

# Picking out GRAPHITE PENCILS



## How to select the right graphite pencils for learning how to draw

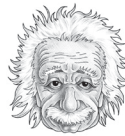
Ordinary writing pencils are not designed for drawing and tend to scratch the surface of paper. For example, a pencil with an eraser on its end is probably not suitable for drawing (Figure 1).

Figure 1



Artists prefer erasers and pencils that are specifically designed for drawing (Figure 2).

Professional drawing pencils are made with a higher-quality mixture of graphite and clay, and make marks that glide smoothly across your paper. On the downside, they are usually more expensive than pencils made for writing.



### ArtSpeak

**Wood-encased pencil:** (also called a *wooden pencil*)  
A drawing or writing tool with a thin, cylindrical stick of graphite held inside a wooden casing.

**Graphite:** A soft black form of opaque carbon found in nature that is usually mixed with clay in the manufacture of various types of drawing tools.

**Grade:** The softness or hardness of the mixture used in the manufacture of drawing mediums.

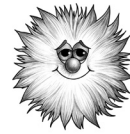
**Mechanical pencil:** A drawing tool with an internal mechanism that pushes a thin graphite lead placed in a tiny tube upward through the tip.

Figure 2



Three of the most popular types of drawing pencils are (1) wood-encased, (2) mechanical, and (3) woodless (Figure 3).

Figure 3



### As an Aside

The word *pencil* comes from the Latin word *pencilus* (which means “little tail”).

In the early 17th century, the term *pencil* was used to identify any writing or drawing tool that held a piece of graphite, chalk, or charcoal.

By the end of the 19th century, *pencil* was used to mean a stick of graphite encased in a cylindrical piece of wood (wood-encased).

Today, *pencil* includes a huge selection of wood-encased mediums as well as mechanical and woodless types of graphite.

## Wood-encased Pencils

Professional drawing pencils are available with many different mediums – not just graphite (Figure 4). Your first goal when you go shopping is to locate *graphite* pencils.

When you locate graphite pencils, you’ll find that all the grades made by each manufacturer look much the same (Figure 5). Thankfully, the wooden casing of a professional drawing pencil is labeled with a number-letter code to identify its grade (Figure 6).

Figure 4

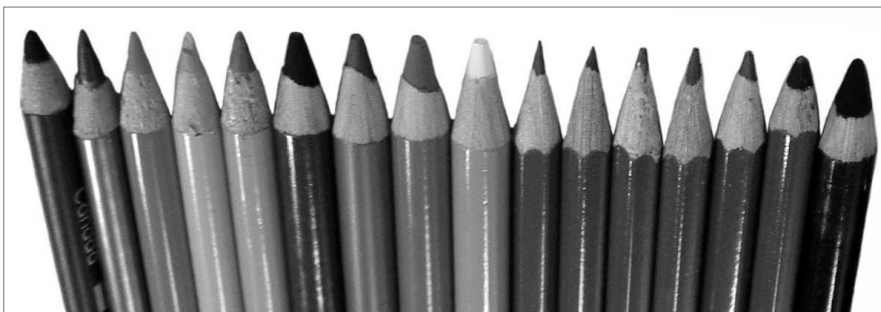


Figure 5



Figure 6



**Tip!**

Beginners to drawing only need five grades of pencils: 2H, HB, 2B, 4B, and 6B. You can choose wood-encased, mechanical, woodless, or a combination of all three types.

Soft grades wear down more quickly than hard grades, so, pick up two or more 2H and HB grades and three or more 2B, 4B, and 6B grades.

**Caution!**

Don't buy cheap mechanical pencils (such as the inexpensive novelty mechanical pencils in many stores).

Professional mechanical pencils that are designed specifically for drawing can be found only in specialty stores.

**Tip!**

Read the labels on the package of mechanical pencil leads to make sure they're the right size for your pencil.

For example, 0.7 mm leads will not fit inside a 0.5 mm mechanical pencil.

**As an Aside**

High-quality, professional, wood-encased graphite pencils are often made in Germany, and some of the best are sold under the brand names Staedtler and Faber-Castell.

## Mechanical Pencils

Professional mechanical pencils are a super alternative to pencils that need to be sharpened (Figures 7 and 8). They are designed to mechanically push a thin rod of graphite (called a *lead*) through a small hole in the pointed end.

The marks created by mechanical pencils stay approximately the same size, even after hours of drawing.

Figure 7



Figure 8



You can buy leads of different grades (sold in individual packages) for your mechanical pencil. You must also choose which size of mechanical pencil you need.

A 0.5 mm is the most popular size and works best for drawing on small- to medium-sized sheets of paper. A 0.7 mm is a great choice for sketching loosely and/or drawing on a large surface. A 0.3 mm mechanical pencil allows you to render very detailed drawings.

A professional-quality mechanical pencil designed specifically for drawing is expensive; however, in the long run it tends to be more economical than constantly buying wood-encased pencils.

Mechanical pencils can last 10 to 15 years when well cared for.

## Woodless Pencils

Obviously, woodless pencils do not have a wooden casing! A thick rod of graphite is surrounded by a thin (usually vinyl) casing (Figure 9).

They last a long time and can make lines of various lineweights. Woodless pencils are ideal for all sizes of drawings and sketches, especially subjects needing wider strokes than regular pencils.

They rarely need to be sharpened in a pencil sharpener. Wood-encased pencils last much longer if you use a sandpaper block more often than a pencil sharpener. A few strokes on sandpaper and the points are sharp!

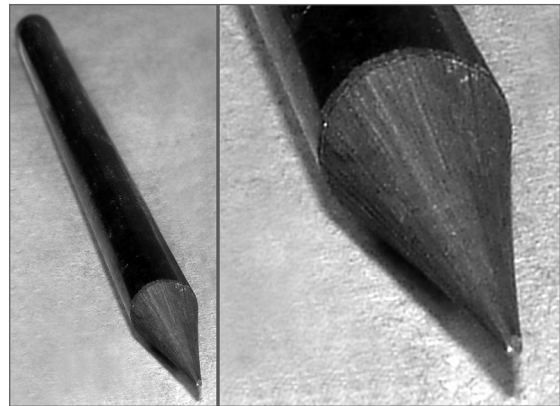


### ArtSpeak

**Woodless pencil:** A thick, cylindrical stick of graphite wrapped in a vinyl casing. Woodless pencils are ideal for large graphite drawings needing wider strokes than regular pencils can provide. When sharpened, they can also make thin lines.

**Sandpaper block:** A block with tear-off sheets of fine sandpaper used to sharpen the points of pencils.

Figure 9



### Caution!

If you plan to shop for pencils online, search specifically for *graphite* pencils so you don't accidentally buy another medium.

If you prefer to shop at a local store, ask a salesperson for help.