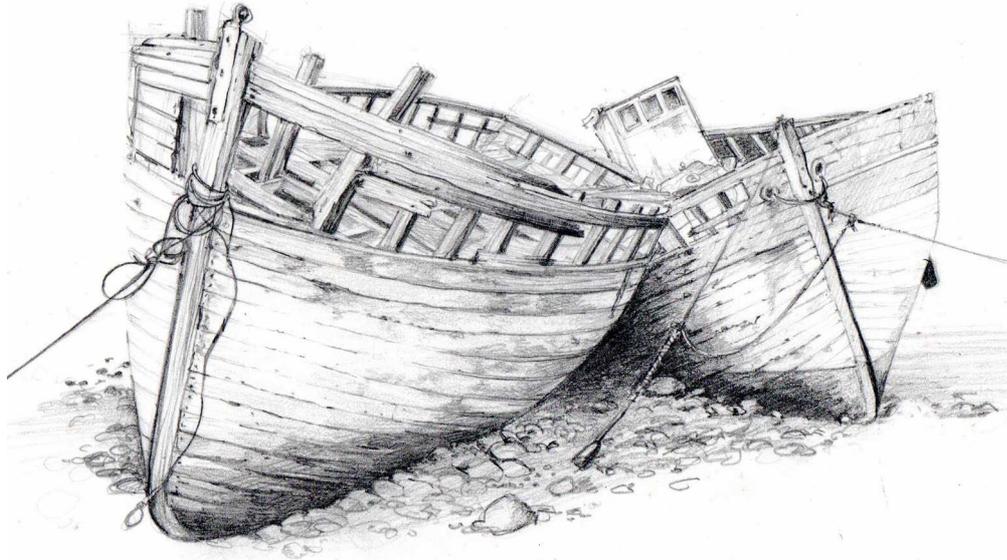


## Chapter 2

## All shapes matter

*'True boldness and power are only to be gained by care. Even in fencing and dancing, all ultimate ease depends on early precision in the commencement; much more in singing and drawing' (John Ruskin, The Elements of Drawing)*



*'To Sea No More' ~ Fishing boats, Camaret*

One of the hardest things about drawing is getting shapes and proportions right. To begin with, your drawings look squashed, elongated, distorted, too big in places and too small in others. It can be demoralising but take heart, it's a technical problem with a practical solution.

Drawing is very much about comparison and measuring, and this needs a different way of looking. Habitual, three dimensional observations such as 'What is it?' 'Who is it?' 'How far away is it?' are of no use to you when trying to draw. You are trying to interpret what you see in front of you as a series of flat lines and shapes, so you have to ask a new set of questions – two dimensional questions:

'How high is that in relation to its width?'

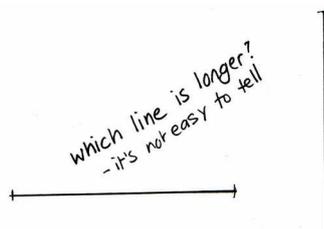
What shape is that?

'How long is this line in relation to that one?'

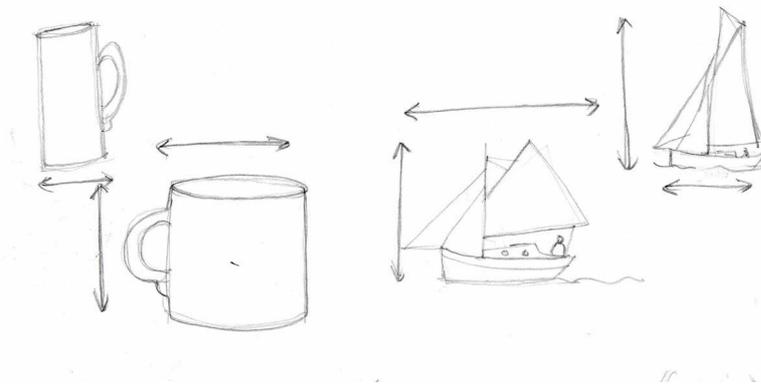
'Where does this line meet that one?'

What direction does that line go?

If it helps, ask these questions out loud. You've nothing to lose – everyone thinks artists are eccentric and will make allowances. But some comparisons are not easy to make: for example, can you tell at a glance which of these two lines is longer?



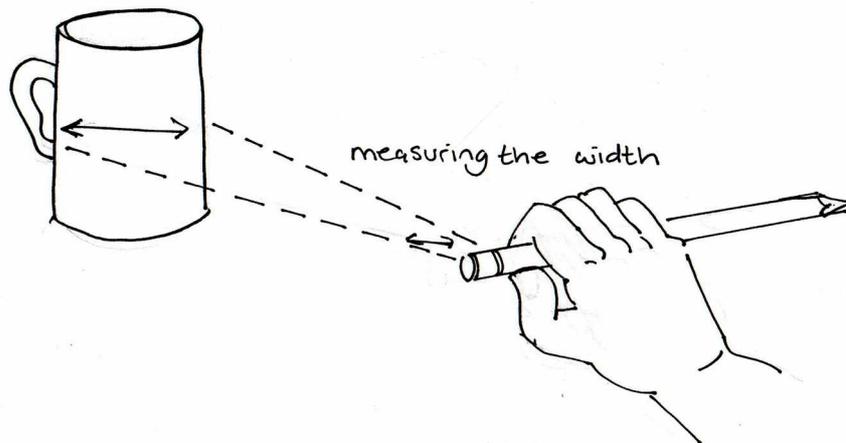
The most important proportions in any drawing are height and width – part of the essential nature of anything is its overall shape. But it's a hard one to judge by eye, so we end up with a dumpy bottle or mug, or boat that's too tall and a beach hut that's too fat.



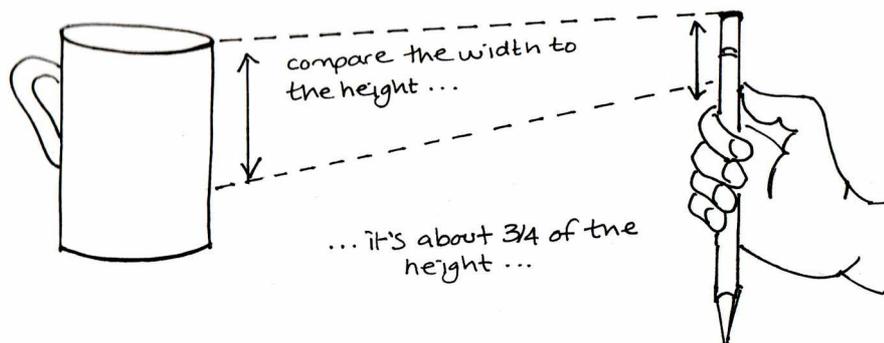
### Measured drawing

Measured drawing is the technique we use to get proportions right, and it goes like this:

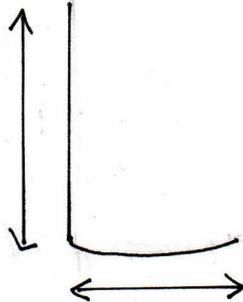
*Put a mug or other object on a table. Now extend your arm in front of you, shut one eye and use your pencil and thumb as a measuring tool. Starting with the shortest edge (usually the width), see how that compares with the height.*



*Now, keep your thumbnail marking the spot and turn your pencil to see how the width compares with the height.... Is it the same? Twice as high? In this case it's about three quarters. Yours might be different. Don't get too mathematical, just get close enough.*



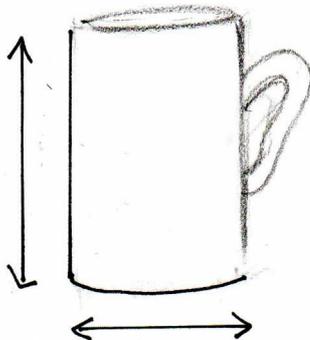
Now transfer these basic proportions to your paper. It's at this stage that it can get confusing, because you might think you have to draw your marks on the page the same size as the measured end of your pencil. Dont! Simply draw your first line – height or width – to whatever size you like. As long as the second line has the same relationship to the first as it did in your pencil measuring exercise, it will look right.



In my example, I drew the upright first, to a size that fits easily on the page, then drew the bottom edge of the mug to about three quarters of the size of the upright. I checked this by measuring my lines on the page with my pencil and thumb. You'll notice I've put the slight curve in for the bottom edge.

This process takes a while to describe, so it may sound complicated, but it truly isn't. Once you've got the hang of it, it will be a quick and easy check to make at any stage of a drawing.

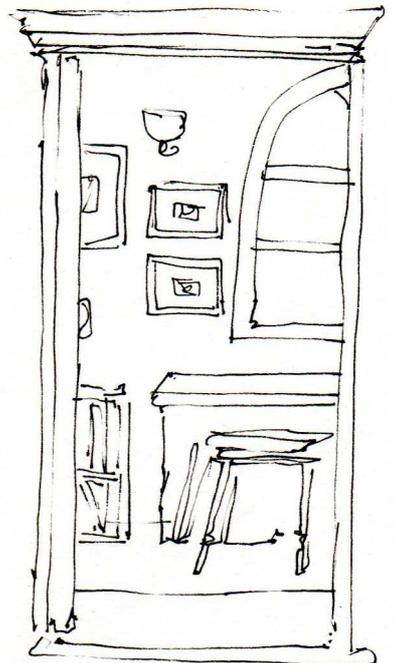
Now have a go at drawing your own mug (or if you're finding this exercise truly taxing, your glass of gin and tonic). Check as you go that your comparisons on the page match those of the real object. Do your drawing at whatever size fits the page comfortably. All you are doing is comparing one measurement with another.



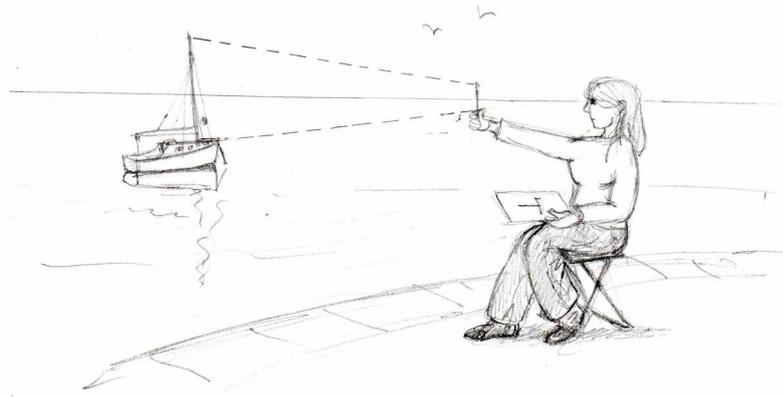
When you're happy that you've got that basic relationship right – height and width, then you're free to fill in the rest of the drawing, add all the detail, enjoy yourself.

Measured drawing takes the guesswork out of proportions. The more practised you become, the more you train your eye to get these comparisons and proportions right without having to wave your pencil around, but even very experienced artists use this technique. An object is, after all, defined by its shape. If you change the shape or proportion too much, it becomes a different object.

Look around you at home and find a door, cupboard or any other rectangular object. Measure the width and then see how many times that goes into the height. Transfer this relationship to your drawing. Flick your eyes between the shape on the page and the shape in front of you to see if you've got it right. If you have, then when you fill in the detail it will fit the space much more easily than if you'd just used guesswork.

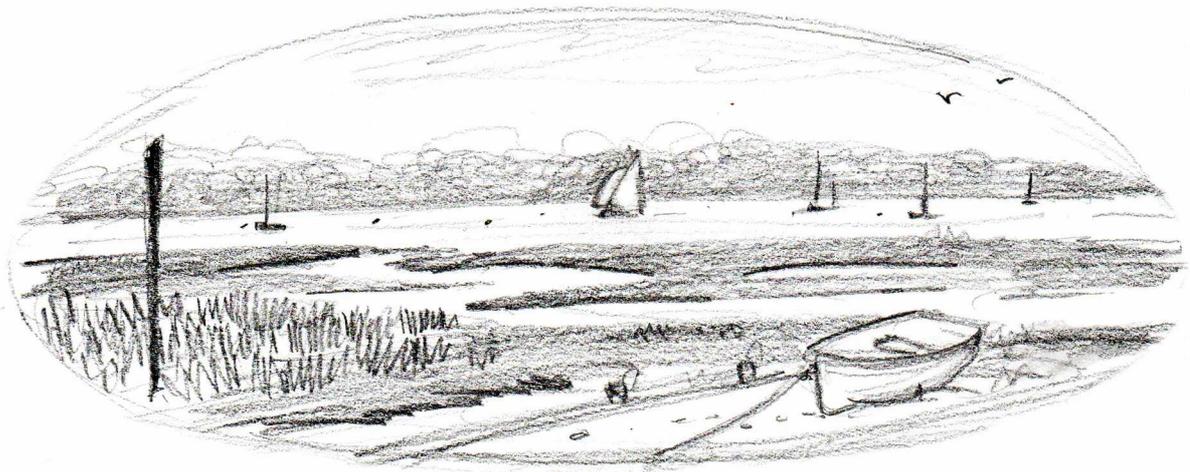


Final reminder – keep your arm extended as you measure, if you can. If your elbow is bent for one measurement but not the other, your results won't be accurate. Don't worry about looking conspicuous!

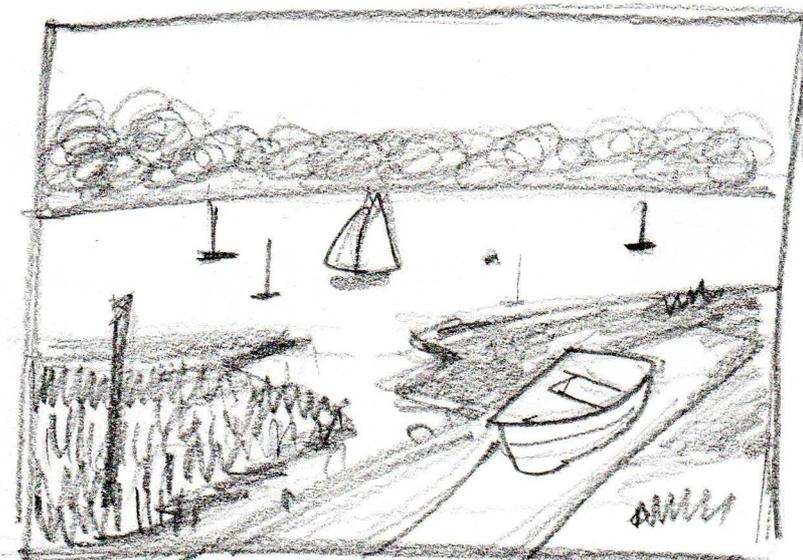


### Using a viewfinder

I think another reason why we often get proportions wrong and end up with dumpy objects and squashed up landscapes is because of the way our bodies are designed. We move our heads side to side to observe a scene; we seldom move them up or down. So we see a wide panoramic scene like this....

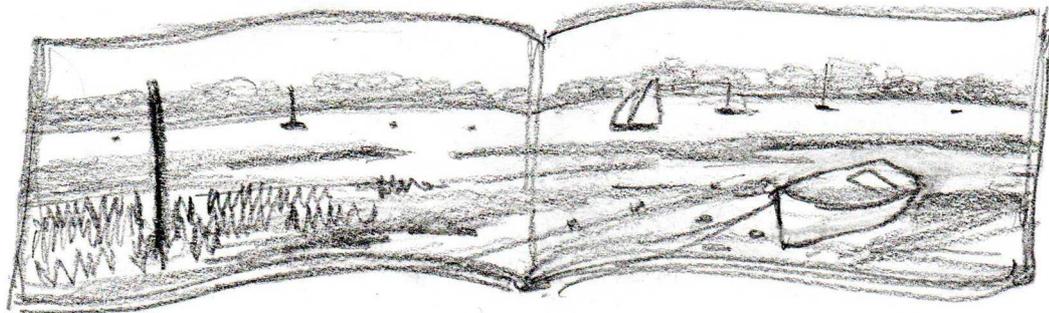


But of course our sketchbook page is a rectangle. To squeeze our view onto a page we tend to compress it, which then distorts all the shapes.

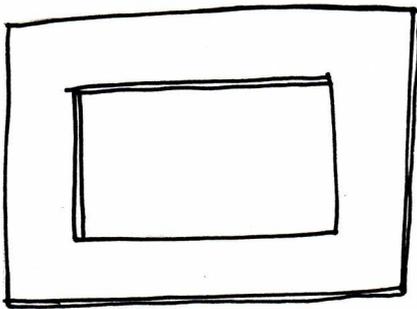


It's recognisable of course, but you'll have a frustrating time trying to get the proportions and scale of each object right.

One way to avoid crunching up and distorting the scene is to work to a panorama format. I often go across the spread of a sketchbook page like this;



Another very useful solution is to borrow a camera's eye and use a viewfinder.

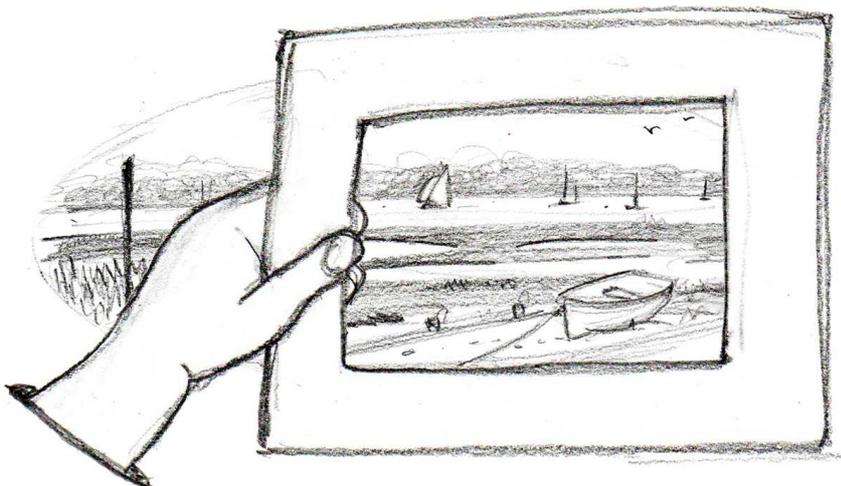


*You can buy viewfinders from art suppliers, but it's easy to make your own by cutting a rectangle out of a piece of card or stiff paper, with an aperture about 6 x 4 inches, to make a frame like this:*

*Go outside with your sketchbook to a place where there is a reasonably open view. Firstly, do a very simple outline sketch of what you can see, without the viewfinder. Don't add any detail, just draw in the basic shapes of trees, hills, fields.*

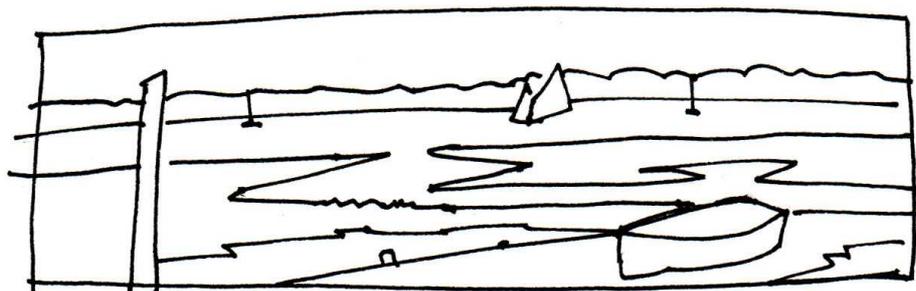
*Now look at the scene through the viewfinder (it can help to shut one eye). Vary the distance you hold it at to zoom in and out, and move it around to find the most pleasing arrangement of shapes. When you've chosen your scene, have another go at a quick sketch using the edges of the viewfinder as the shape of your page.*

*You may find at this point you need three hands – one to hold the page, another to hold the pencil and another the viewfinder! But once you have the basic reference points in place, noticing where your horizon comes into the side of your rectangle, where that tree or that post is positioned, for example, you can put it down and just use it occasionally to check you're not cramming too much into the scene.*



*Compare your two sketches. The chances are that you will be surprised at just how little a slice of landscape you can fit into a small rectangle. Using a viewfinder can help you to frame and select a scene as well as eliminating the distortion that occurs when you try and pack too much into your drawing.*

Another advantage to using a viewfinder is that it may help you to switch off your 3D vision and see everything as a series of connected shapes – just as we did with the exercise of drawing through a window in Chapter One. This ability to ‘flatten’ a scene and treat it as if it was two dimensional is particularly hard to do when you have several miles of scenery in front of you. On location, you might not notice, for example, that the post on the left hand side crosses the line of trees in the distance, or that the sail of the boat goes to the top of the line of trees, or that the river is not the broad expanse you know it to be, but a narrow slice only a bit larger than the distant trees. But if I reduce the scene to a series of flat shapes, it should become easier.



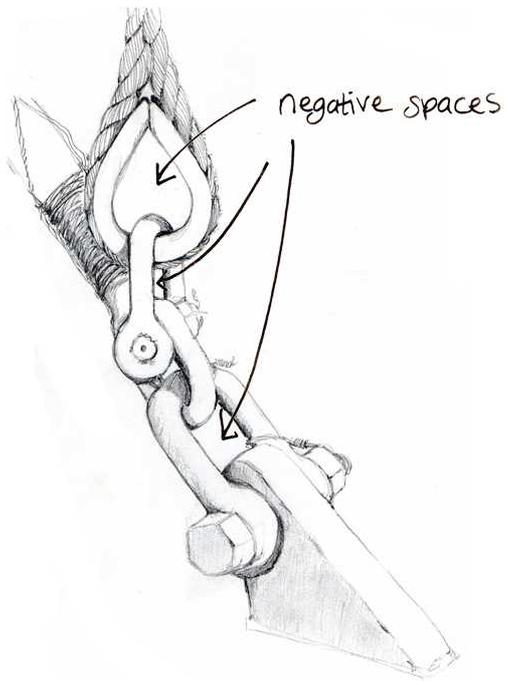
Once you develop the skills to ‘see’ your scene as a series of flat connected shapes (and you will!), it gives you the vocabulary to express several miles of landscape on a flat page. If you get it right, someone else will read your visual language and translate it into a distant river view inside their mind. That’s a bit of magic! And even if no-one else sees your sketch, the act of making it will have engaged you with that place so intensely that you’ll never forget it.

### **So why not just draw from a photograph?**

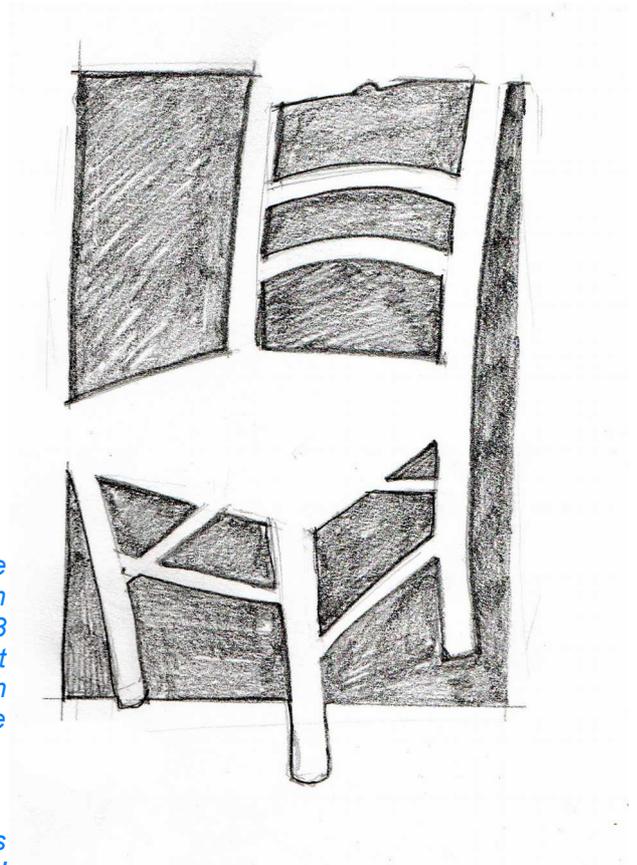
You can of course work from photos – and many artists do, me included. Apart from the fact it is already neatly in two dimensions, the viewfinder has cropped the scene to a rectangle so that your job of working out what goes where, and the relative sizes of everything, is much easier. But I do urge you to work from life as well, and as often as possible. You can always take a photo of a scene as well so that you add detail later if you need to. Apart from the fact that drawing ‘real’ things is a wonderful way to engage fully with your surroundings and improve your powers of observation, it helps you to develop your visual ‘alphabet’ and that wonderful elusive skill called the artist’s ‘eye’ that can do so much more than simply copy something. More about working from photos in Chapter Seven.

### **The power of negative shapes**

Your normal everyday way of viewing the world sees ‘things’ and not the spaces around them – after all, the objects are important, the empty air isn’t. But when you look with your artist’s eye and switch off your 3D vision, this changes. All shapes become important, even the ones with nothing in them, because they define the object and make it recognisable. They help us to ‘read’ the drawing in the same way that the spaces between these words enable us to read the sentence. These empty spaces are called ‘negative spaces’ and they are a great help when drawing. If you can find those spaces and draw them with the same attention to detail as the solid form, they will help you to get everything else in proportion.

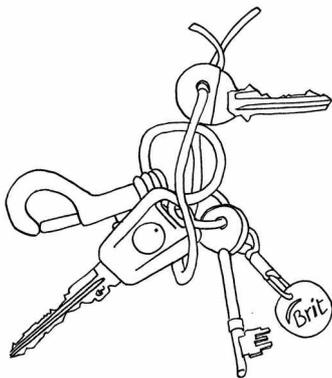


Find a fairly complex object or selection of things to draw as a still life. Good examples would be a vase of lilies, a pot of kitchen utensils, an elaborate chair. Have a go at drawing them in your usual way first, concentrating on the shape of each object.



Now try again paying particular attention to the negative shapes, all those different shaped spaces in between. Remember to stop thinking of them as 3 dimensional spaces; from your viewpoint they are flat shapes. If it helps, use a small viewfinder zoomed in close to give you plenty of negative spaces around the edges of the object as well as within it.

If you don't have a chair to draw, a bunch of keys usually offers plenty of internal spaces and challenges!



Every shape counts!