

Cristina Birkel
15-221 Section A
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Intended Audience: Artists with some drawing experience that want to learn more about charcoal. Possibly second year high school art students.

Creating a Still Life Drawing With Charcoal

Purpose: This document is designed to provide an explanation of the process used by artists to create a charcoal drawing from a still life. It is intended to give the reader enough information to attempt a drawing, using the basic techniques discussed. The reader is encouraged to practice and experiment with charcoal, while still following the general step-by-step process.

Audience: This document is ideal for the artist with some drawing experience, but no charcoal experience. New artists are also encouraged to begin drawing in charcoal, as it is considered to be an inexpensive, forgiving medium.

Materials: The following materials are necessary for this process: Drawing paper, charcoal sticks and pencils, paper towels, erasers, a graphite pencil and a pencil sharpener. Blending sticks and rulers also come in handy.

Charcoal is a messy tool, but when used properly artists can create very expressive, dynamic drawings with a lot of contrast. Artists use a variety of charcoals to create desired effects. Typically, soft charcoal sticks are used for shading large areas, and harder charcoal pencils are used for detail work. And by taking advantage of the fact that charcoal smudges so easily, an artist can create smooth textures and gradients.

A drawing can be created in five steps:

1. Set up the still life and gather materials
2. Lightly sketch the scene in pencil
3. Fill in the tones with charcoal
4. Add final contrast and detail
5. Spray with fixative

Step 1: Set up the still life and gather materials

In this step, the artist sets up his still life. He then gathers all the materials he will need to draw. This step ensures that the process will go smoothly. Once the artist starts using charcoal, his or her hands will become too messy for him to conveniently fetch things and make adjustments to the still life.

- The artist will first set up his still life. This is a process in and of itself, and the artist takes many things into consideration, such as balance, theme, contrast, texture, and level of detail.
- Figure 1.1 shows an example still life. Objects moving off the page, eye movement, and high contrast are demonstrated and considered good form in artwork.



Figure 1.1

- Next, the artist can decide what materials he will use. Once the materials are laid out within the artist's reach, he is ready to begin drawing.
- Figure 1.2 shows a typical setup. That white, double-pointed utensil in the middle is a blending pencil.



Figure 1.2

Step 2: Lightly sketch the scene in pencil.

In this step, the artist makes a rough sketch of the still life. He stresses proportions, while mostly ignoring shading and detail. The purpose of this step is to ensure good proportions and composition while it is still easy to erase and edit.

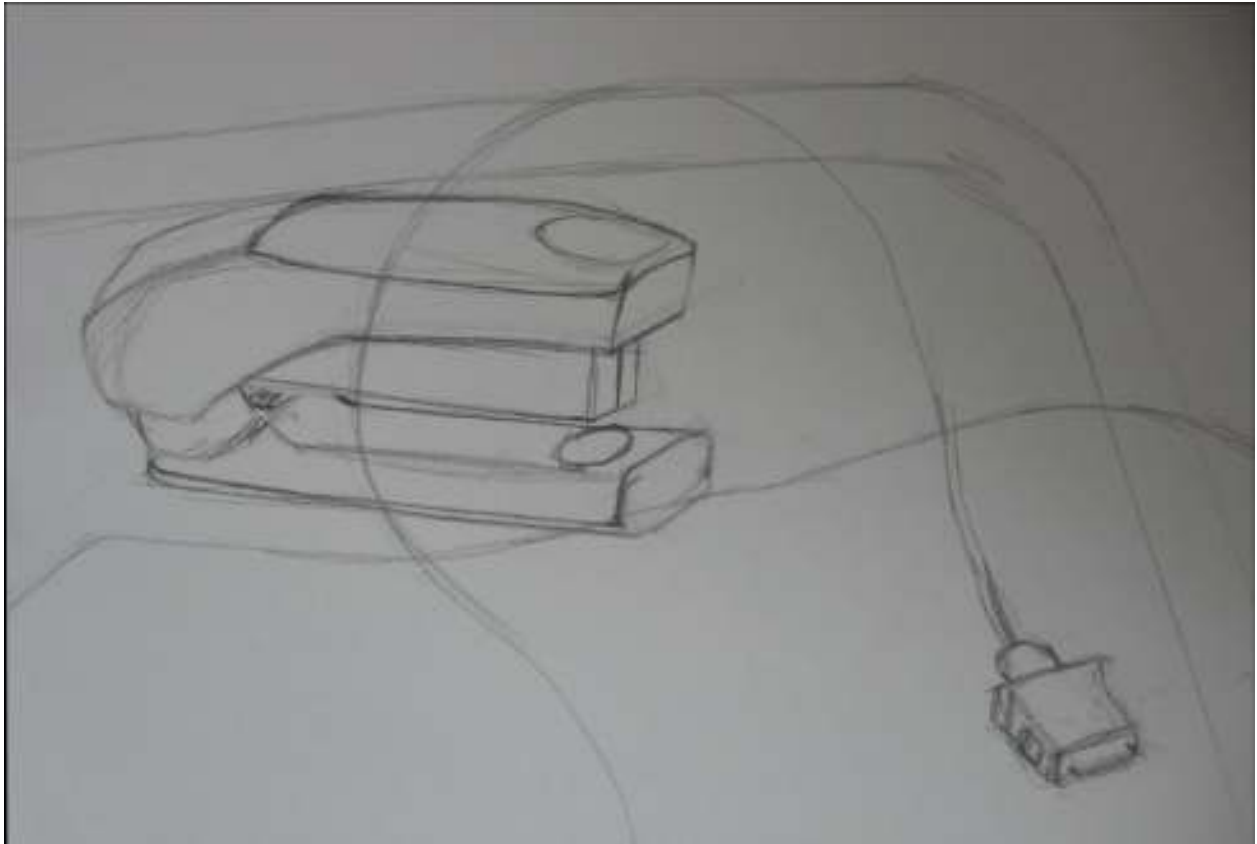


Figure 2.1

- First, the artist decides a frame for his drawing, and begins to block out the basic shapes he sees.
- He then refines the shapes, using darker lines to indicate the final outlines of the objects. This allows him to easily see problem areas to fix.
- Once the artist is happy with his sketch, he can move on to the next step and start using the charcoal to shade, confident that he has the proportions right.
- Figure 2.1 is an example of a finished sketch. Notice the lack of detail, especially concerning the thickness of the cord. Also notice the sketchy lines, like in the round table corner.

Step 3: Fill in the tones with charcoal.

This step represents the first pass over the drawing with charcoal. The artist is mainly interested in shading the objects according to their relative contrast—meaning how dark or light they are compared to the rest of the drawing. This step is used to cover the page with charcoal, and is where most of the work is done.

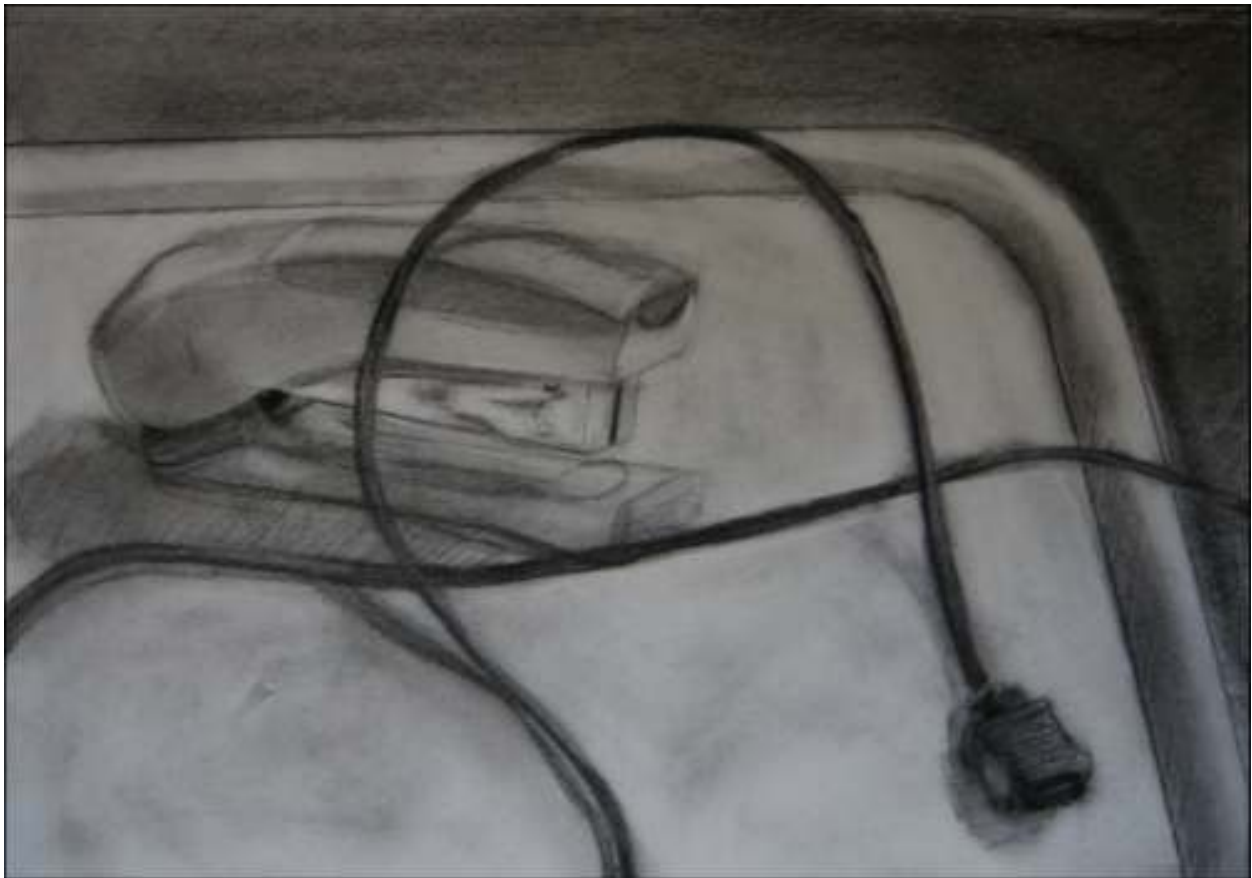


Figure 3.1

- The artist works from left to right (or right to left, if he is left handed) so that he can easily work without smudging the charcoal with his hand. He goes over the whole drawing with varying shades of charcoal, careful not to press too hard in light areas, so that he can erase for detail later.
- Then, the artist will smudge the charcoal using the paper towel, to create smoothness and soft, realistic gradients. He will use the blending pencil for more delicate sections.
- When this step is complete, the artist will have a blurry-looking, somewhat realistic drawing. The next step will sharpen and finish the image.
- Figure 3.1 is an example of a drawing after this step. Notice how blurry and unfinished it looks, but that all the tones and shades are present.

Step 4: Add final contrast and detail.

This is the final drawing step. Small details and textures are added. The artist pays particular attention to relative contrast, making the darkest things in the drawing black and erasing the lightest things to white.

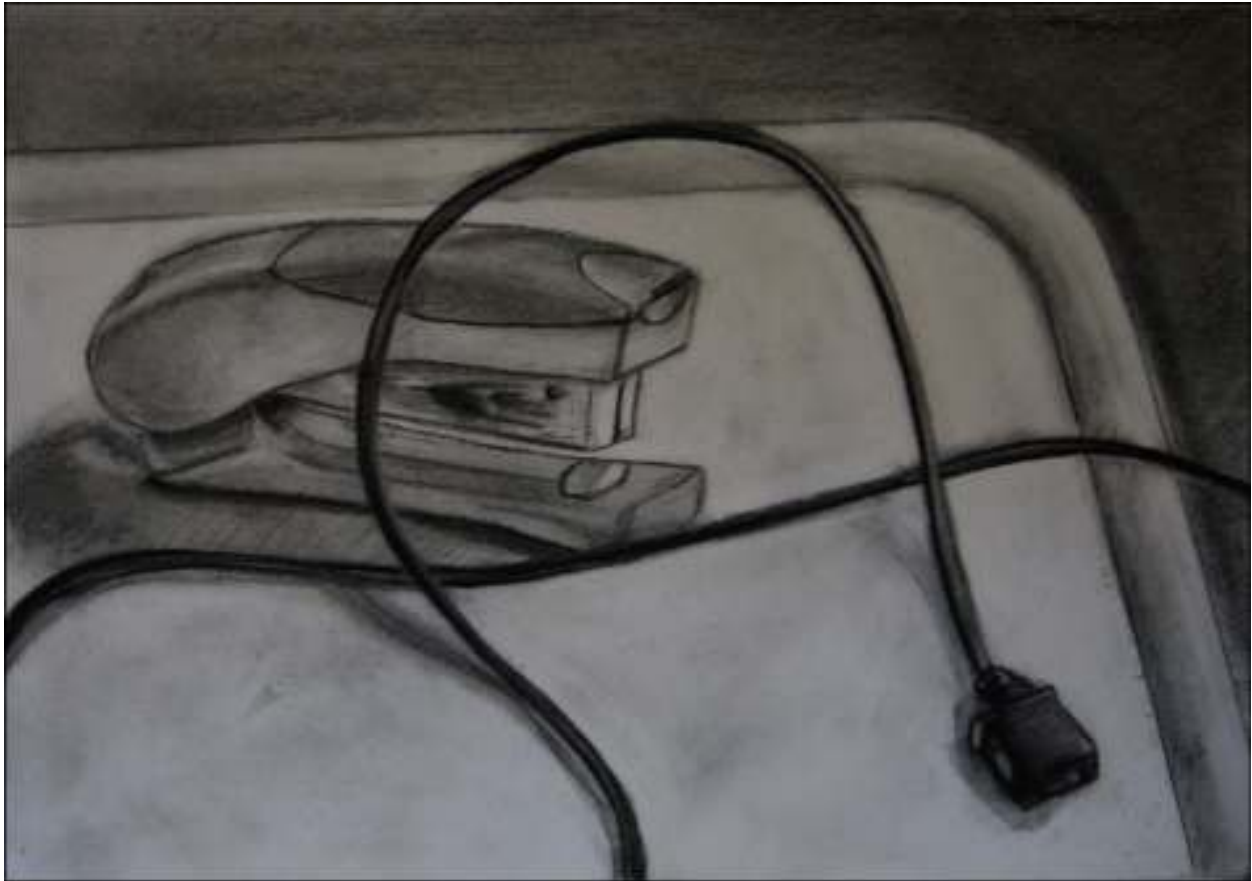


Figure 4.1

- For a dramatic drawing, the artist will use the full range of darkness. Even if there isn't anything black or white in the picture, he erases to make the lightest thing white and presses hard with the charcoal to make the darkest thing black.
- Once the contrast is fully realized, he will go back in and carefully add the fine details. He does this last to make sure they don't get smudged while working on other sections.
- In Figure 4.1, notice how the black cord stands out against the white table. Contrast is an area in which a charcoal drawing can excel. Also notice the darker lines in the stapler—this is to make the object stand out more, and to give it more substance.

Step 5: Spray with fixative.

Once the drawing is complete, the artist will spray it with fixative in order to make the charcoal resistant to smudging. This is important to ensure that the finer details of his drawing won't get blurred by just the touch of a finger. The artist does this step in a well ventilated area, as the fumes from the fixative can be toxic.

- The artist sprays the drawing according to the instructions on the can of fixative, usually with the can a foot or two away from the drawing. Two lighter coats is better than one heavy one.
- Once the drawing is sprayed, the artist will let it dry for at least an hour before handling it.
- The drawing is now complete and ready to be stored or displayed.