

# HAS THIS EVER HAPPENED TO YOU?

I keep changing their color scheme, hair, and clothing, but all my characters look like twins ...



Disclaimer: I have no formal training in character design and am kind of just trying to put into words something I've been thinking about, while practicing visual communication. I don't claim any authority here, nor do I make any claims regarding the quality of my cartooning

No matter how many reference sheets I make, my OC looks different every time I draw him!



WHAT IF I TOLD YOU ...



\*Recall what I mentioned regarding the quality of my cartooning.

But how?!

I've got a hero  
of a thousand  
faces, --

-- And I've  
got a thousand  
heroes with one!

When I draw a person,  
I want my drawing to be both  
recognizable (consistent)  
and specific (unique).

In other words,  
my cartoon of Bernie  
Sanders should be  
different from my  
cartoon of  
Larry David\*.

Don't be  
condescending.

Of course  
drawing a person  
means drawing a  
specific person.

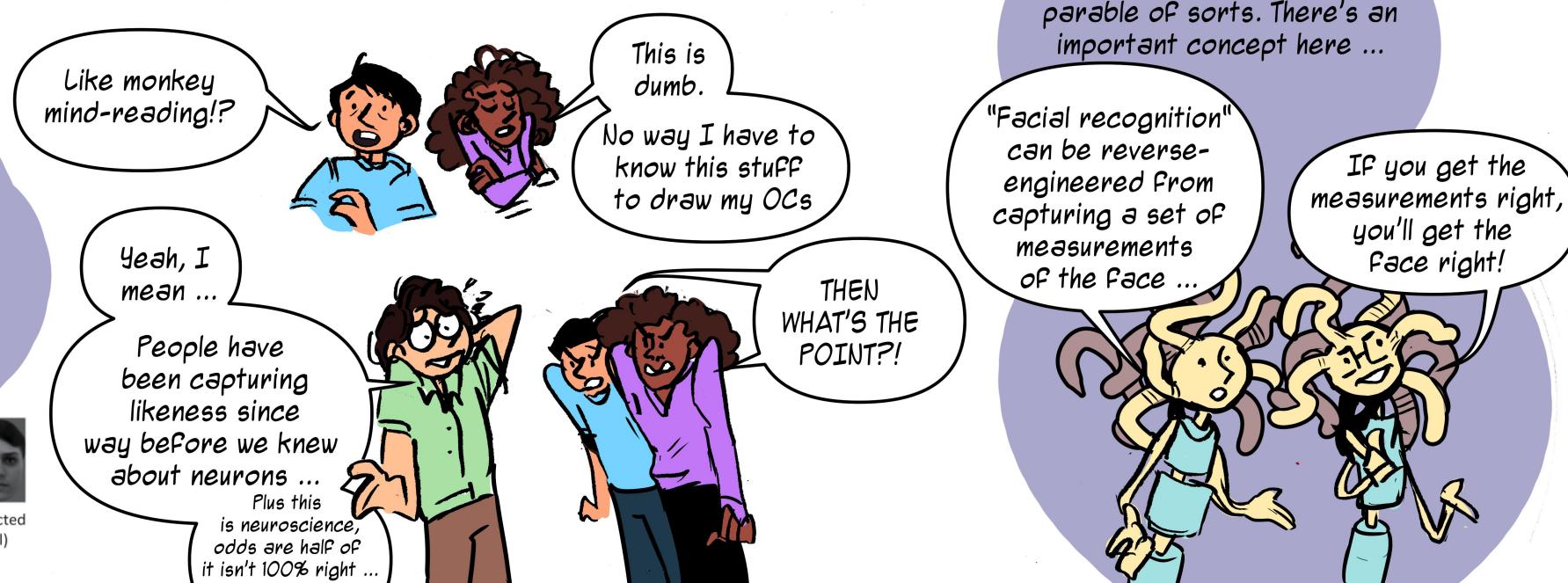
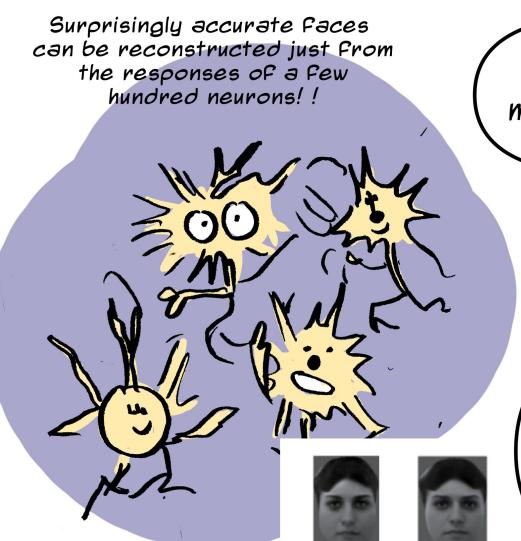
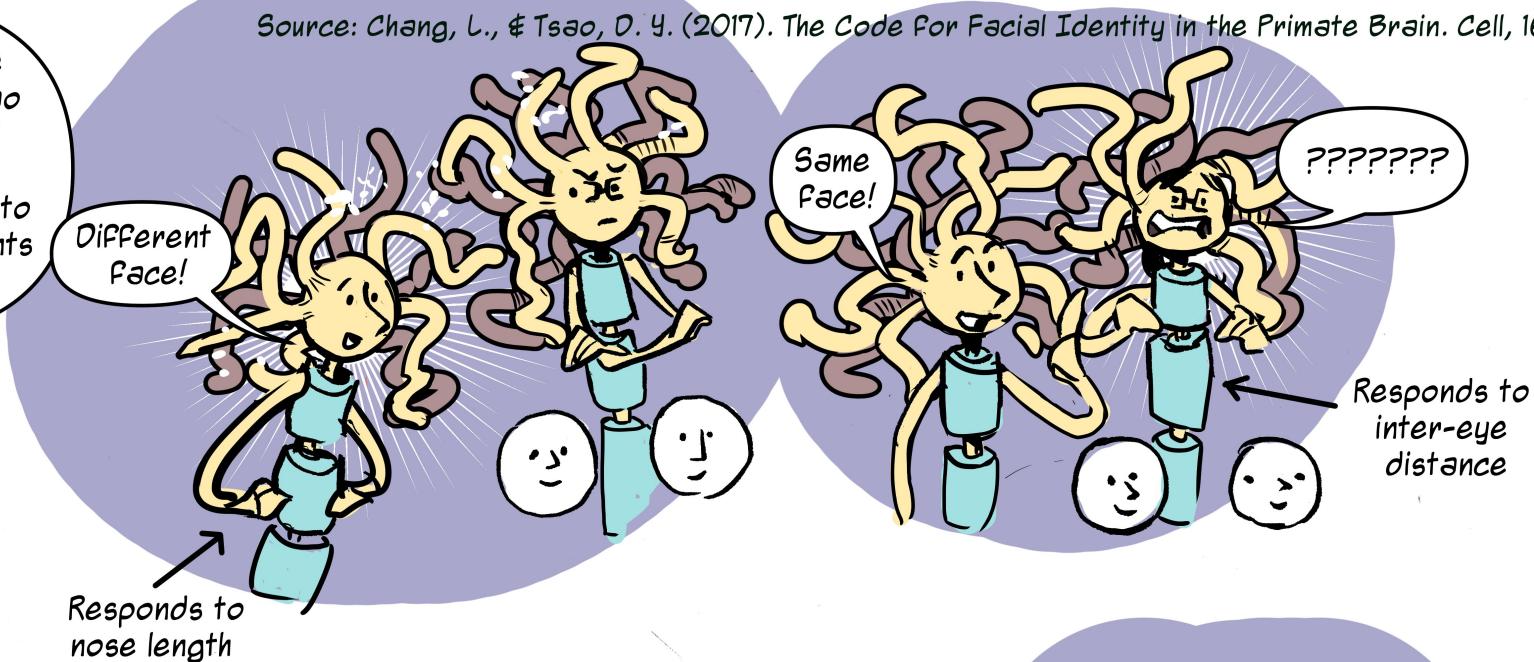
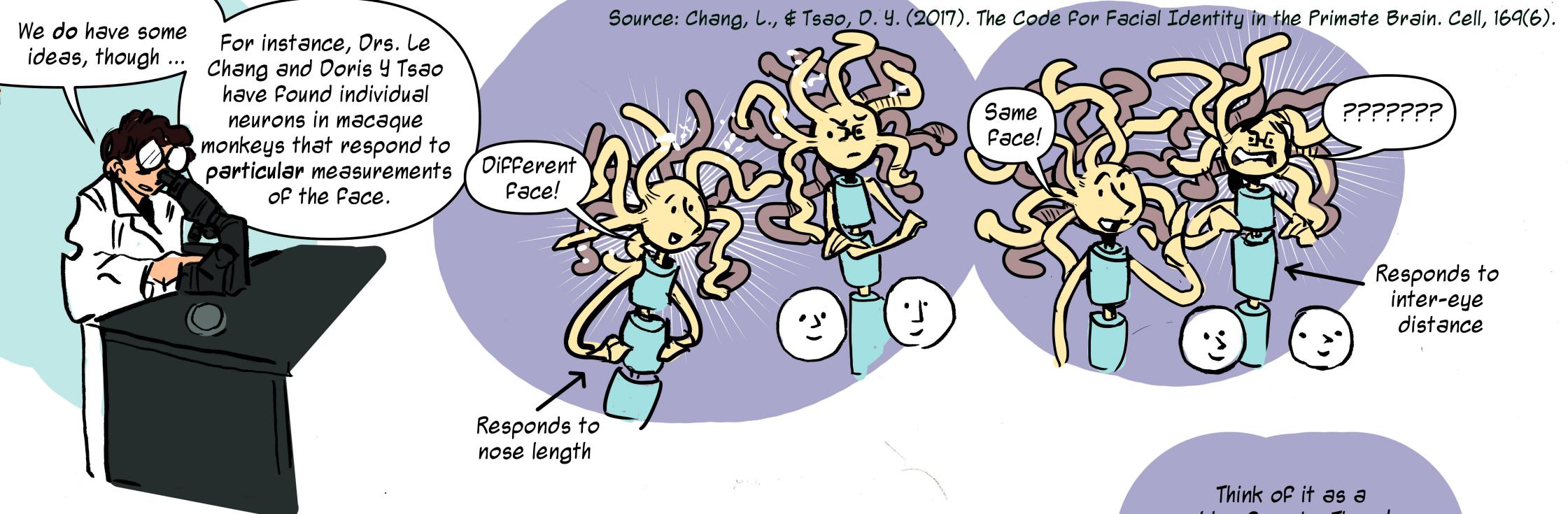
What I mean is,  
artists should find a way  
to trick their audience into  
recognizing a person in a  
two-dimensional drawing.

This is much  
more difficult  
than you'd think.

I mean, we  
have no idea how  
facial recognition  
works!

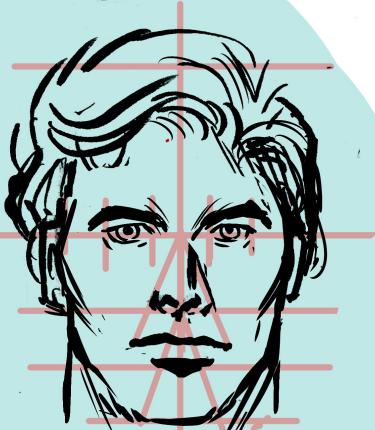
Effective cartoonists  
must master one of  
the hardest problems  
in modern neuroscience!

Oh, get over  
yourself ...

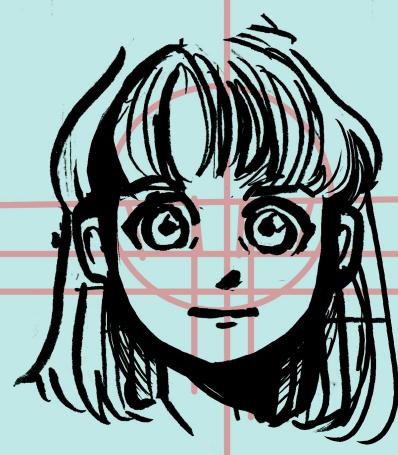


I know "measurements" isn't the nicest word. We're cartoonists, after all, not architects!\*

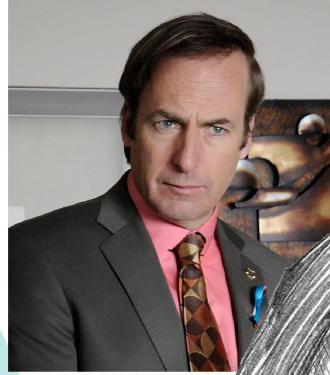
But if you've ever read one of those "how to draw" books, you may have come across diagrams like these, perhaps accompanied by instructions to place the nose 3/4 of the way down the face, or to ensure the face is five eyes in width.



NOTE: This example is a facsimile from How To Draw Comics the Marvel Way by John Buscema and Stan Lee, which despite my mild criticism is an EXCELLENT resource even if you have no interest in superhero comics.



These are nothing but a set of standard measurements!



This is perfectly fine advice, even necessary scaffolding if you are not yet comfortable with drawing any human face.

But take a look at work by people who specialize in capturing likeness -- yes, I mean *celebrity* and political cartoonists.

Even if you don't wish to work in this style, you cannot deny the immediate recognition!

How do they do it? Well, you may notice how drastically these features depart from the advice on the left. They identify how a face may differ from the default proportions of a how to draw book, and exaggerate those differences.

Done well, this will enhance the similarity of the portrait to its subject.

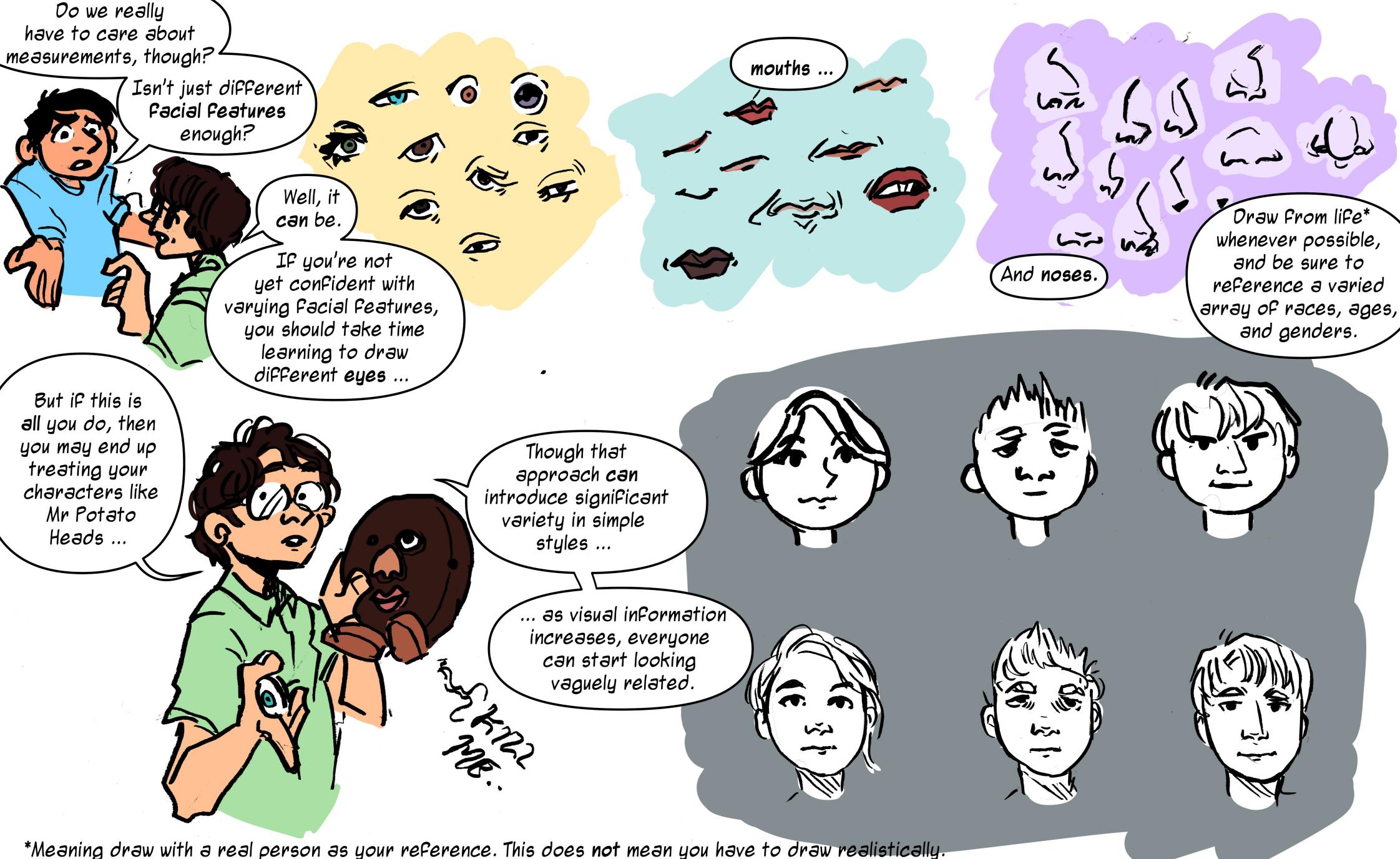


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When a tutorial talks about how far apart to draw eyes, it is sneaking in measurements of a "default" face. Once you've built up confidence, you should question how the faces you see in your daily life differ from this advice.

\* Well, maybe you are. Don't know your day job. I'm not.



\*Meaning draw with a real person as your reference. This does not mean you have to draw realistically.

Remember our "inter-eye distance" neuron? Most human beings don't rely solely on the shape of Facial Features to tell people apart\*. We also care about the relative size and position of them!

We'll use the word "proportion" to refer to this relative variation in size and position.

Here's an example of varying the shape of Facial Features while keeping proportions identical:



Here, we vary proportions, while keeping features the same (I perceive this as having more variation than the row above, but that is subjective):



Here, we vary both, and we can observe how both the shape and the proportion of Facial Features can work together to create character:



These principles are not specific to any particular style! Here are some examples of how variation in shape and proportion can keep your characters distinct even when hairstyle and color scheme are kept constant:



\* Though a few individuals with prosopagnosia ("face blindness") describe something like this experience.

# BUT WAIT ...

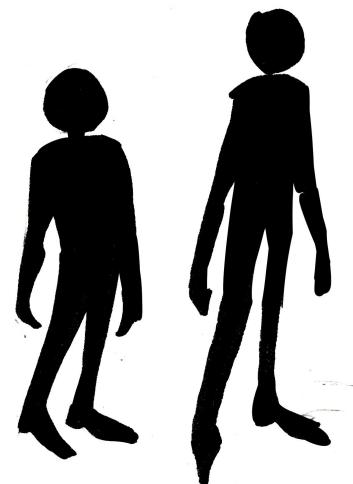
# ... THERE'S MORE!

A solid understanding of proportion helps with MUCH more than creating variety in the faces of your characters.

You may have seen images like the one below, typically suggesting (correctly) the importance of a strong silhouette in character design:



One of the quickest ways to get those silhouettes in your cast is by varying proportion!



"Default"  
(For me)



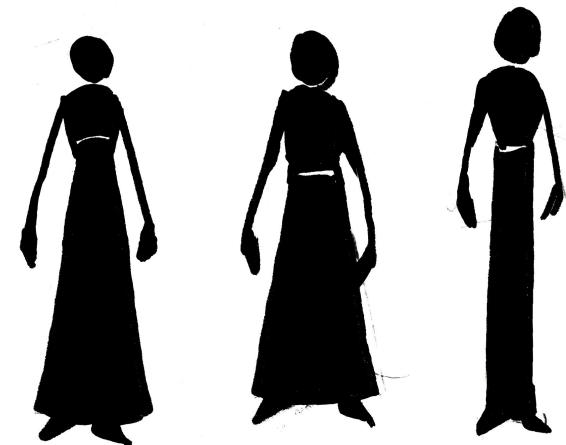
Long torso,  
small legs,  
long arms.



Wide torso,  
narrow arms  
and legs.



Broad arms  
and legs,  
narrow torso  
and waist.



Abstract "proportion" away from features of the human body, and it can apply to costume design as well! Notice how changing the length and width of a triangle changes the shape of a skirt, for instance.

Before we conclude, I do want to mention that I believe that "same-face syndrome" has been unfairly maligned.



Some of the most iconic and memorable character designs of the last fifty or so years, particularly in animation, were in casts where faces varied very little.

These casts typically rely on a strong sense of color and costume design.

However, I do believe that understanding proportion can help your choices in hairstyle or coloring "pop". If my proportions aren't exact, my characters are inconsistent ...



But if I keep an eye on them, the "same-face"ness seems intentional. Perhaps this is the point of those how-to-draw manuals.

All that to say: you can keep faces identical if you want, but do so on purpose!

Plus, there are all sorts of things you can think about to create character that have nothing to do with any of this ...

What habits around appearance does your character keep? How does that reflect their personality?



How does their day job, their living habits, their personal history, etc. affect their body? Is the muscle on a lumberjack different from that on a bodybuilder different from that on a mountain climber?



Squint their eyes?



What part of their face wrinkles?



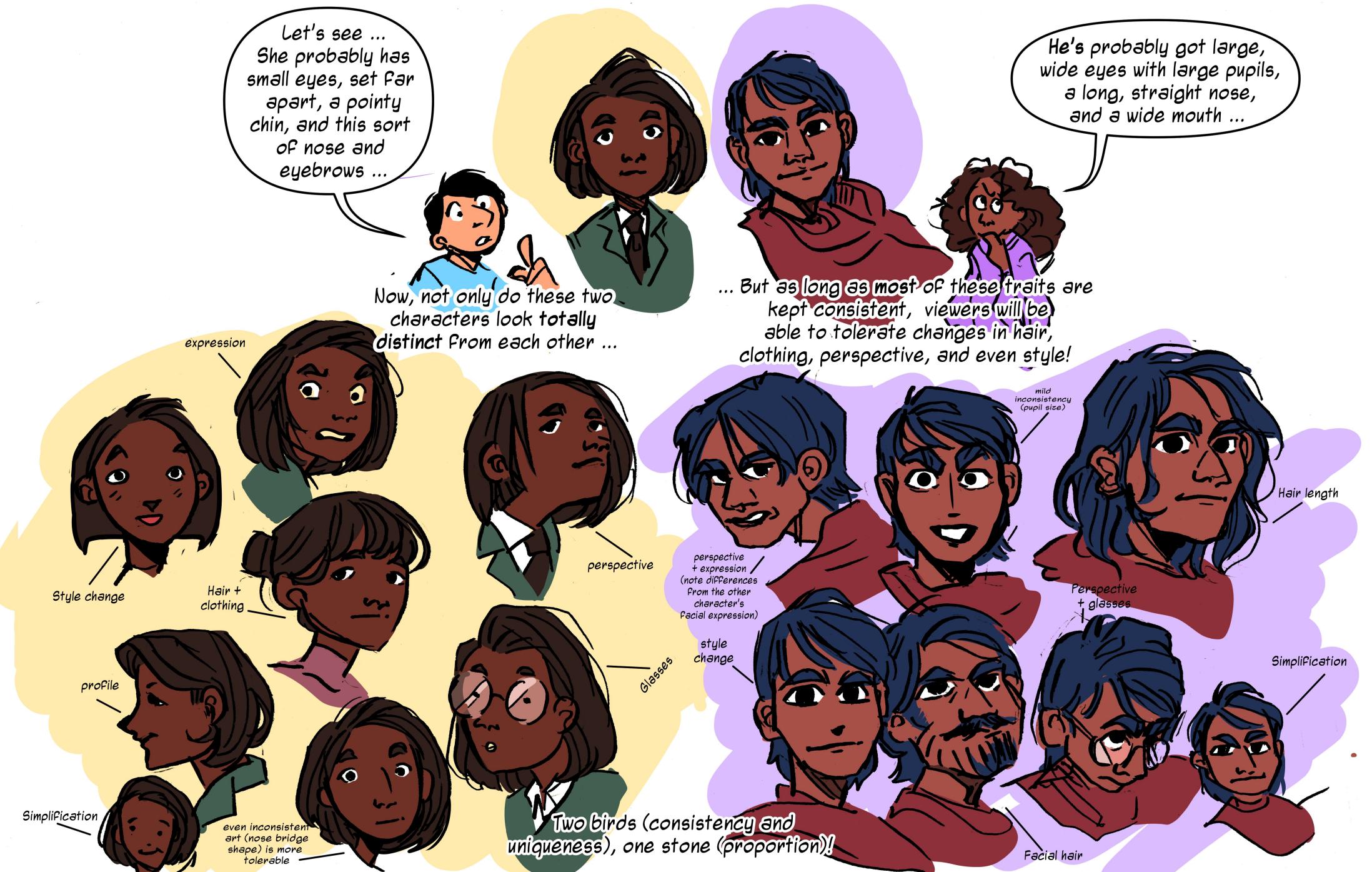
What is their typical posture? (an easy exercise is to draw them sitting down).

Do they show their gums when they smile?



Are you guys ready for some redesigns?

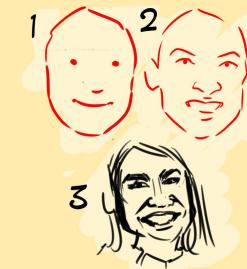
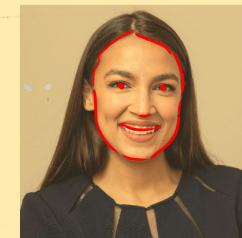
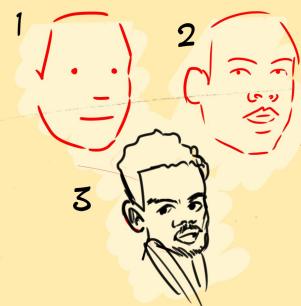
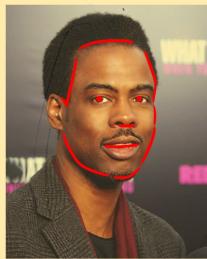
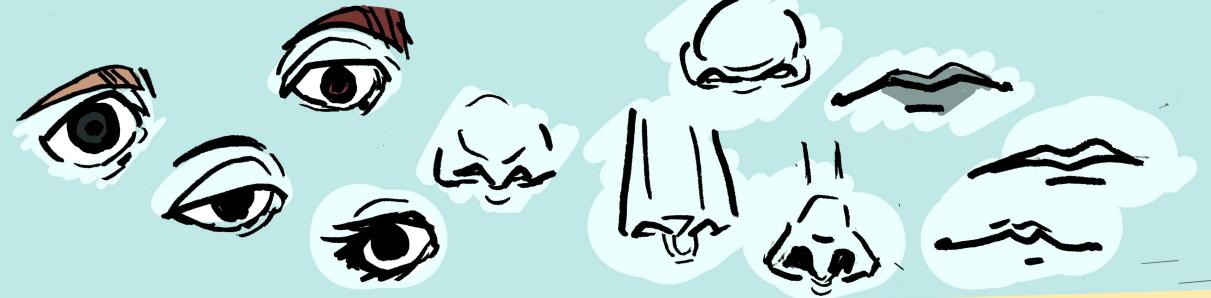




# EXERCISES

Draw Facial Features (stylized if you want) from real-life people of different races/genders/ages.

Drawing from real life or from a video will help you understand how to keep features consistent despite changes in perspective or expression, but photographs work in a pinch.



Find photographs of real-life people (not necessarily well-known), then:

- 1) trace over them, marking their eyes, nose, and mouth with one line/dot. Observe how their proportions vary from one another.
- 2) Trace over them, this time tracing their features with more detail. Observe how their features vary from one another.
- 3) Draw some good old celebrity cartoons, using what you've observed.
- 4) (not shown) To practice style consistency, draw them in "your style". Does your style allow for significant variation in facial features? If not, why not?

Choose two characters (I chose two characters that I actually do struggle to differentiate sometimes) then simplify them. Then simplify their simplification. What is important to conserve to keep them separate? What do you naturally exaggerate?



Have a friend describe someone from memory. Draw what they describe. After, look up the person. How accurate were you? What did your friend find memorable about their face? This exercise is also valuable if your friend is looking at a photograph of the person they are describing, if they don't trust their visual memory.