

Get a Grip: Exploring How to Hold a Pencil

The do's and don'ts of how to hold a pencil are not written in stone; each of us has our own handwriting. Just as our signature identifies us at the bank, how we make our marks identifies us as artists. With an open mind and a willingness to try new things we can expand our expressive potential.

When I was first learning to draw my art teacher emphatically told me, "Don't hold a pencil when you are drawing the same way as you hold your pencil when you are writing." Experience has led me to think it is more sensible to say, "Hold a pencil the way it will help you make the kind of marks you want to make." Over my

years as a teacher I have seen many artists hold their pencils in the most peculiar ways and still make beautiful drawings. When you are in a room with others who are drawing, stop and look around. Compare how you are holding your pencil to how other artists are holding theirs. You may be surprised by the variety of grips.

Although mark making is unique to every artist, certain pencil grips do favor certain marks, effects and styles. Here we present a few ways of holding a pencil alongside brief explanations of how they can help you achieve different results. In the long run, it is all about trial and error and the discoveries you make in the process.

WRITING POSITION

For writing, a pencil is usually held close to its point so that the small intricate shapes of each letter can be neatly made. This way of holding a pencil is perfect for doing details in drawings as well, but that tight a hold significantly limits the size and placement of the marks that can be made. They can only be small. You could attempt to raise your whole arm high off of the paper, but that is quite difficult and uncomfortable, especially at a horizontal writing desk.

SHORT PENCIL

Using an old worn-down pencil or a new one that has been cut in half relieves tension in your back, wrist, hand and fingers. It makes it easier and more comfortable to draw for a longer time. It also improves your control when you are making small, delicate marks. Several short pencils can be tied together so that one line becomes three or four rhythmically repeated ones.

ANCHOR

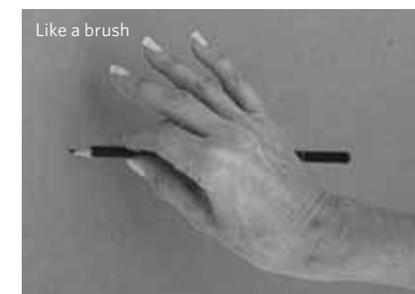
Keeping your hand in a writing position while raising it just a little off of the paper allows you to use your fifth finger as an anchor on the surface so that you can maintain the stability of your hand. This makes it possible for your fingers to carefully control the small actions necessary for detailed shapes while extending the size, shape and range of the drawing you can comfortably reach.

LIKE A BRUSH

Holding a brush or a pencil between the thumb and the index finger with the third, fourth and fifth fingers off of the length of the body allows the arm freedom from the surface, making long straight and curving strokes possible.

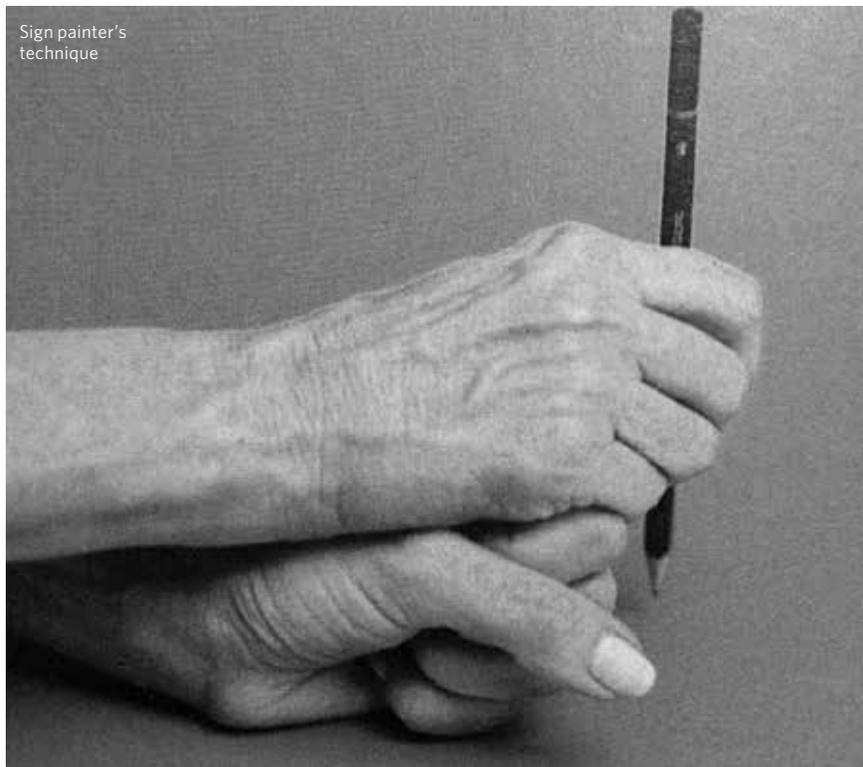
PERPENDICULAR

Moving the pencil between your thumb and second finger, resting your third, fourth and fifth fingers on the paper and holding the pencil perpendicular to the surface makes it easy to do short, neat, crisp vertical lines.



Chava
by Sherry Camhy, 2000,
graphite, 72 x 48.

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SIGN PAINTER'S TECHNIQUE

In order to get longer straight strokes and accurate curves, pick up your pencil about a quarter of the way up from the point and place it between your thumb and second finger of your dominant hand. Make a fist with your other hand and rest your drawing hand directly on top of it. Both hands now can work together. The bottom one rocks horizontally, enabling the upper one to make vertical and swirling movements.

COOK'S CURVE

Imagine holding a large spoon and stirring soup with it. Your little finger is closest to the top of the pencil with all four fingers tightly gripping its length. With your thumb resting on the very top of the pencil, it can control the pressure and direction of the point. It's exciting to

use this method of working to build spiral curves that go from quite light to extremely dark with the flick of the wrist.



Nellie
by Steven Assael, 2013, graphite and crayon, 14 x 11. Courtesy Forum Gallery, New York, New York.



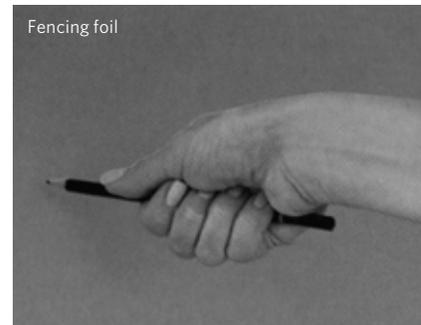
CALLIGRAPHER'S BRUSH TECHNIQUE

Japanese and Chinese calligraphers hold their brushes vertically, inches above their paper until they are ready to strike with a deliberate, calculated movement. They can control the width of the stroke with the weight of their arm. Holding a pencil in the same manner doesn't give you the same control over the width of your lines, but it will allow easy, flowing changes between dark and light.

FENCING FOIL

So far we've considered grips in which the artist's hand remains on or close to the image's surface. As the hand is allowed to move further away from the paper, many other ways of working become possible.

With all four fingers curled along the length of the pencil, reverse the placement of the point so that it is under your thumb with its back sticking out



from the circle of your curled fifth finger, the way a fencer might hold a foil. As your wrist moves up-and-down and side-to-side, your thumb can control where and how forcefully the point strikes. It also feels a little like holding chalk to write on a blackboard.

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN

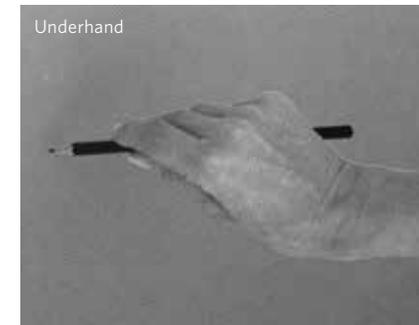
Slightly loosen your grip on the pencil so that your fingers spread out slightly,



spaced along the pencil's length. If you turn your wrist so that the back of your hand faces down and your fingers are belly up like an upside-down bug, your hand position will resemble the ones ancient Egyptian artists used to create gracefully curving lines.

UNDERHAND

Next, if you simply tighten your



fingers a little and turn your wrist down, you will find this underhand technique will be quite comfortable for making long repetitive lines next to each other for shading with a wedge-shaped pencil point.

TAIL END

Gently grasping a pencil by its tail at arm's length while its point rests firmly on the paper is a perfect

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method for contour line drawings. With your eye moving slowly and steadily over an object, your arm can move at the same speed and in the same direction. With a great deal of concentration and a lot of practice your skill at this kind of drawing can grow amazingly accurate.

TWIG PENCIL

A painter might hold a brush at the heel of its ferrule and get up very close to the canvas for small details,



but a painter also often steps back. The further away a drawer moves from a drawing, the easier it is to see the whole picture and to use bigger, bolder marks either to establish the beginning of the composition or to complete it.

One method for working farther from your surface is to dip the pointed end of a long, thin young twig in powdered graphite—a “twig pencil.” With it you can draw very far from your surface, similar to making marks with a stick in the sand. The marks will often wander slightly out of control,



Samira

by Bernardo Siciliano, 2009, graphite, 22½ x 24.
Courtesy Forum Gallery, New York, New York.

which can yield intriguing accidental results.

However you hold your pencil, monitor your image as you work. Often as an artist develops a drawing it seems to lose the life it had at the beginning. Wake it up. Add quick action lines. Add accents or highlights. Don't be afraid of the darks, and let your lights sparkle. And try a new grip—you may find a new approach gives your drawing just what it needs. ❖