

Effective Art Study Guide

Effective studying is performing the correct practice methods to learn at a reasonable rate. **Learning is being able to take in information such that you can retrieve it from memory to use in both familiar and new contexts.** There are a lot of commonly recommended bad practices about how to study born from misunderstanding that cause the majority of people to fail to learn effectively regardless of how much time and mental effort they put in. Talent is sold as the magical predetermined factor that divides the hard working people who fail or succeed but **talent is simply doing truly effective learning methods for a long enough period of time regardless of whether you realize specifically what those methods are or not.** Most people's learning journey is a random mix of (usually poor) study methods thus even the people who manage to successfully learn will not fully understand how they learned and even worse will suggest the bad methods that cause people to fail. There are also people who feel they have successfully learned an aspect of a subject but their memory and application of the information they studied is lacking. Essentially, **the ideas that the vast majority of people may find logical and true when it comes to learning skills are simply not very effective in the long run even if they see good short-term results.**

The goal here is to help you study art such that you will be able break down the aspects that make up an image, properly connect that fundamental knowledge to the type of art you want to make, and consistently call that information from memory to use in your own artwork. **Ultimately, the process in this guide is the true middle ground between the knowledge gained from studying the fundamentals of art and drawing from imagination combined with general strategies for effective studying.**

Some bad habits and mindsets that go against effective studying include – studying a subtopic exclusively over-and-over; – studying the fundamentals with no connection to the end goal; – trying to come up with good art from imagination without having truly internalized existing good art; – thinking that the best way to learn information is to cram for a large number of hours every day for many years; – thinking that copying art or learning things from others in any way will lock you into a certain style and ruin your ability to be creative; – thinking that you need to master a number of prerequisite skills before you can attempt to draw a subject; – thinking that mimicking a skilled artist's workflow is all you need to consider when trying to learn; – thinking that everyone has their own unique learning style that they have to find on their own; – thinking that as long as you are actively working at improving then it doesn't matter exactly what path you take/what you study since you'll improve eventually; etc.

The biggest takeaway from this guide is that the bulk of all of your art studying should be frequently expanding and strengthening your knowledge by accurately recreating appealing references from memory.

Effective Art Study Process:

- **Choose references that have elements that you wish to have in your artwork.** The references can be real life things in front of you, photos, artwork, screenshots, 3D models, or anything else you can observe. The elements you would focus on can include

the physical properties (proportions, anatomy, colors, etc.) of various objects or people and any stylistic effects. Don't worry about the flaws, stylization, or complexity in the reference. Choose what is appealing to you and what is closest to the type of art that you immediately want to create.

- **Find learning material that will teach you the principles that make up some part of your references**, use that information to break down your references into simpler to remember parts, and come up with a logical drawing process that will allow you to build it back up even when you can't see it. The material could cover the fundamentals of art such as basic shape construction, light and color theory, artistic anatomy, perspective, etc. or be any kind of guide on visual creations. You should avoid getting immersed in following the drawing exercises the learning materials suggests verbatim since you will not properly master a topic outside of the context of a finished drawing. Read/watch the material, take pictures/screenshots, write notes to keep track of what you're being taught and how that information can be added to your overall drawing process or studies, and then have your first usage of the information be applying it directly to recreating your chosen references.
- **Trace and copy your references using the processes you acquired from the learning material.** Both the tracing and copying should be drawn together meaning you'll draw out a section of the reference tracing over it then switch to copying a bit and continue switching until both drawings are complete. This is to avoid being too reliant on the reference while tracing or from going too far off track while copying. For tracing, it's simpler to use digital tools but it's possible to do so traditionally using tracing paper over a printed image. For copying, it can be helpful to draw and reuse a guide so that you can focus on drawing the specific parts you want to study but don't rely on things like using a grid since that won't assist you when you move on to creating original work.
- **Draw your references from memory after letting time pass from when you did your tracing and copying.** It will help to stare at and analyze your reference for a few minutes before letting time pass. After you complete your memory drawing, let some more time pass before you compare it with the reference and review your notes and process. This is to avoid having your brain associate your failed attempts with being immediately corrected which would weaken the need of being correct. **The memory drawings should cause you a fair bit of mental struggle for you to benefit from it; It coming too easily is a sign that you should increase the time span before your next attempt. Don't give into the urge to binge trace/copy; Memory drawing should always be the bulk of your studying.**
- "Memory drawing" here is referring to recreating a reference exactly which is different than "drawing from imagination" which refers to creating an original artwork using your preexisting knowledge. While there is a significant mental struggle in trying to create a drawing from scratch, in most cases you won't have enough information to properly correct all of your mistakes even if you find similar references and you'll likely not draw the exact same thing more than once thus you won't be reinforcing what little you did properly correct. **Creating original works from imagination should be thought of as a means of expressing and remixing the knowledge you already have and not as the main source of acquiring that knowledge.**
- It should be noted that even just tracing and copying by themselves are a form of memory drawing since the knowledge you use to build up the image isn't laid out on the

reference itself. This is how people are able to improve through only doing copies. You should still do full memory drawings in order to guarantee and speed up your learning and completely cover the gaps you'll have with creating a work without being able to rely on an exact reference to correct immediate mistakes.

- Simplifying your process is key to being able to remember what you have studied and being able to use what you learned to create original artwork. Your studies do not need to be detailed fully realized drawings even if your reference is. **Focus on being able to recreate a simplified and/or incomplete version of your reference from memory first, then later add in more steps and complexity.**
- In order to keep with the effective study ideas of memory testing, spaced repetition, and variety, **you should use this study process to cycle through multiple references at a time and study them in an order such that you aren't repeating the same subject too frequently in a short period of time.** This will serve in strengthening your ability to compare the features of a variety of subjects which in turn will allow you to recall them easier and be able to mix and alter them in a more skillful way.
- It will be up to you to determine the exact duration of your studies and how long they should be spaced out, but **in the early stages, you should keep the study time for each picture on the shorter side; Not for the sake of speeding up but to keep the amount you study within range of what you'll be capable of remembering** or else you'll quickly hit diminishing returns and also skew your ability to tell how much you are actually learning. **You are free to use this process for any number of hours per day but the more frequently you study the more references you will need to switch between to properly reap the benefits of effective studying.**
- As you do more studies, you'll have more knowledge to draw from and gain an intuitive sense about how to alter the visual information you have memorized. At which point, you will be able to create original work much easier from imagination (with the use of references for details) and know that you can move on to studying other references effectively.

Productivity Tips:

- Rather than taking frequent short breaks doing minor activities (like browsing social media) take a few long breaks to do things that will truly reenergize you (like doing another hobby or consuming media you enjoy).
- Use art forums to share your studies with others. It will allow you to learn new things and have a huge impact on keeping yourself encouraged to improve.
- Use an app to keep an accurate log of how much time you spend on any activity you do throughout the day. Seeing the breakdown of your routine will help you cut down on misused time.
- Use an interval timer (alarm that rings every X minutes) to help avoid losing focus or spending too much time on a given study.
- Keep track of the images you have/plan to study using folders or an image arranging program like PurRef.

Resources:

Remember, you should be taking any drawing concepts in the material and immediately use them to recreate and memory draw your references rather than getting bogged down with trying to master the examples they give.

- Dorian Iten: Accuracy – A Drawing Guide (on Gumroad)
- Steve Huston: Figure Drawing for Artists - Making Every Mark Count (Book)
- Steve Huston: Beginner Figure Drawing Series (on New Masters' Academy)
- Pin2D: Digital Drawing Correction playlists for Figure, Eyes, Folds, and Hair (on Youtube)
- Michael Hampton: Figure Drawing - Design and Invention *2013 Edition* (Book)
- Dorian Iten: Light Guide (on Gumroad)
- Marco Bucci: Painting Tutorials/Demos playlist (on Youtube)

Also see:

- **Artists' Improvement Obstacles Overview:**
https://drive.google.com/file/d/0Bz_mE9a29gsEd09TemJMNTJMWGs/view?usp=sharing&resourcekey=0-EU3FEM-IOMD5GV31uppeOQ
- Peter C. Brown: Make It Stick - The Science of Successful Learning (Book)

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