

Draw and Paint For Children's Books Make Your Splashes; Make Your Marks!

A power course in illustrating books, magazines
and other media for children

Part One: *Dynamic Drawing and Design*



Session One

#1

A scribbled start

Looks like a tangle of fishing line, doesn't it?

Let's formalize the sketch by framing it in a rectangle.



That's better.

This scribble does actually represent something, by the way.

But you're not expected to guess what it is.

I mean, how could you know?

I'll tell you what it is in a minute.

Here is my scribble of some trees outside my third story window.



Here's one of my watch, lying on my work table.



Here's one of two small children feeding a goat at the zoo.



Okay, you get the idea.

Now you do one.

Draw the box first.

Next, take a moment to consider what you're going to draw inside there. You can pick an object in front of you.

Or consider one in your mind's eye -- draw from your imagination in other words.

Think about this subject you've selected and ask yourself:

Is it moving in three dimensional space?

Or poised to move?

Are forces acting upon it?

For example, is gravity pulling it down?

Feel that resistance inside you. Or the tension coiled in your muscles.

Or feel the motion. Or the stretch of the reach

This is what you draw on your page with your pencil.

Draw that *impulse*. Don't worry about what it looks like.

Keep your pencil on the page for as long as you feel that connection. (It's a bit like *automatic writing*, which you may have heard of.)

Don't lift your pencil off the paper. Take no more than 20-30 seconds to capture the impulse of the action.

If more than one thing is happening in a scene, express all of that *doing* -- without lifting your pencil from the page. Don't break the connection. Draw swiftly, though not carelessly. This is how you capture all of the information you're feeling in the scene.

If there's a "moment of truth" for your picture, it's in these few seconds. In this little doodle.

This scribble you make won't look like anything to *anybody else*.
But it will carry a lot of meaning for you.

It doesn't matter if you are drawing from a live model or a photo or just straight out of your head.

Or your subject is moving or at rest. Or is human, animal, vegetable or mineral. Or a cloud, or even an empty space.

Because everything in the material world contains gesture.

It's how the physical universe expresses itself. One of the ways anyway, and for the visual artist, the most important way.

This is a bigger concept than it first appears to be.

Many of us have tried 'gesture drawing' exercises before in life drawing classes – maybe in college or community art classes. Most likely, we were doing them 'wrong.'

The instructor might have broken the model's time into poses of different durations -- 30 seconds, one minute, five minutes, then into 15, 30 and/or 60 minute poses. And we called our drawings of these shortest poses "gesture drawings."

But they weren't, really. Not the way we're using the term here.

For one thing, even in those shortest-timed poses we were still trying to capture a likeness of the figure.

It wasn't our fault. That's what we try to do when we draw, right? Catch that "likness."

Certainly no one ever told us *not* to draw that way.

But the gesture, as we'll refer to it in this course, is a different approach to conventional drawing. In the beginning it will seem abstract – even a little esoteric to you. But it's not really. So stay with me.

Gesture as we'll refer to it here is the *inner movement* of the subject of our picture.

Often it's the movement *before the movement*. The action behind the action. The impulse. To feel that requires your total empathy with the subject you're trying to convey.

Our job as “artists” is to find the gesture behind surfaces. To feel it in the winter trees, and the snowflake and the skaters on the pond. Catch it in children running in the park and plants in bloom and shadows on a sunny day. Know it in the rolling waves and stacking clouds and glowing streaks of the aurora borealis in the evening sky. See it in architecture and furniture, in planes... trains and automobiles.

Feel the impulse of it and trace the movement in the air with your hand. Draw that.

“The study of gesture is not simply a matter of looking at the movement that the model makes.

“You must also seek to understand the impulse that exists inside the model and causes the pose which you see. The drawing starts with the impulse, not the position. The thing that makes you draw is the thing that makes the model take the position.”

– Kimon Nicolaides

Nicolaides, an artist who made aerial contour drawings of the battlefield for the army during the First World War, devoted a whole book to this idea of gesture, *The Natural Way to Draw*.

Gesture, Nicholdaide's variety of gesture, was part of a two or three

step process of drawing. The second step, or the other shoe that he drops in *The Natural Way to Draw* is *contour* drawing.

Contouring is what mapmakers do and it's how you draw something from the *outside in*.

Niicholaides suggests you slowly contour draw *right over* your initial *gesture drawing*, which was, if you'll recall, a sort of drawing from the *inside out*.

We'll talk about *contour drawing* in another session.

In the meantime, *gesture* – finding and scribbling "the squiggle within" – is the is the surefire way to begin our drawings.

I told you that I would let you know what my scribble on page one of this session was.



So I'll tell you now. It's a scene from the children's fairy tale, *Hansel and Gretel*. It's when the children, deep in the forest confront the gingerbread house for the first time. Do you see them? (You're not supposed to.)

So now you draw a scene from *Hansel and Gretel*.

Don't copy mine. Come up with your own. Draw the box first, then quickly scribble something inside it.

Don't stop to research how a gingerbread house is supposed to look -- or a witch's oven.

There will be plenty of time for research when you're working up the finished sketch. But for now draw something straight out of your head – as best you can. Don't spend more than five seconds on Hansel. “ “ “ five seconds on Gretel.

“ “ “ witch.

Feel the interaction of children, witch and oven (if it figures into your scene)...

Be all the characters (and the setting, too.) Be everything at once.. Feel what they feel – truly, in your muscles – and dash this down.

Get it all down in one sentient, searching, tingling line. Take no more than 20 seconds with this -- and *stop*.

Don't fret over this exercise. The work's already done for you. You'll find you have the structure, heart and soul of your picture... all right there.... before your eyes in your quick scribble.

It will have happened pretty much on its own, with little or no investment on your part.

Again gesture is the impulse or inner movement of your subject. It's what holds your drawing and composition together. It will provide the foundation of your scene.

It's a superior way to approach figure drawing.

You'll find that landscape painters, too often make thumbnail sketches to determine how the light is falling on a subject they want to paint. They'll use a small thumbnail sketch to decide what the main "shape elements" of their painting will be.

They might do another one to discover a "value pattern" for their landscape. They'll confront the "color notes" in a small "color sketch."

Thumbnails are mini-rehearsals – and a great way to start a drawing or a painting. That's how the *plein-air* painters slam-dunk their larger complex paintings – by isolating the design issues one at a time in these easy, small-scale thumbnails.

Children's book illustrators can use thumbnails, too.

We can start by drawing a box, a little frame in the format or "aspect ratio" that we want the final illustration or illustrated book page to be.

Then we scribble *briefly* inside the box.

We nail the gesture, not the subject. The verb, not the noun --and that's how we find the natural composition that's already waiting for us in there.

When you do this, you focus all your dramatic and aesthetic ideas in an instant.

You'll find you've also:

- 2.) Established the movements, poses and angles of the characters in your scene.
- 3.) Laid out the stage and vantage point from where your viewer will see your "stage."
- 4.) Drastically narrowed your visual reference search. This means you've saved yourself a ton of time hunting for and collecting picture reference you don't really need. That's because you know now exactly what you're going to draw and you know the viewpoint or angle you'll show it from.
- 5.) Divided your picture space, evoking its underlying *grid*, which sets up your design.
- 6.) Determined how your gesture (via your scribble) will relate to the four edges of your frame and your picture's empty ("negative") space.

That was a lot of designing going on. And all of this happened *just like that*.

Your 'inner artist' did all of the work for you. Did you even know you had one?

We all do.

Working in this spontaneous, *fly by the seat of your pants* sort of way at the onset will take some getting used to.

But have faith. You'll know it when you start to get it.
You won't believe it until you do.

With a little practice you'll see how easy this gets.

It's like a magical remedy to your worst anxieties over any composing or art-making that you'll do.

Recapping today's idea: The gesture is the basic building block of all your picture making. It's the hydrogen atom in your universe as an illustrator. Everything starts with it.

Your "*Homefun*":

As you go about your day, look for the living gesture in everything you see around you.

Trace the gesture with your thumb and fingertips.

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Try 'gesturing' a scene from another fairy tale – or any story you may be working on. Like we did *Hansel and Gretel*.

If it ends up looking like a clump of tangled fishing line -- you know you did it right. 😊

In the next session, we'll apply this idea of the *gesture building block* to laying out that ultimate showcase for an illustrator, the children's *picture book*.

See you then!

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[Http://HowToBeAChildrensBookIllustrator.com/course](http://HowToBeAChildrensBookIllustrator.com/course)

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