

# Developing Ideas, Resolving Problems, and Evaluating Results

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### Ideation: Generating Ideas

**I**deation is really just a fancy word that refers to the process of forming or generating ideas or images, and clearly this process is vital to the creation of art. All the technical skill in the world does not rescue a work of art that is poorly conceived and/or lacking in strength of idea.

For hundreds of years, human beings have explored various methods for coming up with ideas—some of which have been unconventional to say the least. For example, Beethoven would often pour cold water over his head, thinking that it jogged his creativity. And the story goes that Schiller, the famous German poet, could only write if he smelled rotten apples, so he would keep decomposing apples in the drawer of his writing desk. The great novelist Dickens aligned his bed to the North Pole, believing the magnetic lines in the earth gave him his creative abilities. But in fact ideation is a natural process, one that we all knew well as children but may have lost sight of as adults. As children we were driven by imagination and curiosity, and as artists these remain vital components in the process of nurturing creativity and developing compelling ideas.

#### IMAGINATIVE THINKING AND THE BRAIN

The following information (edited for length) is taken from the writing of Dr. Marvin Bartel, Emeritus Professor of Art at Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana.

Central to the process of art and central to the success of artists is the ability to generate original ideas, designs, and compositions. Imaginative thinking is at the core of art as well as a number of other disciplines, but the art of imaginative thinking is often not well understood by students and is often not practiced as an integral part of course work. For many of you, the source of ideas for art really remains a mystery, and this can lead to a lack of confidence in your ability to generate and develop your own ideas.

Studies show that we lose our divergent thinking ability, our ability to think outside the box, as we mature. Why does this happen? We should not assume that education, parenting, and societal factors are the only things causing this loss of creative thinking habits and skills. The normal biological development of our brains may be programmed to change the way the brain works as we mature. Divergent thinking allows our brains to scan all compartments and categories and to look in all the unexpected places for possible ideas. Young children have fewer fixed categories, so it may be natural for their brains to be flexible and quick in this respect. As we accumulate more knowledge we categorize things and our brains try to keep a log (remember) of where everything is. As we mature the volume of information and the categories become immense and overwhelming at the same time that our brains become less flexible. It gets harder and harder for us to scan all these compartments. The need to get things organized seems to be a very important part of our evolved genetics (and sanity). Furthermore, we know that genetics varies between individuals, so we may be genetically predisposed to be more or less capable of divergent thinking and creativity.

To the extent that the youthful brain is malleable, creating art is a perfect venue in which to practice and nurture the brain's imaginative powers to make choices and connections between experience and expression. Art is an ideal venue with which to practice imagining scenarios that go beyond anything experienced in the past. When you write about art, describe it, have discussions about artistic quality, and create aesthetic descriptions of your surroundings, you can be learning to make creative connections with your own experiences and you can imagine and speculate about experiences you have never actually observed or experienced. Like good science education that encourages observation and wonderment about how things work, art education can build minds that ob-

serve, wonder, imagine, and create. In this way, art history and the study of art-world content can become concept centered rather than product centered. Works can be studied for why they were made and for how the artist strategized them.

## IMAGINATION, CREATIVITY, AND BRAINSTORMING

Imagination requires divergent thinking and allows us to form a mental image of something that is not perceived as real and is not present to the senses. Imagination reveals what the world could be rather than what it is. Imagination is the capacity to see the unseen. Imagination can give us practice in the ability to hold a variety of different and conflicting notions in our minds simultaneously.

Creativity and imagination compel us to look at one thing and see another, to entertain a new or different arrangement of known, existing elements. A creative person is not necessarily someone who tries to create something totally new, but rather someone who mixes existing elements into a new or different arrangement. Consider, for example, the world of music and the piano as instrument. All composers for the piano use the same known elements to create their music—the eighty-eight keys of a piano. They simply arrange them differently, or, in the case of the composer John Cage, they conceive of different ways to coax sound from the piano. This idea applies not only to music but also to so many creative endeavors, including literature, poetry, filmmaking, choreography, screenwriting, and the visual arts. As visual artists, we have the potential to create limitless variations from a menu of options—point, line, plane, shape, form, mass, volume, texture, value, color, positive space, and negative space—regardless of process, media, or subject matter.

### The Process of Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a rapid, spontaneous, idea-generating activity, and it is a great way to get the creative juices flowing. It can be done singly or as a group. The idea behind brainstorming is to generate a lot of different ideas or solutions to a problem or a question. Ideas generated by brainstorming can be recorded in a sketchbook through written words, quick sketches, collaged images or information, diagrams, digital photos, voice recording, and any other means that allow you to record ideas quickly in a way that you can understand and access later. Because you are brain-

storming for drawings, ultimately your ideas will be expressed in a visual form.

When brainstorming, begin by defining the problem to be solved or by asking a question relevant to the task at hand. Write it down and speak it out loud. Brainstorming in response to this problem or question may likely generate more problems or questions that generate even more ideas. Think in broad terms initially, allowing yourself to freely associate and letting one idea build upon another. Don't edit or censor any ideas. The very nature of brainstorming suggests that at this point in the process, everything is valid for consideration. Try to imagine ideas or solutions through an unfamiliar viewpoint by placing yourself in an imaginary role or position—as a child, as a large or small animal, as an inanimate form, as an alien, as someone from another culture or country, as a member of the opposite sex, as your father or your mother, and so on. Try to see, both literally and in your mind's eye, from as many different viewpoints as possible.

Your sketchbook is an ideal place to record the results of a brainstorming session and to take these results and begin developing and exploring them more thoroughly. The advantage of a sketchbook is its portability and its privacy. It is a place to record possibilities freely without the fear of "making mistakes" or "messing up." And ideally, as an art student, you should always have a sketchbook of some sort in your possession because you never know when an idea may come to you or when a grand opportunity to sketch will present itself. You can also keep multiple sketchbooks of various sizes if you prefer. Sketchbooks range in size from 4" × 6" to 14" × 17". They come in a wide range of formats and papers, including hardbound sketchbooks and wirebound sketchbooks, which have the advantage of being folded back to provide a flat surface on which to draw. You may have one sketchbook that is less private, especially if your instructor requires you to submit a sketchbook for evaluation. You may also want to have a sketchbook that no one will see unless you decide to show it to them.

## Diagnosing Problems in Your Work

With a successful brainstorming session behind you, you've taken an idea that you're excited about and created a drawing. You've taken into consideration any parameters that your instructor may have provided for the assignment, and now you're on your way. As

your drawing reaches various degrees of development, and after you have completed your drawing, it is wise to spend some time assessing your results. Maybe you achieved everything you had hoped to achieve, or maybe your drawing didn't quite yield the results you had hoped for. It could be that your idea is strong but your skill level isn't developed enough to give visual form to your idea, or maybe your drawing is beautifully executed but the idea you were trying to express isn't clear in the final result. Perhaps you have expressed your idea effectively and your technical skills have provided the results you want, but your drawing is poorly positioned on the paper. There are many ways in which a drawing can go well or go poorly. One of the ways that we develop our skills as an artist is to learn to ask ourselves the right questions as we evaluate our own work (and the work of others). By asking yourself a variety of questions, you can begin to assess where your strengths and weaknesses lie while gaining experience in using the language of art through the process of self-critique.

Regardless of our efforts to the contrary, it is nearly impossible to critique work in a purely objective fashion, particularly when it is our own work that we are critiquing. But objectivity is a worthy goal. Bear in mind that there are those aspects or qualities of a drawing that can elude analysis, rooted instead in intuition or personal sensibility. While you may not be able to specifically identify their presence in a drawing, you may know when you encounter them, and efforts to describe them through language may find you marveling at the essential inadequacy of words in the face of something that defies a language-based description.

In your initial experiences of formal art education where observation of form/subject is the primary objective, it is quite possible to identify some recurring problems that you will encounter in your drawing experiences. An awareness of some of the more insistent hurdles and problems will provide you with a solid framework for diagnosing problems and critiquing your own work and the work of others. As is the case in any situation where troubleshooting takes place, effective solutions are more readily arrived at when there is a clear identification of the problem. In some instances, a problem will be a problem in relative terms only, as an element of a particular drawing. What may be troublesome in one drawing may be a necessary and working element in another. In many other instances, a problem or defect in a drawing will

be nearly universal—that is, it would be a problem in the context of any drawing.

An example of this would be a drawing of the human head, based on observation and the desire for a likeness, in which the eyes are located too high in the overall shape of the head, which in turn alters all of the proportions of the face. This is a perceptual error that would not be relative—it would be considered a problem in any drawing. Some may say that altering proportional relationships of the features of the face can have powerful expressive properties, and this is most certainly true. But the distinction here is grounded in *intention*. Your *intention* to distort for expressive purposes is distinctly different from an *accidental* and inconsistently applied distortion based on perceptual and observational errors.

Following are some general drawing problems that you may encounter on a fairly regular basis in your own work or in the work of others, regardless of subject matter.

### **INACCURATE PROPORTIONAL, SCALE, OR SHAPE RELATIONSHIPS**

This is perhaps one of the most common weaknesses in the work of students in the early stages of their development. Whether in a drawing of the human form or of a still-life arrangement of forms, an awkward and inaccurate size relationship between parts of a form or between one form and another is apparent. In this instance, there is generally a disregard or lack of understanding for sighting techniques or other measuring techniques used to observe size and shape relationships between parts of a subject or between multiple subjects in a drawing. In the event that sighting techniques are understood but not applied, there is a tendency to draw what you experientially know about your subject rather than what you actually observe, and these two attitudes are frequently in conflict. For example, we know that a particular chair has a square seat and four legs that are equal in length. We know this because the square shape of the seat of the chair has room for and supports our buttocks when we are seated on it, and the chair rests firmly on the floor because its legs are all the same length and meet the floor simultaneously. But when observing the chair from an oblique angle, the seat does not appear to be in the shape of a square, and the legs appear to meet the floor or ground plane in different places, implying that the legs are not all equal in length. With this example, it is easy to understand how an empha-

sis on “knowing” versus observation can contribute to a drawing’s demise.

With the human form as subject, proportional problems are common, indicating a lack of regard for relating the scale or size of various parts of the figure. Proportional problems may also indicate a disregard for establishing a unit of measure as the basis for determining the relative scale of all other forms to this unit of measure. In the case of the figure, the unit of measure is most often the head. Again, the tendency to draw what you experientially know about your subject rather than what you actually observe contributes to degrees of visual illiteracy. We know that there is a certain length to the thigh or upper leg, for example, in relation to the length of the lower leg. But when we observe the figure seated in a chair, we see a foreshortened view of the thigh that often does not relate to the lower leg in the way that we would expect. This difference between what is known and what is seen may create a conflict, and the more familiar “what we know” will override the less familiar “what we see.” So we lengthen the thigh in an effort to get it to match what we “know” about a thigh, and the figure appears to be sliding off the seat of the chair because of the conflict between the position of the body and the adjusted proportions.

In some instances when proportional problems surface in your work, there is an emphasis on length relationships at the expense of width relationships. What may at first appear to be a torso that is much too long, for example, may actually be the result of a torso whose length is accurate in relation to the unit of measure but whose width is too narrow. The converse is also true. What may at first appear to be an arm that is incorrect in width may actually be an arm whose length has been inaccurately observed but whose width is correct.

These perceptual short circuits require a more careful study and understanding of the principles of observing size, shape, and scale relationships and the underlying language translation from 3-D (the actual, observed form) to 2-D (the flat plane upon which the form is represented). Sighting and scaling are addressed in Chapters One and Four.

### **MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVE EYE LEVELS**

If you are familiar with the principles of perspective, then forms that have an observable relationship to perspective (any forms derived from a cubic structure) can be represented with a clear sense of a fixed eye

level or horizon line and with a clear sense of converging parallel edges meeting at a single point on that horizon line. But even if you have no prior understanding of perspective principles and no experience with drawing in perspective, sighting provides a method for accurately observing and recording the angles and lengths of a form’s edges and axes. If sighting principles are applied with care and concentration, and if all forms are seen in their spatial relationship to all other forms, a unified sense of spatial placement and location can be achieved, even in the absence of specific perspective training. Once again, sighting provides a key component for accurate observation.

### **FORESHORTENING INACCURACIES OR A LACK OF FORESHORTENING**

Foreshortening, especially in the extreme, can throw off even the most careful observer. Not only are the axes and the length and width relationships of forms altered (often radically), but the resulting shape of a form seen in a foreshortened view often bears no resemblance to how we typically imagine that form to look. Once again, sighting techniques are tremendously helpful in observing and recording foreshortened forms, whether they are found in the human figure, in a still life, in a study of an interior space, or in some other subject.

Foreshortening is related to the perspective principle of diminution in size. Not only does it alter the appearance of an isolated foreshortened form, but it may also create a radical shift in size or scale relationships between the various parts of a more complex form. This is highly evident in drawing a reclining figure. If the observer is positioned at the figure’s feet or head, with the main axis of the body at a pronounced angle to the plane of vision, there will be various degrees of foreshortening observed in the limbs and the torso of the body. But there will also be dramatic differences in the size or scale relationship between near and distant parts, such as the feet and the head. Entire parts of a form may disappear in a strongly foreshortened view. Instances of overlapping increase or are heightened in a foreshortened view. In the event that these are not observed and recorded with care, the visual impact of foreshortening will not be achieved.

When confronted with foreshortening you must utilize sighting techniques to observe the often unexpected width, height, and size relationships. Avoid the strong inclination to tilt your sighting stick along the axis of a form, often unconsciously, as opposed

to the correct technique of keeping the sighting stick within the two-dimensional plane of vision that represents the picture plane.

### **FLAT AND RESTRICTED LINE WORK**

This inadequacy in a drawing is characterized by line work that is uniform in tone, width, and texture and is generally found along the outermost contours of a form. Because of its uniformity and placement, it serves primarily to describe a flat shape rather than a volumetric form. If the line work ventures into the interior of a form, it usually does so reluctantly and lacks the sensitivity to describe a range of undulating surfaces such as may be found in the human form or other organic forms. Rather, that same uniform line within the interior of a form will tend to read more like a scar or a tear than as a description of a changing and shifting surface.

In this instance, you may have a very narrow idea of what constitutes an edge (the place where form meets negative space is one narrow definition), and you may view line as capable only of defining this particular kind of edge. The idea that line can describe volume and space is not a familiar one. If you accept the notion that line can beautifully describe form, volume, and space, you may still struggle with knowing when, why, and how to introduce variation into your line work. In addition to an awareness of the systems used to denote hard, medium, and soft drawing materials and their role in developing line variation, you must become familiar with the ideas governing the use of lighter and darker, thicker and thinner, softer and sharper, textured and smooth lines to denote edge, form, volume, and so on. Line variation is discussed in depth in Chapter One.

### **DETAILS OR SPECIFICS AT THE EXPENSE OF THE LARGER AND MORE GENERAL UNDERLYING FORMS**

Although overattention to detail can develop in linear drawings, this is an issue that is usually closely related to the use or misuse of value or tonal structure. In many cases, your drawing may progress well in the linear state only to begin to fall apart when you begin to explore value or tone as a description of form, volume, and light source. The problem is rooted in overattention to details and specifics at the expense of the larger, simpler forms and volumes upon which the details are based. Detail attracts our eye, and it can be especially challenging to bypass detail until the “spon-

soring or host form” is clearly established as a volumetric form.

In the figure, this issue most often develops in relation to areas of greater detail, such as the head and face or the feet and hands. Nostrils may be colored in as dark holes before the nose takes on any volume or structure. Eyelashes and irises may take precedence over the spherical form of the eyeball and the eyelids. On a grander scale, the eyes, nose, mouth, and ears may all be properly positioned and well defined, through tonal structure, as individual forms. But the facial features may be lacking a sense of cohesiveness because the greater form and volume of the head itself, upon which these features are based, has been ignored or underdeveloped. Hands may show all sorts of lines and creases and knuckles and fingernails, but this information may rest on fingers that lack volume and fullness. Nipples may rest on breasts with no volume.

The same premature scrutiny can be found in the study of inanimate or nonfigurative forms as well. A still-life arrangement of fruits and vegetables may focus on surface texture without acknowledging the spherical form upon which the texture is found. A study of a tree may excessively describe the texture of bark without sufficient emphasis on the columnar volume of the trunk and branches. A drawing of a shoe may obsessively describe laces and eyelets or the pattern found on the sole of the shoe while denying the larger volume of the shoe itself. A drawing of a house seen in two-point perspective may beautifully describe doors and windows and roof lines and columns and brick patterns, while missing the overall tonal shifts from one large plane or side of the house to another, which describes the house as a large cubic structure upon which the details of doors, windows, and other features can be found. As you can see, the list of examples is endless.

The solution to this problem is in repeated emphasis on working from general to specific and in utilizing techniques and exercises that facilitate this approach to observation. Exercises for reinforcing the process of working from general to specific are outlined in Chapter One and, in relation to the figure, in Chapter Four.

### **SCALING INACCURACIES IN RELATION TO PERSPECTIVE PRINCIPLES**

In its most fundamental state, problems with scaling are directly related to problems with proportional relationships between individual elements in a composition. If these individual elements do not relate to each

other convincingly in terms of size, the integrity of the drawing is compromised. When forms can be observed directly, sighting techniques provide a means for determining accurate size relationships.

In its more specific application, scaling refers to a process based in perspective that determines the accurate size relationships of forms on a fixed ground plane in an illusionistic three-dimensional space. If you are attempting to invent elements in an illusionistic three-dimensional space without the benefit of direct observation, scaling issues will be evident through size and placement discrepancies. Forms may appear to be too big or too small in relation to other forms, or forms may appear to be unintentionally floating above a ground plane or crashing through a ground plane. Drawing situations where scaling problems may arise include attempts to address multiple forms within an interior space or a room environment or attempts to address multiple forms in a deep exterior space, such as a landscape or a cityscape. Doorways and furniture may appear too small to accommodate figures or too large; houses and trees and cars may appear too large or too small in relation to each other.

The process of scaling effectively establishes a corridor of convergence that determines the change in apparent size or scale as a given form is moved to different positions within the illusionistic three-dimensional space of a drawing. It also maintains an accurate size relationship between different forms within this same illusionistic three-dimensional space. The process of scaling is addressed in depth in Chapter One, and in relation to the figure in Chapter Four.

### **LACK OF VOLUME OR TIMID VALUE STRUCTURE IN THREE-DIMENSIONAL FORMS**

As already discussed, lack of volume can result from excessive emphasis on detail at the expense of the sponsoring or host form. If this is not the cause, lack of volume is often rooted in inadequate tonal structure resulting from fear or timidity about tones getting “too dark.” It may also result from a misuse of media based on a lack of awareness of different grades of lead, charcoal, graphite, conte, and other materials. You may be limiting yourself unwittingly to harder media that in turn limits the resulting tonal range.

It is important to make a distinction between timid, underdeveloped value structure and high-key value structure. High-key value structure would

be sensitive to the six divisions of light and shadow (highlight, light, shadow, core shadow, reflected light, cast shadow) and would intentionally represent them using tones found on the lighter end of the value scale. An anemic or timid value/tonal structure would not acknowledge the full and rich range of lights and shadows necessary for describing volume effectively.

In the event that you are misusing media because of a lack of awareness of the systems used to denote hard, medium, and soft drawing materials, you must inform yourself of the system and what it means. Harder tools make a lighter mark and can incise the paper if too much pressure is applied in an attempt to make a mark darker than what the medium is intended for. This is especially true in the case of drawing pencils. The softer the tool, the darker a mark it makes, the more easily that material will smear and move around, and the less easily or thoroughly it will erase.

In the case of timidity, you are encouraged to push tonal ranges further. It can prove helpful to set aside harder drawing materials and use medium and soft materials only. It may also prove helpful to “break the ice” by establishing an overall ground or base tone of vine charcoal from which to work both additively (with compressed charcoal pencils and sticks) and subtractively (with erasers). It may also prove helpful as an exercise to draw some lit forms whose local tone is dark to begin with, which can relieve some of the anxiety of making shadows on a light form too dark. Information on what to look for when identifying value structure can be found in Chapter One.

### **OVERLY GENERALIZED DRAWING**

Overly generalized drawings are characterized by a lack of development beyond a certain intermediary point. The drawing is on the right path but is not reaching the destination. Description of volume or form does not address any details of surface or form, and value structure, if applicable, does not develop beyond an initial limited tonal range. The drawing is developed competently up to a certain point, but moving beyond that point is something that you either don't pursue or pursue hesitantly and with negative results. Often it is because you are afraid of “ruining” a drawing that is working well in the early or intermediate stages because you may not feel confident in developing darker passages that define a full value range (timid value), or because you are overwhelmed by

the shift from generalized information to detailed information, or because your attention span is limited and you are unwilling or ill equipped to move beyond general analysis of form to more careful scrutiny. Encouraging yourself to “take the plunge” is important, with the understanding that practice and experience will make this transition from a moderately developed drawing to a fully developed drawing easier.

If technical issues seem to be more the problem than perceptual issues, understand that this is often a good time to make a shift in drawing materials, particularly if the initial drawing was developed using stick media. Detail is more easily addressed using pencil forms of lead or graphite or charcoal or conte, which provide greater control.

### **SUBSTITUTING RECIPES OR FORMULAS FOR CAREFUL OBSERVATION**

This is a common problem in drawing, particularly when the form being drawn is one that has historically been the subject of “how-to” books or instruction that encourages you to use recipes or formulaic solutions. Careful analysis and observation is replaced with generalizations and stylizations (what you “know” vs. what you see) that result in generic-looking forms lacking unique character and integrity. If this approach to drawing is firmly established, it can be a difficult habit to break. It is often far more challenging to unlearn something that has become second nature than to learn something about which one has no prior experience.

### **UNINTENTIONALLY AMBIGUOUS SPACE**

Ambiguous space that is arrived at unintentionally delivers mixed messages to the viewer, characterized by passages that convey form and volume juxtaposed with passages that read as flat, two-dimensional shapes. There may be a shift in technique or process or media from one part of the drawing to another, from continuous tone modeling to hatching and cross-hatching to outlining, for example. A unified language or “voice” is markedly absent, resulting in a drawing that is visually confusing, weak in presenting the compositional principle of harmony, and lacking in authority. It is a drawing that is hard to believe, difficult to trust. Addressing these shortcomings requires that you clarify your intention (what is the drawing intended to speak to) and that you are attentive to maintaining a relatively constant language that works toward realizing your intention.

### **RIGID OR PRISTINE DRAWINGS LACKING A SENSE OF PROCESS**

A drawing may be well composed and reflect accurate and careful observations of form but still lack freshness and a sense of the process of drawing. This is often the result of your fear of making a mistake or your fear that a drawing will become too “messy.” In an attempt to avoid this, there may be evidence of an overly restrained approach that is reflected in a stiff or rigid drawing. A lack of enjoyment of or appreciation for the *process* of drawing is evident in the results. Line work may lack fluidity, and every indication of process, if any even exists, may be painstakingly erased and “corrected.” Fear and caution become obstacles, and the desire for perfection stands in the way of discovery through process and trial and error. Exercises that emphasize process over product can help you to develop enthusiasm for the act of drawing and for visual evidence of the search that is vital to the life of a drawing.

Sometimes this excessive caution is the result of previous drawing experiences, such as technical drafting, that may have emphasized a degree of precision that is frequently inappropriate for a freehand drawing. In this instance it is helpful to examine the different approaches and their relationship to the desired results and function of a drawing. Process or searching lines are discussed in Chapter One.

### **DISREGARD FOR OR POOR COMPOSITION**

Because of the many factors that must be considered in developing a strong composition, the ways in which a drawing may reflect poor composition are numerous. Typical compositional weaknesses in the work of beginning students are often grounded in a disregard for the most basic compositional “rules” or guidelines. Your work may show a lack of visual balance; awkward or overstated divisions in the picture plane; a lack of recurring similarities of line, shape, value, texture, or form necessary for compositional harmony; or a most fundamental disregard for the relationship between image and format.

This disregard is typically not intentional. It results instead from a narrow and singular focus on the individual forms or images that make up a drawing, eclipsing the need to pay attention, from the outset, to the relationship of forms or images to each other and to the format or picture plane that becomes their universe by defining the total space in which they exist. Key compositional concerns are discussed in Chapter One.