The drawing pencil comes in many brands, with different types of lead. Generally, each pencil contains a mixture of graphite and filler that is referred to as lead. The ratio of graphite to filler determines the hardness of the lead. The harder the lead, the lighter the line the pencil will make. The most common lead hardness is HB, what is commonly referred to as the #2 pencil.

As most artists know, each different brand of pencil has different thicknesses and hardness of lead. Even the ubiquitous #2 pencil can be vastly different in hardness from brand to brand. Thicker leads can be better for thick lines and shading. A good thick lead can create a varying width line. Varying the hardness gives more detail to a drawing.

Depending on the brand, art pencils will have hardness ratings from 4H to 4B or more, with HB in the middle. There may be many variations depending on brand. However, B hardness refers to a softer lead that contains more graphite. A 6B pencil will have the softest lead and produce the darkest line. The hardest lead will produce very light lines since there is little graphite.