

Urban Sketching & Plein Air — Workbook

This workbook turns the course into pavement practice. Each section pairs with a course module and gives you exercises, fill-in worksheets, and checklists to build real skill on location, not at home. Work through it with your kit actually packed and a sketchbook in hand — the goal is finished spreads, a logged habit, and figures you can draw in seconds, not tidy notes.

The Kit, the Sketchbook, and the Location Mindset

Pack a one-bag kit, prove your paper survives water, and run your first low-stakes location sit.

Worksheet: My One-Bag Kit Inventory

List the actual tools you own or plan to buy, with brand and spec, so you can see your kit and what is still missing before you leave the house. Weigh the loaded bag at the end and confirm it is under 700 grams.

Fountain pen — brand, nib size (EF / F), ink loaded

Backup fineliner — brand and tip width (e.g. Micron 03)

Flexible / fude pen — brand

Watercolor set — brand and number of pans kept

The six pigments in my limited palette

Waterbrush(es) — brand and sizes

Sketchbook — brand, paper weight (gsm), surface, page size

Stool or bracing plan (railing / cafe chair / folding stool)

Extras packed (clip, spray bottle, pencil, cloth)

Total loaded bag weight (grams)

Gaps still to buy

Exercise: The Paper Water Test

Before trusting any sketchbook on location, prove it takes water. On a back page, draw a few lines with your waterproof pen, wait one minute, then flood a heavy wet wash straight over them. Let it dry fully and inspect.

- Did the pen line smear or hold? (If it smeared, your ink is not waterproof — switch ink.)

- How badly did the page cockle or buckle, on a 1 (flat) to 5 (warped) scale?

- Did the wash bloom, lift, or sit evenly?

- Is this book good for full watercolor, light washes only, or ink alone?

Exercise: First Sit: The Ten-Minute Cafe Doorway

Go somewhere with a legitimate reason to sit — a cafe or a museum bench. Pick the single simplest thing in view (one doorway, one chair, one window) and draw it in ten minutes flat, in ink, then close the book. The goal is the sit, not the sketch.

- What did you draw, and why did you choose it?

- On a 1 to 5 scale, how self-conscious did you feel at the start versus the end?

- Did anyone look or comment, and how did it actually go?

- What one thing will you do differently on the next sit?

Checklist: Before You Leave the House

- Pen loaded and tested — line is waterproof
- Backup fineliner packed in case the fountain pen dries out
- Watercolor tin cut to a limited palette, lid clean for mixing
- Both waterbrushes filled with water
- Sketchbook tested for water and not nearly full
- Clip or bulldog clip packed for wind
- Stool packed or a bracing plan in mind
- Whole kit fits one bag and weighs under 700 grams

Line First: Confident Ink Without a Net

Drop the pencil, build accuracy through measuring and contour, and make your line describe light.

Exercise: The No-Pencil Warm-Up Routine

Run the four-step warm-up at the start of your next session, in ink only: a half page of loops and hatching, three blind contours, a timed 2-minute object, then your main subject. Do this before every sketch for one week.

- How did the first warmed-up line feel compared to a cold first line?

- Which warm-up loosened your hand the most?

- Did committing in ink (no eraser) get easier across the week?

- Which 'mistake' line actually ended up reading as character?

Worksheet: Comparative Measuring Worksheet

Pick one building or large object. Choose a measuring unit (a window, a door, a person), then sight-measure with your pen held at arm's length and record the proportions before you draw. Fill this in on location.

Subject drawn

Chosen measuring unit

Overall height in units

Overall width in units

Landmark 1 and where it sits (e.g. door starts 2 units up)

Landmark 2 and its alignment (e.g. lamppost lines up with 3rd window)

The big three proportions I must get right

Where the drawing drifted off and how I re-stated it

Exercise: 70/30 Contour Drill

Draw one detailed object — a bicycle, a bench, an ornate window — keeping your eyes on the subject about 70 percent of the time and on the paper only 30 percent. Resist drawing every brick; suggest texture in one small patch and imply the rest.

- Was it uncomfortable looking up more than down? What changed in the result?
 - Where did you suggest texture rather than render it fully?
 - Did the line vary in weight as forms turned from the light?
 - How accurate were proportions compared to your usual look-at-the-page habit?
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Checklist: Line-Weight Decisions Check

- Thickened the bottom and shadow edges where objects meet the ground
- Weighted the nearest objects more heavily to pull them forward
- Added weight where forms overlap to show what is in front
- Kept distant buildings and lit edges thin and broken
- Hatched only the two or three darkest shadow shapes
- Kept hatching direction consistent within each area
- Left the sky and lit surfaces as bare paper
- Stopped texturing before the whole drawing went gray

Perspective and Composition on the Street

Eyeball believable space, then arrange and crop the scene so the eye lands where you want it.

Worksheet: Perspective Setup Worksheet

Before inking a streetscape, set up its perspective deliberately. Decide your eye-level horizon, the type of perspective, and the angle of the key receding edges (measured with a held-up pen) and record them here. Where is my eye-level horizon on the page (high / middle / low)?

One-point, two-point, or three-point — and why?

Nearest vertical corner — its position and height

Angle of the top receding edge (steep / shallow / which way)

Angle of the bottom receding edge

Are verticals kept dead vertical? (yes / no)

Check: do equal-height objects shrink toward the horizon?

Exercise: Two-Minute Notan Thumbnails

For one scene, draw three different notan thumbnails about 5 by 7 centimeters each, using a gray marker and only three values (white, mid, dark). Squint hard so detail drops away. Choose the strongest one to build your full sketch from.

- Which thumbnail read most clearly at tiny size, and why?
 - Did the dark shapes connect into a pattern or scatter as spots?
 - Where is your focal point, and is it off-center near a third?
 - What did you decide to leave out entirely?
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Exercise: The Viewfinder Crop

Make an L-shape with both hands, or cut a small window in card, and frame your scene. Move it closer and further to test a tight crop and a wide crop of the same subject, then sketch the version you prefer.

- Did you choose portrait, landscape, or a full panorama spread, and why?
 - What ran off the edge of the page deliberately?
 - Tight crop or wide crop — what did each one emphasize?
 - Did you leave breathing room, or did it feel crammed to the edges?
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Checklist: Composition Pre-Flight

- [] Decided in one sentence what this sketch is about
- [] Placed the focal point off-center near a rule-of-thirds intersection
- [] Found a leading line (road, railing, window row) toward the focal point
- [] Considered a foreground frame (arch, tree, awning)
- [] Chose orientation to suit the subject's shape
- [] Drew a notan thumbnail and confirmed it reads
- [] Left some empty paper as breathing room
- [] Planned to date and caption the spread as a record

Color, Light, and the Finished Location Spread

Add fast luminous watercolor, populate the scene with life, and finish a complete dated spread against the moving light.

Exercise: Limited-Palette Mixing Chart

Using only your six core pigments plus your two earth neutrals, mix the colors you actually need for a city scene — a brick warm, a foliage green, a stone gray, a deep shadow, a sky blue — and swatch each one. Note the proportions so you can repeat them on location.

- Which two pigments gave the most useful warm neutral for shadows?

- How did you mix a convincing foliage green without a tube green?

- How much did each swatch lighten as it dried?

- Which mixes turned muddy, and what caused it?

Worksheet: Wash-Order Plan

Before painting a location scene, plan your washes light-to-dark so you protect your whites. Fill this in at the scene, then paint to the plan.

Whites / lights to leave as bare paper

First palest wash (sky / largest light area)

Mid-tone local colors and where they go

Areas to keep soft (wet-on-wet) versus crisp (wet-on-dry)

The two or three darkest accents, saved for last

Drying conditions today (hot/fast or cold/slow)

Where will I deliberately stop and call it done?

Exercise: Thirty Figures in Ten Minutes

Fill a sketchbook page with about thirty loose figures from a cafe, market, or station, using the seven-mark method. Keep heads small, plant feet on a perspective line, and lean bodies for movement. Speed matters more than polish.

- Did keeping heads small make the adults read as adults?

- Which postures came alive with the fewest strokes?

- Did the heads of standing adults line up along one horizon line?

- Which three figures would you actually drop into a real scene?

Checklist: Complete Spread — Finish Sequence

- [] Scouted five minutes for subject, seat, shade, and sightline
- [] Drew a two-minute notan and locked the composition
- [] Marked the horizon and one or two big landmarks lightly
- [] Inked directly for 15 to 25 minutes with varied line weight
- [] Committed to the starting light and did not chase the shadows
- [] Painted light-to-dark, guarding the white of the paper
- [] Added three to five gestural figures and one or two signs of life
- [] Dropped the darkest accents last to snap the focal point
- [] Lettered the date, place, and one line of observation
- [] Stopped before overworking, even with a corner unfinished

Your Action Plan

1. Buy or confirm a waterproof-inked fountain pen, a backup fineliner, a fude pen, a six-pan limited palette, two waterbrushes, and a 200gsm+ sketchbook; pack it all in one sub-700-gram bag.
2. Water-test the sketchbook and do your first ten-minute cafe-doorway sit with the back to a wall.
3. Run the four-step no-pencil warm-up daily for a week, then practice comparative measuring and a 70/30 contour drawing on one building to lock proportion habits.
4. Make a line-weight study: re-ink a simple scene weighting shadow, nearest, and overlapping edges.
5. Set up and ink a two-point street corner, keeping verticals vertical and receding edges aimed off-page.
6. Draw three notan thumbnails of one scene and build the full sketch from the strongest one.
7. Mix a limited-palette chart and paint one small location scene light-to-dark, saving the whites.
8. Fill a page with thirty fast figures, then add three of them into a real streetscape for scale.
9. Complete one full dated location spread in a 45-to-90-minute window following the finish sequence, and stop early.
10. Log every outing in the practice tracker, join a local sketchcrawl, and commit to one ten-minute sketch a day.

