

# CREATING COMICS WITH ADOBE ILLUSTRATOR

*A Tutorial by Emily Gonsalves*

## For your convenience, shortcuts are included in this tutorial

- Mac shortcuts are **green**
- Windows shortcuts are **purple**
- Menu functions and cross-platform shortcuts are **orange**

This tutorial covers my method for creating comic pages with Adobe Illustrator. I hope it will be useful to those considering using Illustrator for this type of work yet have little experience with the program itself. Please adapt the techniques to suit your purposes as required.

I regularly use Photoshop for other work, and it is a common software choice for webcomic creators. However, if you are using “cel shading” – Illustrator may work better for you.

## Why Use Illustrator?

Illustrator is a vector based graphics program, which stores image data in “paths.” File sizes are often significantly smaller than Photoshop files. Scalability is infinite, meaning you can scale up a comic page to billboard size without losing quality.

Complex gradation can be achieved with gradient meshes. Gradient meshes are a bit tricky and require more patience and adjustments for the novice user.

## The Visuals

Page seven of *Green Corner* is used for most of the visuals in this tutorial, and many screengrabs are included. I used **Illustrator CS3** for this comic page, but I include notes on how to achieve effects with **Illustrator 9** as well. Some of the newer features I used in CS3 are also available in earlier versions of Adobe Illustrator.

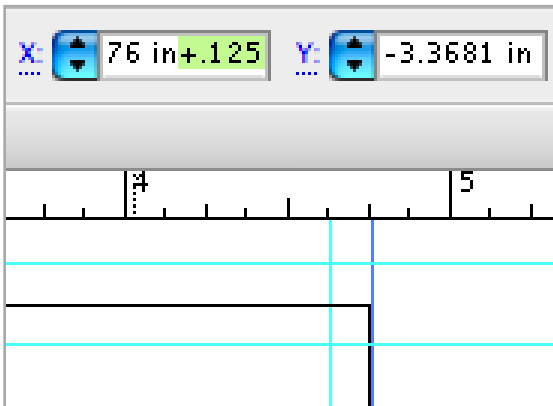
Please assume that “older versions” mentioned have the capabilities of Illustrator 9 or better. If you are using a version that has some or all of the features mentioned, use them where possible. Livepaint is especially useful, and will greatly reduce the time spent colouring artwork.

If you still prefer colouring in Photoshop, I encourage you to consider creating your linework in Illustrator to easily create smooth lines.

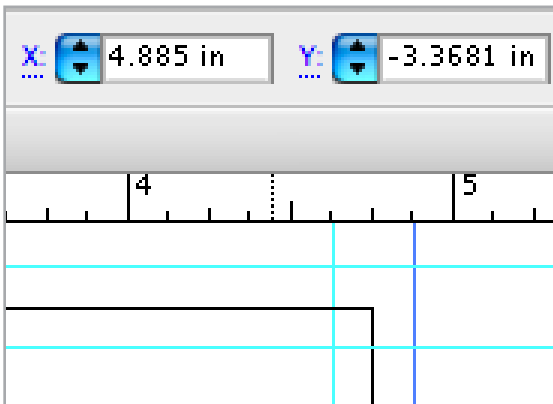
## Setup

My artboard dimensions are the page size (or trim size), which I've set to 4.76" by 6.72". This is not a standard size, but I can scale the artwork later. By making the artboard your trim size, you can also easily export the trimmed page for web.

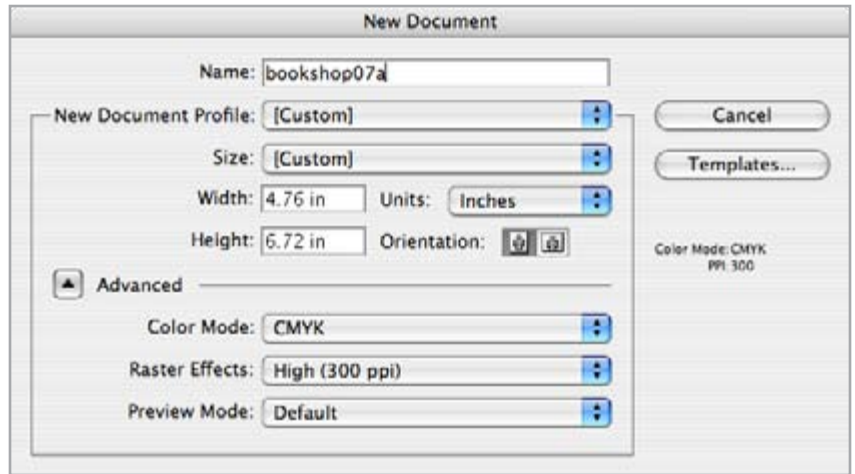
**Tip:** to easily place guides on the right and bottom of your artboard, drag a guide to the edge of the artboard and type +.125 or -.125 into the appropriate box (X for vertical, Y for horizontal). For the top and left side guides, type the coordinates at 0.125 and -0.125 after dragging guides.



Adjusting a vertical guide position by typing the amount of variation from the original placement



The result after inputting the amount of variation



### My guides:

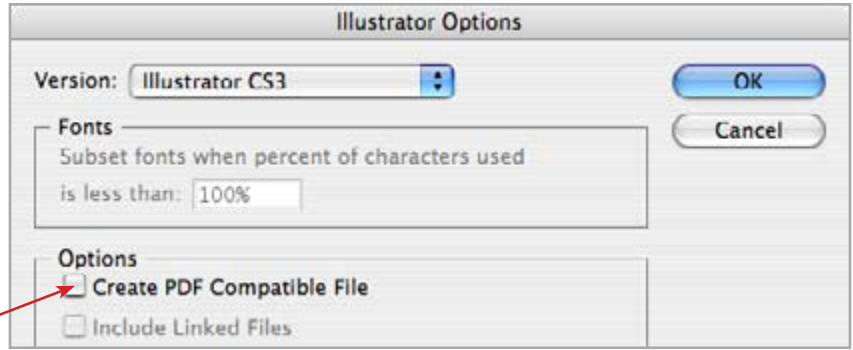
X -0.125	Y -0.125	(0,0 set as the top left corner, note that some of the positive values may list as negative in Illustrator)
X 0.125	Y 0.125	
X 4.635	Y 6.595	
X 4.885	Y 6.845	

The location of guides can be manually inputted (in older versions you may have to zoom in to 6400% and drag guides to the necessary location, using the info palette to confirm coordinates). Use **Command R** (**Control R**) to show the ruler if it's not visible.

The guides outside the artboard show where to drag artwork to account for bleeds (any artwork that goes to the edge of a printed page). The interior guides are for my "live area" where I keep all important content, like text. I use standard 1/8" margins to compensate for variance in printing and trimming.

For printing, I strongly advise using CMYK colour mode unless your printer specifies that RGB is acceptable. Some RGB colours are unprintable with standard ink. If sending your work out to a printing press, confirm output settings and file format preferences (usually PDF or EPS). The native file format is for working documents, but you should use EPS for placing into a page layout program like InDesign or Quark Xpress.

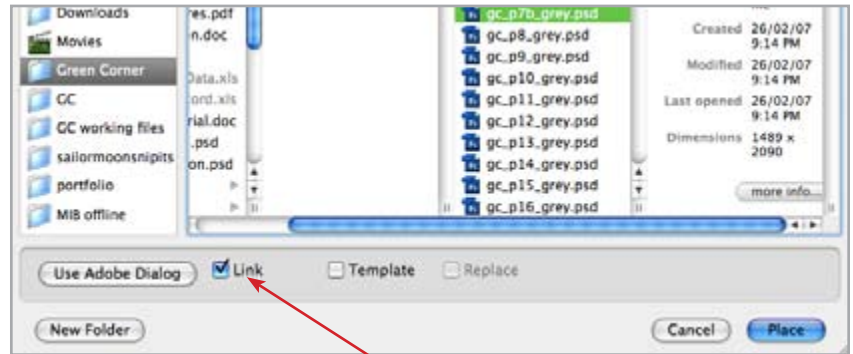
Save as a native Illustrator document (using the "ai" extension). Do **NOT** check the option "create PDF compatible file" as it increases file size significantly and slows save times. It can also increase the chance that Illustrator will crash. You can save a PDF copy later if you need one. Select "use compression" to keep your file size down.



Do **not** check "Create PDF Compatible File"



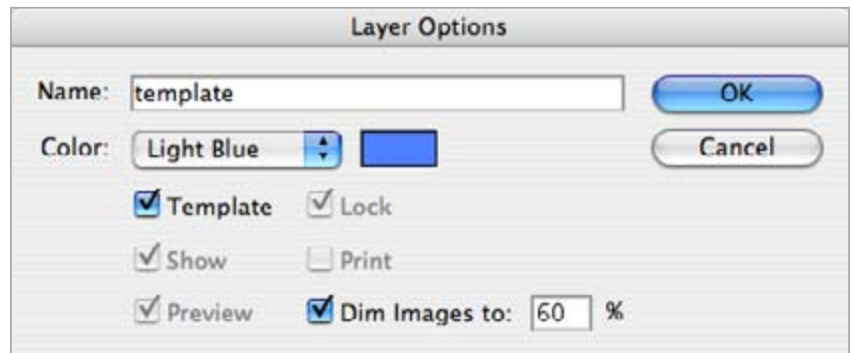
Pencil image used for the template (actual size: 5" x 7")



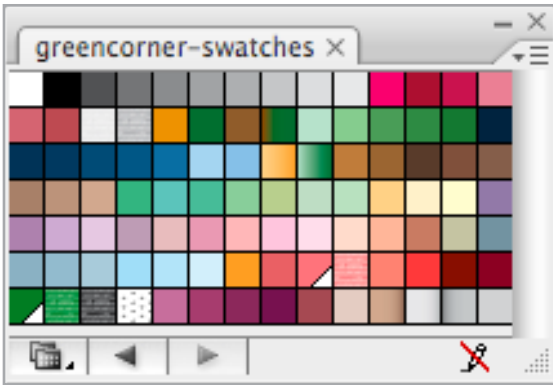
Remember to link your placed image. Embedding increases file size.

My pencil images are small, but detailed. You can use less detail, but I do recommend using a template rather than drawing freehand, especially if you're new to using Illustrator.

I place the image on my artboard (**File/ Place**), linking the file to keep my file size down. I adjust the placement and size, change the layer to a template, and dim to 60%. This layer should be set as unprintable.



Settings for the template layer



I use a custom swatch library. For older versions of Illustrator, you may need to define swatches in each file. A template file that includes swatches can save time setting up. Use the **add to swatches** button in the **swatches palette** to add new colours (you must open the swatch library file to edit it). You may want to make certain swatches **spot colours**, as this allows for more flexibility if you want to use tints of a colour.

### My Brush Settings:

**Angle:** 130 degrees (fixed)

**Roundness:** 15% (fixed)

**Diameter:** 10 pt (pressure),  
variation: 9 pt

**Angle:** 45 degrees (fixed)

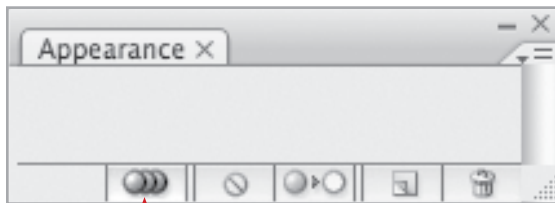
**Roundness:** 15% (fixed)

**Diameter:** 10 pt (pressure),  
variation: 9 pt

I use calligraphic brushes for most linework. My settings necessitate using a fairly small stroke weight, usually around 0.05 pt, varying depending on the item being drawn.

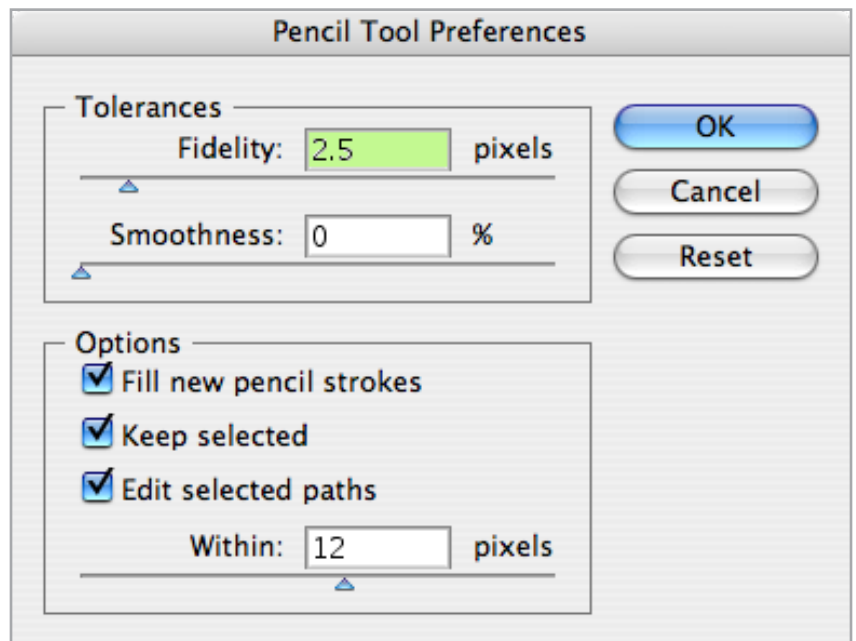
Line variation adds interest to illustrations, especially for figures and objects with curves. It also mimics traditional pen (or brush) and ink. Calligraphic brushes will work for the **pen**, **pencil**, and **paintbrush** tools.

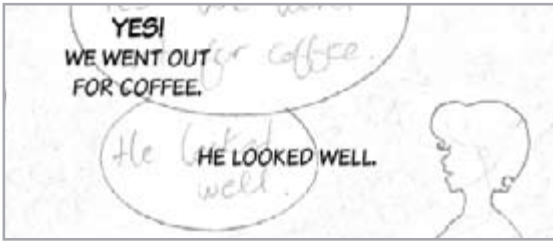
In the **appearance palette** ensure that “**new art maintains appearance**” is active to keep the same fill, stroke, and brush settings active as you create multiple paths.



New art maintains appearance

You may need to adjust settings for tools like the pencil and paintbrush by double clicking on them. For the pencil tool, check “**Fill new pencil strokes**” to maintain the stroke and fill settings for new paths drawn with the pencil.

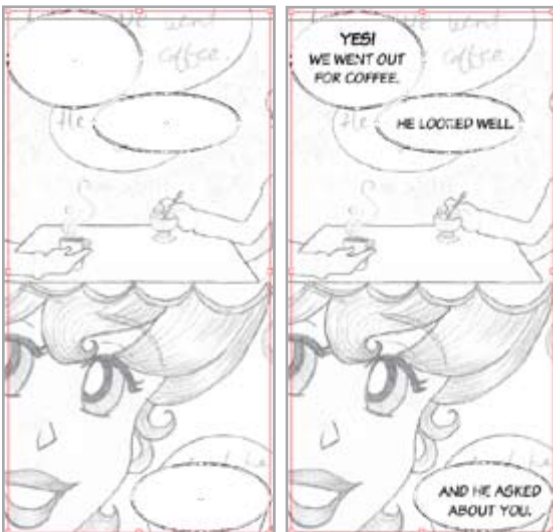




Text placed over the template



Use the alignment tools to centre the text in the balloon



Draw ovals to accommodate the text and send them to the back

I place text first, splitting the lines up logically by how they will be read. Next, I draw ovals filled with white to accommodate the text. Hold down **Option (Alt)** while dragging, to draw ovals from the middle.

I move the ovals to the back of the layer by selecting them and using the shortcut: **Command Shift [ (Control Shift [)**. Text is centred within the ovals with the alignment tools.

Next, I draw the “tails” of the balloons with the pen tool. The easiest way to do this is to draw one curve, click on the point you want to become the midpoint of the tail, and then continue. Clicking directly on your second point before continuing changes it into a corner.

**Here's the fixed tail on the balloon:**



Holding **Command (Control)** will revert to the last selection tool used. I select the **direct selection tool (A)** and use **P** for the pen or **N** for the pencil when drawing. This allows adjustment while drawing by holding **Command (Control)** and grabbing handles. Use the **Option (Alt)** modifier when necessary to control the way the handles affect the shape of the path.

I group objects that make up a balloon once they're positioned as groups can be moved as a unit. I keep word balloons on a separate layer so that I can hide them while drawing artwork on other layers.



I used guides on page three for Alshina in profile to ensure that proportions were correct



Paths created with the pen and pencil using a template underneath

**Tip:** At times, it may be easier to draw a continuous path and use the scissors (C) to cut the path on points to better control the appearance of brush styles.

## Linework

For linework of the characters, I use a black stroke and no fill. Organize using layers that make sense for your workflow; I separate characters, linework, and colouring. Adjust positioning as needed for overlapping items.

You may need to fill some paths while drawing linework to ensure that items overlap correctly. You may want to cut paths for overlapping linework after copying items for livepaint, so that visible linework doesn't overlap awkwardly.

If you have problems constructing an item or figure and your pencil needs adjustment, use guides for assistance. Draw the paths to be converted into guides, select them, and use the shortcut **Command 5** (**Control 5**) to convert to guides.

I keep guides on a separate layer so that I have more control over them. I usually turn off the automatic locking of guides as I prefer to control that through my guides layer.

**Shortcut:** **Option Command ;** (**Alt Control ;**).

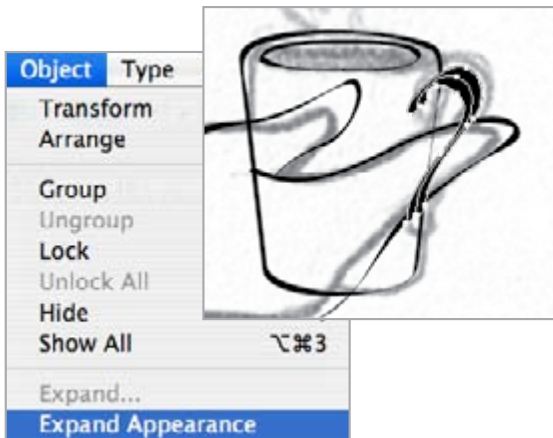
**Shortcut for hiding/ showing guides:** **Command ;** (**Control ;**) (this locks your guides)

To see gridlines, use **Command ' (Control ')**. I use gridlines for drawing geometric objects (adjust gridline settings in preferences). Gridlines aren't visible through your template.

**I mainly use the pen and pencil for linework, adjusting with:**

- The direct selection tool: **A**
- The smooth tool: **N** while holding **Option (Alt)**
- Variants of the pen tool:
  - **P** - to delete anchor points
  - **P** while holding **Option (Alt)** to change points between curved/ smooth and angled/ corner (to convert to a smooth point, you need to click and drag on the point)
  - **P +** to add anchor points

If the initial linework was created with marker or pen and ink, you can use **Livetrace** instead of a template. **Livetrace** does not lend itself to brush styles and it outlines your strokes, so it can be trickier to edit. I prefer to re-draw manually over a template, but use whichever option suits your needs.



Creating a shape by using "expand appearance" on a path

## Techniques

### Creating a Shape by Outlining a Path:

1. Draw the initial path, using a thicker stroke to get the rough shape that you want.
2. With the path selected, choose **Expand Appearance** in the **Object** menu. A group will be created.
3. Ungroup and delete the unnecessary centre path.
4. Define the stroke and fill and adjust the shape as desired.

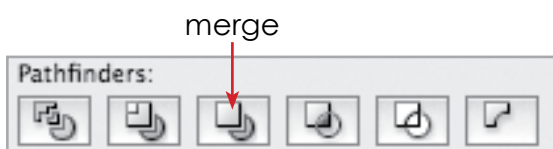
Arranged ovals



Merged shapes



Adjusted shape, centre deleted



### Creating Shapes Using the Pathfinder:

The **pathfinder palette** has a variety of functions that can be used to create more complex shapes. I mostly use **minus back**, **divide**, and **merge**. The example shows an adjusted shape created using **merge**.



Paste a copy of the necessary paths in back to keep them aligned



Scale the group of paths vertically



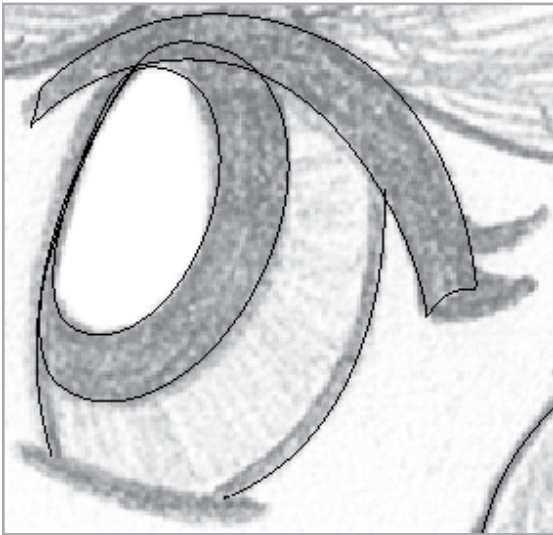
Adjust positioning as needed and trim

### Creating Shadows:

Sometimes you can create simple shadows for characters and other objects. For the cups, I used ellipses.

This is how I created the shadows of the characters' arms on the table:

1. Copy the filled paths of the hand and arm, use paste in back to keep aligned. Set the colour for the shadow.
2. Using the selection tool (V) adjust the shape by scaling vertically only.
3. Adjust the position of the squished shape depending on the light source and use the scissors (C) to cut off the excess.



A partially drawn eye in outline view.



Use the reflect tool to create a mirrored copy of the first eye, to shorten time drawing the second eye.



I drew the entire ear to ensure that the shape is correct, although I only needed to draw to the bleed guide.

### Drawing the Eyes and Face:

For items that only have a fill, use outline view for clarity. I use outline view for drawing the pupils, upper lashes, and shine on the pupils. For the lower lashes, if the stroke does not have the overall thickness or variation you want; create a path similar to what you would like, expand, and adjust points as necessary.

After completing one eye, I make a copy and use the reflect tool to flip it. From there, I adjust to create the final effect. For eyebrows, I also draw one, flip a copy, and adjust the second to create the desired effect.

I simplify facial features, varying line quality depending on the viewing angle and the expression. It is sometimes helpful to draw items that bleed off the page farther than the bleed line in order to ensure that the item is illustrated correctly. As my characters have long ears, I usually draw the full ear even if it bleeds off the page.



### Using Transparency to Add Interest:

To make the swirls above Aena's hand and the outline of the cloud appear less flat and more interesting, I used transparency and offset copies of the paths from each other.



The original swirls



The swirls with transparent, offset copies

## Colouring

When the linework is complete, we can move on to colouring. Ensure all linework is unlocked, select all and copy. Then, lock any layers with linework and create a new layer below. Use **paste in front** or **paste in back** to paste the copied paths aligned with the locked linework.

**Shortcut for paste in front:** **Command F** (**Control F**)

**Shortcut for paste in back:** **Command B** (**Control B**)

If you need to separate pieces for layering, do it now, as you can't really layer within a **Livepaint** group. Create separate livepaint groups if necessary to control overlapping.

Select the paths that you want to use for colouring and convert to a **Livepaint** group. You may receive an error about brushes being discarded (this is why the paths are copied, to preserve brush styles above).

Colour using the **Livepaint bucket**. **Shortcut:** **K**

I lay flat colour before shading, but do whichever works best for you. I usually add textures when I do the flat colouring. Note that textures may require duplicating shapes to achieve the desired effect. You may want to add textures after expanding the **Livepaint** group if you need to duplicate shapes.



Outline view of the paths used for a livepaint object for colouring Aena in the bottom panel



The completed page in outline view

**Livepaint** is a newer feature. In older versions like Illustrator 9, there is a more complex process for colouring and shading.

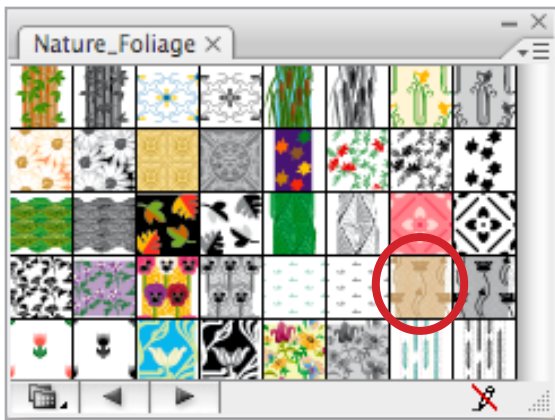
### Colouring in Older Versions of Illustrator:

1. Choose relevant paths with the select tool and copy.
2. Paste onto a separate layer (paste in front or in back) and discard brush styles.
3. Cut off excess pieces of paths. Lock overlapping paths that you aren't currently cutting if you keep getting errors.
  - **Shortcut to lock:** **Command 2 (Control 2)**
  - **Unlock all shortcut:** **Command Option 2 (Control Alt 2)**
4. Join paths to create a new shape and fill with colour.
5. Adjust path to accommodate for gaps due to brush style of linework above as necessary.

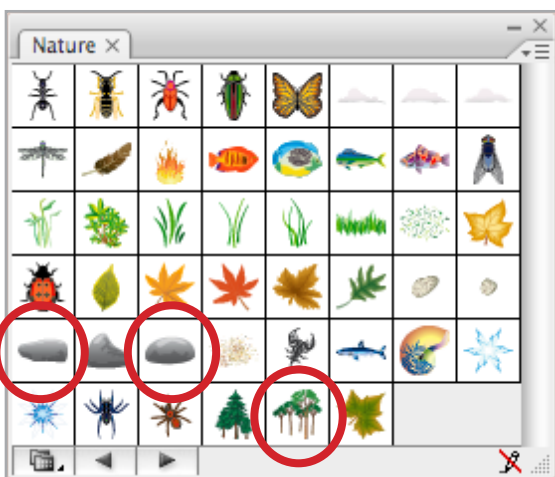
Once your flat colour is complete, you can move on to shading. Sometimes, you will draw the edges of your shading manually, and at other times you can copy shapes and fill them. I usually copy the hairline to create the shadow from the hair, and cut off the excess.

If you have problems filling certain areas with **Livepaint**, you may need to adjust your paths. Use **Command Y (Control Y)** to show paths in outline view (you also need this if you use the old method of colouring). This helps ensure that edges of paths align as needed. Thicker lines indicate multiple paths layered on top of each other. Use the same shortcut to change back to the regular view.

When shading is complete, you can add accents like shine. For the hair, I place the shine below the linework but above colouring and shading, to maintain detail. For indoor settings, I use a white fill with a maximum of 80% transparency for the hair shine. I tint the white with another colour like yellow or blue depending on the mood and light source. I manually draw and adjust shiny accents until I achieve the desired effect.



I used a pattern swatch to create the wallpaper in the coffee shop.



I used pre-created symbols in the outdoor scene viewed through the window in the coffee shop.  
(I expanded and edited the trees for my purposes)



The divide tool was used to define the window frames at the edges of the cloud in the top panel.

## Backgrounds

I usually draw backgrounds and other objects after characters, adjusting as necessary. They can be added any time, but keep on separate layers so you can hide them as needed when creating other linework.

Pre-made backgrounds can be copied and pasted into your working document. Adjust scale and perspective as needed. You can use the **3D effects** to assist you, but you may need to draw extra elements to realistically change the perspective.

In older versions of Illustrator, **3D effects** are not available. Copy the artwork into Photoshop to use the transform tools to create an image you can use as a template if necessary. (In Illustrator 9, I couldn't find a transformation tool as flexible as in Photoshop; and the skew tool was insufficient).

### Using Patterns, Symbols, and Other Pre-Made Items:

Illustrator comes with a variety of swatch libraries, brush libraries, symbols, and other items that you can use. The [Adobe Exchange](#) has additional downloadable items.

### Using the Divide Tool (in the Pathfinder Palette):

To create the windows at the edge of the top panel, I selected a copy of the cloud path with a window frame path and used divide in the pathfinder palette. After ungrouping, I deleted the paths I no longer needed. I used clipping paths for the copied scenes in the windows on the sides.



## Adjustments

I make adjustments over the course of creating a page but additional adjustments may be needed after completing previous steps. I often adjust proportions of figures after completing the linework, to ensure that they look correct. For this page, I re-drew Aena's hand in the bottom panel by using my own hand as reference.

I sometimes move dialogue balloons as I progress through the creation of the page for a more pleasing layout.

Textures and transparency are usually set during the process of colouring and shading, but they may be altered as additional elements are added to the page.

I used to use some swatches with transparency (especially the skin shading), but this doesn't work with [Livepaint](#), so I created new swatches which had a comparable result to simplify the colouring and shading process. Swatches set as spot colours can be used to create tints of colours.

Note that there is an assortment of Illustrator filters as well as the option to use some Photoshop filters on objects. There is also an eraser tool, but I usually find the scissors more useful.

## Exporting

When I export for web, I set the dimensions to 425 x 600 pixels, and select "constrain to artboard" – reflecting how the page would look in print when trimmed. I export as JPEG with maximum quality, to keep artwork as crisp as possible. You may have good results exporting to GIF format if you don't use many colours or gradients. Adjust your export settings to suit your needs.

For print, I place the individual pages into an InDesign document and proportionally adjust the size of artwork based on the final print size. When I'm ready to print, I export to PDF with appropriate settings (use "high quality" unless you receive a job options file from your printing service provider). I can assemble volumes in InDesign using an InDesign "book" and adjust the order of chapters.



The trimmed, completed page