw entirely new layers of hair on top.

But as you add more graphite into the darker areas, brush that graphite out over the lighter areas you've made with your eraser, then add in new highlights. You'll start to see a sort of magical "depth" appear within the coat of fur.

This happens because the light "hairs" that you created with your eraser are getting just a smidge darker when you "cast a tone" with your brush. The new light hairs then stand out and appear to be in the forefront of your drawing.

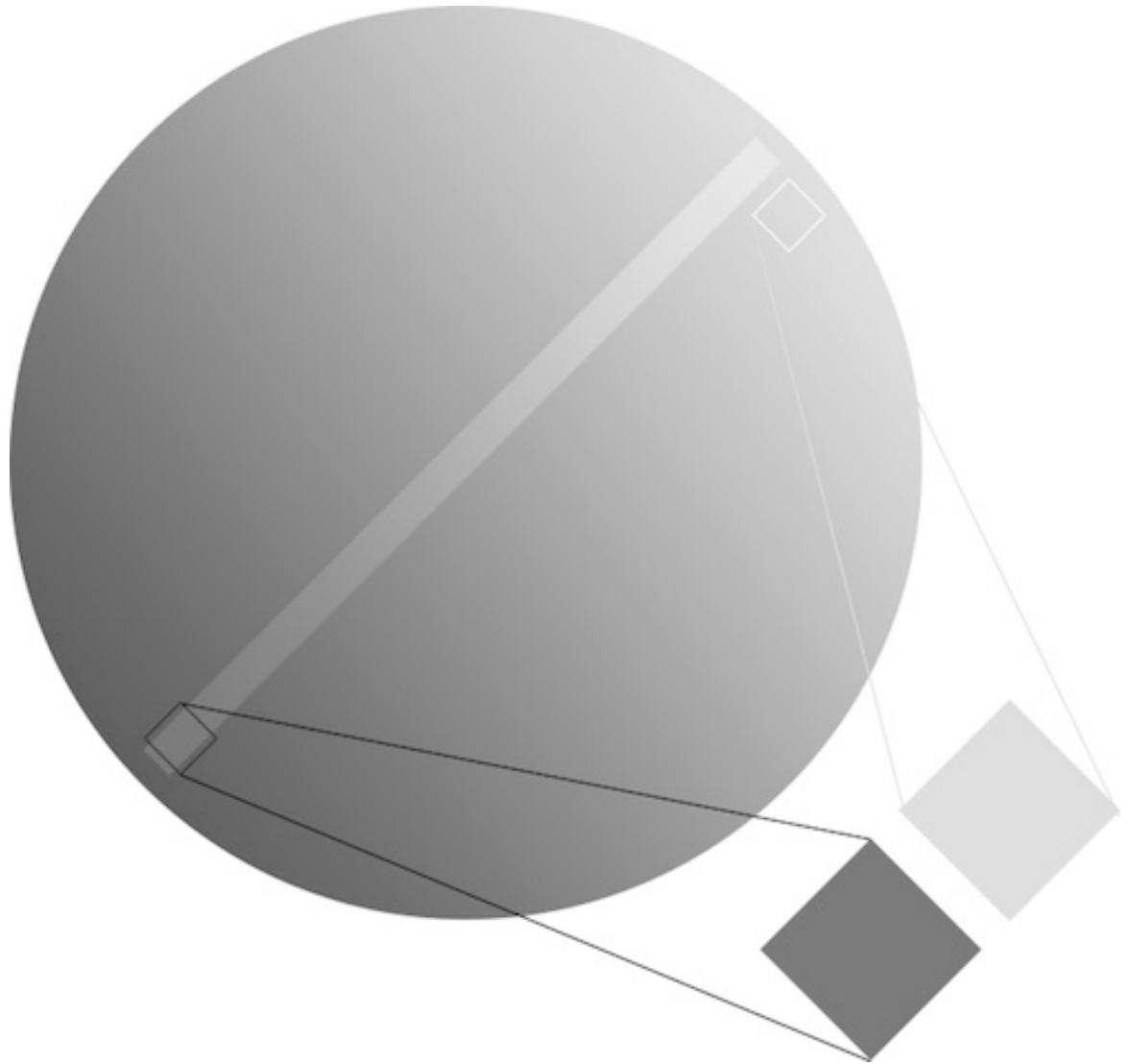
Of course, as you continue adding layers, your drawing will also get darker overall—or "increase in value," to put it into drawing terms.

As this happens, you must pay special attention in order to not only create a "dark and light" pattern within the fur, but also to build a general contour over the entire fur texture. In other words, portions of the fur that are within the shadows will all be darker, and portions in the highlights will all be lighter.

Of course, it's possible that a light hair in the shadows could be darker than a shadow between hairs within a highlight.

But it might not look like it...

Notice in the illustration below that although the two values within the small squares appear to be nearly identical when viewed within the circle, the background at the top is actually much lighter than the line on the bottom when they are isolated in the squares.



That's another one of those clever visual rules that helps you master the skill of drawing as you learn how to use it.

Now as you continue to add layers of graphite between the hairs, gently brush the entire area with your soft-bristled brush. Then, as you add in the highlights with your eraser, you'll see the fur texture gain a complexity that would have made your head spin if you'd had to draw it outright.

Yet, using this simple technique, an incredible fur texture is actually fairly easy to create.

This is how far I've built up the fur texture at this stage in my drawing...



Step 7: Draw the mane.

Here's where the similarities to drawing straight human hair are almost uncanny!

This is awesome, because any time one skill can help you draw not only the project at hand, but also future works of art, you're maximizing your learning!

Of course, since the mane is hair, we're going to follow many of the same principles and practices that I just laid out for drawing the fur. Those light portions are the actual groups of hair, and the dark gaps you see are the shadow areas between the hairs (or groups of hair, depending on the shape, contrast, and contour of the shadow).

This is very important to keep in mind as you think of what shapes you're drawing.

The dark gaps you'll draw with your 2B pencil need to be the "static" shapes that would be created between hairs and locks of hair. The light portions will be the "flowing," lifelike locks of hair that you'll draw with a loose, graceful stroke.

This is true of blonde hair, black hair, and every color in between. The main thing that will change for different hair colors is the contrast between the dark and the light areas.

Another important thing to keep in mind as you draw the mane is that the hair is not plastered to the face and fur!

You know this to be true from experience. Your hair doesn't grow out of your scalp and meld seamlessly to your forehead and face; there is space between the two. This "dimension" between head and hair is a powerful opportunity to create 3D realism in your work.

So, as you draw the mane, be sure to show that the hair is above the surface of the face or forehead, blocking the light

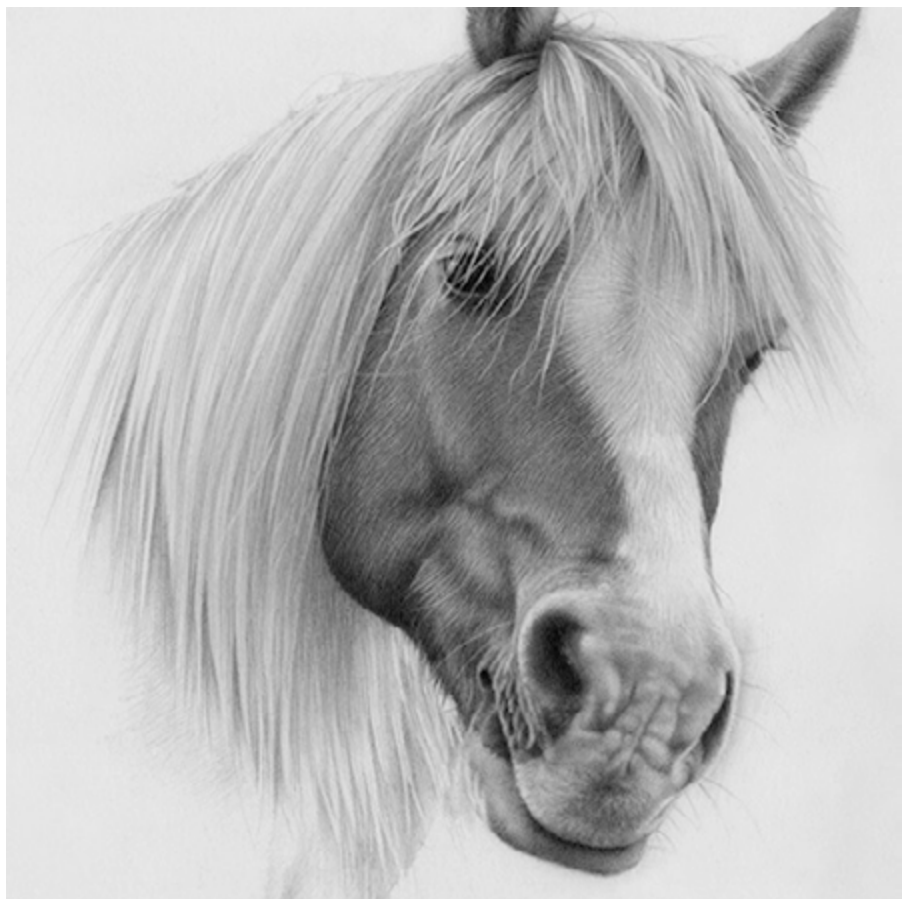
and casting a shadow on the fur below. This can be achieved simply by increasing the value of the texture beneath the hair.

Here's an example of what it looks like:



As you draw the mane, keep returning to your soft brush as you build each layer in order to create depth the same way you did with the fur.

Here's the mane after completing this stage in my drawing:



Step 8: Add “character” and balance.

With the mane drawn, you have an incredibly fun and exciting opportunity to make some BIG improvements with just a few small adjustments!

Let’s start by picking up your eraser:

- Kneaded
- Elastic-polymer
- Tombow Mono Zero
- Electric

Any one will do; the important thing is to create a sharp, precision edge.

Now, we’re going to emphasize a few highlights in the hair by “drawing” them with the eraser.

Locate a grouping of hair (the light parts from the earlier steps) and carefully run your eraser along the length of that grouping to pick out and emphasize a bright strand of hair. You’ll need to angle your eraser so you’ll have the sharpest edge and greatest control to ensure that your line is thin and subtle.

[Watch an animation of the eraser stroke creating wispy flyaway hairs](#)

Now you can see why it's so important to use your brush to spread extra graphite into the light areas!



Repeat this process to continue increasing the dimension in the hair; but remember, this is meant to enhance—not distract—from the mane. By adding too many highlights, you will start to lose the subtle contrast and dimension that you've been working so hard to achieve.

This same procedure is how you can make those great-looking strands of stray hair that fall across the face and add a whole new level of depth!



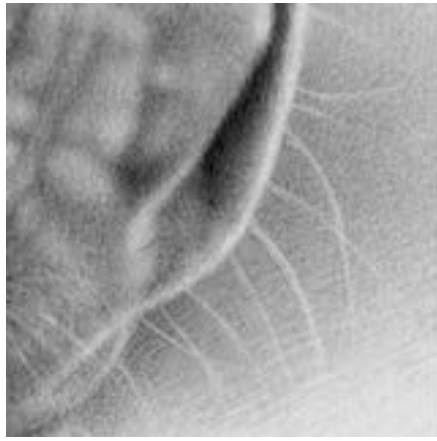
To create those, simply start your eraser stroke at the end of the current mane and run downward along the face.

Have fun with these strokes!

You can see that those stray hairs aren't just straight and rigid. They are windblown and fancy-free, so lighten up on your eraser and "go with the flow."

Again, you aren't trying to draw every single stray hair; just add a few for emphasis!

Here are some places I chose to add some "character" with the whiskers. Have fun and play around with what you think looks best!



When you're done adding your eraser strokes, you can use your brush once again to spread graphite back into the white space that you just created. That may seem counterproductive, but the bright white of the newly revealed paper can be glaringly bright compared to your other highlights. It will also give you the opportunity to pick out the brighter part of the strand of hair, suggesting that it is curved.

So, in order to keep a proper balance, you'll want to tone down the white just a bit. But don't worry; this won't destroy the effect you've created.

There's one final place where a small adjustment with your eraser can make a huge difference...

The eyes!

The eyes in this reference are pretty heavily concealed by the mane, so you aren't re-

ally seeing the gleam in this horse's eye.

That's an important detail to capture in your drawing. It's going to make the eyes stand out and "pop off" of the page, while also helping you to show that they are contoured.



Step 9: Emphasize and refine your highlights and shadows for the “POP.”

Sure, those “character” elements and balance that you just worked on really pumped your drawing up in a big way. But here’s where things can really come alive!

This step comes down to one simple idea: contrast.

Why?

Because contrast is how the effects of light are indicated in an image. And lighting effects are one of the largest contributors to creating mood.

All throughout the drawing process, you have been paying attention to where the darkest (and lightest) parts of the image are as a whole. We talked about that back in step 6.

Now you should analyze your drawing and locate the value “extremes”!

By extremes, I’m simply suggesting that you find the absolute darkest and lightest places on your drawing and enhance them for emphasis.

In most cases, the pupils in the eyes will be at least as dark as any part of your drawing. Conversely, the highlight or glisten in the eye that you created in step 8 is typically the brightest.

Any guess what that does?

You got it! It creates the most contrast. By putting the brightest value next to the darkest, you’ve made the eyes a strong focal point because high contrast demands a viewer’s attention.

For the other dark “extremes,” see if you can spot the “shadows within the shadows,” or those deepest, darkest reaches of the reference where the shadows are strongest.

In the case of this horse, perhaps it would be within the dark gaps between the hairs, which also happen to appear where the darkest shadows are being cast.

Think about all of the spaces that light would have the hardest time shining into and illuminating.

Now, for the highlights, look at where the light is hitting the horse and find those few spots reflecting it the strongest. Those are your light “extremes.”

Remember to be precise and deliberate. We’re not just scribbling anything in willy-nilly! These adjustments, though meant to enhance, can quickly and easily become distractions. Don’t forget to keep the contour, dark-to-light effect going even at this stage.

Step 10: Sign your name and seal it with fixative.



Claim a FREE 2" Langnickel Camel-Hair Brush

Get a head start on trying these hair and fur drawing techniques out with your free 2" Langnickel camel-hair brush if you'll just cover a little shipping. Limited-time offer.

[Learn more...](#)

Now that you've put so much work into your drawing, you certainly don't want to ruin it with a signature that throws things out of balance!

That's why I suggest that you sign your name on a piece of scrap paper, cut it out, and move your signature around your drawing to find the spot where it best compliments your overall composition.

Once you've added your John Hancock and are sure there aren't any more refinements that you can make, it's time to seal the graphite with workable fixative.

You might be asking, "What is workable fixative"? Good question...

Workable fixative is a clear, liquid enamel that comes in an aerosol can. When sprayed on your drawing, it dries and creates a protective barrier that keeps graphite on the paper and dirt, dust, and smudges off.

This protection is hugely helpful, but also fairly permanent, so you'll want to be sure that you are completely satisfied with your work before applying.

First, you'll want to do a quick test spray away from your paper so you can rule out any defects or blockage in the



spray nozzle. Make sure that the spray is a fine mist and isn't going to spit on your drawing.

Then, hold the can about 12 inches away from your paper and in a quick, smooth, side-to-side motion, mist the entire paper with a light coat of fixative.

Now, stop and let the first layer dry, so as not to create any puddles or bleeds. When the first coat feels dry, repeat the process, allowing the fixative to dry between each coat.

Dab your drawing in one of the darkest areas with a clean tissue after each coat to see if any graphite comes off. When the tissue reveals no new graphite, you know that you have thorough coverage.

“Finished drawing

And that's it!

You're now ready to frame and hang your masterpiece!

About Darrel Tank

Darrel Tank is a professional artist and educator with over 45 years of experience. His greatest strength lies in his ability to demystify and declutter the art of drawing, making it fun, formative, and completely accessible to anyone!

His drawings and illustrations have been featured in over 400 publications and his unique 5-Pencil Method drawing DVDs and online classes have inspired countless artists from around the globe.

Darrel invites you to pick up a pencil, grab your paper, and discover the joy of drawing for the first time or all over again!