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ASK THE EXPERTS

Product Profiles: Drawing Pencil Basics

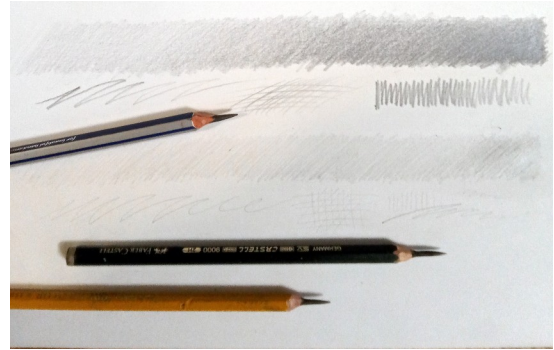


Ask the Experts: “I’m shopping for some pencils for someone who just uses regular writing pencils to draw with. What do the different types and numbers mean?”

A: Drawing pencils come in a huge range of brands and types, but the main differences break down to: light or dark; hard or soft; shiny or dull; thick or thin. Pencil lead- the core material- is a solid stick that can include several types of pigment: graphite, a silvery carbon isotope; charcoal, a carbon made by heating wood, vines, or other natural material; amorphous carbon, an extremely fine, matte black made from oil or natural gas; or colored lead made with assorted pigments. Despite the term “lead”, pencil cores don’t contain any actual, toxic lead metal.

The wooden barrel surrounding the core is called the “casing”. Pencil barrels can be round or faceted. Some artists use carpenter’s pencils, which have a flat lead and barrel, which is useful for creating line variation, and for practicing italic-hand calligraphy. So-called “woodless” pencils are actually dense crayons of solid drawing material, in the shape and dimensions of a traditional pencil.

Pencils are available in a range from soft to hard. Harder pencils hold a sharp point for a long time, but they are limited in how dark a mark they can make, and the hardest leads can emboss or dent paper. Soft leads can make darker marks, with smoother coverage, but they need to be sharpened more often, and they require a lighter touch to achieve crisp details.

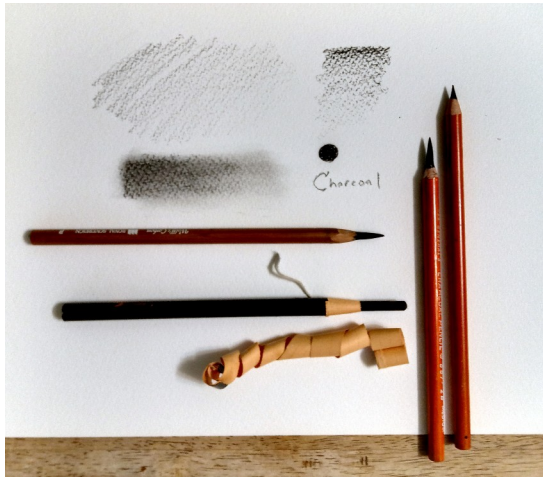


The range of hardness for a particular type of pencil might only include a few increments, or there may be many degrees of hardness. Graphite pencils are available in two ranges: H-range and B-range, with a couple of degrees in between. “H” is for “hard, and “B” is for “black”. HB (“hard black”) is in between the H and B assortments, and has the same hardness as a #2 writing pencil. “F” is a little harder than HB. “F” for “fine” is the only pencil hardness designation that refers to the type of point it produces.



Graphite leads for mechanical pencils use the same hardness scale as traditional wood-bound products. Thick leads used in “clutch pencil” holders for drafting and artistic drawing can be shaped to a needle-sharp point with a barrel-shaped pointer, but most clutch pencils include their own compact pointer in the clutch release button on the end of the lead holder.

Differences in pencil hardness are mostly determined by binding agents like clay, or polymers for drawing on plastic film. Some special graphite pencils may only have one hardness, usually very soft.



Charcoal and carbon pencils

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Charcoal pencils have a core that is composed of a combination of powdered charcoal and binders, like wax and grease. The core material is a lot like compressed charcoal sticks, including the color temperature of the black, which tends to be slightly warm. This warm color can look slightly brownish when used next to vine charcoal. Wood casings are used for charcoal pencils, but they are also available with tightly wrapped paper scroll barrels that can be torn and peeled away carefully to avoid breaking the soft, delicate leads.

Carbon pencils are a close cousin of charcoal, but the core is a compressed stick of amorphous carbon pigment, a black powder with tiny particles and binding agents. Carbon pencils have a smooth lead that produces sensitive, precise lines and dark, matte tones that can be smudged and blended into suave gradients.

Pencils are more portable than just about any other drawing medium. A pencil is one of the first supplies an artist gets to use, and practically everyone draws in pencil at least once in a while. Real drawing pencils offer a much richer experience than ordinary writing instruments. Anyone who has only worked with #2 pencils will be amazed at how expressive and descriptive their drawings can become when they start using instruments designed for artistic use!