THE
CHARACTER
DESIGNER

LEARN FROM THE PROS!

THE
CHARACTER
DESIGNER

CONTENTS

For beginners, students, and masters

THANK YOU

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for purchasing *The Character Designer*! This book was created to give you a unique insight into the minds of some of the most popular illustrators and character designers in the world today. You will learn the unique methods they use to create awesome art. The designers have condensed their long years of training into their submissions for this volume.

We created *The Character Designer* to compare the techniques of very different artists. We trust that this book will help you explore different methods and find your own unique voice on your artistic journey!

We hope that you love this book as much as we've enjoyed making it! It has been a fun process that started in May 2019 when more than two thousand backers on Kickstarter helped us raise the funds to make it happen. We're so thankful for the incredible support over the years, and we promise that we'll keep making awesome books as long there are people who keep asking for them!

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

It's recommended that you read the book from start to finish as opposed to skipping around the chapters. We made a real effort to design the book in a way that gives the character design process a logical feel, where we start off with fundamental concepts before moving on to more specific skills. We've also included lessons in each chapter, and we recommend you complete them before moving on to the next chapters.

If you're interested in learning about a specific artist, then of course feel free to skip to that chapter or bio page where we've included information about them that will hopefully inspire you to continue to improve as an artist. You will find that each artist's submission is unique, and we are confident that this will allow you to understand the exact process the artist uses when completing an image from start to finish.

For the most part, the artists followed the briefs we gave them, but in some cases we gave them the freedom to change it, allowing the artist greater scope to respond. By doing so, the work from these artists turned out to be even better than what we had envisioned. We trusted the artists' versions and chose these over our own briefs. We are sure that you will enjoy the creativity that each artist offers.

Although we revised some text for spelling, grammar, and editorial styles, the artists were shown their completed chapter in full layout for their approval before sending to press. We hope that you take what you learn from the artists, add it to your own repertoire, and become a master someday too. Of course, you could already be a master. In either case, make sure to have fun on your creative journey, because that's what it's all about!

1
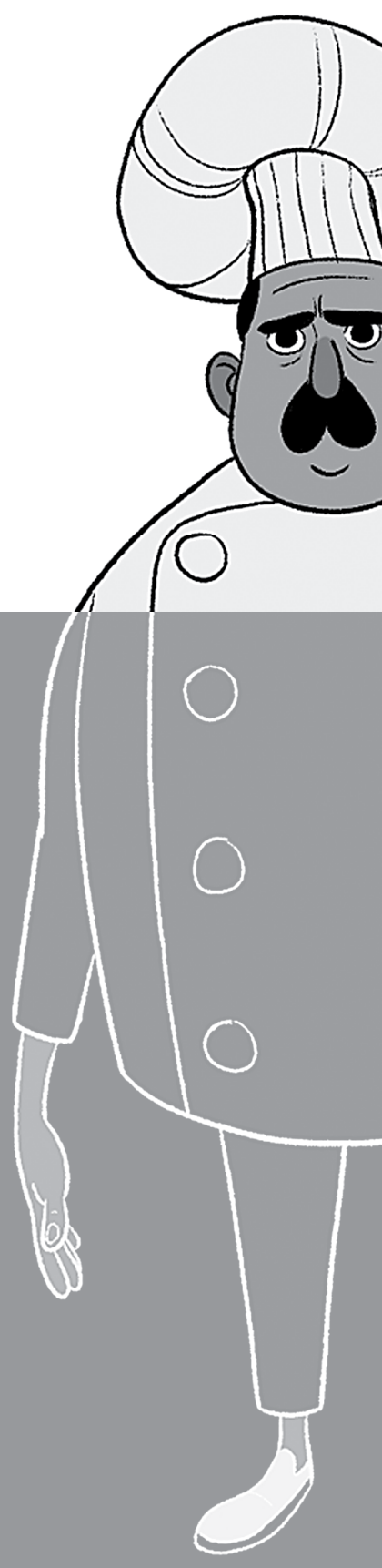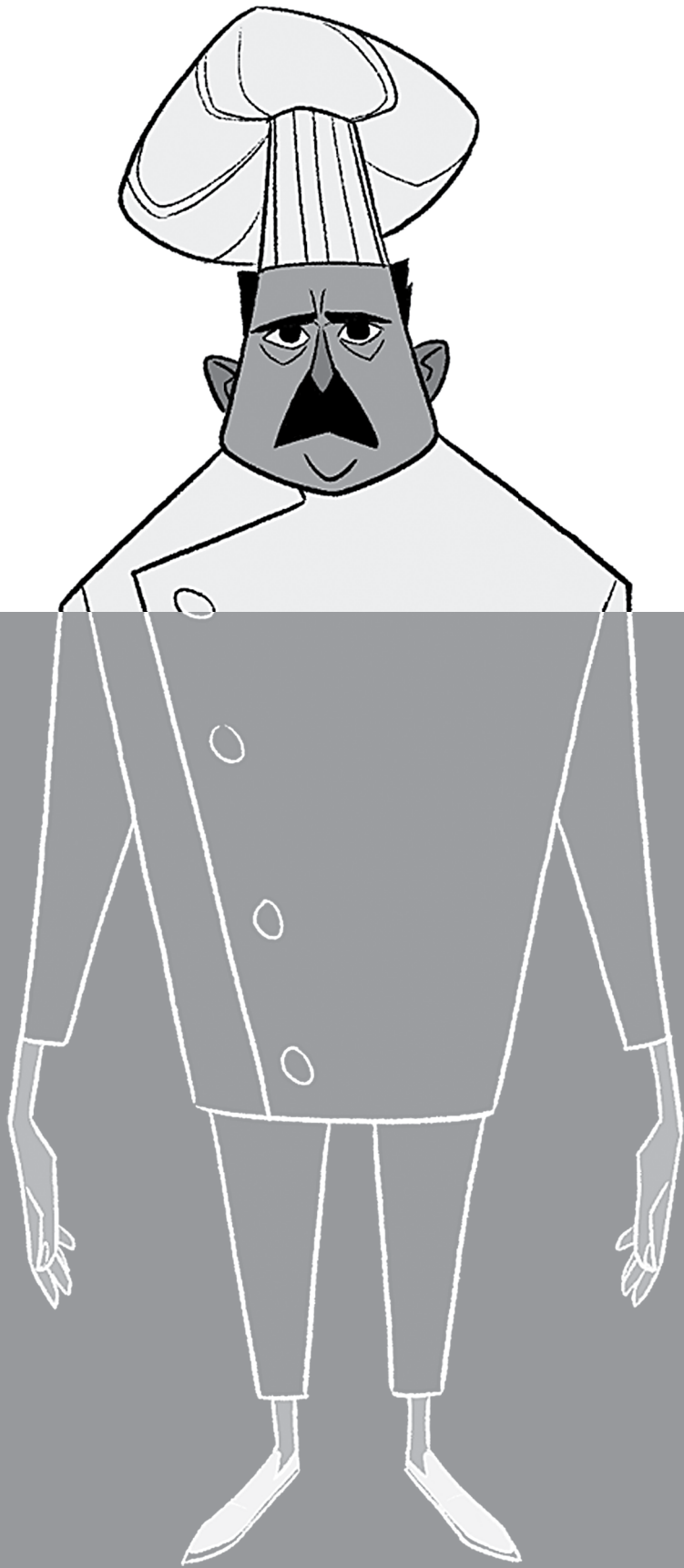
SHAPE LANGUAGE

WITH RANDY BISHOP

As a character designer, our first job is to communicate a character's purpose to the audience. In order to do that effectively, it's important to be deliberate in the decisions we make as artists. Being able to communicate a particular idea can be tricky and requires more effort than most people might expect.

With any form of communication, familiarity and mastery over the language affects how well we're able to get our point across. The greater our mastery of the language, the better we're able to communicate.

Color has its own language, as does line, texture, value, etc. For this section of the book, we'll be discussing shape language.

What is shape language?
Simply put, shape language is using shape to communicate meaning. Different shapes provoke different reactions within us, causing us to associate the things we see with certain feelings or meanings.

THE PRIMARY SHAPES

There are three primary shapes, just as there are three primary colors. The primary shapes are the square, circle, and triangle. Each of these shapes has strong associations psychologically with certain meanings. The most important ones are these:

- **The square represents physicality and masculinity.**
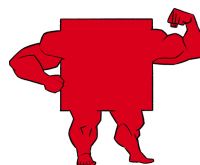
- **The circle represents positivity and femininity.**
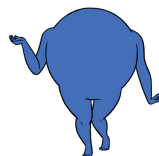
- **The triangle represents movement and sharpness.**

CIRCLE: The circle evokes thoughts of peace, kindness, softness, safety, and wholeness: things that we generally associate with femininity. It can also represent things like emptiness, loneliness, magic, and mystery.
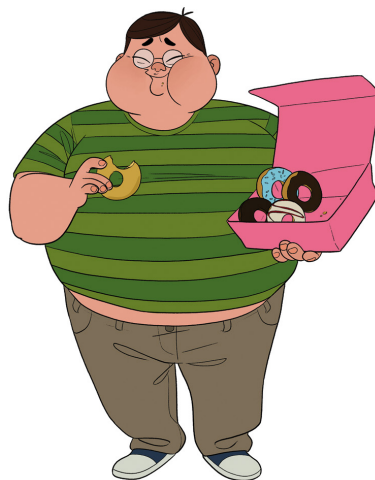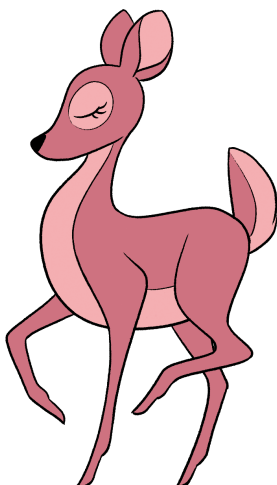
Circular shapes can be used to make a male character feel kind, soft, happy, or weak, etc.

SQUARE: The square represents physicality. It represents things like stability, dependability, discipline, strength, and reliability. It's the more masculine of the primary shapes. It also represents things like boredom, stationariness, and stupidity.
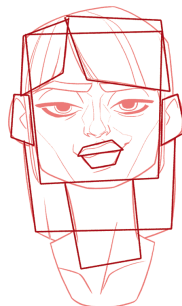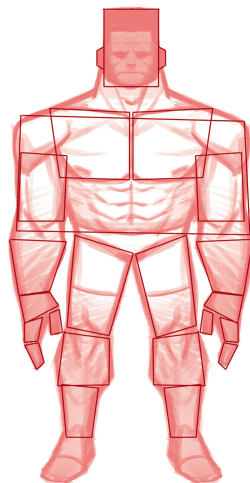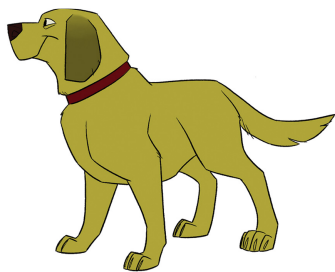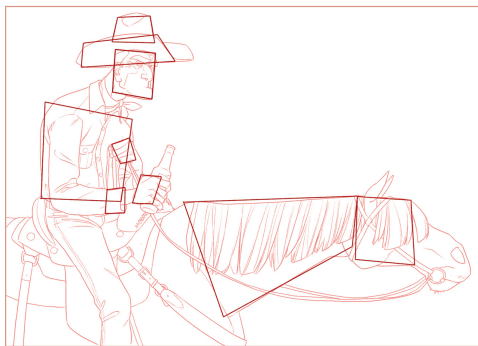
Blocky shapes can be used to make a female character feel strong, independent, or disciplined.

TRIANGLE: The triangle is neither masculine nor feminine. It represents movement or deviation, and sharpness. The more extreme the angle, the greater the effect. For example, villains are commonly designed with severe angles because those angles make the character feel far separated from masculine, feminine, or heroic traits; a deviation from an ideal or comfortable personality. In contrast to blocky or circular shapes, triangular shapes can make a character feel severe, unstable, and dangerous.
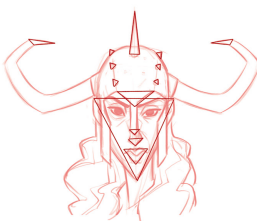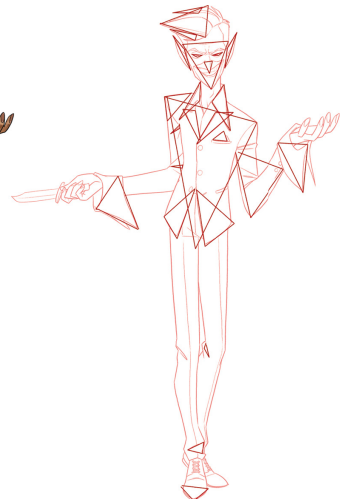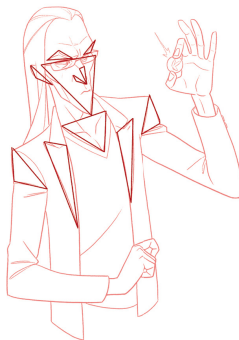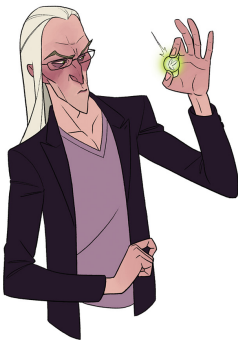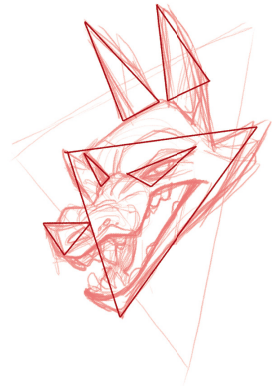
CONTRASTING SHAPES

Here, notice how using blocky, angular shapes in the male character and circular shapes in the female character emphasize the contrast in their idealized masculine and feminine traits.
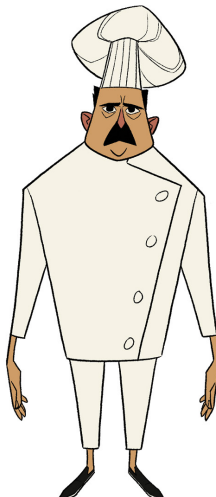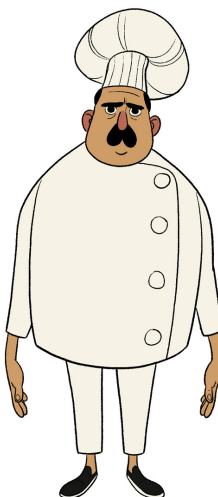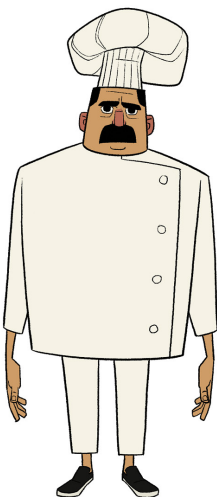
Being aware of the distinctive meanings that are attached to different shapes makes it easier to analyze design choices that other artists make. Here are three variations on a design, each using one of the primary shapes as the base for the choices made. Notice the way that the feel of the character changes, despite the fact that the proportions, pose, and expression are the same.
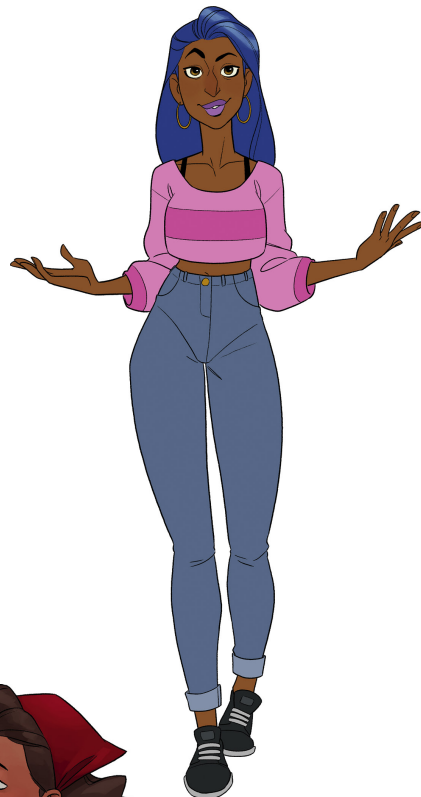
COMPLEX CHARACTER SHAPES

As with primary colors, the primary shapes can be altered and combined in myriad ways. These combinations help communicate more complex meanings. An absolutely square character is going to communicate something very specific to your audience. That character is likely to feel masculine, set in his or her ways, and not terribly bright. Most characters in a good story will have more complexity to them than one type of shape can adequately capture. By adding some complexity to the shape language, you add complexity to the character.

SHAPES IN A LINEUP

Any project that involves more than one character is going to require a continuity of shape language throughout a character lineup. Each character needs to look like it comes from the same world. In terms of spoken language, think of this continuity as an accent.

When visiting any area of the world, there's a dominant accent that people speak that is different than the accents people speak in other areas, even when speaking the same language. We still get all kinds of variations in speech—old voices, young voices, high voices, low voices, etc. But each voice is colored by the accent that unifies them all, making it clear where they're from. When someone speaks in an accent that isn't local, it calls attention to the person. In a similar way, if the overall shape language of any given character in a lineup isn't consistent with the rest, he or she is going to seem out of place.

Most animated feature films use shape language that is very circular, making the overall aesthetic of the film feel safe and appropriate for children. Many comics and graphic novels have a blocky, angular aesthetic, emphasizing the physicality and edginess of the content to appeal to an older audience. Learning to understand how to work with a specific "accent" when designing characters is vital when creating a lineup.

Shape is only one of the many art languages that we can use as a tool to communicate. The more we learn about the different ways that visual media can communicate to audiences, the more effective we'll be as designers.

Good luck and have fun designing with shapes in your characters!

LESSON: SHAPE LANGUAGE REVIEW

STEP 1 – DRAW CHARACTERS USING THE THREE PRIMARY SHAPES:

- **CIRCLE –** Draw at least one character that is composed of circles.

- **SQUARE –** This time focus on drawing characters using square shapes.

- **TRIANGLE –** Next draw characters that are made with triangles.

STEP 2 – PICK YOUR FAVORITE CHARACTER FROM STEP 1:

- Redraw the same character using the other two shape languages. When finished you should have three variations of the same character, one representing each primary shape. (Similar to the chef characters at the bottom of page 6.)

STEP 3 – DRAWING MORE COMPLEX CHARACTER SHAPES:

- So far you have drawn characters featuring a single primary shape, but this time choose a favorite character from the group, or draw a new character that uses more than one shape language.

  How does a more complex shape language alter the look and message a character communicates to your audience?

STEP 4 – CHARACTER CHALLENGE:

- Choose your favorite shape language combination or "accent" and design a character lineup. Make sure the characters have continuity and look like they belong in the same world.

2

CREATING STRONG GESTURES

"DECISION LINES"

CREATING STRONG GESTURES

WITH TOM BANCROFT

How do I make my characters look "animated" or "in movement" when I draw? I get this question quite often on social media or at convention appearances. When I do, I try to understand what an artist means by wanting to create *movement* in their drawings. Most often, when I dig deeper, I uncover that they want to know how to create characters that have a sense of *flow* throughout the pose and the lines themselves. This is *gesture drawing* for the most part and *flow* is an element of gesture drawing.

It's not an easy question to answer. It can be difficult to describe how to achieve flow in a gesture drawing because—like most concepts in art—it feels intuitive. In this chapter, I'll try to describe ways to approach it. But first, I need to bring us back to the basics of how to sketch because it directly relates to the approach I want you to take. To be honest, I'm going to ask many of you to question and possibly **REINVENT THE WAY YOU DRAW**. (That's right, I put that in ALL CAPS because it's powerful.)

WE WERE NEVER TAUGHT HOW TO USE A PENCIL TO SKETCH.

It's a bold statement, I know, but think about it. When we were young (at least in the U.S. educational system), the first instruction we received in how to use a pencil was in elementary school and it was how to write—not to draw. We were instructed to create lines (for print writing) or flowing swoops (for cursive writing) in a consistent line, without picking up the pencil very much. Later, when we start art classes, the art teachers assumed we knew how to use a pencil so there is little instruction beyond rendering tones. When did we learn how to sketch? More often than not, we didn't learn how to use a pencil as an artist uses it. To make matters worse, we live in a world of social media where artists feel the need to show only their best, most finished, revised, and colored artwork. We show finished work, not our sketches, so most often we are seeing tight, rendered work. Young artists see this and think that's the way they need to work and they tend to bypass the sketch process.

To illustrate the difference between clean line drawing and sketching, I'll draw two circles in different ways. The one on the left is created with a clean line—I call this a "drawing." The rough, multiple lined image on the right is the "sketch" version.
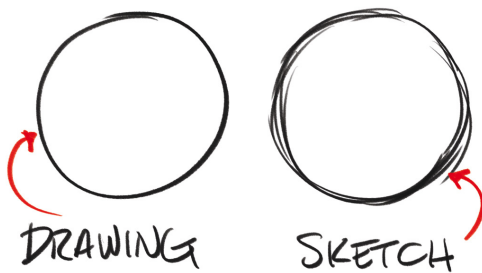
DRAWING   SKETCH

(To be clear, by my definition, a sketch can be a drawing, but a drawing is not always a sketch.) You can't see it, but when I did the sketch version, my pencil jumped around the circle as I drew the curved lines—from the top, to a side, to the bottom, and so on to form the circle. For the drawing on the left, I it approached like a non-artist—started at the top peak point and drew left to right around, not picking up my pencil once, until I reconnected the line at the top. This approach gives you what I call a "dead line" drawing. The circle on the right is obviously a rougher, sketchier line, but it also implies an invisible but important element that comes from sketching: volume.

You can say there's no difference in the volume of these two circles and you wouldn't be wrong. The one on the right is two dimensional and so is the one on the left. What is key is what you do not see—the thought process behind the lines—that helps you create more dimensional sketches with flow to them. It's the Zen behind it that is also something that is not being taught and here are **BOLD** letters again: **DON'T DRAW LINES, DRAW SHAPES WITH LINES.**

IN SHORT: SKETCHING IS SCULPTING.
When I sketched the drawing of the circle on the right, I was THINKING of a sphere, not a circle. When I sketch with multiple lines and jump around the figure (if it's a character), I am finding the form and shapes of the character, not just drawing the exterior or interior lines. Animators—especially 2D animators—are trained to think of their characters as dimensional and existing in "real" space. That thinking applies to every sketch of the character they make. It's one of the elements to drawing gestures: to think dimensionally and that the shapes—not just the lines—are flowing from one to another.
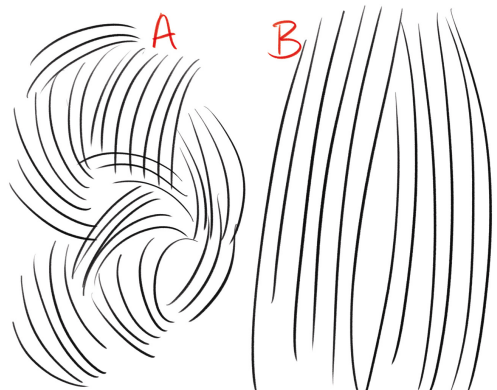
LESSON 1: DRAWING LINES WITH FLOW

As basic as it sounds, I want you to practice sketching with a pencil in short strokes (A) and longer, slightly curved strokes (B), in an angled, downward action. Just like in figure drawing class, you need to learn to use more of your wrist when you draw, so you can get more flow in your lines. To do this, you should draw larger sketches if you

are someone that prefers to draw tiny sketches. It's hard to use your wrist and create flow in your lines when drawing small. If you're used to sketching 6 or 8 full figures that fill a 8.5" x 11" (letter size) page, instead draw 2 to 4 per page. Practice drawing these line strokes for a while, until you get better at creating gestures with flow.
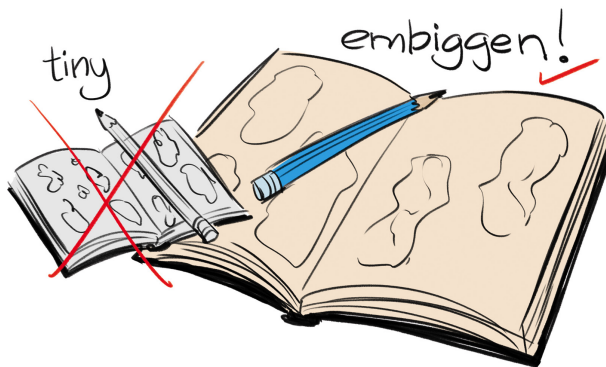
ALL PENCILS ARE NOT THE SAME:
Before we dig too deep on this subject, I want to make a note: I will be making suggestions about types of pencils because they do different things, but I am NOT suggesting that there is ONE PENCIL that you MUST USE. Pencils are like coffee or tea; we all have our particular favorites for different reasons. When I was at Disney Animation, I was taught by my animation mentor that "the pencil doesn't matter, it's what you do with it that matters." I completely agree with that. From this point forward, stop asking an artist what kind of pencils they use, because if you don't have their art experience or training, it won't do for you what it does for them anyway.

That said, there are better pencils for certain jobs. There are also better ways to use a pencil depending on the style or artistic job at hand.

For sketching, softer leads are more pleasing and will give you that smoother, "buttery" feel you want in a sketchbook as you move your pencil across the paper. I suggest anywhere from 2B to 6B, but keep in mind that the softer the lead (like the 6B), the more it will smear when you get the edge of your hand in it. I use a 3B primarily. I've found if you keep it a little stubby, instead of overly sharpened, you get thicker, definite lines, not thin, wispy lines that feel less decisive.

I don't care for mechanical pencils (though they are popular, especially with comic book artists). I am heavy-handed when I draw and tend to have them break constantly. Additionally, I don't like thin, wispy lines. I also don't want you, the student, adding too much detail in these early phases. Please try using a softer pencil for sketching; it may be hard at first, but combined with drawing slightly larger sketches, I think you'll see the rewards of more flowing lines with practice. I suggest you don't use a mechanical pencil until you've created a few sketches and then you want to create a finalized, clean version. Mechanical pencils were designed by and for architects. They have a long metal shaft at the end so it can fit into the groove of a ruler, not break the lead, and make clean, straight lines. The leads are round and give very little line variance, another plus for architecture drawing but not for sketching.

My last point for sketching is that you shouldn't erase much. Sketching is not about refinement to that level of perfection. That phase is for your last version, right before you go to color. Your goal should be to start sketching lighter as you find your gesture, then draw darker and more determined as you build up the sketch. The darker lines show your "decision lines" and the lighter "searching" lines become less important. If you are using the eraser even a third as much as you are the pencil, you're using it too much. Sketches are "built" and sometimes you need many lines to complete it.
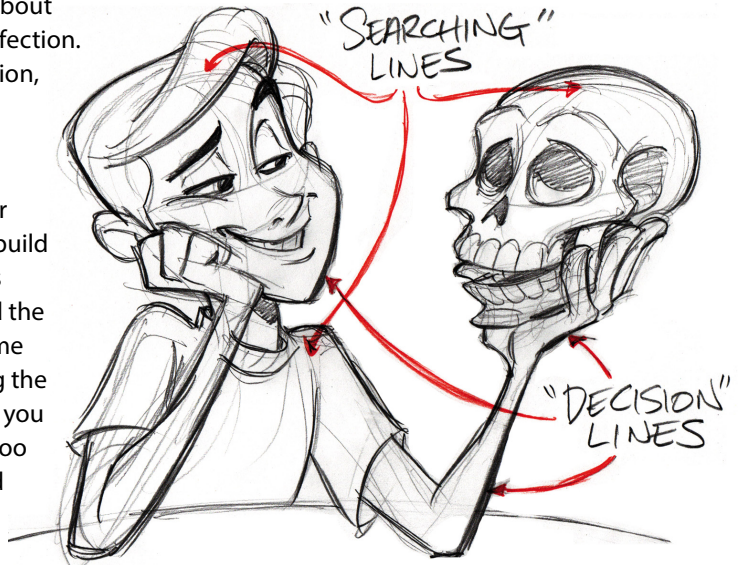
TILTS, FLOW, AND RHYTHM

In 2011, I was in California for work and made sure I got together with friend and legendary Disney animator Glen Keane for breakfast. The film *Tangled*, for which Glen served as the animation director, had just come out. I loved the film—and most of all—the character animation, so I had many questions for him. We talked about many things that morning but one thing he said—almost as a side note—was that "working with the computer animators, I was constantly stressing three things: Tilts, Flow, and Rhythm." He was in mid-story and I didn't want to interrupt him. Then we got distracted and I saw that the time had flown by and I was about to be late for work. I rushed off without having a chance to follow up on why those three elements were such a challenge for the computer animators on *Tangled*. Still, it stuck with me. The more I thought

about it, the more those three concepts solidified in my mind. Those are the three areas in which computer animators—and moreover COMPUTERS—are the weakest! They are the almost forgotten basic elements that we traditional animators put into our drawings to give them that extra appeal! This started me down the road of analyzing how we create gestures that have those elements.

But like the concept of LOVE, defining these words is difficult. You can "feel" rhythm in a drawing, but defining it is another thing altogether. I researched the words a bit and came up with multiple definitions depending upon what they were applied to. Ultimately, I have come up with my own definitions that are specific to drawing and posing.

TILTS: The process of placing the shapes of your character at angles to create a

stronger visual interest and/or pose. Tilts can be used in a pose to create a stronger sense of rhythm in your drawing/pose. The Italian word *contrapposto*, which means *counter pose*, is an example of this. It is best illustrated in a counter pose where weight is more on the right foot so the right hip is pushed up higher than the left; correspondingly the right shoulder will be lower than the left, or vice versa. This results in the shoulders being at an opposite angle to the hips, which creates a more dynamic pose and contrasting curves throughout the pose.
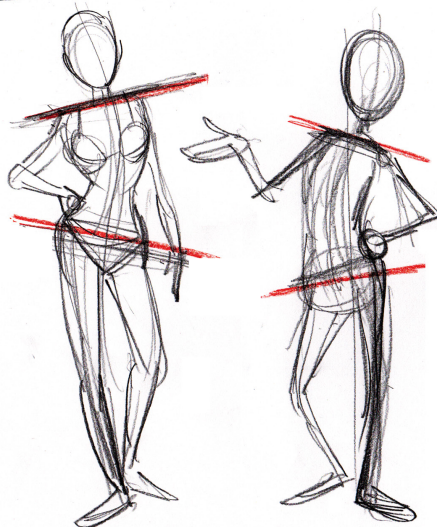
FLOW: The way the outlines of your drawing/character flow from one to another. You can have flow in a drawing or pose, but not have rhythm. Flow is made up of curved lines that move from convex (curved inward) shape to converse (curved outward) shape.
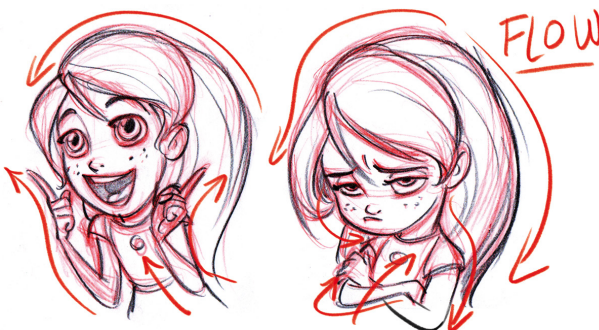
RHYTHM: The big picture of your pose. This is the way the positive and negative shapes work together to create movement in the pose. Flow can be an element of rhythm, but not vice versa. Rhythm needs curved lines, rounded shapes, and some opposing straights to work best. The terms *flow* and *rhythm* are oftentimes incorrectly used interchangeably.
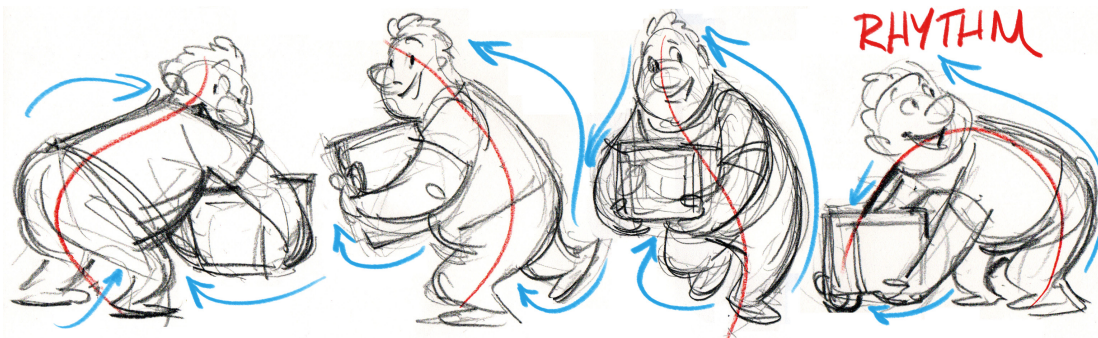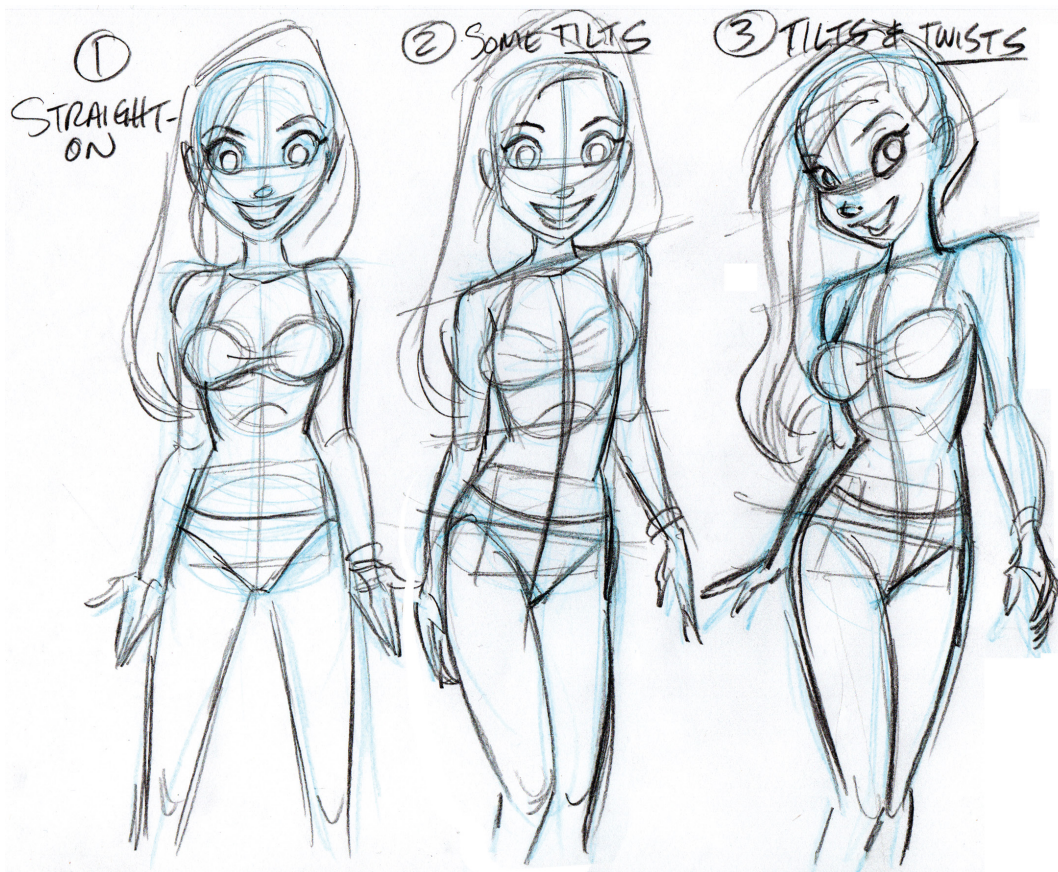
I'd like to throw in one more term that is perhaps a "sub-term" to *tilts* because I think of them together: **TWISTS**. Many gestures will be strengthened further with a torso twist. It's implied that when you tilt the torso, you may also twist it. A body twist— or even a head turn—will strengthen the appeal, interest, dynamism, and flow in a pose.

Now we can really start to apply the principles of tilts and twists, flow, and rhythm. Look closely at your poses, try to see how they can be pushed and improved. Ask yourself questions: Can the head have a slight tilt? Are the shoulders too even? Would it be stronger if I pushed the hip over to one side a bit? Does it have

more flow through the body if I twist the torso while also creating a better rhythm? Oftentimes it will.

ONE LAST THING: Remember the wooden, hinged mannequins made for posing the human body so you could light it and see the simple shapes of the body in dimension? We all got them for our birthday from the aunt that knew we "liked art" but didn't know what else to get us. Throw it in the trash. They only create stiff poses because they are rigged and not well jointed. They can't even move or pose as well as a ninety-year-old man. Our real anatomy and musculature already have a natural flow to the shapes. Our arms taper
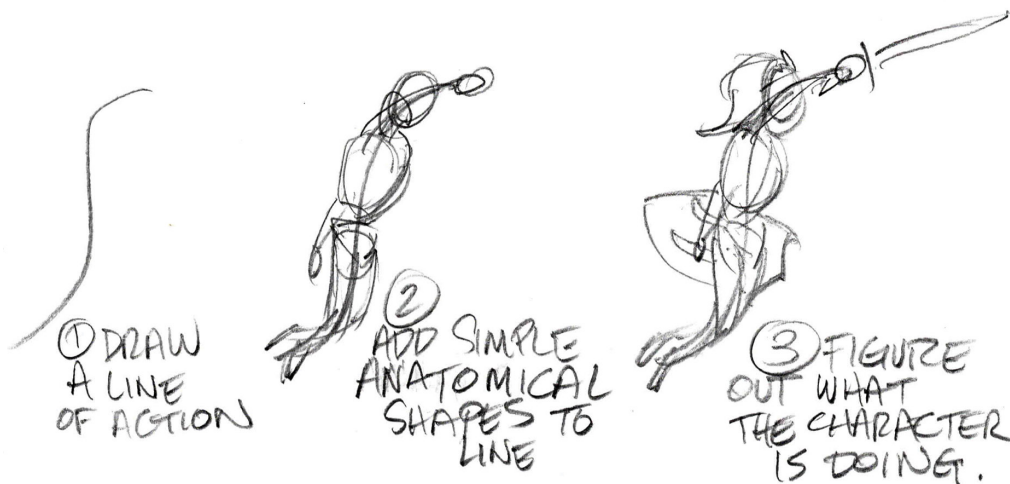
from the elbow to the wrist, our legs have a side that is slightly more curved than the slightly straighter side, and even our muscles flow over and under each other to create flowing shapes. So before we jump into drawing gesture poses, let's start with a more graceful, flowing body form. This is the way I like to draw a simplified body:
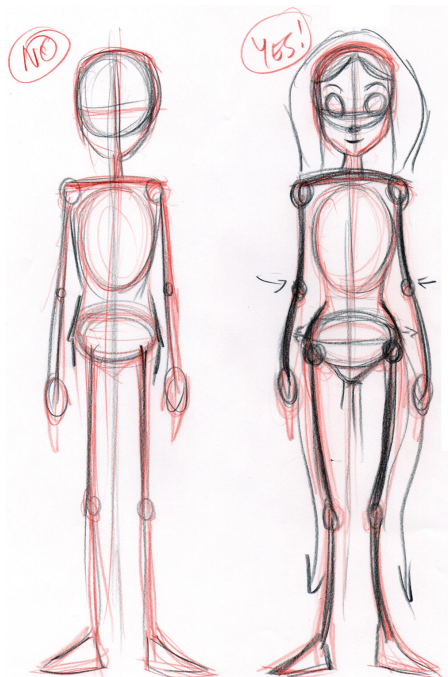
THE ELUSIVE "LINE OF ACTION"

Over the years, many well-meaning art instruction books and art class instructors have addressed how to find the *gesture* in a pose by saying, "Find the line of action in your pose." It's true, a simplified way to sum up the gesture of a pose is the curved line of thrust that is moving through a body's shape from feet to head (usually). Drawing an imaginary line through the body proves out a successful or less successful line of action. Poses that are straight up and down (like a person standing straight) also have a line of action; it's just a straight line and doesn't have much "action," which is not a very interesting or dynamic pose for an artist to use.

The line of action concept seems so simple, but why did I struggle with it—and basically ignore it—throughout most of my early days of learning? I recently discovered the way it was taught to us is broken, in my opinion. Below is the way most art books teach it:

① DRAW A LINE OF ACTION

② ADD SIMPLE ANATOMICAL SHAPES TO LINE

③ FIGURE OUT WHAT THE CHARACTER IS DOING.

The problem with this example is that you start with a curved line and force a body shape around it. Young Tom Bancroft struggled to figure out not only how the forms fit together to create that line of action, but more important, what the figure was actually doing. The books that used this approach to illustrate the principle didn't focus on the "why" of the pose and I couldn't get beyond it. I would create bizarre, stiff drawings that made no sense. Additionally, I don't believe that artists think in a logical, step-by-step approach. We layer information and jump from one "rule" or "principle" to another—in short, we don't think about just one thing at a time.

In analyzing my process, I realized I first think of the pose I want, then I piece together the line of action as I go. But, it's the main "thrust" of the action that is determining the pose and flow as I sketch.

Before and during the sketch I'm thinking:

1: What is the "story" behind my pose? (What am I trying to show?)

2: What is the "leading force"? (If it's a character throwing a punch, it's that arm.)

3: How would the character's core be used (convex, concave, twisted) to best show that action and story?

**NOTE ON THE "CORE":** I may draw the core (the pelvis and chest sections) as two separate shapes, but I tend to think of them as one shape. As if it were two ovals connected by rubber bands—our abs. The rib cage can twist very little and our pelvis does not at all, but what does create the twist is our midsection, so thinking of them as one shape helps create a good portion of your flow throughout your body.

SIMPLIFIED TORSO ("CORE")
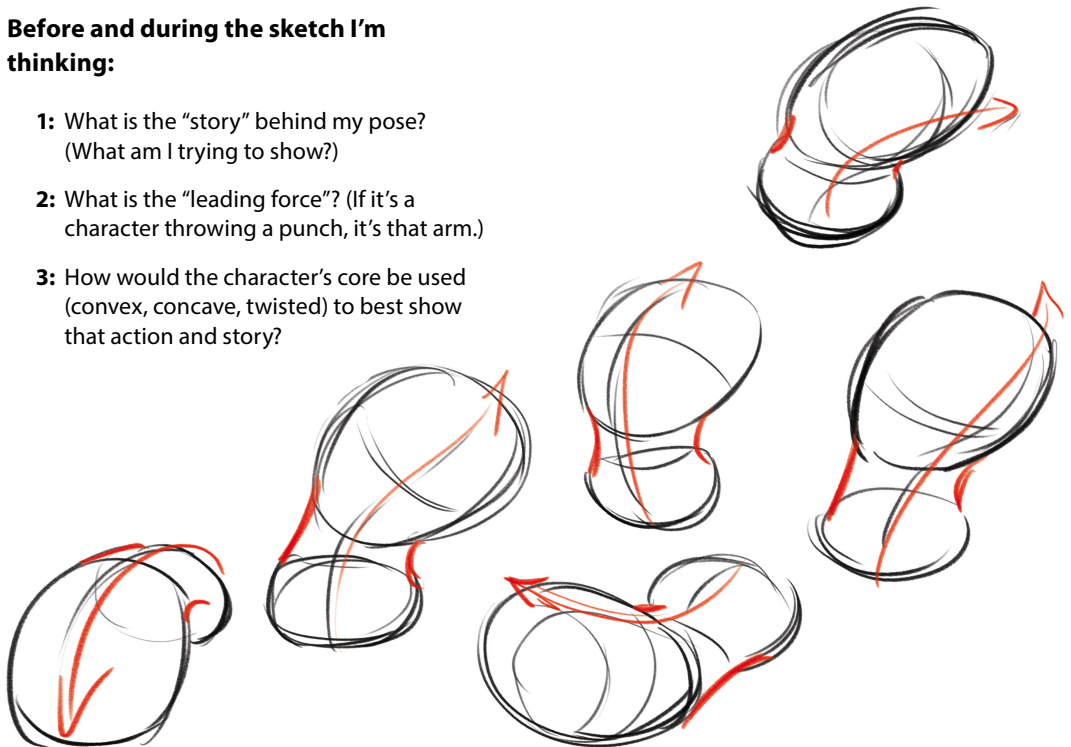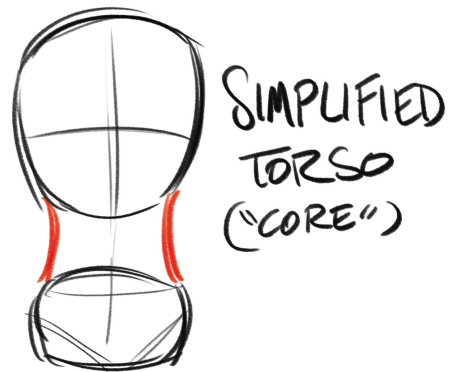
To put this all together in a semi step-by-step process (for illustration purposes only), I'll break it down with a sketch of a baseball pitcher who is about to throw a pitch.

Illustration of the 3 steps to create the pose:

1: Think of the leading force and how it affects the "core."

2: Continue the flow created by the core and main thrust through the second half of the body.

3: Add details that accent the movement and flow.

GESTURE IN STEPS
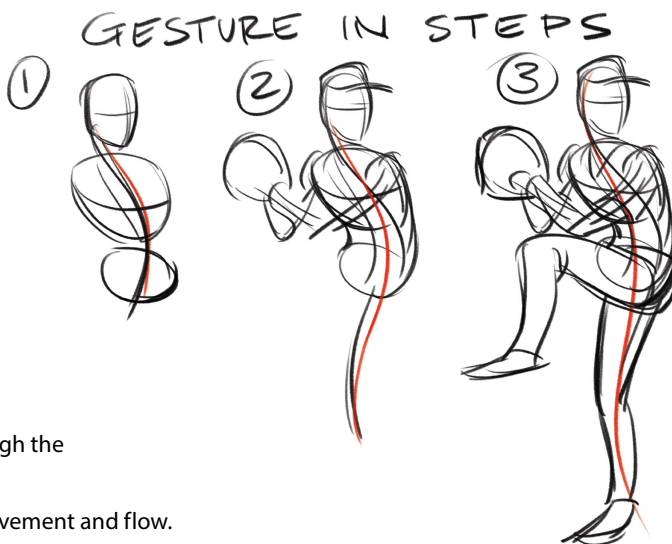
However, a good gesture (and line of action) doesn't only work for bold, action poses. Even subtle poses should have a gesture. To break away from the problem of vertical poses being less dynamic, when a character isn't doing much, consider if the core should be convex or concave. Keeping a slight curve to your core will help change a straight pose to one with some flow and attitude through it.

LESSON 2: CREATE THE POSE

1: Using the 3 gesture steps, think of a pose you want to draw and the leading force of the pose. How does this pose affect the "core"? Draw the core and find the line of action for the gesture.

2: Continue the flow created by the core and line of action through the second half of the body.

3: Add details that accent the movement and flow.

4: Repeat this lesson using variations on both "S" and "C" curves.

LOOKING UP, YEARNING

TRYING TO VERBALLY CONVINCE SOMEONE

DEFIANT TEEN

That's how I approach line of action in a step-by-step thought process. But I still want that line to anchor more directly to my pose. Then it hit me: we already have a built-in line of action—our spine. As I mentioned above, I was already thinking of the core as a simplified section of the body, now I could look at the entire line throughout the core as a simplified "through line" that makes sense to me. Additionally, I'm an animator

so character performance—especially the facial expressions—are of utmost importance to me. Because of this, when I draw a pose, I tend to start with the head to determine where I'm placing it and work back from there. This works with my new simplified thought process nicely: it is a cranium with a line coming out of it. That's my line of action! Here are some mermaid* poses that show this clearly:
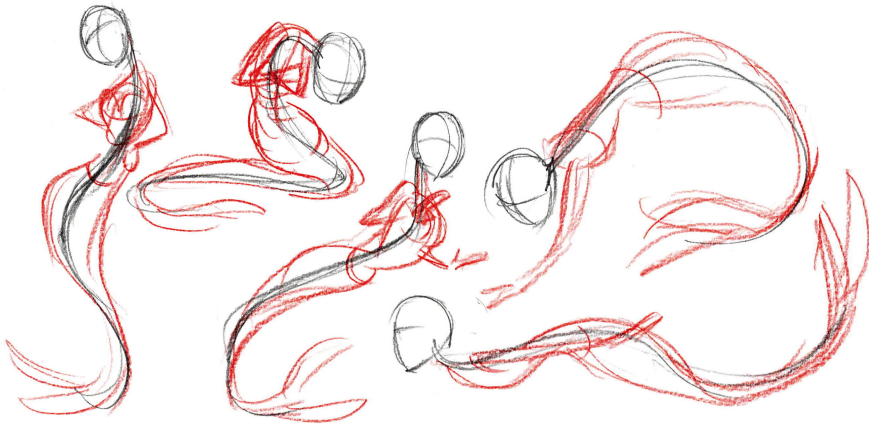
"S" AND "C" CURVES IN YOUR POSES

For animation poses, nothing beats a good "S" curve. That's the shape the line of action takes throughout the body (it looks like an "S"). Using an "S" curve shape, you get instant flow throughout your pose and it works well when twists and *contrapposto* concepts are applied. Another pose you may see is the even more simplified "C" curve. A sad or depressed character may have a simple hunched over pose that would be a good example of a "C" pose. Mermaids are pure line of action, so here's a few poses of them in "S" and "C" curve poses:
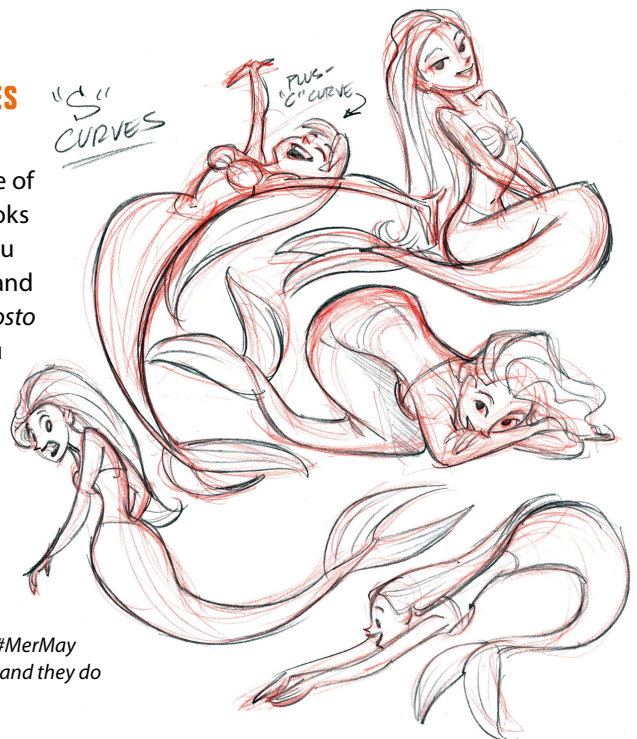
Sorry about all the mermaid examples, I created #MerMay a few years ago on Instagram so I draw them a lot and they do tend to be good examples for creating gestures.
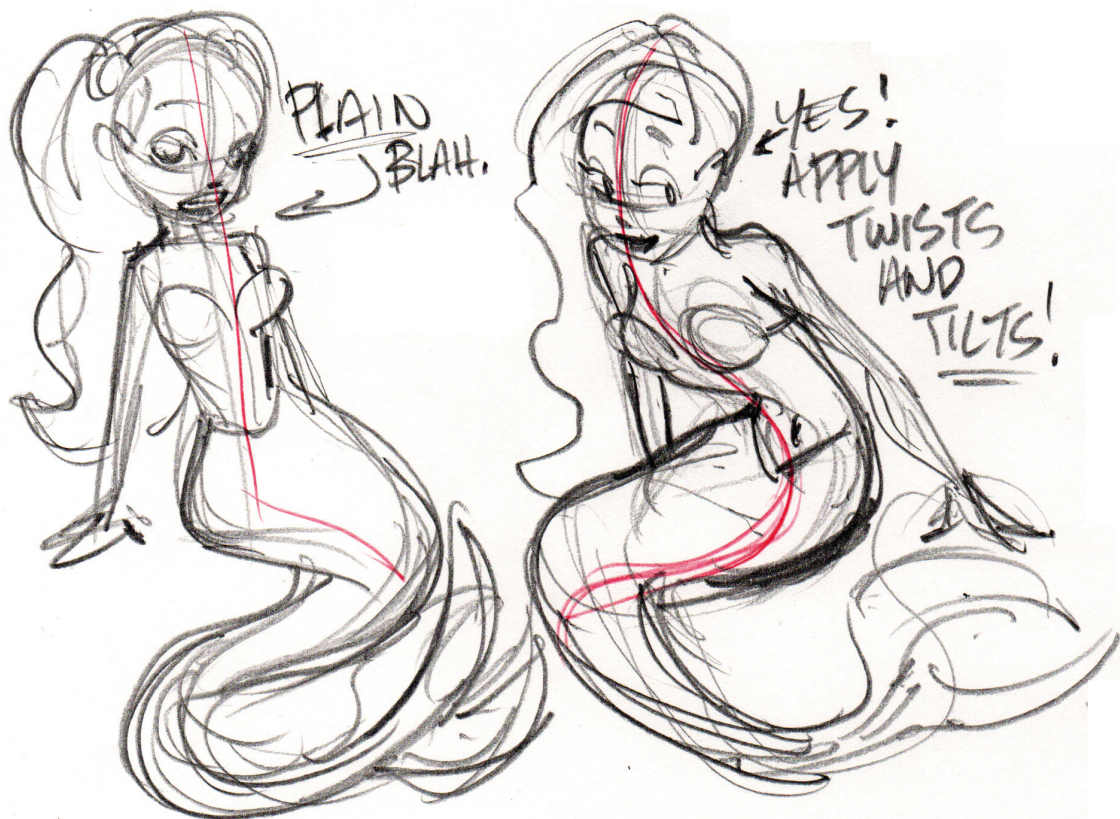
To sum up, gesture drawing doesn't have to be as allusive as it may have been for you in the past. Think of all the concepts we've covered but, most of all, when you sketch a pose, take a second and consider how it could be stronger. It may look fine, but applying some of these concepts may help you to push the pose and achieve a more interesting and successful gesture to really help "sell" your character and story!

LESSON 3: APPLY TWISTS AND TILTS

1: Pick your favorite energetic pose from Lesson 2, look closely, and consider how you can take the pose further by applying the principles of twists and tilts.

2: Repeat with another pose, but this time choose a pose that is more subtle and see how it can be improved with twist and tilt.

Enjoy the journey!

END OF SAMPLE

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