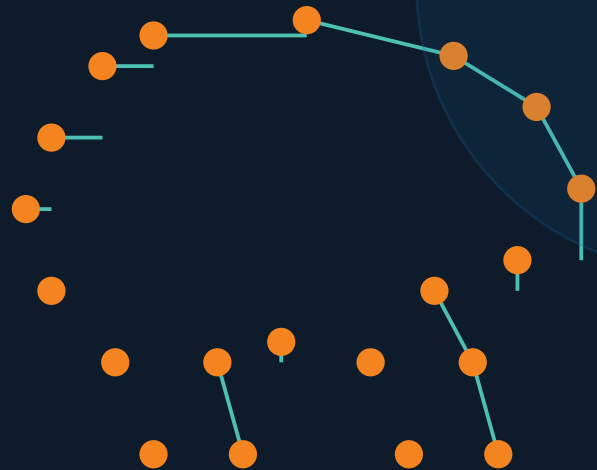


MODULE 10

Making the Pen Tool Painless (For Real!)

The constellation method, anchor point tool, and compound paths



Concepts at a Glance

Every tool and concept introduced in this activity

Pen Tool

P

Draw paths by clicking to place anchor points. Shortcut: P. Works best with minimal points — less is more.

The Constellation Method



Place straight-line anchor points around a shape like stars in a constellation — then curve the segments after.

Compound Path



Object → Compound Path → Make. Multiple paths treated as one single shape — including negative space (donut holes).

Anchor Point Tool



Shortcut: Shift+C ("starry constellation"). Click and drag any path segment to curve it between two anchor points.

Add / Remove Anchor Points

±

Press + to add points on a path by clicking it. Press – to remove a point by clicking on it. No path is disrupted.

Escape to End Open Path



When drawing with the Pen tool, press Escape to end an open path without closing it — no messy dangling thread.

P The Pen Tool Family

Four related tools — all accessible from the Pen tool group in the toolbar



P

Pen Tool

The main tool. Click to place anchor points — creates straight-line paths between them. Shortcut: P.

★ *Close a shape by clicking the first anchor point. A small circle appears to confirm.*



⬆C

Anchor Point Tool

Click and drag any path segment to bend it into a curve, shaping the path between two anchor points. Shortcut: Shift+C.

★ *Also drag existing handles to reshape curves. Hold to expose directional handles.*



Delete Anchor Point Tool

Click any anchor point to remove it cleanly without breaking the path. Activate by pressing the – (minus) key while the Pen tool is active.

★ *You can also click anchor points in sequence to prune unwanted kinks.*



Add Anchor Point Tool

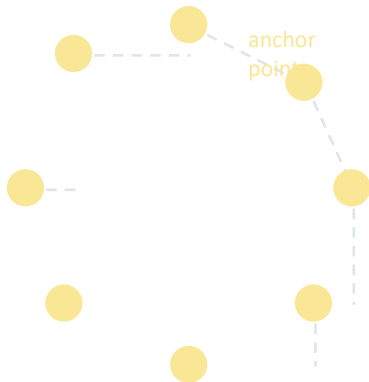
Click anywhere on an existing path to add a new anchor point at that spot. Activate by pressing the + (plus) key.

★ *New points are added with handles already fitted to the existing curve direction.*

The Constellation Method

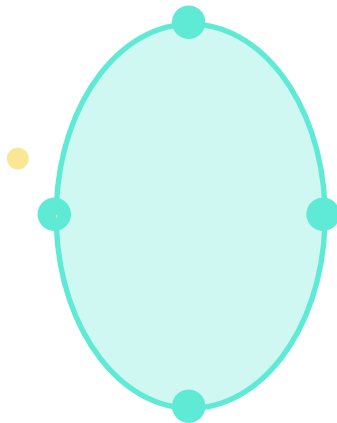
Place dots like stars — then curve the lines between them. Less dots = better results.

STEP 1 · Click to place anchor points



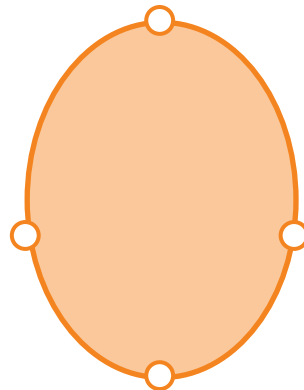
Work around the outline of your subject placing straight-line anchor points — like stars in a constellation.

STEP 2 · Shift+C — curve the segments



Switch to the Anchor Point tool (Shift+C). Click and drag any segment to bend it into a curve.

STEP 3 · Refine with A (Direct Selection)



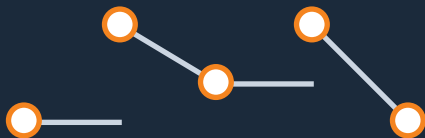
Use the Direct Selection tool (A) to move individual points, or Shift+C to adjust curve handles.

↑C Anchor Point Tool

Shift+C · 'Starry Constellation' · Curves the lines between anchor points

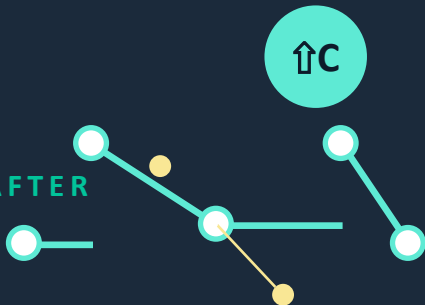
BEFORE vs AFTER

BEFORE



Straight segments
(just clicking with Pen tool)

AFTER



Smooth curves
(Shift+C drag applied)

Click + Drag to Curve

With the Anchor Point tool, click anywhere on a segment and drag to bend the line. The longer you drag, the more extreme the curve becomes.

Drag from Existing Points

Click and drag an existing anchor point to expose or reshape its directional handles — giving you precise control over the incoming and outgoing curve directions.

Twisted Path Fix

If dragging creates a twisted loop (figure-8), you've pulled the handle the wrong way. Swing it in the opposite direction to unwind it.

Works with Corner Widgets

After drawing with the Pen tool, you can also use the Direct Selection tool to select multiple anchor points and drag a corner widget to round them all at once.

Managing Anchor Points

Add, remove, and move points at any time — without breaking the path

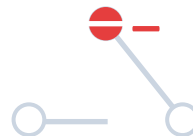
Add Point · + key

Press + while the Pen tool is active to activate the Add Anchor Point tool. Click anywhere on an existing path to insert a new point at that location with handles already fitted.



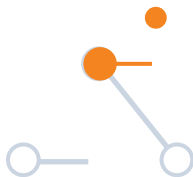
Remove Point · – key

Press – to activate the Remove Anchor Point tool. Click any anchor point to delete it cleanly — the path stays intact, reconnecting through the adjacent points.



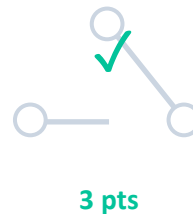
Move Point · A (Direct Selection)

Press A for the Direct Selection tool. Click any anchor point to select it (it turns solid), then drag it to reposition or use arrow keys for precision nudging.



Fewer Points = Smoother Results

Resist the urge to click too often. Every extra anchor point is another potential kink. Work your way around with the minimum number of clicks to keep curves clean.



Compound Path

Object → Compound Path → Make · Multiple paths treated as one single unified shape

TWO TYPES OF COMPOUND PATH

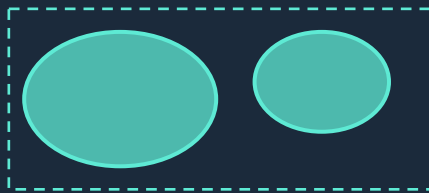
1 · Negative Space (Donut Hole)



Outer path +
inner cut-out path
= one shape with a hole

Example: elephant ear cut-out

2 · Disconnected Shapes as One



Two separate shapes
treated as one object
= Compound Path

Example: elephant body + head

How It Differs from Group

A group is just objects held together for convenience. A compound path is a single shape described by multiple paths — it can have a fill, stroke, and effects applied as one object.

Object → Compound Path → Make

Select all the constituent paths, then go to Object → Compound Path → Make. The type indicator shows 'Compound Path' instead of 'Group'.

What the Illustrator Compass Shows

When a compound path is selected, the type indicator (top-left) shows 'Compound Path'. This tells you the object is one unit even if it visually has holes or separate parts.

In This Activity

The elephant body, tail, and ear cut-out are merged into one compound path — so the whole elephant behaves as a single shape that can be filled, stroked, and scaled as one.

Closing Paths, Open Paths & the Asterisk

Three important signals from the Pen tool cursor



Close the Path · Small circle cursor

When you hover over the very first anchor point you placed, a small circle appears next to the cursor. Click to close the shape — connecting the last point back to the first.

When: Used for closed shapes like the elephant body.



New Path · Asterisk cursor

An asterisk (*) next to the cursor means you are about to start a brand new, disconnected path — not joining onto an existing one.

When: Use this to draw the tail or ear as a separate path from the body.

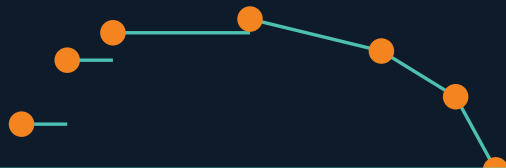


End Open Path · Escape key

Press Escape at any time to stop drawing the current path and leave it as an open path (two disconnected endpoints). Unlike the Pencil tool, the Pen tool doesn't end naturally.

When: Used to draw the ear line — an open path that is later expanded.

Module 10 Summary



Pen Tool

P

Click to place anchor points. Close shape by clicking start point.

Constellation Method



Place minimal points first — curve segments after.

Compound Path



Multiple paths as one shape — includes donut holes.

Anchor Point Tool

⇧C

Shift+C. Click-drag segments to curve them.

Add / Remove Points

±

+ adds a point. – removes a point. Path stays intact.

Escape to End

⌘

Finish an open path without closing it.

Next: Saving and Exporting your Illustrator work →