

The Complete Beginners Guide to

Graphite & Charcoal



By Shaymus Art

Contents

What are Graphite Pencils?.....	3
The Graphite Grading Scale	4
What is Charcoal?	5
My go-to Charcoal Materials	6
Paper Perfect	7
Must Have Tools	8
My Favourite Way to Sharpen	9
Methods and Techniques	10 - 11
Storage and Framing	12

Hi there! If you're new here, my name is Shay and I'm an artist specialising in soft pastel, graphite, charcoal & oil paints. I have spent many years of trial and error & I'm excited to share all of my graphite & charcoal knowledge, methods, techniques & tips with you here! Graphite and charcoal are incredible mediums that can be used individually or in combination to enhance creative possibilities. Their simplicity and lack of colour make them user-friendly, requiring minimal materials to begin creating your own masterpieces. Whether your artistic interests lie in portraying people, animals, scenery, objects, or anything else, graphite and charcoal offer endless possibilities for your artistic expression. I really hope you enjoy this beginners guide!

All the best,



Shay.

What Are Graphite Pencils?

Graphite pencils are simply wood encased cores of graphite & clay. The amount of graphite to clay ratio determines the pencil's hardness or softness, which in turn determines how light or dark its marks will be.

The greater ratio of graphite to clay in the core, the softer and darker the pencil's marks will be. Conversely, the lower the graphite ratio to clay, the harder and lighter the marks will be.

Graphite pencils have a grading system to indicate how light or dark their marks are. Typically a set of pencils will range from 6H - 6B.

'H' or 'Hard' pencils are harder and produce lighter lines. The higher the H number, the harder and lighter in value the core will be. They are ideal for technical and precise drawing.

'B' or 'Black' pencils are softer and produce darker lines. The higher the B number, the softer and darker the core will be. They are ideal for darker shading & blending.

There are also single 'F' & 'HB' pencils which sit in between of the 'H' & 'B' grading scale. Both are very similar & offer a mixture between hardness and softness, making them suitable for a variety of applications.

Graphite is a naturally shiny medium, especially in the darkest areas of a drawing, yet I think it's important to respect the nature of the material. However, if you find the shine to be distracting, there are pencils available with a carbon-based core to create darker, more mattified marks.

Quick Recap:

Graphite pencil core's consist of graphite mixed with clay

Different ratios of graphite and clay produce darker or lighter pencils

'H' pencils are hard and produce lighter marks

'B' pencils are soft and produce darker marks

Graphite is shiny by nature, especially in dark areas - there are carbon based pencils available for darker & more mattified results

Graphite pencils can be complemented by a variety of tools, allowing artists to expand their range of techniques and creative possibilities. Find out more throughout this guide!

The Graphite Grading Scale

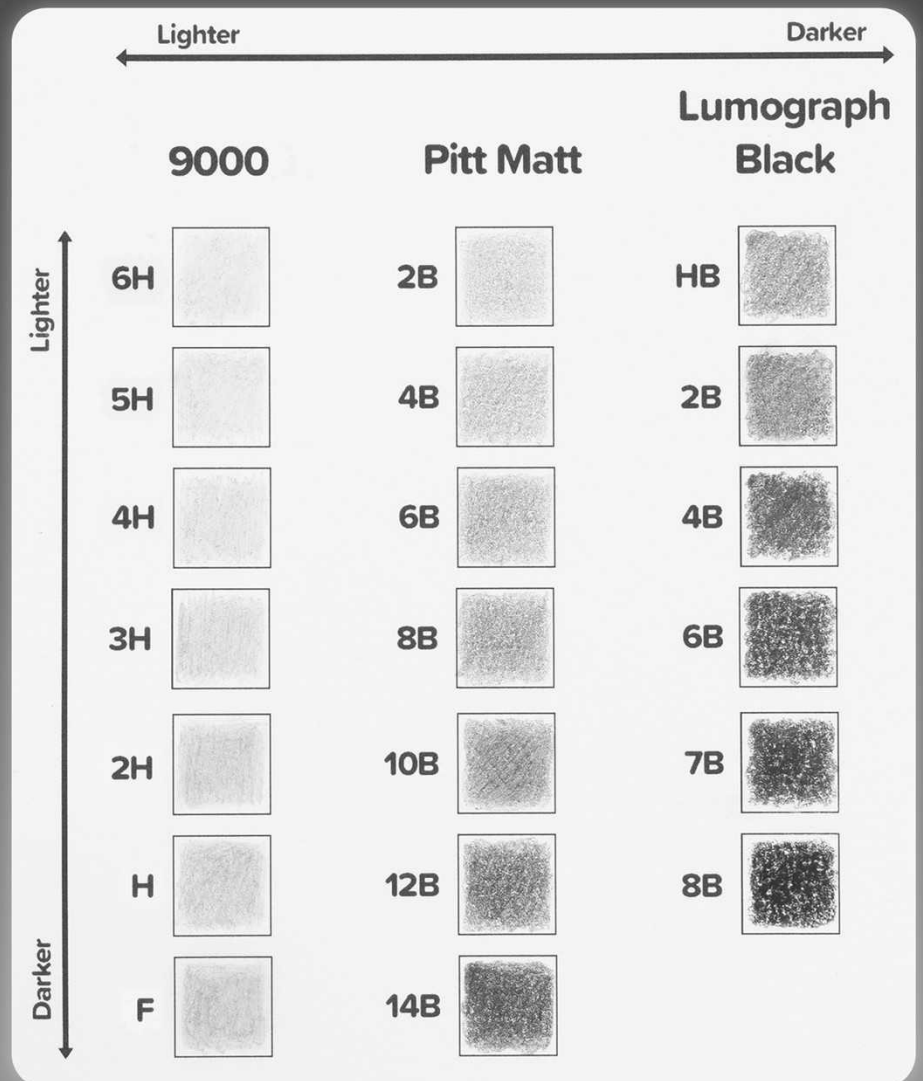
Now that we've got the basics of the graphite grading scale down from the previous page, let's take a closer look at what the differences look like.

We'll observe my 3 favourite graphite pencil series in action: The Castell 9000 & Pitt Matt from Faber-Castell, and also the Mars Lumograph Black from Staedtler.

As you can see, the Castell 9000 H scale is very light - especially 6H which is barely visible.

The Pitt Matt B scale has a wide variety, going from quite light at 2B to achieving deep blacks at 14B. Fun fact: the Pitt Matt includes the very dark 14B, most other brands only go up to 10B or 12B

The Mars Lumograph Black are clearly the winner when it comes to deep blacks, thanks to their carbon cores. Also, because of the carbon they feature, there is little to no shine that's often common with traditional dark graphite grades.



There are many other brands & series of graphite pencils to choose from, these 3 are simply the ones I find to be the best quality & therefore gravitate towards. Each series have their uses in my graphite artworks. The Castell 9000 are chosen for very light shading, the Pitt Matt are the pencils I use for the high majority of areas & I reserve the Mars Lumograph Black for the darkest areas. If you would like to also give these pencils a try, I have left some useful links below!

Looking to purchase?

[Faber-Castell
9000](#)

[Faber-Castell
Pitt Matt](#)

[Staedtler Mars
Lumograph Black](#)

What is Charcoal?

When used in creating artworks, charcoal comes in 3 main forms: Willow / Vine, powdered & compressed.

Willow & vine charcoal is created from willow & vine branches that have been burnt in a kiln, resulting in a brittle, lightweight stick - perfect for less intense application of pigment & easy to smudge compared to compressed charcoal .

Powdered charcoal is vine charcoal that has been grounded to a fine powder - useful when paired with a brush for softly toning large areas.

Compressed charcoal is powdered charcoal that has been condensed and mixed with a binder to keep it's shape, coming in a variety of forms such as sticks or pencils - ranging from hard to soft & able to produce incredibly deep blacks.



Similar to graphite pencils, the harder the compressed charcoal stick, the more binder & less charcoal powder is used which results in a lighter tonal value.

White charcoal pencils aren't made with charcoal but rather with chalk. Great for bright white highlights when used in conjunction with charcoal.

Tinted charcoal is compressed charcoal that is also mixed with a little colour pigment. Great for experimenting with subtle hues.

My go-to Charcoal Materials

Willow & Vine Charcoal Sticks



Willow and vine charcoal sticks are used for sketching, shading, and creating expressive tonal drawings. Artists use them to build tonal values and block in compositions as they're ideal for loose, dynamic work, such as developing under drawings before adding any detail.

Winsor and Newton
Willow Charcoal Sticks



Jackson's
Vine Charcoal Sticks



Powdered Charcoal



Powdered charcoal is mainly used for broad shading, tonal backgrounds, and soft gradients. Typically applied with brushes, sponges, or fingers.

Cretacolor
Charcoal Powder



Compressed Charcoal



Compressed charcoal is available in tonal gradients from light to dark and can be used for a wide range of applications using various techniques.

Jakar Compressed
Charcoal Set



Charcoal Pencils



Charcoal pencils are used for detailed drawing and controlled shading, offering the rich, dark values of charcoal with the detailed precision of a pencil.

General Pencil
Charcoal Pencil Kit



White Charcoal Pencil



White charcoal or chalk pencils are used to add highlights, enhance contrast, and draw on toned paper to create light and dimensional effects.

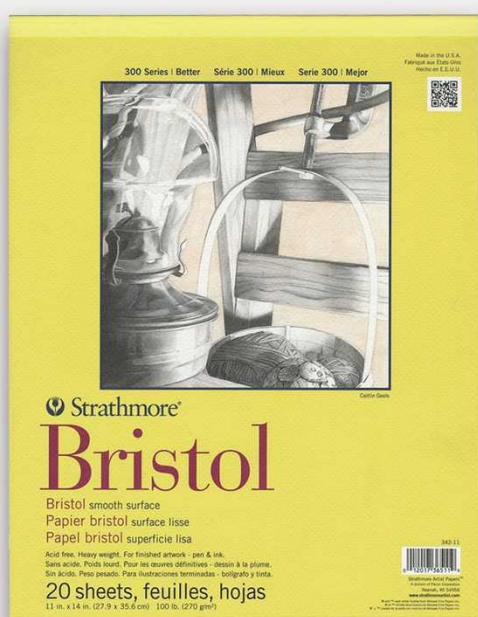
Koh-I-Noor
White Coal Pencil



Paper Perfect

for graphite & charcoal pieces

The specific paper you choose to use is an important factor when it comes to working with graphite & charcoal. Different artists will have their own personal preference so I think it's important to experiment with different types yourself. Nevertheless, I have partaken in a lot of trial and error for different paper types throughout the years and you'll find my favourites below. Both are acid free & archival!



Graphite Pencils: Bristol Smooth

I like using Bristol smooth paper with graphite because it provides an ultra-smooth surface that allows the pencils to glide across easily. This consistent soft texture is ideal for drawing soft human skin for example. The smoothness also keeps the graphite markings sharp and crisp, allowing for precise detailing.

Charcoal: Fabriano Classico 5

For charcoal, I find that a smooth but also slight textured surface such as the Fabriano Classico 5 works best. This is a watercolour paper with a slight tooth, able to better grip and hold onto the charcoal to build up rich, dark values. Some artists like very textured papers with charcoal, but it depends on what you're drawing and the textures you are looking to create. I find that this paper can be very versatile.



Looking to purchase? Helpful shopping links [HERE](#)

The Must Have Tools for Graphite & Charcoal

Blending Stumps are a very cheap and important tool to have at your disposal when it comes to working with graphite and charcoal. They are able to push and blend the pigments around the paper, creating smooth transitions and soft edges. As they are shaped like a pencil with a relatively sharp tip, they also allow for detailed and precise shading - giving the artist useful control, especially in small areas.



Eraser Pencils are incredibly useful, especially for detailed and intricate work. There are a few different types, such as the Tombow Mono Eraser which works like a mechanical pencil with a refillable eraser tip. Also, the Faber-Castell Perfection Eraser is just like a pencil that erases layers of graphite instead of making marks.

Kneadable Erasers are a great addition to any graphite and charcoal artist for their wide range of uses. Their moldability gives them great versatility, allowing artists to gently lift up graphite to fix mistakes or soften edges.



Pencil Extenders are vital in assisting me when my pencils get too short. There's nothing worse than trying to work with a pencil that's nearing the end of its life. As soon as I put an extender on, I regain full control again. I highly recommend putting extenders on all of your pencils once they start to get too short, it will make your life a lot easier!

Makeup Brushes are perfect for softly blending out the graphite and charcoal for a smooth & soft effect. Different sizes can be useful for different areas of your drawing: Large brushes can help to cover vast areas where as smaller brushes can aid in softening the more detailed parts.



Looking to purchase? Helpful shopping links [HERE](#)

My Favourite Way To Sharpen Graphite & Charcoal Pencils

Many artists choose to sharpen their pencils in the traditional way by using a regular pencil sharpener. While this is a reasonable way to achieve a sharp tip, I propose a more effective and useful way. Sharpeners can often snap the tip and get jammed in the process (especially for charcoal pencils), I have always found it to be a fiddly and frustrating task. In more recent years, I have instead shaved off the wood casing and sanded my pencil tips to a point with great results!



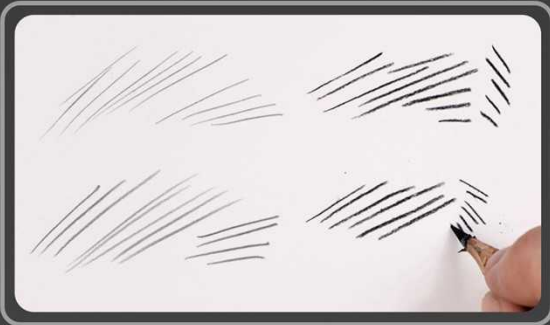
To shave the wood casing off my graphite and charcoal pencils, I carefully use a Stanley knife by guiding it with both thumbs in an angle towards the end, making sure not to press too hard. This will take some practice to get used to but you will improve overtime.

To sharpen the tips, you can use sand paper for a safe option & also for when you need a quick sharp tip. I keep some sand paper taped down near my working area to touch up when needed. If I'm sharpening many pencils at a time & need a quick method to sharpen all the tips, I use a belt sanding machine. This can be very loud, dusty & dangerous so I'm not suggesting that you should use one of these, this is simply what I use & what works well for me. If you don't plan on using one, sand paper will do the same job, just a little slower.



With an elongated tip, it becomes much easier to shade in larger areas. When you sharpen a graphite or charcoal pencil to a long, tapered point, it exposes more of the pigment, allowing you to use the side of the lead rather than just the very tip. This creates broader, smoother strokes that cover more paper with each pass, making it ideal for shading large areas or creating soft gradients. The extended surface contact between the pencil and paper also helps achieve more even tones and reduces the appearance of harsh lines.

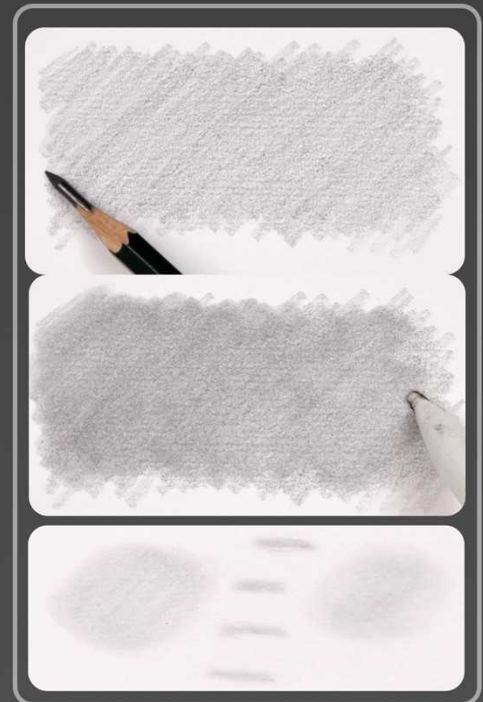
Methods & Techniques



Mark making with graphite and charcoal pencils can create varied textures through techniques like hatching (parallel lines), cross-hatching (overlapping lines), stippling (dots), and blending (smudging for smooth gradients). Graphite offers precision and subtle shading, while charcoal provides bold, expressive strokes and deep contrasts. Varying pressure, pencil hardness, and stroke direction enhances texture, enabling artists to depict rough, smooth, or intricate surfaces effectively.

To shade with graphite pencils, artists often start by selecting pencils of varying hardness (e.g., 4B for darker areas & HB for lighter areas). When shading, a long tip is desirable as much of the pigment is exposed, allowing for long sweeping motions for an even layer. You can then gradually layer strokes, increasing pressure for darker values, keeping movements consistent to avoid uneven textures.

For blending, a tool I love to use in particular is a paper blending stump which is essentially just a tightly rolled paper tool, to gently rub the shaded area. Move the stump in small, circular motions or along the stroke direction to smooth transitions and soften lines, creating a gradient effect. You may also transfer excess graphite from the tip of the tool after blending, this deposits the residual pigment, allowing artists to create subtle marks or extend shading without additional pencil work - it can act as a sort of big blurry pencil which is very handy for various techniques and visual effects.



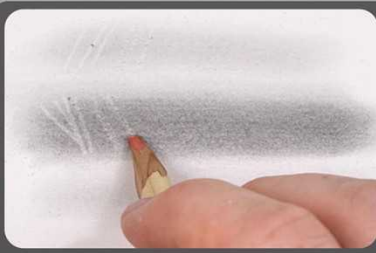
Another tool I love to blend graphite with is a small firm makeup brush. I do this by gently sweeping over any shaded areas in circular motions with a light even pressure. The makeup brush is great at blending soft, spread out areas as well as creating really smooth gradients, such as human skin for example. The brush also picks up excess graphite which can then be lightly applied to other areas, creating a very light, subtle shading of graphite.

You may also blend large shaded areas of graphite using a kitchen paper towel. First, wrap it around your finger and then gently rub over the graphite with even pressures using circular motions. I find that the paper towel helps to subtly redistribute graphite, creating a very soft blend - especially useful for large spread out areas. Excess pigment can also then be lightly applied to another area, achieving an even lighter subtle shading.



→ [watch the video demonstration](#) ←

Methods & Techniques

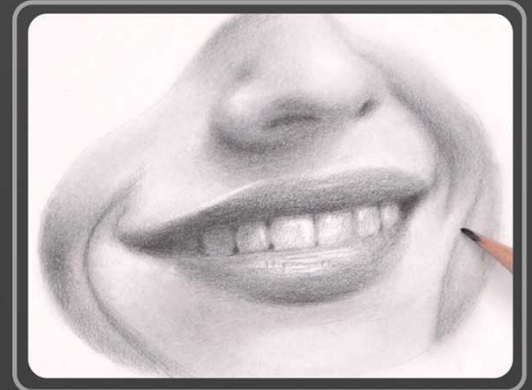
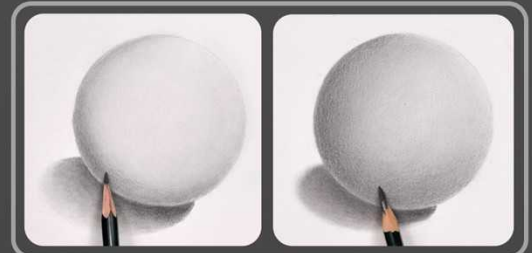


Precision erasers like the Tombow Mono and Faber-Castell Perfection allow artists to refine their work with great accuracy, akin to using a pencil with the high precision it offers. The Faber-Castell Perfection is a sharpenable eraser that offers reliable precise control for erasing textured lines or correcting detailed mistakes. Similarly, The Tombow Mono, a retractable stick eraser, also excels at lifting graphite in small, detailed areas. These tools allow us to carve out clean, crisp lines without smudging or accidentally erasing surrounding areas or details.

These tools are vital in my practice for rendering hair or fur texture out of layers of graphite, erasing white lines out of the darker graphite base layers to create highlighted texture, creating the illusion of fur or hair. Beyond this, you can also imagine how we can create other textures such as grass or clothing details for example.

For tougher mistakes or thicker lines, traditional erasers are also very handy to have close by as they remain superior at lifting the graphite, especially in larger and less detailed areas.

A useful exercise for beginner graphite artists in understanding some of the fundamentals is creating these 3D spheres. It is a lesson I think all artists can benefit from by mastering key artistic principles like shading, perspective, and light behaviour. When you render a sphere using graphite pencils, you're able to practice smooth gradients to depict curvature, learning to control pencil pressure for seamless transitions from the highlights to the shadows. This hones value control, essential for a realistic sense of depth. The exercise also teaches observation of light sources, as artists are able to map highlights, mid-tones, and cast shadows, understanding how light interacts with form. Additionally, it introduces perspective, as the sphere's contour suggests volume on a flat surface. These skills can then transfer to complex subjects, such as this nose and mouth study I recently created for my students on Patreon.



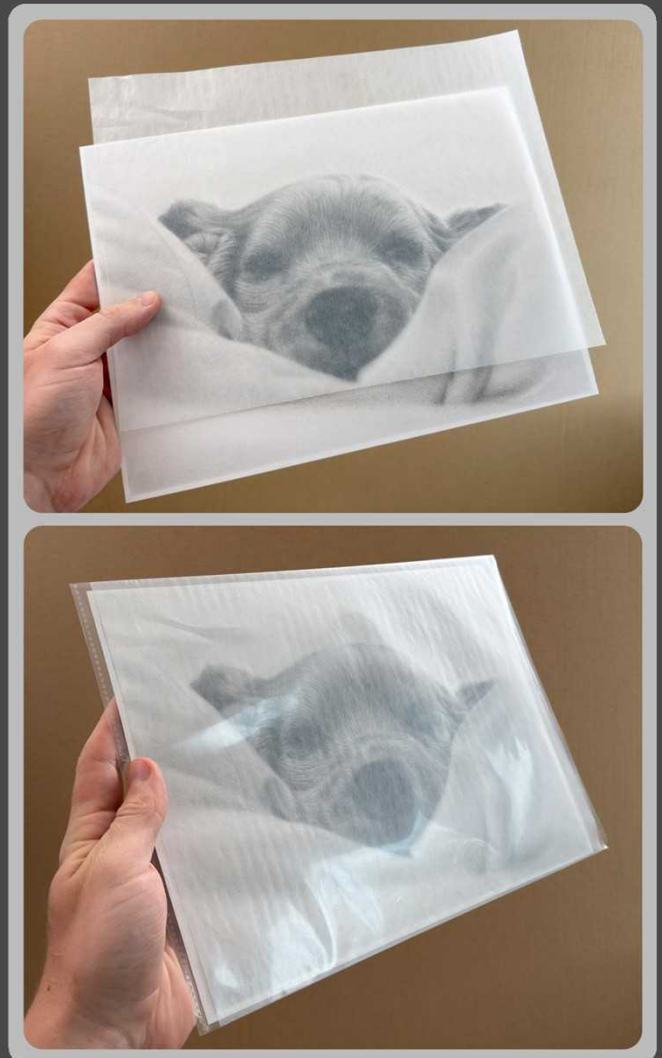
For a stronger contrast, we can also use charcoal pencils. Charcoal enhances graphite artworks by providing richer, darker values that create a much stronger sense of depth. It blends seamlessly with graphite, allowing artists to layer intense blacks into shadows or backgrounds, where graphite alone might appear flat or grey. Applying charcoal over graphite in focal areas, such as deep crevices or silhouetted edges, amplifies three-dimensionality, making subjects pop vividly against lighter graphite values.

→ [watch the video demonstration](#) ←

How To Store & Frame Graphite & Charcoal Art

Once you have completed your masterpiece, it's important to know how to best **store** it.

Whether drawing on Bristol Smooth or Fabriano Classico Paper, I personally do not use any fixative sprays. Instead, the charcoal and graphite will remain 'loose' on the paper, so I need smart storage and framing solutions. I will always recommend avoiding the use of a fixative on artworks as every brand I have tried has always ruined or altered the values and sharpness of the details in some way. To store my artworks, I custom cut a sheet of glassine paper to cover the artwork. This will protect the artwork from being smudged or disturbed. I then place the artwork with the glassine paper on top into an acid free plastic sleeve. For large artworks that do not fit into a plastic sleeve, I carefully tape the glassine paper to cover my artwork and then wrap it in acid free tissue paper. I will often then sandwich this between foam board for extra protection, this is also how I package up artworks for shipping. It's then important to store your artworks flat so that gravity keeps it from bending or warping. Large drawers are really handy!



Once you're ready to display your piece, here are the steps you need to take to safely **frame** your piece.



As previously mentioned, no fixative sprays are used on my artworks which means the graphite & charcoal is still technically loose on the paper. To avoid any smudging or damage of the artwork, it may be a good idea to frame your piece with a picture mount inside. Apart from elevating the appearance of your artwork, the picture mount will also leave a small gap between the artwork and the frame glass. Doing so will avoid any smudges or deposits of pigment onto the glass. The picture mount should have an aperture size roughly 1 or 2 cm's smaller than your artwork to easily cover all sides. On the back, the artwork should then be secured to the mount using acid free tape. I always recommend to my clients to keep the artwork out of direct sunlight and humid areas.

Are You Ready to Take Your Art Skills to the Next Level?

I hope this guide has been helpful for those who are new to graphite & charcoal, my goal is to provide clear, easy-to-follow content to help you quickly develop new art skills.

Personally, I've found that observing other artists at work is one of the most effective way to learn new techniques and methods. That's exactly what I offer on my Patreon channel. I understand how challenging it can be to create realistic drawings, and I'm here to support you in growing your skills and knowledge.

Over the years, I've built an extensive collection of in-depth video tutorials and real-time process lessons, guiding students on creating highly realistic artworks with not only graphite & charcoal, but also soft pastel & oil paint!

On my Patreon, you'll find videos covering a wide range of subjects, including realistic animal and human portraits, intricate still life, vibrant seascapes, and more. Each tutorial comes with a complete materials list, so you'll know exactly what supplies you need to get started.

By subscribing to a specific tier on Patreon for as little as \$5 a month, you'll gain immediate access to all past and future lessons. Plus, you can cancel your subscription anytime that works for you.



Are you looking for a specific tutorial?

To help you sort through the wide variety of tutorials and real-time videos available on my patreon, I have created a catalogue of all the lessons for you to look through on my website. As well as graphite, we also have soft pastels & oil paints included in your subscription!

→ [View available lessons here](#) ←

