

Tattoo Design — Workbook

This workbook turns the course into reps on real designs. You will pick a style and commit to its rules, build a clean line drawing with a proper weight hierarchy, run the blur test to predict how it ages, plan black-and-grey value or a limited colour palette, choose anatomy-led placement and flow, and assemble a stencil-ready reference sheet an artist could work from. Do one section per module and finish with a complete, tattoo-ready design package, line art, a value or colour plan, placement notes, and a reference sheet, for at least one piece of flash and one custom design.

Why Tattoos Are Designed Differently

Internalise that skin is the medium, commit a real design to one of the four core styles, and learn to think in flash.

Exercise: Fresh Versus Healed: Design for the Future

Take one tattoo idea you like. Describe how it looks the day it heals, then describe honestly how it will look in twenty years once the lines have spread, the contrast has softened, and the skin has aged. Then list what you would change now so the aged version still reads as intended.

- What in this design will spread or merge as the ink softens over the years?

- What relies on subtle contrast that will fade toward flat grey?

- If it sits on a curved or high-movement area, how will it distort or wear?

- What three changes, bolder line, wider spacing, stronger contrast, would make the healed version hold up?

Worksheet: Style Commitment Sheet

Lock the style for one design before you draw, because line weight, palette, and shading all follow from it. Fill one sheet per design.

Design name / concept (one line)

Chosen style (American Traditional / neo-traditional / black-and-grey / fine-line)

Why this style fits the subject and feeling (one line)

Intended palette (limited solid colours / wider neo-trad palette / greys only / minimal or none)

Line-weight intention (single weight / heavy outline with tiers / illustrative variation)

Shading approach (flat / dimensional / graywash value / minimal)

Subject and any must-have elements

Longevity horizon (built to last decades / deliberately delicate accent)

Checklist: Think-in-Flash Readiness

- I have committed this design to a single style and will obey its conventions
- The design has a clear, closed outline and a recognisable silhouette
- It reads instantly at a glance, not only when studied up close
- I have planned deliberate negative space rather than filling every gap
- I am designing for the healed, aged tattoo, not the day-one photo
- I have one piece of flash and one custom idea chosen to practise both

Line, Weight, and Designs That Survive Ageing

Build a clean line drawing with a real weight hierarchy, space it so spread cannot merge it, and prove it with the blur test and a value plan.

Exercise: Build a Line-Weight Hierarchy

Draw or redraw your design as a clean outline at its real tattoo size, deliberately using three tiers of line weight: a heaviest outer silhouette, medium internal divisions, and the thinnest detail last. View it small and confirm the tiers read.

- Is the outer silhouette the boldest line and does the shape read on its own?

- Are the medium internal lines clearly lighter than the outline but heavier than the detail?

- Where did you stop adding fine detail because it would not survive at this size?

- At small size, do all three weight tiers stay distinct, or does the piece flatten to one weight?

Exercise: Run the Blur Test

Take your finished line drawing and blur it: add a small Gaussian blur in Procreate or Photoshop, or shrink it down and squint, or step back several feet. The blur simulates years of ink spread. Mark every area that fails.

- After blurring, does the subject still read clearly as what it is meant to be?

- Which clustered or tightly spaced lines merge into a solid mass when blurred?

- Which fine lines disappear entirely, and can the design lose them or must they be bolder?

- What spacing or weight changes will you make so the blurred version survives?

Worksheet: Black-and-Grey Value Plan

Plan the value structure for a black-and-grey version of your design in a few clear steps, not an infinite gradient. Leave the contrast-range judgement for you to assess after you place the values.

Design name

Number of value steps (for example 5: white, light, mid, dark, black)

Where the darkest darks / solid blacks sit (describe)

Where the lightest lights / bare-skin highlights sit (describe)

Which mid greys handle the transitions and form

Smooth gradient areas at risk of healing patchy (list)

Does the design read in greyscale value alone with no line work? (you assess: yes / no / fix)

Checklist: Ageing-Proof Line Gate

- The outline is the heaviest line and the interior weights are tiered beneath it
- Lines are spaced with enough bare skin that spread will not merge them
- Negative space is deliberate and part of the composition
- The blur test passes: the subject still reads and clusters do not become a blob
- Black-and-grey value uses a few clear steps with true blacks and bare-skin highlights
- The design is sized so its detail has room to survive at the intended scale

Placement, Anatomy, and Flow

Choose anatomy-led placement, make the design flow with the body's contours, and match its delicacy to how the area ages.

Exercise: Place It on the Real Body

Choose a body area for your design and mock it up on a photo of that actual area, designing over the photo in Procreate, or print the design and hold it against the limb in a mirror. Judge it on the three-dimensional, curved surface, not the flat page.

- What is the underlying form, cylinder, muscle, flat plane, and does the design follow it?

- Does the main subject face the natural line of sight, with supporting parts wrapping away?

- Does anything important cross a joint, fold, or seam where it will distort?

- Once seen on the body rather than the page, what sits wrong and needs moving or rescaling?

Worksheet: Placement and Flow Plan

Document the placement decision and how the design follows the body. Fill one per design.
Body area (e.g. outer forearm / calf / chest / upper arm)

Underlying form (cylinder / muscle group / flat or bony plane)

Main flow line / dominant direction of the area

How the design's main axis aligns with that flow line

Orientation and where the focal point sits (line of sight)

Existing tattoos, scars, or planned future work to flow around

How the piece resolves at its edges (into bare skin / into neighbouring work)

Worksheet: Area Ageing and Longevity Check

Assess how the chosen area will age this design so the delicacy matches the placement. Leave the final verdict for you to decide after weighing the factors.

Area wear level (high-wear hands/fingers/feet/elbows / moderate / stable forearm/calf/back)

Sun exposure (high: forearms/hands/neck/lower legs / mostly covered)

Stretch risk over a lifetime (high / moderate / low)

Design delicacy (fine detail / moderate / bold and simple)

Touch-up expectation (likely soon / occasional over decades / minimal)

Verdict: does the design's delicacy suit this area? (you decide: yes / move it / make it bolder)

Checklist: Placement Gate

-] The design follows the underlying form rather than being stamped flat onto a curve
-] The main axis aligns with the area's flow line and elements curve with the body
-] The focal point sits in the natural line of sight
-] Delicate detail is on stable, low-wear skin; bold simple work is on high-movement areas
-] The design flows around existing tattoos and scars with negative-space breaks
-] Placement was tested on the real body by mockup or stencil, not only on the page
-] A margin for ageing, slightly bolder lines, wider spacing, stronger contrast, is built in

From Drawing to the Chair

Produce clean stencil-ready line art, assemble a complete reference sheet, plan the artist conversation, and pass the final ethics and mistakes gate.

Exercise: Finalise Stencil-Ready Line Art

Clean your line drawing into final stencil-ready art on its own layer: confident closed lines, no sketch marks, the weight hierarchy in place, sized to the real placement, black line on a clean white background. Export the line layer alone as the stencil.

- Are all lines solid, closed, and confident, with no doubled or searching strokes?

- Is the size labelled and matched to the planned placement?

- Is the background clean black-on-white with no stray marks so it transfers crisply?

- Did the blur test still pass at this final size, and is every area resolved with nothing left to guess?

Worksheet: Reference Sheet Builder

Assemble the package an artist works from. Fill this for the design and gather the linked artwork alongside it. Stencil-ready line drawing attached, at intended size (yes/no)

Intended size / dimensions (label)

Value plan (black-and-grey) or colour plan with palette attached (yes/no)

Placement: body area and orientation

Mockup on a photo of the actual area attached (yes/no)

Style and line-weight / shading notes

Source reference used and where it came from (list)

Reference-versus-copying check: nothing lifts another artist's design wholesale (confirm)

Exercise: Plan the Artist Conversation

Whether you tattoo this yourself or hand it to an artist, write the brief that separates what is fixed from what the artist may tune for how it sits and ages on skin. Then plan the on-skin check.

- What is fixed: the core subject, meaning, and must-have elements?
 - What is flexible: exact sizing, minor composition, line-weight tuning the artist may adjust?
 - How will you confirm size and placement with a stencil on the skin and a mirror before the needle?
 - What questions will you ask the artist about how this design will age on this specific area?
-

Checklist: Final Tattoo-Ready and Ethics Gate

-] The design is not over-detailed for its size and has real negative space
-] Lines are bold enough and spaced enough to survive spread; contrast is strong enough to survive fading
-] Placement and flow suit the area, and the area suits the design's delicacy
-] The package is complete: stencil-ready line art, value or colour plan, size, placement, notes
-] Sources are honest reference, with nothing copied wholesale from another artist or a copyrighted image
-] Any culturally specific or sacred imagery has been researched and is used respectfully or not at all
-] Where the design favours a trend over longevity, that trade-off is deliberate and the wearer is informed

Your Action Plan

1. Choose one piece of flash and one custom design, and commit each to a single core style and its conventions.
2. Build each as a clean line drawing at real tattoo size with a heavy outline and tiered interior weights.
3. Space lines with deliberate bare skin and run the blur test, opening up any area that merges or vanishes.
4. Plan black-and-grey value in a few clear steps with true blacks and bare-skin highlights, or set a limited palette.
5. Pick an anatomy-led placement and mock it up on a photo or stencil of the actual body area.
6. Align the design's main axis with the area's flow line and shape it to follow the body's contours.
7. Match the design's delicacy to how the area ages, and build in a margin of boldness, spacing, and contrast.
8. Finalise stencil-ready line art on its own layer, correctly sized, and export the line alone as the stencil.
9. Assemble a complete reference sheet: line art, value or colour plan, size, placement, mockup, and honest sources.

10. Run the final ethics and mistakes gate, then plan the artist conversation and the on-skin stencil check.

