

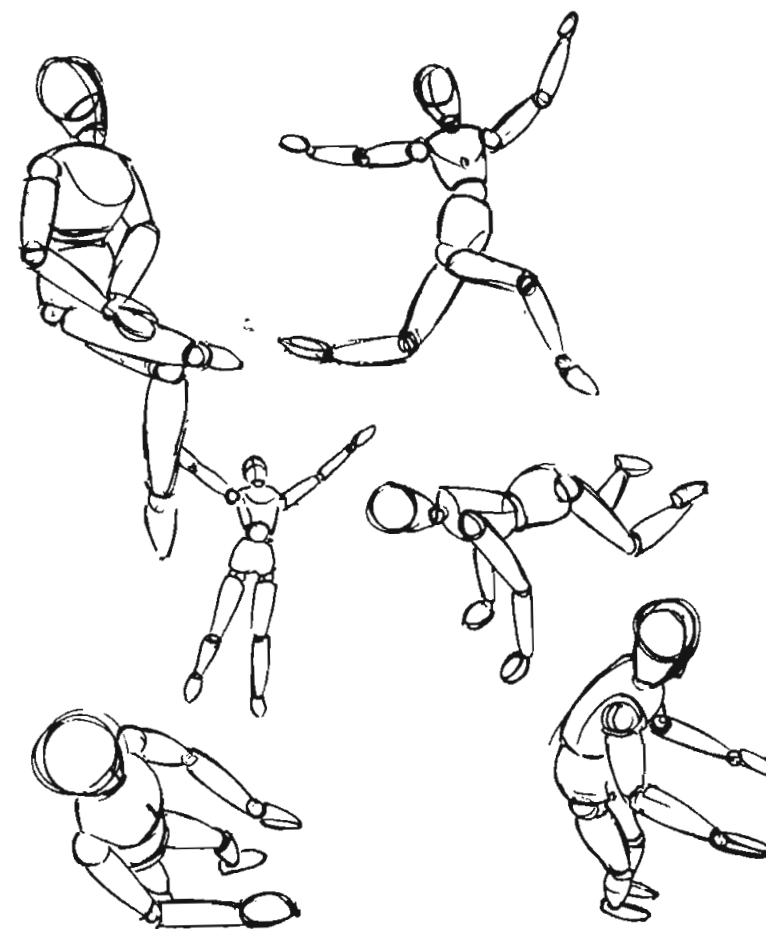
Portfolio on the Loose

Two years after I arrived in Los Angeles, I had managed to put together enough work to fill a good-sized portfolio. This included storyboards, production sketches, and set photos from the films that I had decorated. I decided that it was time to introduce myself to a larger community of art directors and production designers. To this end, I invested in a beautiful leather-edged case with large plastic-covered pages inside. I made up captions, typed up a new resume and had large prints made of all my best set shots.

I called up the art directors I had already worked with and asked for the names of other art directors who might be looking to expand their crews. I set up seven or eight meetings over the course of two weeks and was set to begin the interview process when I decided to go downtown to show my new book to a friend. We were going to have dinner and since the portfolio was large and heavy and I was running late, I locked it in the trunk of my car. We finished about 9:30 and walked back to the lot. It was one of the outdoor lots common to downtown Los Angeles. The attendant had already gone home. We reached the car and I popped the lock. I will always remember the sight of that empty trunk. I had trouble breathing as I tried to take in what had happened. I even checked to see if I was dreaming. No such luck; the portfolio was gone. And this was not just my Los Angeles work, but photos of sets I had designed in New York, original set illustrations...everything.

Mildly stated, I was very upset. We began to comb the area looking in every dumpster for a three-block radius. I called the police and made a report, but they weren't helpful. I could only hope that whomever had the case would dump the contents and they would be recovered. But nothing ever turned up. And I had interviews with some of the top designers in town starting the next day and nothing to show.

When I returned home I began to comb through the "reject" pile for some photos and storyboards that I could cobble into a presentation format. I was desperate, just this side of defeated at the daunting task of redoing all my work, but between calls to coworkers for replacement photos and long hours at the drawing table, I managed to create a "portfolio version 2.0," which was in some ways better than its predecessor. Thereafter I vowed to never leave the portfolio in my car, never put original work in the book, and always have copies made of my drawings. I also realized that even when my most "valuable" professional possession was taken from me I was able to go to my interviews and make a convincing presentation. They were hiring me, not my portfolio. In subsequent years I insisted, whenever possible, to meet with prospective employers personally, and not just leave a portfolio as some requested. Even if it was just to shake hands and say hello, there is power in connecting a person to the portfolio.



8 Figure Notation

"On the first film I directed, I made drawings. I wanted to be very sure. I was uncertain of myself as far as the camera was concerned and I wanted to be sure not to fumble, not to get lost in the mechanical aspects of making a film. So I made drawings of every set-up..."

John Huston, *Hollywood Voices*
director: *The Maltese Falcon*, *The African Queen*

The Human Form

8

“For *Duel* the entire movie was storyboarded. I think that when you make an action film, especially a road picture, it’s the best way to work, because it’s very hard to pick up a script and sift through five hundred words of prose and then commit them to memory....I felt that breaking the picture up and mapping it out would be easier for me.”

Steven Spielberg
director: *Jaws*, *E.T.*,
Schindler’s List

“Don’t try to do a complete drawing all at once. Spend all the time you can doodling with stick figures. They’re the easiest way for you to get the action and position that you want for your characters.”

Stan Lee
How to Draw Comics the Marvel Way

This chapter will concentrate on the development of figure notation. The human figure is perhaps the most common element in film composition. Whether the shot is a close-up, a long shot, or a full-figure, chances are that there will be a human form somewhere inside the frame. Some of you will approach this challenge with little or no figure drawing experience. Others, myself included, come from a background in fine art and are accustomed to referring to live models as we draw. For those with limited or no drawing experience, this chapter will take you through some simple steps that will improve your ability to render natural-looking figures. For artists accustomed to using live models, the information will guide you toward simplifying your notion of the human body so that you can quickly render human forms using a simple internalized model instead of a complex live figure.

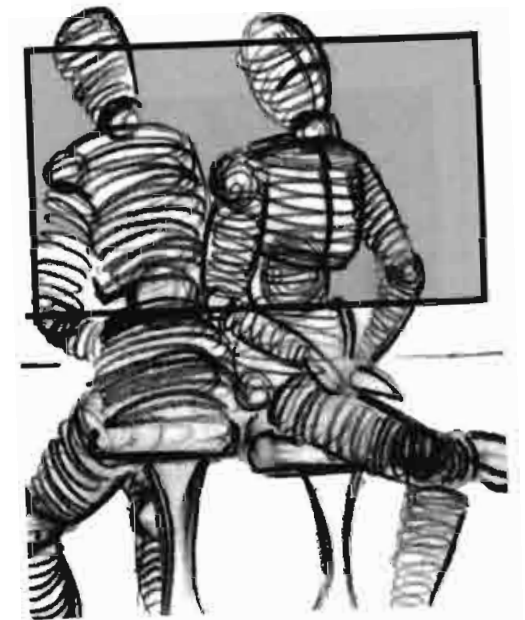
Our bodies are composed of over 200 bones and hundreds more muscles. Besides these basic biological traits, our forms carry marks of personality, gender, ethnicity, and individual history. That makes the human figure one of the most complex forms to render in a natural-looking manner.

That said, the director or writer who is using storyboards to help visualize his or her project needs to concentrate only on some of the fundamentals of the form.

Main Elements of Figure Communication:

- SCALE
- PROPORTION
- GESTURE
- THREE-DIMENSIONAL FORM (various approaches)
- Skeletal
- Simple geometric shapes
- Stacked ellipses

The fine artist and the illustrator have a different challenge. For them, the process involves simplifying a form they already understand in terms of its deep complexities. To accommodate the storyboard format, the network of interlaced shapes that make up the head, torso, and extremities of a human form will now need to be rendered on a relatively small scale, often no larger than 3" by 5". In addition, the presentation of light and shadow needs to be accomplished as quickly and accurately as possible.



Simplified Forms

Sometimes a storyboard artist will get location or set model photos to use as reference, but most of the time you will find yourself working from overhead diagrams and shot descriptions. Many artists new to storyboarding find they have to develop a revised set of rendering skills that focus on mentally designing each shot before they begin to visualize it on paper.

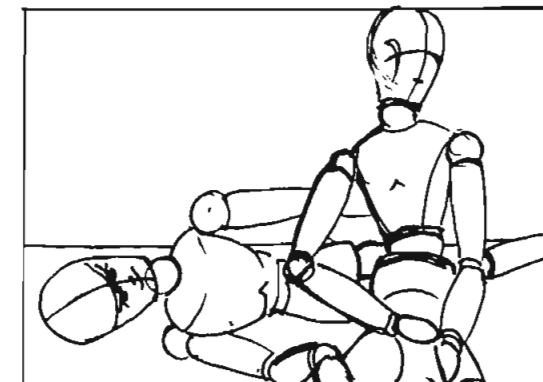
When I came into the film industry I had been working as a set designer for theater and as an artist who specialized in portraiture. When I began to work as a storyboard artist it took me well over a year to internalize a generic human that I could call forth from my mind at will, having no external imagery for reference.

The first step for me was to acquire a 12" high mannequin with moveable limbs. These can be found in most art and graphic supply stores. They usually are built with simple wooden shapes, an egg-like form for the head, a sphere for the neck pivot, a rounded trapezoid for the torso, and tapered cylinders for the arms and legs. There are no articulated fingers or facial features, just the basics.

The limbs, head, and torso are linked by a spring mechanism that allows you to pose the figure, and then lets the "body" maintain that shape after you release the limbs. By using an aspect ratio cutout, you can arrange the mannequin so that you can see the gesture of the figure in whichever scale you desire. You now have a visual reference from which to build your drawing.



This approach may sound time-consuming, but it's actually fun. There is a lovely element of play to this that will make the time pass quickly. Also, many people experience a higher level of achievement with a short amount of practice using this tool.



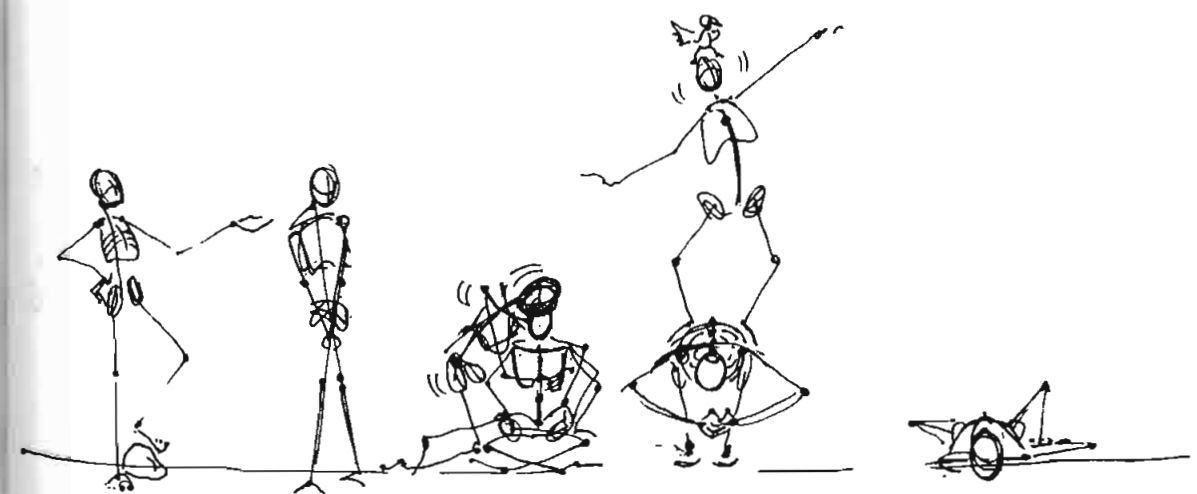
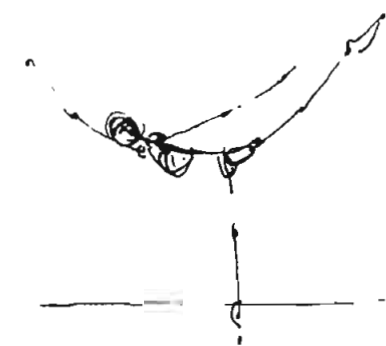
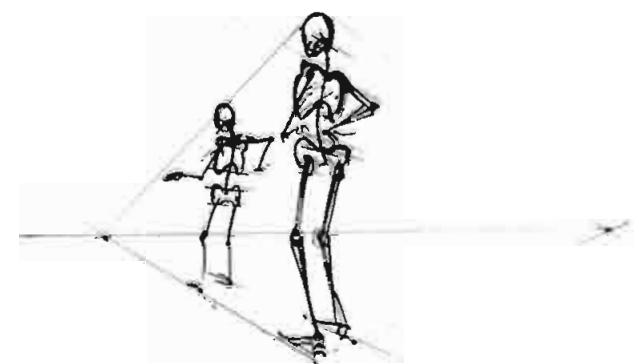
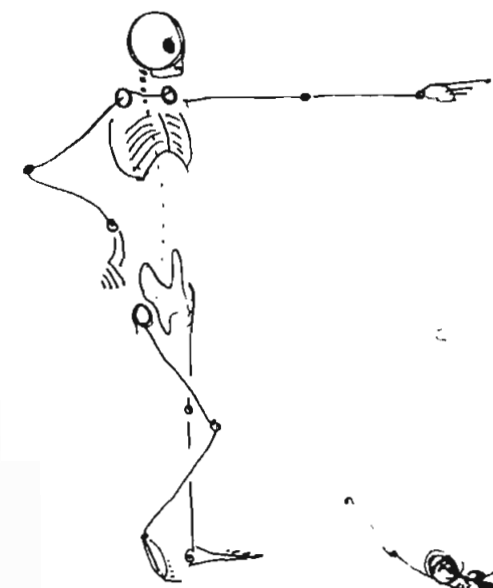
You cannot over-estimate the importance of play in this process. Many of you stopped drawing, cut yourselves off from expressing the visual world, when your internal criticisms became too severe. Small children have a universal love of painting and drawing. It is inbred, just as the need to speak and to write comes with the desire to communicate about the world. Some of you will now be opening yourselves up to an ancient manner of expression. In the history of "scripting" the image pre-dates the word.

In the preliminary storyboard image, remember:

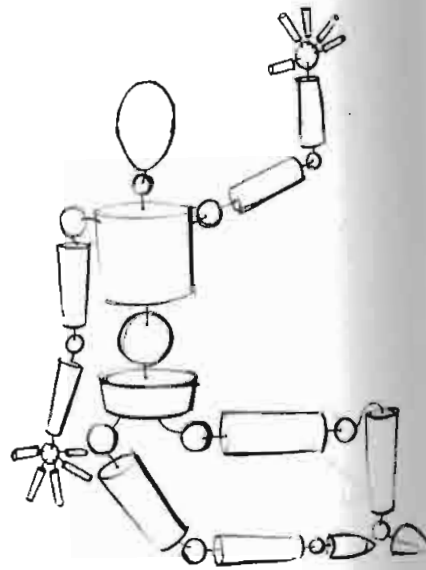
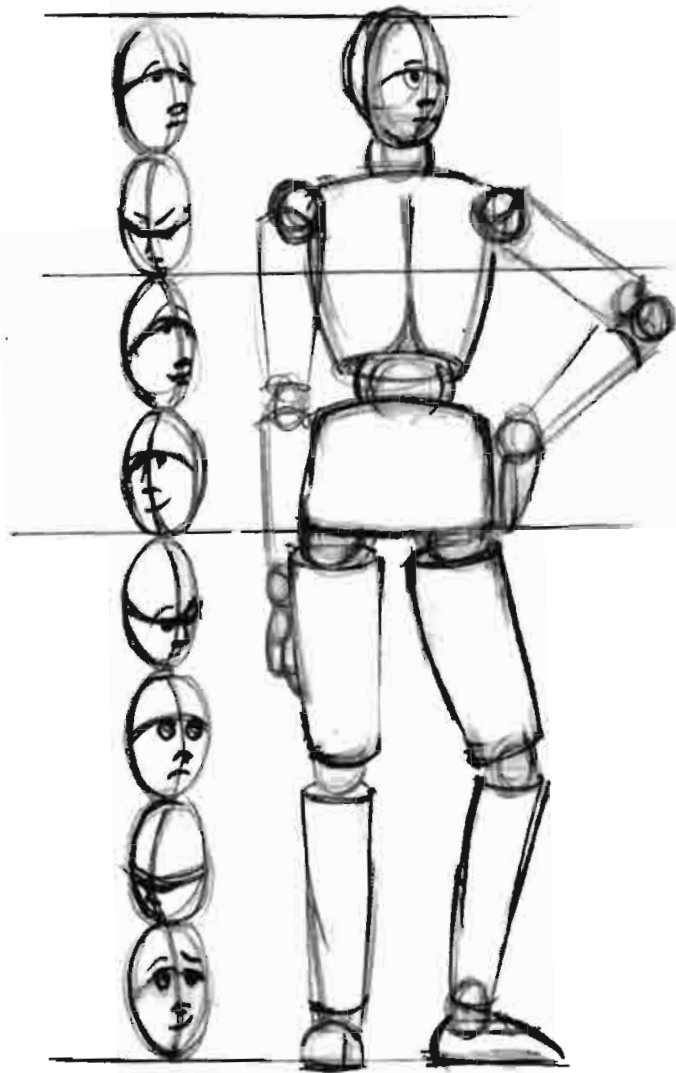
- **Gesture Before Detail**
- **Three-Dimensional Figure in Space**
- **Simple Animation of Facial Expressions**

The Figure

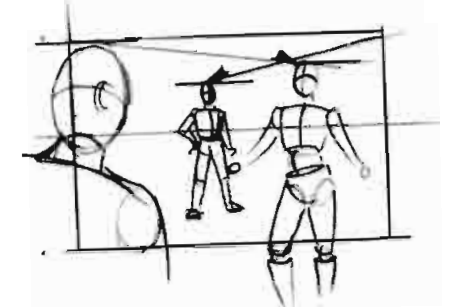
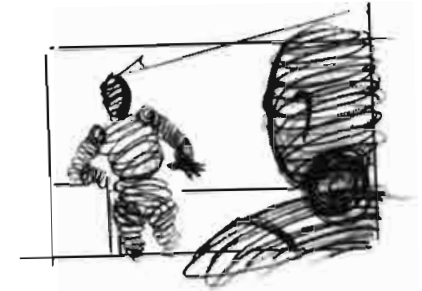
The focus here will be on three ways to quickly sketch the figure and communicate its gestures in space. Skeletons are the next step up from the beginner's stick-figure rendition of the human body. They can be created from some simple building blocks that are far easier to put together than a fully-clothed figure.



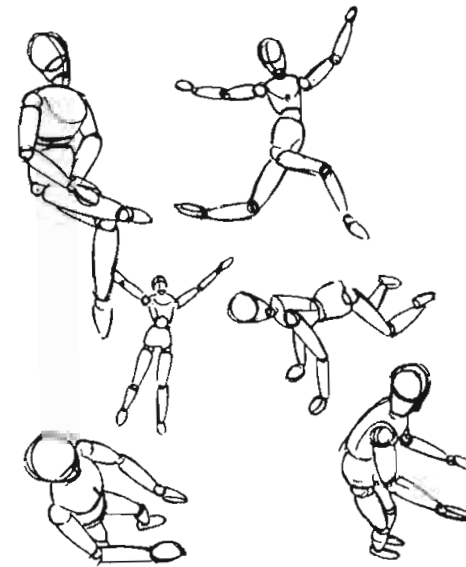
The next step up might be creating human forms from simple geometric shapes, such as cylinders and cubes. Stacked in proportion, this figure can be rotated and sketched more easily from memory than a true anatomical version.



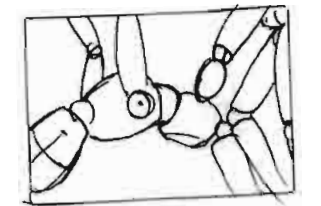
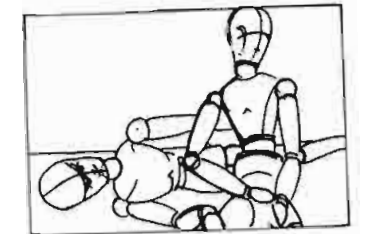
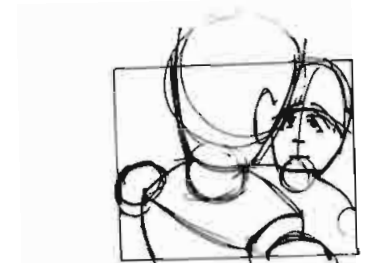
Stacked ellipses, which can be sketched as unbroken spirals, can also be helpful in getting the figure into three dimensions. Remember, you are attempting to *refer* to human movement and positioning, not faithfully *reproduce* it.

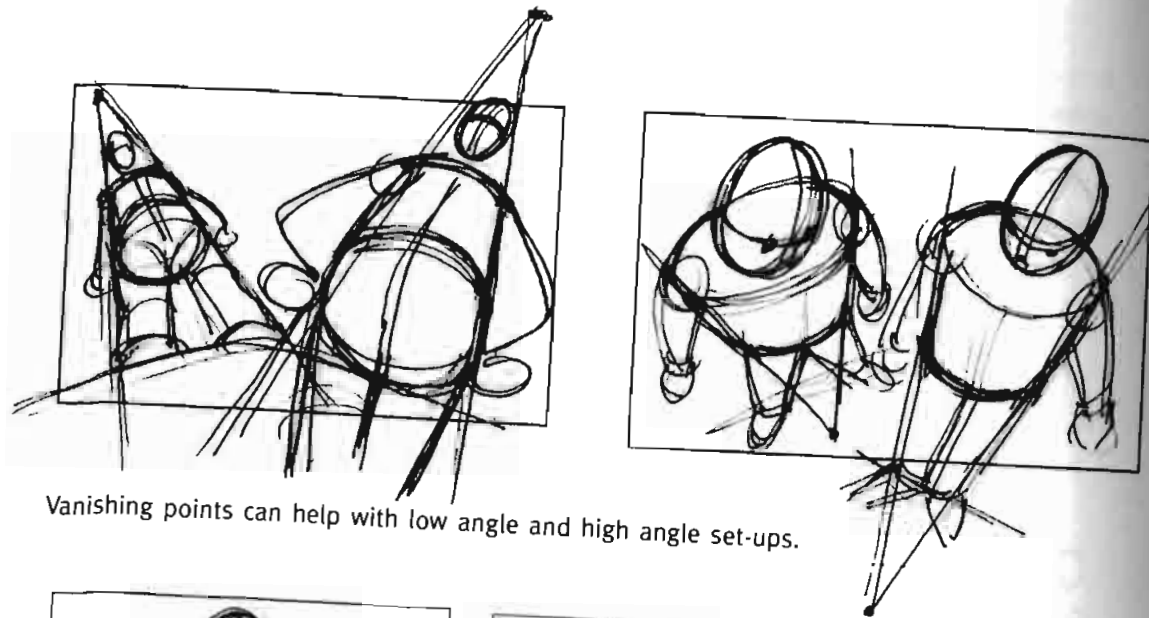


Use vanishing points to line up the tops of heads.

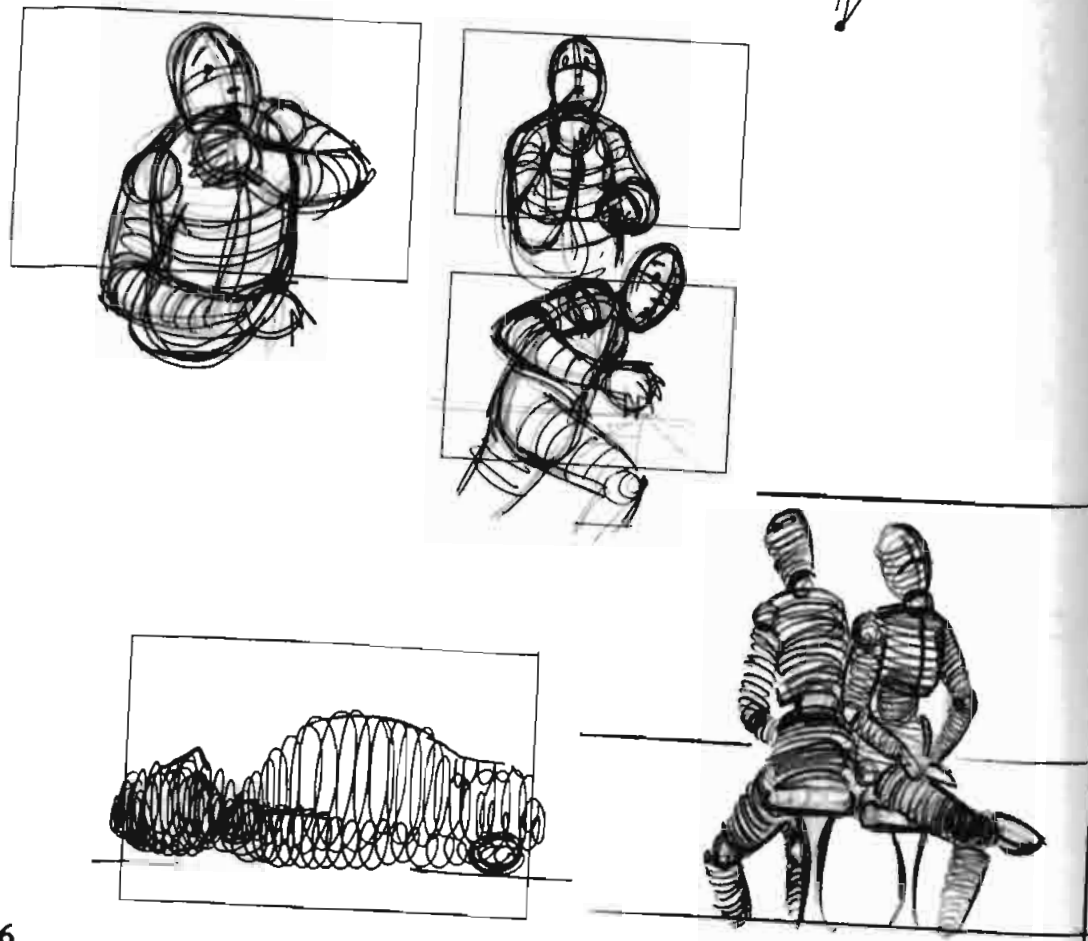


Try sketching mannequins in various positions.



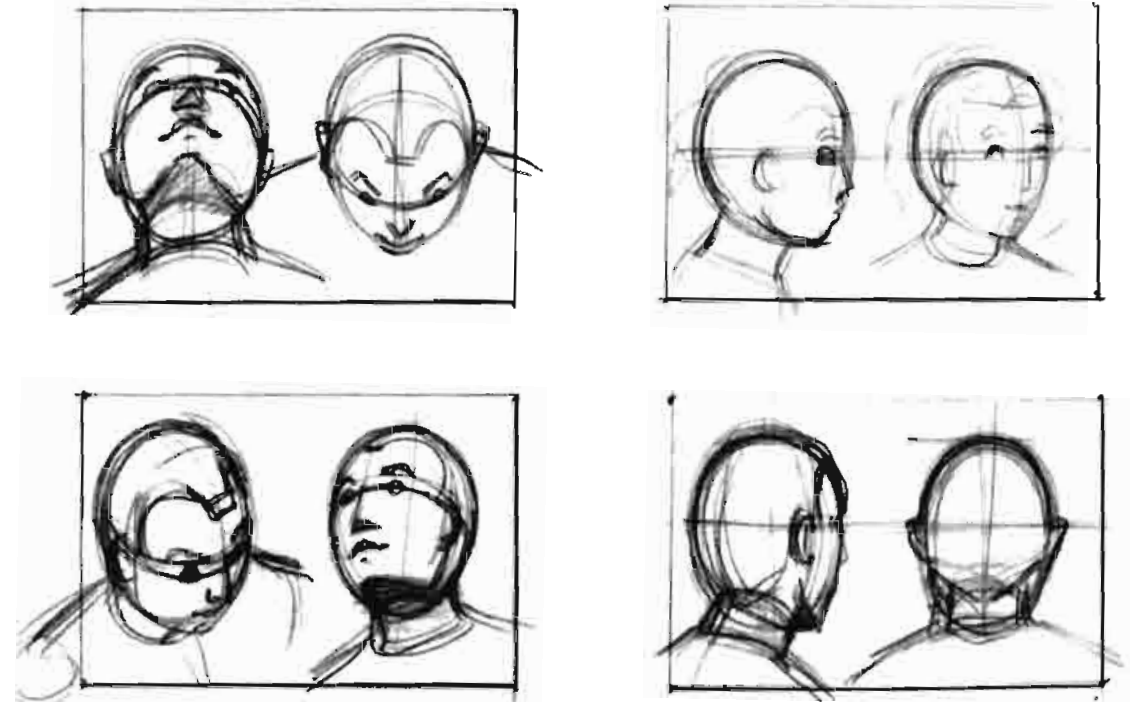


Vanishing points can help with low angle and high angle set-ups.

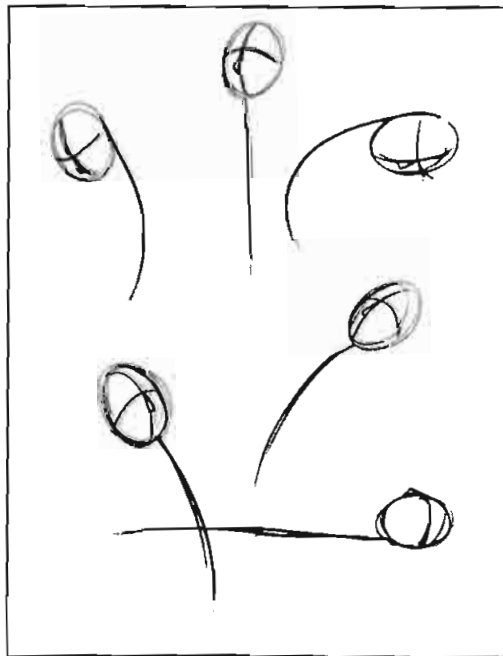
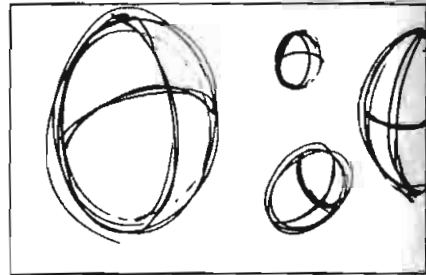
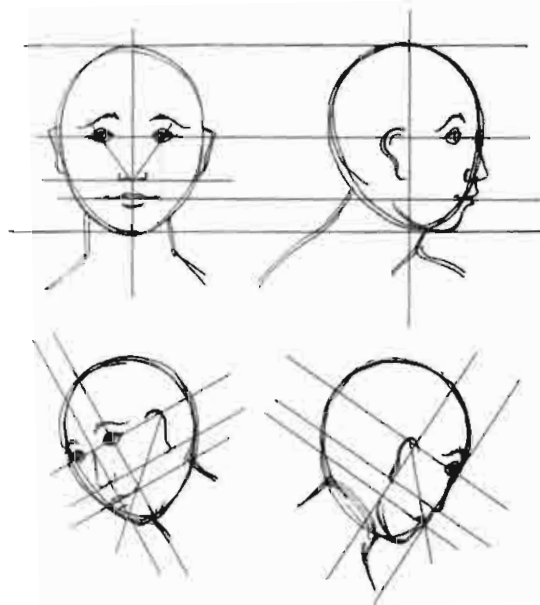


The Head

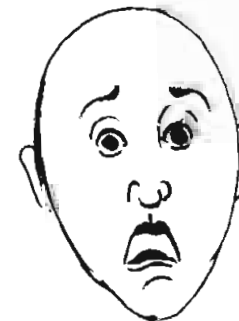
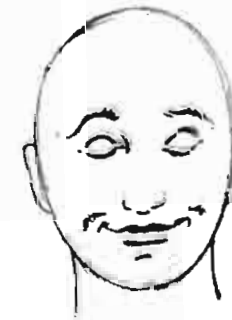
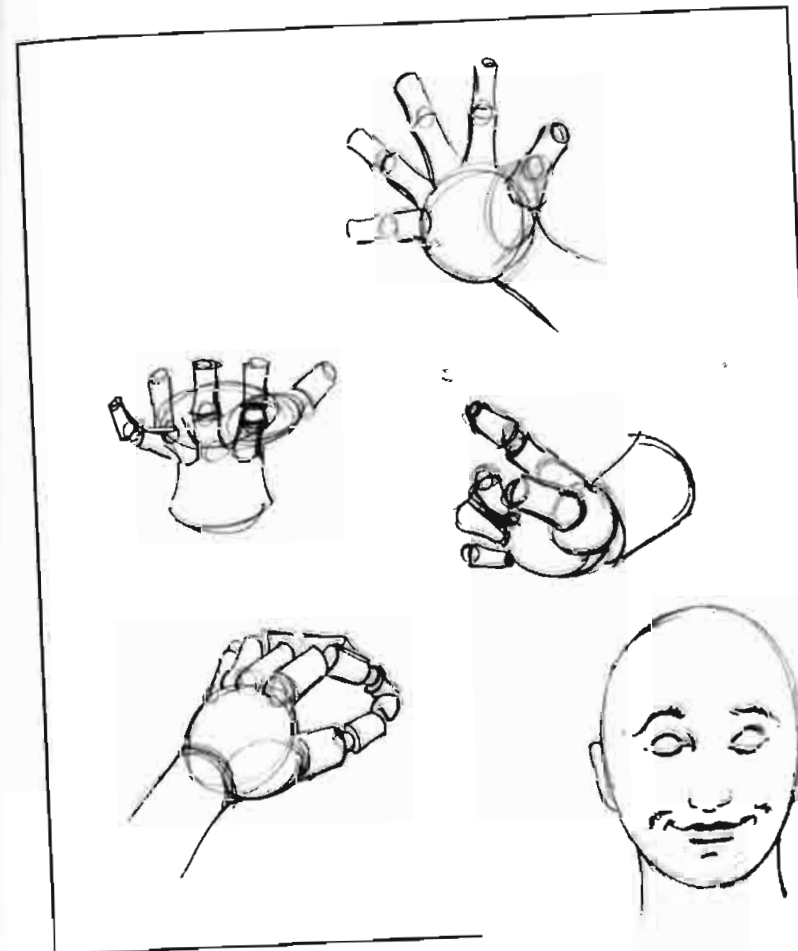
It's said that as we age, our face shows the life we have lived. Of all the parts that make up our bodies, the head has attracted the most attention. It is the site of the "windows to our souls," the plane on which our expressions reflect our emotional lives. It can communicate our feelings, which are at times a counterpoint to our words.



Let's start with the egg. An egg on end, with the thicker end toward the sky, is a good place to start in the rendering of a head.

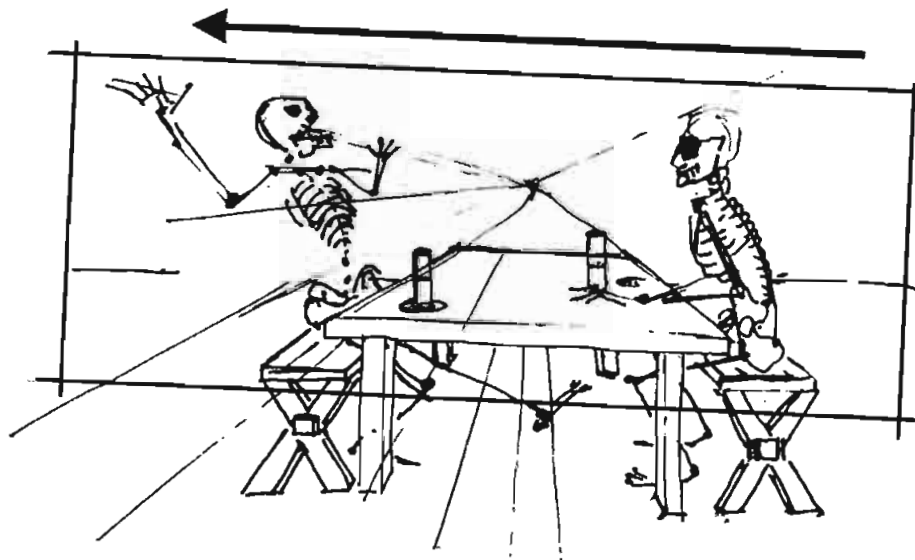


Simply an "egg" head and a spine-line can give gesture to a basic figure.



Summary

The important thing to remember is that **this process needs to focus on experimentation, not "success" and "failure"** as viewed through the comparison of your drawings to the art of professional illustrators. As directors and writers you are looking for a shorthand style to effectively communicate your ideas on blocking and composition. It's not that you "can't draw" or that you are missing some "talent" that other people seem to be born with. It's just that you need to sharpen a skill which has been long dormant.



See What You Can Come Up With

I was hired to storyboard a feature for a first-time director. He had worked in music videos and commercials and had a great visual flair. I arrived for our first meeting and was asked to wait outside his office because he was busy interviewing designers. I read the newspapers. I went for coffee. His assistant apologized, and I went to lunch. That afternoon he was busy with casting. Finally he had a break in his schedule and I was offered a seat across from his desk. He handed me a script and asked me to look at couple of scenes and get back to him when I had something for him to look at. No conversation, no advice guidance of any kind. We worked together in this way for a few weeks. I would stop by to drop off drawings and get a new assignment. He would glance at the work and run off for another casting session. I had a good time drawing up the boards, but never made much of a connection with the director or figured out how he was planning to use the information. When I saw the completed film, it was clear that he didn't use the boards at all.

People use the boards in many ways. Sometimes they are a way to involve another sensibility into the visual mix. Sometimes they are created just to satisfy the demands of an off-site producing organization. It's a good idea to determine where the boards are heading and what purpose they will be put to before you start the process.

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