

# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING



**FOR  
STORYBOARDS  
AND  
ANIMATION  
by ED CHEE**



# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING for Storyboarding and Animation

This document explains how life-drawing sessions with a live model can be a powerful tool for storyboard artists, designers, and animators by adding *one simple element*.

People attend life drawing for various reasons: studying anatomy, practicing the human form, relaxing, socializing, or breaking from routine. These sessions also serve as a great opportunity to expand our visual library of poses through observation and interpretation of the human figure.

Over time, I've found that one of the most enjoyable and valuable aspects of life drawing is to: ***add storytelling***.

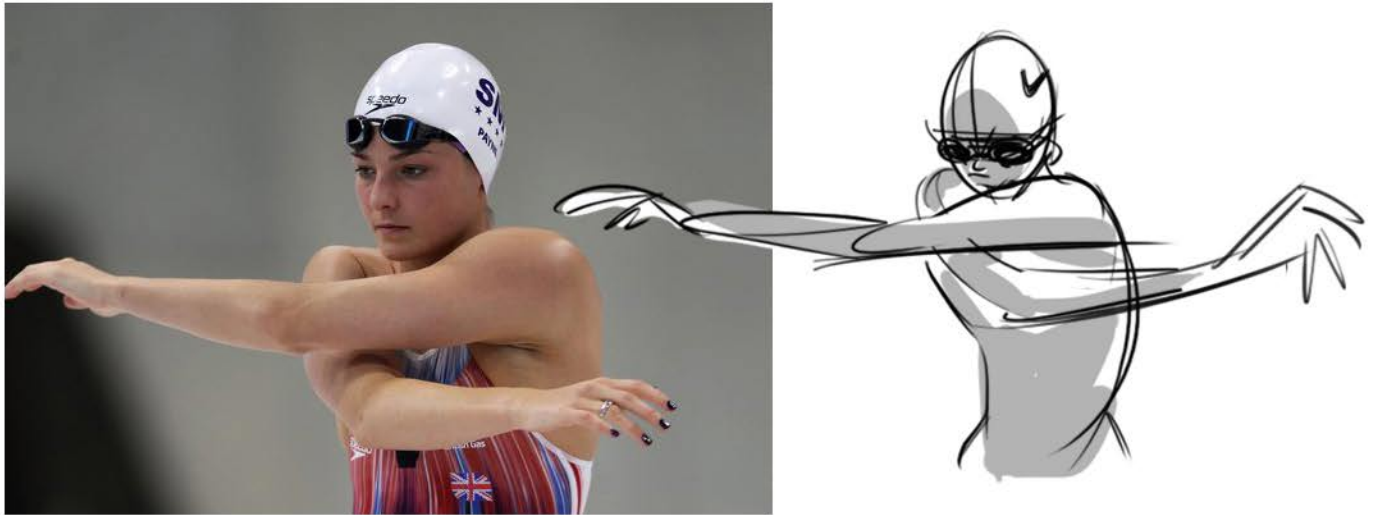
Approaching life drawing with a **storytelling** mindset makes the experience more engaging and offers fresh inspiration that we can apply to our storyboarding and animation work.

Yours Truly,  
Ed Chee  
@cheechoo98  
Cheers!

Let's Get Drawing!!!

# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - WARM-UP, START LOOSE

Let's dive in! The session usually starts with 30-second or 1-minute poses - treat these as warmups. Loosen your wrist, your arm, and your mind. Don't worry about how the drawings look—just go fast and loose. If you're using an easel and newsprint, it can feel like a cardio workout, getting your whole body moving.



Think of the quick poses as a warmup—you're not aiming for masterpieces. It's like a swimmer warming up their arms before a race.

As you draw, keep these things in mind:

**ENERGY** – Bring it! These quick poses are all about movement. Draw fast and with confidence.

**LINE OF ACTION** – Find it quickly—it's the backbone of the pose.

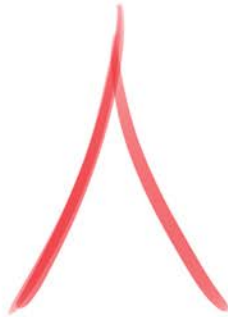
**EXAGGERATE IT** – Push it beyond what the model gives you. Make the pose sing.

**ADD A STORY** – Imagine what the character is doing or feeling. Even the simplest pose can hint at a bigger moment.

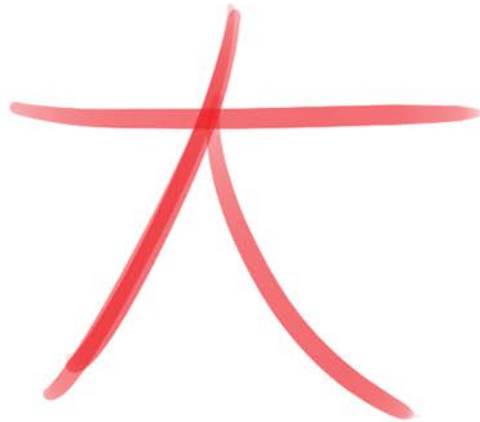
# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - LINE OF ACTION

As you work fast and loose, focus on the *line of action* —simplify the pose to its most basic form.

Pixar storyboard artist Alex Woo describes it well: it's similar to how meaning is conveyed through the simplicity of Chinese characters.



The Chinese symbol for 'person'



The Chinese symbol for 'big'  
is a person with their arms spread out!

So treat the pose and *line of action* with the same simplification.

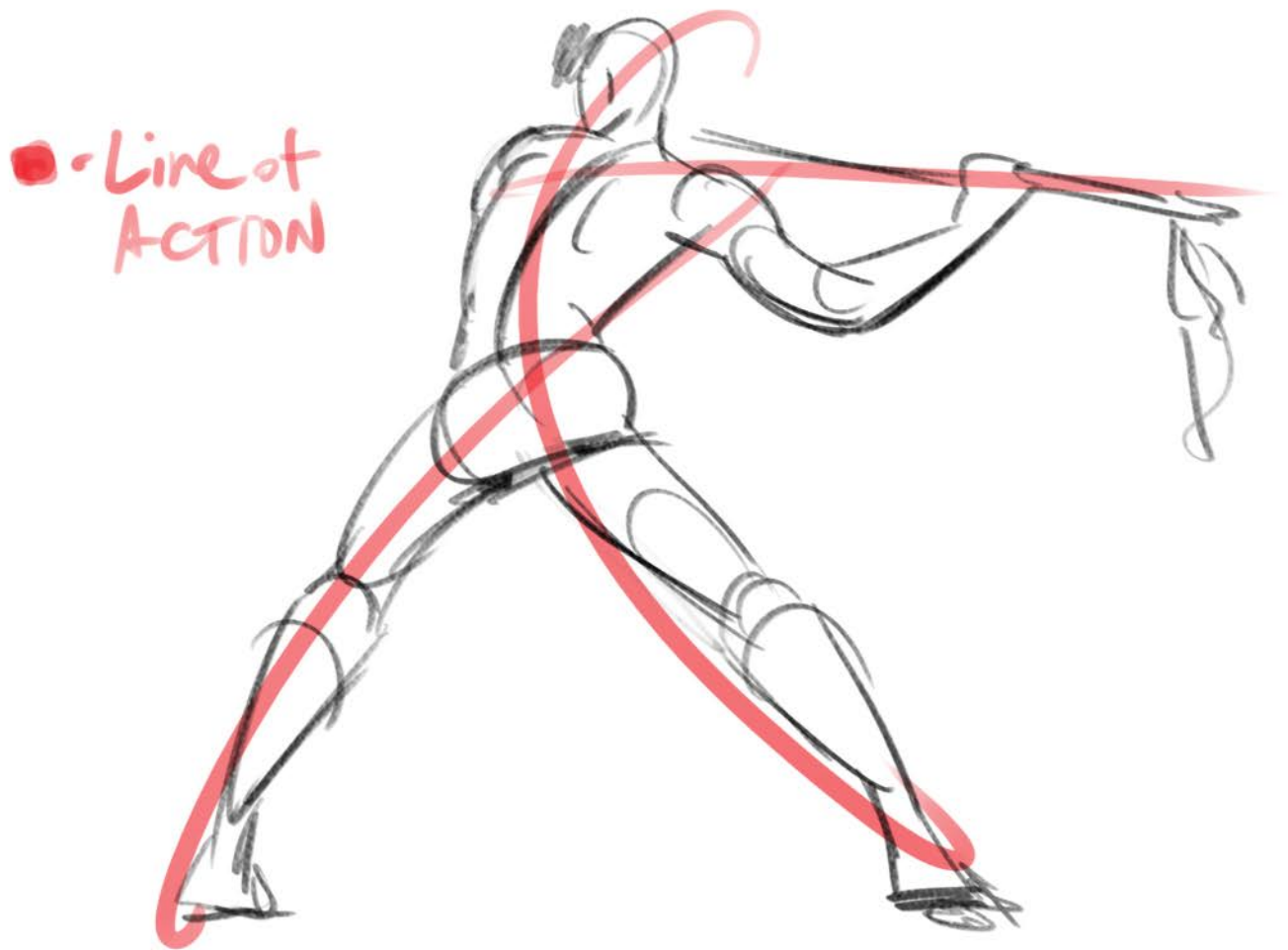


# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - GESTURES - Line of Action

A quick note about gestures: while the model may hold a pose for 30 seconds, 1 minute, or 2 minutes—remember, in real life, that moment only exists for a split second.

How often have you seen a model strike an extreme pose, only for it to gradually fade into something completely different? Almost every time! That's not the model's fault—those extreme positions are naturally unsustainable.

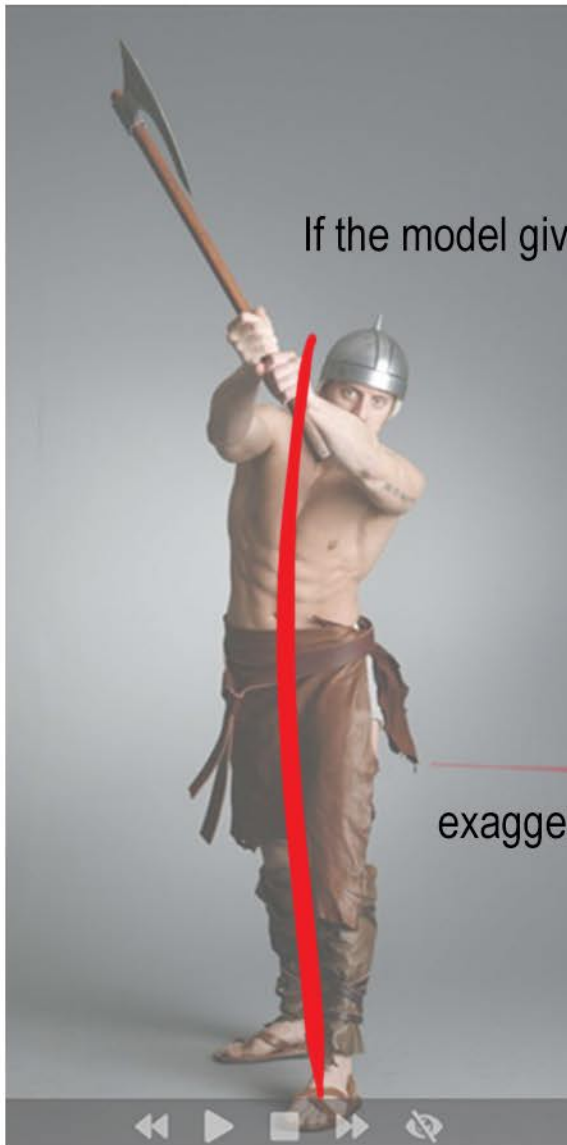
They exist only for a moment in time, like a key pose in animation.



Just as the model begins with energy and intent, you should match that right from the start. Capture the **line of action** quickly—and exaggerate it! Lay down those first lines with bold, energetic strokes.

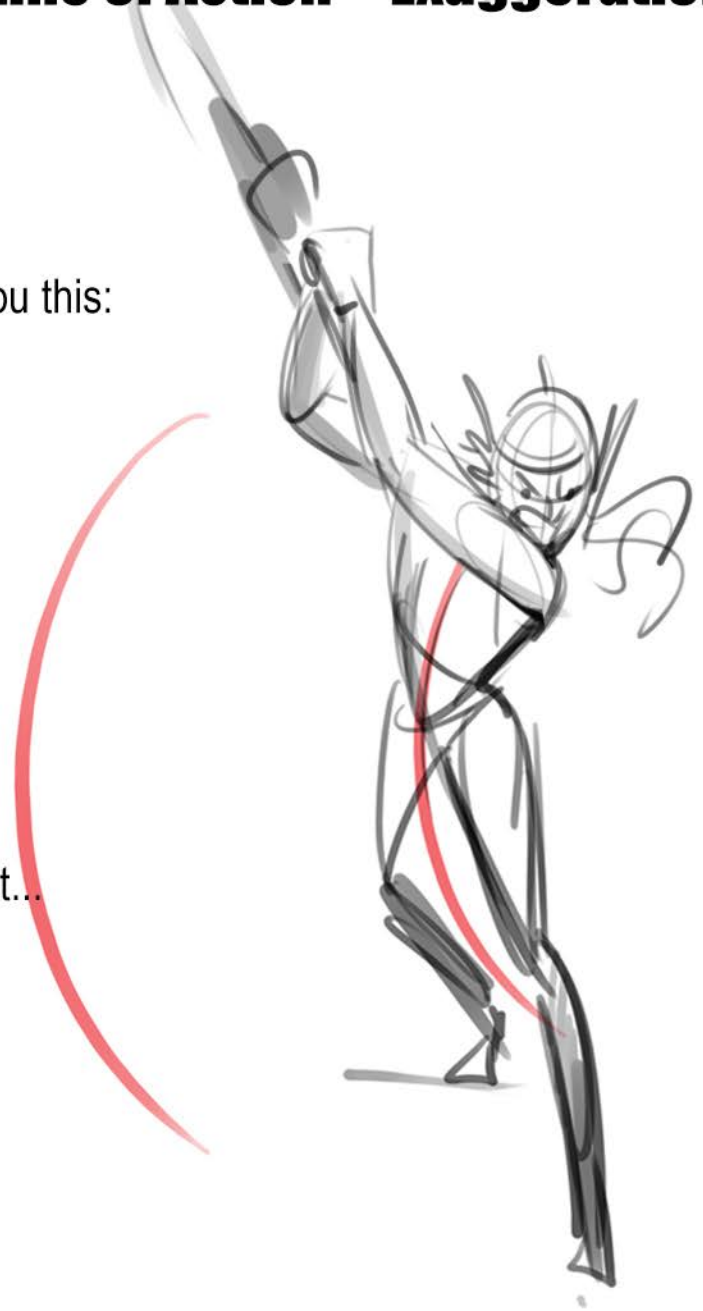
If you are working on a stand-up easel with large newsprint, it's not just drawing—it's a full-body workout!

# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - Line of Action + Exaggeration



If the model gives you this:

exaggerate it...



Start by quickly reading the pose and dropping in a strong line of action - everything builds from there. The energy of that line can shape the feeling, emotion, and story behind the pose.

**Exaggerate it!** Push the motion further than what the model gives you.

**Project** your own emotions onto the pose. Even a quick facial expression can add powerful context and bring the character to life. That's when the **story** starts to emerge.

# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - LINE OF ACTION + STORY

In a session with a nude model, focus on these key principles:

Bring plenty of **energy**, Find and exaggerate the **line of action**,  
**Add a story** to give the pose depth.

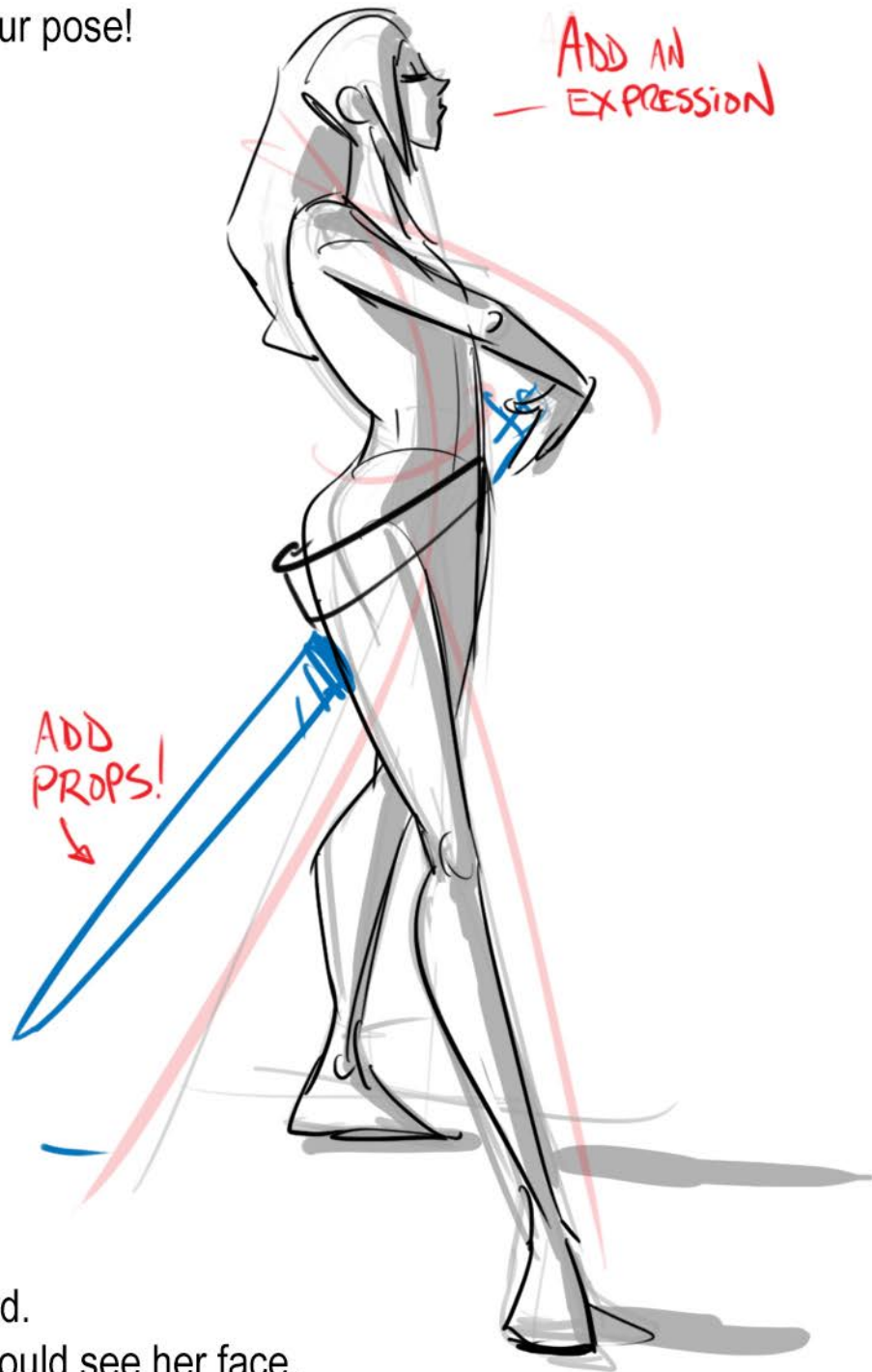


Start with that **line of action** and let your drawing flow from there! Feel free to tweak the pose to match your story, and throw in **props** if they help sell the idea. The goal today? Not to copy the pose or nail perfect anatomy, but to **tell a story!**



# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - Add Props!

Feel free to add **props** where needed to support the story behind your pose!



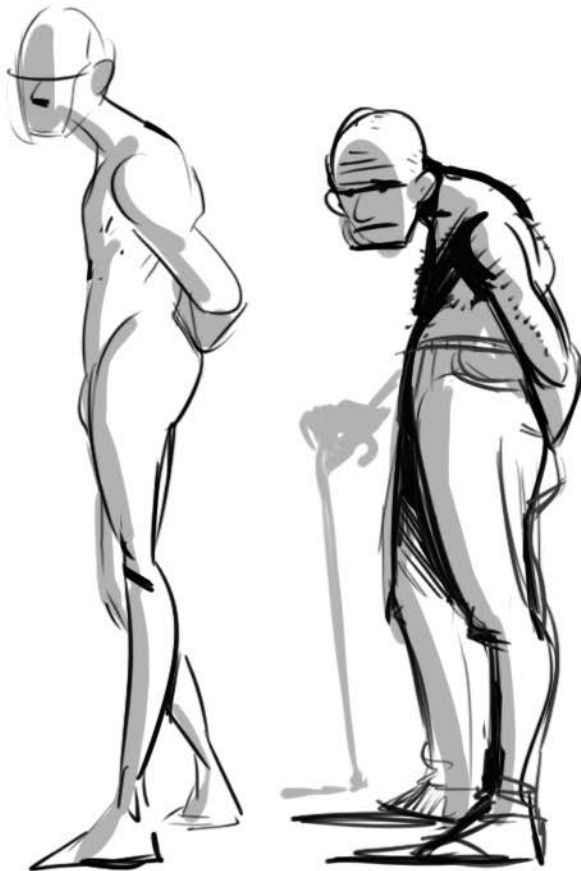
Here, I've added the sword.  
I also re-arranged it so I could see her face,  
which adds expression to the pose.

Notice how I exaggerated her stance in the line of action -  
look at the negative space between her legs.



# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - STORY & EMOTION

**Story is emotion.** With a live model, try to capture the emotion being expressed. If it's not clear, **project** your own onto the pose—and, as always, exaggerate it a bit more!



If the pose hints at sadness, push it further! Exaggerate it, add clothing, props—whatever helps sell the emotion. You never know when this pose might show up in your scene.



If the model gives this relaxed, but non-expressive pose, push it!  
Maybe this becomes a 'girls night in' :)

# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - use existing characters



By ***projecting existing characters***, creating a storyline is easy - even from your current show, it becomes a fun challenge!

# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - Photo Reference - a note

This document focuses on live, life drawing with a nude or costumed model, but the same principles apply when using photo reference:

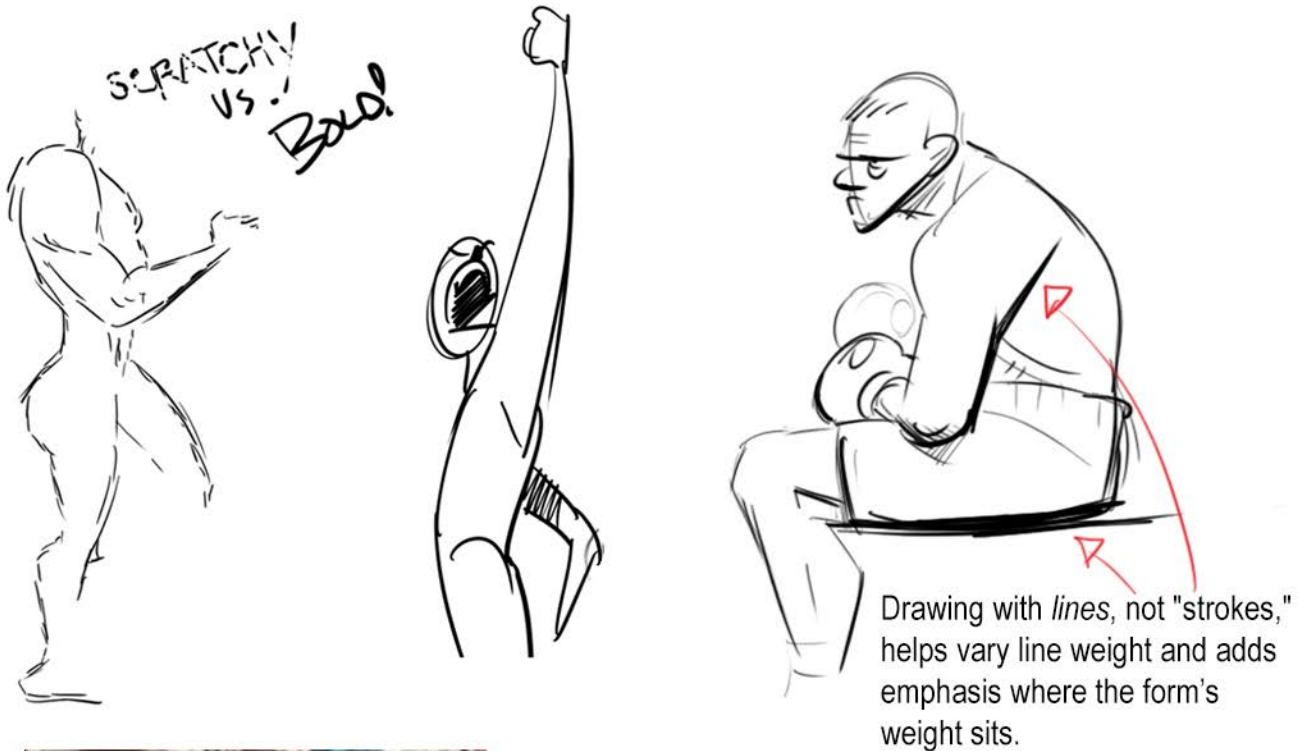
## *Line-of-action, Exaggeration, Adding a story*





# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - Line Quality - a note

When capturing the model's early energetic pose, use continuous lines instead of slow, scratchy ones. Remember the phrase:  
*"Draw from your arm, not your wrist."*



It all starts with the energy you bring. Not every line will be perfect from the get-go, you can always go over and rework them.



# GESTURES - not always REAL

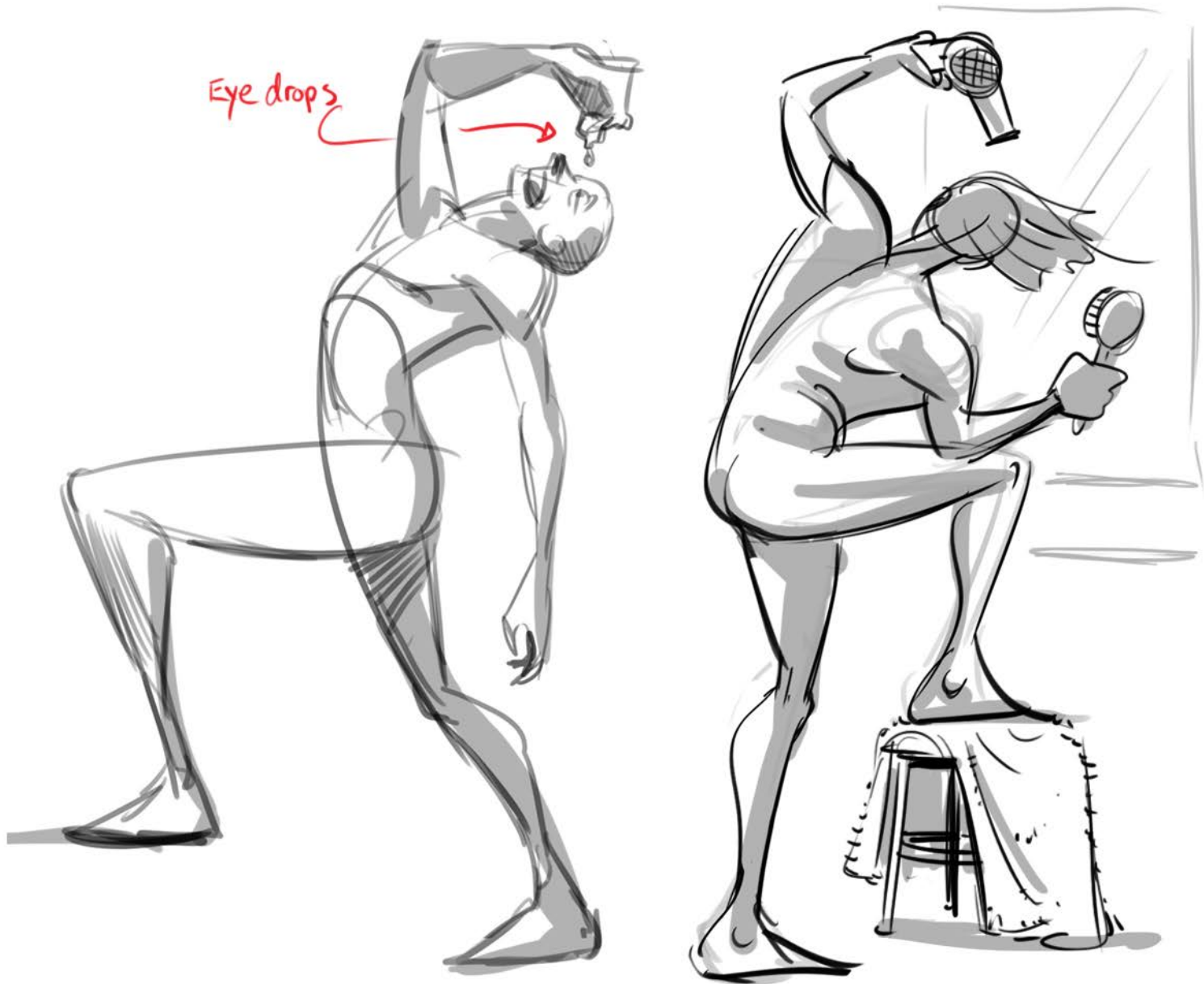
Here's the thing about gestures and poses in life drawing: sometimes, they don't exist in real life. Take the example on the right—there's tension in the body's twist, but the relaxed hands don't match. You'll rarely encounter this in storyboarding or animation—unless you're drawing Atlas carrying the globe.



What do you do when you encounter these poses? As always, **add a story**: On the left, maybe they're using eye drops, on the right, holding a hair dryer. If you can't think of a story in 1-2 minutes, use the time to practice other aspects of drawing: anatomy, balance, force, weight, lighting, contour, line weights, silhouette... Just keep drawing and move on to the next pose.

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# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - UGH! Those poses...!

We've all had that moment—"How am I going to draw that?!" You're not alone. Remember, we can't expect life drawing models to be super active and creative all the time. These poses are just as much a physical challenge for them. They're also a chance for them to take a break.



ALSO: It's very rare that you will have to draw these types of poses in your storyboard or animation. Take a break!

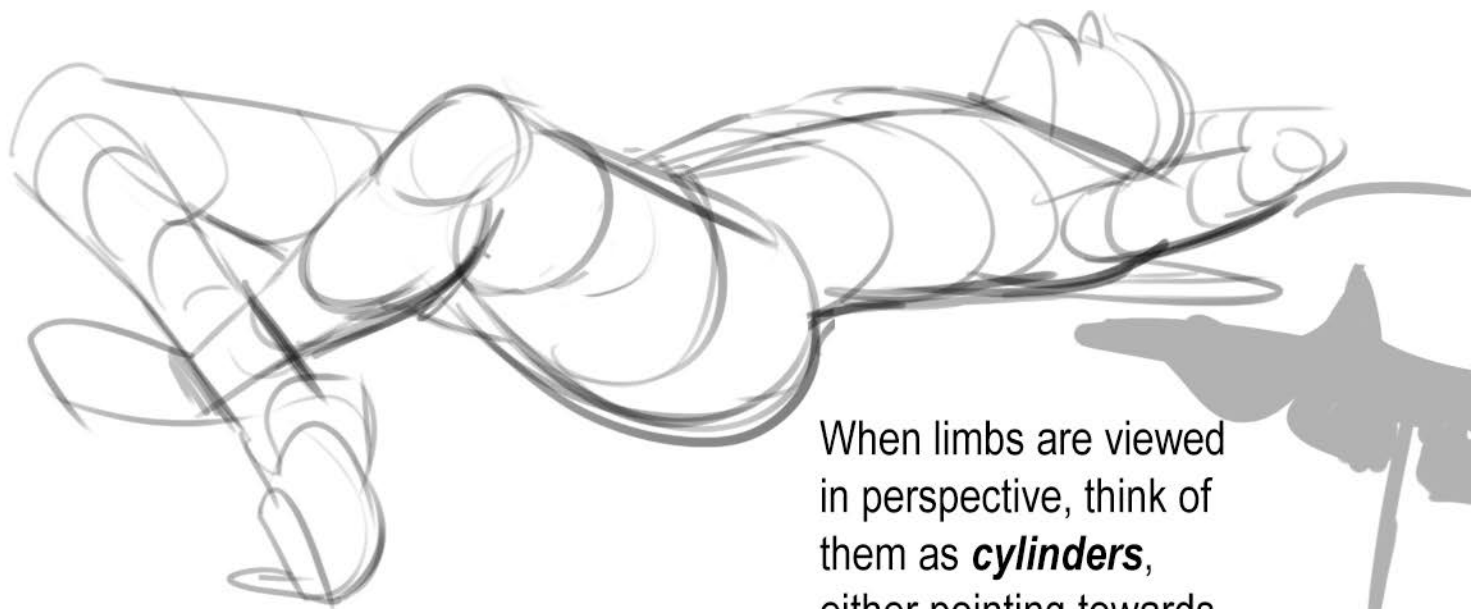
- OR -



you could also use the time to practice other aspects of drawing, like...

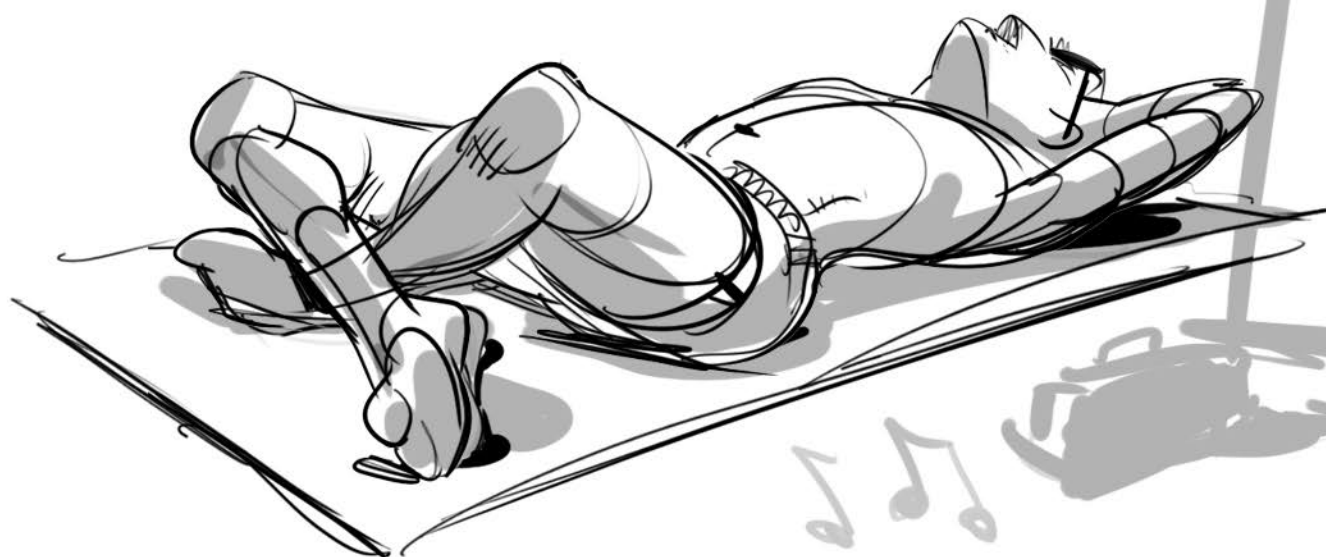
... foreshortening!

# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - FORESHORTENING



When limbs are viewed in perspective, think of them as ***cylinders***, either pointing towards or away from you.

Add a bit of story, and suddenly, you've got someone at the beach.





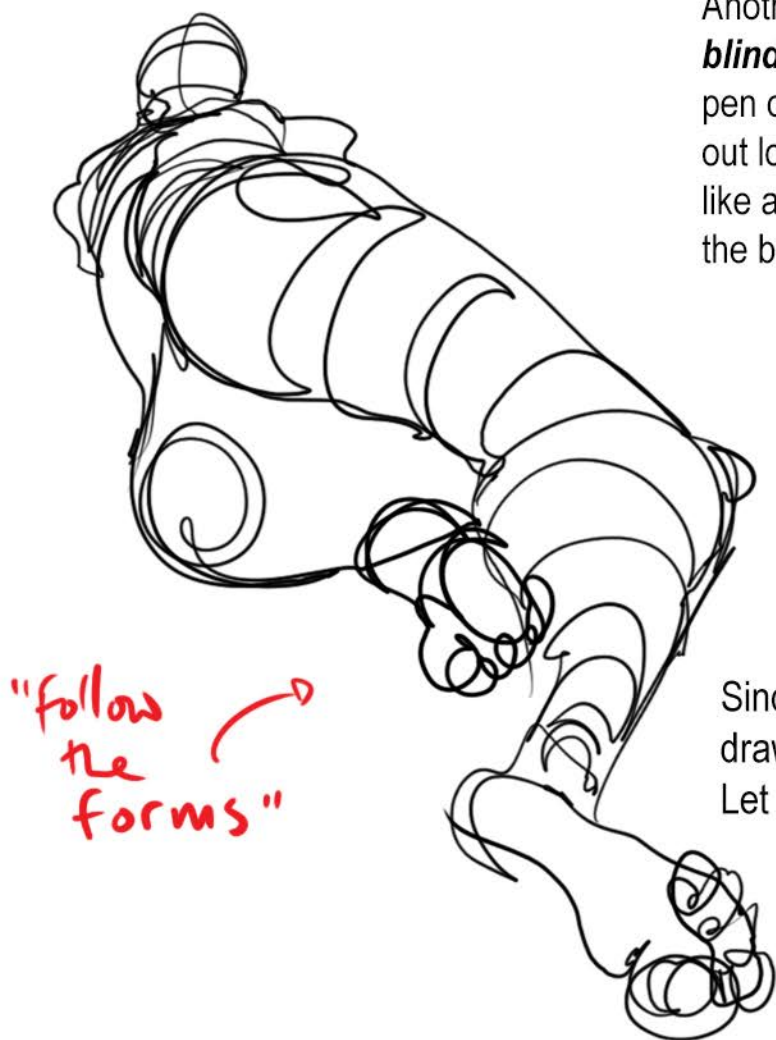
# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - FORESHORTENING - Contour Drawing



Another great exercise for foreshortening is **blind contour drawing**. Keep your pencil or pen on the paper the entire time—draw without looking at the result. Don't just outline like a police chalk drawing; instead, follow the body's forms without lifting your hand.

the '**half-blind contour drawing**' allows you to look down at your page sporadically.

Since you won't be looking at the paper, draw at the speed of your eyes. Let your eyes guide your hand as you go.



"follow  
the  
forms"

# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - FORESHORTENING - Contour Drawing



Focus on the elevation changes of the form—where forms tuck under or rise above each other. The *blind contour* exercise will improve hand-eye coordination, help you discover 3D forms, and lead to more dynamic poses. Plus, you'll end up with some nice odd drawings!

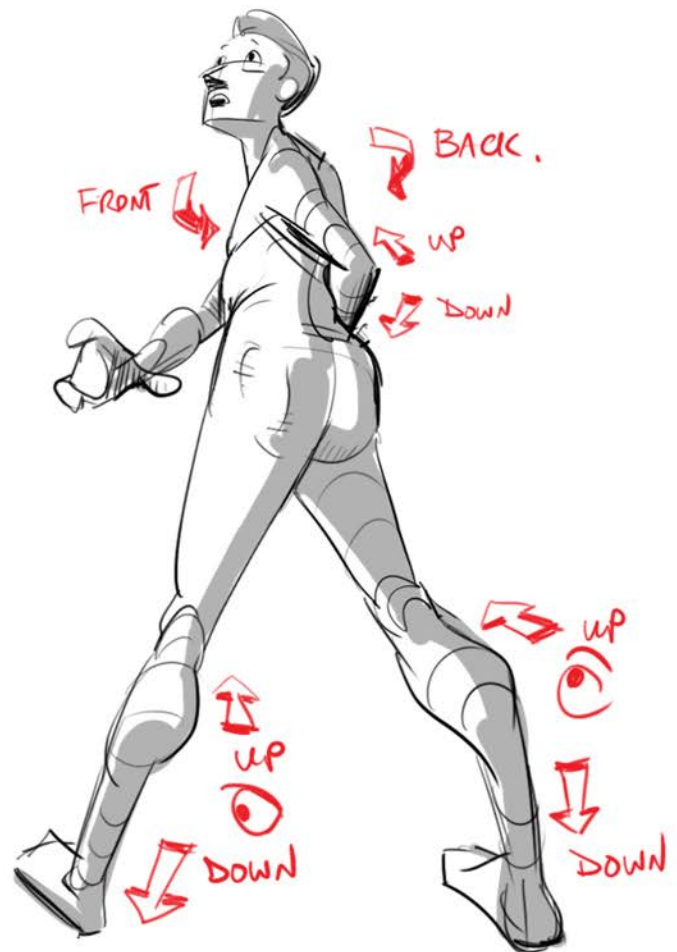


# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - Direction Changes

The beauty of life drawing is realizing the human figure isn't just 2D - it has form and depth. Depending on your vantage point, you'll see the model from *above*, *below*, and from all angles—amazing!

Anything above the *horizon line* you are looking up at, and anything below it, you are looking down at. The figure is full of direction changes at every angle.

HL



How many times can you tell someone: I can see your chest AND your back at the same time!

# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - Direction Changes



This pose is quite static. We could draw it flat, or...

...or, as always, exaggerate it a bit, keeping in mind the many direction changes within the pose.

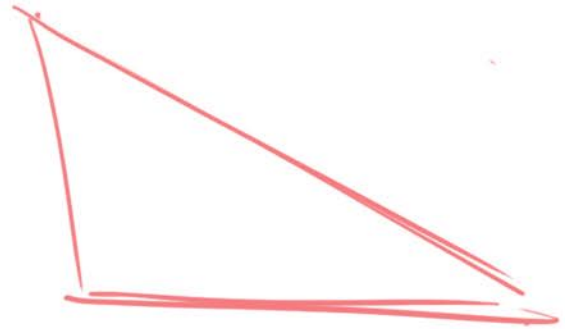
Try and observe where parts of the figure recede and come toward to you.





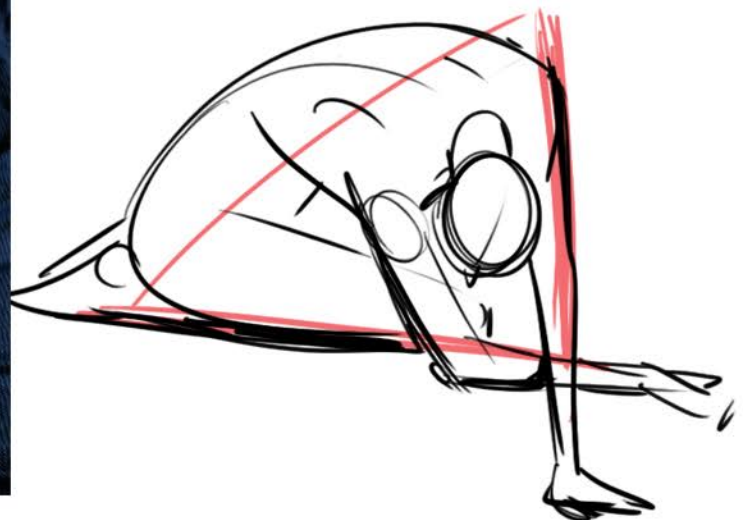
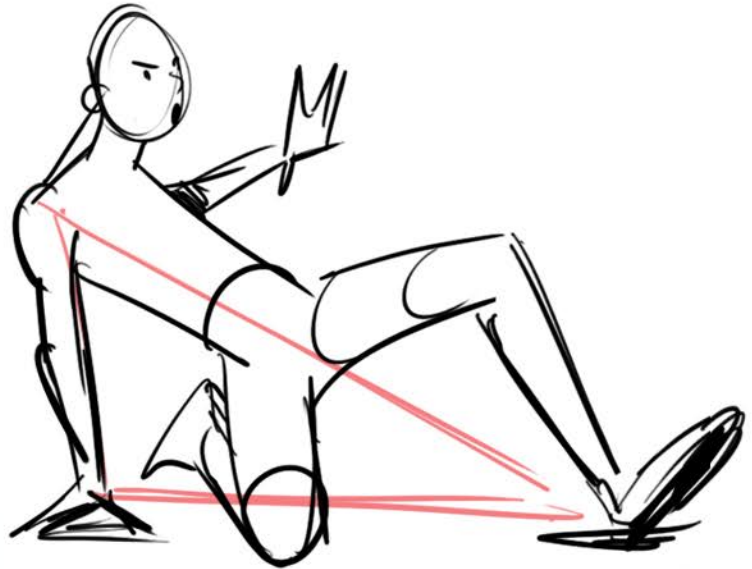
# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - SHAPE LANGUAGE

Another exercise to help capture the pose is to break it down to large geometric shapes

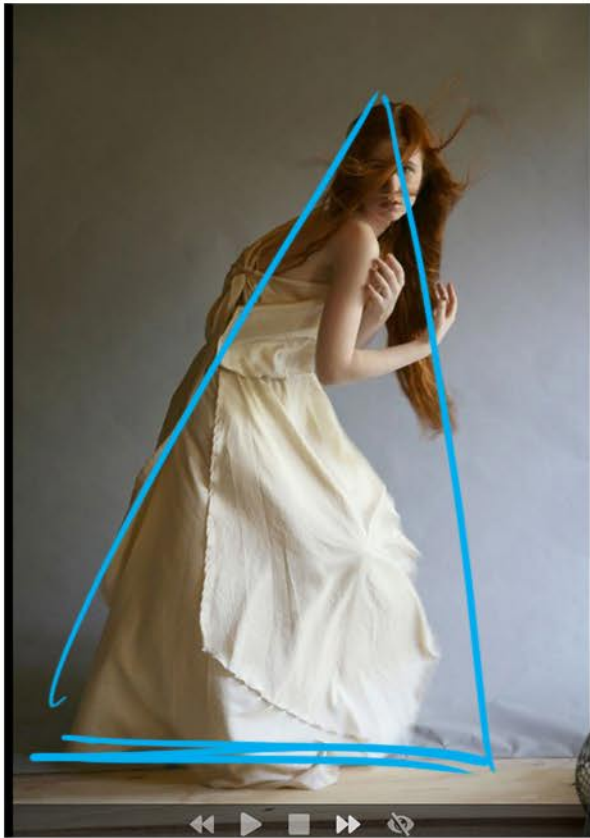


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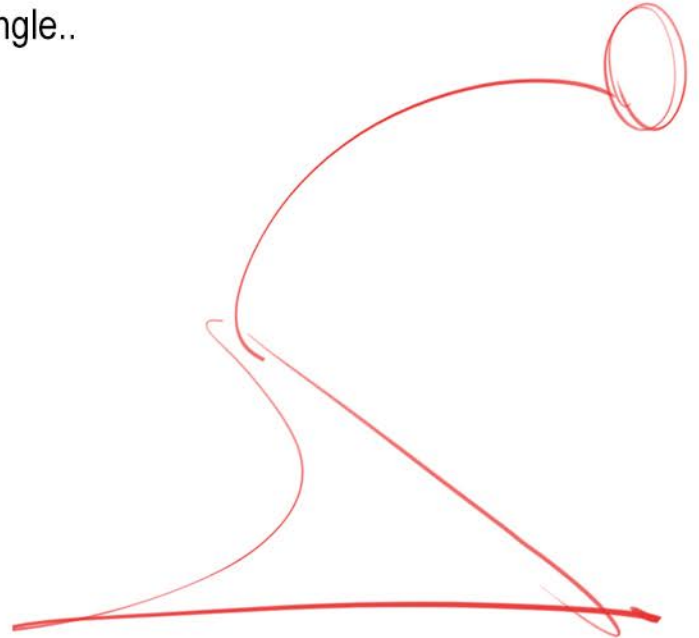
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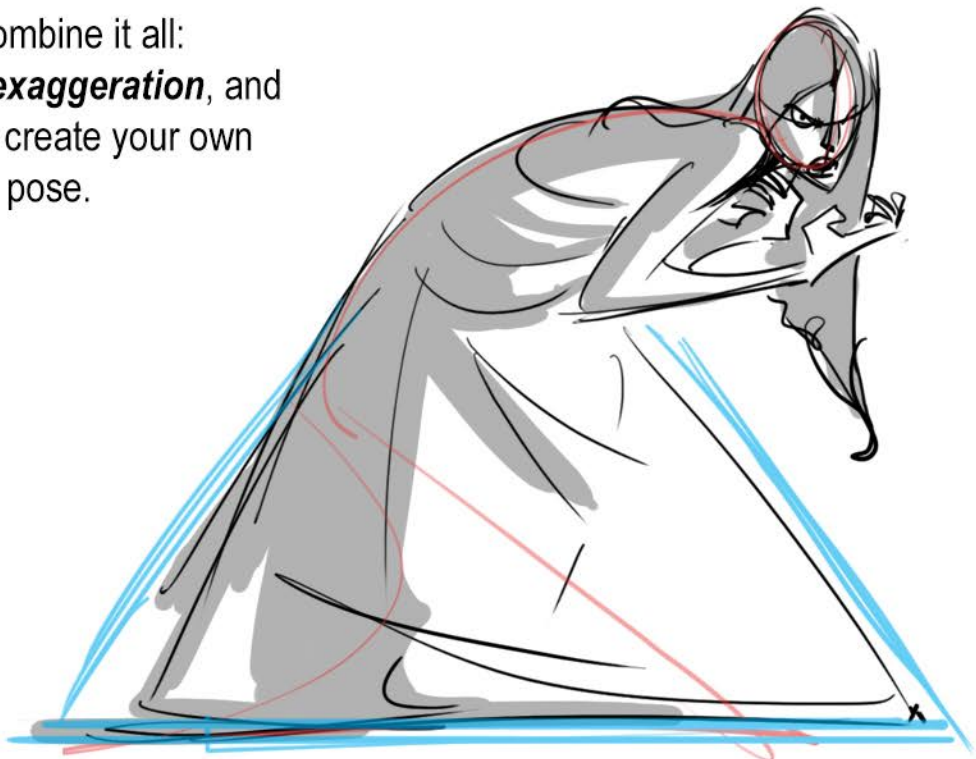
# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - SHAPE LANGUAGE



The overall shape of the pose was a triangle..



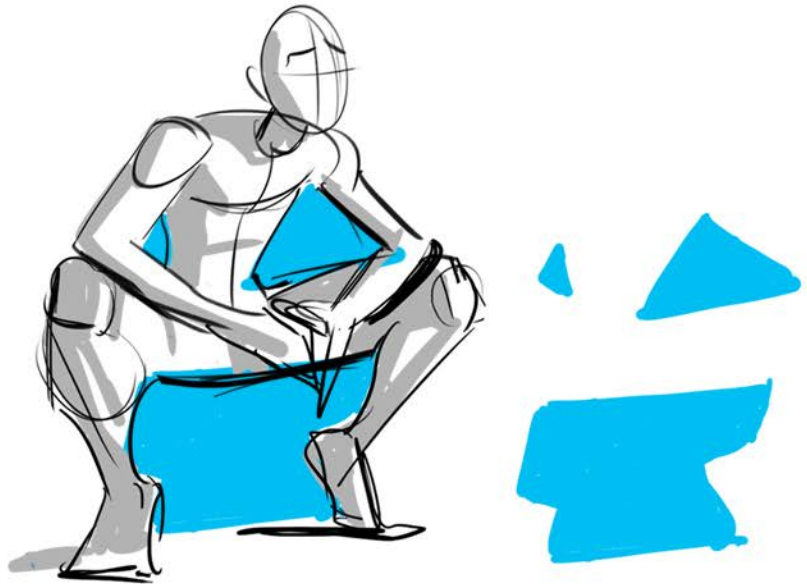
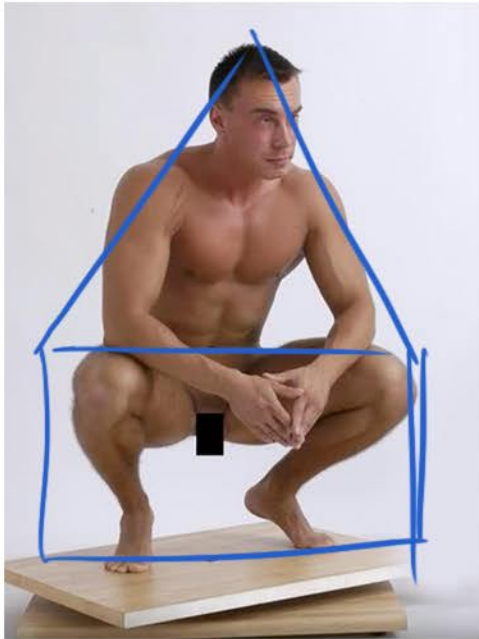
...but you can combine it all:  
**line of action**, **exaggeration**, and  
**expressions** to create your own  
narrative for the pose.





# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - NEGATIVE SPACE

Another way to help build your drawing is to look at the spaces in-between!

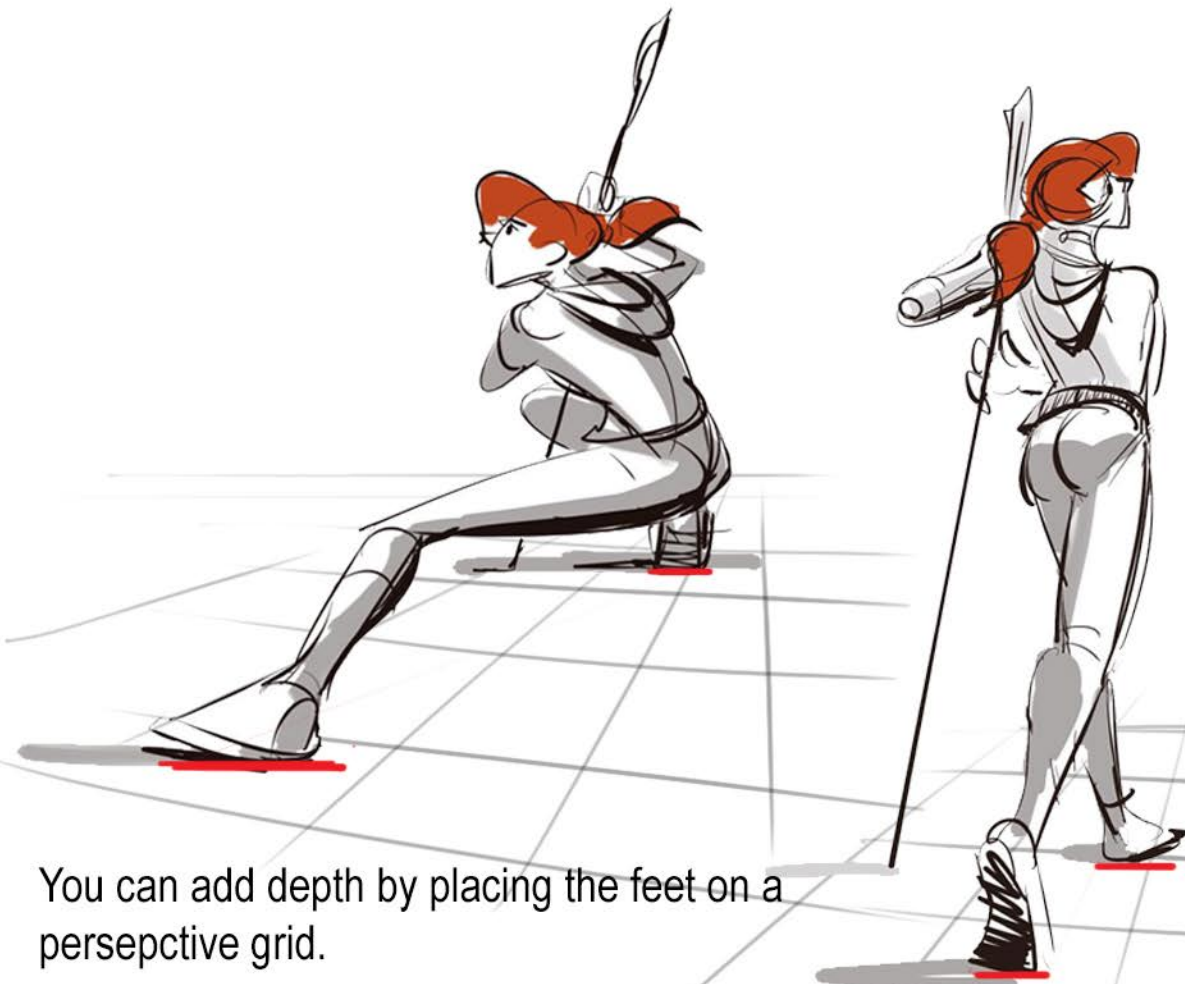
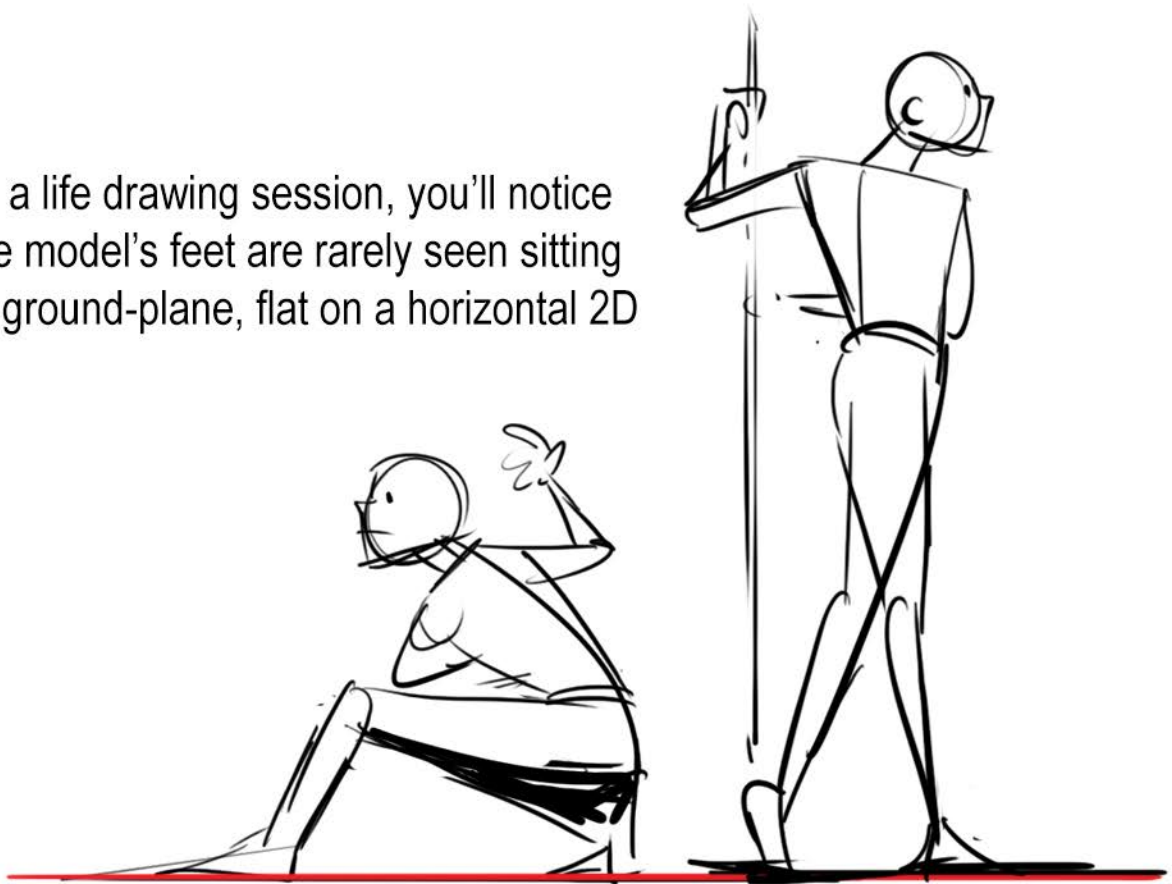


Searching for the negative spaces will also help in building your 'strong silhouettes'



# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - Depth and Perspective

During a life drawing session, you'll notice that the model's feet are rarely seen sitting on the ground-plane, flat on a horizontal 2D plane.



You can add depth by placing the feet on a perspective grid.

# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - LIGHTING

In a life drawing session, there are often multiple light sources — overhead fluorescents and spotlights. This can make it tricky to see the forms clearly through all the overlapping shadows.

## TIP!

TIP: Pick **one light source!**

Eliminate the others visually to avoid multiple cast shadows and keep the drawing simple and clear.

**EVEN  
DRAW  
THE LIGHT  
SOURCE  
ON YOUR  
PAGE**



In storyboarding, you'll sometimes add lighting to set the mood, but as always, keep it simple and clear. Eliminate the confusing lighting from a life drawing session.



# Lighting to Create Depth - Light vs Dark

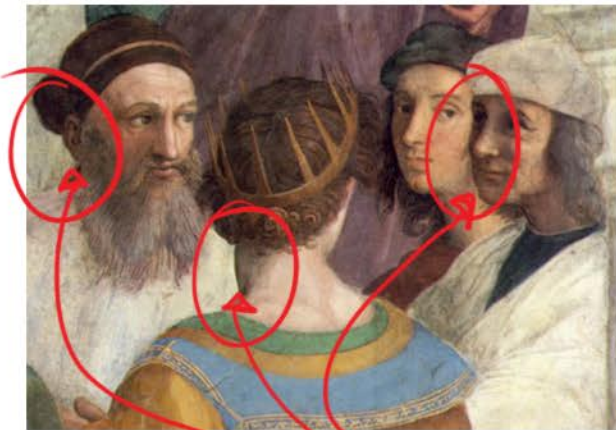
One simple tip to create depth: place a light against a dark. This technique, used by Renaissance painters, adds contrast and dimension to your drawing.



12thC Medieval painting



The RENAISSANCE! 15thC Raphael



**LIGHTS AGAINST DARKS**

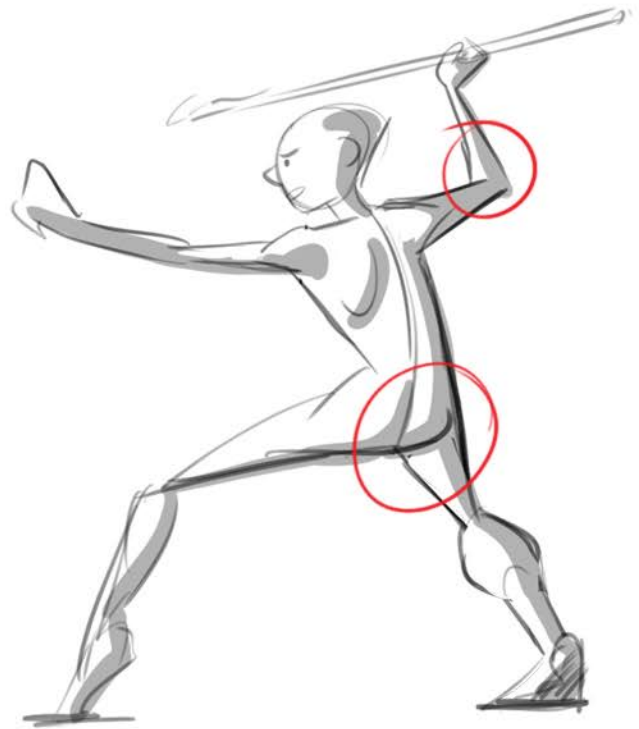
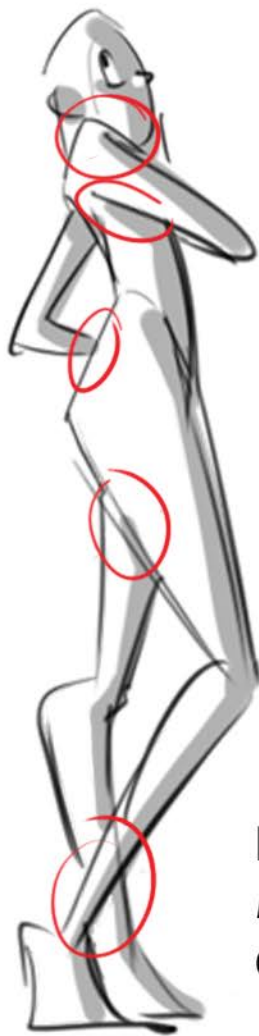


Michelangelo

**STORY:** This concept is something you'll see in real life all the time. When my art teacher pointed it out to me, it was an *enlightening* moment. It reminded me of 'Field of Dreams'—when the stepbrother sees the ballplayers for the first time and asks, "When did all these ballplayers get here?" They were there all along, but his mind was closed to seeing them. Lights against Darks are always present—use them to bring depth to your drawings.



# Lighting to Create Depth - Light vs Dark

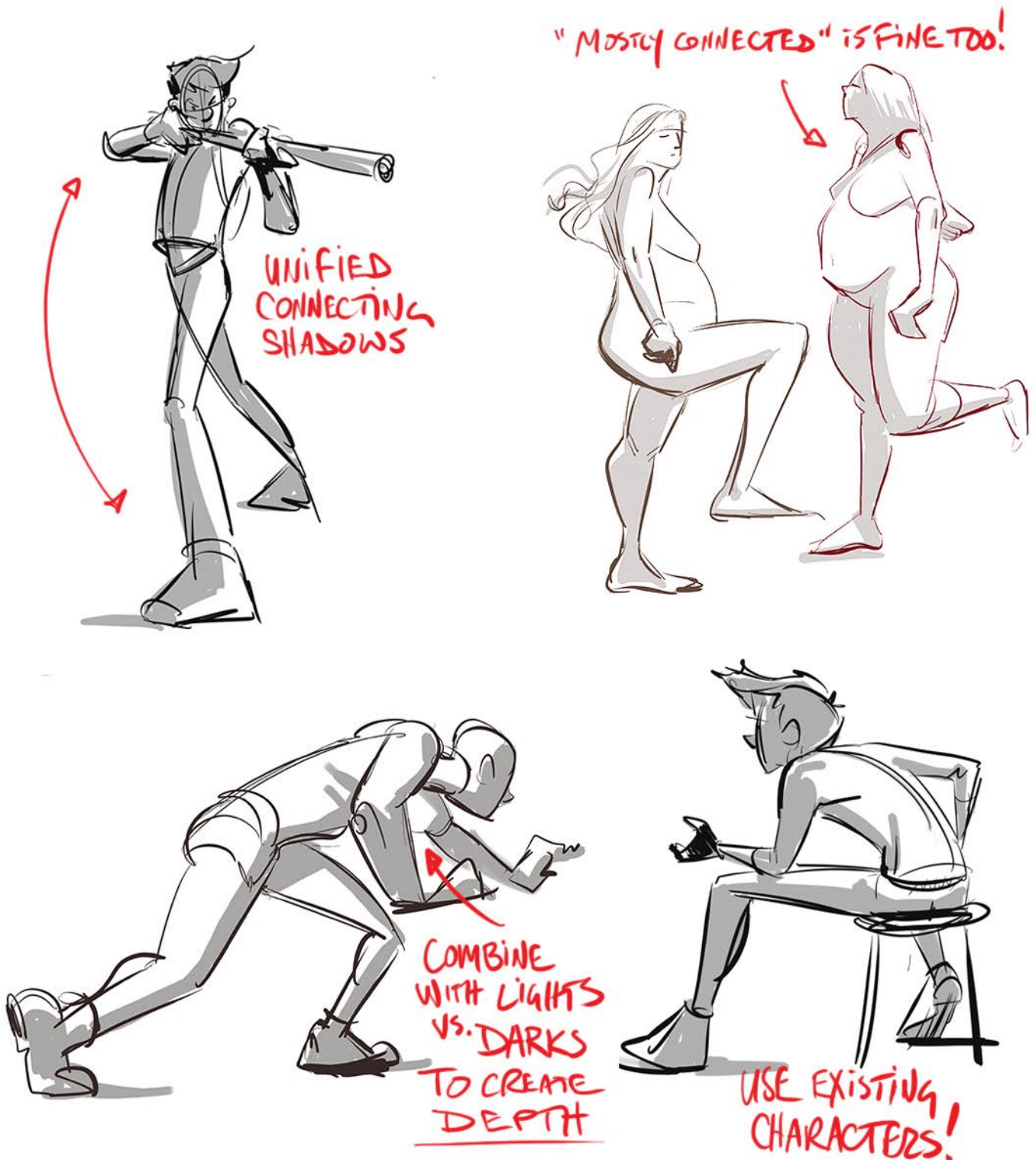


Look for places to put **Light** against **Dark** on the same pose to create overlap, depth and dimension.

# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - Connecting Shadows

This is a **TIP** from Disney storyboard artist, Normand Lemay\*:

When drawing shadows on the figure, try to keep them connected from start to finish.



Connecting the shadows will help simplify the lighting in a life drawing session and add clarity and simplicity to your drawings.

\* you can find more Normand Lemay tips at [grizandnorm.squarespace.com](http://grizandnorm.squarespace.com) or simply search "Normand Lemay Tuesday Tips" online



# PRACTICAL LIFE DRAWING - Resources - a sample

## Online

[line-of-action.com](http://line-of-action.com)

<http://reference.sketchdaily.net>

<https://www.quickposes.com/en/gestures/timed>

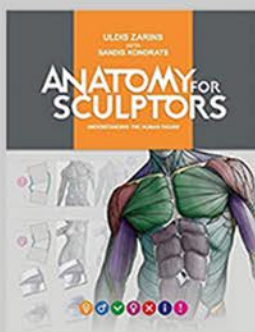
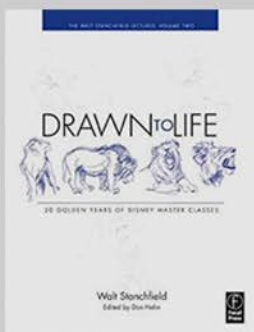
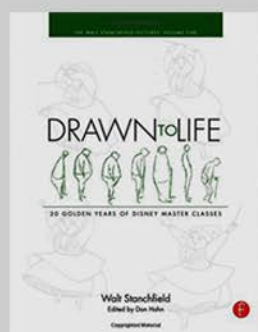
<https://www.bodiesinmotion.photo/>

- timed costumed and nude poses

<https://grizandnorm.tumblr.com/>

-Disney Artists, Normand Lemay  
and Grizalda Stayastema-Lemay

## Books



### Drawn To Life vol. 1, 2 by Walt Stanchfield

legendary Disney animator  
sharing lessons from life drawing  
sessions at Disney

### Anatomy for Sculptors

best modern  
anatomy book  
(available as .pdf)

### How To Draw Comics The Marvel Way

visual storytelling!

### Figure Drawing For All It's Worth by Andrew Loomis

legendary artist,  
designer with  
fundamentals

**Local Life Drawing sessions** (Vancouver, BC, late-2019 check online for info, subject to change)

**Basic Inquiry** - 1011 Main Street - (traditional life drawing, various sessions )

**Dr Sketchy Vancouver** - (various venues) burlesque-themed eat, drink, draw and be entertained!

**SNAG** - 926 Main St, The American Bar - monthly live art event w life drawing

**Kerrisdale Life Drawing** - 2909 W 33rd Ave. (traditional life drawing)

**Slice of Life Gallery** - 1636 Venables St.

**The Space2** - 3133 Kingsway ( Japanese Kinbaku rope bondage life drawing. Oh My!)

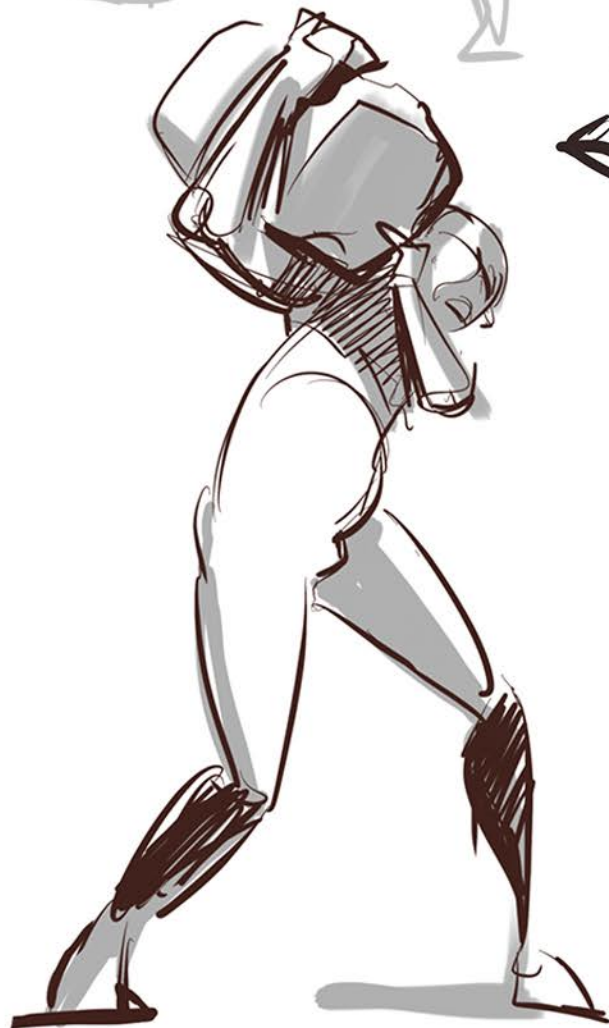


# BONUS GALLERY - Thanks for reading! Have Fun!

the model was doing this:



but I dressed him as  
Dirk from  
*'Last Kids on Earth'*



# BONUS GALLERY - Thanks for reading! Have Fun!



the model was doing something like this, but I turned him into Jack, from *'Last Kids on Earth'*



the model was sitting on a stool, but I turned him into Superman lecturing the children...



# BONUS GALLERY - Thanks for reading! Have Fun!

