Squares, rectangles, triangles, cones, cylinders, circles, ovals... these are the basic shapes that will aid you in drawing objects more accurately. This technique can be used when doing a still life, a landscape, and practically any other object or subject you wish to draw. As you progress through this book, you will see how this style of drawing can aid you in producing a more accurate presentation of the subjects. First, examine the object you want to draw, and determine what basic shapes make it up.
Basic Shapes

Most paintings can be broken down into basic shapes. See how this famous painting by Cézanne can be broken down into basic shapes.

“...treat nature by means of the cylinder, the sphere, the cone...”, Paul Cézanne

*Still Life with Soup Tureen, Paul Cézanne*
Getting Started

Start with a large, rough-finish newsprint pad (18” x 24”), a compressed charcoal stick or a 6B pencil, and a kneaded eraser. Do just one object to start. As you progress, you can make set-ups with multiple objects.
Method:

1. Look at the object you want to draw. Determine what basic shapes are needed to render the object.
2. Start by roughly locating where on your picture plane you want the object to appear.
3. Draw a center line, top line, and bottom line.
4. Place a line where one shape changes to another shape. (see dash rules above)
5. Draw in the basic shapes.
6. Select the lines you want in your final drawing.
7. Draw the complete shape. This avoids connecting the shapes later in the drawing and improves placement.
By reducing objects to basic shapes, an artist can draw a more accurate rendering of an object. If you just make a drawing of the outline of a vase, you will notice that the left side and right side do not match (Art A). But if we use basic shapes and a center line, both sides will look similar (Art B).

The basic shapes technique is applied to preliminary sketches, which are done before the finish is created. Producing sketches beforehand allows for more finite adjustments. Be sure to sketch the same size as the finish will be, or in proportion to the finish, so you can scale the sketch to size.

The picture plane is the finished surface—whether it be paper, canvas, or gesso board. Locate your object in the picture plane. To begin, draw a center vertical line, and place the object in the center. Divide the line into the same number of shapes as the object. Keep the left-to-right distances from the center line the same on both sides of the drawing. With tracing paper, draw over Art B, adding the smoothing lines that give the object its shape and form. Practice with other objects on the newsprint pad. Do many sketches. Another way to solve this drawing is to put in the guides and trace only one side of the object. Then, flip the paper over and trace the side you had drawn onto the other side of the object. Each side should be a mirror image of the other.
Adding Dimension

Use basic shapes to define your drawing. This will add dimension to the objects, simplify the drawing, and aid in the placement of objects on the picture plane, making the objects truer and more accurate. Adjust the positioning of the objects in the final, and eliminate the sketch lines by painting over them or erasing them before you paint. Sketch lines should be lightly drawn so as not to leave an impression.
Examine the objects you are going to draw, and reduce them to basic shapes. Then combine the shapes to create the finished objects. Add detail and shading. Shapes can be modified to produce a better drawing. Note that the basic shape of the pear is a round circle with a tapered rectangle.

**Method:**

1. **Look at the object you want to draw.** Determine what basic shapes are needed to render the object (circle and tapered rectangle).
2. **Draw in the basic shapes.** Draw the shapes completely, not just the parts that touch, but parts that are hidden by other parts.
3. **Select the lines you want in your final drawing.**
4. **Round off the shapes, and blend the forms into each other.**
These preliminary sketches of vases show the trial lines and the basic shapes that were used to create the drawings. The sketches can now be refined and transferred to a heavy paper for painting. Look at the center lines and the outlines. These lines define the basic forms of the vases.
When sketching a group of shapes, it is best to draw each shape fully. In this manner, all of the curves and straight lines are more accurate, and you don’t have to draw the objects to fit into each other. Remember to draw the objects lightly so they can be erased or covered in your final.

1. Set up some small boxes and jars, and arrange them as a still life.

2. Use simple objects.
Overlapping means to extend over and cover partly. When partially obscuring an object by placing another object in front of it, the object will appear to be farther back in the picture plane. This will add dimension to your drawing. Do not overlap too much, as the item in the back may become hard to distinguish.

Remember, when drawing the overlapping shapes, draw the entire object; the excess lines can be erased or painted over.
Do several sketches of the objects, in groups and individually. Take your best group sketch, and set up to do a sustained sketch, incorporating a light source and shadows. The light source is on the bumpy texture of the gourds, as well as on the side, and the shadow is opposite the light source. Try doing some sketches from memory without looking at the objects.

In this preliminary sketch of gourds, circles, and tapered cylinders were used to define the basic shapes. Note that the center lines (axis lines) are at various angles. These lines are important in creating the composition of the drawing and indicating where the stems will be. They add interest and character and avoid the objects leaning in the same direction. Many sketch lines are used to locate the objects for a good composition. Make placement corrections at this point before going to the final.