

# How to Hold a Pencil for Drawing

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There's more than one way to hold a pencil, especially when it comes to an art as delicate as drawing. Most artists use two main grips to produce the bulk of their drawings—the tripod grip, which is the same one you'd use to hand-write a letter, and the underhand or overhand grip, which is useful for tracing long, steady lines and shading broad areas. However, you're also free to explore different variations of these grips in order to adapt your style for a given technique or situation.

## Method 1

### Method 1 of 3: Basic Grip



**1 Position the pencil between your forefinger and middle finger.** Curl your hand loosely and slip the shaft of the pencil into the space where your first two fingers meet. More specifically, the pencil should rest between the pad of your forefinger and the inside edge of your middle finger. Make sure the tip of the pencil is pointed downwards.<sup>[1]</sup>

- In a standard tripod grip, the tip should extend roughly 1–2 inches (2.5–5.1 cm) below your hand.
- Drawing demands quite a bit of stability and precision. For this reason, it's best to use your dominant hand.<sup>[2]</sup>

**Tip:** You can also “choke up” on the pencil and hold it closer to the tip if it's more comfortable for you.



**2 Brace the opposite side of the pencil with your thumb.** Place the tip of your thumb at the midpoint between the tips of your fore and middle fingers, making sure that only the first knuckle of each finger is making contact with the pencil. Apply enough pressure to steady the pencil, but avoid squeezing it.<sup>[3]</sup>

- Since this is the same hand position that most people use when first learning to write, the tripod grip is also sometimes referred to as the “writing” grip.
- Squeezing the pencil too tightly actually makes it harder to control, and can cause your lines to come out jagged and shaky.



**3 Lift your wrist off of your drawing surface.** Rather than using your wrist to anchor your hand the way you would when writing, allow it to hover just above the paper. Not only will elevating your wrist help you form straighter, more fluid lines, it will also prevent you from dragging your forearm or the edge of your hand over your pencil marks and smearing them.<sup>[4]</sup>

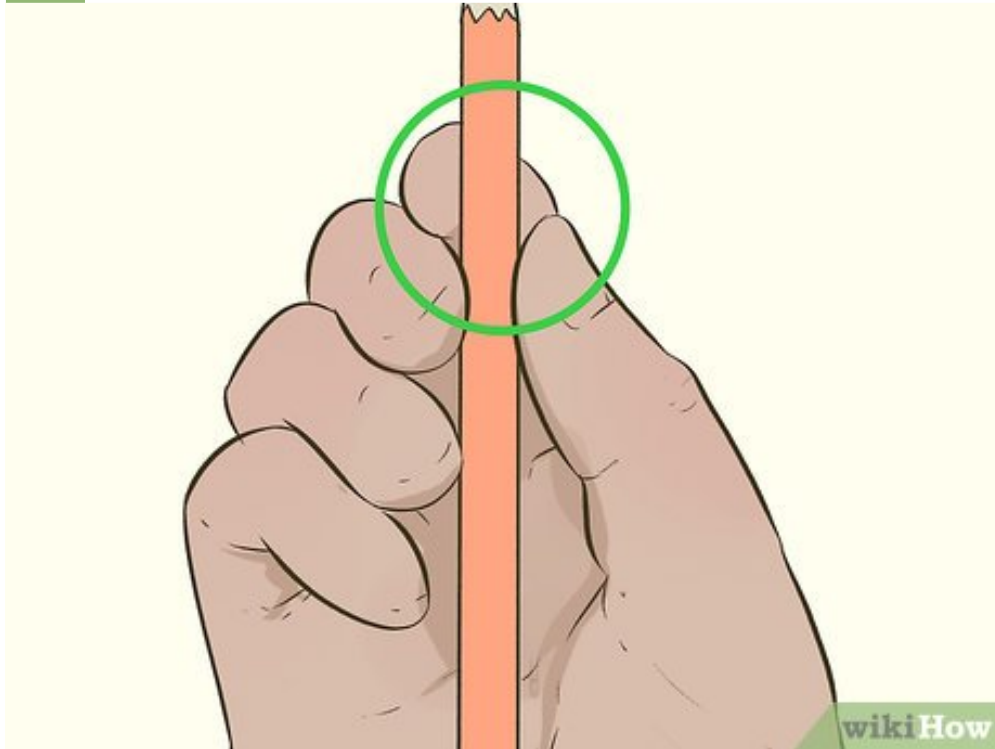
- If you leave your wrist on the drawing surface, you're more likely to curve your lines involuntarily as you run out of room to maneuver the pencil. By simply picking up your wrist, you can avoid this common problem.<sup>[5]</sup>
- The only time it's useful to let your wrist remain on your drawing surface is when you're filling in especially small areas that don't require you to move the tip of the pencil more than about 1 inch (2.5 cm).



**4 Use both your wrist and forearm to draw.** Once it's time to put pencil to paper, get your entire lower arm involved. Move the pencil with smooth, precise strokes, starting from the elbow. Remember to keep your wrist poised above your work surface at all times.[6]

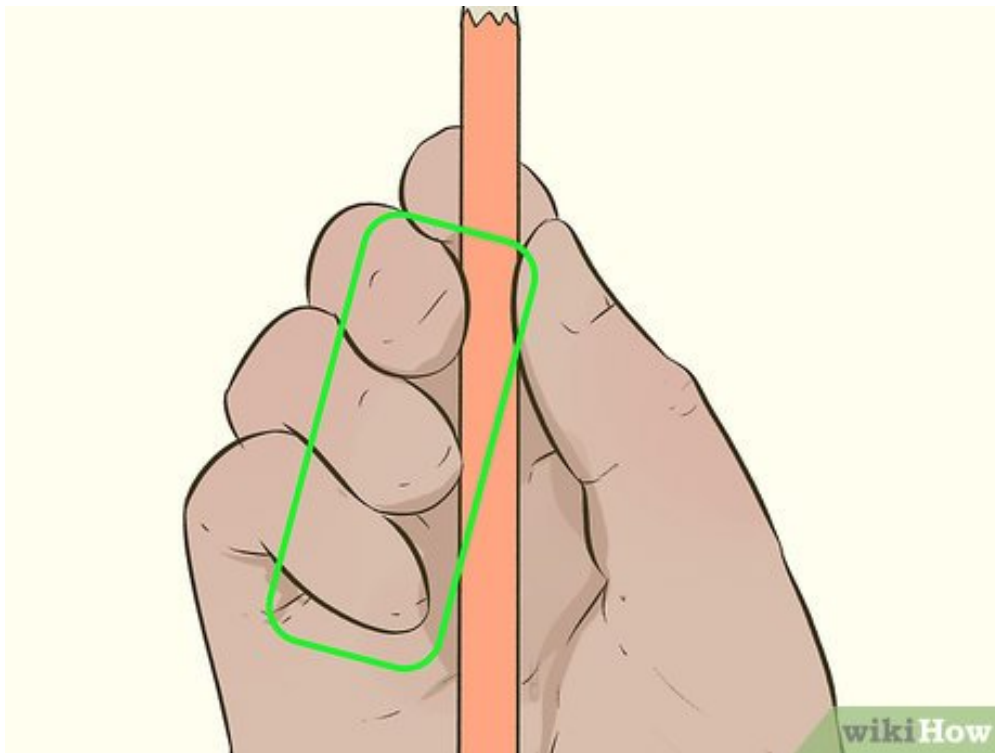
- As an alternative technique, try letting the first knuckle of your pinky finger glide along the paper as you draw. This will force you to keep your wrist up while also guiding and adding stability to your movements.
- A basic tripod grip is best suited for making short lines, small, intricate shapes, and other fine details.[7]

## Method 2 of 3: Underhand and Overhand Grips



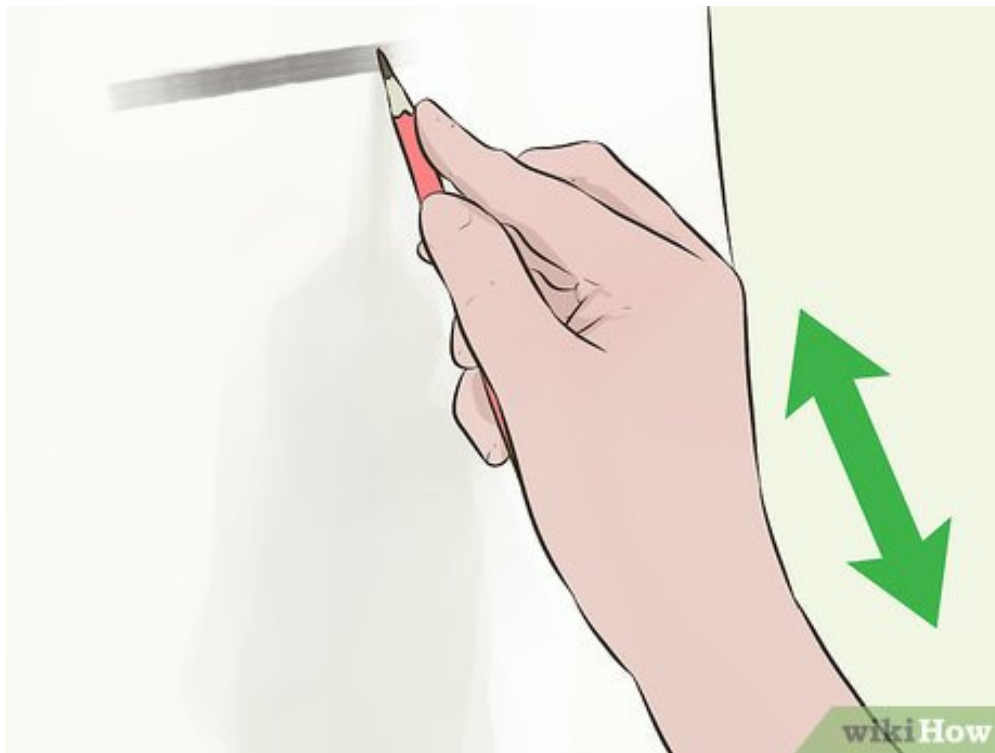
**1 Pinch the pencil between the pads of your forefinger and thumb.** Press your two fingers together just enough to stabilize the pencil. The underhand grip is extremely relaxed and easy, so there's no need to squeeze too tight.<sup>[8]</sup>

- The tip of the pencil can be anywhere from 1–3 inches (2.5–7.6 cm) away from your fingers. Do what makes the most sense to you.



**2 Rest your other fingers against the shaft of the pencil.** Place your remaining fingers in a row along the forefinger side of the pencil. In this position, they'll serve to offer a little extra stability. You can also drape them lightly around the shaft if you prefer a slightly more secure grip.<sup>[9]</sup>

- Another option is to leave your middle, ring, and pinky fingers completely free if you feel like they're going to get in the way.
- If you choose to wrap your fingers, be careful not to close your hand enough to press the shaft of the pencil into your palm. This will change the angle of the tip and take some of the flexibility out of your wrist.<sup>[10]</sup>



**3 Run the tip of the pencil along the paper using your whole arm.** Guide the pencil in long, loose strokes originating from the shoulder, keeping your hand and wrist at a fixed angle. The resulting lines will be much smoother than you could produce with a tighter, more focused tripod grip.<sup>[11]</sup>

- An underhand grip is ideal for tracing long, light lines and contours that span much of the paper.

**Warning:** Don't bear down too hard. Doing so will interfere with the fluidity of your arm movements and could cause the tip of the pencil to snag.



**4 Turn your wrist over to switch to an overhand grip.** An overhand grip is almost identical to an underhand grip except for the position of your wrist. One isn't better than the other—some artists feel that an underhand grip is the most precise, while others prefer the stability of the overhand variation.<sup>[12]</sup>

- An underhand grip is usually most comfortable if you're drawing on an easel, elevated desk, or similar upright surface. When drawing on ordinary desktop, table, or other flat surface, an overhand grip may feel more natural.
- Keep in mind that you're not locked into a single technique. You can switch back and forth from underhand to overhand as often as you like based on what feels good and creates the desired effect for your drawing.<sup>[13]</sup>

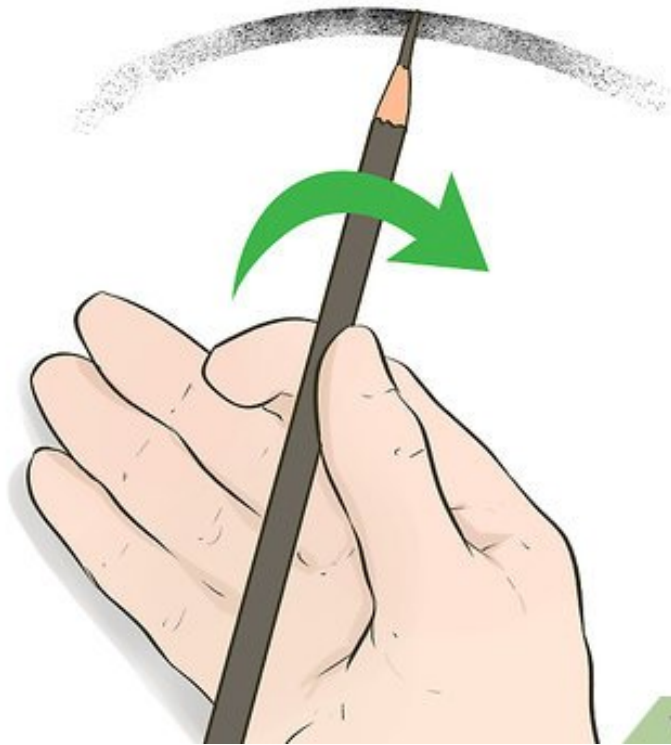




**5 Shade broad areas with the side of your pencil.** Underhand and overhand grips lend themselves well to shading, since they make it possible to put a larger portion of the pencil tip in contact with the paper. Just hold the pencil against the paper at a near-parallel angle and move it back and forth in short strokes.<sup>[14]</sup>

- Start with light pressure to add a sense of texture to blank spaces and increase the pressure or go over the same area multiple times to create gradually deepening shadows.

### Method 3 of 3: Experimenting with Less Common Grips



**1 Slide your hand back on the pencil in a tripod grip to take a brush grip.** As its name suggests, the brush grip is a variation that closely resembles the way a painter holds a paintbrush. The major advantage of a brush grip is that it enables longer, lighter, easier strokes, bridging the gap between a controlled tripod grip and looser underhand and overhand grip.<sup>[15]</sup>

- With a brush or brush-style grip, your hand might be anywhere from the middle of the pencil to the very back end.

**Tip:** Another benefit of the brush grip is that it makes it easier to see what you're drawing without your hand getting in the way.<sup>[16]</sup>



**2 Use a “loaded” overhand grip to apply more pressure while shading.** Begin in a standard overhand grip, then slide your forefinger all the way up to the tip of the pencil. The weight of your finger behind the tip will provide additional leverage, which is great for shading bold, dark areas.<sup>[17]</sup>

- It’s also possible to take a loaded tripod grip by angling the pencil down slightly and putting most of the emphasis on your forefinger.



**3 Try out an inverted grip for maximum visibility with complex drawings.** Grasp the shaft of the pencil between your thumb and forefinger near the back end and use your other three fingers to support the front end. Unlike all of the other traditional grips, the tip will actually be pointed towards you in an inverted grip.<sup>[18]</sup>

- An inverted grip can come in handy when you're working on an especially detailed drawing and need to be able to watch what you're doing carefully.
- Because the inverted grip doesn't offer the precision of a tripod grip or the consistency of an underhand or overhand group, it's best to only use it on occasion.



## Expert Q&A

### Question

How do you get better at inking drawings?



**Kelly Medford**  
Professional  
Artist  
Expert Answer

So a lot of illustrators and architects ink their drawings, which means they sketch something out in pencil first and then go over it in ink. The best way to get better at this is just to practice. It's like anything else in art, if you make mistakes and keep learning from them, you're going to get better.

Helpful 4 Not Helpful 0

### Question

I've always held pencils in a very weird way, but I draw just fine. Is that okay?



Community Answer

Sure. As long as the method you're using works for you, it's perfectly fine.

Helpful 21 Not Helpful 2

### Question

#### Does this also work for a pen?



Community Answer

Yes. You can benefit from this article in using both. It is upto you and which way you feel most comfortable.

Helpful 7 Not Helpful 1



### Tips

- Certain types of pencils make certain grips more effective, as well. For example, a hard-tipped pencil can enhance the precision of a tripod grip, while softer tips are better for shading and delicate preliminary linework.<sup>[19]</sup>
- Don't be afraid to put your own unique spin on your grip to make drawing with a pencil more comfortable and hone your personal style.

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## About This Article



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This article was co-authored by **Kelly Medford**. Kelly Medford is an American painter based in Rome, Italy. She studied classical painting, drawing and printmaking both in the U.S. and in Italy. She works primarily en plein air on the streets of Rome, and also travels for private international collectors on commission. She founded Sketching Rome Tours in 2012 where she teaches sketchbook journaling to visitors of Rome. Kelly is a graduate of the Florence Academy of Art. This article has been viewed 45,114 times.

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