



Get Started Right with Coloured Pencils



By Phil Davies





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Introduction



This guide is designed to get you set up and seeing results with coloured pencils quickly.

It's not an exhaustive guide to coloured pencils and techniques. You don't need that to make great artwork - in fact too much information will only slow your progress.

I'm a huge believer in the 80-20 principle. Applying that to drawing and painting, it means that 20% of all the possible techniques and materials will give you 80% of the results.

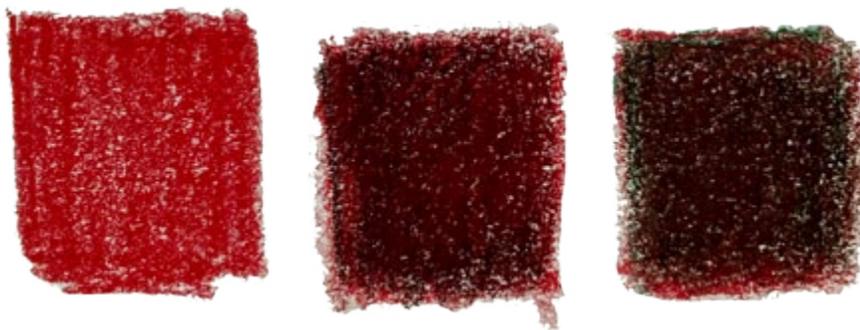
Or in other words, the majority of techniques, tips and accessories you could learn about will only make a very small difference to the quality of your artwork.

This is why I stick to a very limited set of colours for each drawing (comparative to most colour pencil artists). I don't stress over the paper surface, I don't bother with solvents and I only occasionally use a burnisher.

I created the following four images with no more than 8 -12 pencils each, all available from Faber-Castell's starter set of 24.

The only time I buy individual pencils is to replace the ones I use most frequently (i.e. the white and cream).

A lot of botanical artists have hundreds of pencils in order to select a precise colour match. And purists will spend hours making dozens of colour charts of various layering combinations in order to avoid using a single pencil out of the tin. Many frown on the use of black to create a shade, saying instead you should experiment with different complementary colours.



Red with black added to create a shade in box 2 versus using the complementary colour green, in box 3. Using black is much quicker and requires a lot less layering and blending. I disagree that using black creates a 'flat' for "dull" colour.

These artists can spend 50+ hours on a single drawing.

All well and good if you have the time, patience and money for that approach. It's not for me and, more importantly, it's the exact opposite of what newcomers need. It's the 80-20 principle in reverse - spending most of your time and effort on things that make the smallest difference.

The longest I've ever spent on a colour pencil drawing is six hours (a photorealistic style). My sketchier styles are completed in less than two hours. The sneakers image took me about two hours including the drawing-out stage. The fried egg a bit less, and the waterfall about an hour and a half.

I do this by focusing on the few things that make the most difference.

This guide is my attempt to show you how to do the same.



• SECTION 1 •

Recommended Materials

Pencils

Like many art materials, coloured pencils are made by mixing pigment with a binder. Better quality pencils have more pigment and less binder than student or budget pencils.

The coloured pencil brands you'll see on the market can be split into two categories - those that use a wax binder and those that use an oil binder.

There are pros and cons to both.

WAX BINDER PENCILS

Example brands:

Caran D'Ache Luminance

Prismacolor Premier Soft Core & Verithin

Derwent Colorsoft & Studio

Pros: 👍

- Generally easier to blend than oil-based based pencils
- Very rich, buttery colours (it can almost feel like you're painting!)

Cons: 👎

- Prone to unsightly waxy blooms (a bit like a cauliflower or run back in watercolours)
- Nibs break more easily than oils based pencils



Caran D'Ache Luminance



Prismacolor Premier Soft Core & Verithin



Derwent Colorsoft & Studio

OIL BINDER PENCILS

Example brands:

Faber-Castell Polychromos

Lyra Rembrandt Polycolor

KOH-I-NOOR Polycolor

Pros: 👍

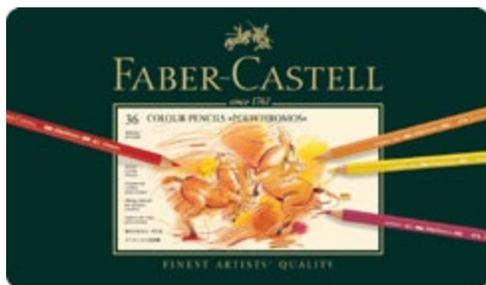
- Easier to layer than wax-based pencils (in my opinion, not everyone agrees)
- Less prone to breaking

Cons: 👎

- Colours not quite as intense as wax-based pencils
- Can be more difficult to blend than wax-based pencils

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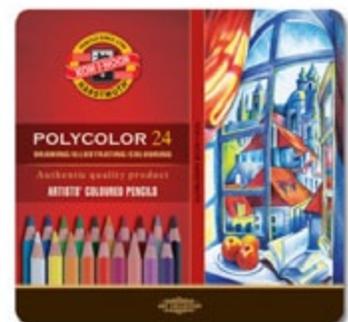
I have a clear favourite pencil overall. It's the same as many other artists - which is great because if a lot of us agree, it makes your purchasing decision easier!



Faber-Castell Polychromos



Lyra Rembrandt Polycolor



KOH-I-NOOR Polycolor

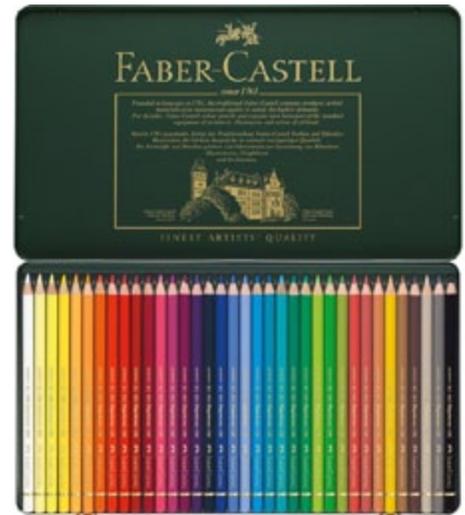
RECOMMENDED PENCILS

The coloured pencils I recommend to the majority of artists are Faber-Castell's Polychromos.

If you want to save some time and just take my word for it, you can move swiftly on to how many pencils I suggest you get by [clicking here](#).

But if you need some rationale behind my choice here it is... I recommend Polychromos because:

1. They are soft enough to give you very rich colours (almost as rich as the best wax-based pencils).
2. They are THE most resilient coloured pencils I've used and hold a sharp point really well compared to wax-based pencils. This sounds trivial but it's not. Nothing will frustrate the heck out of you more than pencils that constantly break when you sharpen them. It's why I don't recommend a number of other well-known brands.
3. They layer and blend more easily compared to other oil-based pencils and almost as well as the best wax-based pencils.
4. They don't produce unsightly waxy blooms.
5. Lighter colours erase well (for when you're doing your initial line drawing - more on that later).



Faber-Castell's Polychromos are the colour pencil I recommend to the majority of artists.

I've used virtually all the major artist-quality brands of coloured pencil. Here are my thoughts on some of the most well known:

Prismacolor Premier Soft Core - beautifully intense colours and blending is a joy. But they break far too easily and often. Cheaper than Polychromos but you'll burn through them much more quickly. Also prone to waxy blooms.

Prismacolor Verithin - much harder and so more resilient but lacks colour intensity and blending ability. Needs to be combined with a softer pencil, which only adds complexity to your materials list.

Caron d'Ache Luminance - excellent wax-based pencil and a close call with Polychromos but very expensive. I'd still probably go with Polychromos even at the same price.

Lyra Rembrandt Polycolor - a good oil-based pencil but not quite the same level of vibrancy of colour as Polychromos.

Koh-i-noor Polycolor - this would be my alternative recommendation and if you want something a bit cheaper (depending where you live in the world) with similar results to Polychromos.

In summary, Faber-Castell Polychromos are the best all-rounders and in my opinion the best for making your drawing life easy.

I recommend a set of 24 or 36 (36 if you want to do portraits)

(SIDE NOTE) Light Fastness

There's an obsession in the art world with light fastness (a colour's resistance to fading with exposure to light). There are fierce debates over which brands of acrylics, watercolours and coloured pencils should be chosen with the



greatest weight placed on their light fastness. Some people even mix and match brands to choose the most light fast combination of colours. Here's my take...

If you're a professional selling your art for lots of money, then obsess over light fastness. If you're a serious leisure artist (and that's the category I place myself in by the way), then just go for artist quality materials and forget about the whole light fastness paranoia.

If you're a newcomer, and you want to practice, light fastness is irrelevant. You have other things to focus on right now!

SET SIZE

Polychromos come in sets of 12, 24, 36, 60 and a whopping 120.

When you're starting go for a set of 24 or 36. I say "when you're starting out" but I've never actually bought anything other than a set of 24 or 36. I've only bought individual pencils from those sets (such as the white) to top up colours I go through more quickly.

This is important...

More colours makes life harder not easier. Any more than 36 and you're spoilt for choice. It increases something called 'decision fatigue' and it's a big hindrance to newcomers - something I'll explain later in this guide.

With my approach, limiting your materials is one of the core principles to becoming a better artist more quickly. It's true for every medium and coloured pencils is no different.

If you're not interested in doing portraits, then go for the set of 24. If you can see yourself doing portraits at some point (and you should!) then get the set of 36. There is no subject matter you can't tackle with a set of 36. Trust me!



Surfaces

The surface you work on with coloured pencils matters but while it seems like there's an overwhelming choice, really it just comes down to a couple of things.

Here's how to choose the paper that will help shorten your learning curve...

SURFACE TEXTURE

We can keep it simple and split surface texture into two categories:

1. Smoother Surfaces: Easier to achieve a smooth blend but harder to layer colours on top of each other
2. Rougher Surfaces: Harder to get smooth blend but easier to layer

So which do you go for?

Discount the really smooth papers. You won't be able to layer colours on top of each other much at all and the colours will look quite dull on very smooth paper.

Papers that are too smooth:

- Bristol paper with a smooth surface
- Hot pressed watercolour papers (although you can get away with some brands)
- Also discount the really rough papers. Unless you want a very loose sketchy style, too much paper surface shows through for most people's liking.

Papers that are too rough*:

- Any rough watercolour rough paper
- Many pastel papers (such as an Ingres, honeycomb or sanded texture)

**Note: when I say "too rough" I mean if you want one all round paper. Rougher surfaces are great for loose, expressive drawings but less so for more refined drawings.*

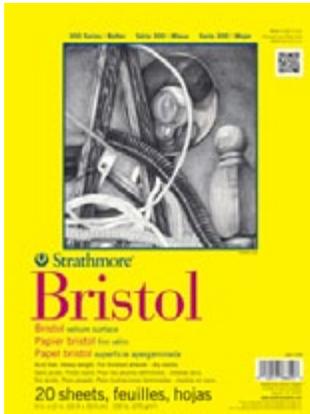
For an all rounder, go for a paper that has some texture, but not too much.

Surfaces (cont.)

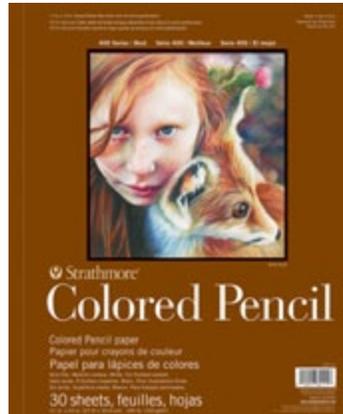
Just right papers:

- Bristol paper with a vellum surface
- Good quality drawing paper

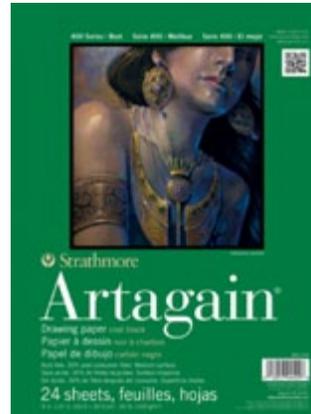
Here are some specific brands for you to choose from:



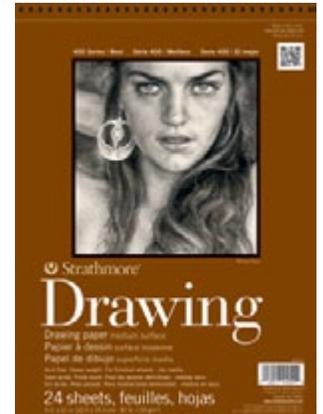
Strathmore 300 Series Bristol (vellum surface not the smooth surface)



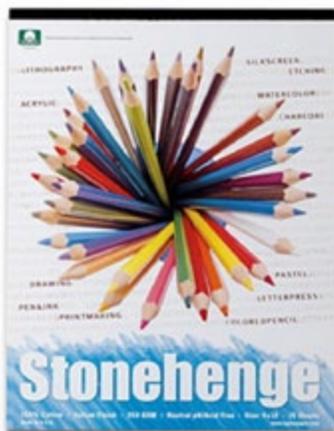
Strathmore 400 Series Colored Pencil (400 series is very good quality)



Strathmore 400 Series Artagain (available in various colours)



Strathmore 400 Series Drawing (available in recycled as well)



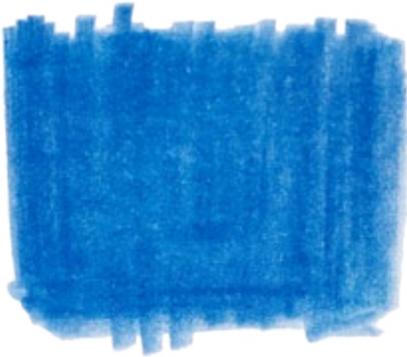
Stonehenge (vellum surface)



Derwent Drawing (a low cost good all round paper)

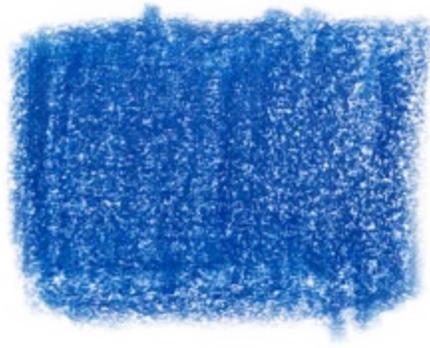


Carson Mi Teintes (a great texture for looser drawings)



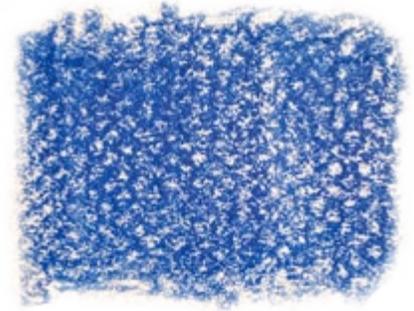
Bristol Smooth Surface

It looks nice - almost painterly - but this was a dark blue pencil. You can't layer much on top of this either.



Bristol Vellum Surface

Same blue pencil and look how much darker and richer it is compared to left. You can also layer on top of this with darker colours.



Mi Teintes Surface

Notice how much texture shows through. Great paper for looser studies but this is as rough a texture as I'd go.

SURFACE SIZE

I almost always work on A4 or American letter size paper (or whatever the nearest equivalent is). This is roughly 200 x 300 millimeters or 8 x 11 inches.

I do this purely for time purposes - the bigger you work the longer it takes, obviously!

Working bigger takes longer but it will also get you better results if you want to achieve a photorealistic style. Why?

Because even if you sharpen your pencils every 30 seconds, it's hard to create very small details and subtle blends at small sizes. It becomes really fiddly.

Also, when you work big small inaccuracies are much less obvious - a line that is about by a millimetre on a huge drawing is unnoticeable. On a 6 inch drawing it's significant.



Working bigger takes longer but you'll also get better results if you want to achieve a photorealistic style.

SURFACE COLOUR

Here's something controversial... I recommend that everyone start on a toned grey paper. And if you're not starting out but you're not happy with your results either, then try grey paper.

Here's why...

It allows you to see and compare lights and darks a lot more easily.

Being able to judge lights and darks is MUCH more important than being able to judge and match colours. I'd go as far as saying that when it comes to creating form (how solid and 3-dimensional your drawing looks), colour is nothing, value is everything!

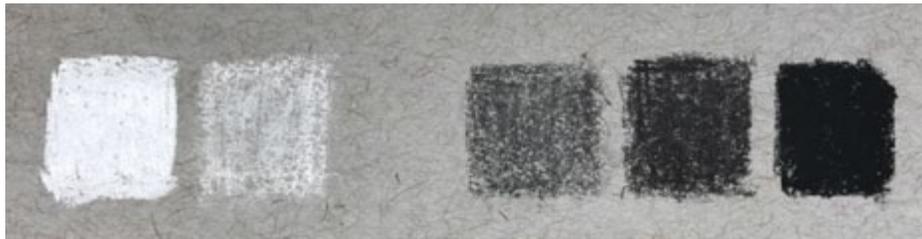


Most of my coloured pencil and pastel pencil artwork is on either grey or another mid toned paper

Imagine a scale of lights and darks. One end is pure white, the other end is jet black:



A grey scale on white paper. Every value has to be judged against the extreme left end of the scale (the white paper surface).



A grey scale on grey paper. Every value can now be compared to the middle of the scale (the grey paper surface). Plus it's much easier to judge lighter values.

When you work on white paper, you have to judge the lightness or darkness of every colour to pure white - an extreme end of the scale. That's tricky to do. It's one of the reasons why the single biggest 'mistake' we see amongst hobby artists is darks that aren't dark enough.

When you work on grey, you are comparing the lights and darks of your colours to the middle of the scale. You can see whether your lights are light enough and darks dark enough.

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I recommend that everyone start on a toned grey paper.

I know the following image isn't coloured pencils (I used a black and white charcoal pencil) but the grey paper made it very easy for ArtTutor members to follow along. I've added some student results beneath my lesson image:



By ArtTutor member BP



By ArtTutor member Jacquie8

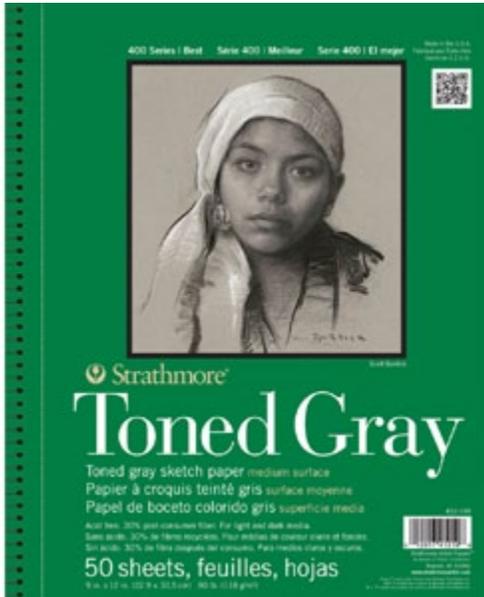


By ArtTutor member Marguerite

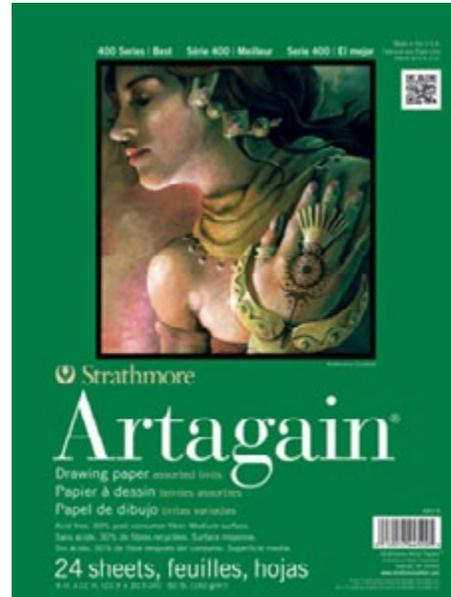


By ArtTutor member stilda2012learner

Here are the grey papers I use and recommend:



Strathmore 400 Series
Toned Gray Sketch



Strathmore 400
Series Artagain in Steel Gray

(SIDE NOTE) Archival / Acid Free Paper

Cheaper papers are made with wood pulp and are acidic. That means over time (a long time!) they will turn yellow and degrade.

Many papers made for drawing and painting are acid free, meaning they won't degrade as much over time. More expensive papers are made from cotton pulp and are said to be archival (they won't degrade at all).

If you plan on making art that will hang in museums for the next 200+ years, just accept you'll have to put your hand in your pocket for the best cotton-made archival paper.

Otherwise, look for the acid-free symbol on any paper you buy.



Acid free logo.
Some paper might just say "Acid Free"



Accessories

The reason I love coloured pencils is because of how fuss free they are. No mess, virtually no set up and the bare minimum of materials. As such, this section will be short!

SHARPENER

I refuse to let any hobby frustrate me. That's why I gave up golf. If it wasn't for testing a few different sharpeners and pencils I may have given up drawing!

All I want to do is sharpen a pencil to a good point - quickly and consistently - without the nib breaking with every other turn on the blade. Not too much to ask right?

I've managed to pretty much cut that frustration out of my life using certain brands of pencils (Polychromos for coloured pencils, as you know) and avoiding certain types of sharpeners. Here's my rundown...

Hand Held Sharpeners

These are the best for most people. They are cheap as chips and if you buy a job lot each time and use a new one every two or three drawings, you'll be saved from sharpener rage.



Good quality sharpener by Staedtler

My favourite is this one by Staedtler. It's still cheap but not cheap enough that you'd throw it out after two drawings. Buy two of three at once and throw out after you start getting breakages and chewed up wood.

Electric Sharpeners

These things will make mince meat of your pencils. You'll burn through them at such a rate that you'll end spending a fortune. We have four different brands in the studio. One is great, the others break the nib with frightening consistency. I'd like to see them banned.



Very low cost sharpener multi pack. throw out after one or two drawings

Blade & Sanding Block

This will give you the best control and the least breakages, in theory. The blade exposes the nib from the wood and can be used for a sharp point but boy that last bit is tedious. Use a sanding block to get your sharp point.



Swordfish Ikon
mechanical sharpener

Mechanical Sharpeners

This is what I use but it needs to be a good brand and they're not cheap. I've been using my mechanical sharpener for a year and it gets heavy use once a week. So far so good but at some point I'll have to change the blade (especially as I use it for pastel pencils too).

I use the Scholar and Ikon by Swordfish and I've heard good things about the Rapesco 64 for those in the US.

ERASER

A kneadable eraser is great for gently lifting out colour without damaging paper. You won't lift a lot of pencil but I use it for erasing back my line drawing when I need to (usually drawn with a light coloured pencil, not graphite).

Plastic or vinyl erasers are great for erasing mistakes where you've added too much colour or too dark a colour and need to get back a few layers. They can crush the paper surface though so once you've used it you're not going to be able to layer a lot on top of it. Use sparingly!

Scotch tape or masking tape can be used to lift out fine lines and I do use this on portraits.



Kneaded eraser



Vinyl / plastic eraser

BURNISHER / COLOURLESS BLENDER

This is a colourless pencil that allows you to blend several layers of colour together. I only use a burnisher for photo realism and where I want a particularly smooth surface.

It's subtle. You'll get more of a change with wax based pencils but it's worth having in your toolkit.



Lyra's colourless blender

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Colour pencils are fuss-free with minimal set up.
That means you're more likely to use them more often.
That means you'll improve faster!

SOLVENTS

Don't worry about these when you're starting out. Every additional tool or material adds a layer of complexity that you don't need.

In time, when the basics are second nature, you could play about with solvent blending if you really want. I didn't use any solvents on the images in this guide - just a few pencils and the occasional burnisher.



• SECTION 2 •

Techniques



Layering

As I mentioned in the introduction, this guide is not an exhaustive guide to coloured pencils and techniques.

It's designed to get you set up and seeing results quickly.

This section focuses on a few key tips and predominantly one technique - layering. I believe that if you can get to grips with how coloured pencils layer on top of each other, you'll be most of the way there (especially if you have some drawing background).

LAYERING

For the pear on the left, I paid no attention to layering. I used one colour in each place and only light pressure. Lot's of paper surface is showing through and it looks pretty insipid and flat.

On the right, I tried to blend and layer the colours somewhat but I used lots of pressure from the start. I found that a lot of colours wouldn't 'take' to the layer below. It's better but a combination of these two pears would work best...



No layering - light pressure



Attempted layering - heavy pressure

In the third image below, I've used several layers in most places, starting with lighter pressure and lighter colours and then gradually adding more pressure and darker colours with each layer.



Lots of layering - gradually increasing the pressure for each layer

Layering seems like it could be complicated with an infinite number of choices and variations but I have 3 'rules' or principles that will simplify the whole process.

//

Layering is the foundation of good coloured pencil artwork.
It's the single most important technique to understand.

► **RULE 1: The more layers you want, the less pressure you use for each layer.**

The less pressure you use, the more paper surface will stay showing through... and that gives the next layer of colour something to grab on to.

If you use lots of pressure on layer one, you'll crush the paper surface and you're not going to have any tooth for the next layer to grab on to.

Here's an example...

In the following cube I'm going to use red with lots of pressure:



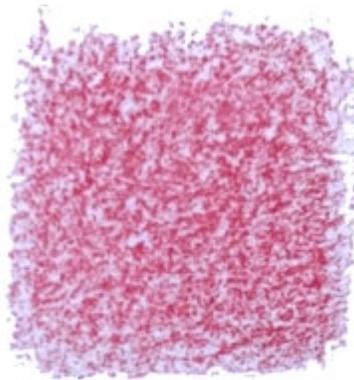
If I want to make this a more pinky-red, when I try to add white on top it just skids off the surface of the red. I've got to really dig the pencil in to get anything:



If this time I use about the same pressure for the red I'd use when writing (lets call that 50%-60% pressure), you'll see how some of the paper texture shows through:

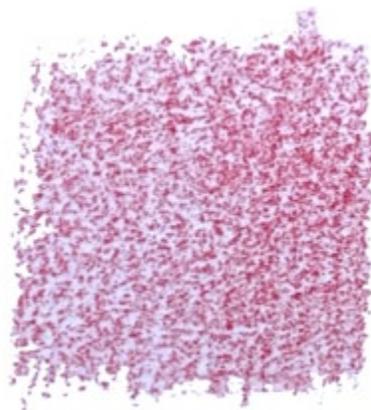


I can now use the same pressure with the white:



The white has something to grab on to rather than gliding off the surface.

Now, if I use less pressure (let's say about 30% - so less than what you'd use to write a letter) here's what one layer of white and one layer of red looks like:

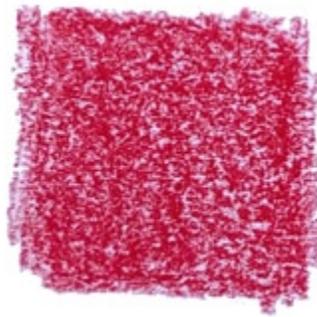




The less pressure you use, the more paper will show through...
and that gives the next layer something to grab on to.

Lot's of paper surface showing through.

I can go back and forth with the red and white, with the same pressure, until I get a more even blend and most of the paper surface has disappeared:



A few more layers of
red and white



Several more layers
of red and white

The question you should be asking now is why you'd bother using less pressure and lots of layers to achieve a similar result you get using more pressure and just one layer of white and one layer of red.

That's a great question! In this case, with two colours, I wouldn't bother. I'd do what takes less time and energy - one layer of each with more pressure to begin with.

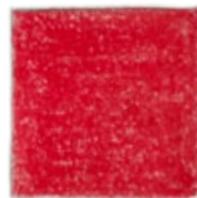
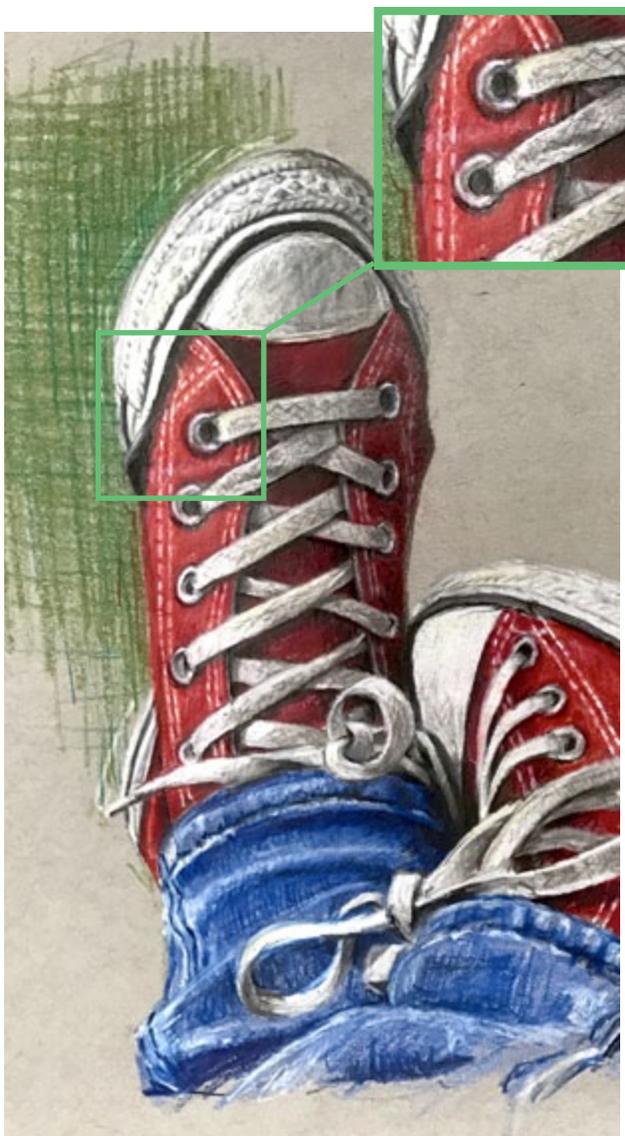
You can take that to the extreme...

If there's an area of your drawing where you know the colour of the pencil in your hand is exactly the colour and value (darkness) you want, then just use full pressure right away and completely cover the surface in one layer.

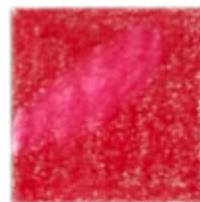
Here are some real world examples:

In this drawing of Converse sneakers, the whole left side of the main shoe (circled) was created with a firm pressure (let's say 70%) of the scarlet. I knew that I'd only need some very subtle lighter and darker areas (magnified) just to break up the shape a bit. I then went back over with the red to blend it all together.

Here's how that looked in stages:



Start with a mid red using firm pressure. That covers the paper surface quickly and I know I don't need a lot of layering, and that those layers will only be subtle



Use lots of pressure to add a subtle white highlight. If I wanted a bright white colour (like for the stitching) it's too late to add it now. I have to add those first or reserve some paper surface as I'm adding the red.



Do the same with the grey to create a shadow area. I don't need to use as much pressure as I do with the white because, generally, darker colours layer more easily on top of lighter ones.



Go back over the area with the red with moderate pressure to blend everything together.

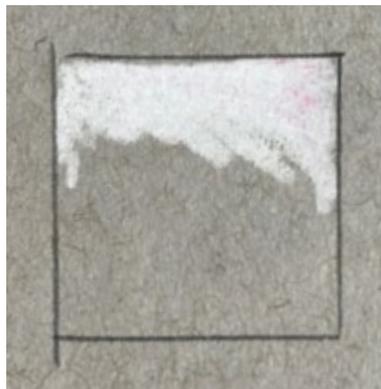
Look at the toe cap.

I used full pressure with the white in the circled area right away because I knew I wouldn't need anything on top of that. But to the left I used less pressure because I knew I'd want to add some grey.

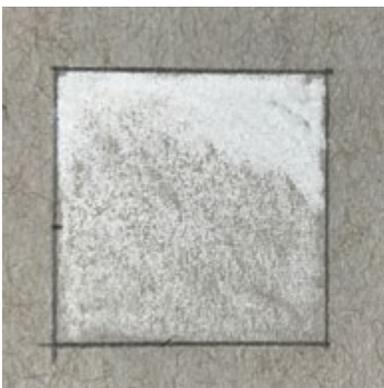
Here's how that looked:



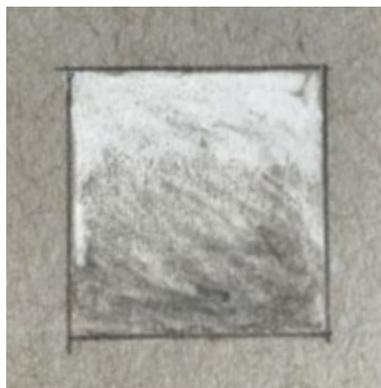
I created the toe cap using white and grey



Full pressure with the white on the left of the toe cap because I want that as a bright white



Less pressure on the right of the toe cap because I want to mix it with the grey to make it darker.



Layer some grey on top of the white with moderate pressure. Because there is some paper surface showing through, the grey pencil blends and layers more easily

► **RULE 2: Layer from light to dark.**

For this egg shell, I didn't have a colour that looked egg-shelly. And even if I did, there are lots of different subtle colours within an egg shell and using just one colour would look really flat and boring.



Also, look at the changes in value (lightness and darkness).

You've got the bright highlight and the lighter area around the highlight, then you've got the dark shadow towards the back.

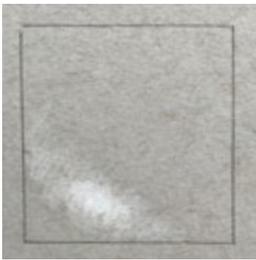
There are lots of layers going on here so what sort of pressure do you think I used for each step?

Yep 30% or less, or in practical terms no more pressure than I'd squeeze a full tube of toothpaste to get some out.

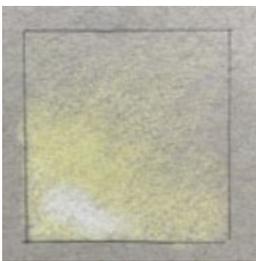
Here's how I built up the layers and what you'll notice is that I'm layering the colours from lightest first to darkest last:



Here's the rather boring reference photo I used for the egg shell. I left the red stamp mark out of the final piece.

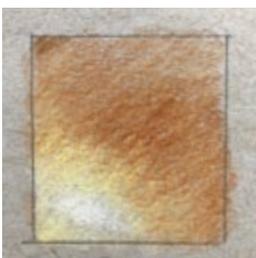


I start with the light highlight using full pressure to get a bright white. Use less pressure around it because I want other colours in there later - so I need some paper surface to show through.

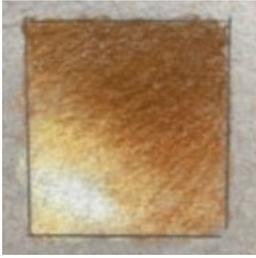


I add my next darkest colour - some light yellow. Notice how I've used more pressure around the highlight and less pressure as I move away. Why is that? Because I know I'll need less layering around the highlight area (I want it to be mostly yellow there) but further away I'll be layering more colours so I need more paper surface to work with.

Notice also how I haven't added any yellow at the top of the box. I'll need dark values there and too many colours underneath is going to stop me achieving that.



The next darkest colour is the closest thing I could find to an egg shell colour - a sort of orangey brown. Again, I've used more pressure where I think this will be close to the final colour (around the middle bit of the shell) and then less pressure elsewhere - where I just want it to be a subtle under layer.

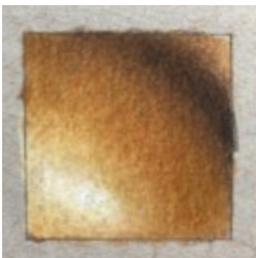


Next up is a mid brown. I used very little pressure in the middle of the egg and next to no pressure towards the highlight. I use moderate pressure towards the top of the egg.



The fifth colour I use is a dark brown. I only use this for the dark shadow at the top using moderate-heavy pressure.

Even though I've used five pencils so far, can you see how any one part of the egg shell only has two or three layers at most? I haven't just used the white all over, then the yellow all over, the egg-shell orange all over and so on. If I'd have done that, the top part of the square would have so many layers I'd struggle getting that dark brown on.



Finally, I just take the pencils I've used so far and gently adjust the various parts of the shell so the transitions are more smooth. This is really easy to do when you have your main layers down less neatly first.

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As a rule of thumb layer from light to dark - start with the lightest layers and progressively add darker ones.

► **RULE 3: The lightest light & darkest darks should be one layer**

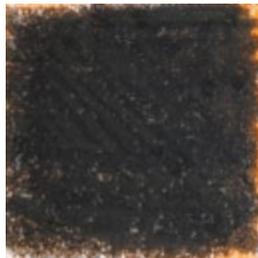
In this cafe front the darkest darks are the windows, and the lightest lights are the white menus in those windows. Compositionally, having your lightest light and darks dark next to each other in the focal point is a good thing, but more on that another time.



In my experience, most newcomer artists fail to see that the darkest dark on their drawing or painting should be jet black and the lightest light be pure white, most of the time. Show me any subject matter in almost any lighting conditions and I'll find you either jet black or a pure white, and usually both.

To achieve this in coloured pencil, you need put these down on to the paper surface without any colour underneath.

That's why it's often a good idea to put your darkest darks and lightest lights in first - so you don't forget to reserve the paper in that area.



Black on the paper surface vs on top of light orange. For both squares I used as much pressure as possible. Look how the second square is a light value.



White on the paper surface vs on top of light yellow (right hand side of the second box). See how, even with lots of pressure, I can't get a nice strong white on top of another colour.

In the fried egg example, I added all the bright white highlight first. I then added gentle layers of white and grey back and forth with light pressure until I achieved the lightness and darkness I was after.



I added the brightest highlights first, with full pressure. This is easy to do on grey paper!

Then I added subtle layers of grey (and white on top of that grey) to build up the shadow areas. The stronger the shadow, the more pressure I used with the grey.

Here are some student examples:



By ArtTutor member Lise-Lotte Baarup



By ArtTutor member Wandam

One last example of layering...

This soda can has a couple of areas of silver-coloured aluminium.



Because I was going for a more photorealistic style, I wanted to layer in some very subtle blues and reds that were being reflected in the surface of the silver bits.



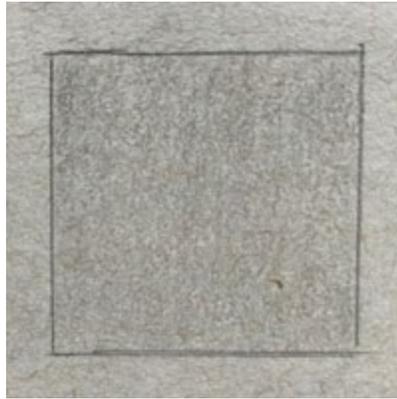
Look how there are some very subtle blues in this area. And the whole aluminium colour is more of a purpley-grey than I had in my tin

I knew from doing a quick test in my sketchbook that those blues and reds would look way too vibrant no matter how little pressure I used. So I needed to use some white to mute them.

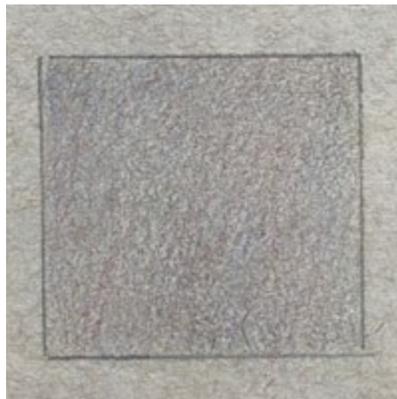
And the grey base colour of the aluminium is more of a purpley-grey than the grey I have in my tin, so I wanted to change the colour of that too.

Sounds like it could be really complicated and tricky right?

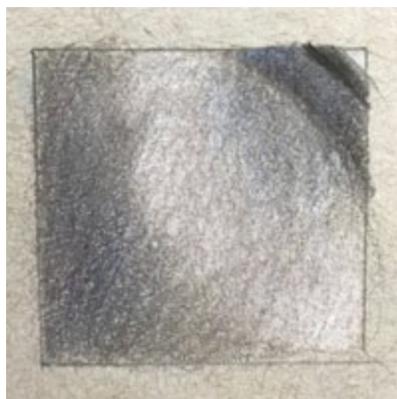
Nope. All I did was start with a very light layer of grey (let's say 20% pressure). I used small circular strokes to get a nice even coverage:



Then I added a super-light dusting of blue and magenta:



I then went back with the grey and strengthened any darker areas and lightened some areas with the white:





Choosing Colours Ahead of Time

I have a simple method for working with both coloured pencils and pastel pencils that I think every newcomer will benefit from.

Even now, I stick to this method religiously because it makes the process of making art so much easier, quicker and more enjoyable. And you should enjoy the process as much as the end result!

It's simply this...

1. Pick your colours out before you start
2. Leave the rest of them in the tin
3. Close the tin and move it to one side

What this means is that I typically work with about 10-12 pencils maximum for a drawing out of a set of say 24 or 36.

Why is this such a big help?

It massively reduces something called decision fatigue. Decision fatigue is where you have to make so many little decisions, in a short space of time, that you become mentally overwhelmed and fatigued.

If you've got to constantly think...

"Should I use this pencil or this one?"

"Is that the right colour or is it too dark?"

"Do I go with that red or that one?"

...you become mentally anguished and you certainly can't get into any kind of flow where you produce your best work.

By picking your colours out at the start, and sticking to them, you put the whole colour choice dilemma to bed.



Pick your colours out before you start. Leave the rest in the tin.
Close that tin and put it to one side.

Drawing and painting should be a form of meditation. It should allow you to switch off. If you've picked out your colours beforehand and you discipline yourself to stick to those, you'll significantly increase the likelihood of that happening.

"But what if I choose the wrong colours? Shouldn't I be testing each one as I come to use it?"

Firstly, colour choice isn't nearly as important as you think. Value - the correct balance of lights and darks - is more important than you think.

For three of the four images in this guide, I could have used any variation of each colour and got a result that I was just as happy with. In fact, if I did those three studies again tomorrow I'd probably choose many different colours simply because I don't remember what I used first time round!

What would remain the same, are the values - the lights and darks. No matter what colours I select.

Secondly, the reason you won't pick completely erratic colours ahead of time is because you're going to test them in your sketchbook or on a scrap of paper first. Here's how you do that...

15 Minutes of Prep - Always!

Before any drawing I do, I spent 10-15 minutes choosing the colours, testing them on a scrap of paper, and doing some test layering.

At the end of those 15 minutes I have a limited set of pencils (so no decision fatigue and every chance of settling into a flow and losing myself in the drawing). And I also have the confidence and reassurance that I'm going to be able to create the effects that I want.

Here's how I did that for the cafe front (which has the most colours and textures of the four images in this guide)...



I broke the image into distinct areas or colour palettes:

- The wooden door frame
- The stone wall and canopy
- The bench and table
- The green plants and sign

I focused on one colour palette at a time, starting with the wooden door frame (because why not start there?).



I looked at the lightest colour within that door frame and to me it looked like a yellow. So I picked a couple of yellows from my tin.

The next darkest colour, and what I'd call the overall base colour, looked like an orange. So I took out two of those. I had four to choose from. I just randomly picked two. The darkest colour in the frame is a brown. I only really have one dark brown so that's easy. And finally, I take out the black because I can see some really dark recesses within that frame.

Next I try out the colours I've chosen. I just make little swatches in order to choose one of the yellows and one of the oranges:



Two yellows from the set of 24. I'll choose one



A couple of oranges (I'll choose one)



A dark brown and the black

And you know what?

Most of the time I can't decide what to go with so I just pick the first one that jumps out at me!

Sometimes it's obvious - sometimes the yellow or the blue or the green looks completely different on the paper compared to the outer casing. That's why I choose a couple and do test swatches, like above.

Next, I pick a very small part of the door frame - one that has a nice range of those colours in. Here's one circled below:

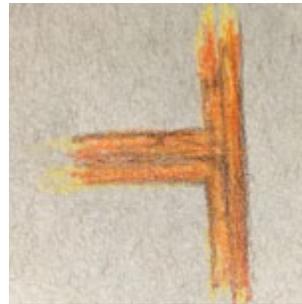
And I do a rough sketch of just that area:



Layer the yellow with light/moderate pressure.



Add a layer of orange with the same sort of pressure.



Add some browns for texture.



Sharpen up the edges and give some contrast with the black.

It looks ok. So four pencils that go in the lid of my tin.

Just in case my young son decides to introduce that tin to the floor, I make a quick note of the pencil number on my scrap of paper.

I then repeat the process for the stone wall.

When I choose those colours, what I'll try and do is make use of any colours I've already selected for the door frame. This keeps my pencils to a minimum and also helps with colour harmony.

I repeat for the the bench and table.

The green sign and plants.

Here's what my 'scrap' piece of paper looks like:



My test piece of paper with colours, their numbers and a few quick studies.
Total time: 15 minutes.

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15 minutes of prep. Always!

Here's the lid of pencil tin. With little bits of kneaded eraser separating the colours:



A total of 11 colours is all I've picked out for the entire cafe front drawing.

I recommend you use something other than the lid of your pencil tin because I know what you're like... you'll dip into the other pencils and I really want you to avoid that ;)

What I'm not going to do, which is what so many do, is figure everything out on my actual drawing paper as I go along. No matter how experienced you are, or become, take a few minutes to test your materials.

And finally, what I don't care one jot about during this process, is exact colour matches. Life is too short. Besides, you're making art not a carbon copy.



Summing Up

If you're starting out with coloured pencils, or not making the kind of artwork you want, do this:

- 1 Go with Faber-Castell Polychromos. They are the best all-round pencils.
- 2 Use grey toned paper. Strathmore's is great. All the images in this guide were completed on that. You'll find everything easier on grey paper.
- 3 Use simple, cheap handheld sharpeners. Buy several at once and throw them out regularly. If budget allows, get a decent mechanical sharpener like the Swordfish Scholar.
- 4 Forget about solvents and other types of blending techniques. Get a colourless blending pencil or burnisher if you want to do photorealistic stuff. A total of 11 colours is all I've picked out for the entire cafe front drawing.
- 5 Get yourself a kneadable eraser and half decent vinyl eraser.
- 6 Practice layering different colours (light to dark) by using varying amounts of different pressure. You can do this with simple boxes - you don't need to make them look like anything. Just get a feel for using lots of pressure and how that stops you layering on top, and light pressure and how many layers you can build up.
- 7 Before your next coloured pencil piece, commit to choosing a limited set of colours ahead of time, and putting the rest away!
- 8 Use a spare piece of paper (ideally the same as what you're going to work on), to figure out the colours and layering techniques ahead of time.



• SECTION 3 •

Pear Study



Gather Your Materials

Before you attempt this study, gather your materials.

Get some grey toned paper - don't attempt to follow along on white.

I'll be using Faber-Castell's 24 set but you don't need to use the same brand if you have another already. The point of this study is to pick out colours available to you, NOT to pick the same colours as me!

Here's the reference we'll be using. It has some nice highlights and shadow tones. And importantly, for this exercise, it requires the layering of several colours to achieve the subtle blend of yellows, greens, reds and oranges:



This image is in the public domain so feel to use it as you wish. Print this page out on a regular printer and it will be the same size as my drawing below.

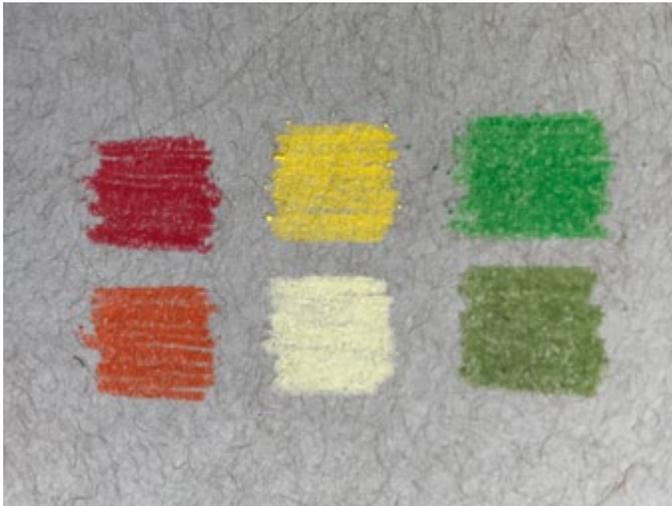
Step 1: Choose Your Colours

Spend a few minutes looking at the reference. What colours do you see?

I see greens, obviously. I see yellows on the right. I see reds and oranges in the centre and I see a dark brown.

Don't worry about how many different potential greens and yellows and reds you see. That's going to overwhelm you. Just choose a couple of greens, a couple of yellows, a red and an orange and a dark brown.

Here's my selection minus the dark brown:



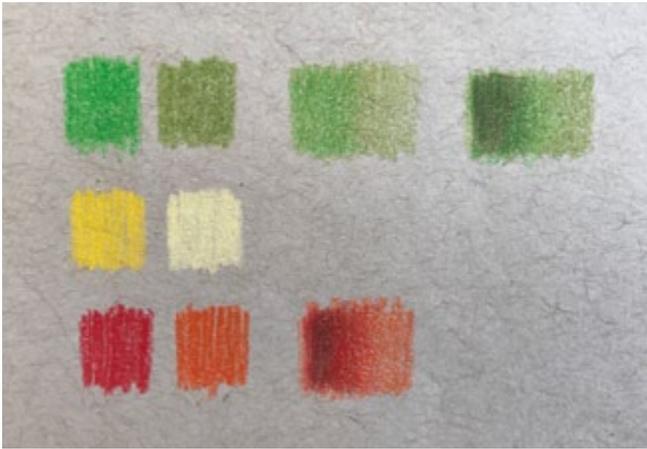
This is the six colours I ended up with. I tested a few other greens and preferred these. I thought it would be useful to have a light yellow and a more vibrant yellow. I could have chosen any number of reds or oranges.

To this I'm going to add a white and black plus that dark brown. So that's nine pencils in total:



Nine pencils, grey toned paper, a pencil sharpener and eraser is all you need.

Step 2: Practice Layering and Blending



Some simple layering tests to create a darker green and red.

With colours to hand I now want to test how they layer and blend. What I'm looking for is how to achieve dark and light variations (values) of the different colours.

For example, how do I create the dark green shadow area?

I layer the lighter of the two greens, then the darker green then the brown on top (see the top-right green swatch in the photo above).

I do the same with orange, red and brown.

The brown seems to work okay and I'm confident I can get a dark enough value with it for the shadowy areas on the pear.

For the lighter areas I know the white on top of the yellows and greens will work nicely but you should quickly test that out too.

I might need the black for the very dark shadow at the bottom of the pear and maybe bits on the stalk (I can mainly use the dark brown for that).

I need to remember to add a bright white highlight first thing as well.

That's about 5-10 minutes to figure out everything I need to now approach the drawing with confidence.

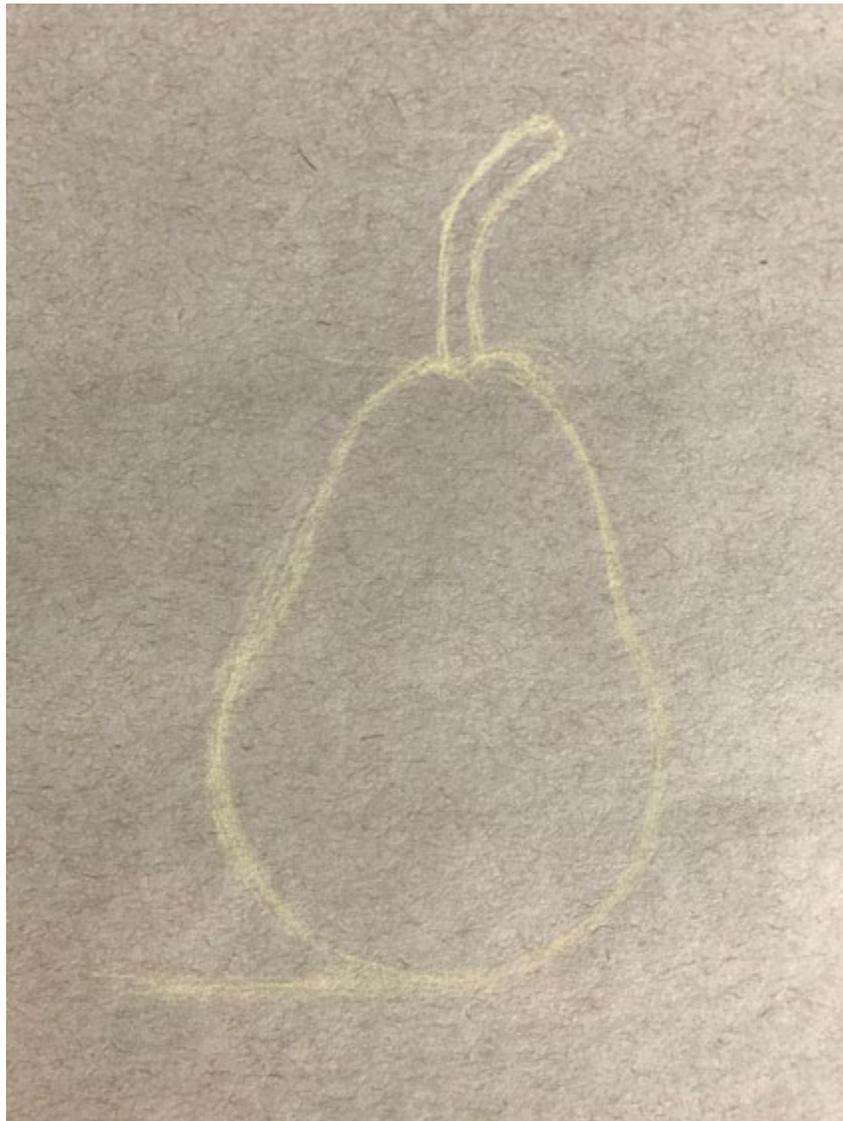




Step 3: Create Your Outline

This is a relatively simple drawing that you should try to draw by eye rather than tracing. To make it easier, draw size-for-size. In other words print the reference out and draw it the same size. That way you can make some simple measures with your pencil to get the height and width about the same.

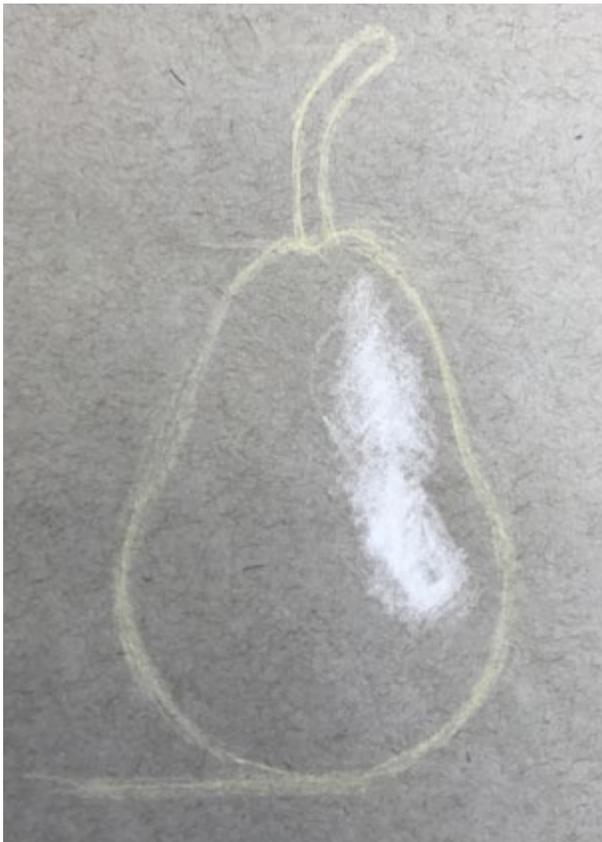
Draw the outline with a light / white coloured pencil. Coloured pencil won't cover graphite and while it's not too much of an issue for an image like this, for more detailed drawings (and definitely a photorealistic style) it can be ruin things before you start.



Step 4: First Layer (Highlight)

I add the main highlight on the right. I've used full pressure where the highlight is brightest and I want it to be pre white. Then I reduce the pressure around it.

I should have probably added the left hand side highlight too at this stage but forgot! I added it later on.



Step 5: Next Layer (Light Yellow)

I'm adding the yellow with the same pattern of pressure as the earlier egg shell example - stronger pressure where it's closer to the final colour and just a light dusting where I know I need more layers.

And I remembered to add those right hand highlights just in time!



Step 6: Next Layer (Lighter Green)

Adding the lighter of my two greens with same approach as the yellow. There's more green in the reference in the bottom left of the pear so I use more pressure there. I use very little pressure on the right of the pear.

By the way, I'm using really quick, sketchy back-and-forth strokes here. You can probably see that in the marks below (it's almost a bit scruffy).

What a lot of coloured pencil artists will do is use very small, circular movements to get a really even coverage on the paper. I do this sometimes, when I want a more photorealistic look, but I think it's a complete waste of time for a study like this, especially on these initial layers.



Step 7: Next Layer (Stronger Yellow)

See how I've added stronger yellow to the right and then only very lightly elsewhere? Hopefully I'm not repeating myself too much - this idea of varying the pressure is what will help you layer effectively and quickly.

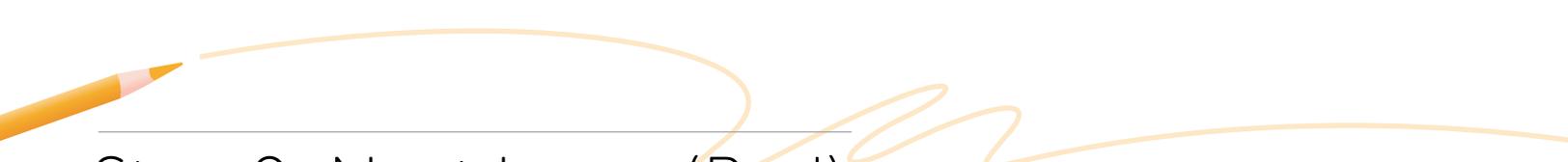


Step 8: Next Layer (Orange)

I've added some of the orange here. I may have started adding a touch of red in the photo below too - but again only in the areas that need it.

Importantly, the only place I have 'committed' a colour is the white highlight. By 'committed' I mean using full pressure which effectively stops my doing a great deal else over the top. The yellow in the top right is close but I haven't crushed the paper surface in that area just yet!





Step 9: Next Layer (Red)

I add the red on top of the orange gradually increasing the pressure. All I'm looking for are the rough patterns of colour. I use more pressure where it's reddest and less where it fades into the surrounding greens and yellows.



Step 10: Next Layer (Brown for Shadows)

I want to start creating some form now - a sense of three dimensions.

I'm going to use the brown to start turning the bright colours into shadow tones. Could I have used a dark grey or a black? Possibly, but I had the brown anyway and I felt it looked nicer than the black. That's what your sketchbook is for. It's a 30-second experiment!

You'll notice also that I've added the darkest shadow in black, at the bottom of the pear. This is my darkest dark and by adding that it gives me something to compare to.

I'm using light-moderate pressure with the brown because I can feel it layering really nicely. I don't want to commit to too much pressure too soon and go too dark. Remember: it's easier to go darker than it is to go lighter (you'd need your eraser for that!).

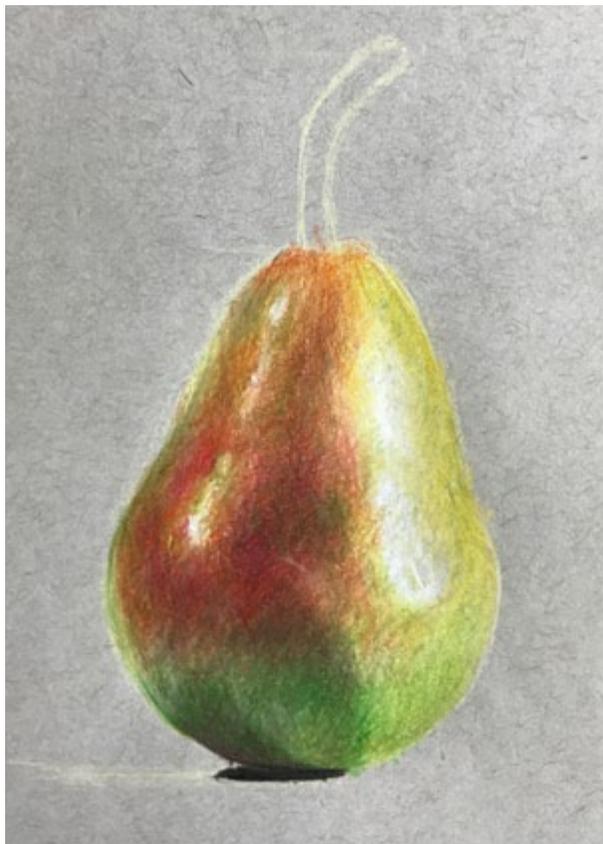


Step 11: Refine the Layers

So this step is going to look like a big jump from the last. But it isn't.

In the previous step I've got the various colours in their place and I've added the shadow tones. But there's still a lot of paper surface showing through and everything looks a bit weak and insipid. Now I want to commit the colours to paper by using more pressure, which will remove most of the paper surface from sight. I do by using all of the pencils I've used so far - quickly switching back and forth between them.

All I'm thinking about is retaining the same balance of colours but just bringing them up in strength. And for the shadowy areas, I really squint my eyes to defocus them and that way I can more easily compare the values rather than the colours. Squinting lets me see whether I need to make the shadowy areas darker.



Step 12: Add the Stalk

This bit's easy! Start with the white highlights. Then add dark brown for the shadow areas (full pressure) and a touch of orange for some variation in colour. In the next photo you'll see how I've merged the orange and brown together (using the brown pencil) to create a more refined look.





Step 13: Finishing Touches

Firstly, the cast shadow is created with a layer of light yellow, then a layer of green, then some of the dark brown. I made this up. You might want to use the reds or even go and get some blues and purples. Just make it darker nearer the pear and lighter as it gets further away.

As for the spots, I spent just five minutes tapping the pencil vertically all over. The key though is to use a dark brown pencil in the shadow side and the green pencil (or very light pressure with brown pencil) on the lighter right hand side.



About the Author



My name's Phil Davies and I'm the co-founder of [ArtTutor.com](https://www.arttutor.com). I'm completely self taught and a passionate believer that anyone can become what others refer to as a "brilliant artist". I don't believe in a lack of natural talent - I believe in proven technique and proper practice (something you were definitely not shown at school!).

I've produced a number of courses and free guides based around drawing various subjects (portraits are my favourite) using dry media such as graphite, charcoal, ink, pastel pencil and coloured pencil. I believe I'm also the world's leading authority on pencil sharpening.

Here's some of my artwork. All of these are lessons on [ArtTutor.com](https://www.arttutor.com):

