



# **Guide to Realistic Portrait Drawing**

By  
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This guide along with the corresponding video is meant to give an overview of my approach to drawing a realistic portrait. You'll learn the steps I take to render the facial features, and discuss why I choose to complete them in a particular order.



## Corresponding Video to This Guide:

[https://youtu.be/PT31\\_Gx-bPU](https://youtu.be/PT31_Gx-bPU)

### The Key Concept

Our perception of a value is determined by the surrounding values. If you want an area to appear lighter, render the adjacent value darker. If you want an area to look darker, consider lightening the adjacent value. Also, by rendering the darker values first you'll have a benchmark to help determine the lighter ones. For more information about this extremely important concept watch the free video by clicking below:

### Video - The Illusion of Value

<https://youtu.be/e7yzn9baKRM>

### The Overall Ideas

- 1) Get the correct placement of the features before you commit to darker values.
- 2) Establish the lightest and darkest areas of the portrait in the eyes first.
- 3) Throughout the entire shading process, always shade the darker of two adjacent values first.
- 4) Compare the values you've established in a *finished* area to the values you are currently working on to create value consistency throughout the portrait.

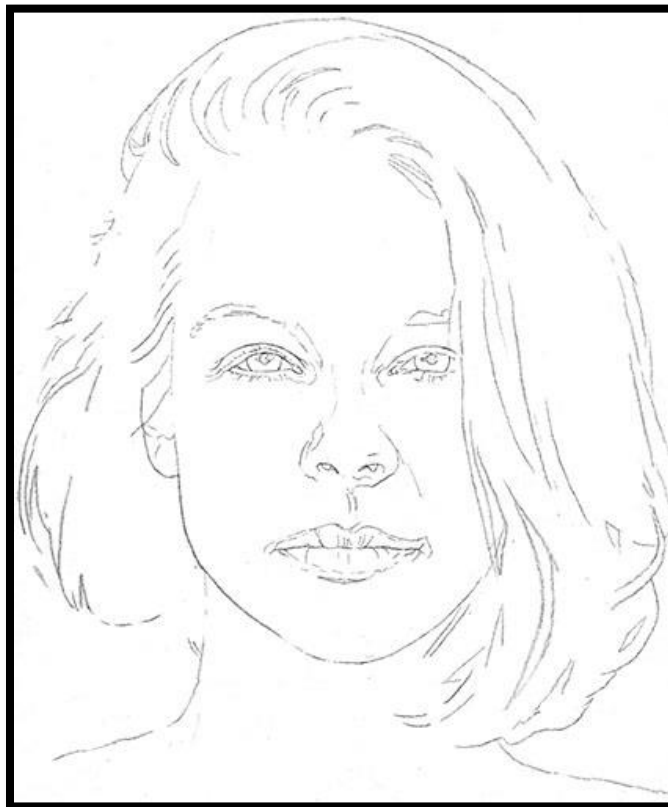
## The Steps

**1) PLACEMENT OF THE FEATURES:** There are many different ways of getting the correct proportions of a portrait down on your paper. Everything from drawing freehand to using grids and measuring tools, or even tracing or projecting the image on to your paper. If your goal is to create an accurate likeness of the subject as well as make it look as realistic as possible, I suggest you use a method that allows you to be as precise as possible. These basic guidelines are the bones of the drawing and if you start off with elements out of place or the wrong size, no amount of shading or texturing is going to give you the results you want.

I like to use graphite to get these guidelines down on the paper, and I keep them fairly light. Remember, graphite erases much easier than charcoal in case you need to erase and make adjustments. Also, don't make the mistake of getting too detailed at this point. Too many lines can be confusing. Just make sure you have the correct placement and size of the features before you begin shading the subject.

**Below is a video that may be helpful for getting proportions down correctly:**

<https://youtu.be/ENBv-TZjZb8>

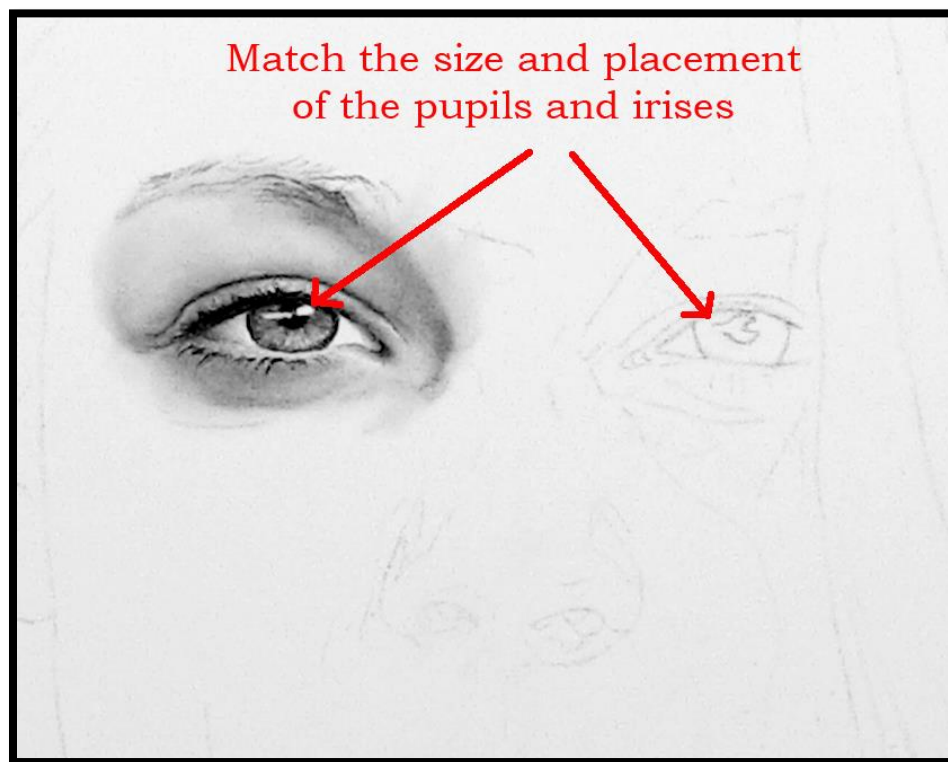


**2) EYES:** In many portraits the eyes are the most important feature. When done correctly they bring life to the portrait and help establish a likeness more than any other feature. If I mess up the eyes, I'll start over. So, it's good to get them out of the way first.

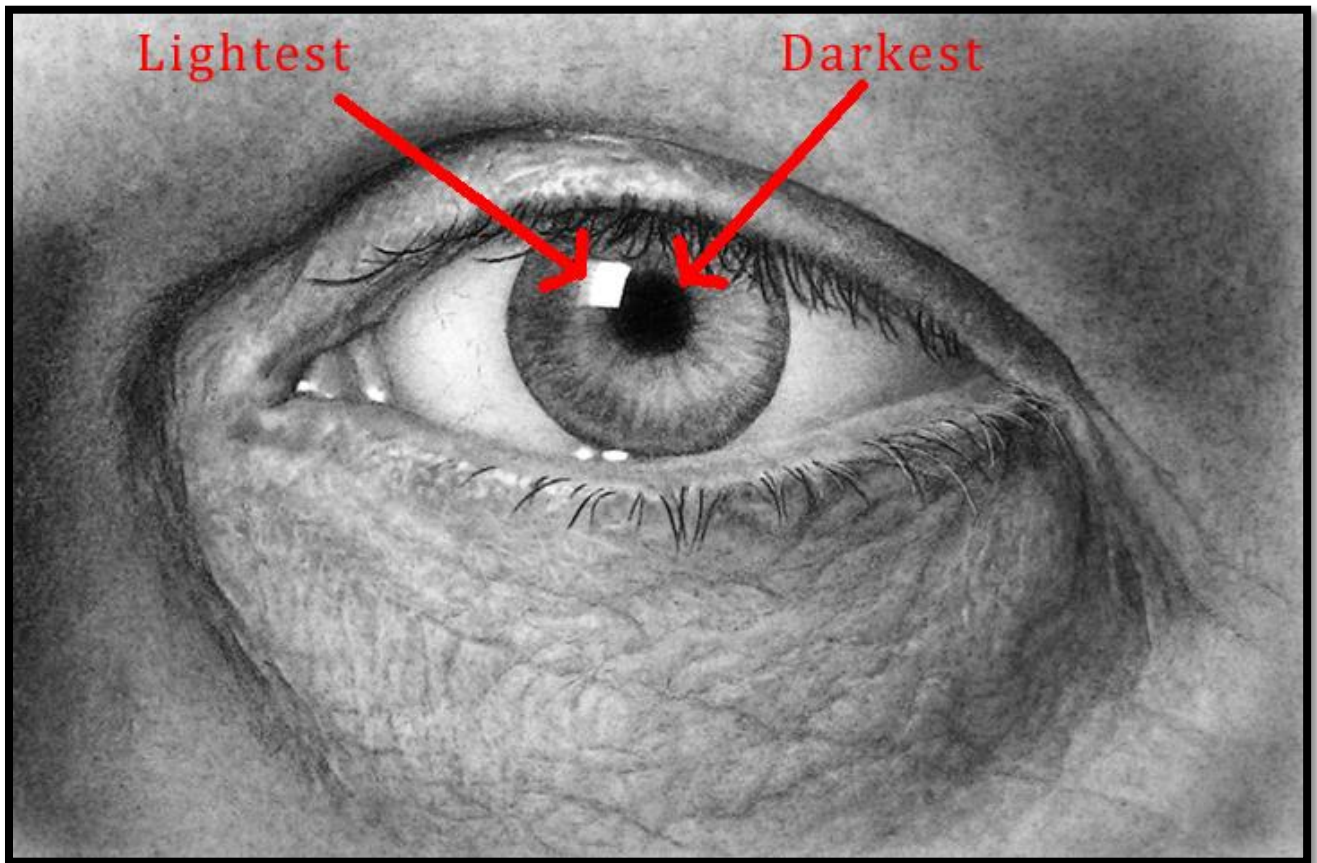
If the subject is facing you, you will want the pupil, and iris to be very similar in size and placement in the eye. If you are right-handed, draw these elements of the eye on the left first, and use them as your *model* when you begin to render the eye on the right. That way, your hand isn't covering up the model as you draw. Do the opposite if you are left-handed.

After you've added in the dark values of one of the pupils you may notice that it doesn't match the reference photo exactly. If I've made a mistake with the eye on the left and made the pupil larger than the reference photo, I'll make the same "mistake" with the eye on the right. Pupils change in size depending on the brightness of the environment, so the portrait will still look like the subject even if they don't match the reference photo.

If the subject is facing and looking straight ahead, the pupil will be directly in the center of the iris. Another mistake could be that you've gotten that pupil off center and you've already darkened it too much to erase. The best "fix" for that, is to make the other pupil off center in exactly the same way. This will shift the subject's gaze to the left, right, or up and down but the *likeness* of the subject should still be apparent. The important thing to get right is that the placement of the pupils in the irises match *each other*. If they don't, you may be rendering what the subject would look like if they had a concussion!



The eyes are usually the place with highest contrast in the entire portrait. The pupil will be rendered with very dark charcoal, and the highlight will usually be the only area where the white of the paper is left untouched. The drawing below is a good example of this. A highlight will look brighter if it is directly adjacent to a dark value. Having the darkest value directly adjacent to the lightest value will draw the viewer to the eyes of the portrait – which is usually exactly what you want!



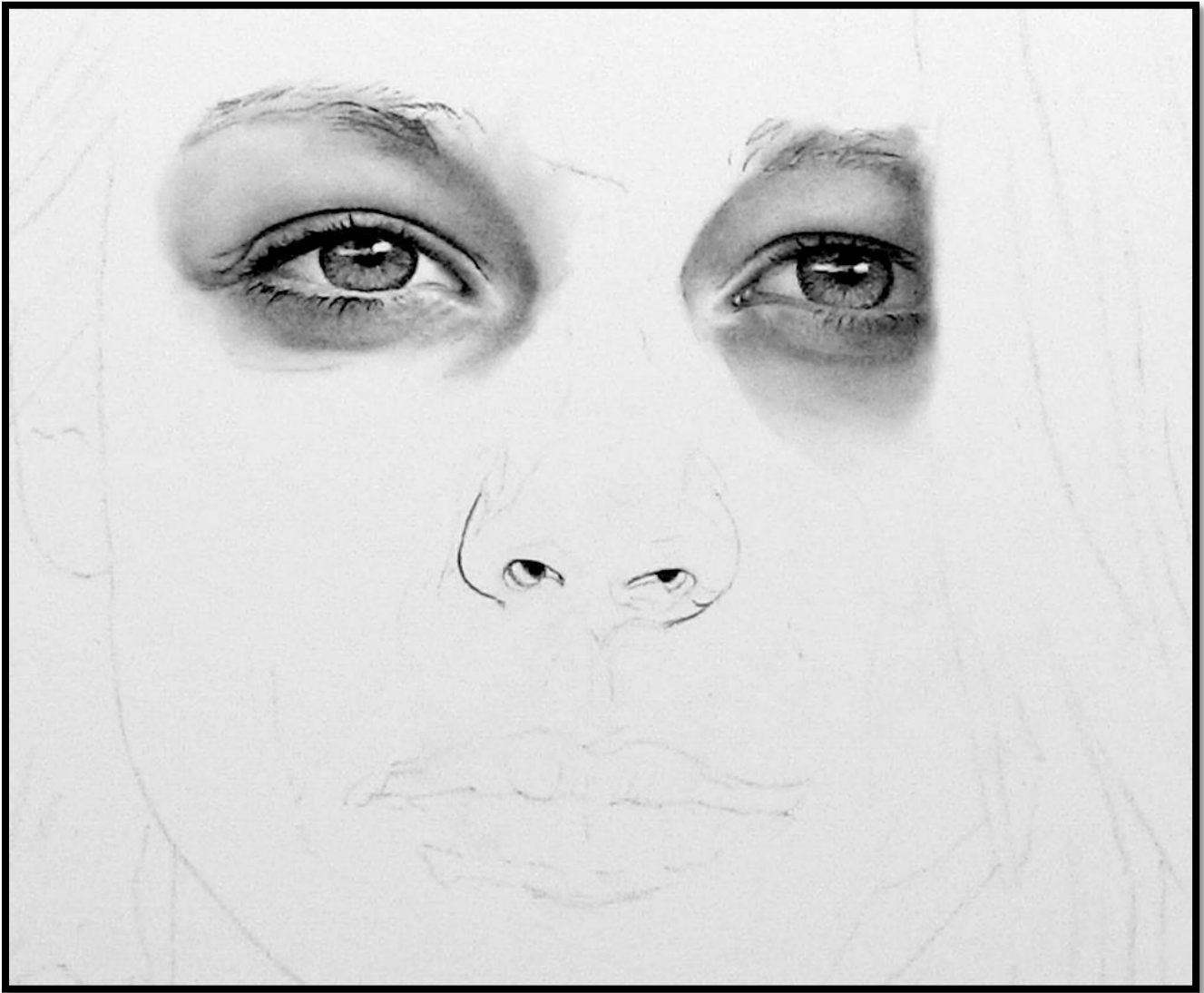
When I begin to render the values for the rest of the portrait, I'll be able to compare the values I'm working on to these lightest and darkest areas of the eyes. It's a matter of fitting all the other values of the portrait in between these two.

My thought process goes something like this - "Well... this shadow area of the skin tone is dark, but it can't be as dark as the pupil". I do the same with the lighter values of the skin... "This area is light, but it can't be as light as the highlights in the eyes". By the way, comparing the lighter skin values to the eye highlight is extremely important for a realistic portrait, and a mistake many artists make. For the most realistic effect, even the lightest skin tones should be slightly darker than the highlight in the eyes.



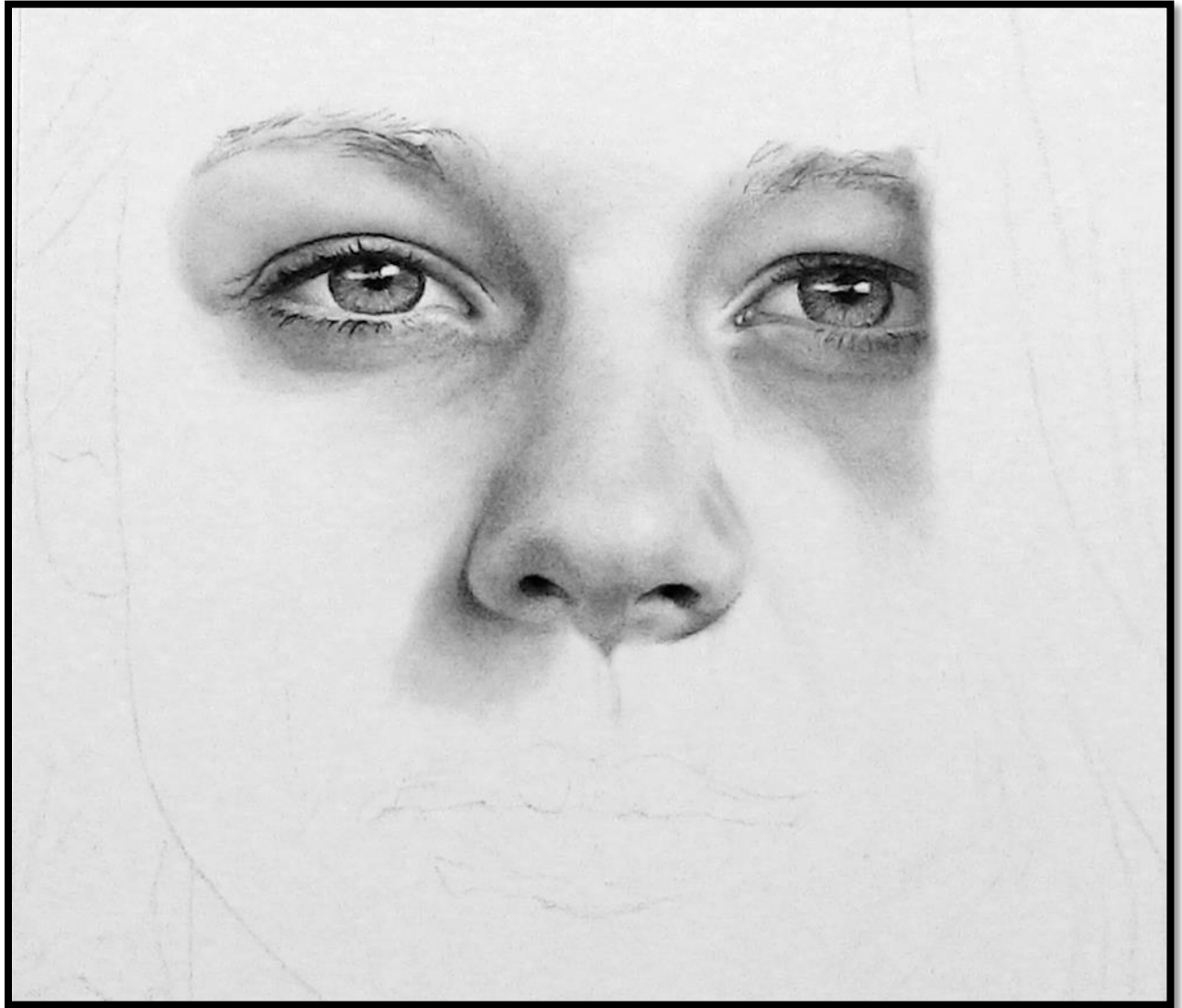
**3) NOSE:** After the eyes and a little bit of the surrounding skin tone has been established, I move on to the nose.

Using charcoal, I will start off with the darker values in the nose - usually the inside of the nostrils. Again, establishing these dark values first helps me know how dark I should go with the rest of the skin tones for the nose. It's normally much darker *up inside* the nostrils than any shading on the outside skin of the nose. Sometimes inside the nostrils will be as dark as the pupil of the eyes.





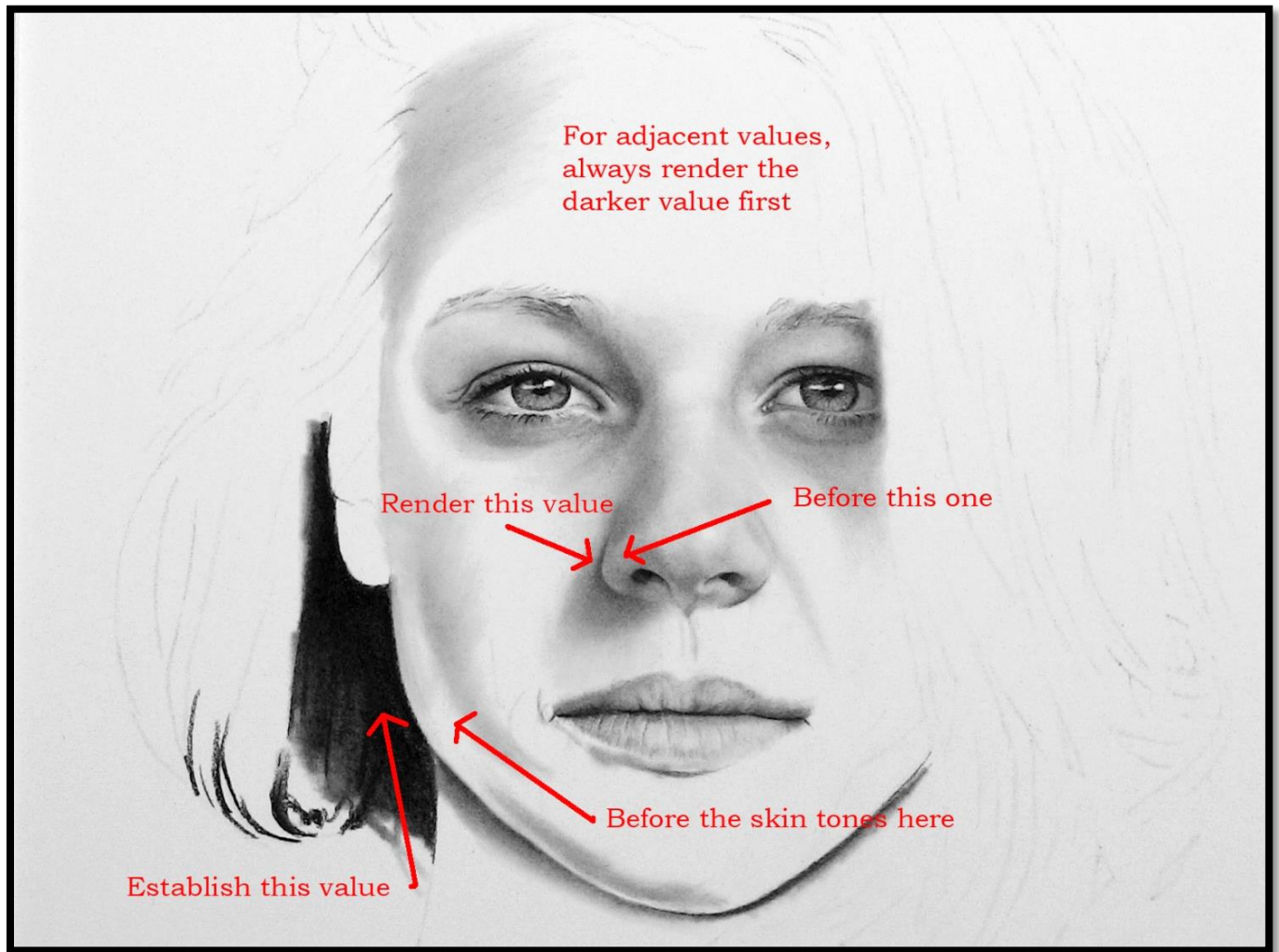
One of the biggest downfalls of a portrait is when the nose doesn't look like it is protruding from the face. While adding shading to the nose, I want to use all the values necessary to make that nose look three dimensional and "pop off the page". The values used here will be my benchmark for how dark to make other skin tones.



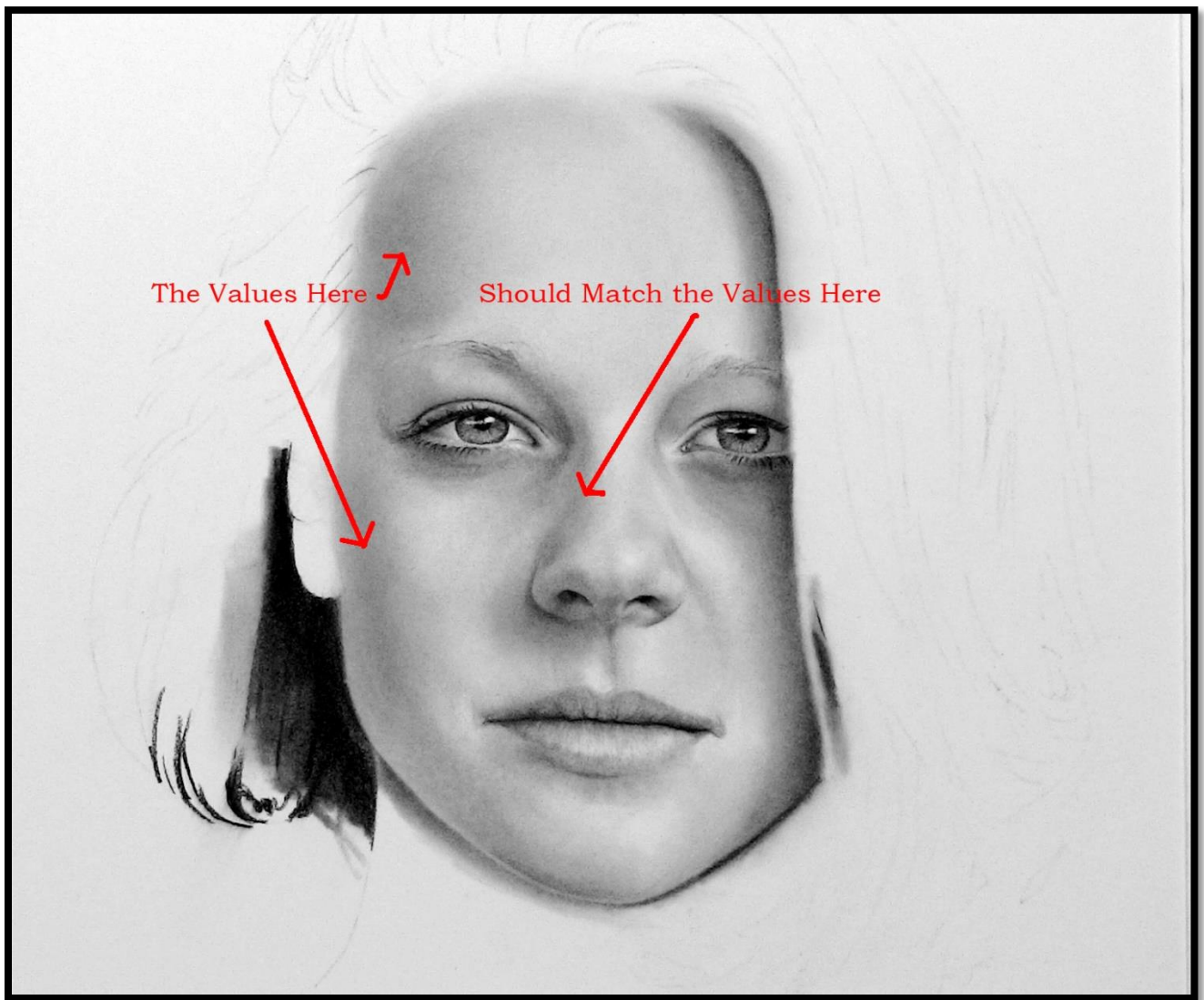


**4) OTHER SKIN TONES (Darker Values First):** In order to see and render *ALL* the values of the nose correctly, sometimes you may have to establish some of the darker surrounding values of the face first.

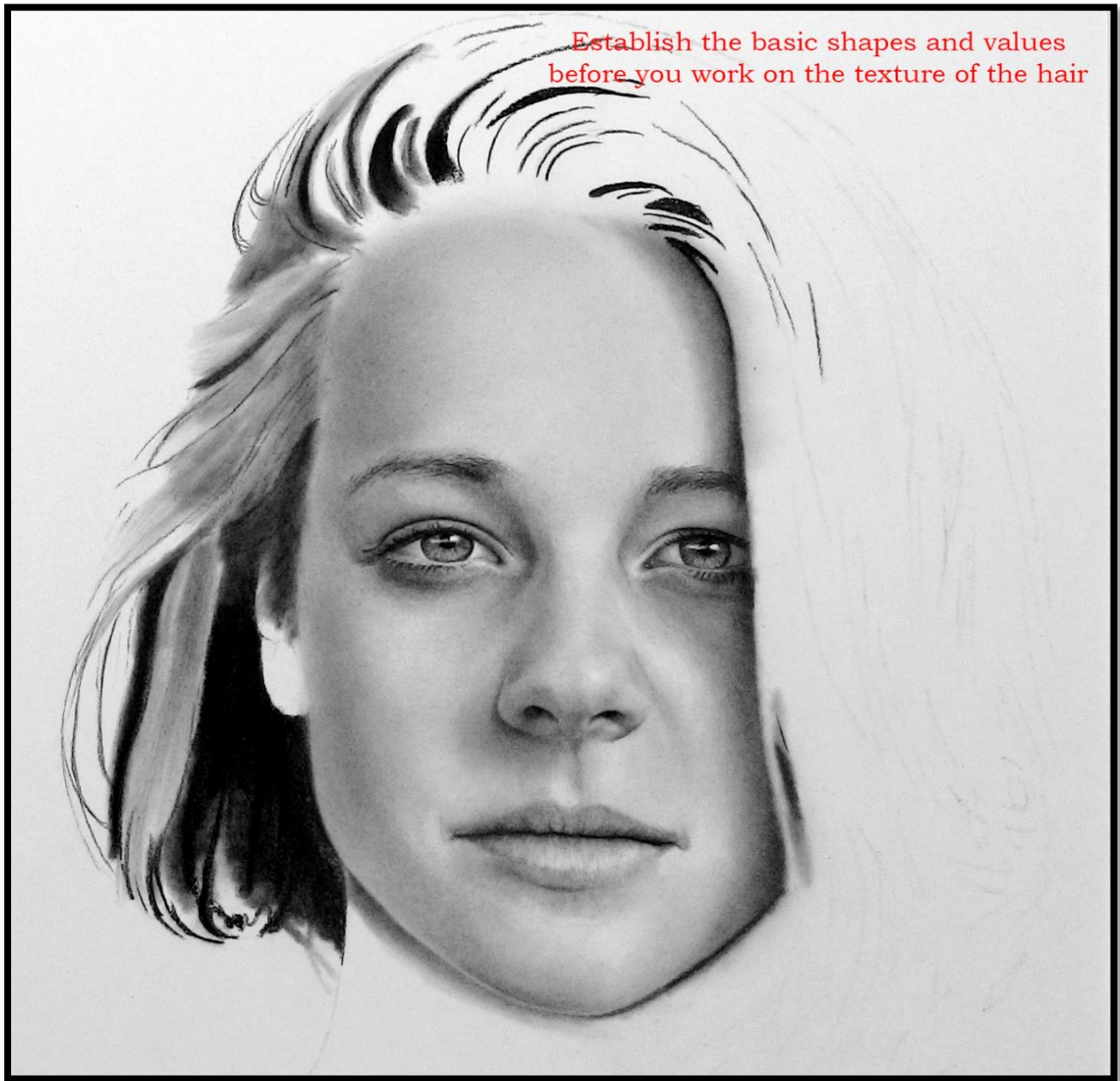
You don't know if a value is correct until you get some of the darker surrounding values in. For instance, before working on the skin tone values *around* the mouth, I'll render the lips first because they are darker. If the subject has darker hair surrounding the adjacent skin tones, I will want to render that first as well.



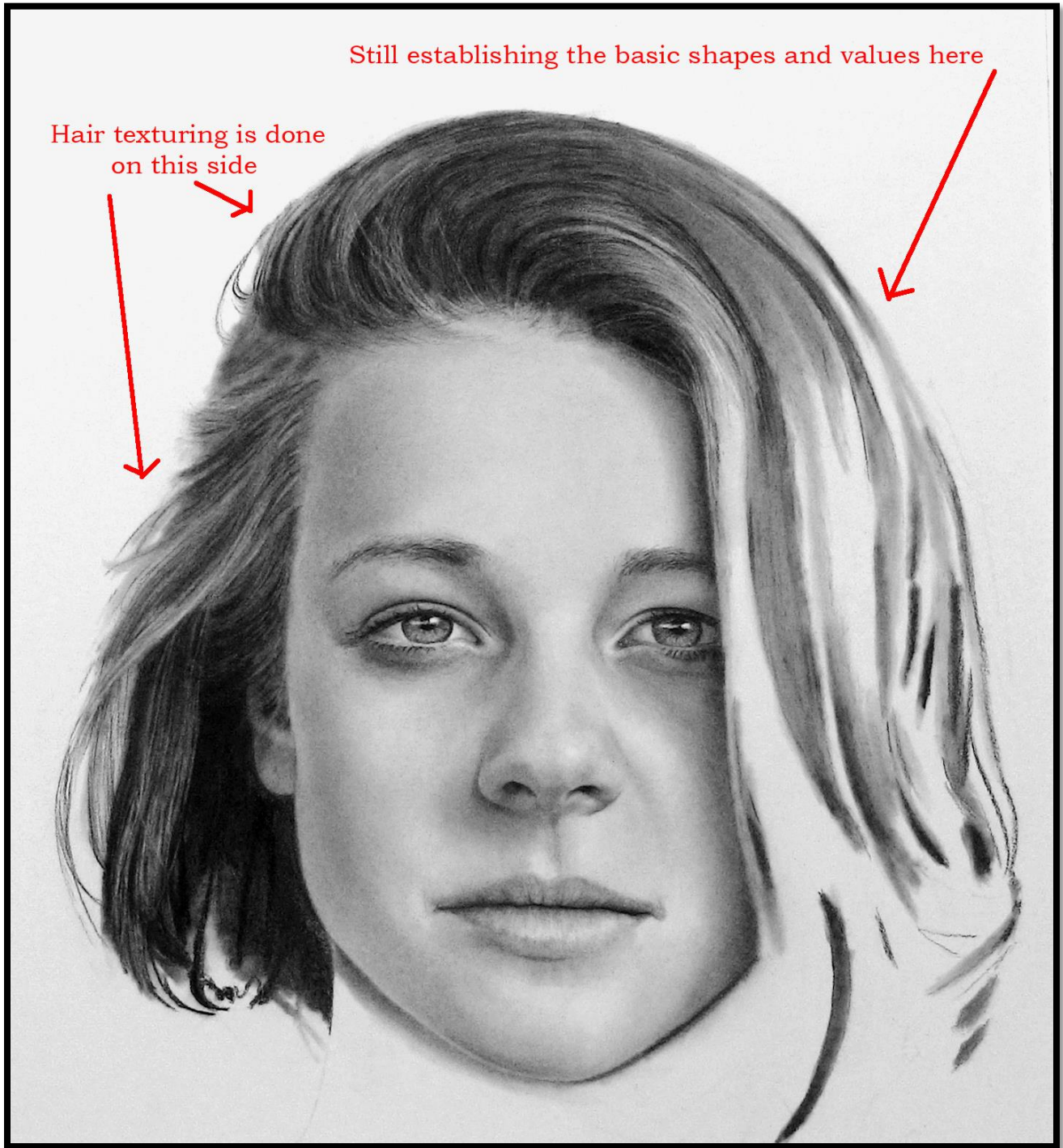
**5) THE HEAD:** With the facial features in place, I'll move on to shading the rest of the head. The most important aspect of the head is to make sure that the shading I used on the face matches the shading on the nose. I think about the nose as like a miniature head stuck onto the face. I know that sounds strange but stick with me here. :) A nose is basically the same color and value as the rest of the skin. It is being affected by the same light source and will have similar areas that are facing the light and facing AWAY from the light. My thought process is, if two areas of the skin are facing the light at exactly the same angle, they should be rendered with the same value. For instance, the core of the shadow on the nose should match the core of the shadow on the side of the face. The same with the mid tones, highlights, etc. Thinking about it like this helps keep the value relationships consistent.



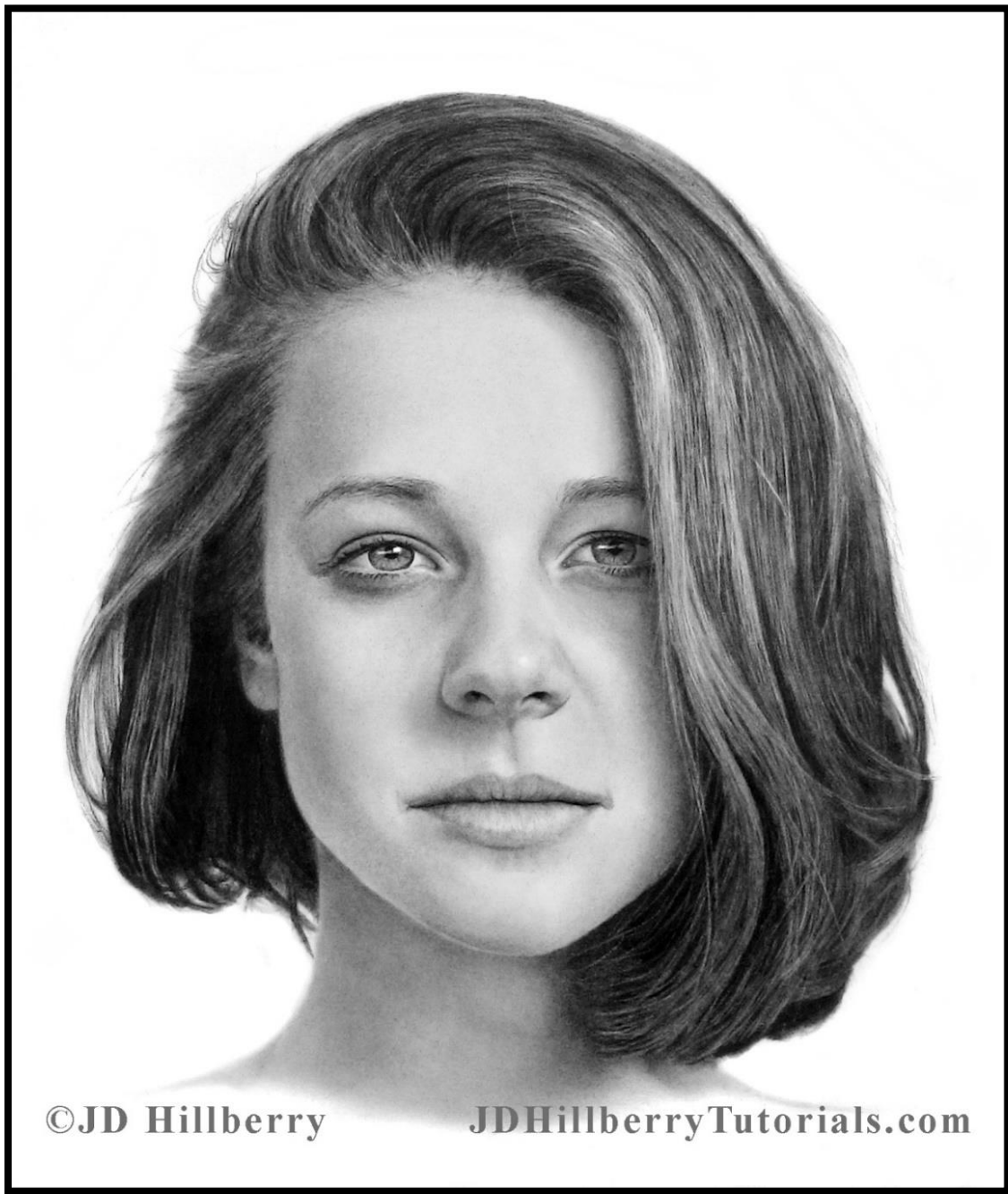
**6) HAIR:** When you begin to render hair, make sure you are thinking about the large shapes and values, not the texture. Don't make the mistake of thinking that you can represent hair with a bunch of lines. After the basic shapes and values are in place you can begin to add texture lines of both light and dark values.







**7) FINISHING AND DOUBLE CHECKING:** The longer you have had values, shapes, etc., on your paper, the more your mind will tell you that they are correct. After I *think* I may be done with a portrait, I do several things to help me see it with fresh eyes. One of the best ways to help you spot areas that may need attention is to hold your drawing up to a mirror. The reversed image will help you see it in a new light. Another method is to take a photo of both your drawing and the reference photo next to each other. You can also try putting the drawing out of sight for a few days. When you come back you may notice some areas that could be improved.



## MORE REALISTIC DRAWING RESOURCES:

### **Drawing Supplies:**

You can purchase essential drawing pencils, blenders, and other supplies I use in my drawings and in my live workshops, and recommend to my students to create more contrast and realism:

<http://www.jdhillberrytutorials.com/drawing-supplies.html>

### **Video Tutorials:**

Learn my realistic drawing techniques in the comfort of your own home. Video tutorials include the ability to upload your progress and get direct feedback from me and other pencil artists learning the same techniques:

<http://www.jdhillberrytutorials.com/tutorials.html>

### **Live Drawing Workshops:**

This is by far the quickest way to take your drawing ability to the next level. Even beginners see amazing progress after taking just one class. Learn more here:

<http://jdhillberry.com/workshop-schedule.htm>

### **My Realistic Drawings:**

Peruse my extensive online gallery of realistic pencil drawings that I've created in my 30 years as a professional artist. Subject categories and the associated links are listed below.

***Trompe l'Oeil:*** (These are the drawings that fool you into thinking real objects are displayed.)

[http://jdhillberry.com/tromp\\_thumbpage.htm](http://jdhillberry.com/tromp_thumbpage.htm)

### ***Family Themes:***

[http://jdhillberry.com/gallery\\_family\\_thumbpage.htm](http://jdhillberry.com/gallery_family_thumbpage.htm)

### ***Still Life:***

[http://jdhillberry.com/pencil\\_drawings\\_still\\_life.htm](http://jdhillberry.com/pencil_drawings_still_life.htm)

### ***Western:***

[http://jdhillberry.com/gallery\\_western\\_thumbpage.htm](http://jdhillberry.com/gallery_western_thumbpage.htm)

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#### **My YouTube Channel:**

<https://www.youtube.com/user/jdhillberryvideos>