

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.

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



Simplest – stage 1



A little more detail – stage 1



Best version – stage 1

Simplest: Use one pale sweep for the head tilt and a short neck mark. Mark the muzzle tip and leave room for a small horn.

A little more detail: Mark head tilt, muzzle tip and neck direction. Use one broad sweep for the future mane.

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

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. Place temporary masses



Simplest – stage 2



A little more detail – stage 2



Best version – stage 2

Simplest: Lightly place a head egg, short muzzle wedge and two small ears. These are temporary supports.

A little more detail: Place the head egg, short muzzle wedge, two ears and neck direction without features yet.

Best version: Lightly place a head egg, short muzzle wedge and two leaf-like ear positions.

Why: These shapes are scaffolding for proportion, not permanent boundaries of the animal.

Check: Does the muzzle continue the gesture? Is the far ear behind the head?

Erase / repair: Erase just the wrong outer wedge edge and shorten it. Keep the head and neck; their lines should remain pale.

Step 3. Place guides on a turning surface



Simplest – stage 3



A little more detail – stage 3



Best version – stage 3

Simplest: Use one pale eye curve and short face axis to locate a dot eye on the side of the head.

A little more detail: Lightly mark an eye guide and muzzle axis; check the turn before adding the eye.

Best version: Use a pale curved eye guide and a short face axis. One visible eye is enough.

Why: A surface line places features on a rounded turning form.

Check: Do the curves agree with the axis? Is the eye on the side of the head?

Erase / repair: Choose one axis and erase the competing one. Keep the useful light guide until you check the eye.

Step 4. Find an organic silhouette and erase the diagram edges



Simplest – stage 4



A little more detail – stage 4



Best version – stage 4

Simplest: Connect forehead, nose and chin in a soft silhouette. Mark dot-eye and nostril positions; erase the inner wedge edge.

A little more detail: Find the smooth forehead-to-muzzle-to-cheek transition and mark eye and nose lightly; do not trace the whole egg.

Best version: Search for forehead, bridge, soft muzzle tip and chin with short strokes; mark eye and nostril lightly.

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

Check: Does the outer edge read as one head? Is there a closed oval seam inside the face?

Erase / repair: Lighten the egg and wedge. Erase the muzzle dividing arc and abandoned contour trials; keep useful axes for the next step.

Step 5. Refine the eye, muzzle and horn



Simplest – stage 5



A little more detail – stage 5



Best version – stage 5

Simplest: Place a dot eye, tiny nostril and short mouth curve. Add a small horn with one curved band.

A little more detail: Use a plain oval eye and small pupil, short nose and mouth lines, and two curves on a small horn.

Best version: Make a plain oval eye and small pupil, short nostril curve and quiet mouth line; use two curves on a short cone horn.

Why: Small details rely on large relationships; horn bands describe a curved tapering surface.

Check: Has the eye drifted onto the nose? If there are two horn curves, is the upper one shorter?

Erase / repair: Erase the mistaken eye mark and replace it on the guide. Lighten unneeded guide segments without removing every useful support.

Step 6. Build large mane locks and overlap



Simplest – stage 6



A little more detail – stage 6



Best version – stage 6

Simplest: Make one broad mane lock without interior hairs. Let the forelock cover some brow and erase the hidden edge.

A little more detail: Use one broad lock and just two strokes following its curve. Erase the covered head edges.

Best version: Use one broad flowing lock with only a couple of directional strokes. Let the forelock cover part of forehead and horn base.

Why: Foreground hair hides the head, horn base or neck. A lock's direction matters before individual hairs.

Check: Point to a rear contour that stops at a foreground lock. Which lock is nearer?

Erase / repair: Erase the covered forehead, horn-base and neck segments. Repair a crossing rear edge before adding more hair.

Step 7. Put the pencil down for an eraser pass



Simplest – stage 7



A little more detail – stage 7



Best version – stage 7

Simplest: Erase the egg, wedge and eye guide after they have served their purpose. Keep the dot eye, silhouette and single lock.

A little more detail: Remove the face axis and construction remains; lighten trial edges and keep only the two useful mane strokes.

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

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

Check: Compare frames six and seven. Which guides disappeared, and why did visible muzzle edges stay?

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



Simplest – stage 8



A little more detail – stage 8



Best version – stage 8

Simplest: Gently strengthen the dot eye and one or two visible edges. No lashes, fur or shading are needed.

A little more detail: Accent the eye and forelock overlap lightly. Keep white paper and the two mane strokes; no more detail is needed.

Best version: Strengthen the eye, nostril and a few visible edges; keep the rest light.

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

Make your own variation

On another part of the paper change one thing: head tilt, muzzle length or mane direction. Restart from gesture and masses rather than copying the finished edge. Decide which guide stays until the eye and which contour disappears behind the mane. Compare how clearly both drawings show the turn and overlap.

Three ideas for a slightly different drawing

Draw the familiar head again and change just one thing: a shorter horn, a shorter mane or a pony without a horn. Keep the same scope and start with light construction rather than tracing the example.



Shorter horn



Shorter mane



Pony without a horn

Shorter horn

Keep the familiar head, eye and mane. Make the horn shorter and use one curve around it.

Check: Is the horn attached to the same brow? Does its band wrap the form?

Repair: Erase the abandoned tip mark and the base edge covered by the forelock.

Shorter mane

Build the same head. End one or two broad locks beside the cheek instead of carrying them down the neck. Keep the familiar forelock.

Check: Which neck edge is visible below the short mane? Does the forelock still cover part of the brow?

Repair: Erase the long hair trials. Restore only the revealed neck edge, keeping the covered contour hidden.

Pony without a horn

Use the familiar head and short muzzle masses and place the eye on a pale guide. Leave out the horn; keep two ears and one broad mane.

Check: Does the forelock cover part of the brow while the ears remain visible? Is the head coherent without scaffolding?

Repair: Erase any leftover horn trial mark and the brow edge under the hair.

Self-check question: if you shorten the mane, should you restore the whole neck contour?

Self-check answer: restore only the neck edge revealed below the hair. The edge behind the mane stays hidden. The pony uses the same idea: choose what is in front, then remove the hidden line. Point to that spot on your drawing.