How to draw a unicorn: three levels

Choose one route and follow it from the first gesture to the last stroke. Learn to search for form, check it and use an eraser, rather than trace circles into a finished character. This lesson draws a head and neck, not the whole animal.



Simplest



A little more detail



Best version

Simplest: dot eye, short horn and one lock without interior hairs. A little more detail: oval eye with a pupil and two mane strokes. Best version: expressive eye and a few soft mane lines, the most detailed drawing in this lesson. Choose by preference and experience, without age labels.

Read the pairs: “Trial” shows a decision before checking, sometimes with a deliberately retained error; “After checking” shows the chosen form. Do not copy errors on purpose. Continue your own drawing and repair only what needs changing. Left panels are diagnostic comparisons, not mandatory states between steps.

Your goal and materials

Build a coherent portrait and explain two choices: how features sit on a turning surface, and why one contour hides behind another form. Uneven strokes are welcome; check decisions rather than likeness to the sample.

Use paper, an HB or 2B pencil and a soft eraser; a kneaded eraser is useful but optional. Allow about 25–45 minutes with breaks. Start with light marks and curves, without denting the paper. Erasers also remove scaffolding when its work is finished.

Two ideas you will use

Surface line. Imagine a ribbon around the rounded head: its visible curve follows the surface. A guide locates the eye and muzzle direction, then is erased. Similar horn curves narrow toward its tip. Choose the ribbon’s position intentionally.

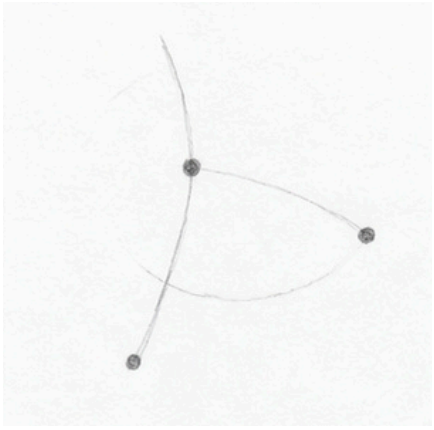
Overlap. An opaque foreground form hides part of the rear form. Neck lines stop at the mane; the far ear stops at the head. Choose what is in front before erasing an intersection. Transparent objects need a different decision.

Warm up with two small trials

On a spare corner, draw a small egg mass with a curved ribbon. Mark an eye on the ribbon, then lighten the guide with your eraser: the eye stays, the support disappears. In a second trial overlap two simple shapes, choose the front one and erase only the hidden rear edge. Swap their order on a new trial. Check: explain why that specific line disappeared. These are warm-ups, not the final lesson result.

Step 1. Find the gesture before the outline

Trial



Trial



Trial

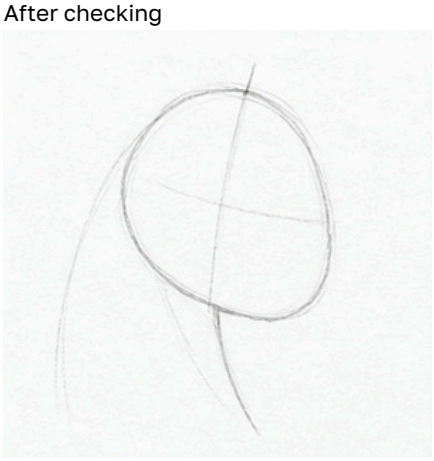


After checking



Simplest — stage 1

After checking



A little more detail — stage 1

After checking



Best version — stage 1

Simplest: Make a light head tilt and two ticks for forehead and muzzle tip. Leave room for the horn.

A little more detail: Sweep in the neck and broad direction of the future mane. This is gesture, not individual hair. Compare the forehead-to-nose distance.

Best version: Find the head tilt and the neck's counter-movement. Mark forehead, nose tip and throat without closing a silhouette.

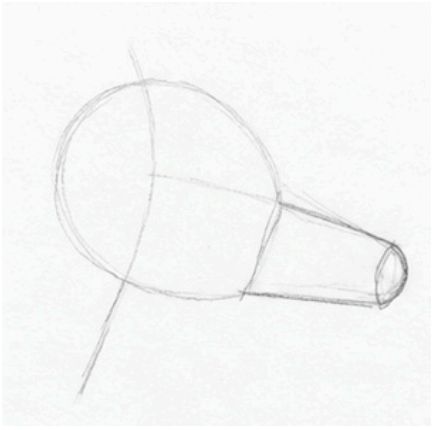
Why: Gesture connects the head and neck before features compete for attention.

Check: Can you show the tilt with your hand? Is there room above and to the right?

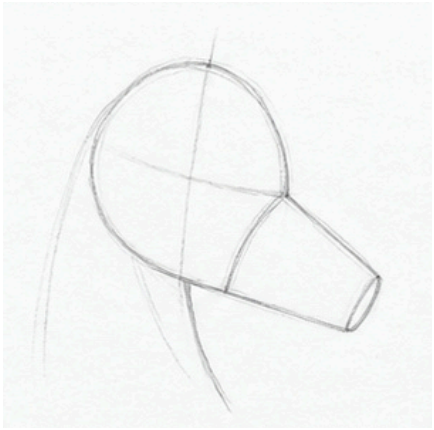
Erase / repair: Lighten the wrong sweep with your eraser and move the endpoint ticks before adding masses.

Step 2. Compare and shorten the muzzle

Trial



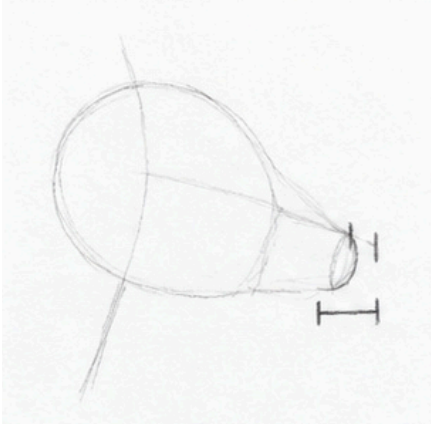
Trial



Trial

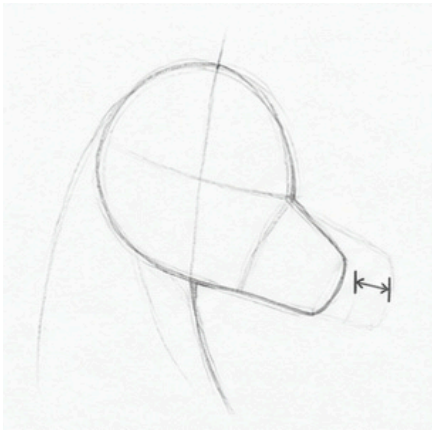


After checking



Simplest — stage 2

After checking



A little more detail — stage 2

After checking



Best version — stage 2

Simplest: Place the head egg and short muzzle wedge. Compare the trials: the far end moves closer in the checked version.

A little more detail: Compare wedge length with head width before adding ears or eyes; repair the muzzle independently.

Best version: Keep the skull and neck while shortening only the overlong wedge.

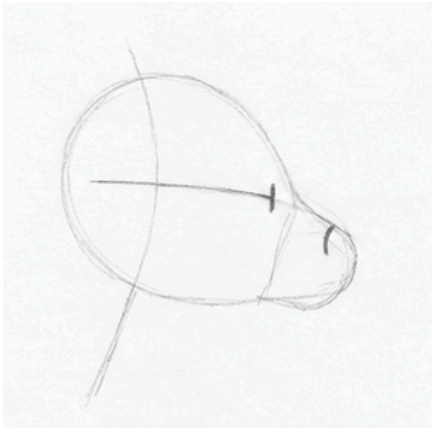
Why: Large proportions are easier to change before details. One local repair avoids restarting the whole head.

Check: Is the muzzle shorter than the head width, with room for the cheek?

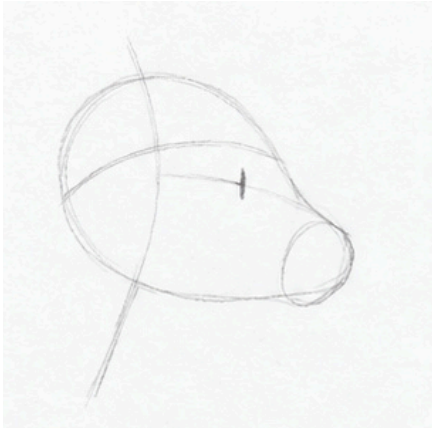
Erase / repair: Erase the far wedge edge and move its end closer. You do not need to copy the wrong trial.

Step 3. Move the eye onto the side surface

Trial



After checking



Simplest — stage 3

Trial



After checking

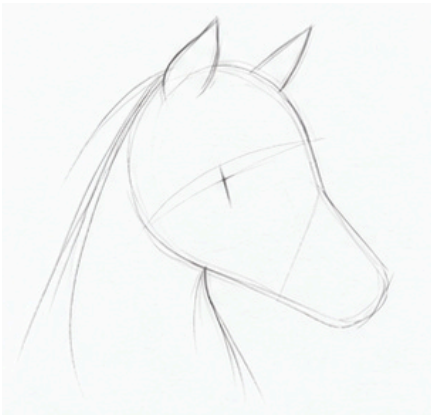


A little more detail — stage 3

Trial



After checking



Best version — stage 3

Simplest: Wrap a pale guide around the head and place an eye tick on its side, farther from the nose.

A little more detail: Compare the straight trial with the curved guide; mark the oval eye position without drawing it yet.

Best version: Align the surface curve with the head turn and move the tick away from the bridge.

Why: A surface guide locates the eye on the turning mass instead of an arbitrary gap near the nose.

Check: Is the tick on the side? Does the guide wrap the mass rather than cut it with a flat line?

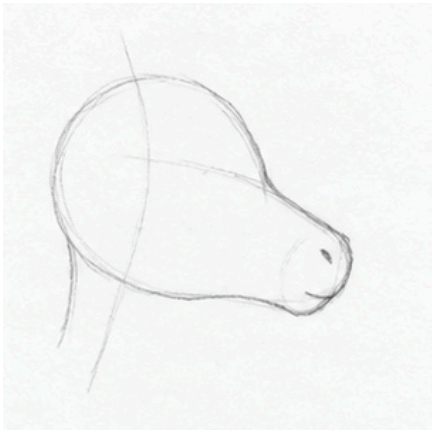
Erase / repair: Lighten the straight trial and wrong tick, then place a new tick on the curved guide. Keep the useful guide.

Step 4. Search for a living edge over the masses

Trial



After checking

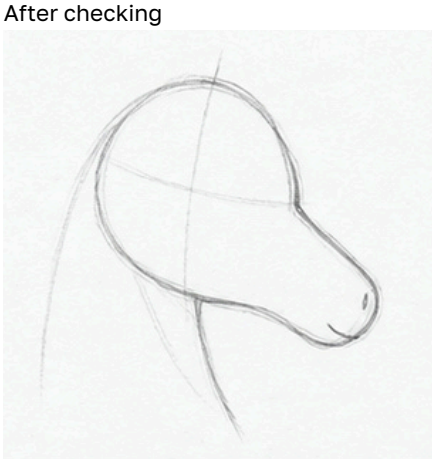


Simplest — stage 4

Trial



After checking



A little more detail — stage 4

Trial



After checking



Best version — stage 4

Simplest: Join brow, nose, chin and cheek with light short strokes; round the wedge tip without closing an inner oval.

A little more detail: Soften the angular wedge-to-cheek transition while the masses still show beneath the search.

Best version: Compare brow, bridge and chin curvature; the egg boundary need not become the final edge.

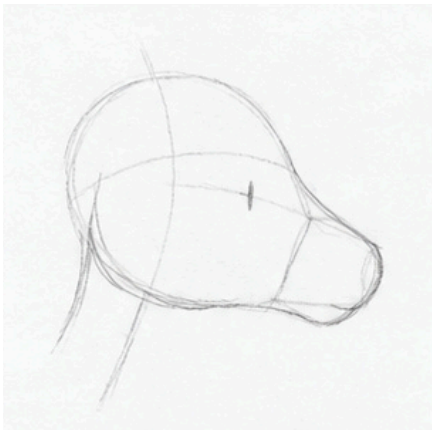
Why: The masses now support one living surface. A horse head is not a circle with an outlined oval pasted onto it.

Check: Does one outer silhouette emerge? Where does it depart from the egg or wedge?

Erase / repair: Keep the search light. Do not darken the internal mass join; the eraser will remove it next.

Step 5. Choose a contour and erase the rejected trial

Trial

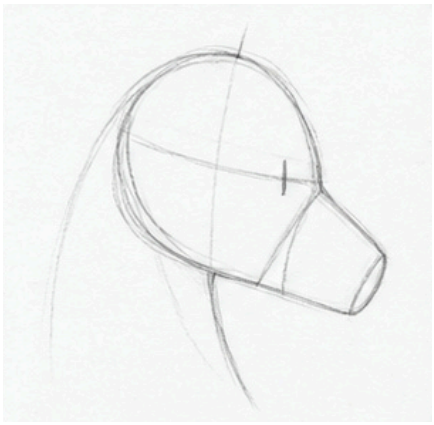


After checking



Simplest — stage 5

Trial



After checking



A little more detail — stage 5

Trial



After checking



Best version — stage 5

Simplest: Choose the softer cheek edge and lighten the competing stroke and inner muzzle seam.

A little more detail: Keep one chin-to-cheek edge; remove the angular wedge boundary and duplicate trial.

Best version: Compare the silhouette with its masses, then lighten the obsolete edge and seam while keeping the eye tick.

Why: Selecting form includes subtraction: fewer lines make the right panel clearer. Use the eraser before small details.

Check: Are the rejected edge and inner seam gone while the eye tick remains?

Erase / repair: Dab the rejected stroke with a soft eraser. Restore only a short useful edge if you accidentally remove it.

Step 6. Place features and stop hidden edges

Trial

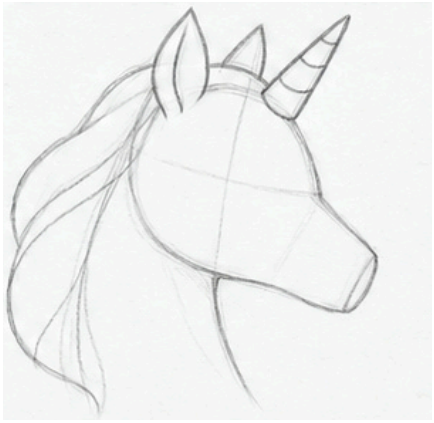


After checking



Simplest — stage 6

Trial



After checking



A little more detail — stage 6

Trial



After checking



Best version — stage 6

Simplest: Use the checked tick for a dot eye, nostril and mouth; add ears, short horn and broad hair without interior strands.

A little more detail: Use a plain oval eye and pupil, ears and short horn; two broad mane strokes are enough.

Best version: Add the expressive eye and a few broad mane lines, keeping the portrait simple.

Why: Features belong to the checked form. Overlap then makes foreground hair hide rear brow and neck edges.

Check: Which rear edge crosses the hair in the trial? Does it stop at the foreground lock after checking?

Erase / repair: Remove only the covered brow or neck segment. Correct a misplaced eye before darkening it; do not erase every intersection.

Step 7. Put the pencil down for an eraser pass

Trial



After checking



Simplest — stage 7

Trial



After checking



A little more detail — stage 7

Trial



After checking



Best version — stage 7

Simplest: Remove the axis, eye guide and egg/wedge remains. Dab at dark trials rather than scrubbing the whole page.

A little more detail: Move from horn through muzzle to neck, removing scaffolding and covered rear lines while preserving visible contours.

Best version: Lighten repeated search marks on brow, cheek and mane. Keep the one that describes the form; remove the hidden far-ear base.

Why: Drawing includes subtraction. This stage has fewer and lighter marks, yet reads more clearly.

Check: Compare this pair: axis and eye guide disappear while visible eye, nose and locks remain.

Erase / repair: Restore only an accidentally erased useful edge after checking its neighbours. Stop if the paper surface begins to wear.

Step 8. Choose pencil pressure instead of tracing everything

Trial



After checking



Simplest — stage 8

Trial



After checking



A little more detail — stage 8

Trial



After checking



Best version — stage 8

Simplest: Strengthen the dot eye, nostril and one overlap edge, leaving other contours light.

A little more detail: Strengthen pupil, nostril and two short overlap edges; add no hair or hatching.

Best version: Accent the eye and a few overlaps without tracing every edge or increasing detail.

Why: Equal dark outlines turn form into a sign. Varied pressure preserves a living drawing and a clear focus.

Check: Did the head circle or oval muzzle seam return? Can you read the turn and hair overlaps?

Erase / repair: Lighten one heavy edge or accidental dark stripe with the eraser, then restore just one useful stroke.

Repair a small problem

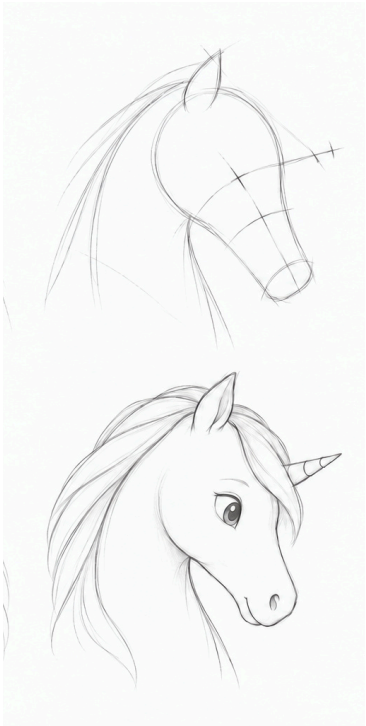
What you notice	Possible cause	Small repair
An oval sticker remains on the face	Scaffolding became the final edge	Lighten the inner muzzle arc and find the nose-to-cheek transition
Eye points away from the head	Position ignored the guide	Erase the pale mark and place it on the surface curve
Transparent hair	Rear contour crosses a lock	Remove just the covered brow or neck segment
Every edge is equally dark	Pressure was not chosen	Lighten one secondary edge and keep the eye accent
Worn paper	Repeated scrubbing	Stop; begin the next trial with lighter pressure

Three ideas: draw the head in a new position

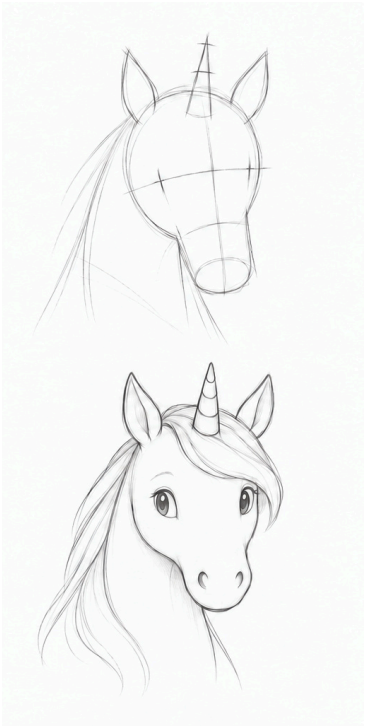
Choose one task and keep the detail of your route: a dot or plain oval eye, short horn and broad locks. The head position changes. Each card shows pale supports above and a refined example below. Build your own version from the supports first, then compare; an exact match is not required.



Profile: supports above, example below



Lowered head: supports above, example below



Near-front: supports above, example below

1. Pure profile facing left

What changes: View the head strictly from the side: muzzle points left, one eye is visible and the far ear hides behind the head. This needs a different construction, not a mirrored copy.

Try: Place the head egg and a left-pointing muzzle wedge. Use a pale curve to find the eye between ear and bridge, not on the nose. Connect forehead, nose and chin in an organic silhouette, then place the horn on the brow tilt and one broad mane.

Why: The familiar surface guide locates the eye on the side. Overlap explains why the far ear and part of the neck should not be traced through foreground forms.

Check: Does the muzzle read from the side? Is one eye visible, and can you point to the neck edge hidden by the mane?

Repair: If the old turning muzzle returns, lighten its wedge and find the side silhouette again. Erase the covered neck edge, then the checked eye guide.

2. Lower the head

What changes: The head bows toward the ground while the neck stays nearly upright. Do not rotate the entire old drawing together with its neck.

Try: Leave space for the neck, tilt the head egg and point the muzzle wedge down. Run an axis from brow to nose and a curved eye guide before placing the eye. Place the horn on the tilted brow rather than vertically above the page.

Why: The axis and eye guide belong to the head and move with its tilt. Overlap connects the head and neck while a broad lock hides part of their join.

Check: Is the nose lower than in the main drawing? Does the eye sit on the new guide while the neck keeps its own direction?

Repair: Erase a misplaced pale eye mark and put it on the new guide. Remove the covered neck edge and checked guides; do not hide a wrong join with extra hairs.

3. Almost facing you

What changes: The short muzzle sits below the forehead; both eyes and ears are visible. The example turns slightly, making one side a little narrower.

Try: Place a nearly upright head egg and short muzzle mass below, near the centre. Add a face axis and one eye curve, with an eye mark on either side. Compare their distances from the axis before adding pupils, nose and one broad forelock.

Why: The same surface guide connects both eyes to one head turn. Familiar overlap still applies: the forelock hides part of the brow without making the face transparent.

Check: Are the eyes on opposite sides of one axis? Is the muzzle below the brow instead of pointing sideways? Does the hair hide only the chosen edge?

Repair: Lighten an eye mark placed too close to the nose and compare distances again. Erase the brow edge covered by hair and the checked axis, keeping the visible face silhouette.

Independent trial: choose one view and adjust its tilt a little from the example. Start with masses and guides. Before details, point to the eye position and choose which edge hides behind the mane.

Explain those two decisions after erasing.

Self-check question: can you lower the nose while leaving the eye, horn and eye guide in their old positions?

Self-check answer: the head turns as one form. Change its masses, axis and surface guide first, then place eye and horn again from those supports. The neck may keep a different direction. Moving just the nose disconnects the features. Point to your new eye guide and one edge erased because of overlap.