

# The Practical and Creative Art of Form Drawing

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The cognitive benefits of drawing are well proven and include improved memory retention and recall, neural plasticity, motor skill integration, and development of divergent thinking skills. Waldorf students often draw and illustrate as they create their main lesson books for each subject. Illustration plays an integral role in history and language arts as well as in math and science lessons.

This University of Waterloo study, [The Surprisingly Powerful Influence of Drawing on Memory](#), helps explain why this is so valuable, describing how drawing improves memory through “multi-modal reinforcement and promoting the integration of elaborative, pictorial, and motor codes - facilitating the creation of context-rich representation.” This study out of Dartmouth College, [The Artist Emerges: Visual Art Learning Alters Neural Structure and Function](#), found that “the emergence of visual artistic skills is supported by plasticity in neural pathways that enable creative cognition and mediate perceptuomotor integration.”

What that truly means to a student who practices art and illustration is addressed in [An Interview with Milton Glaser, published in Metropolis Magazine](#). Glaser, author of [Drawing Is Thinking](#),

reiterates the neurological benefits and expands those benefits to a deeper understanding of abstract thinking. "There is no greater instrument for understanding the visual world than the hand and a pencil, because the idea of creating or recreating form produces a different neurological pattern than using a computer to find things. To understand the meaning of form -- what a shape is, what an edge is, what space is -- there's nothing more instructive than the act of drawing... Illustration provokes the viewer by its symbolic relationship to reality. Abstraction encourages the mind to bridge the distance from suggestion to reality."

While daily drawings are an essential part of a Waldorf student's educational experience, there is another subject Waldorf students learn that is solely focused on the process of illustration. It is methodical and specific and, well, a bit less intuitive to comprehend.

Form drawing, as it is called, is repetitive drawing of symbols and shapes -- both linear and lateral, zigzag or congruous knots. This freehand creation of patterns is more about process than product and as such can be puzzling to parents and educators alike. It is the movement expressed through the drawing that holds the value.

In her article simply titled [Form Drawing](#) at [The Online Waldorf Library](#), Rosemary Gebert, teacher of form drawing at Waldorf Institute of Mercy College (now [Sunbridge Institute](#)) describes form drawing as "movement made visible... reflections and rotations, geometric figures [and] intricate interlaced designs [illustrating] beauty, harmony and balance..."

She also describes form drawings as "reminiscent but not representational" of shapes that connect us to the spirit of nature and the wider world such as waves, spirals, erosion patterns, or butterfly wings.

Many skills are developed during the process of form drawing which challenges, absorbs and inspires while requiring students to focus, control movement, and practice patience. Types of form drawing vary and increase in difficulty as grades progress to develop different sets of skills that challenge different parts of brain processing.

The drawing of spirals develops processing of visual motor integration as students move their pencils from the outside of the paper inward or vice versa. When making forms focused on symmetry and mirroring, the midline is crossed. Loops and braided forms challenge in both the previously mentioned ways while also developing a keener sense of spatial intelligence.

Multisensory Learning: Form drawing can be done while standing or sitting, in sand or on paper, with pencils or yarn and through many other mediums. Students can even be taken outside to trace patterns with their feet in the dirt or their hands in the air. [Benefits of multisensory learning](#) come from using multiple processing areas in the brain, which has been proven to enhance learning and memory.

Crossing the Midline: Crossing the midline refers to moving arms and legs across the middle of our body to complete a task. This promotes the coordination and communication between brain hemispheres and also encourages bilateral coordination. It is credited with helping boost and refine

[large and small motor skills](#) needed for writing, shoe tying, hitting or throwing a ball, and eye tracking for reading. Midline Crossing is also being studied as a contributor to [academic success](#).

Visual Motor Integration: Coordinating our visual perceptions to our motor skills allows us to use our eyes and our hands in a coordinated and efficient way. This ability is key to learning handwriting and eye tracking, and, as such, developing this integration boosts [many areas of academic performance](#).

Spatial Intelligence: As form drawing lessons progress through older grades, mirrored and symmetrical forms and looping and geometric figures are added, which challenge spatial processing. The [American Psychological Association](#) defines this as "the ability to generate, retain, retrieve, and transform well-structured visual images." Those with well-defined spatial skills can use them in many areas, including architecture, mathematics, and engineering. Developing these skills in our students has proven [benefits in academics](#) as well.

Social Emotional Skills: Form drawing requires a high degree of care and effort from students. The results are often not what a child may have anticipated because of the challenge to all the brain processes mentioned above. Creating a proper form requires calm, smooth movement and control, which does not always come easily to younger students. As a teacher helps students develop skills in form drawing, there are often opportunities to develop social emotional skills like positive thinking, resilience, and perseverance.

An example lesson for form drawing as seen in Waldorf education is the drawing of knots and knot art in fourth grade. The well-known Celtic knots, for example, use spiral motifs, often in triplicate, and challenge students with the use of rhythmic over and under lines, the requirement of flow technique without stopping, and the balance of proportions within the braid.

Fourth graders are studying Norse mythology, and both Celtic and Nordic cultures used knotwork in their pottery, paintings, and other artwork. Ideally, form drawing does not begin by saying, "And now we do form drawing," but instead with a story or reference to main lesson studies. The teacher tells the story that would involve the art or practicality of knots in the Nordic culture and then draw a knot on the chalkboard while modeling the focus, precision and slowness required to do the form well.

The students can immediately try to copy the form from the board, but many teachers find it helpful to instead have students practice in other mediums. For example, a teacher could give students yarn to use to mimic the outline of the knot form. Yarn is difficult to control and make into a shape! Doing this before the final drawing is done can help to hone patience and better understanding of the over and under type of patterning in knot forms.

The students can then use large sheets of paper or their own slates on which they can copy the board drawing and then the teacher's role switches to observation. Students are encouraged to strive for accuracy, balance in form, and patience. Some teachers will then have students outline forms again, color them in, and further engage in beautifying the final knot to be drawn in the main lesson book or on large paper.

Photo Credit: [Davinci Waldorf School](#)