

The 3 reasons why you can't draw, (and what to do about it)

by WILL KEMP

Sometimes you just can't figure it out. It seems no matter how hard you try, how intensely you look at a subject, your drawings look wrong. You've read how to draw books, maybe gone to a few art classes but the art of drawing still seems to elude you.

And you begin to question yourself – What if it's me? What if I don't have enough talent?



What if I'm never going to improve? You are not alone.

Understanding drawing can be the key to both your artistic success and a new, razor sharp creative mind – but it can seem an uphill struggle. But what if there was a simple solution? Pieces to the puzzle that you didn't know existed, 3 secrets that could instantly improve your drawing and painting? Wouldn't you give it a try?

1. What if I told you, you talk too much

Talking and drawing don't mix. The main problems associated with drawing is when you talk you engage your logical, language dominated left side of the brain. This side of your brain is keen on knowing an objects name, labelling it, and organizing it. Often when learning to draw, you need to temporarily hold off judgment and try not to second guess what you think the object should look like, rather than what the object actually looks like.

When you are trying to learn to draw something realistically, you have to engage your right-hand side of the brain, which is keener on images and spatial perception. It's very hard to do both at the same time.

Why?

Because it causes mind freeze. Have you ever been in a creative zone of absorption, a state where time travels quickly and you are in what psychology professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls 'flow'.

How Does It Feel to Be in Flow?

1. Completely involved in what we are doing – focused, concentrated.
2. A sense of ecstasy – of being outside everyday reality.
3. Great inner clarity – knowing what needs to be done, and how well we are doing.
4. Knowing that the activity is doable – that skills are adequate to the task.
5. A sense of serenity – no worries about oneself, and a feeling of growing beyond the boundaries of the ego.
6. Timelessness – thoroughly focused on the present, our sin to pass by in minutes.

7. Intrinsic motivation – whatever produces flow becomes its own reward. Flow is the mental state when you are fully immersed in an activity, a feeling of full involvement and energy. You can get to this stage of involvement whilst drawing... until you get interrupted.

The combination of left and right battling against each other makes trying to draw tricky. You can learn to talk and draw at the same time but it takes practice. It all starts by understanding how your mind works, and how you can be subconsciously sabotaging your best efforts.

2. You have a harsh inner critic

You can learn to draw, you just might not believe it and this is often the first stumbling block to attaining a new skill. Drawing is as much a mental game as an observational game. Sure, you need a basic level of skill to hold a pencil and make a mark but not as much as you may think. It's about the same level of skill as signing your name or throwing and catching a ball.

However, your subconscious mind is extremely powerful and it can play havoc with your best efforts when learning this new skill. You see, your subconscious is already telling you this can't be true.

Changing your internal script

Often successes in our lives stem from our own internal beliefs. And these can be crippling both in your progress as an artist or in any other areas of your life.

“Well-meaning, intelligent people often resort to repeating self-defeating behaviour in their personal and professional lives,” --Robert Brooks PH.D and Sam Goldstein, authors of *The Power of Resilience*. **If you keep on thinking you can't draw, you won't.** As you try and draw something realistically and it starts to go 'wrong' your inner critic starts to rear its head. Often drawings start off really well and you observe things accurately, it's only when you get to a perceived 'tricky' bit you start to question yourself. The truth is you have probably started to 'make up' the rest of the drawing and have stopped observing, relying on what you think it looks like. In comes the inner critic and says: “*That doesn't look like a boat, give up now, it looks like a kid's done it*” So what we have to do is stop labelling objects, and start to look more abstractly.

3. You label the object too much

Isn't this correct? You should be looking and labelling the object, you should be really concentrating on it, that is what you have to do, right? Well yes and no. When I'm drawing a bottle, I don't draw the bottle. I draw the shapes *around* the bottle and then the bottle is drawn for me. Confused? Let me explain some more.

All edges in a drawing are **shared edges**, you cannot draw a line without it sharing two edges. Imagine drawing the bottom of a boat, one straight horizontal line. That line now shares an edge with the bottom of the boat and the water. One line, two edges. That boat you were having trouble with is just a series of lines and shapes.

How artists draw

So if I draw the space around a bottle, it shares an edge with space and the bottle so the bottle is drawn by me not drawing it.

In drawing, you are constantly trying to disassociate from labelling real objects so your logical left brain can't try to tell you how to draw what it recognizes.

It seems wrong, it seems backwards, but this is why you can't draw. To see like an artist you have to learn to make a **cognitive shift** from left brain to right brain. If you keep on talking to yourself, engaging your inner critic you will be firing up the left brain. Ever wonder why Jackson Pollack drank a lot of Bourbon, Van Gogh absinthe? Alcohol calms you down, you're not as self-critical. So although I'm not suggesting you hit the bar before getting out your pencils, just try to be aware of the internal 'voice' that will hinder your progress. Drawing is a paradox.

To see something as an artist sees it, you have to look at the Abstract elements within it.

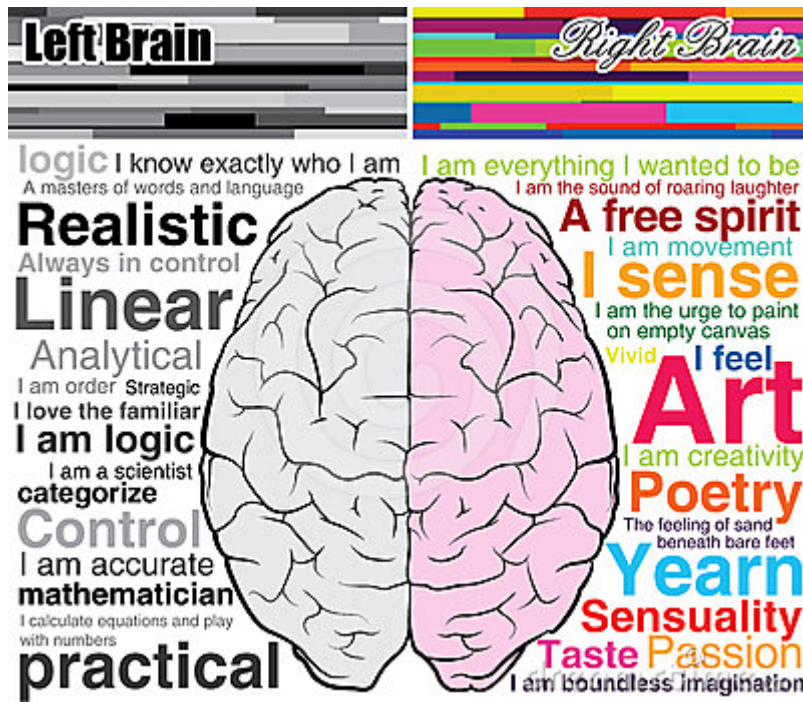
Try not to focus solely on the object, try not to label an object but just see it as simple shapes and lines. Abstract elements once drawn then become real in front of your eyes and the left brain will then fire up to make sense of the shapes and label it.

A brief overview of left brain right brain

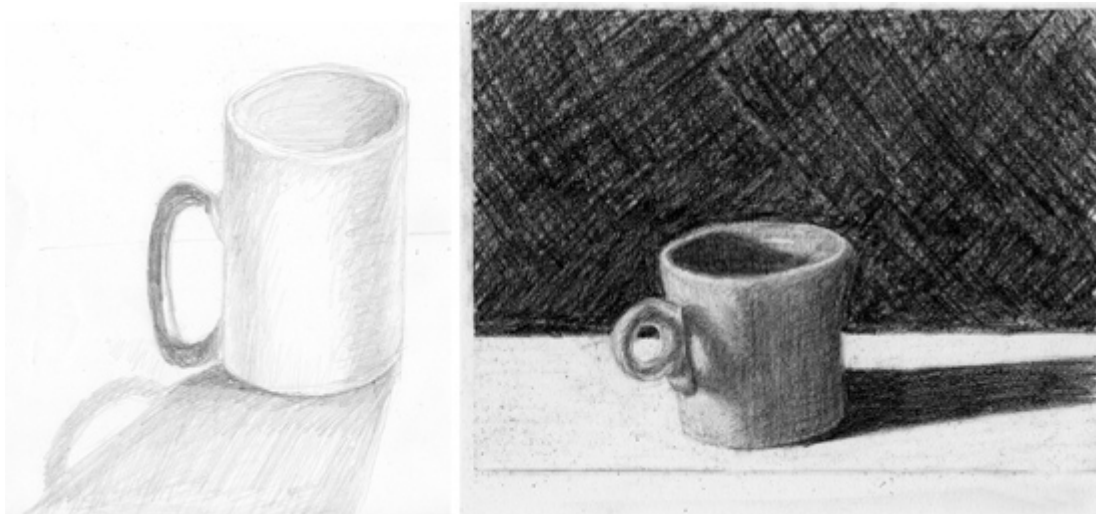
A right-brain outlook on life can give you a holistic view, where left brainers are often more detail orientated. Left-brain thinkers focus on the logical, rational, sequential, and analytical while right-brainers prefer more random, holistic, and free-associated approaches. Psychologists say that left-brainers focus on words and numbers while right-brain people focus on visual images and patterns.

Right brain thinkers make lateral associations whilst left-brain people make logical deductions from information. Most people are a mix between the two, do any of these character traits seem familiar?

LEFT BRAIN FUNCTIONS	RIGHT BRAIN FUNCTIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ uses logic▪ detail oriented▪ facts rule▪ words and language▪ present and past▪ math and science▪ can comprehend▪ knowing▪ acknowledges▪ order/pattern perception▪ knows object name▪ reality based▪ forms strategies▪ practical▪ safe	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ uses feeling▪ "big picture" oriented▪ imagination rules▪ symbols and images▪ present and future▪ philosophy & religion▪ can "get it" (i.e. meaning)▪ believes▪ appreciates▪ spatial perception▪ knows object function▪ fantasy-based▪ presents possibilities▪ impetuous▪ risk taking



Drawing as a learnable skill



This is an example of one of my students 'Before' and 'After' on my beginners drawing course – this is the same mug drawn 4 weeks apart!

Just like every other activity, your skills will be improved as you learn basic principles and get some practice.

The key to learning to draw, just like learning to write, is good foundational instruction and then working until you own it.

No one said it would be easy, nothing worth doing is. Yet just because it is challenging does not mean that, with time and hard work, you will be excellent.