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Cartoon Fundamentals: How to Draw a Cartoon Face Correctly

by [Carlos Gomes Cabral](#) 11 Sep 2013Length: Long Languages: English ▼

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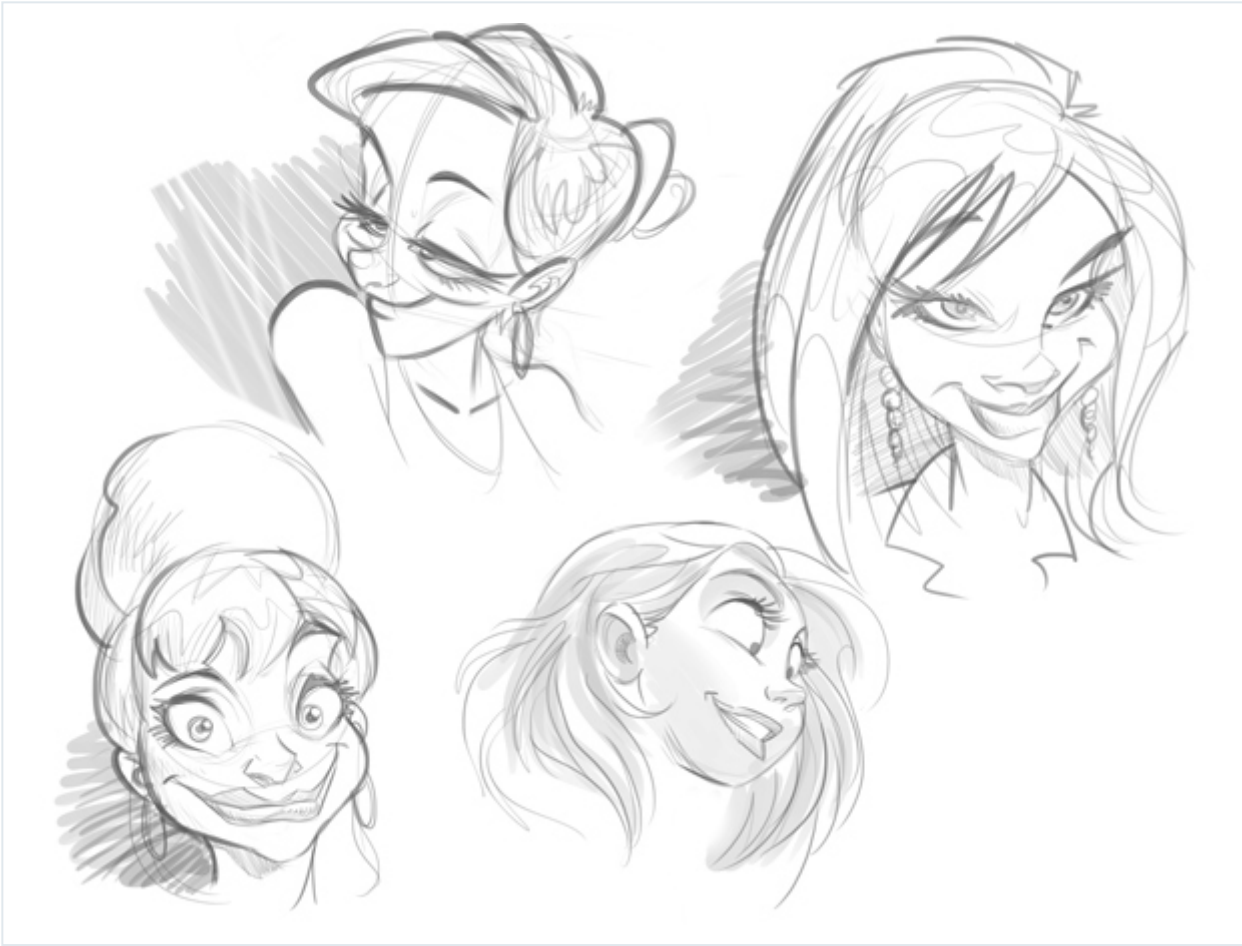


This post is part of a series called [How to Draw Cartoons](#).

▶▶ [Cartoon Fundamentals: Create Emotions From Simple Changes in the Face](#)

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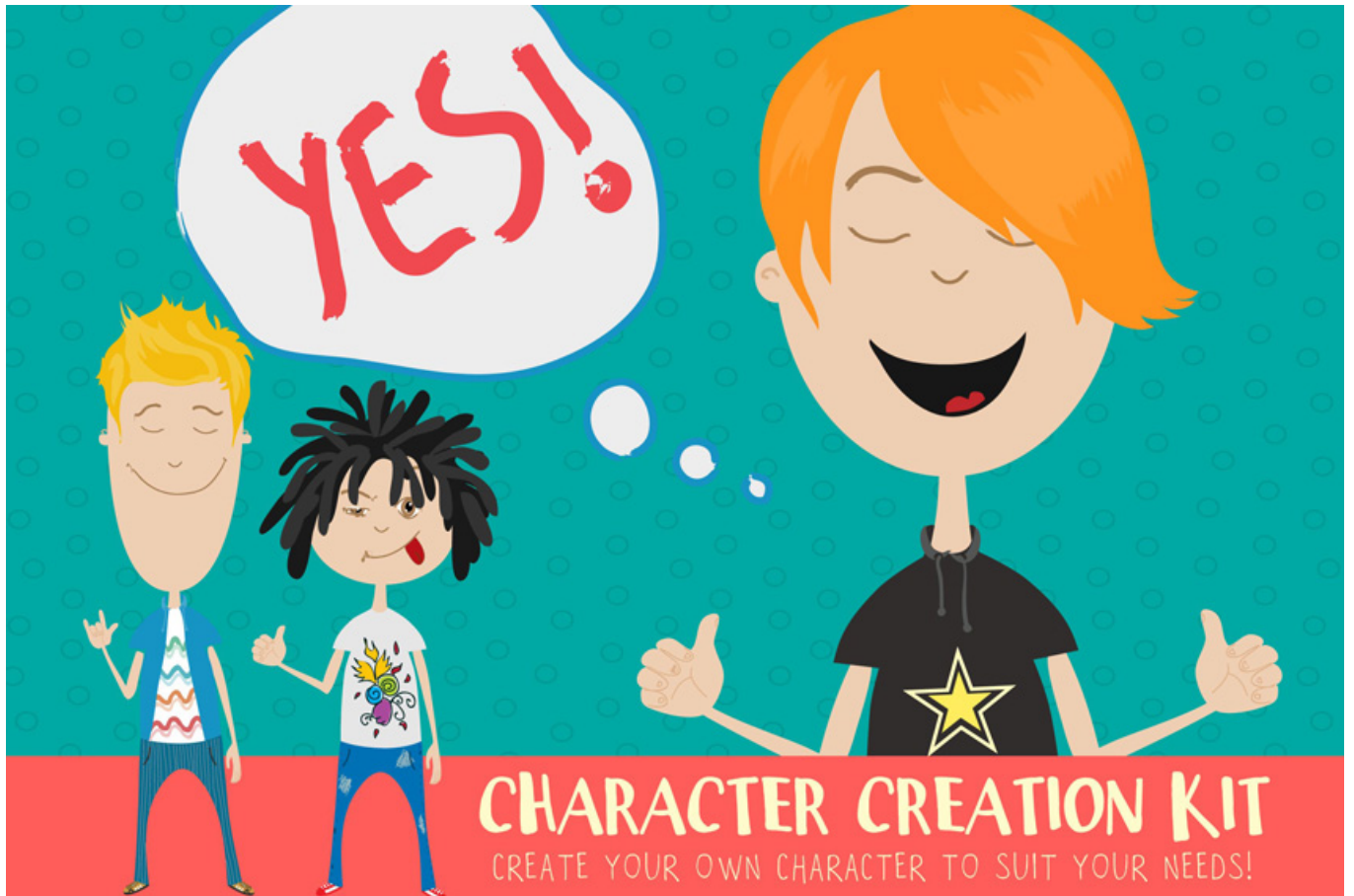
▶▶ [What Is Composition, and Why Is It So Important in Drawing?](#)



Children are the main audience when referring to the cartoons. A good cartoonist is one who can extract the main details of an object or a human being and simplify in shapes so that a child can recognize and be attracted to what they're looking at. Was studying infant perception that masters like Walt Disney, Hanna & Barbera, Chuck Jones, Jim Henson, Walter Lantz and many others have enchanted the world with its magical and eternal characters.

My role here is to make you understand the proper way to assemble this puzzle and definitely learn how to build any character from the techniques presented. I guarantee you will be shocked at how easy it is to create a cartoon expression that children (and adults) will adore!

To get some inspiration, have a look at the hundreds of [character designs](#) on Envato Elements. Or for a shortcut, try a [character creation kit](#)!



Cartoon character creation kit

Understanding Human Perception

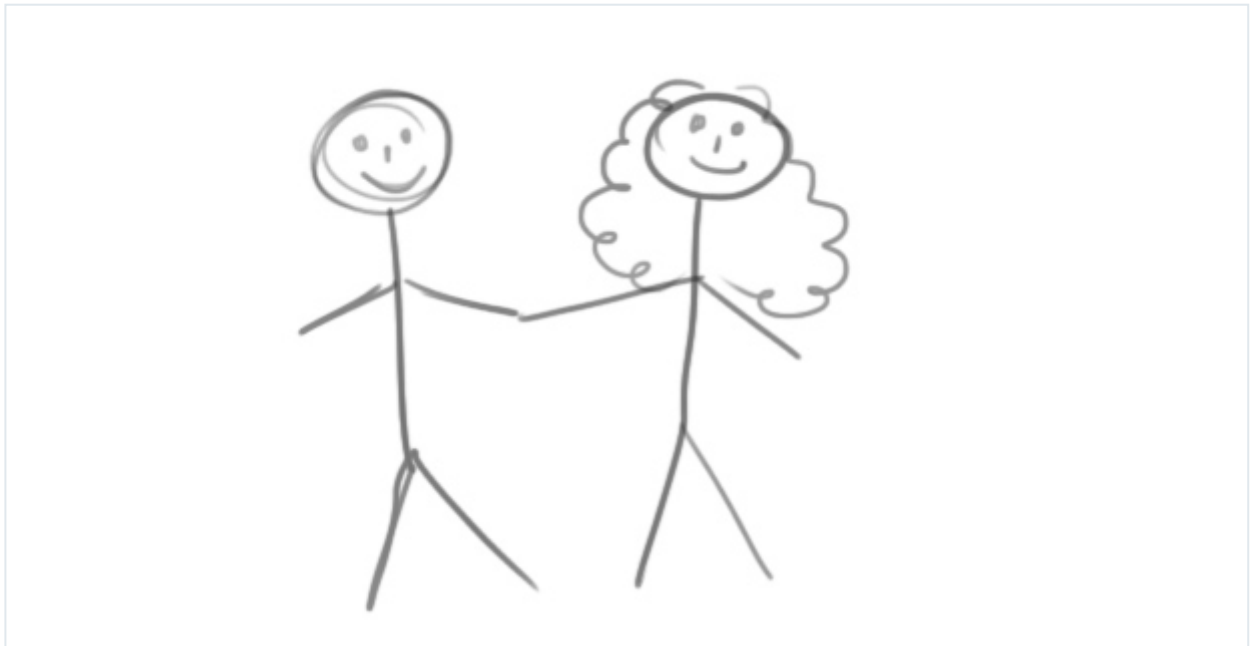
The human-being has a very interesting feature: We can synthesize the details that make up a structure or an object in very complex ways into very basic and simple ones. This way we can represent any type of thing through a few curves and geometric shapes.

Can you tell me if the two images below represent the same object?



Weird as it may seem, you can look at the two pictures and say "it's a car".

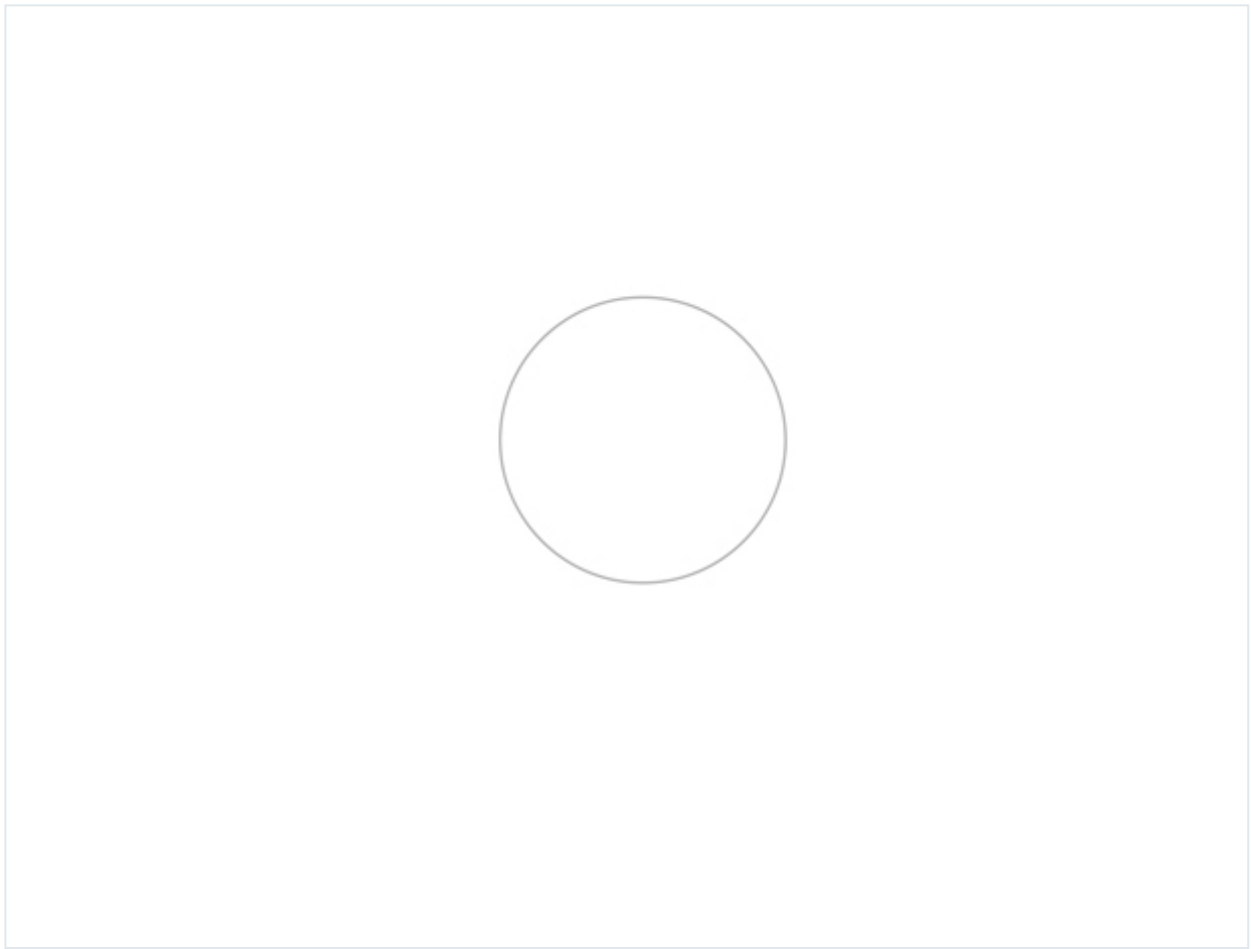
What happens is that, unlike artists, most people can't tell from memory all the details that make up a car, a dog or even a child. So they start to associate very basic and primitive shapes to the specific characteristics of each object. How many children of 4, 5 or 6 years old came from school with a drawing of two circles and some toothpicks on a piece of paper and said: "That's mommy and daddy!"?



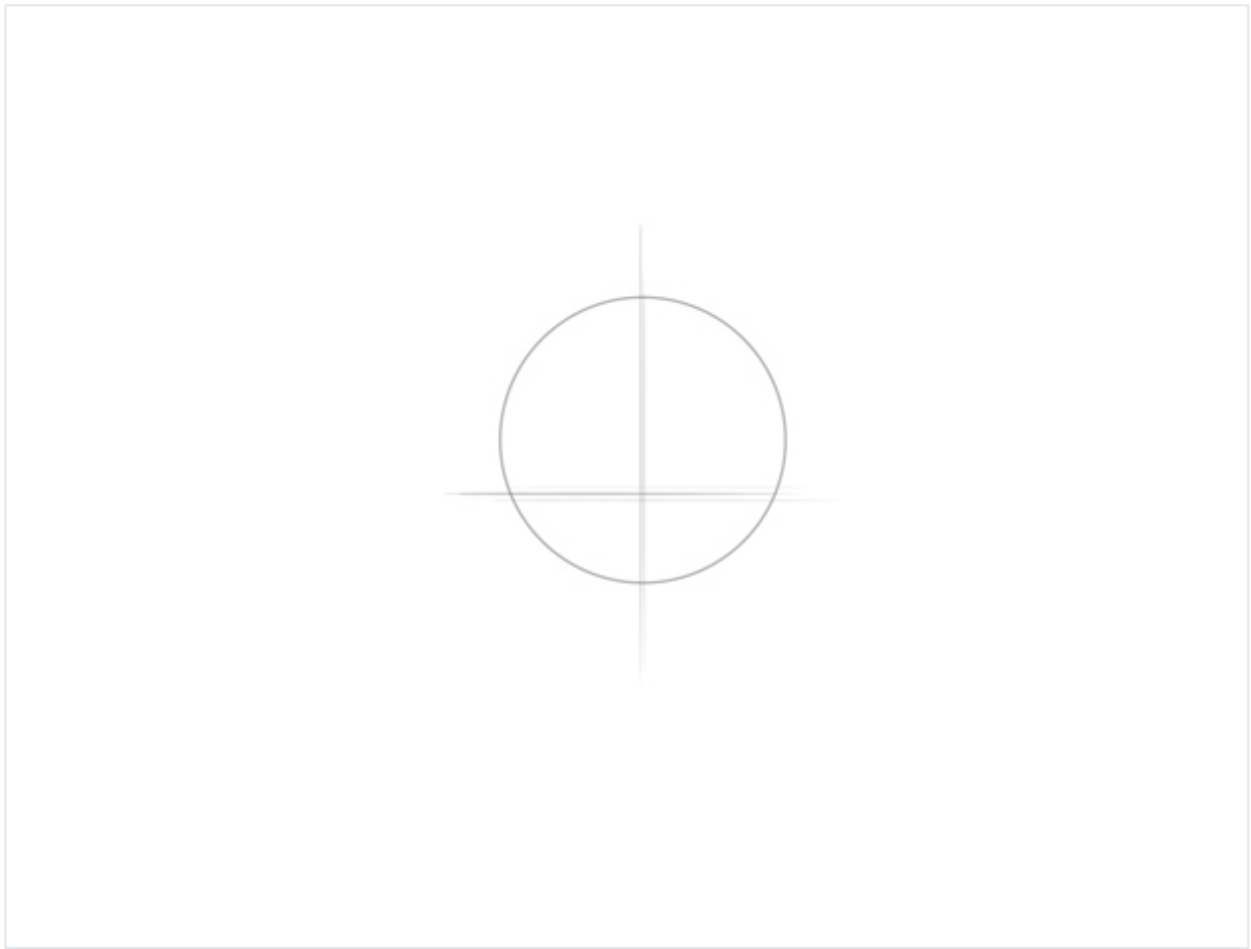
You don't want to keep drawing like that, do you? So, let's get our hands dirty and make some cartoon faces!

1. Create Our First Character

The basic cartoon shape is a circle. Circle Is All You Need (besides Love, of course). It's from the circle that you define the basic proportions of your character's head.

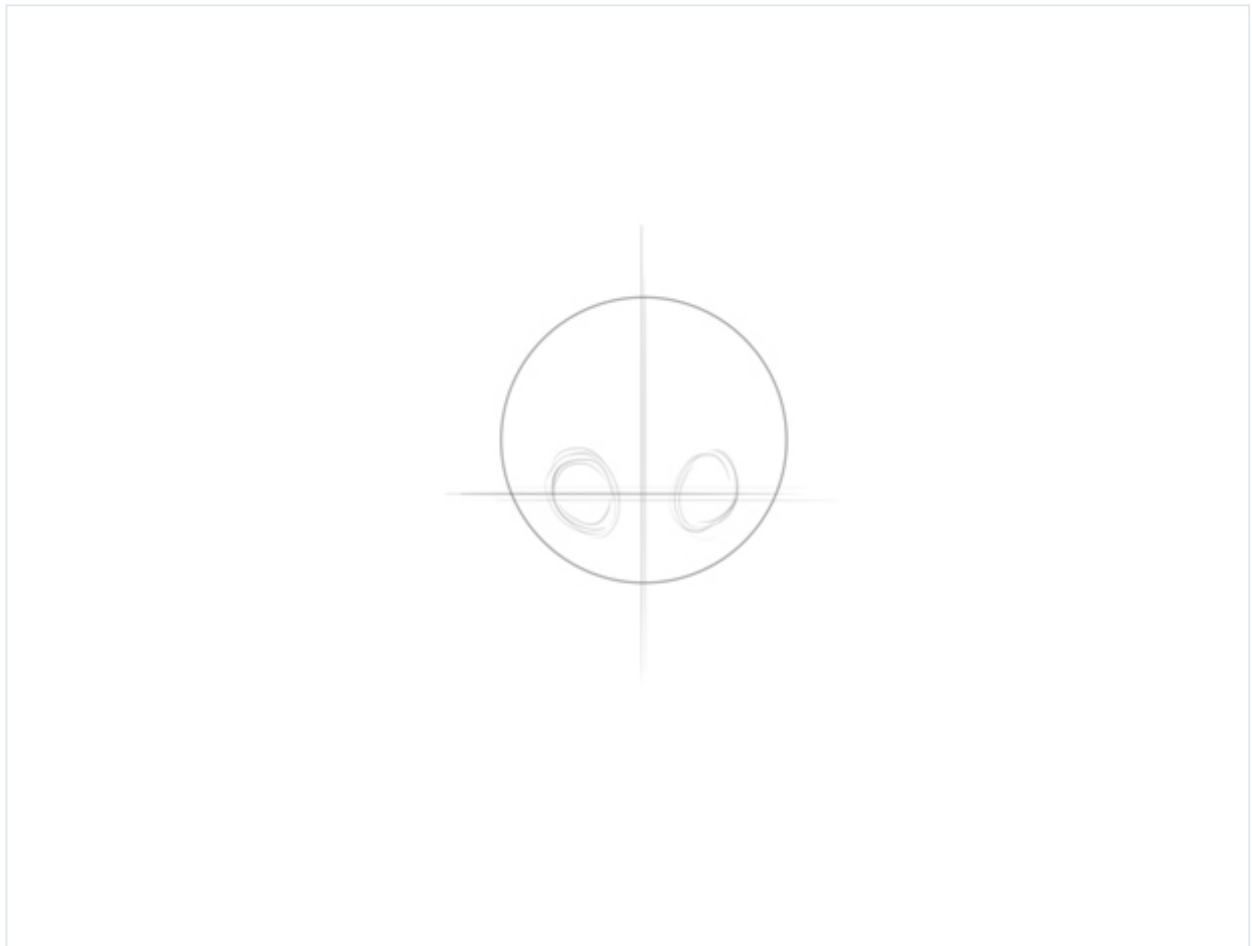


Once the circle is ready, it's time to trace the face axis. Draw a vertical and horizontal line intersecting at the center, like in the image below:



Step 1

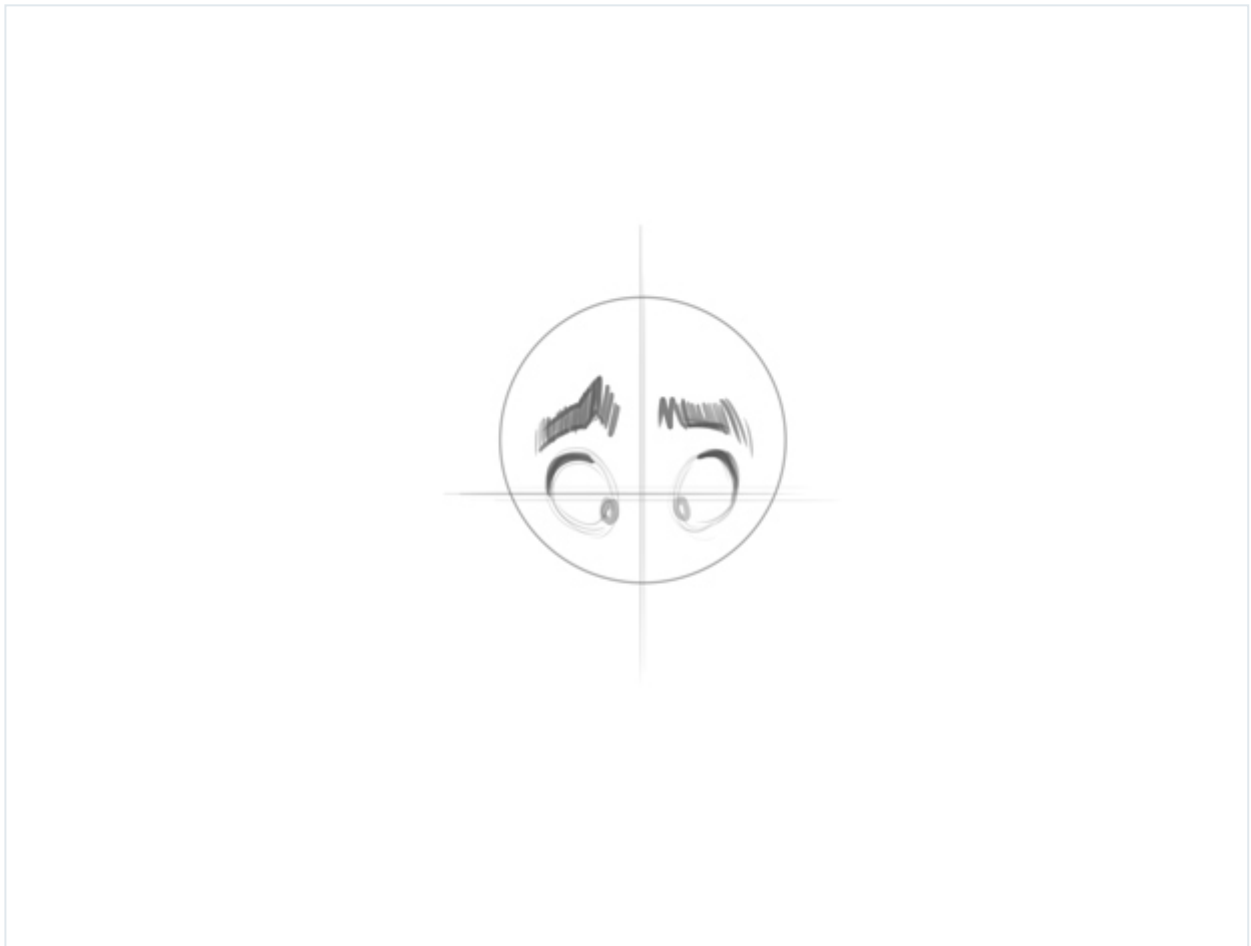
To make the eyes, draw an oval shape with a slight tilt to the side at the top. Repeat on opposite side. It is important to leave a gap between them of approximately the same size as an eye. As we are in the drafting phase, you can draw another eye in the center to serve as a measure.



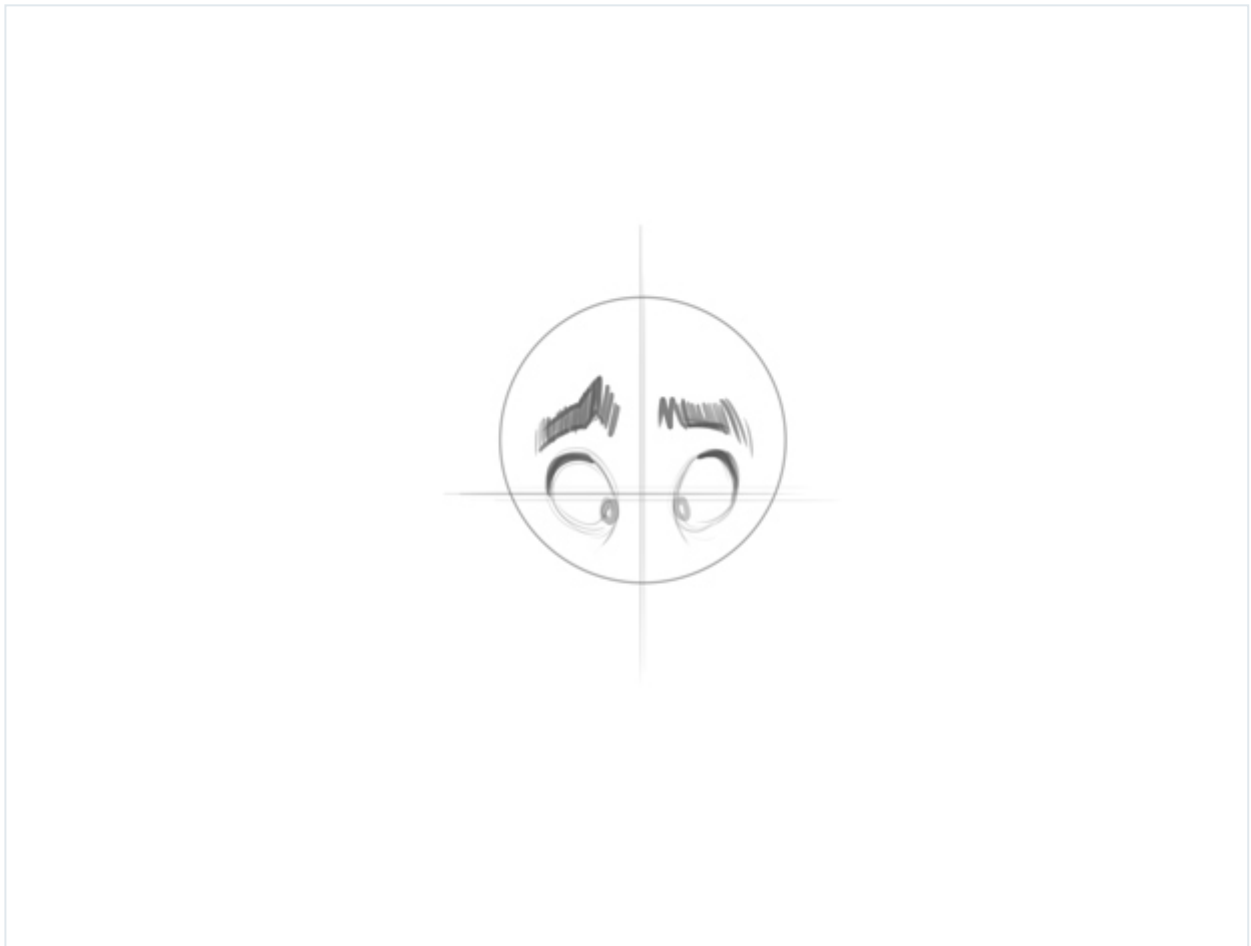
Step 2

At the top of the circle, slightly thicken the trait that will be the eyelashes of our character. Place the eyebrows a bit above the eyelashes to spend a sort of a surprise expression. The eyebrow form is free and with practice you will adjust to your own style.

Draw both pupils directed to the center (this is a very effective tactic used by major cartoonists whose sole purpose is to make our characters look cuter).



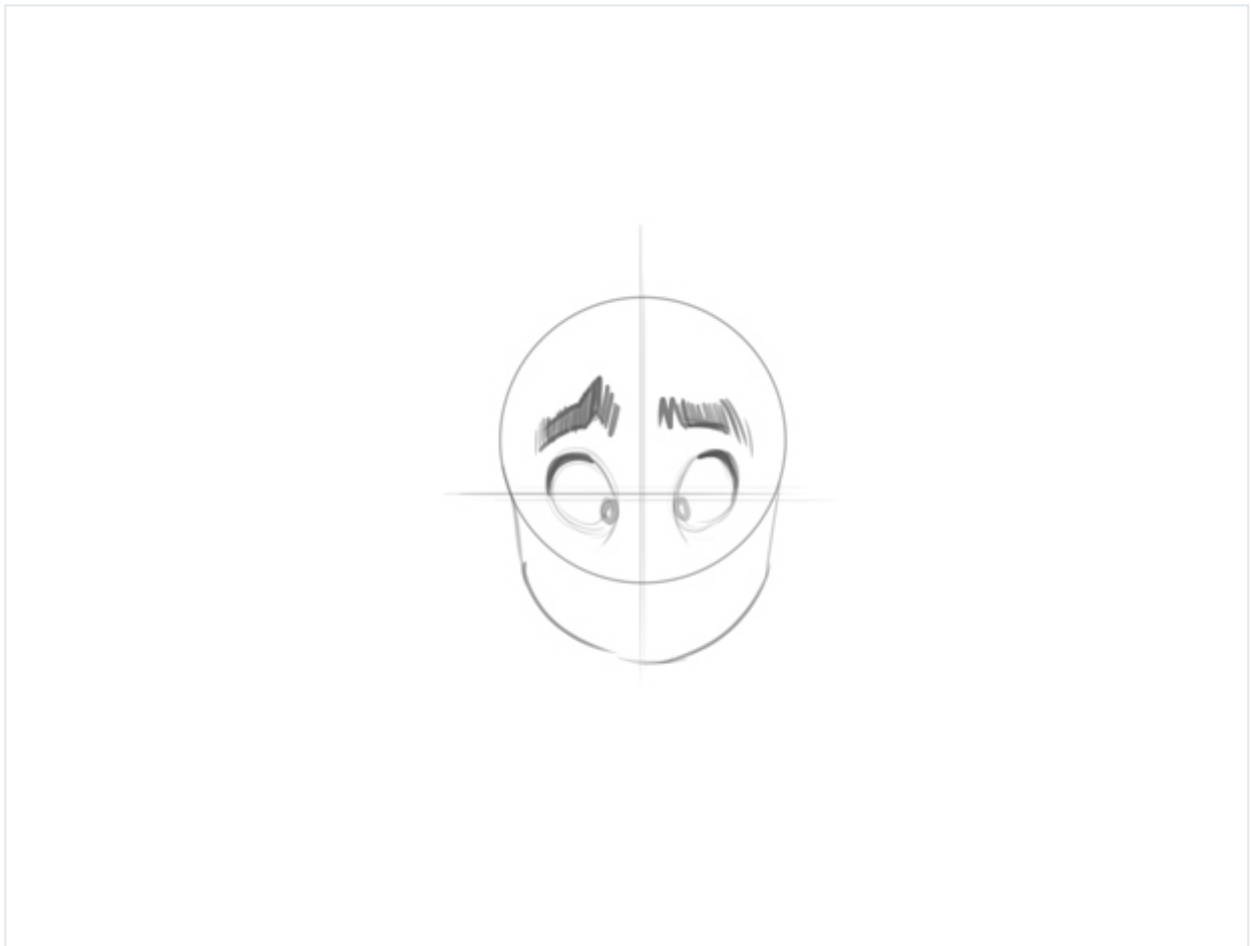
Tip: To give more life and "realism" in our eyes you can draw a small line below them to simulate a kind of wrinkle. This is another very interesting tactic that adds a special touch to our facial expressions.



Step 3

We arrived in the most creative freedom of the whole course. Think of it this way: In cartoon style designs, the main structure of a face is the skull and the eyes of the character. It is at that stage where you define the identification with the external world, IE, it is already clear to people that you're drawing a character.

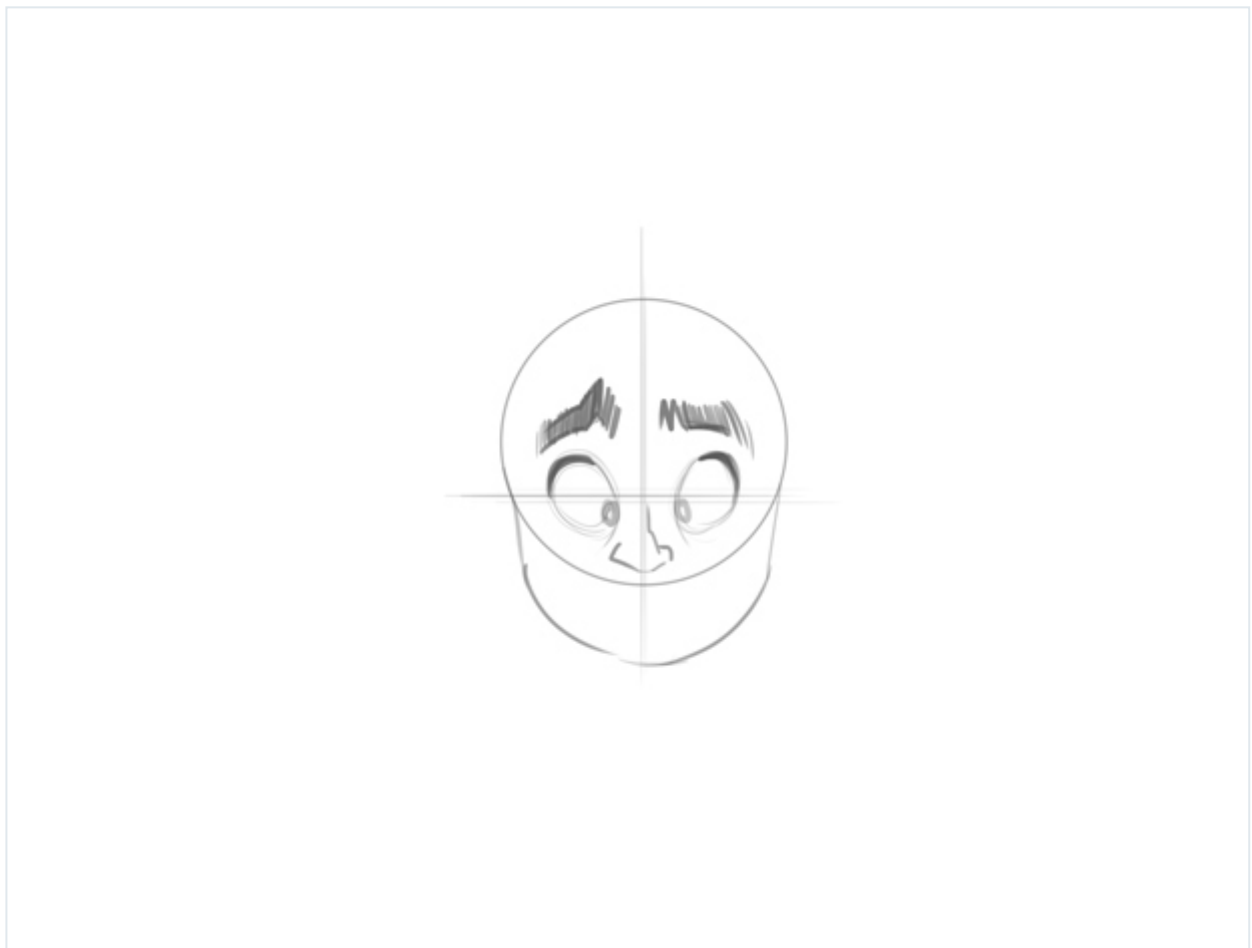
Now that we come to the jaw, we will decide if we want a fat character or a thin one. Could be old, young and so on. My character will be a young one. So, let's design a proper jaw for him.



Step 4

When designing a nose being seen from the front, it is common not to use many details. If you draw only its tip, it is likely that already achieves a convincing effect. It is also very common detailing to draw only one side of the nose, from the idea that this is the opposite side of light.

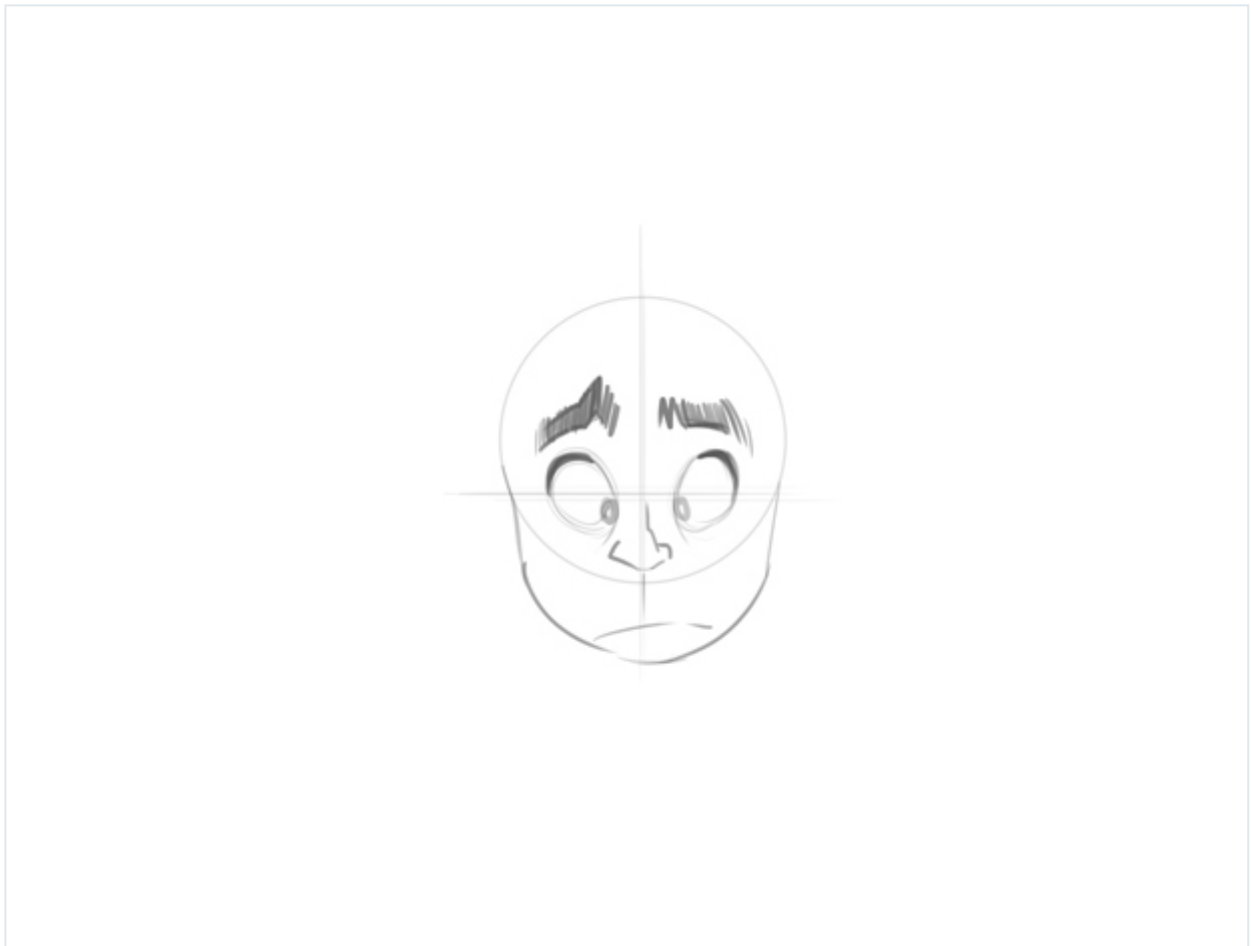
Let's put the correct nose on our character.



Step 5

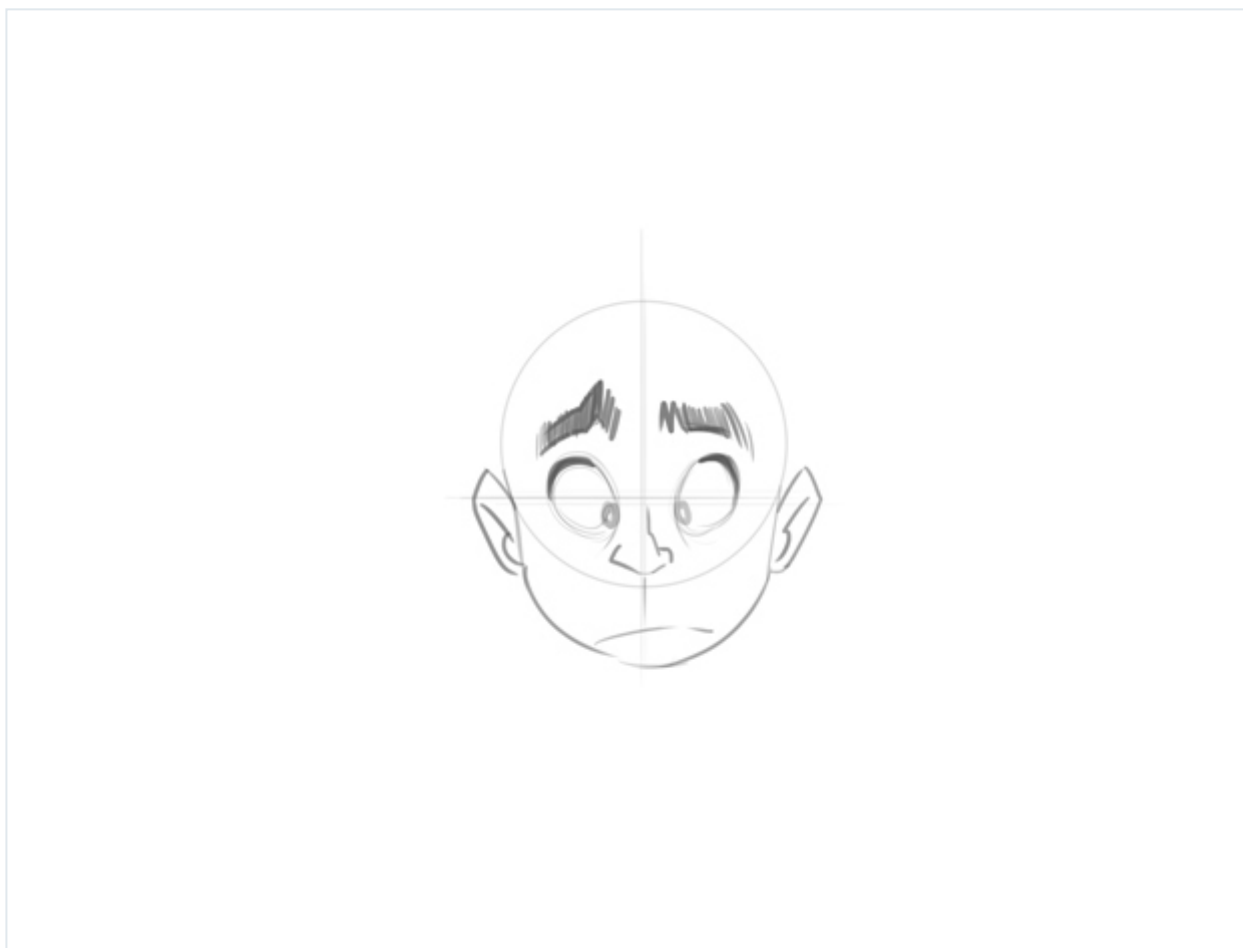
As our character is a child, we will make a cartoon mouth: something simple just to represent an expression of innocence.

Notice that when drawing a little child's mouth, the lips shouldn't be drawn! In cartoon style, children, regardless of gender, have quite simple mouths. A good and expressive trace already does the job.



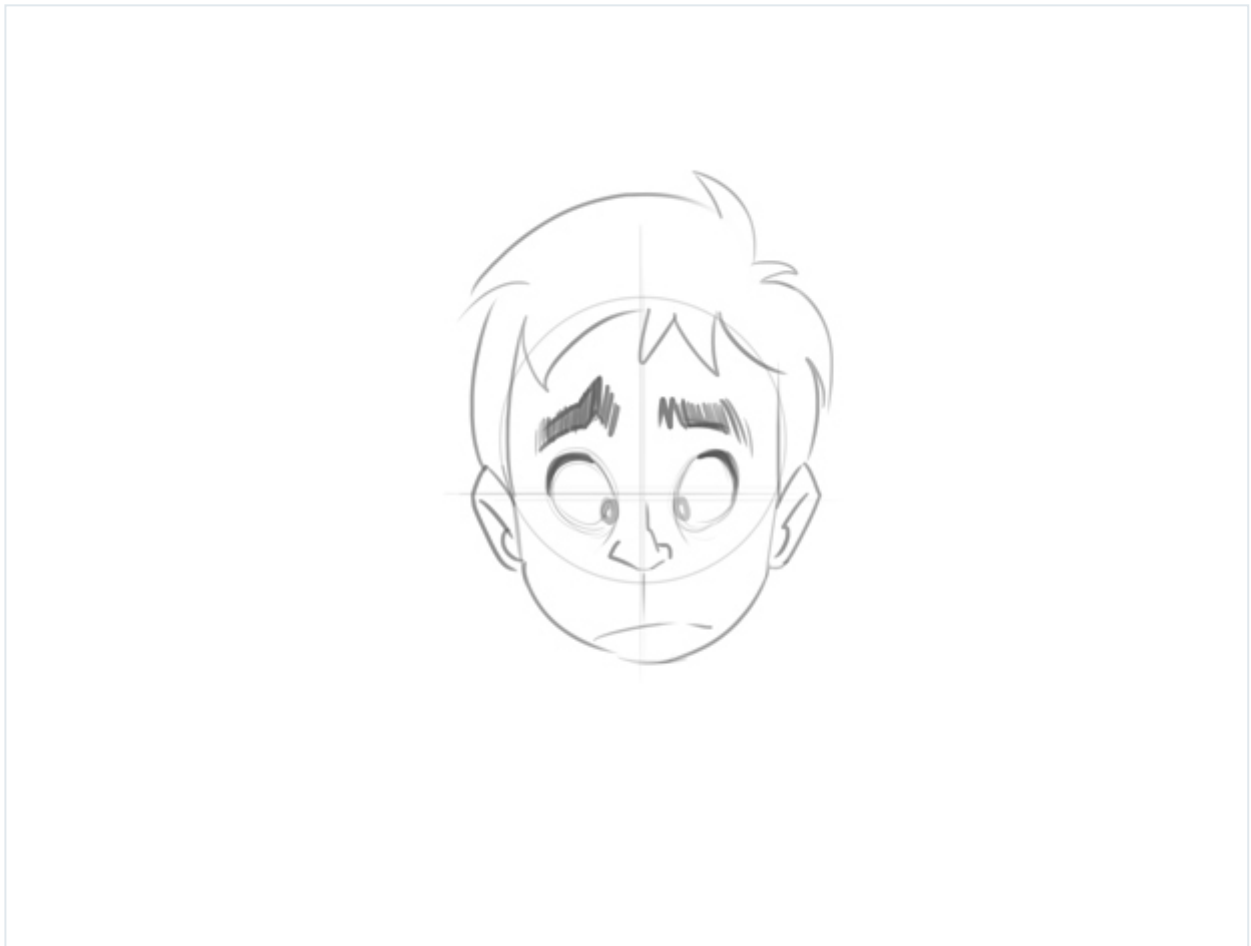
Step 6

The ears are seen from the front side view (because our character is facing the camera), so that the internal cavities will not appear. Then we will do just a simple shape using some basic perspective (more on that later).



Step 7

The shape of our skull is already defined by the circle we did at the beginning, right? So we just need a very simple and childish haircut to give life to our boy. Let's do it now.



I Don't Know How to Draw Hair! Help!

Easy, easy... there is nothing to fear. Nobody needs to be stylist or fashion designer to make the perfect hair. There isn't a right way to draw hair, so you'll need to try until you create the ideal haircut you want. Just remember that the hair is responsible for defining the personality of our characters. Oddly enough, the hair can express age, rebellion, conservatism... incredible, isn't? Speaking of which... what is your hairstyle?! Oh, never mind...

An accurate and fast way to drawing cartoon hair is to seek photo references on the web! I do this all the time: grab a fashion magazine or try a Google search. After finding the ideal style, put the image as a reference next to your drawing board (or tablet) and start making a cartoon and simplified version of it.

Well, it seems we completed our character successfully! Congratulations!

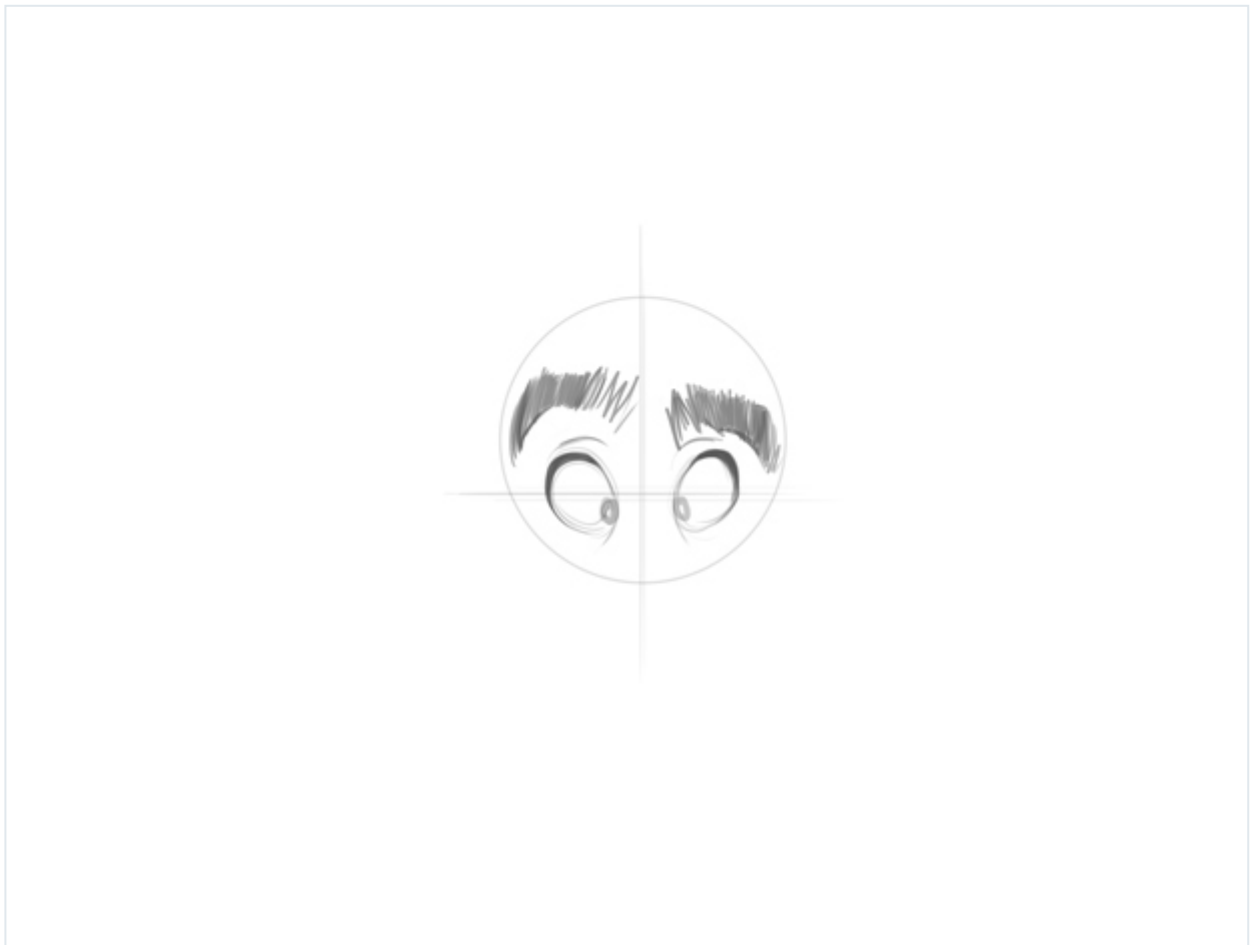
Now let's play a bit more and create a completely different character leveraging the same template we used for little Tommy (yes, I created a name for him).

2. Create an Older Character

Step 1

As usual, let's start with the eyes. This time we will draw faster, adding wrinkles, eyebrows and the eye pupils.

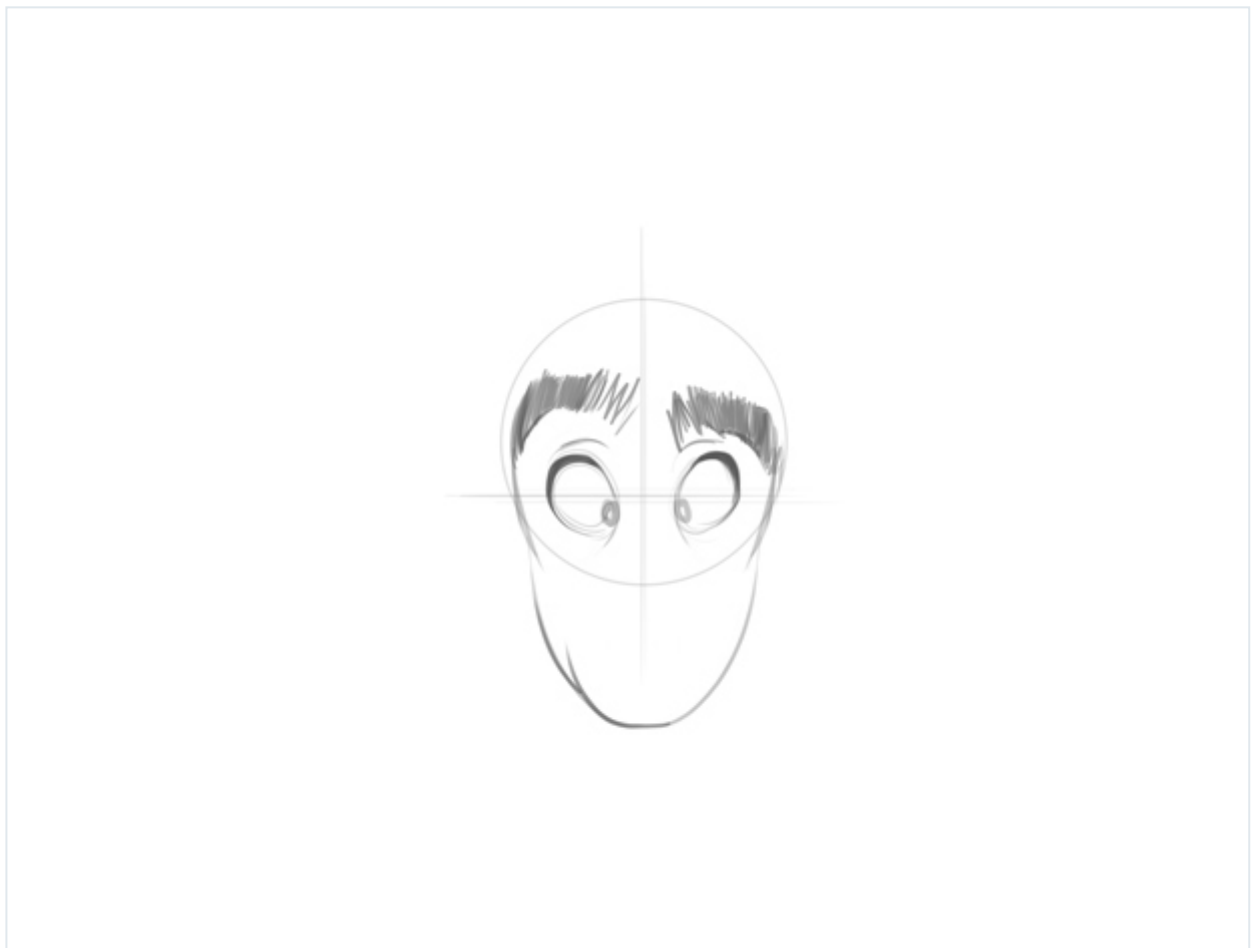
Notice that we haven't changed a lot, we just expanded the eyebrow a bit. Older men have thicker eyebrows, occupying more space on the forehead. Eyelashes make no difference in men, they are always drawn in the same way.



Step 2

We will increase our chin a bit this time. Try something like this.

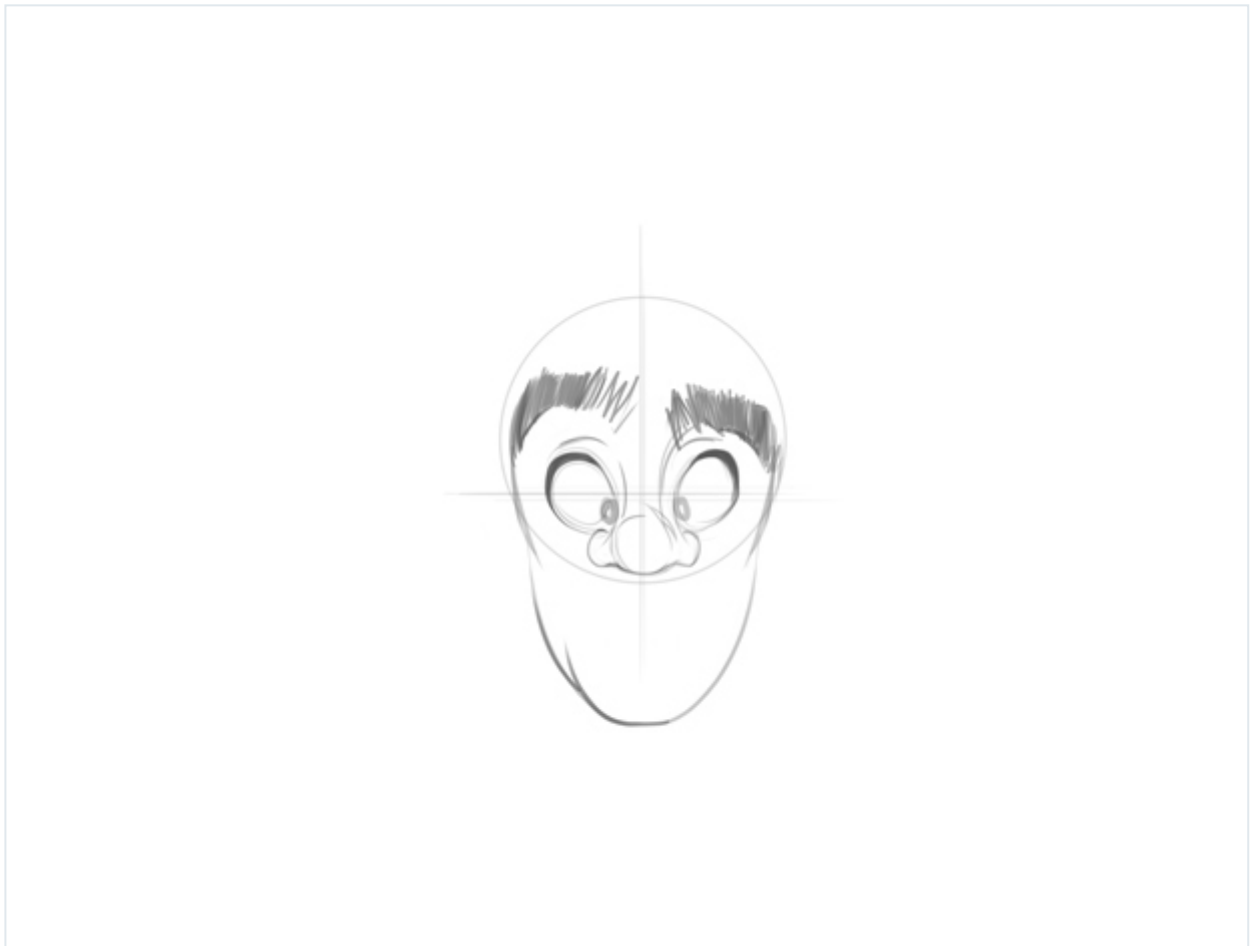
Our character is already with a different "look"! This is very good. We will proceed by choosing the ideal nose for it.



Step 3

Following what we did before, let's create the nose. This time I will make a completely different nose from before:

Notice that the ends of the nose are positioned very close to the bottom of the eyes. This is an effective technique to use when designing larger and wider noses. The idea is always to exaggerate to get a good result!

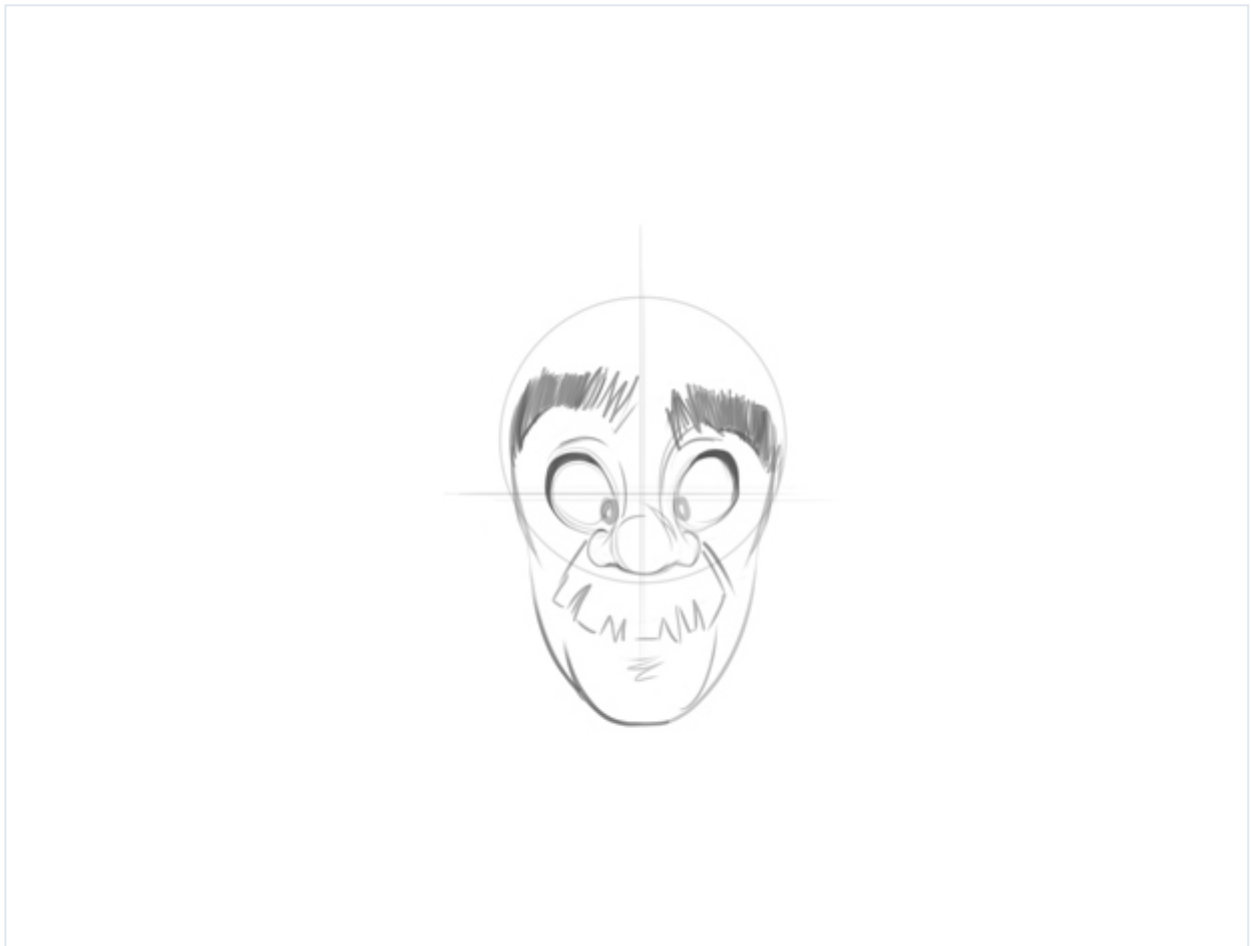


Speaking of overkill, let's eliminate the mouth of our character in favor of another artifact...

Step 4

I decided to use another technique now: instead of drawing the mouth, we'll simply draw a big mustache to create a better persona for our character.

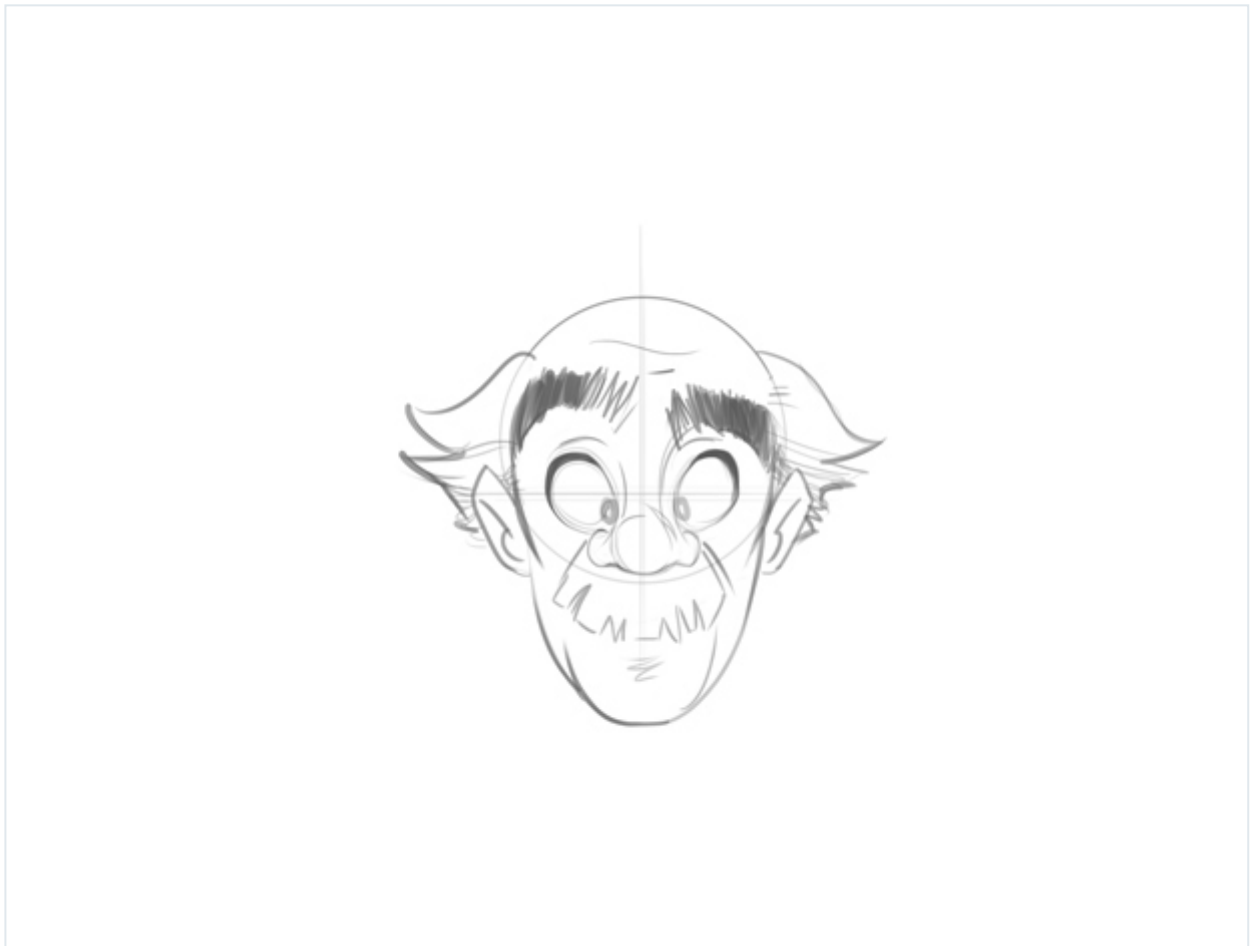
Done! A big and exaggerated mustache for our old friend!



Step 5

Remember what I said about the hair helps to represent age and personality? Check it out.

We've just added some side hair and left him bald on top. Amazing how it creates a totally different look, isn't it? Also notice that I took the same ear from Tommy, our beloved boy. That's the advantage of working on templates. That's the magic of cartoon!



I think our friend is a mad scientist!

3. Create a Female Character

I don't know... I think Tommy needs a sister! He's been very lonely out there. Let's create a sister for him now, as if by magic:



Hey!!! How did you do that so fast? Very simple ... Women have more delicate facial structures. Follow the step-by-step instructions below:

- Thin eyebrows;
- Larger and expressive eyelashes;
- Thinner chin;
- Small nose with less details;
- Long hair (use a real reference and choose any style you want).

That's it. These are all changes you need to do. Besides that, I took everything I could from Tommy, her brother. After all, they are siblings, right?

When you start to feel more comfortable, you can slowly create some more "realistic" details to your characters. Such as larger pupils...



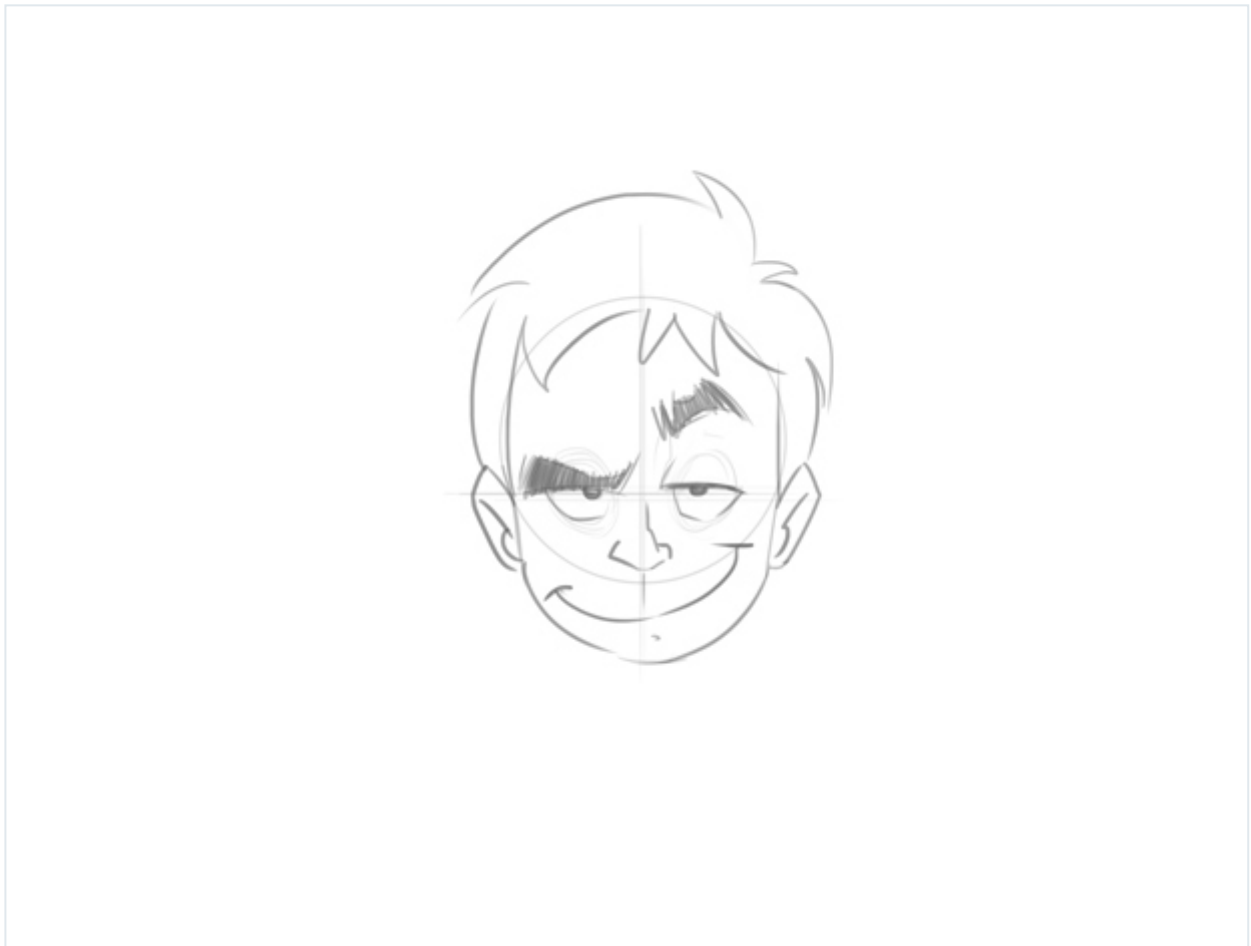
4. Facial Expressions

We are ready to add more emotions to our dear Lucy (yes, that's her name). Let's draw her after receiving the news that their school holidays have come to an end...



Again we achieve something totally different just adding two things: The tears and the new shape of her mouth! Isn't it amazing?!

Now let's get back to Tommy and ask him what he thinks about it:



Hmm... I got a feeling that Tommy is planning something!

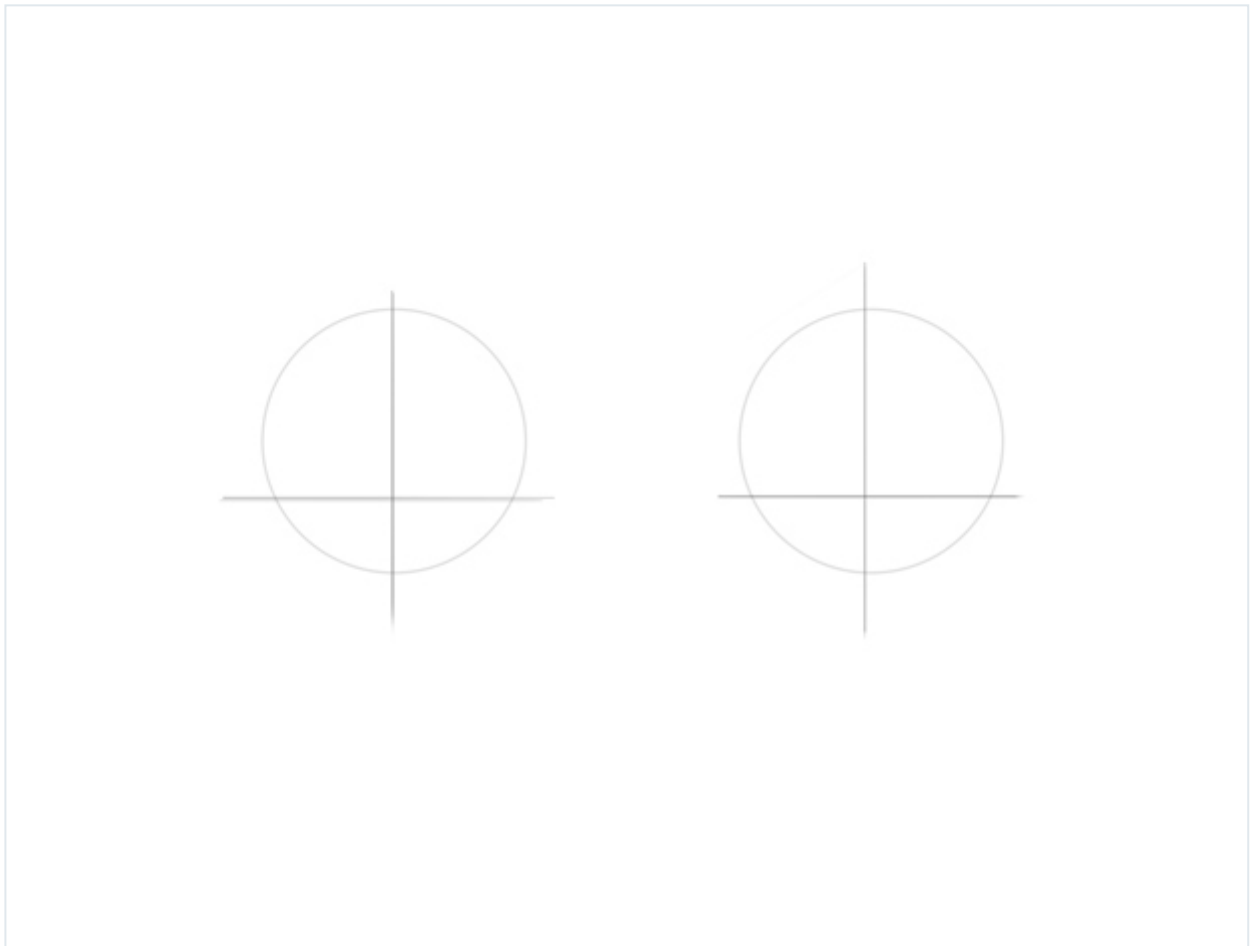
Notice that I've totally changed his expression just following the steps below:

- Making one eyebrow lower than the other;
- Cutting the eyes in half with the eyelashes;
- Adding a smile (one side is higher, following the eyebrow);
- Moving up the eye pupils to stay under the eyelashes.

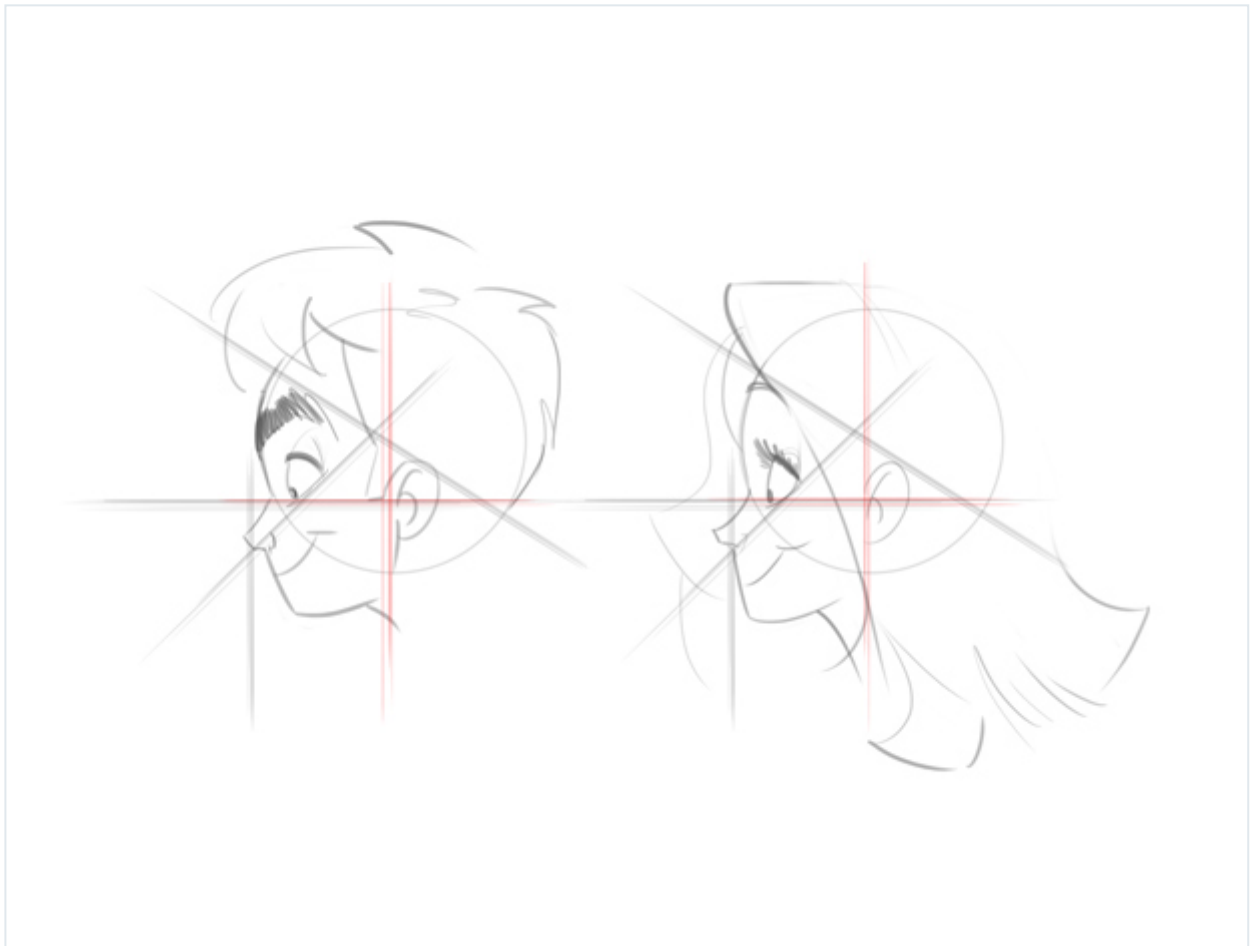
And that's it! We got the expected result with just these few changes. Hair, ears, nose, chin and the circular shape of the eyes are the same! Simple as that!

5. Profile View

Draw the template below again. Now we'll learn how to make Tommy and Lucy from the profile view:



We will fit the face of both now:



Notice that, in profile, is the ear that stays in the center of the circle.

Be aware of the main differences in structure when comparing them side by side. Pay attention to these details when drawing male and female characters:

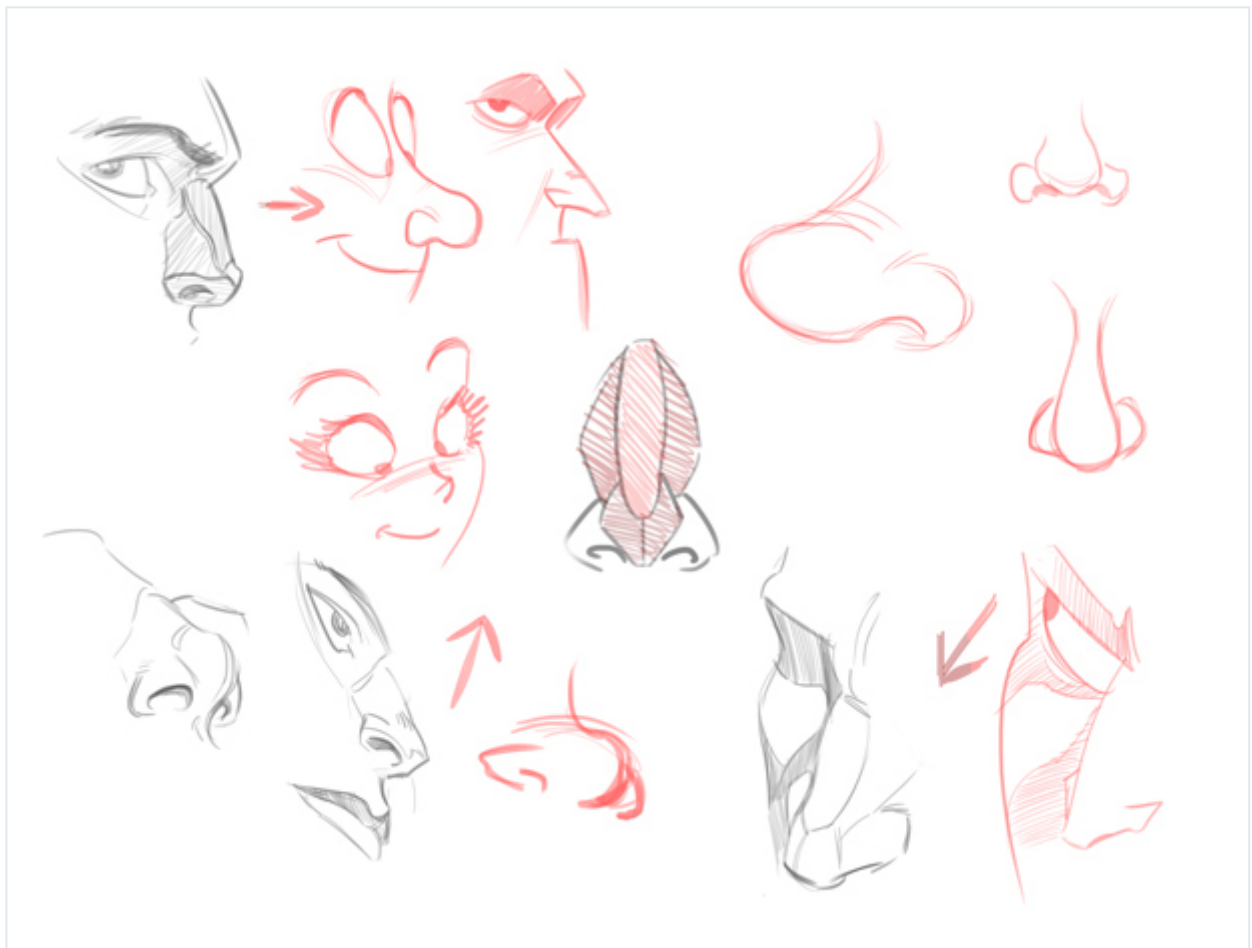
- Tommy's eyebrow is thicker
- Lucy's chin is slightly projected in front of the face
- Lucy's nose is thinner and pointed;
- Lucy has big and feminine eyelashes.

6. Play With Angles

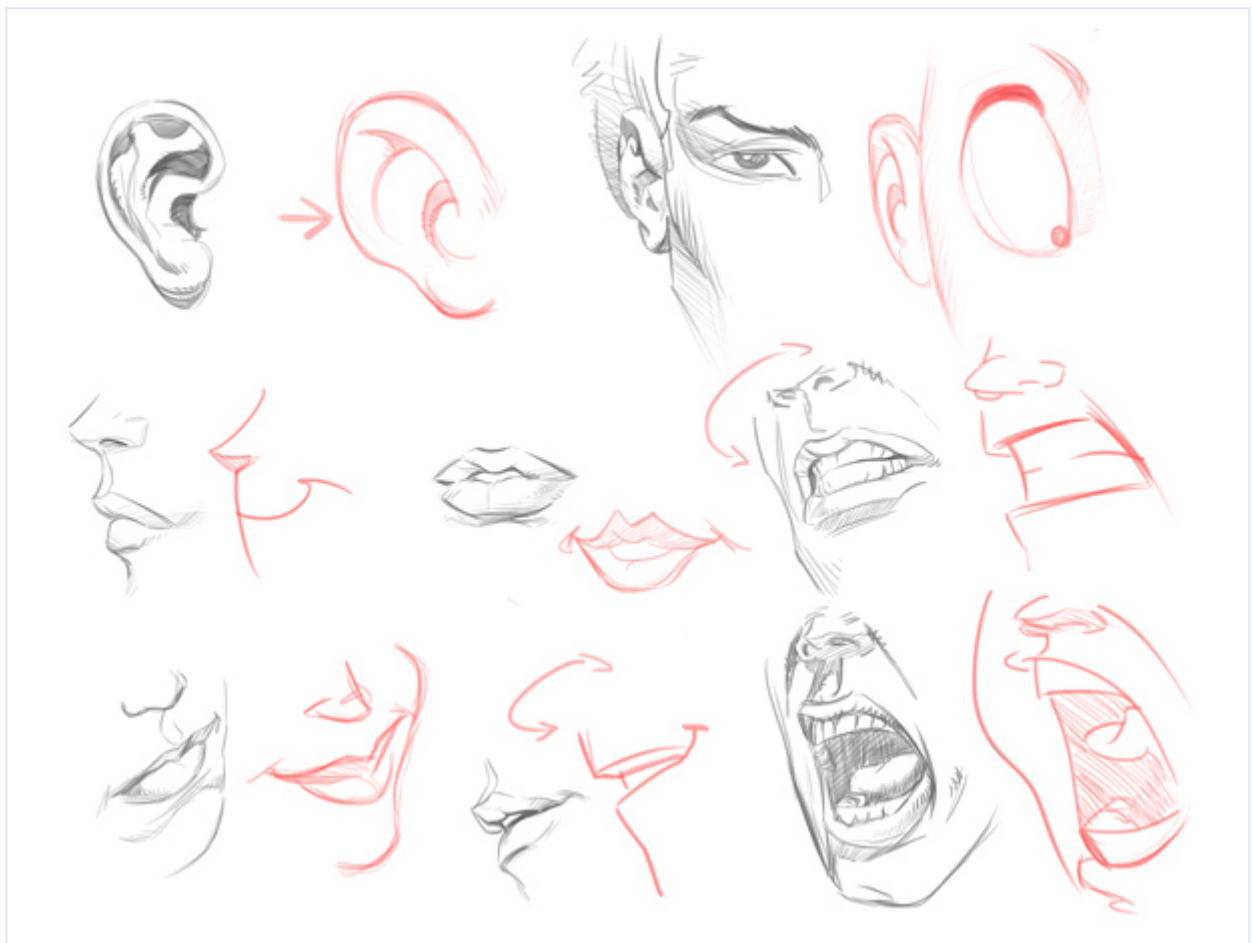
Eyes, nose, mouth, ears... all the details that make up the face change its shape when viewed from different angles. It's very common to see cartoon characters looking at every possible direction with different camera angles, because they will need to react to situations and objects around them. This helps bring them more to life!



Notice how the eye format is simplified when converted to cartoon. See it in red the oval shape in contrast to the circular shape of the real eye.

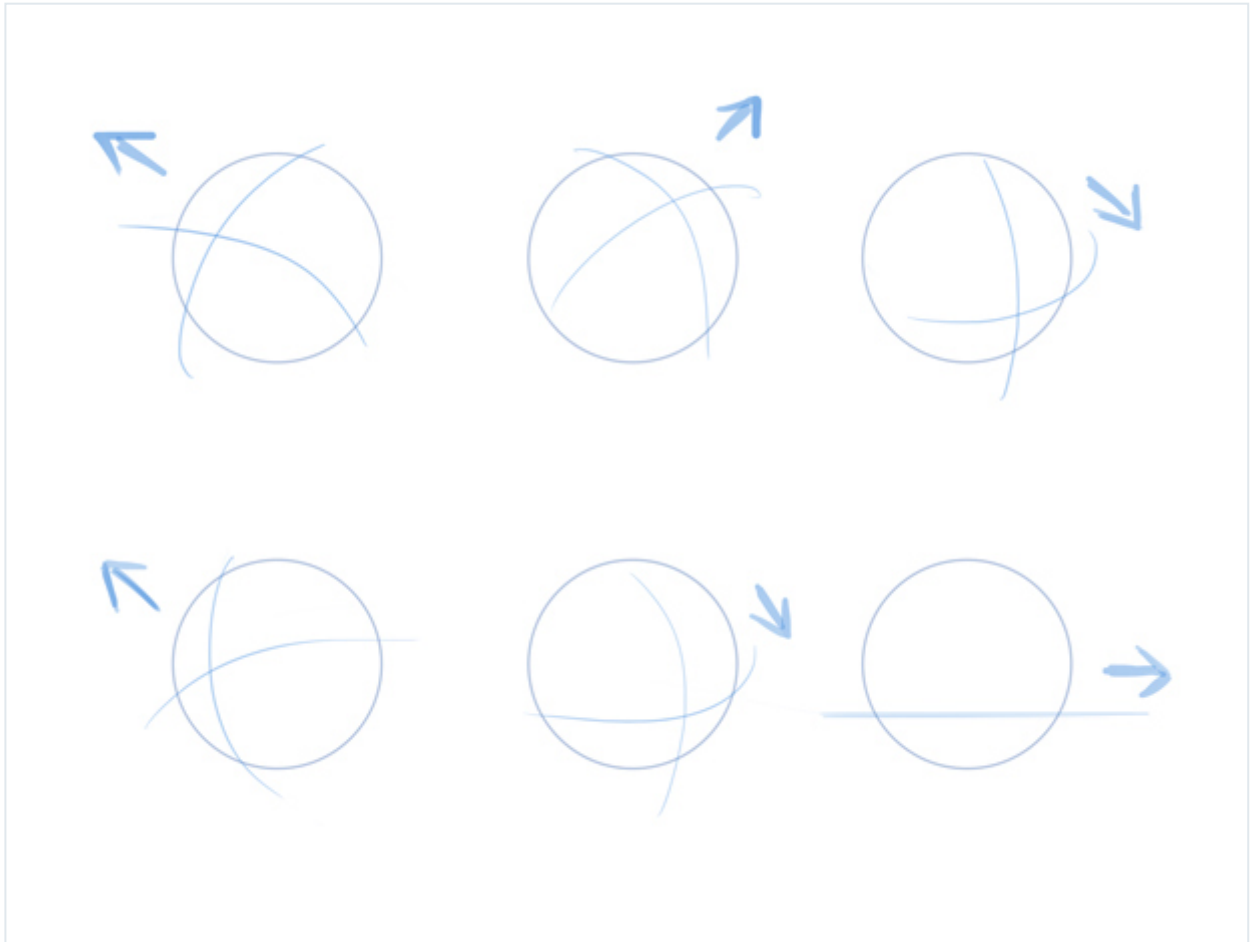


The real nose is composed by several cartilages. Notice how its shape is drastically simplified in the cartoon.

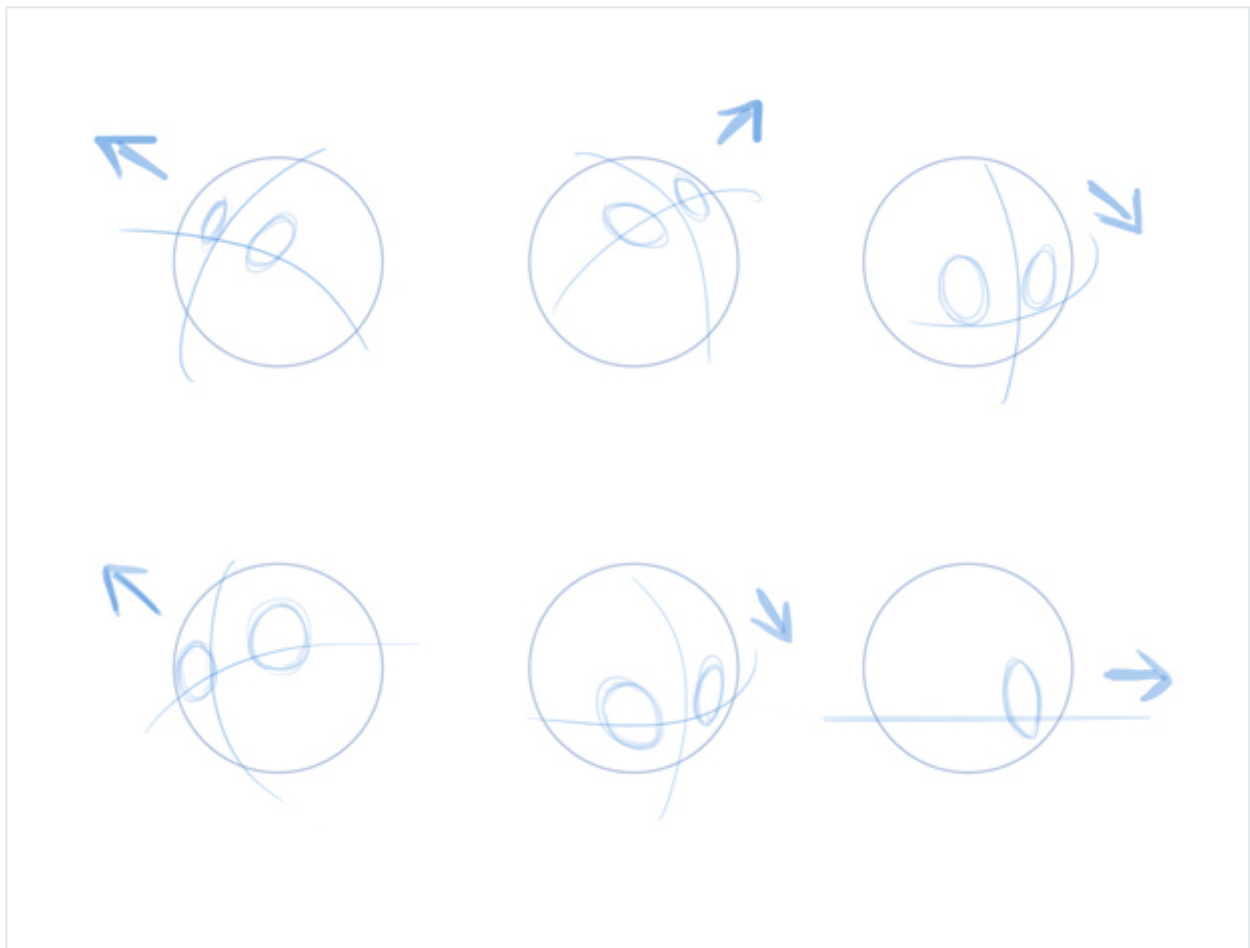


Understanding how the mouth behaves at different angles is essential. Remove the excess detail and try to keep only the basic shape of the lips. The ears are also dramatically simplified.

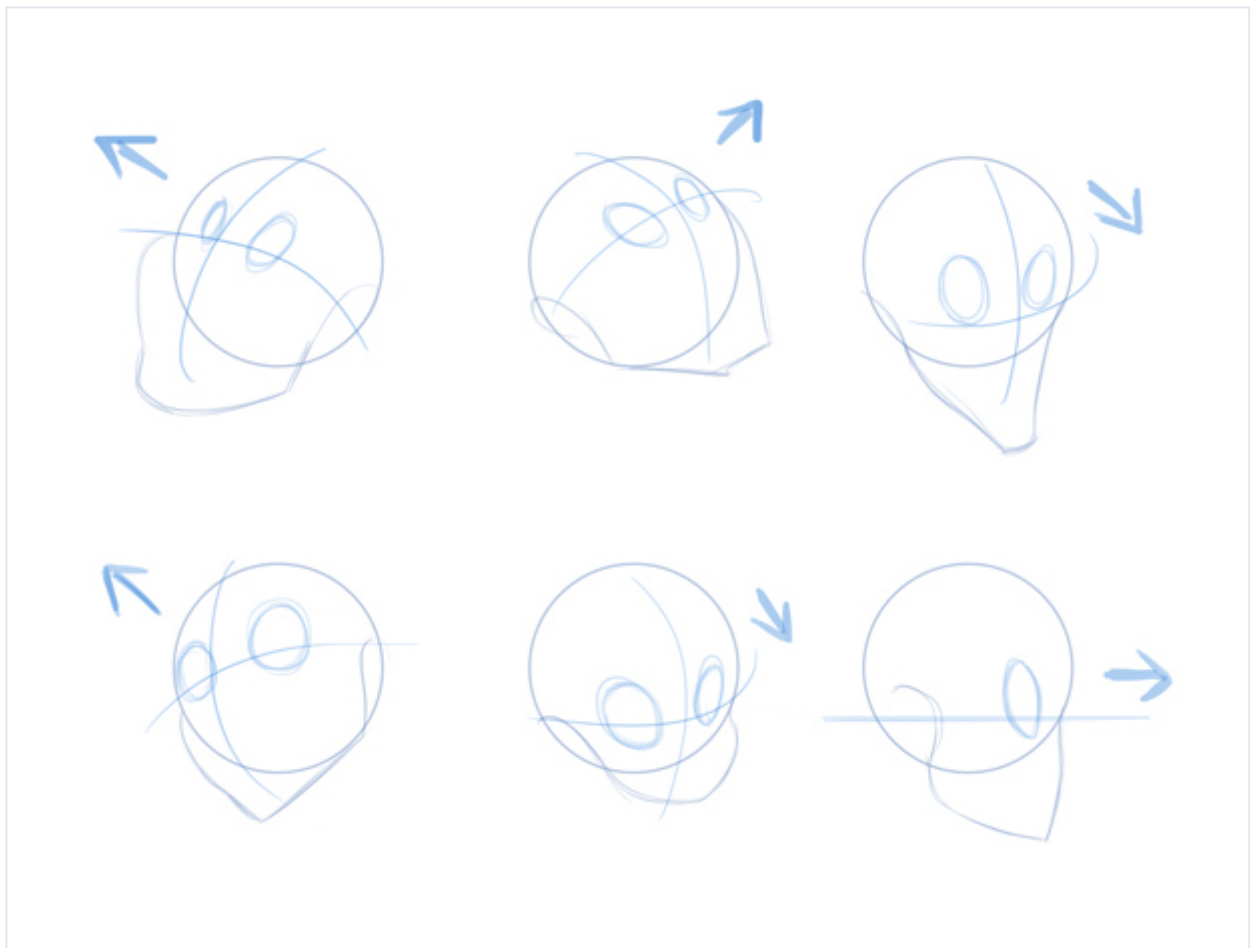
Now we will put into practice everything we have learned so far... Below follows a basic template (only circles and directional guides) where we can practice our drawing skills in different positions:



Let's mark the eyes in different directions for each one of the circles...



Now, let's add some random jaws, with different sizes and shapes...



It's up to you now. I guess you can walk alone and explore the techniques I gave to you to complete the drawings. Remember that cartoon style has two premises:

- Simplify the face details in rounded shapes;
- Exaggerate the facial expressions.

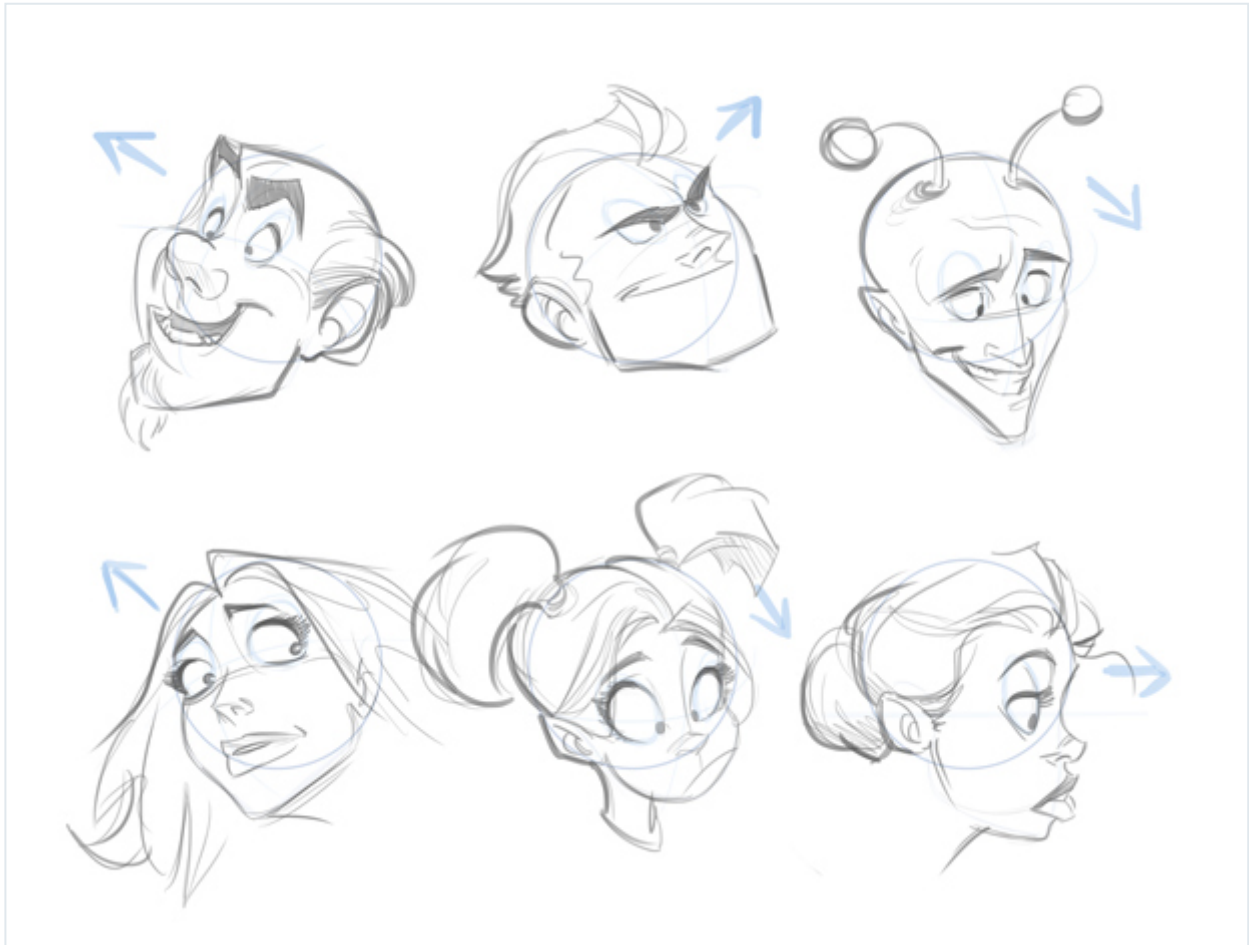
Once you managed to sketch the direction of the eyes and have chosen the proper chins, try to use your creativity to build how many faces you want. You can be sure that, if you practice at least 10 minutes per day of the techniques presented here, drawing cartoon faces will be as natural to you as breathing.

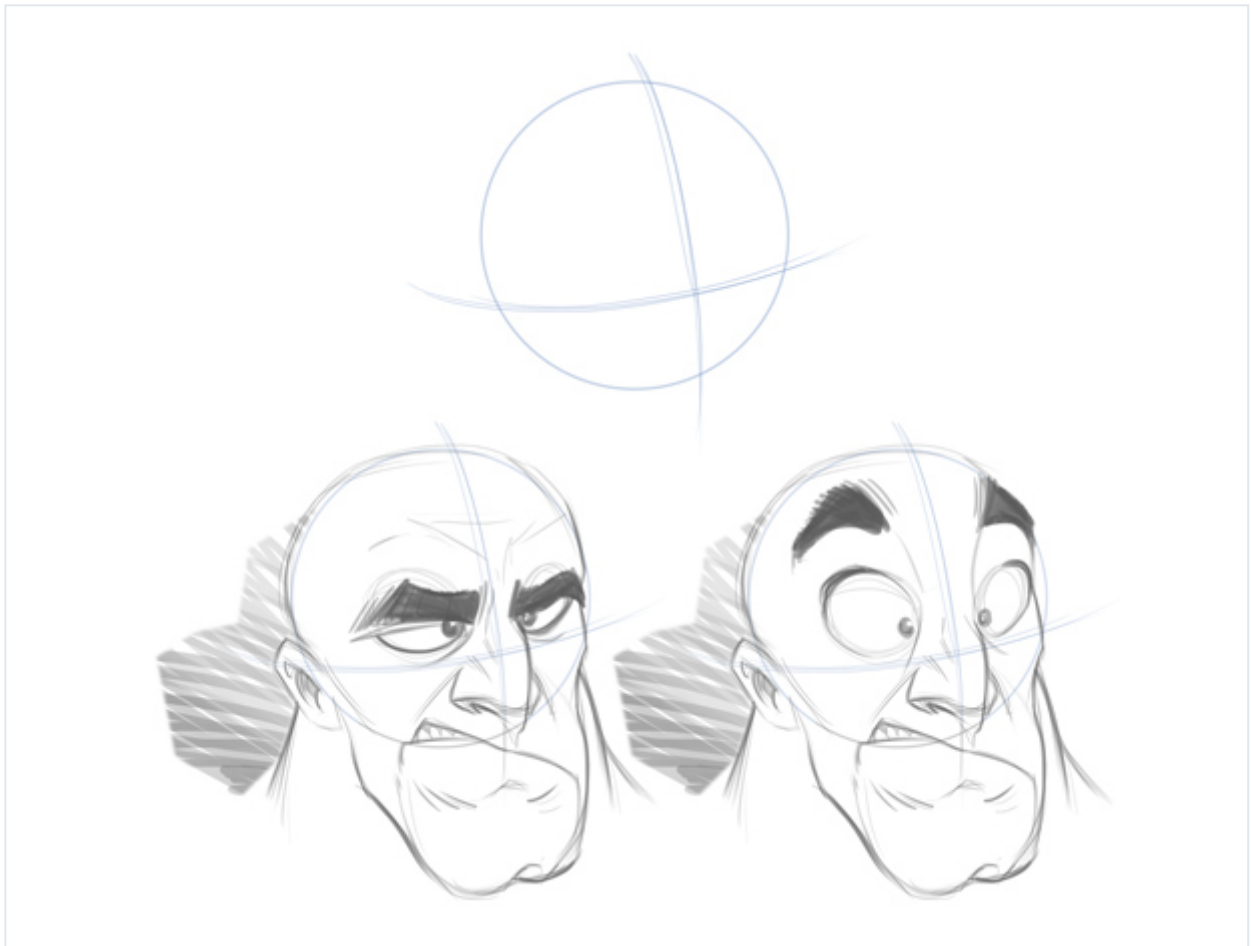
Let's summarize! To reinforce what I talked throughout the tutorial, let's remember the proper steps to draw cartoon faces:

1. Make a circle that will represent the skull of our character;
2. Set the direction in which your character will be looking at and draw the guidelines;
3. Make the outline of the eyes in an oval shape;
4. Draw the eye pupils (make them pointing to the nose, if you want a cute character). Don't forget the eyelashes;

5. Choose the correct eyebrow, depending on the age and gender of your character;
6. Draw an appropriate jaw;
7. Draw simplified ears;
8. Search haircut styles in Google (or a magazine) and use it as a guide reference for your sketch;
9. Celebrate!

Below is my version:





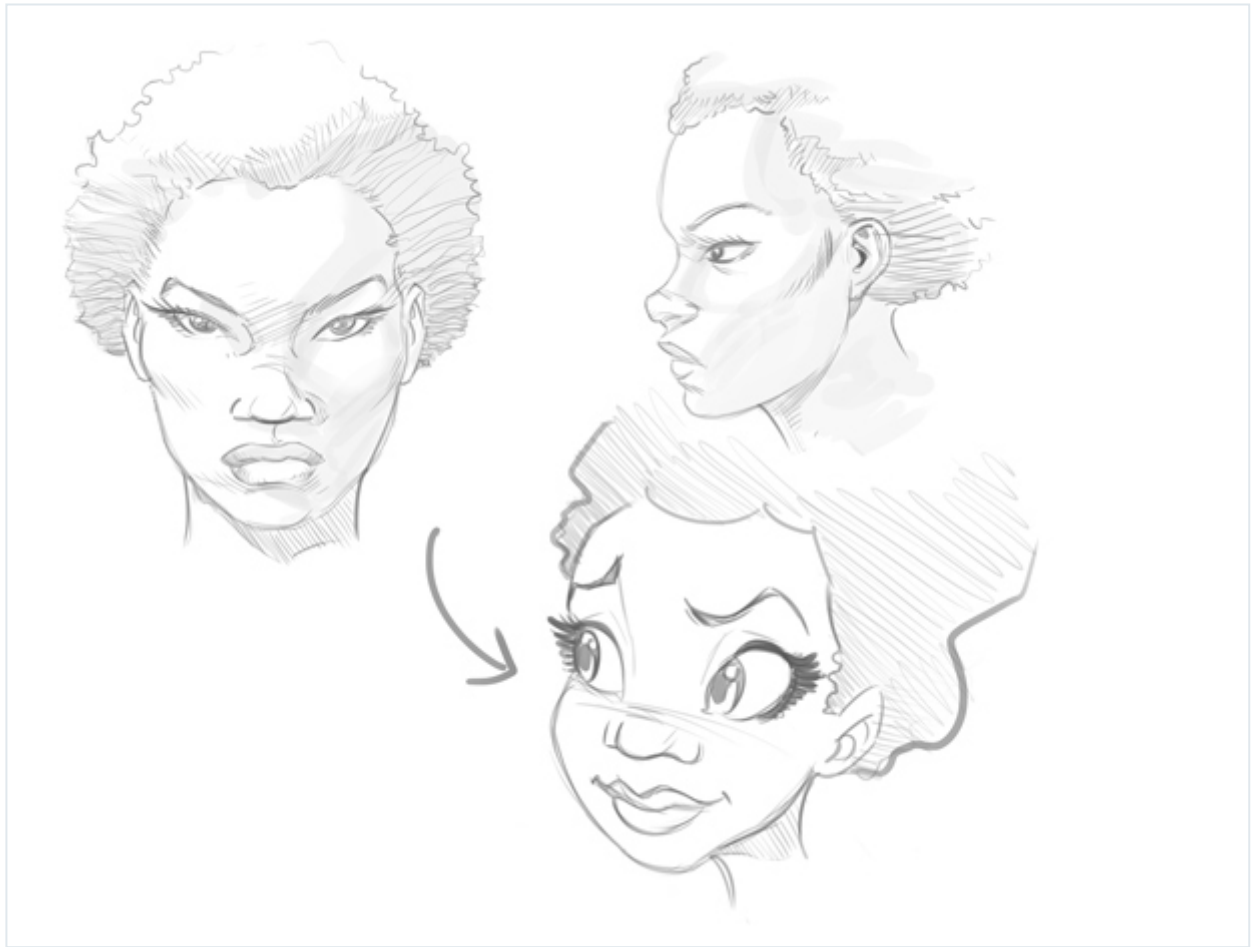
Example of how to use the same template to build distinct emotions. Notice that only the eyelashes and eyebrows were changed. Nothing more!!!

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7. Research Multiple Ethnicities

We are nearing the end of our tutorial. As a last tip, I would encourage you to continue experimenting with facial expressions and, whenever possible, to invest more in studies

of the face. Learn how the eyes and mouth behave in different situations. Take a look at different ethnicities and the key features.



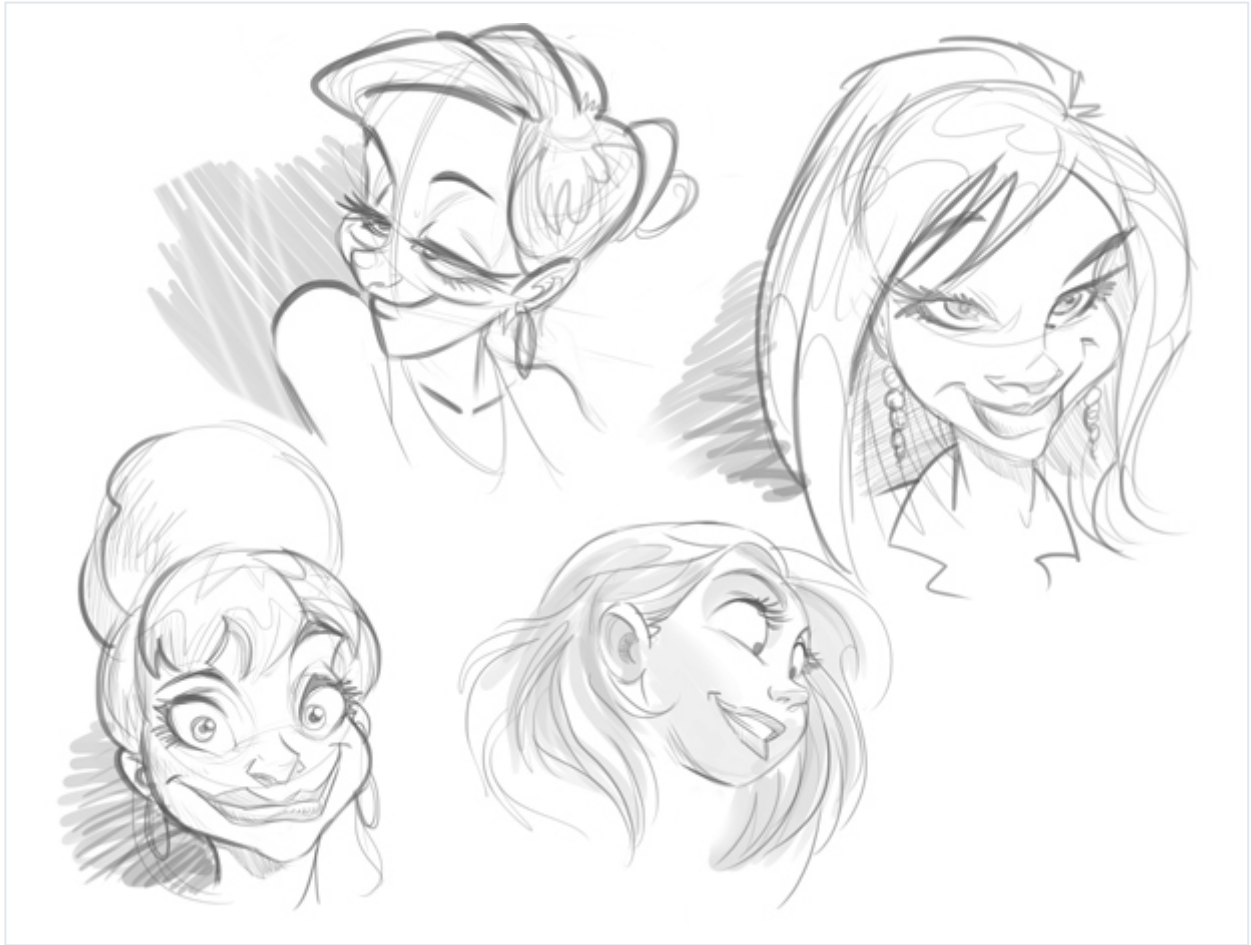
For example, those of a black ethnic origin have a slightly flattened nose and more rounded cheek bones.

Whenever possible, try to give a little more realism to your characters. Observe the behavior of people in real life. Look at photos, study the style of your favorite artist or search for inspiration on the Internet. It's when we look to real life that we can extract quality information for our drawings. But remember: observing the real world does not mean copying! You want your character to be unique and not a copy of reality, right?

Great Job! There is More to Come!

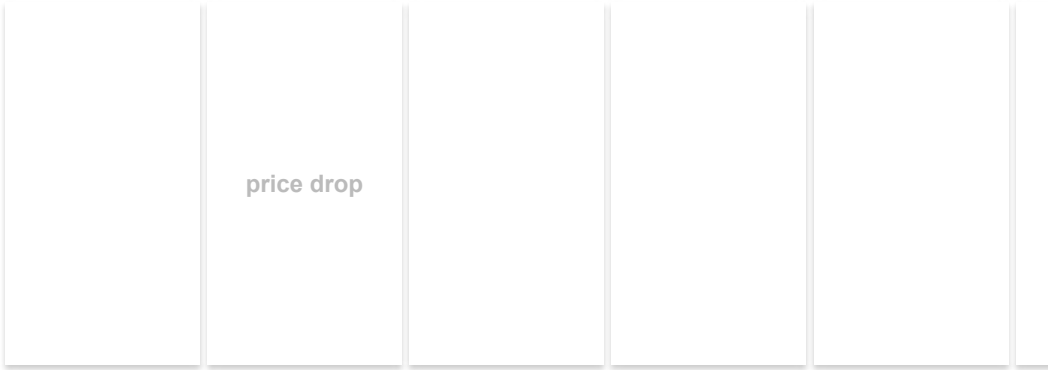
Now you know the basic techniques used by the best cartoon artists around the world. There is plenty more to come and this is just a small fraction of the cartoon drawing tutorials I'll be presenting to you. Up next, we're going to dig deeper into cartoon expressions.

Take what you learn here and work on your first characters. You can earn a nice side-income selling your [character designs](#) on GraphicRiver as you ramp up your skills. Continue to grow your artistic skills and you can earn a full-time income as a cartoonist.





Explore different styles and skull format! Sky's the limit!



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Carlos Gomes Cabral

I'm a product from the madness of the 80's, living in the city of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). I've been fond of arts, comics and music since I was a child, I dedicate myself to several projects at the same time and I hate sitting still. With a Bachelor's degree in IT, I'm currently working for a technology mobility company. I'm also in love with motion graphics, HTML5, web design and UX trends. You can find me on Twitter (@cgcabral).

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Name



Alasdair Martin MacLeod • 5 years ago

Excellent tutorial, So glad I found it! I thought I'd share my first drawing on here. Please go easy :P



274 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Carlos ➔ Alasdair Martin MacLeod • 5 years ago

Wow! That's it! You're on the right way! Thanks for sharing with us :-)

10 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Sharon Milne Mod ➔ Alasdair Martin MacLeod • 5 years ago

Looks fabulous! :D

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Alasdair Martin MacLeod ➔ Sharon Milne • 5 years ago

:) thanks!

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



berniemacsgreatesthi ➔ Alasdair Martin MacLeod • 3 years ago

Needs some work. Lightly sketch It out next time.

4 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Romet6 ➔ Alasdair Martin MacLeod • 5 years ago

Nice one.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Elijah ➔ Alasdair Martin MacLeod • 7 months ago

Very nice work

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Loveart101 ➔ Alasdair Martin MacLeod • a year ago

GOOD JOB! :)

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



David O. ➔ Alasdair Martin MacLeod • 2 years ago

I love your drawing!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



GeoffZoref → Alasdair Martin MacLeod • 2 years ago

Nice. Was this just pen or did you do guidelines and erase them and pen it in after?

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Alasdair Martin MacLeod → GeoffZoref • 2 years ago

Drew guidelines, penned over the bits I wanted to keep then rubbed out the rest.
:)

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Mary Winkler → Alasdair Martin MacLeod • 3 years ago

Thanks so much for sharing this! :) Your result will be featured in June's "Created by You" post!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Alasdair Martin MacLeod → Mary Winkler • 3 years ago

oooo! I'm honoured. Thanks :D

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



loser → Alasdair Martin MacLeod • 2 years ago

looks terrible

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Rich Leigh • 4 years ago

I used this tutorial to learn the basics of this style of drawing. I wanted to learn so I could draw a cartoon version of my daughter singing on a card we gave her for Christmas. She wants to be a singer and asked for singing lessons for Christmas (she also loves Disney princesses). Rather than just paying for her to go, I wanted to create something for her so she had something to open, so I made a voucher to go inside the card. After sending them to Carlos and thanking him on Twitter for these tutorials, he mentioned it might be nice for me to upload them here, so... here goes!



218 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



VigorousJammer → Rich Leigh • 4 years ago

VERY nice!

I especially like the buck-toothed guy in the upper right.

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



GeoffZoref → VigorousJammer • 2 years ago

Nice. The bucktooth guy is especially good

the buck toothed guy is especially good.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Bannef → Rich Leigh • 8 months ago

Aww! What a lucky girl, to have such an attentive and talented mama. Even if she didn't seem interested in saving the picture, I hope you held onto it for her. I didn't understand saving things as a kid, but now I wish I had kept a couple of the cartoon bears my mom would draw on my lunch bag. :)

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Sophia Aguirre → Rich Leigh • a year ago

the buck toothed guy looks like Soos

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Willow → Rich Leigh • 2 years ago

I love that fat kid. You did a great job characterizing him!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Alf • 4 years ago

I know it's not part of this tutorial but can I get a honest critic on how I colored him I've checked the saturation of colors in B&W but It turned out ok but I know somethings off. I'm sorry if I used your work but I assure you I didn't post it elsewhere I just used it for practice :))



117 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Alf → Alf • 4 years ago

Oh and I love how your characters exaggerate so much emotion! XD

6 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Carlos → Alf • 4 years ago

Awesome work! Thank you very much for your comment :-)

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Noob → Alf • 4 years ago

I have no complaints, haha, but if i might try tinkering with it, I'd probably mess around with making the right (the character's left) pupil a little darker, to emphasize the blue light source, then I would take away the blue light source on his shoulder, to make it appear as though it was being emitted from farther away. Maybe add some faint shading to the upper half of the teeth as a shadow from the lip, due to the upper right light source. also, on the neck, I'd try to make his adam's apple pop out a bit more, by shading the right side of the line that defines it on the right flank of the apple itself. (again, on the character's left.) lastly, MAYBE try to put a couple reflective highlights of blue, from that lightsource, into his hair, as well as making the front side of his mohawk a little bit darker for emphasis. but, mostly fine tuning stuff like that, I think it looks great, as is.

4 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Vinith Kumar → Alf • 4 months ago

i am astronished..... well done

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



nel5on • 4 years ago

Great tutorial! Looks great :)



114 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



shereenty → nel5on • 4 years ago

i like it alot

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Carlos → nel5on • 4 years ago

That's it, Nelson! Congrats :-)

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Brian Savignano • 4 years ago

This is what I came up with in about 15 minutes using some of the tricks in this tutorial. First actual drawing too! SO nice having a Cintiq!



145 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Carlos → Brian Savignano • 4 years ago

Very nice!

btw... Can I borrow your Cintiq? ;-)

10 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Bvega → Brian Savignano • 4 years ago

how did you make it an actual cartoon after the pencil drawing?

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Brian Savignano → Bvega • 4 years ago

I used Adobe Illustrator and played with the Image Trace settings until it got the lines comic-y how I liked them, then changed the white path/shapes it made into the colors I wanted and added shadows/highlights.

Edit: I also have the eyebrows mouth and nose separated nicely for different facial expressions without having to redraw the character.

4 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Ahsan Idrisi • 4 years ago

This is my first try on cartoon drawing, it was difficult to mirror the hair of old guy on both sides



95 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Jain Tharakan ➔ Ahsan Idrisi • 2 years ago

good

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Jak Conrad ➔ Jain Tharakan • a year ago

That's ok, it's hard for "real" old guys to get their actual hair right, too. :)

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



grace • 4 years ago

this is exactly the kind of tutorial i was looking for :3 i usually draw anime style but i really want to try my hand at more cartoon styles so this is great,



81 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Carlos ➔ grace • 4 years ago

Wow, **@grace**! I really like your style. Congrats!

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Jomar Estayo ➔ grace • 4 months ago

hi

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Jain Tharakan ➔ grace • 2 years ago

very nice pic grace

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Boku wa magomago ➔ grace • 3 years ago

GJ Grace! Nice blend of cartoon and anime in there, hopefully you're still drawing!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Hamza Antra ➔ grace • 3 years ago

great one !! you have the skill of copy past ^^

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



akashparaskar ➔ grace • 3 years ago



thts so... nice

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Quishara Amier • 4 years ago

I gave it my own twist :P



76 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Luke • 4 years ago

I gave it a shot. Thanks for the great tutorial :)

iamlukemarques.tumblr.com



42 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Tiffany Munro → Luke • 4 years ago

what brush settings did you use I LOVE the coloring and outlining on these, I would really appreciate it!

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



gottie • 4 years ago

BIG THX.



33 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



heroizm • 4 years ago

great explanation, thanks carlos! awesome work everybody. motivated me to try a self portrait for the 1st time... :)



31 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Tammi • 4 years ago

Great tutorial! It really helps with some simple tricks.

I felt like coloring my two guys and I changed the look of the old man a bit ;)



28 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Maxene Aina Ancheta • 4 years ago

It's a girl thank you very much for the tutorial:)



23 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Gina Hill → Maxene Aina Ancheta • 3 years ago

Wonderful <3 keep up the good work, kiddo!

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

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