

Napalm Nacey's

How to Draw Unique Characters!

Humans vary. We are all different and it's what makes us so interesting to look at. Unfortunately this is also something often abandoned in sequential art in favour of fluidity, speed and style. When something is not represented with realism and is essentially a graphic shorthand representing in the human mind what we imagine should be there, it's a cartoon. Think of Mickey Mouse. He looks nothing **like** a mouse. But he serves as a mouse because of our imaginations. He is a stylised mouse.

A lot of comics, cartoons and illustrations are also stylised. People write whole graphic books like this, tell stories in animations like this. The beauty of the stylised form is similar to the beauty of calligraphy. Line, flow, movement and expression.

Unfortunately as the art form develops, sometimes things are lost to convention. One of those things is the individuality of character design.

Until recently In comics (which is essentially what this tutorial deals with but the techniques here are certainly not exclusive to), characters were drawn **extremely** stylised. Every man looked the same and every woman looked the same. They all had the same face. This face varied from artist to artist, but essentially the characters in comics were like zebras to us. All looking pretty much the same. The only way we could tell them apart was through the cunning deployment of costuming variations. Each superhero had their own costume and hairstyle.

The problem with this, though, is that sometimes there's more than one blonde in a scene. And not all scenes were when the superfolk were on duty! I'm sure you've found yourself mixed up between characters before, and you've only had the text to guide you.

Lately things have been taking a swing towards realism. You might notice the much-lauded (and derided) style of Greg Land, and seen that it's a style readers are clamouring for. The main criticism of Greg Land is that his use of photo references means that one character may have different features and hairstyles in one page.

That is exactly what this tutorial is going to help you avoid. The techniques in this school of drawing combine the ease and fluidity of the stylish old school short-hand and the vivid characterisation of the modern realism. This is how I do comics. You don't have to do your comics like this, I don't expect you to. But you might find some useful stuff in this tutorial that you can take away and incorporate into your **own** style.

So, let's begin!

1) Plan Your Features

When you pick up a Marvel or DC "How to Draw" book, they'll teach you **one way** to draw faces. (I won't touch manga in this tute, but they, too, teach you one way to draw and have the same weaknesses as that of old school Western sequential art). Here is how they show you:

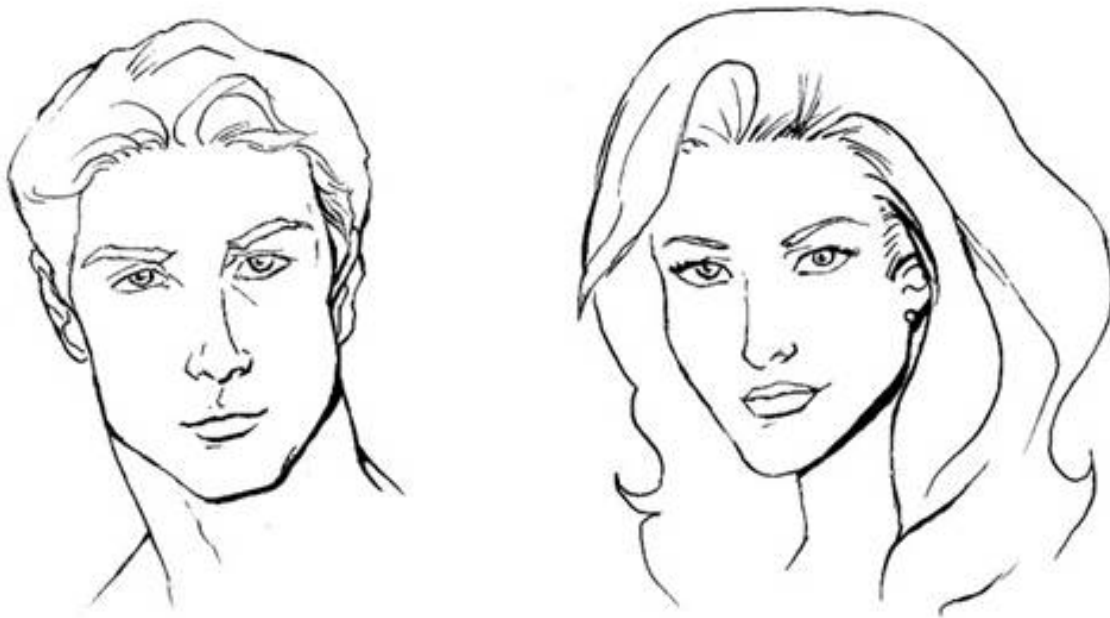


Figure i. Conventional Comic Faces

Well... something like that. I never **have** been able to get those Big Two faces quite right! They're okay. They're faces and they do the job. As I said in the introduction, though, when more than one person of the same colouring enters the picture, we start having troubles! Even if you manage to separate them in the

reader's mind through costume and hairstyle, the sameness of the faces tends to add a sense of the generic to a scene. People start feeling like furniture!

The main reason why I like to vary my faces is because more than anything else, a cleverly drawn expression and set of features can say more about a character than a thousand speech bubbles. You have to get across a lot of information in a very small space with comics. One cocked eyebrow, smirk or grin could change the entire reading of a scene.

Figure ii. -- Expressions and Dialogue.



“Sure, I believe you.”



“Sure, I believe you.”

S0! You've got a character in mind! You've either already written the script or your character is the main inspiration and everything is sort of flowing in around him or her. Faboo! Time to plan their features!

That's right. Before you even think about anything else, you have to draw this character. You have to carve them out of nothingness so they're an absolutely real person in your head. You have to plan them!

Plan their eyes. Their lips. Their nose. Their cheekbones, chin, hair-line, ear shape, nostril shape, eyebrow shape, forehead size, neck length, colouring – you name it. Let's use my characters from *Carrie* and the *Magnetism* for example.

When I conceived of the characters, I knew there'd be three very different women in a crime-fighting team.

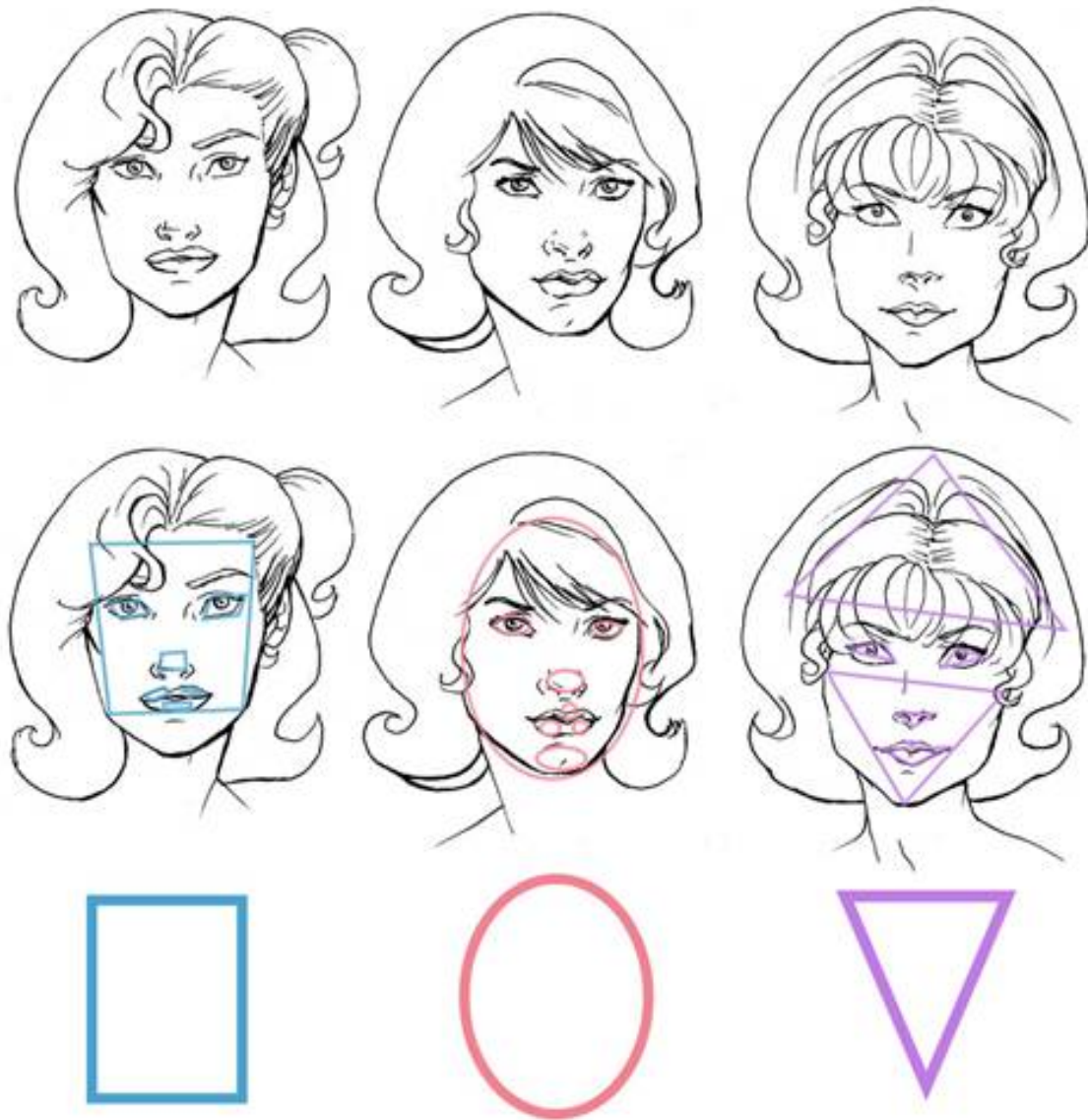


Figure iii. Planning the features.

Carrie: Strong, steely, cool, calm, charismatic, yet warm and protective of the right people. Blonde, muscular. Square

Andrea: Perceptive, sharp, sensual, alluring, charming, playful, emotional, impulsive. Brunette, rounded. Oval/Circle

Ci-Ki: Airy, spiritual, deep, empathic, unsettling, eccentric, understanding. Redhead, pointy (but with curves). Triangle

Now, this is just the very basic notes for the characters and it's pretty much what I started with. Each character has a shape associated with them. This shape aids their character design. (**Fig. iii**)

The Shortcut: Find a Source.

The next few steps in developing the character can be sidestepped by a simple step – find a source. Find a face that suits your character and learn to appropriate its features.

Here are the people I found for my characters in Carrie:

Figure iv. The Found-Face Shortcut.



Anna Paquin



Kate Winslet



Zooey Deschanel

You'll notice that the drawings don't look exactly like the actresses I picked. This is very deliberate. I don't want to just use the actresses – I want the characters to have their own faces. But the source lends a certain solidity and believability to that character design.

Here's what I do. I'll study that actor/actress' face until my eyes bleed. I'll close my eyes before I got to bed and I'll see that face. (Not such a bad thing when one is studying such attractive people!) I'll draw their features in isolated sketches; just an eye, just a nose, just a mouth, all over the paper. I'll do some portrait sketches of my source. I'll even watch movies with the source and take screen shots of their different expressions. I'll be able to see that source moving in my head.

Then I start teaching myself to caricature that person, figure out the specific stylised 'shorthand' version of their features. All those features will be there for me in that source. All I have to do is learn to draw them in a comic shorthand.

What if there's no actor or actress that suits the character in your head? Or what if you'd rather start from scratch and find the face before you find a source? Then follow the next few steps.

- **Find the features.**

Now, get a big stack of scrap paper and start drawing. (**Fig.v**) Muddle your way through if you have to, but find that face. Close your eyes and imagine that face. Is the nose pointed? Round? Square? Are the nostrils far apart, close together, flared, thin, exposed, big or small? What shape are the lips? Do the eyes slant up or down? What ethnicity are they? Do they have any funny little wrinkles, moles or piercings?



Figure v. Find the Features.

- **Solidify the Look**

Choose the features you've decided on and start to draw this face until it looks like a solid, believable face. (**Fig. vi**) Don't worry about how long it takes to draw it right now. Just know that face now that you've found it. Try different angles.



Figure vi. Solidify the Look

- **Get Slick**

Now that you know what it is you're drawing, it's time to loosen up the line and draw that character fluidly and expertly. You were probably already loosening up after the last step, but it's time to really push it and see how fast and free you can draw that character. This'll help finalise the look and let you know if there's any aspect of the character that doesn't work or needs to

be changed (simplified costume, more graceful sweep of anatomy, etc). (**Fig. vii**)



Figure vii. Get Slick!

This is essentially how I've found all my comic characters. It's probably what you've done too, more or less. The emphasis here is on the unique characteristics. Know the face. The face tells the reader what kind of person your character is.

2) Imagine their Movement

Now that you've created this character, it's time to imagine their movement. What do they look like when they're pulling different faces? (For this I've created an exercise sheet called 25 Essential Expressions – you can download it [here](#)).

25 Essential Expressions Challenge



Figure viii. Essential Expressions

Don't just imagine their expressions. How do they move? Are they stiff, fluid, awkward, prim? How do their hands move? How do they sit? Stand? Walk? Run? You must imagine all these things. Your character must exist on the paper – the paper is your camera and the character is the star.



Figure ix. Imagining the Movement.

3) Memorise

You've discovered their appearance and brought them to life in your mind. In this final step, you must remember the quirks and individuality of your character. Make a file on them either on your computer or in a scrapbook. Have them handy for when you're pencilling your comics and you get stuck.

The more you do this, the more you know your characters, the less of a hassle it is to remember the little things about them. They come naturally with the character and it's no effort to keep in your mind.

Notice a Difference?

So – is it worth all the fuss and hassle to fiddle with your comic characters so? Well, take a look at the following panels. You decide!

Yours,

NLORENZ

Nancy Lorenz.



TRADITIONAL COMIC STYLE:

- Uniform features
- Stock expressions
- Clinical rendering



"MANGEL" STYLE

- Individual features
- Carefully studied expressions
- Naturalistic rendering

Final Note: This guide was created to detail my own personal approach to creating unique comic characters. I strongly urge you to adapt and change this guide to **suit your own needs!** (Or ignore certain parts completely! :D) However, please do not reproduce any part of this tutorial (pictures, text) without my permission. If you have any questions, feel free to email me at nacey(a)iinet.net.au.

How to Draw Unique Characters © Nancy Lorenz 2008