Your choice of drawing tool, the characteristics of your drawing surface, the way you set up your drawing pad, the manner in which you hold your drawing tool, and the position of your body while you draw all have a direct impact on the marks that you will make. These factors directly affect the overall look and feel of your drawing.

Drawing is a physical activity that, like its spiritual cousin dance, demands considerable concentration and a surprising amount of physical exertion. Both drawing and dancing are direct expressions of energy and movement and both require that their practitioners understand how these two elements can be controlled and transformed into the vocabulary of the art form. Not surprisingly, drawing and dance are frequently described in terms of each other’s characteristics. The “line” and “flow” of the dancer and the “rhythm” and “movement” of a line are the most obvious examples of this intimate interrelationship. Among dancers the value and importance of stamina, muscle tone, and proper technique are clearly understood, but among those who draw these elements are all too frequently overlooked. Drawing, too, demands good posture, a flexible and energized stance, and a high level of physical involvement.

Standing at an easel while drawing is the best position. Standing promotes a higher level of energy than sitting. Standing promotes physical tension, a slight but meaningful level of discomfort and muscular involvement that helps focus the mind and eye on the activity. When you stand, you involve you entire body. This position promotes sensory alertness and physical responsiveness.

Standing also makes it more likely that you will periodically back away from your drawing. This simple change of relative position enables you to look at and evaluate your drawing with a surprisingly fresh eye. Moving back several feet from your drawing not only is an
energizing physical activity but also counteracts the eye’s natural tendency to become complacent and less discriminating when exposed to an unchanging image over a prolonged period. Backing away from your easel is a simple but effective technique for improving the overall quality and accuracy of a drawing. The more frequently you step back, the faster your drawings will improve.

When you draw, it is important to position the surface of your paper at a right angle (90 degrees) to your line of sight. The center of your paper should be at your shoulder level.

Drawing and handwriting have a shared origin but have evolved quite differently, particularly in the Western world. When we write, we generally cradle the barrel of the writing tool against the knuckle of the index finger and hold the tip between the thumb, index, and middle fingers. This grip provides the limited range of movement that is necessary to form the letters of the Phoenician alphabet. But that grip is totally unsuited to the movement, scale, tonal range, touch sensitivity, and directional control that are essential to drawing. For drawing, the tool should be held between the thumb and index finger with the barrel of the tool positioned across the palm of the hand. In contrast to writing, where the fingers do the majority of the work, the movement for drawing originates in the shoulder, the elbow, and the wrist. With the drawing grip the fingers are relatively static and are responsible only for holding on to the drawing tool and registering the “feel” of the tip of the drawing tool against the drawing surface. Beginners using the drawing grip for the first time are often surprised by how frequently the drawing tool unconsciously works its way back into the writing grip. Regardless of how many times you slip, make sure you return to the drawing grip. The drawing grip dramatically improves the physical mechanics of moving the drawing tool across the surface of the paper. The wrist offers more mechanical movement than the finger joints but certainly not as much as the hinge joint at the elbow or the ball-and-socket joint at the shoulder. The shoulder is far and away the most versatile and fluid anatomical mechanism wit
which to draw. Holding the drawing tool in the drawing grip, while relatively uncomfortable at first, has such a beneficial impact on the sensitivity of the marks and lines of the drawing that it is imperative to overcome any sense of frustration you may encounter and work through the clumsiness.

With the drawing grip there are two ways in which the pencil can make contact with the paper surface. The first way uses the tip of the drawing tool as the only point of contact with the drawing surface, whereas the second way allows for the fingernails of the middle and ring fingers to make continuous contact as the hand moves across the paper. Keeping your fingers in contact with the surface gives slightly more control. The fingers that are touching the surface continuously help to monitor the pressure being exerted by the muscles of the arm and also provide tactile feedback and mechanical leverage. This increased control over the pressure of the drawing tool, though, does have a disadvantage: the grip can result in inadvertent smudging when the fingers move across marks that are already on the surface. While it may be argued that a certain amount of smudging can actually add to the richness of the surface, you want to be fully aware of the limitations of any technique you adopt. If smudging is unacceptable but you prefer to keep your fingers in contact with the surface, you can use your other hand to hold a second sheet of paper over your drawing as a mask. This protects the marks underneath. If you use a mask while you are drawing, the fact that you are covering up part of the drawing makes it even more critical that you regularly back away from your easel. This helps maintain consistency in handling over the entire drawing as well as providing greater accuracy in the proportion and placement of objects.

Position yourself so that your elbow is slightly bent as you make contact with the paper. On average, there should be approximately 24 inches from your breastbone to the drawing surface. This distance allows you to see the entire drawing surface of your paper at a glance, and it give your arm the room needed to move freely about the page. Beginners frequently stand less than a foot from the drawing surface. This relationship
feels comfortable and familiar because of our experiences with penmanship, but it leads to a variety of unnecessary difficulties with mechanics and viewing angle. The 24-inch distance is easily maintained using an easel.

When compressed charcoal is applied with moderate pressure, it produces a dense black mark or line. This rich, deep ebony is bold in its stark contrast to the light warm gray tone of the newsprint. Because soft compressed charcoal makes thick velvety black marks so effortlessly, the challenge of this medium rests in your ability to find ways to create a full range of line thicknesses and degrees of darkness. Varying the pressure on the tip of the charcoal obviously has direct effect on the thickness and darkness of the marks being made. As you draw, the tip of the charcoal undergoes subtle changes. Becoming sensitive to these changes can be extremely helpful in expanding the kinds of lines you can make. As the tool is drawn across the surface, facets, crisp edges, and points are constantly being formed and then reformed on the tip as a result of the friction between the drawing tool and the drawing surface. These facets and edges change size and position in a constantly evolving series of planes, sharp edges, and points. To take advantage of these edges and points, you must develop a “feel” for the tip of the tool against the drawing surface. By focusing your attention on the touch of the charcoal’s tip to the surface of the paper, and by cataloguing how this tactile sensation translates into line, you will gradually develop control over these crisp, delicate points of contact. Once you are aware of these delicate points, you can begin using them by rolling, turning, and tilting the charcoal as you draw it across the paper.

After experimenting with thick, bold ebony marks and marks as delicate as the threads of a spider’s web, you are ready to explore the rich variety of lines and marks that lie between those extremes. Focusing your attention on line variation demands a very high level of concentration that initially feels synthetic and arbitrary, but this variation is the essential building block of a successful drawing. Fluctuating line is the single most crucial element for establishing the overall level of sensitivity in a drawing. It is so
fundamental that the presence of sensitive and varied line is reason enough for a drawing to be classified as a masterpiece even when it contains inaccuracies of proportion or distorted spatial relationships. The lack of line variation, correspondingly, consigns countless drawings that accurately transcribe every object in the visual field to the real of artistic mediocrity. The overall effectiveness of a drawing is, first and foremost, determined by the quality, variety, and sensitivity of the marks from which it is made. Every mark that you make needs to be in constant flux to embody the restless energy and tension that underlie the functioning of our perceptual experience.

Experiment with your compressed charcoal drawing tool. Familiarize yourself with its mark-making characteristics. Focus all you attention on maximizing the variation of the line as you move the tool. Try straight lines, sweeping curves, large circles, and small meandering squiggles. Constantly vary the pressure and rotate the tip. Remember, sensitivity to line is the single most important element in drawing.