



COLORED PENCIL TECHNIQUES

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This colored pencil guide has been carefully created to help you understand the most common and useful ways to use your colored pencils!

PRACTISE MAKES PROGRESS

Learning the core tips and techniques for colored pencils is essential as it will help you understand how to use your pencils better and how to improve your drawings quicker.

When I first started using colored pencils I was disheartened by the drawing results I was getting, and it's only now that I've progressed with colored pencils that I know where I was going wrong – I didn't spend enough time practising and learning the key tips & techniques I needed to get the most out of my pencils.

I want to help beginners learn from my mistakes by sharing my top tips & techniques for using colored pencils. I've compiled this guide together to give you a great starting point and a clearer understanding of colored pencils, and how to use them.

Colored pencils are a very slow medium to work in – if you think about it, you are covering a large surface area of paper with just a tiny pencil tip! Many beginners become tired and frustrated with colored pencils because they lose patience with the drawing process, and give up.

I don't want you to do that. I promise that with practise and perseverance, you will see improvements in your drawing! I hope this guide encourages you to continue working with colored pencils & trust in your own skills and abilities. You can do it!





TOP TIPS

Before we dive into specific drawing techniques, let's talk through the top tips I have when using colored pencils. These tips may not seem like a big deal, but if you ignore them you may not get the results you are looking for & this will hinder your drawing process.

- Scrap pieces of paper – scrap pieces of paper come in handy for practising your drawing skills! I'd always recommend that beginners have a few scrap bits of paper to practise techniques on first before they dive straight into a drawing.
- Color swatches – each time you get a new pencil set, make sure to swatch all the colors of your sets on a scrap bit of paper. This will help you pick the right colors for your drawing! You can also practise mixing colors together and creating new color combinations (especially if you have a limited amount of pencils!)
- Light pencil sketches – if you are creating an outline sketch of a reference photo, make sure you keep your sketch outlines light so they don't show through your colored pencils!
- Use reference photos – use reference photos if you are drawing a particular subject. If you are drawing in black and white pencils, make sure your reference is in grey scale – not color. You can get many wonderful royalty free reference photos online!
- Use the right type of paper – it is essential to use the right paper for your drawing subject as you may not get the results you are wanting if you use the wrong paper. (don't forget to download my free materials guide for colored pencils for more info on paper types!)
- Keep your pencils sharp! Using sharp pencils is important! Not only for creating detailed work, but also blending! Blunt pencils can easily scratch your paper!
- Be careful of lead breakage – some colored pencils may be more prone to breaking than others so it's always best to buy good quality pencils that minimise this. Lead breakage can cause marks on the paper, and could potentially be costly if you have to start replacing materials.
- Preserve white paper (or your mid tones for toned paper, shadows for black paper): preserving your white paper is essential as it can be very hard to create highlights if you are too heavy with your pencils.
- Make use of other tools - There's plenty of tools that you can use in combination with colored pencils (more info on this in my free materials list for colored pencils!) that can help you create different techniques!
- Brush away pencil residue – frequently brush away pencil residue from your paper by using a fluffy brush or paintbrush. This is because pencil residue can leave marks on your paper.
- Use a fixative spray – use a fixative spray when you've completed your drawings so that it protects your work from being smudged. This is particularly important if you are displaying or selling your artwork.
- Practise makes progress – finally, and perhaps most importantly, practise makes progress! Colored pencils are a slow medium to work in but with patience and perseverance you can improve your drawings quickly and effectively!





TECHNIQUES

Now that we have learnt the basic tips for using colored pencils, let's dive into the top colored pencil techniques that you can use in your drawings!

The way you use your pencils is extremely important – especially if you want to create realistic drawings. I made a lot of mistakes when I first started using colored pencils, and I became frustrated and unhappy with my drawings. I didn't know that just by making simple changes to the way I used my pencils could make a huge difference and improve my drawings almost instantly!

By not using the right techniques with your colored pencils, it could cause:

- Your drawings to not have a variation of tone (light, mid, and dark tones)
- Your drawings to not have enough values.
- Your drawings to not have enough contrast.
- Your drawings to look flat.
- Your drawings to look unrealistic.

(and the list goes on!)

HOW DO WE FIX THESE PROBLEMS?

If you are looking at the list above and feeling disheartened because you are experiencing some or all of these problems – don't worry. I promise you that you can fix these problems, and it's not as difficult as you think!

Colored pencils are a slow and difficult medium to work in, so it does take time before you see results. However, by using the correct techniques you will see results a lot faster and your drawings will start to improve.

Remember that we all start somewhere, so don't compare yourself to other artists as they could be at a very different stage to you! Remember that they were beginners themselves once!





TECHNIQUE 1: WORK FROM LIGHT TO DARK

It's important that you work from light to dark when you are using colored pencils! There's a few main reasons why you want to do this:

1. You need to preserve your lightest areas and undertones. This is because you want to create depth to your drawings and for your light areas to stand out.
2. It's really hard to add lighter colors in over dark. You want to get your lightest areas in first and your core undertones so that you don't lose these elements of your drawings when you introduce darker colors.
3. Colors can become muddled if you apply light colors over dark colors. When colors become too muddy, you start to lose definition in your drawings, and they can start to become unrealistic with unnatural colors.

Always work from light to dark so that you can build up enough depth in your drawings and preserve those light areas!

TECHNIQUE 2: VALUES

Values are one of the most important aspects of a drawing and are a key colored pencil technique! Values can literally transform a piece as it brings your drawings to life. If you don't have enough values, your drawings will look flat, unrealistic, and won't have enough contrast.

You always want to make sure you are adding in enough values to your drawings. I follow a 5 point value scale for every drawing so I make sure I add enough value in my drawings:

1. Highlights – make sure you have highlights in your drawings. Highlights are the brightest and lightest areas of a drawing and should be preserved at the beginning of your drawing process, and enhanced at the end (by going over them).
2. Light tones – determine where your light areas are and work on those areas first so that you can build up around them and don't lose them!
3. Mid tones – Mid tones are what I like to refer to as transitioning colors. They are important because they transition from light areas into darker areas. Mid tones add softness to your drawings and without them drawings can look harsh.
4. Light shadows – light shadows transition from mid tones but are slightly darker (although not as dark as dark shadows!) these values are the first step to adding in darker areas of a drawing and really starting to increase contrast in a drawing.
5. Dark shadows – the dark shadows are the darkest parts of your drawing and need particular focus on so that you can make your drawings pop and add final layers of contrast.



Highlights

Light tones

Mid tones

L. Shadows

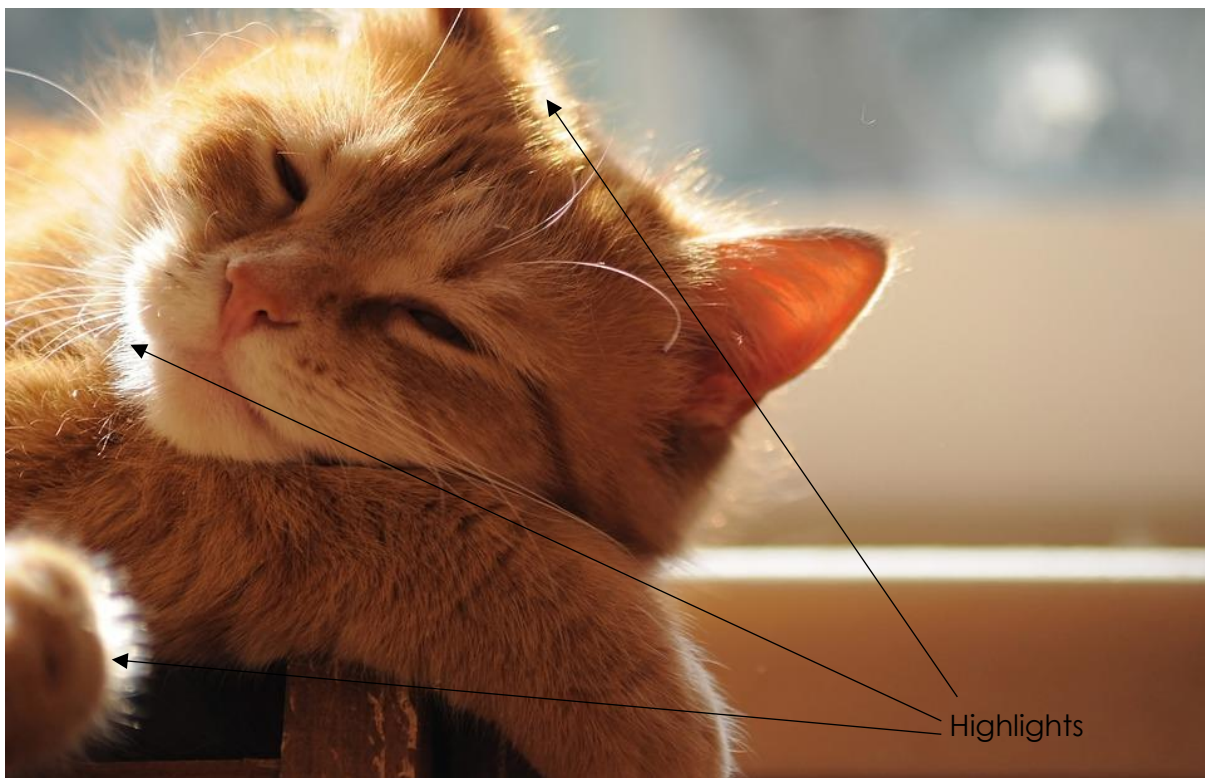
D. Shadows



TECHNIQUE 3: HIGHLIGHTS & SHADOWS

I briefly mentioned on the previous page about the importance of highlights and shadows. Highlights and shadows will add a lot of contrast to your drawings, make your drawings stand out, and add finishing touches to your drawings. You cannot leave them out!

- Highlights are the lightest parts of a drawing and are usually found where the light source is in your reference photo. Let's use this reference photo as an example:



If we take a look at this photo, you can clearly see that there is a light source coming from the left side of this picture (right side of the cat's face). The light source is hitting one part of the cat's face and lighting up that part of the face. The whitest areas of the cat's face are the highlights. Some of the cat's whiskers would also be classed as highlights as they are white & definitive.

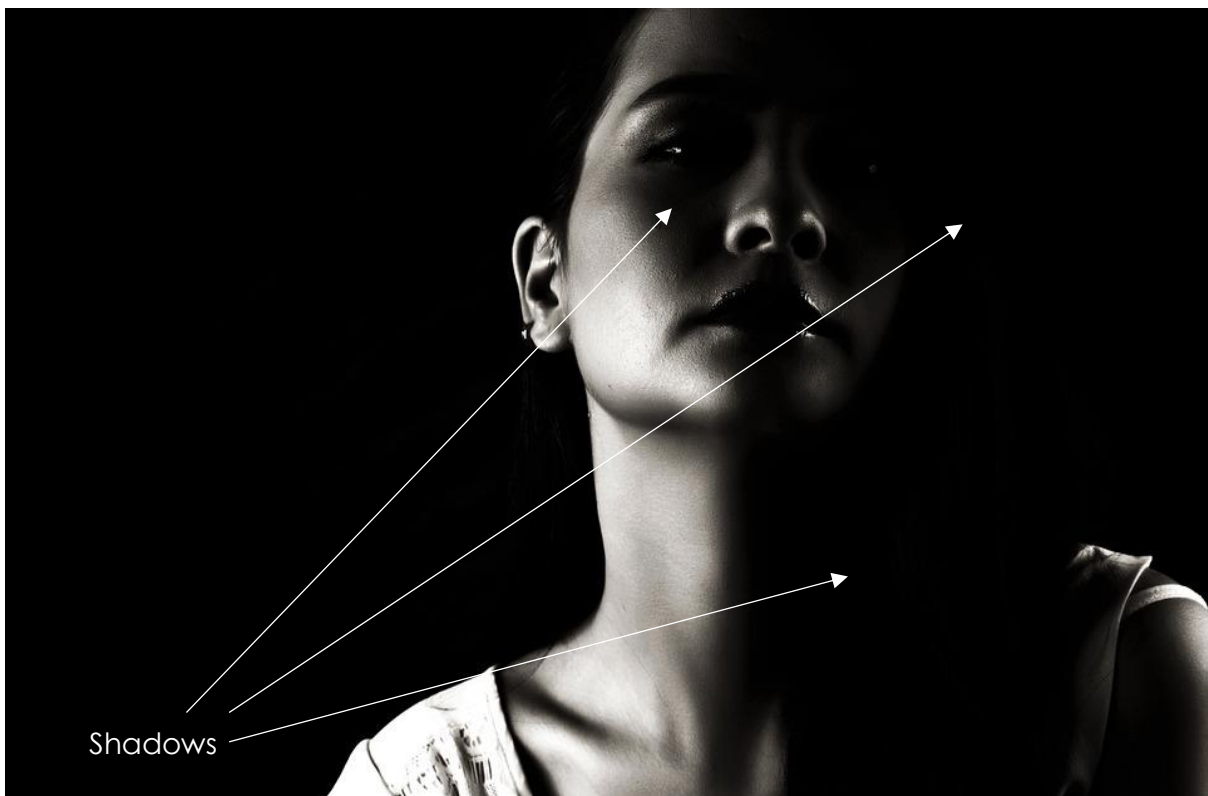
A top tip I have for easily identifying highlights is to turn your photo into grey scale! This will help you determine all of the core values in your photo and highlights usually appear brighter when a photo is in black and white. Just remember to try and locate a light source & the direction it is coming in!





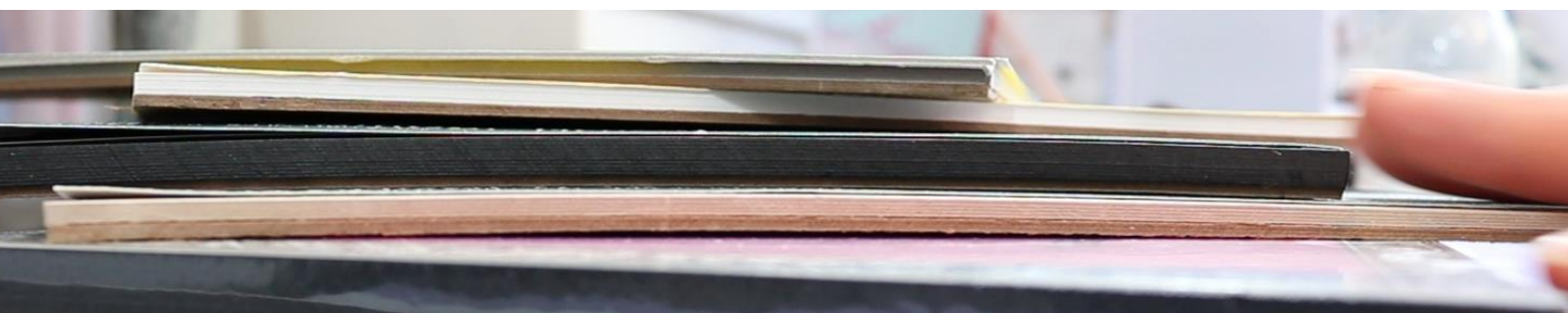
Shadows are equally important to highlights as without them your drawings can look very flat with no definition and dark values. Shadows will add contrast to your drawings and help determine shapes or form. Shadows are cast when little to no light hits an object or subject.

- Shadows are the darkest area of a drawing, with the shadow core being the darkest part of a shadow. Let's use this reference photo as an example:



This photo has very intense and concentrated shadows so there is a lot of depth and contrast in this photo. There are some very bright highlighted areas where the light source hits the subject, but then this transitions into lighter shadows, and core shadows for the darkest areas of the reference photo.

This reference photo is also a great photo to use for determining shadows as it is a black and white image – see what I mean about black and white images showing up highlights and shadows more? Because it's in grey scale, there's no colors to distract the eye from the core highlights & shadows. Using reference photos like these to practise determining where shadows are will really help you to understand values better & homing in on highlights and shadows!





TECHNIQUE 4: LAYERING & BURNISHING

The layering and burnishing technique is one of the most popular and most used colored pencil techniques. It works by gently building up light layers of colored pencils starting with the lightest tones, building up to mid tones, and then adding in the darkest tones before burnishing (applying pressure) to flatten the tooth of the paper and smooth out pencil grain.

The biggest mistakes that beginners make with this technique is that they:

- **Use blunt pencils to layer colors – you shouldn't do this as blunt pencils can create inconsistent shading but can also scratch the surface of your paper.**
- **Use back and forth motions when shading or layering – this can create stop and start lines in your drawing, so circular motions & cross hatching should be used instead.**
- **Don't apply enough colored pencil layers – by not applying enough colored pencil layers you won't build up your light, mid, and dark tones properly.**
- **Use the incorrect hand position when holding pencils – believe it or not, but the way you hold your pencils can effect the drawing results you get!**
- **Burnish (apply pressure) too early on – if you do this then you will flatten the tooth of the paper and then it's near impossible to add more colors in over the top.**

It's always important to work in layers when using colored pencils. This is because there are many aspects of a drawing and many different values. Remember the 5 point value scale? You can only achieve values by working in layers!


You want to start with your lightest layers first. This is because, as I mentioned earlier on, you need to preserve your lightest tones and make sure they don't become muddied by adding in too many dark values. You want to slowly build up your layers so that you incorporate more tone in your drawing and eliminate much of the white paper grain. When layering, it's always best to use circular motions instead of back-and-forth motions as back-and-forth motions will create stop and start lines in your drawings. Circular motions (and also cross hatching) cancel out any stubborn lines in your drawing!

When building layers, it's important you use a light hand pressure. You want to hold your pencil further back towards the end of the pencil so that you have a less harsh grip on the pencil. By only having a light grip, you have less control of your pencil and are less able to apply hard pressure to your paper.

Only burnish (apply pressure) at the very end of your drawing process when you've applied all your layers and are ready to smooth out your layers. This is because if you burnish too early on it will be really hard to add more colors in afterwards. To burnish effectively, hold your pencil close to the tip so you can apply more pressure to the paper, and use circular motions to smooth out your layers.

Make sure to always use sharp pencils when you are layering & burnishing! This is because blunt pencils will give you inconsistent shading and could scratch your paper!





TECHNIQUE 5: BLENDING

Burnishing is a common way to blend out your colored pencils, but it's not the only way! Colored pencils are a versatile medium and are archival with many other products & tools! You can also blend out colored pencils using:

- **Wet blenders – such as solvent, paint thinners, and gamsol.**
- **Dry blenders – such as colorless pencil blenders, and white pencils.**

What technique you use to blend your colored pencils purely depends on what your drawing subject is. Some blending methods may be suited more to some subjects than others. Also, you may find a difference between blending wax based pencils compared to oil based pencils. Wax based pencils in general are easier to blend as they are soft core and more creamy! However, you can still get great results with oil pencils! (you may just need to work a bit more on building layers before blending)

SOLVENTS (OR OTHER WET MEDIUMS)

Solvents can be a great way to blend colored pencils, as long as they are suitable for the subject you are drawing! They are best suited for blending more textured pieces, and can really speed up your drawing process as they bypass a lot of the layering & burnishing technique! (Remember to use paper that is suitable for wet mediums when using solvents, paint thinners, etc, to blend colored pencils)

To use a solvent effectively you should:

- Make sure you have the right amount of colored pencil layers first. Too little pencil layers will result in grainy results with a solvent, whereas too much pencil layers will smear colored pencil everywhere.
- Dab a paintbrush or cotton bud into the solvent and wipe away excess solvent with a paper towel – you don't want your paper soaking wet with solvent as this will leave stains!
- Gently start smoothing out layers of colored pencils. Use a little more solvent for your first layer, and then a little less for every layer you blend thereafter. (make sure you wait at least 20 – 30 minutes in between layers so the solvent dries!)
- Don't overdo it with blending as you may smooth out textures too much!
- Make sure your paper is completely dry if you want to go back in with colored pencils and add details in after! This is because you can damage the tooth of your paper if you start drawing whilst the paper is still wet.
- It's best to fix your drawings with a fixative spray after finishing as this will prevent smudges and smearing – also be wary of leaning your hand on your paper as you could pick up solvent!





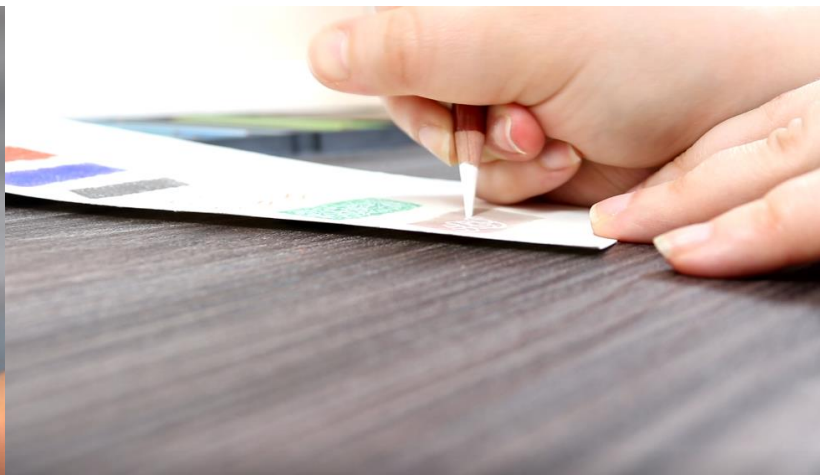
DRY BLENDING

Dry blending materials are another great and effective way for blending colored pencils! Dry blending methods include using a colorless blending pencil and using a white pencil for blending and smoothing colored pencils. You may prefer using dry blending methods with colored pencils as there is less mess than wet blending methods, and it's used often alongside the layering and burnishing technique.

1. **Colorless pencil blenders** – colorless pencil blenders are a soft pencil made from the same binder as colored pencils. There is no pigment to these pencils, so that is why they can be used to blend colored pencils, without the worry of altering colors! These pencils will allow you to create subtle blending and will eliminate the pencil grain as you blend. These pencils are best used to blend two or more pencils, and can also be used in combination with pencils to mix colors together.
2. **White pencil** – using a white pencil for blending colored pencils is effective as it is a soft color and helps blend colors together. A white pencil is best used to blend light colors together, as blending darker colors can lighten them up too much. It is best to use a white pencil for blending as a very last step in your drawing process, when you are ready to smooth down and blend your layers!



Colorless pencil blender



White pencil





TECHNIQUE 6: DETAILS

Adding details is one of the last steps to colored pencil drawings, but it's one of the most crucial techniques you will use with your colored pencils. Details are a core part of drawing as it will add finishing touches to your piece and brings a drawing together.

You can add details to your drawings just by using the colored pencils themselves, but there are also a few other handy tools that you can use which will make details even more realistic!

Creating details with pencils:

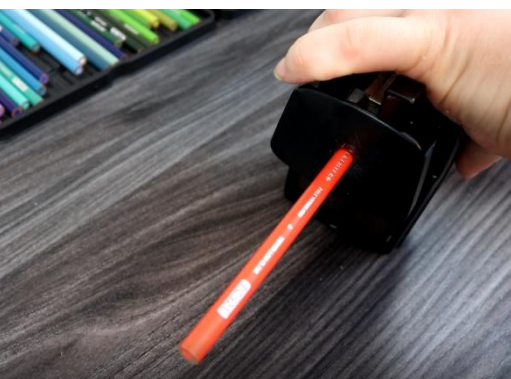
- To create details with colored pencils, make sure your pencils are sharp as sharp pencils create crisp details. Blunt pencils will create thick and fuzzy pencil strokes!
- Keep rotating the tip of your pencil as you are drawing. This will help keep the pencil sharper for longer and allow for more time in between sharpening. (Hatching will create crisp pencil strokes!)
- Oil pencils work best for creating details as they have a harder lead and can retain a sharp point for longer, but you can use wax pencils too! (you may just need to sharpen them more often)

Creating details with embossing tool:

- Use an embossing/ nail art dotting tool to gently indent your paper before you start applying your colored pencil layers! You should make indentations to mimic detail patterns in your subject.
- As you start to color in, you will notice that where you used the embossing tool earlier on those areas stay preserved as the paper has been flattened.

Creating details with an x acto/ craft knife:

- Use an x acto/ craft knife to gently scratch away colored pencil layers, revealing the base layers underneath.
- As you scratch away layers you will start to notice your drawings transform as this technique adds hyper realistic details!
- This technique is perfect for animal drawings & creating hair texture!



Sharp pencils



Embossing tool



X acto knife

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE!

Colored pencils will take some getting used to, and you may not see results straight away. What I can tell you though is that you will start to see progress the more that you practice!

I really hope this guide has helped you and has pointed you in the right direction if you are having trouble achieving the results you want. Please don't give up with colored pencils. They are a tricky medium, but I believe that everyone has the ability to improve their drawings if they use the right techniques and keep learning from their mistakes.

Thank you so much for downloading this free guide, and reading through it! I've created a handy shopping list below of colored pencil supplies in case you need a starting point for your colored pencil journey.

Some links are affiliated. I earn a small commission each time the links are used, at no extra cost to you. I invest the money straight back into my little business by buying new art supplies!

