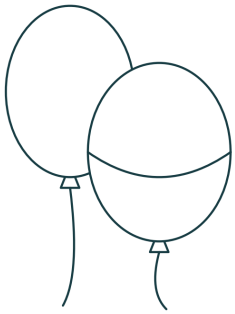
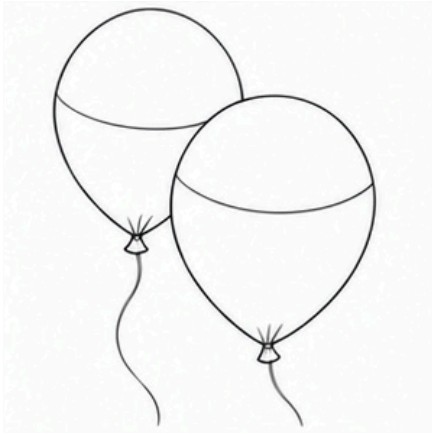
How to draw balloons: form, overlap and pencil volume

Choose a result. The simplest route finishes at step 7, the next at step 8 and the detailed route at step 10. Pairs show a specific change; you need not deliberately copy a diagnostic error.



Simplest



A little more detail



Best version

Simplest: Two oval bodies, simple knots and one front curve.

A little more detail: Smoothly tapered necks, folds towards the knots and one curve on each body.

Best version: A lip with an elliptical opening and gradual shading under upper-left light.

These pencil-style illustrations are AI-generated, not photographs of children’s drawings.

Goal and preparation

Two floating balloons; the right one is in front. You will find a tapered neck, stop the rear edge at the front body and, in the detailed route, build roundness with tone. Own shadow lies on the body; a cast shadow falls on another surface. This view contains no such surface, so do not add a spot below the strings.

Use paper, HB/2B pencil and an eraser; start with a light oval, a curve and gentle pressure. Allow roughly 25–50 minutes, with breaks. Age 7+ is a suggestion, not a judgement of ability. Simplify by finishing a line route; extend by changing light in an independent task. Your own balloon widths and slightly uneven lines are welcome.

Idea 1. From a mass to a chosen form

A light oval establishes size, but its base can become a smooth taper into a neck. Short folds converge at the knot; a transverse curve wraps the body. Overlap is a local edge decision: an opaque front body hides the rear.

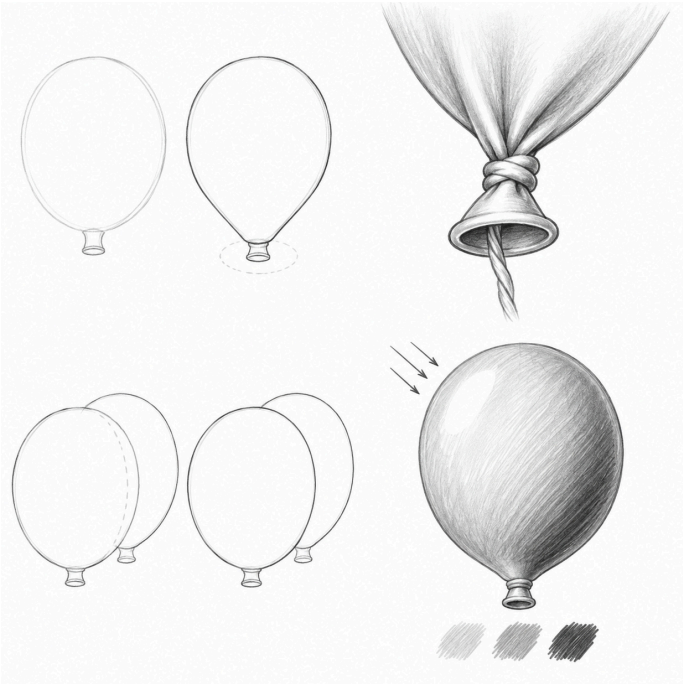
Try tapering a small oval into a neck mark, with three short folds aimed at it and a curve between the sides. On intersecting ovals, choose the front and remove the covered rear edge; reverse the order in another trial. Check: a smooth taper, folds ending at the neck, a curve on its own mass and a rear line stopping at the front. If needed, repair only a short section.

Idea 2. Light and gradual tone

For the third route, choose one upper-left light. Reserve white first, make a midtone with a light layer and deepen the lower-right own shadow with another layer. Short strokes curve along the rounded surface. Heavy pressure in the first layer makes repair harder.

Try three tones side by side: light, medium and denser. On a new oval, leave the upper left white, shade the right lightly and repeat a layer at the lower right. Check: can you name all three areas without a black outline? If the white area disappears, lift only its tone gently with the eraser.

Warm-up



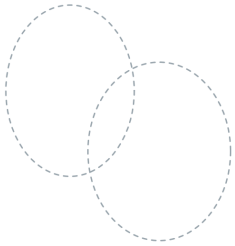
Upper left: oval to taper. Upper right: an enlarged lip, with near and far curves of one opening. Lower left: compare the covered edge before and after removal. Lower right: check three tones and round volume. Make your own small trials before the main drawing. Question: why leave white paper before shading? Answer: it reserves light, which is easier to keep than to erase after heavy pressure. For a floating balloon, practise own shadow without an invented support.

Step 1. Place two large forms

Trial

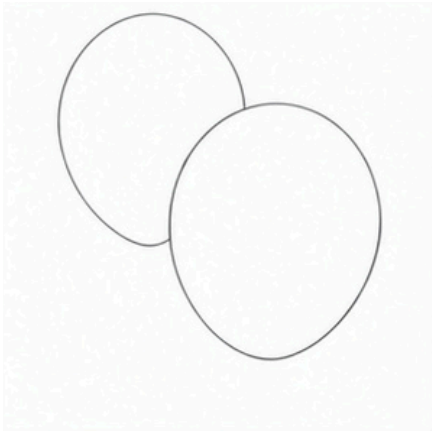


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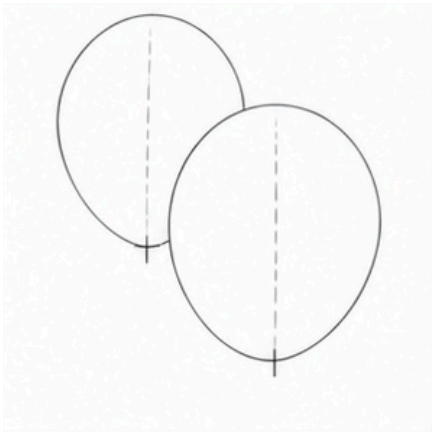


Simplest

Trial

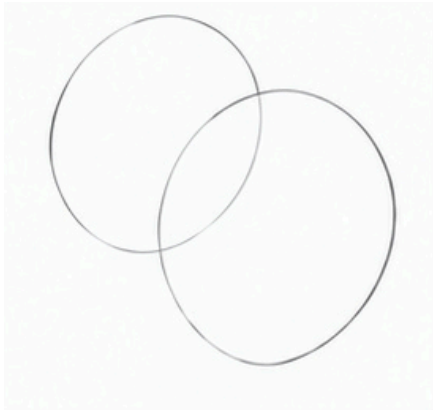


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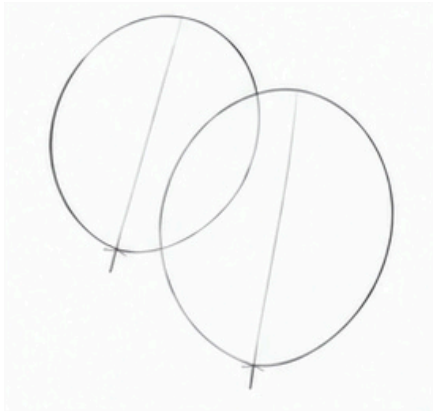


A little more detail

Trial



After checking



Best version

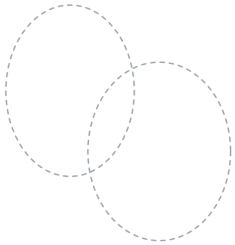
Simplest: Place two intersecting balloon ovals. Keep the large forms light, without an extra axis. Why: Two masses establish sizes before strings. Check: Can you see part of both balloon silhouettes? Repair: Move only one crowded oval.

A little more detail: Sketch a light oval higher on the left and another lower on the right. Add a short axis and a lower neck mark to each; leave room for strings. Why: The masses establish size before small details; the mark keeps a knot under its own body. Check: Can you see two distinct bodies and their overlap? Repair: Move only the crowded mass; avoid changing both at once.

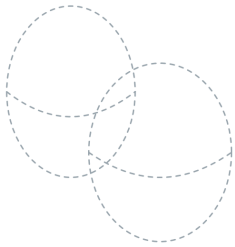
Best version: Sketch a light oval higher on the left and another lower on the right. Add a short axis and a lower neck mark to each; leave room for strings. Why: The masses establish size before small details; the mark keeps a knot under its own body. Check: Can you see two distinct bodies and their overlap? Repair: Move only the crowded mass; avoid changing both at once.

Step 2. Find the lower-body shape

Trial

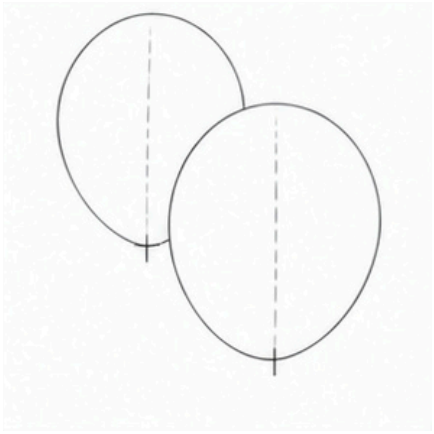


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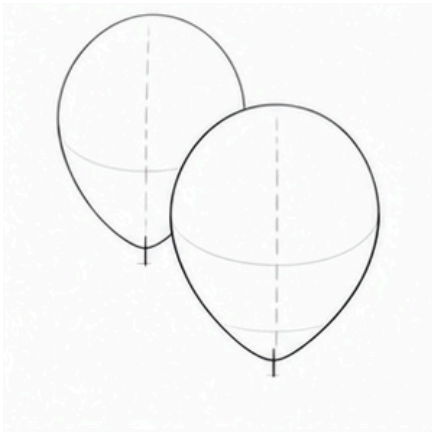


Simplest

Trial

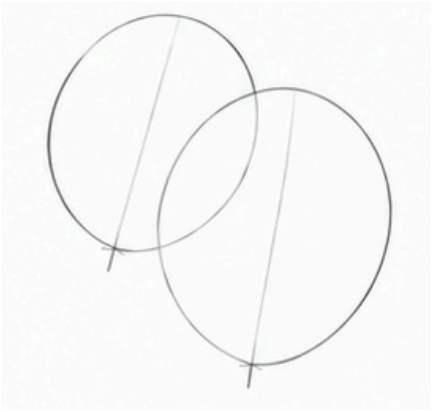


After checking



A little more detail

Trial



After checking



Best version

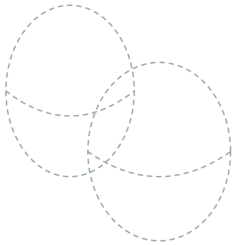
Simplest: Choose the main curve from this step; you may omit a separate axis. Why: A curve can describe a rounded surface. Check: Does the trial curve stay on the front body? Repair: Shorten only an endpoint outside its edge.

A little more detail: Keep the rounded upper part. From the lower third of each oval, draw two gentle lines into its neck mark. Keep the old round base pale. A light crosswise curve tests the width; it is not yet a finished band. Why: An inflated body narrows into a tied neck; the first oval is a trial, not a compulsory outline. Check: Does the lower part taper without a sharp corner at its side? Repair: Lighten only the abrupt lower corner and replace it with a short gentle curve.

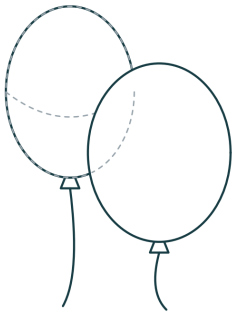
Best version: Keep the rounded upper part. From the lower third of each oval, draw two gentle lines into its neck mark. Keep the old round base pale. A light crosswise curve tests the width; it is not yet a finished band. Why: An inflated body narrows into a tied neck; the first oval is a trial, not a compulsory outline. Check: Does the lower part taper without a sharp corner at its side? Repair: Lighten only the abrupt lower corner and replace it with a short gentle curve.

Step 3. Build knots and strings

Trial

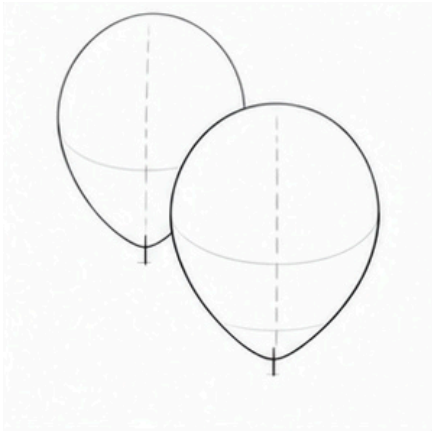


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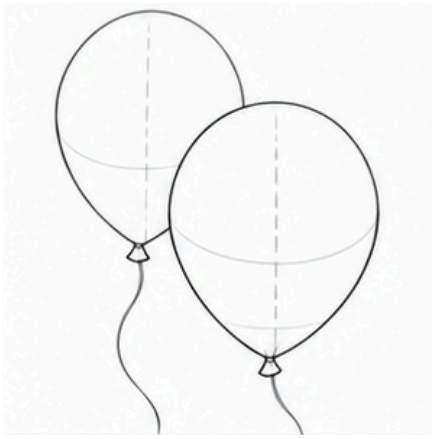


Simplest

Trial



After checking



A little more detail

Trial



After checking



Best version

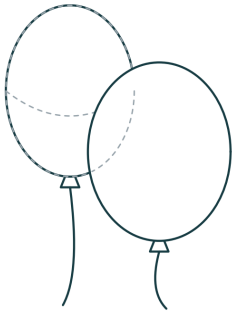
Simplest: Keep both oval edges and choose the right balloon as foreground. Add small knots below and loose strings towards the page bottom. Keep the outer edge plain, without internal details. Why: Small knots connect each body to its string. Check: Does each string begin below its own knot? Repair: Move only a wrong string start.

A little more detail: Below each neck, add a tiny knot and a flared triangular lip; let a loose string descend from the knot. Aim the short front-balloon folds into its knot, not into the body centre. Why: The tied part holds the string; folds show where the material gathers. Check: Is the lip small relative to its balloon, with the string starting at the knot? Repair: Erase only the wrong string start or extra fold and bring it back to the neck.

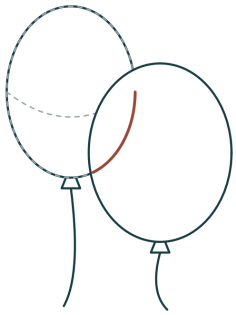
Best version: Below each neck, draw two short close edges and flare the lip downward. Join its base with a small ellipse, with the nearer curve clearer than the far curve. Add a string from the knot and short folds towards the neck. Why: The elliptical rim shows lip depth that a flat triangle cannot; the string attaches at the knot. Check: Can you see both opening curves, with the opening much narrower than the body? Repair: Lighten only an overly tall ellipse or wide lip; leave the large body alone.

Step 4. Find the hidden edge

Trial edge

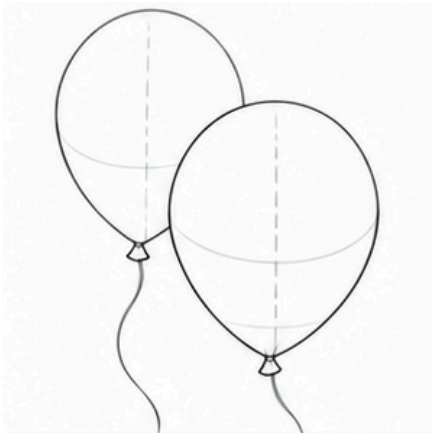


Covered section identified

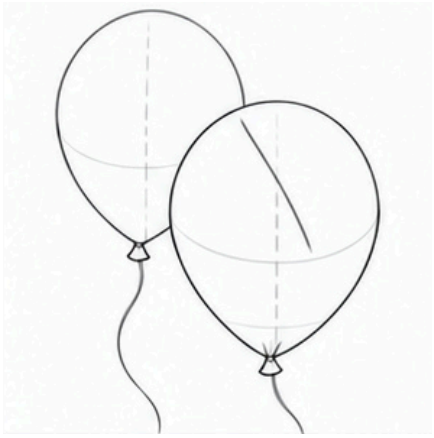


Simplest

Trial edge



Covered section



A little more detail

Trial edge



Covered section



Best version

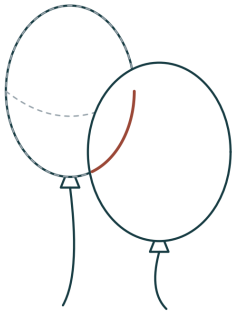
Simplest: At the intersection find the right arc of the left rear balloon. It must not pass through the right foreground balloon. Point to one section to erase. Why: An opaque front body hides the rear contour. Check: Can you identify the rear curve inside the front? Repair: Trace that rear contour again without darkening other lines.

A little more detail: Choose the right balloon as foreground. Find the trial curve of the rear right outline inside it. The pair marks this diagnostic error; you need not draw the error deliberately. Why: The opaque front balloon hides the rear edge; this line is neither a band nor a fold. Check: Can you trace the line to the rear body and name where it is hidden? Repair: If you mixed the edges up, lighten the emphasis and trace only the rear outline again.

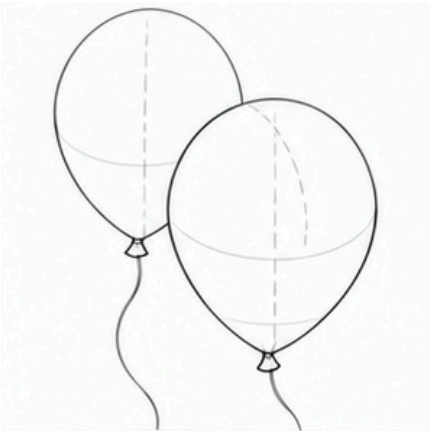
Best version: Choose the right balloon as foreground. Find the trial curve of the rear right outline inside it. The pair marks this diagnostic error; you need not draw the error deliberately. Why: The opaque front balloon hides the rear edge; this line is neither a band nor a fold. Check: Can you trace the line to the rear body and name where it is hidden? Repair: If you mixed the edges up, lighten the emphasis and trace only the rear outline again.

Step 5. Erase the covered section

Trial



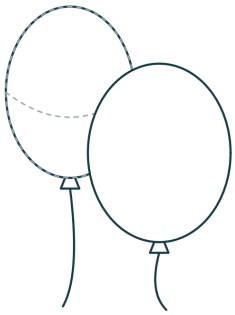
Before erasing



Before erasing

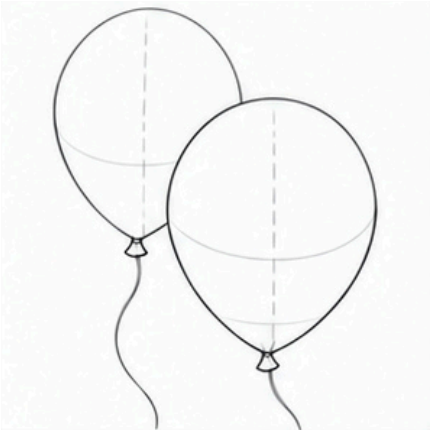


After checking



Simplest

After erasing



A little more detail

After erasing



Best version

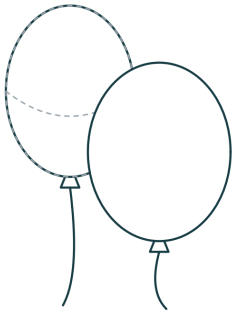
Simplest: Erase the rear arc inside the right balloon. The visible rear arc stops at the foreground edge. Keep the foreground outer edge. Why: Deleting the hidden section makes the overlap readable. Check: Is the rear curve gone inside the front, with the front edge intact? Repair: Restore only a visible endpoint touched by the eraser.

A little more detail: Erase only the identified rear curve inside the front balloon. Keep the visible rear edge outside it. Retain light axes and the trial round bases for now. Why: Removing the hidden section reveals the overlap order. Check: Is the front interior free of the rear outline, with its own edge intact? Repair: Restore only the short visible endpoint if the eraser touched it.

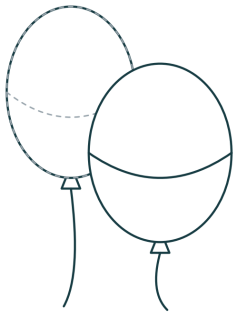
Best version: Erase only the identified rear curve inside the front balloon. Keep the visible rear edge outside it. Retain light axes and the trial round bases for now. Why: Removing the hidden section reveals the overlap order. Check: Is the front interior free of the rear outline, with its own edge intact? Repair: Restore only the short visible endpoint if the eraser touched it.

Step 6. Place details on the surface

Trial

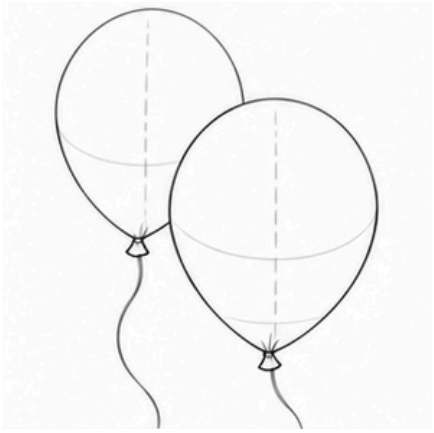


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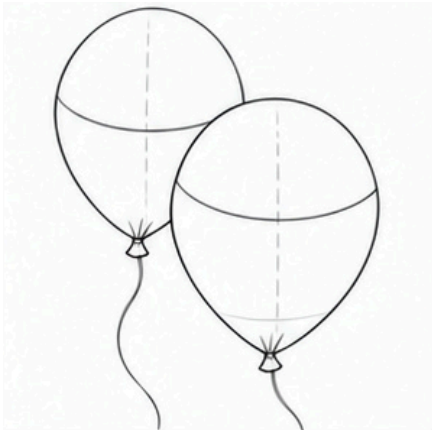


Simplest

Trial



After checking



A little more detail

Trial



After checking



Best version

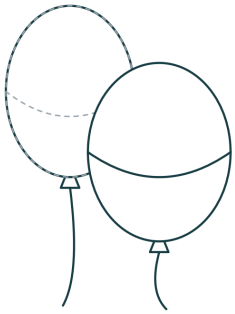
Simplest: Draw one crosswise stripe on the front balloon: the curve wraps its roundness and ends at its sides. Leave the rear balloon plain. Why: A band curves around the front body. Check: Is the curve middle below the ends, within the front balloon? Repair: Lighten a wrong curve segment and redraw that short part.

A little more detail: Add a few short folds at the rear neck. Strengthen one transverse curve on each body, with the middle below the ends. The rear curve stops at the front balloon. Why: Folds converge into the tied point, whereas the band wraps the rounded surface; they run differently. Check: Are the folds short and aimed at the knot, with each band on its own body? Repair: Shorten an extra fold; erase only the band endpoint that escaped its silhouette.

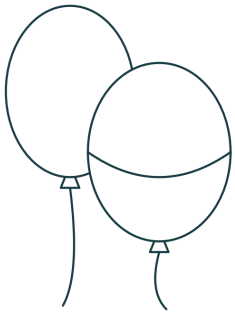
Best version: Add short folds towards the rear knot. Draw two parallel curves on the front body and one on the rear. Their middles sit below their endpoints; the rear curve ends at the front edge. Why: Bands check roundness before tone; they must not become a rear outline showing through. Check: Are there two front curves and one rear curve, with folds pointing at the necks? Repair: Erase only an extra curve or escaped endpoint without moving onto the other body.

Step 7. Remove construction guides

Trial

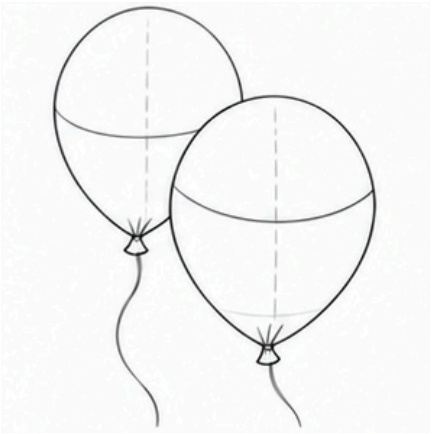


After checking

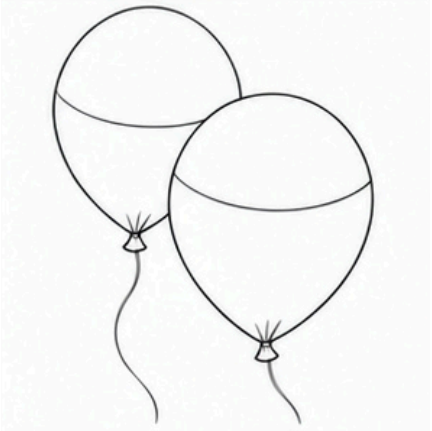


Simplest

Trial



After checking



A little more detail

Trial



After checking



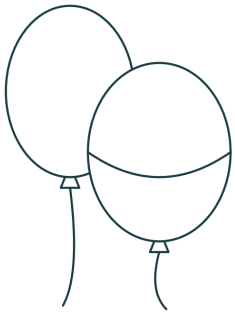
Best version

Simplest: Remove the temporary curve and light masses; retain the plain edge and this route details. Why: Temporary supports are no longer needed. Check: Are guides absent while silhouette, knot and string remain? Repair: Erase only an unwanted guide.

A little more detail: Remove axes, markers and the old round oval bases. Keep the tapered bodies, folds, knots, strings and chosen bands. Why: The guides have served their purpose; outlining every trial would create unwanted seams. Check: Is there a single continuous outer edge for each visible body? Repair: Lighten only the duplicate lower edge without removing the chosen taper.

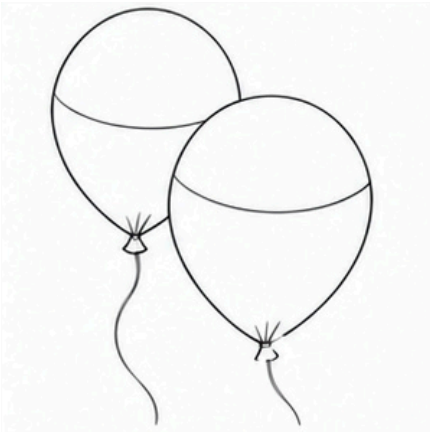
Best version: Remove axes, markers and the old round oval bases. Keep the tapered bodies, folds, knots, strings and chosen bands. Why: The guides have served their purpose; outlining every trial would create unwanted seams. Check: Is there a single continuous outer edge for each visible body? Repair: Lighten only the duplicate lower edge without removing the chosen taper.

Step 8. Check the finish or choose light

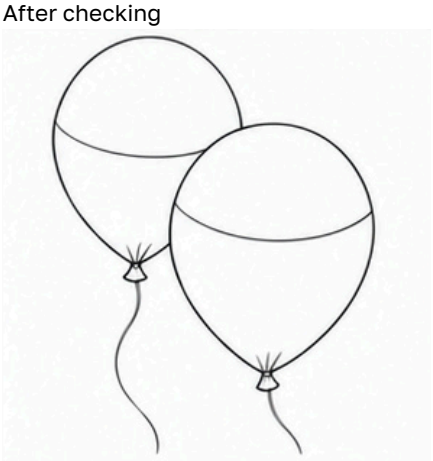


Simplest

Trial



After checking



A little more detail

Trial



After checking



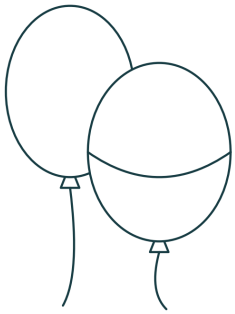
Best version

Simplest: This route is already finished. Keep your drawing; only a more detailed route continues here. Why: The clean line result is complete; it does not need unexplained tone. Check: Are contours intact, guides removed and strings visible? Repair: Repair only an accidental join gap at a knot if one remains.

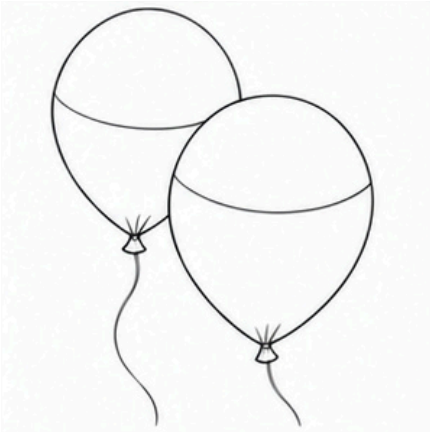
A little more detail: Check the small join between the front body and its knot. Restore it if erasing broke it. The line drawing is finished; only the third route needs further shading. Why: A small join completes the construction without tracing the whole outline. Check: Does the knot meet the body without becoming a heavy black spot? Repair: Lighten the short join with the eraser; do not thicken the rest of the silhouette.

Best version: Choose light from the upper left; the teaching arrow points towards the balloons. Very lightly reserve a broad light area on the upper-left part of each body. Do not shade yet. Why: These surfaces face the light; white paper will become the light area and highlight. Its boundary is temporary. Check: Are both light areas on the side of the same source? Repair: Lighten only a wrongly placed right-hand reserve and move it to the upper left.

Step 9. Lay down a first light tone

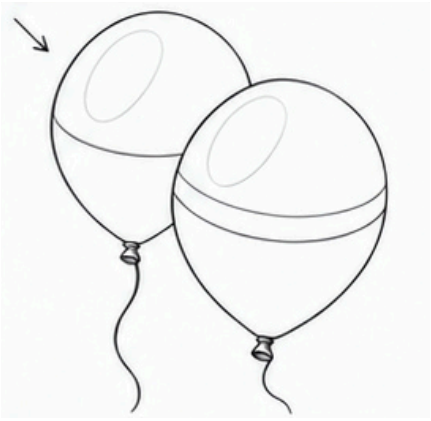


Simplest



A little more detail

Trial



After checking



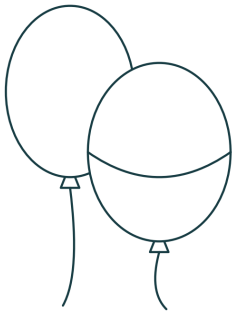
Best version

Simplest: This route is already finished. Keep your drawing; only a more detailed route continues here. Why: The clean line result is complete; it does not need unexplained tone. Check: Are contours intact, guides removed and strings visible? Repair: Repair only an accidental join gap at a knot if one remains.

A little more detail: This route is already finished. Keep your drawing; only a more detailed route continues here. Why: The clean line result is complete; it does not need unexplained tone. Check: Are contours intact, guides removed and strings visible? Repair: Repair only an accidental join gap at a knot if one remains.

Best version: Use the side of the pencil for a light layer of short curved strokes over the right and lower parts of each balloon. Ease pressure almost to zero beside the white reserve; keep the bands readable. Why: The strokes follow roundness; a first layer gives a midtone while preserving light paper. Check: Can you distinguish white from light grey without a dense black rim? Repair: Press the eraser gently against an accidentally shaded reserve; lift only the excess tone.

Step 10. Build volume and recover light



Simplest



A little more detail

Trial



After checking



Best version

Simplest: This route is already finished. Keep your drawing; only a more detailed route continues here. Why: The clean line result is complete; it does not need unexplained tone. Check: Are contours intact, guides removed and strings visible? Repair: Repair only an accidental join gap at a knot if one remains.

A little more detail: This route is already finished. Keep your drawing; only a more detailed route continues here. Why: The clean line result is complete; it does not need unexplained tone. Check: Are contours intact, guides removed and strings visible? Repair: Repair only an accidental join gap at a knot if one remains.

Best version: Build a second layer over the lower-right part while keeping a gradual transition into the midtone. Darken the small lip opening modestly. Lift the light area with the eraser and remove the arrow and reserve boundary. Why: Own shadow on surfaces turned away from light rounds the body. The lip is deeper and receives less light inside. These balloons float; this view has no surface to receive a cast shadow. Check: Are light, midtone and a darker lower-right area distinct, with the lip opening still readable? Repair: Lighten a heavy dark outline or blotch, retaining layered strokes within the lower-right area.

If the drawing is unclear

The front balloon looks transparent. Cause: A rear outline curve remains inside it. Repair: Erase only the rear line between its entry points into the front balloon.

The neck looks like a pasted-on point. Cause: The lower edge has a sharp break instead of a smooth taper. Repair: Lighten that short corner and taper the side gently into the neck mark.

A band crossed onto the other balloon. Cause: Its endpoint did not stop at its own edge or the occlusion. Repair: Shorten only the escaped curve endpoint.

The whole balloon is equally grey. Cause: The first layer filled the light reserve. Repair: Lift tone at the upper left with the eraser, leaving a light transition beside it.

A black outline replaced volume. Cause: The whole rim was darkened instead of the surface facing away from light. Repair: Lighten the heavy rim and layer strokes within the lower-right surface.



Covered rear line

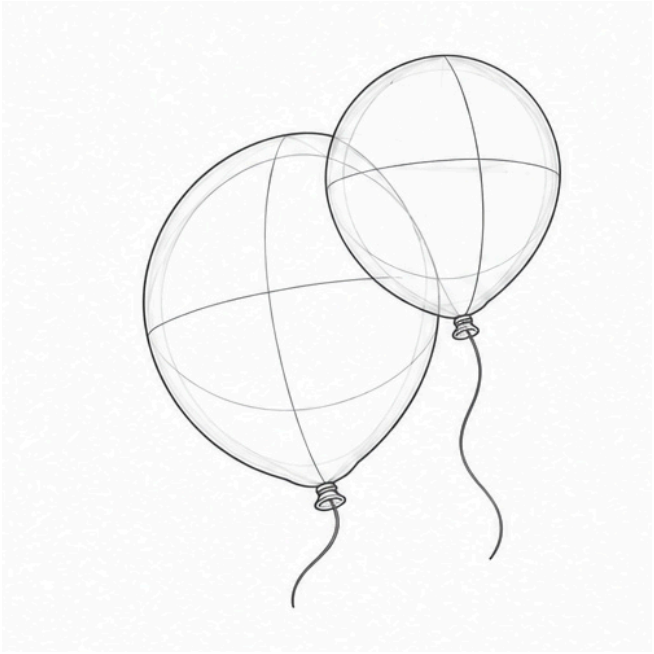


After local erasing

Independent tasks

Choose a new condition. Solve it yourself with new guides; the example helps you check rather than requiring an exact copy. For a line route, choose the first or second task and complete only the construction. The examples show upper-right light: try the third task’s light study before shading them. For shading, be sure to try the third.

1. The front balloon is higher



Construction: a new condition



Example after removing guides

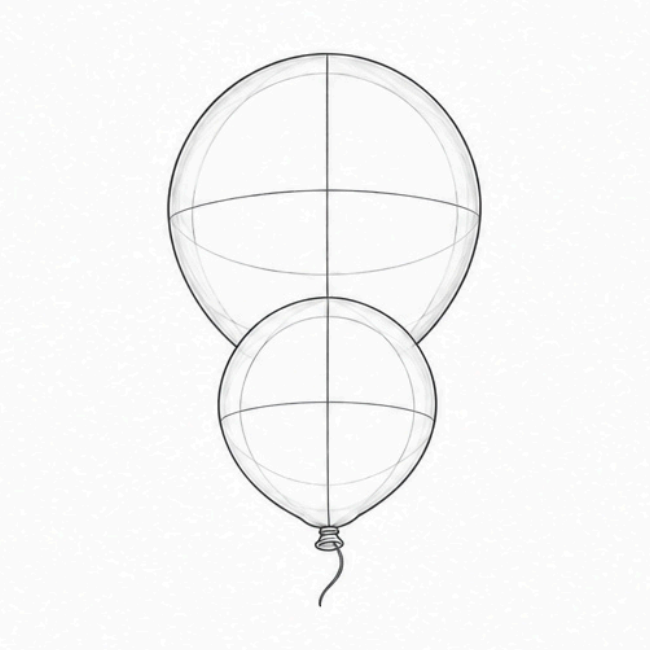
Place a smaller front balloon higher on the right and a larger rear one lower on the left. Mark the necks and choose your curves. Before details, name the covered section of the rear edge.

Why: The overlap has moved upward; the previously erased section no longer fits. Check: Does the upper-right rear edge disappear only inside the new front balloon? Repair: Restore the visible lower curve and erase only the newly covered section.

Question: Why can you not keep the old erased section?

Answer: Moving the front balloon hides a different part of the rear outline.

2. The front balloon covers the base



Construction: a new condition



Example after removing guides

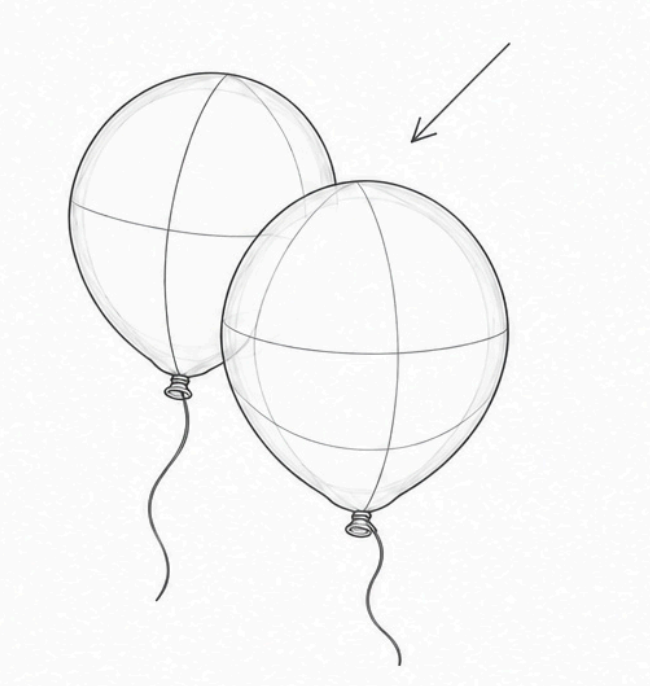
Place a small front balloon below the centre of a larger rear one. First sketch the rear neck and string, then decide which parts the front balloon covers. Do not draw a hidden string across the front body.

Why: The overlap now hides the base rather than the side; part of the knot and string is also behind. Check: Are the rear base and covered string absent from the front body? Repair: Erase only the covered base and string; retain a visible string section below the front balloon if there is one.

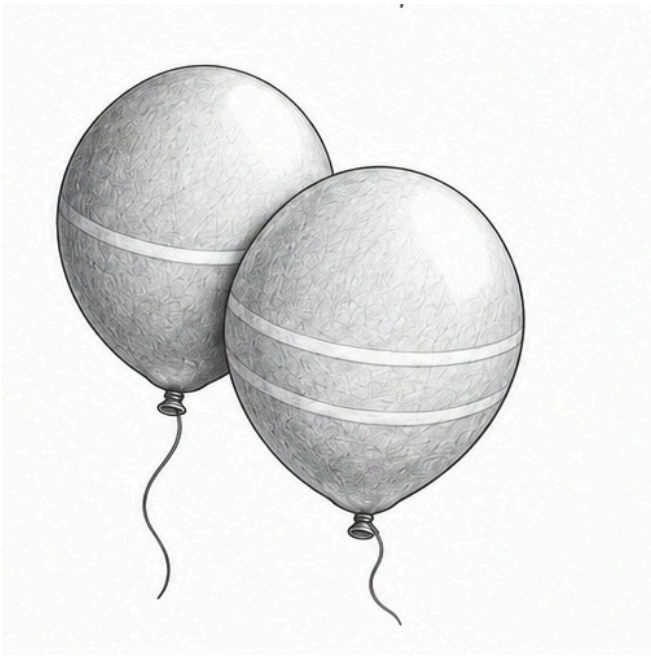
Question: Can a rear string disappear for part of its length?

Answer: Yes: when it passes behind the opaque front balloon, only its exposed sections are visible.

3. Light now comes from the upper right



Construction: a new condition



Example after removing guides

Keep the familiar balloon arrangement but choose upper-right light. Mark the new light area before shading. Place a faint tone on the left and below, then deepen the lower-left own shadow yourself.

Why: The outline stays put, but surfaces face the new light differently; you cannot keep the old highlight and shadow. Check: Is white at the upper right and darker tone at the lower left, with both balloons under one light? Repair: Lift the right-hand light area with the eraser, then add a faint layer only to the lower-left surface.

Question: Why did the dark area move to the left?

Answer: The source is now on the right, so the left surface faces away. This shadow is on the body; a cast shadow would need another surface.

Self-check

Point to a smooth taper, a rear edge endpoint and one removed guide. If you chose tone, name the light direction and three tonal areas. Question: why not darken the whole outline to create volume? Answer: an equally dark rim does not show which surface faces away from light; deepen the chosen shaded area inside instead.