

How to emoji: a design tutorial

by TKodami

|| a tutorial written for Kinko and the manmanbangbang discord server || word count: 9685 ||

Table of Contents

Introduction	[page 1]
Step Zero: Before You Begin	[page 2]
Step One: The Searchening	[page 3]
Step Two: So the Emoji You Want Doesn't Exist	[page 6]
Step Three: Brainstorming	[page 7]
The four things you need to figure out before you begin	[page 7]
The Actual Brainstorming: Finding and Developing Ideas	[page 9]
<i>How do you find good prompts?</i>	[page 9]
<i>I have a prompt--what next?</i>	[page 10]
Step Four: To Base or Not To Base	[page 13]
Making Your Own Base Sketch	[page 15]
High Effort Emoji: Developing An Undersketch	[page 26]
Step Five: Making a Low Effort Emoji in Photoshop	[page 27]
Starting with an already existing base	[page 27]
Step Six: Making a Medium Effort Emoji (Photoshop)	[page 37]
Starting with a Sketch	[page 37]
Step Seven: Digitally Painting a High Effort Emoji	[page 54]
Starting with an undersketch	[page 54]
More Reading on Emoji and Emoji Making	[page 63]
Draw a High Effort Emoji From Scratch (Part Two in a different document)	

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Introduction

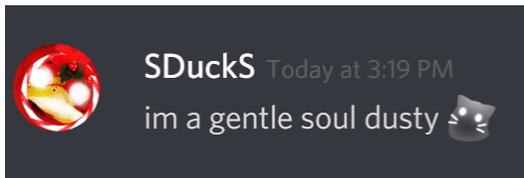
Hey, I'm **TKodami**, and this is my tutorial on emoji-making. You can find my fannish work on [archiveofourown](#). Once I'm relocated from the great Tumblr Meltdown of 2018, I'll provide a link to my work gallery.

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>> STEP ZERO: Before you begin <<

Maybe you vaguely remember someone using the perfect reaction emoji to a status last month. Maybe you're just hungry for emoji powers. If you are willing to brave the wilds of Discord Emoji servers, you can check out the [Emoji Servers section of disforge.com](https://disforge.com/emoji-servers). These emoji will be hosted on someone else's server, and you can get your hands on hundreds of emoji all at once.

So, before you begin: ask! Ask on your server, your friends, whomever!



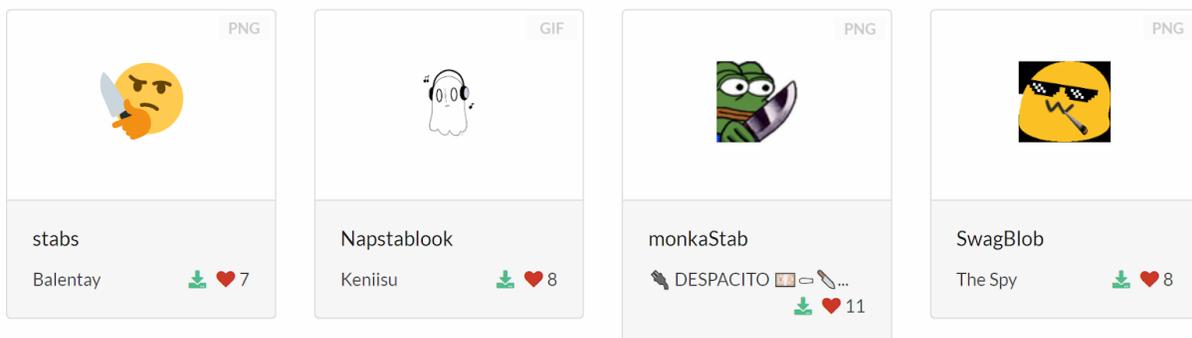
(I often ask SDeeyS for emojis. Let it be known that SDeeyS is a wonderful and gentle soul.)

>> STEP ONE : The searchening <<

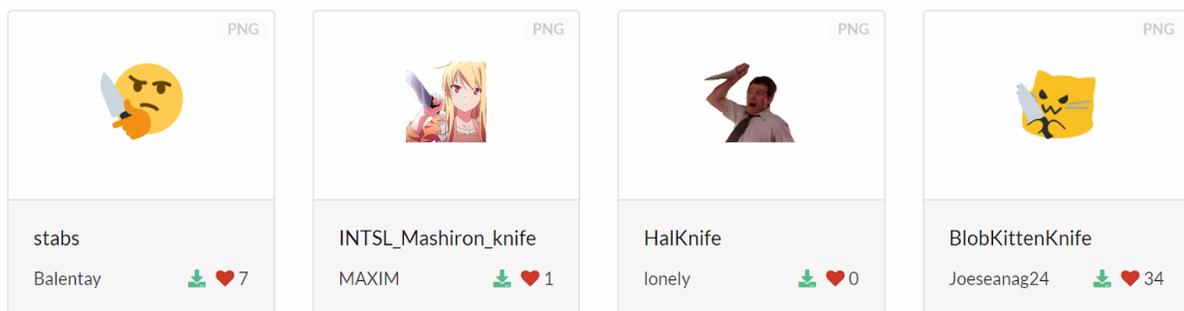
Think of the emoji that you want or need. Now, begin your search. If you haven't been taunted with an emoji you want by others, your first step should be to check major emoji aggregators. Check emoji.gg and the [emojipedia](https://emojipedia.org) to see if they have the emoji you want! Sometimes a simple Google search will turn up something, but unless you're looking for reference for an emoji you are drawing yourself, I wouldn't count on Google image search finding good emoji.

For example, let's say that you need a new stab emoji. Be sure to search for "stab" terms that are similar to "stab" when you go looking on emoji.gg. Or you can mix it up a bit, and search for something completely random, and see if that common emoji (blob, peek, etc) also has the mood you're look for.

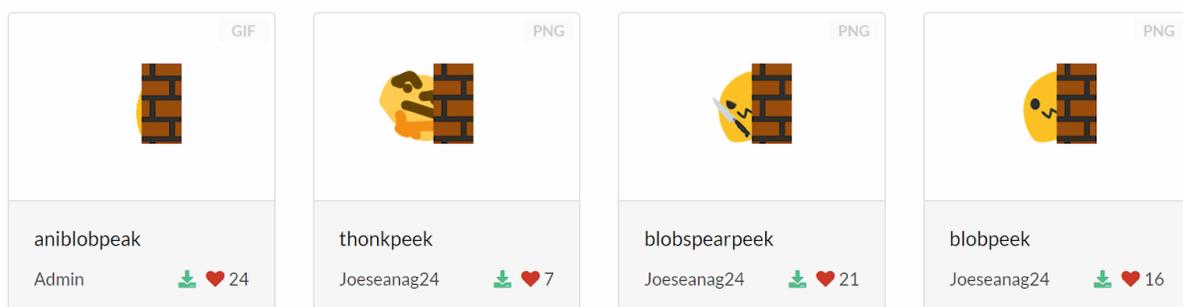
Results for "stab" on emoji.gg



Results for "knife" on emoji.gg.



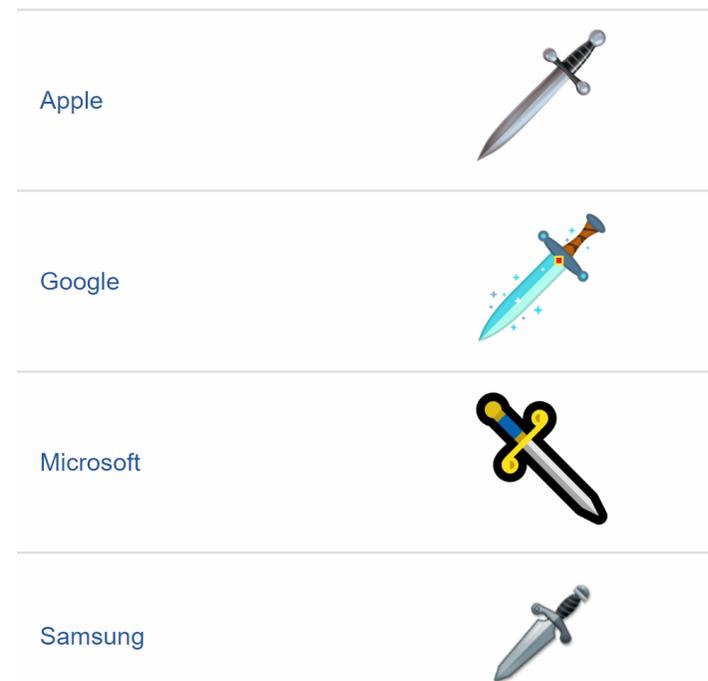
Results for "peek" on emoji.gg



Some of these emoji might be what you're looking for! **Blobspearpeek, BlobStab, and BlobKittenKnife** all look promising. If what you're looking for is an object (e.g. you want just the stabbing tool), you might also consider searching on emojiopedia. Emojiopedia has up through Unicode 11.0 emoji, plus you can learn more about upcoming emoji. Discord is stuck back in the dark ages, and doesn't have many of the emoji that have been rolled out for Facebook and Twiter, for example.

On Emojiopedia, you can see how emoji are interpreted across many different platforms.

Results for "stab" on the emojiopedia brings up the nearest emoji that it thinks you want. In this case, [dagger](#). Below are the results for the first four platforms; there are 10 different major platform emoji in total.



If you find what you're looking for, great! Save that image.

Images on emoji.gg & the emojiopedia are transparent .pngs.

When you find the emoji you want, right click & save (on a PC) and/or do whatever you need to do to bring up a save-image prompt (this probably works better at a computer than on mobile).

Next, upload the emoji on the server of your choice. It must be on a server where you have manage emoji permissions (e.g. usually its your own server). If you've never uploaded an emoji before, you can find the place to do so on your server settings tab.

MEEEEEE

Overview
Moderation
Audit Log
Roles
Integrations
Emoji
Webhooks
Widget

USER MANAGEMENT
Members
Invites
Bans
Delete Server

SERVER EMOJI

Don't let your memes be dreams. Add up to 50 custom emoji that anyone can use on this server. Animated GIF emoji may be used by members with Discord Nitro. Emoji names must be at least 2 characters long and can only contain alphanumeric characters and underscores. Emoji must be under 256kb in size.

Upload Emoji

ESC

EMOJI — 45 SLOTS AVAILABLE

Emoji	Alias	Uploaded By
	:these:	 Grizz0
	:ones:	 Grizz0
	:do:	 Grizz0
	:not:	 Grizz0
	:wiggle:	 Grizz0

ANIMATED EMOJI — 49 SLOTS AVAILABLE

Emoji	Alias	Uploaded By
	:wigglewigglewiggle:	 Grizz0

Add that emoji, set whatever tag you want for it between the :__:_: symbols, and you've now got a new emoji that you can use on this server (if you don't have Nitro) or on any other server where outside emoji are enabled.

>> STEP TWO : So the emoji you want doesn't exist <<

As so often happens, the emoji you want *doesn't* exist. Therefore, you gotta make it.

You know you gotta.



✓ sadness-snuggle



✓ Mirrothnk-squid-with-goatee



✓ mirrorsquid



✓ reverse_squidthonk



✓ 508672464126083072



✓ ghostawww



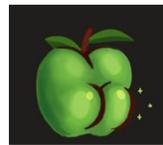
✓ ghost_awwtransparent



✓ ghostawww



✓ ghost_awww



✓ applethnk--origin-of-peach



✓ woahthnk



✓ applethnk

When I'm making an emoji from scratch, I usually follow a design process that starts with sketches, and ends with me checking the emoji a few times on an emoji test-server to see how good it looks on my screen at Discord sizes. This tutorial will present the full emoji design process, starting from "how do I figure out what emoji I wanna make?" to the final polishing stage.

A few things to keep in mind:

- + Emoji will be displayed at:
 - + 48x48 pixels for large emoji size
 - + 22x22 pixels for emojis in a line of text
 - + 16x16 pixels for reactions
- + If you're not used to working in tiny formats, you're almost always going to lose more detail than you're prepared for.
- + **Discord suggests that you upload your emojis at 128x128 pixels.**
- + There is a maximum emoji upload limit of 256 KB.
- + Emoji will look better, crisper, and have more detail on mobile than on desktop.
- + **For non-animated emoji:** even though Discord will size all emoji down to **128x128**, I find it's better to have final emoji dimensions of 200x200 or 250x250 for static emoji. That extra detail can make your emoji look very, very crisp if you are painting something detailed. I usually work in much larger sizes, from 700x700 pixels to 2000x2000 pixels depending on how much digital painting I expect to do.
- + **For animated emoji:** stick with 200x200 as the largest final emoji size. Scaling down an animation can make the movement look less crisp. Work smaller if you can!

- + It's always good to check your emoji against Discord-dark and Discord-light background colors as you're working. **This will keep any unwanted halo-ing of dark or light pixels** from occurring.

Don't worry about remembering these things. I'll remind you of these things again later, if/when they become relevant to the emoji-making process.

>> **STEP THREE : Brainstorming** <<

You need fresh, new thunks. Exciting new peaches. Some kind of crying/horror emoji ready for the next official sprint. If you already know EXACTLY what you want to make, skip down to **STEP FOUR**. If not, let me give you some help in how to brainstorm a new emoji.

When you're brainstorming what emoji you'd like to make, there are four important questions that you should ask yourself.

The four things you need to figure out before you begin:

1. Whether your emoji is going to be static or animated;
2. What kind of base you need;
3. What kind of mood you're looking for;
4. How detailed the emoji is going to be.

You can answer these questions in any order that makes sense to you.

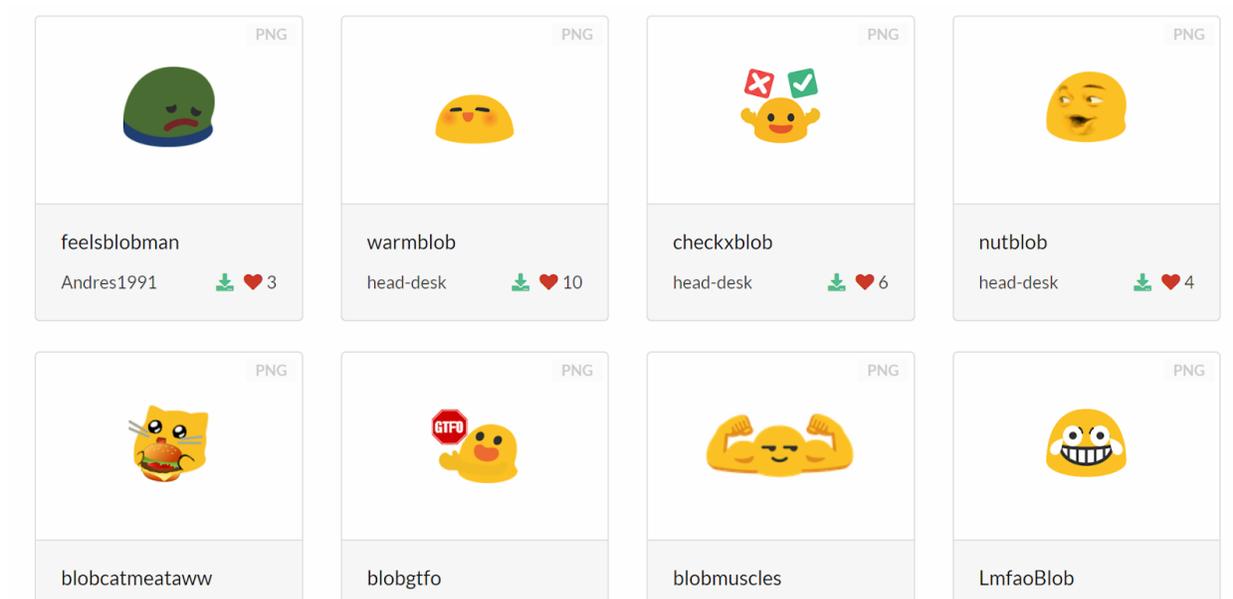
++Decide if you're designing a static or animated emoji. The process to design an animated emoji is much different than a static emoji. It will require you to think a lot about the animating process to make 2D motion happen. I'm a newbie in the realm of animation, so this tutorial will focus on **static emoji**.

++Decide what kind of mood you're looking for. Do you want an emoji that conveys love and excitement and the unsettling movement of your tiny shenanigan hands? Do you want to convey skepticism? Do you want to convey the feeling of stabbing? (It's stabbing, isn't it.) If you get hung up on "mood", try answering another question first.

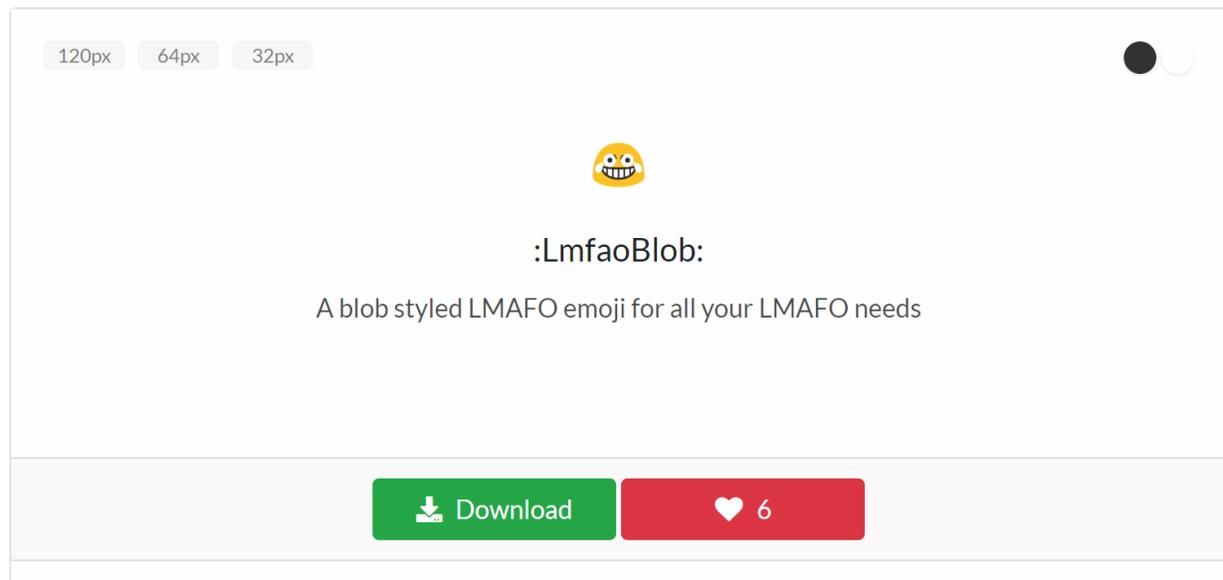
The most successful emoji are ones that convey a relatable emotion or activity. It's important that the emoji is understandable to others. If your emotion or activity is too complex or oblique, other people won't understand what your emoji means. It's okay if you have to explain your emoji to get the ball rolling on what it's about. As soon as people understand what it means, they'll begin using it and other people will pick up how to use it from them.

In this tutorial, we're going to design a **thunk**.

++Decide what kind of base you need. Certain shapes almost always look good and are “readable” at a small size of 32x32. So when there’s a format that works, use it to your advantage. The old Google blob emoji base is very popular.



A range of Blob emoji from discordemoji.com. The Blob base reads very well at big sizes, as well as Discord sizes. (below, displayed at 32px by 32px)



You can find a lot of emoji bases through google search as well, if you google the noun of the base you’re interested in + emoji / emoticon / vector / icon.

I’m a huge fan of the blob emoji base, but for this tutorial, we’re going to design with a **lion base**.

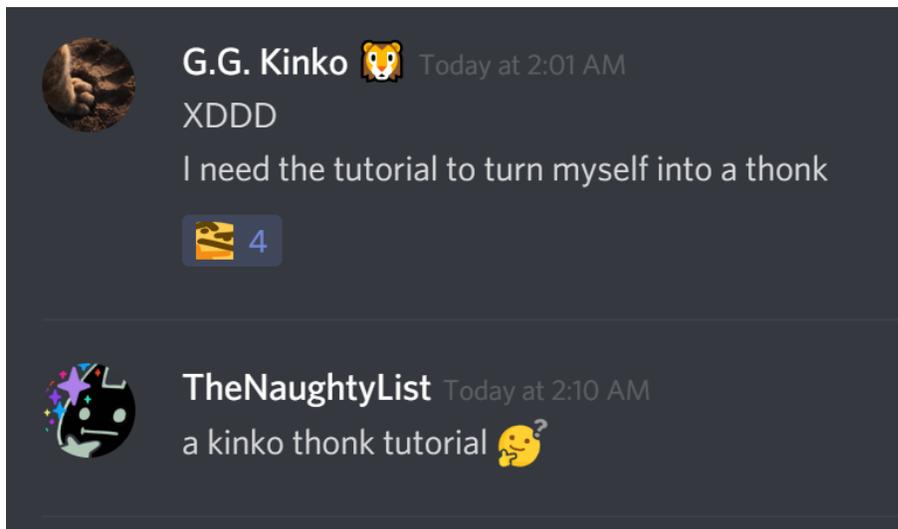
++Decide how detailed the emoji is going to be. You can make very elaborate painted emoji; or very simple vector emoji or anything in-between. I'm a digital painter, so I like to make elaborate painted emoji. You may like simple vector shapes. Do what feels natural to you!

For this tutorial, I'm going to (try to) do a **flat style emoji**.

The Actual Brainstorming: Finding and Developing Ideas

I have my answers to the four questions: I'm going to be designing a **static thank from a lion base in a flat style**. But how did I figure this all out?

I used a brainstorming map and someone's prompt. The prompt part was easy.



Make a tutorial about a kinko thank, so that Kinko can then make the ultimate kinko thank emoji. This immediately felt like a great idea, so I had my prompt.

How do you find good prompts?

In my experience, the best emoji come from people trying to use an emoji in conversation, but finding it doesn't exist. Whether this is you, or someone else in chat that's doing it--this is a powerful way to come up with emoji idea. The best part is that you already have an image in mind of exactly what that missing emoji should be.

I tried to use the non-existent :gemsquid: emoji for at least a week before I realized I should just make it.



This could happen in a range of contexts, since Discord is stuck back on Unicode 2.0 or something equally dire. Someone looking for a miso soup emoji and not liking any of their options. Someone else looking for a really harmless looking thinkyface, and finding Discord only has :thinking:.

A lot of amazing emoji ideas arise naturally in chat. I often keep a little file of emoji ideas I like that have flitted through chat, and will go to that idea file if I need inspiration for a new emoji.

Another good place to find ideas is when people propose an emoji they would make if they had the ability/time/interest/tools. If a person is musing about an emoji they'd *like* to see, and maybe they could make it happen but they've concluded that they can't—that's a great way to kickstart your own ideas. **Be sure that the other person is okay with you taking the idea and running with it.** If someone is talking about an idea they might want to make themselves, you might be stepping on their toes if you decide to work on it yourself. Emoji are a bit like fanfic in that, if you have Nitro, there's no way to run out of emoji. Everyone can have their own thunks. Even if we had five eggthunks, there would never be enough of them. But if you're planning to make someone else's idea, **the best practice is to always ask someone directly if they're okay with you using an idea that they originally proposed.**

I have a prompt--what's next?

The next thing to do is to start brainstorming! Any kind of brainstorming will do. Lists, journaling, free association word bubbles—you name it. If you've never used a formal brainstorming technique, [there are lots out there](#).

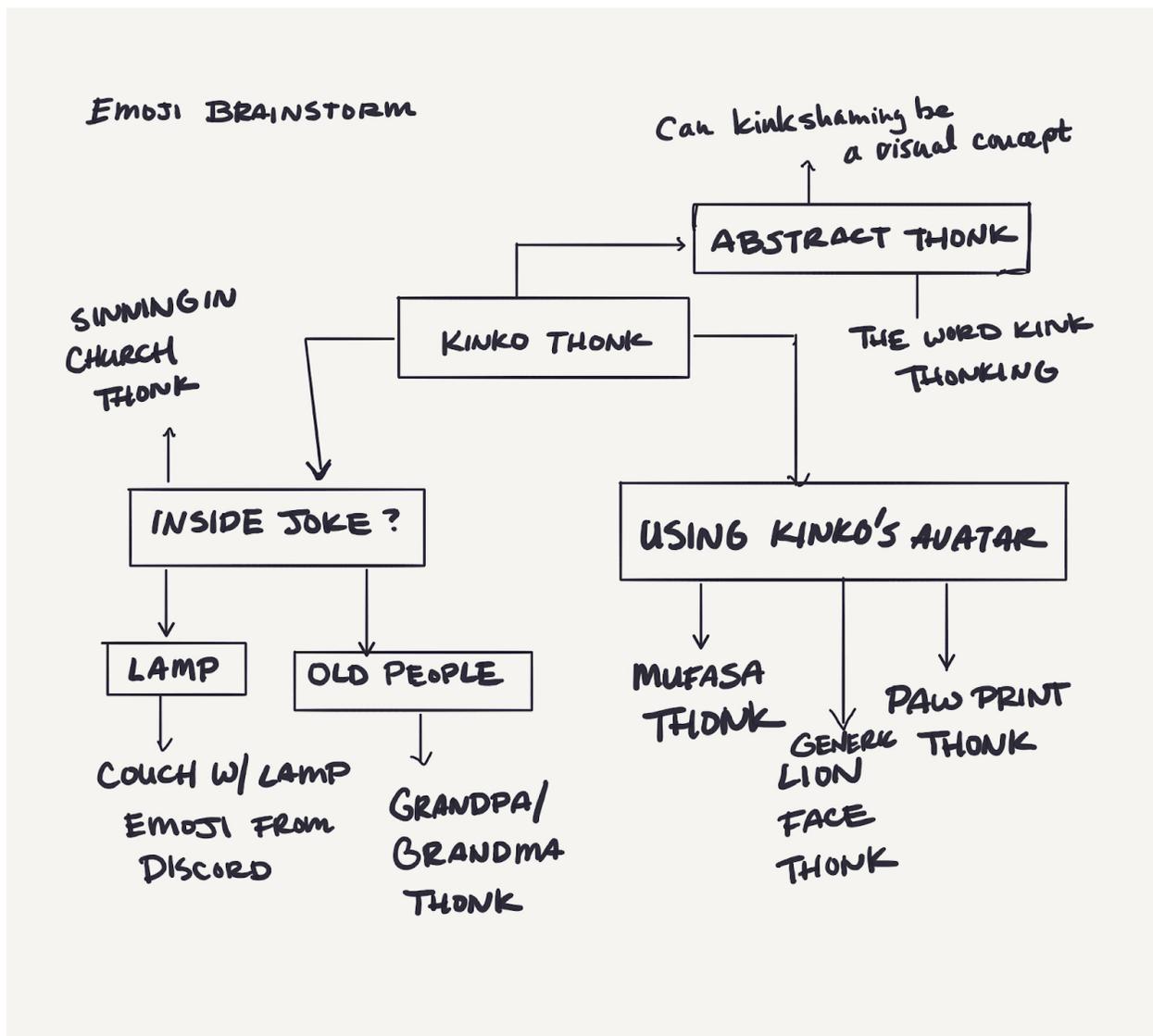
When I'm working on design projects I like to use a somewhat informal brainstorming map. In this brainstorming map, I've made the prompt the central focus. Then when I move from the central prompt out to the first layer of ideas, I ask myself the question, "how could I tackle making a kinko think?"

Every time I come up with an overarching answer to that question, I create a new branch. I end up with three different branches, or directions I could go with a Kinko think: **an inside joke, an abstract think, or a think based on one of Kinko's avatars.**

Once I have my directions, I ask myself the further question of “what could visualize this branch”? If I have any further ideas from there, or the idea isn't quite visual enough to translate into an emoji, I keep thinking about and refining that idea.

At the end of my brainstorming session, I have a range of directions I could go. I could make a **couch with a possible sexy lamp thong**, which would be an inside joke about sexy lamps that got started during the Superbat Reverse Bang. It's a strong idea, but it would be a bit alienating to people who weren't on the server during the Sexy Lamp Epoch. I could make a **sinning in church thong**. This idea is very strong in the abstract, but it's not visual. If I could figure out how to make a tiny “sinning in church” emoji, I'd make a mint off of it.

The **Mufasa thong** or **generic lion face thong** seem like great ideas. They're widely applicable to Kinko's enduring love of Mufasa; Discord has lion emoji, so I know they can be a readable emoji; it's a strong visual idea for a thong; and because Mufasa is an already-existing character, I won't have to do a ton of research on the subject. In fact, I'm sure someone's already made a Mufasa or a lion that looks like Mufasa emoji base, if I wanted to save myself some time.

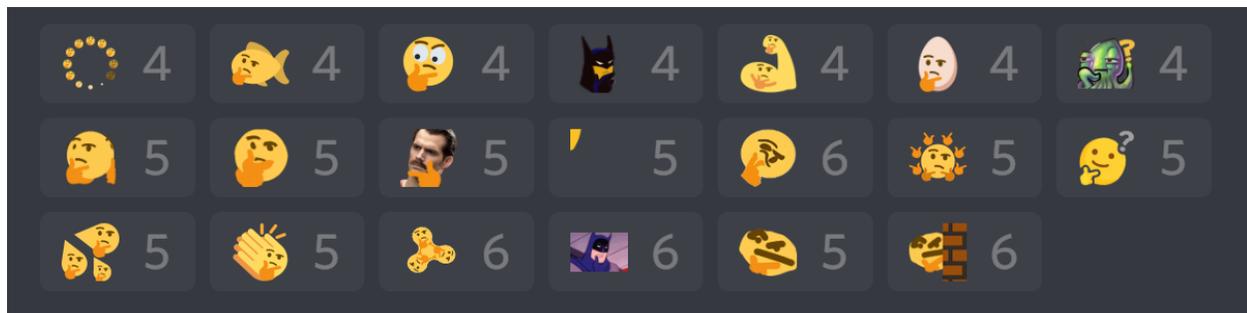


The most important thing about brainstorming is that you take time to let your ideas develop. You can use the first thought that jumps into your head. But it's almost always better if you think your ideas through, so you can be sure you're choosing the strongest possible version of your concept.

(Goodbye, sexy lamp think; you will be saved for another day!)

The next thing to do is to look at other emoji that might inspire you for the project. This project is a think, so I look at all of the thunks I like on the server.

All of the thunks from the Thanksgiving announcement in #events-and-announcements.



Most of these thunks are flat-colored, or have minimal cel-shading. Then there's the highly elaborate :squidthunk:, which is painted in a style so it will fit in with the other squids. I want my Mufasa thunk to fit in with the other thunks, **so I'll start with a flat or simple cel-shaded style**. If I end up not liking how it looks, I can move on to more complicated rendering later.

The next phase of my brainstorming should be to gather more Mufasa and lion reference for the emoji-making that is to come. Once I have reference that satisfies me, it's time to move to the next step.

>> STEP Four : To Base or Not to Base <<

I've gotten myself a prompt. I've answered the four important questions about what this emoji is going to be. I know I'm going to be making **a non-animated think from a lion base in a flat style.**

In short, I'm making **a Mufasa think.**

I tend to think of the three different methods of emoji creation as **low-effort**, **medium-effort**, and **high-effort** emoji creation. In this tutorial, I'm going to do a low effort and a medium effort emoji. In general, you should probably pick the one that means **the most amount of joy for the least amount of work**, depending on the requirements of your project.

Low Effort. If the base or shape you want to use for your emoji already exists, find an emoji that uses the base you want, and load it into the image editor of your choice. I will be using Photoshop for this tutorial, but any image editor or vector program that can export an image with a transparent background should do the trick.

There are several images that I could use as an already-existing base. The lion emoji from Discord, a picture of Mufasa's face from a Lion King screencap that looks sufficiently thonky, or a Mufasa emoji/icon that's already been released by Disney for one of their games. I also found a spirit Mufasa emoji that might be useful for later.



Medium Effort. If the “base” or “shape” you want to use doesn’t exist, you’ll have to design it yourself. Bases can be easy to design if you keep a few things in mind.

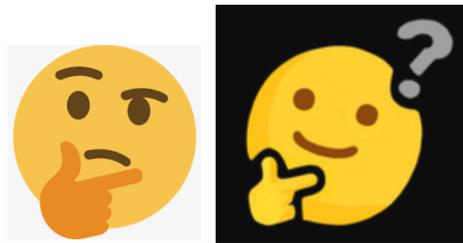
- Successful emoji base are simple shapes that lend themselves well to a range of expressions or emotions.
- Symbolic color and symbolic shapes will communicate more than complex detail.
- High contrast color choices will make your base “readable” at tiny sizes.

The best emoji base will be **distinctive and emotive** or **versatile**. They will rarely be both.

Emotive emoji base: Google blobs

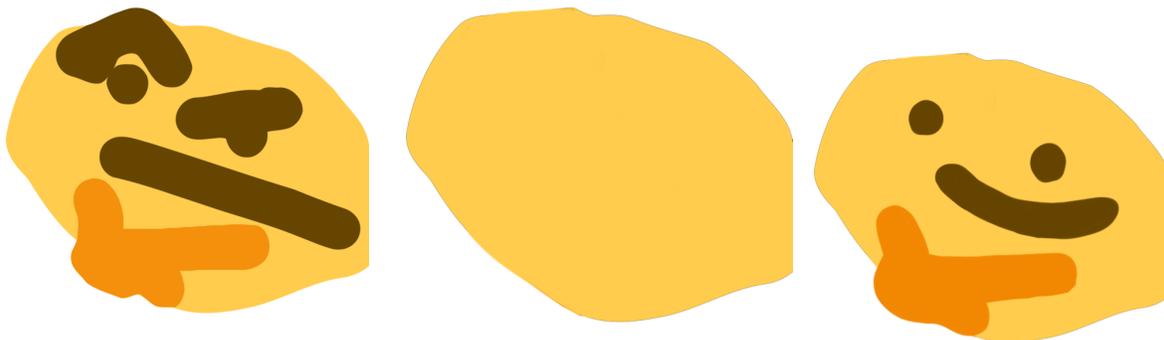


Versatile emoji base: Discord/Twitter's circle emoji



If you’re familiar with animation principles of squash and stretch, you’ll remember that taking a solid object and changing its properties—like stretching out its base—will give an emoji base a really strong visual energy.

Think has a lot of energy. Some of it comes from its expression. A lot of it comes from its base.



The think is a successful emoji because it’s using symbolic color and shape choices. It’s taking the colors of the Discord thinking emoji and remixing them. The “orange thinking hand” becomes an even further abstracted, crude shape. But we all know what the think is doing. We recognize the basic hand shape/color.

Making Your Own Base Sketch

You can start in your image editing program or vector program of your choice. Or you can start in whatever you use to sketch to create a quick shape as your base. I suggest using a program that has excellent symmetry tools. [Sketchbook Pro](#) is my favorite for quick sketching. It’s a lightweight program compared to Photoshop. And I like its line smoothing better than

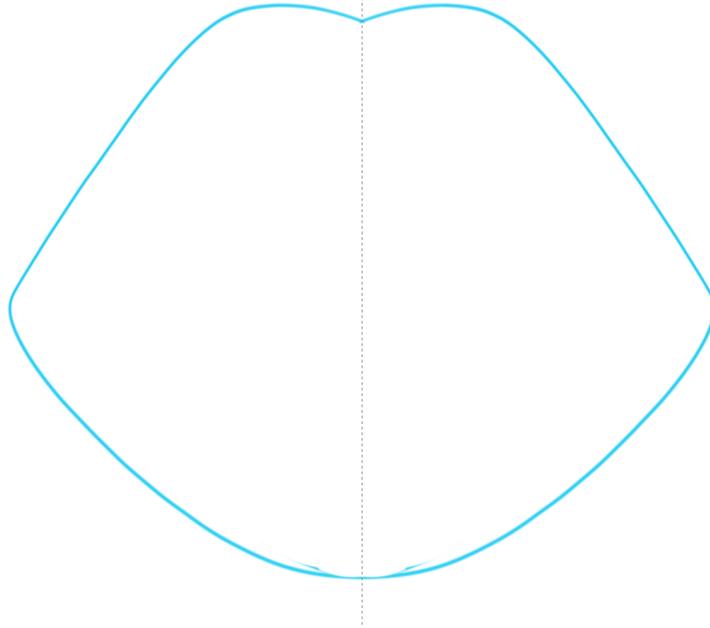
Photoshop CC's. Symmetry tools and line smoothing will speed up the emoji drawing process considerably.*

When you're making an emoji base, pay attention to silhouette and shape. You'll want strong shapes that read well at small sizes. You're just sketching right now, so rough lines are fine.

I open up my reference image of Mufasa. The best reference for emoji are head-on views. This will give you the best angle to analyze the shapes of the original.



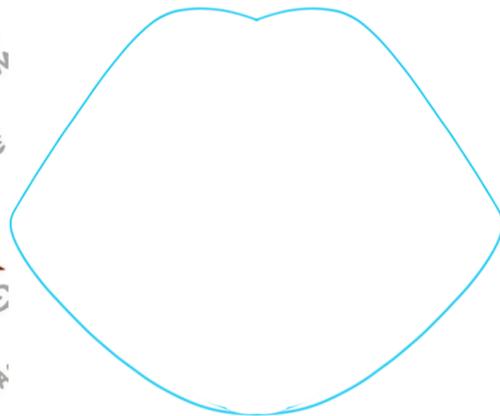
Starting the first base with a silhouette. Mufasa has a very distinctive mane part, so I make sure there's a little "part bump" at the top of this emoji shape. Vertical symmetry is selected in Sketchbook, and line smoothing is set to 35.



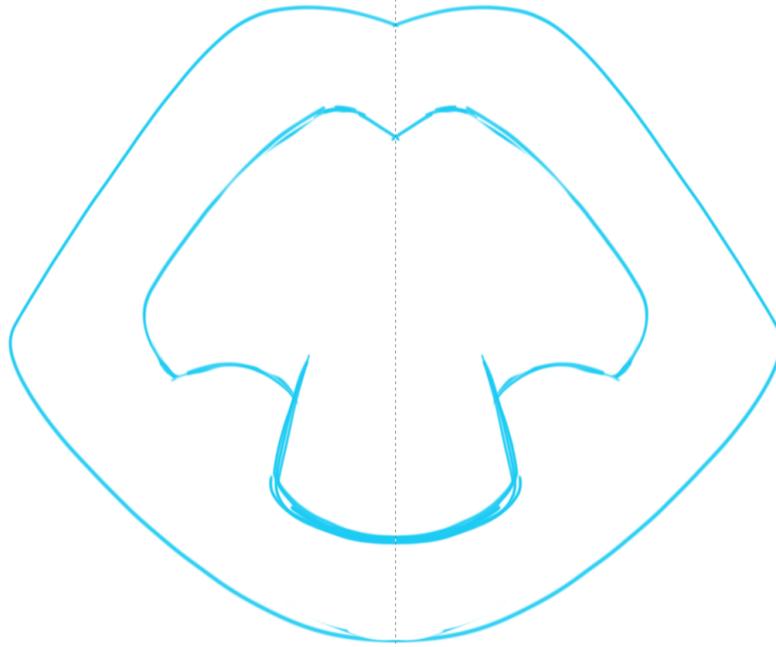
Rather than go for a shape that will fit into a square, I'm going for a slightly squashed emoji look.

There are four major elements to making this base look like a lion: **face shape**, **muzzle**, **ears**, and **mane**.

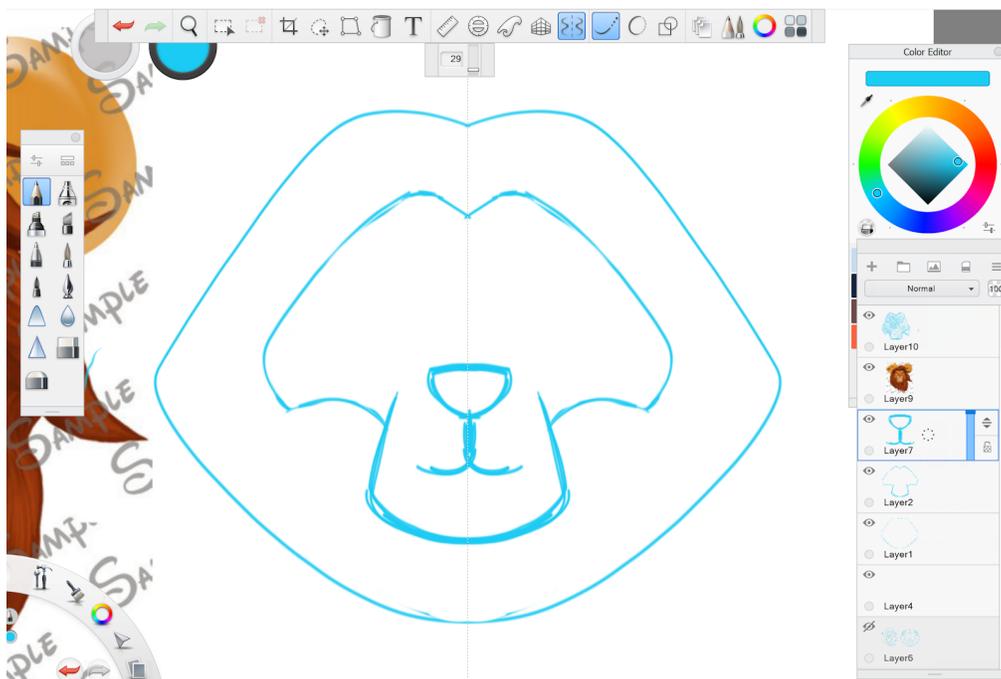
Let's start with the **face shape**. The mane will be created when I add the inner face shape lines. Referencing the Mufasa image, I pick out the major shapes of his face.



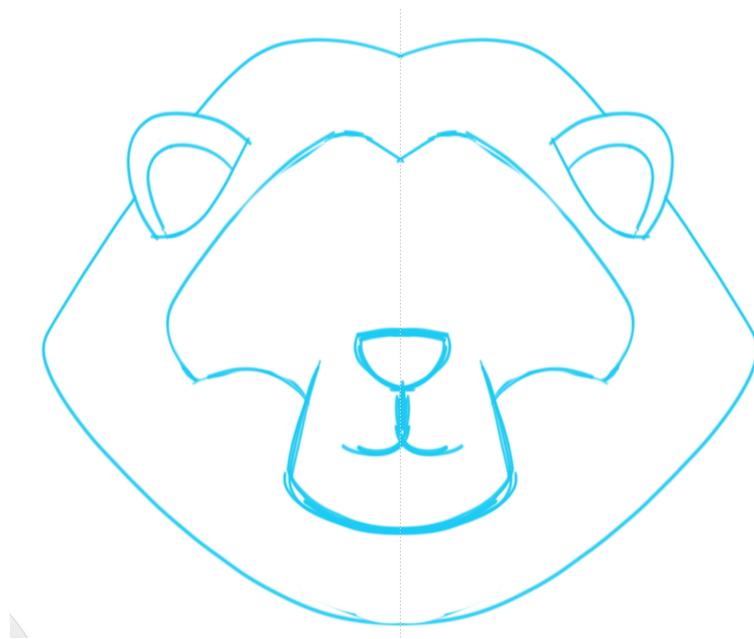
The next step is to recreate a shape like this in my emoji, abstracting, simplifying and smoothing as I go. Here's my first attempt at a face shape.



I like the result of this face shape, even though it doesn't feel like a lion yet. Next, I will add a nose and mouth. Emoji rely on the concept of **closure** more than many other art forms. So you don't need to draw the whole muzzle. Just imply where it is with the very rounded form of the nose.



Let's add some ears. The ears will be popping out from the mane, so there should be lines in front of the ear-shapes to imply the mane sweeping down in front of the ears.



Looking at the emoji, the ears don't look right. The ear shapes could be simplified more to fit in with how the muzzle is simplified. **I can use closure to imply the shape of the inner ear.** The mane sweep at the bottom of the ear also doesn't feel like it's working.

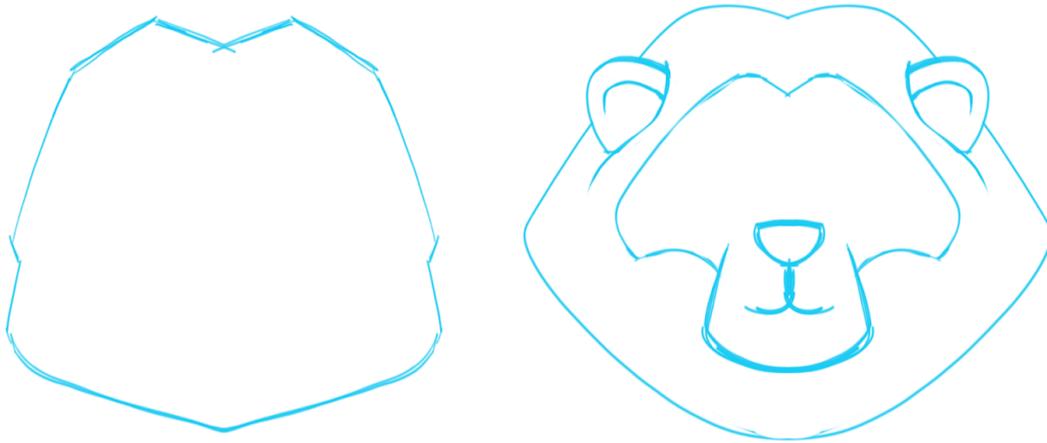
I've drawn each part of the emoji on separate layers so far, so I can go back and edit lines for the ears on their own layer without worrying about destroying any other part of the linework.



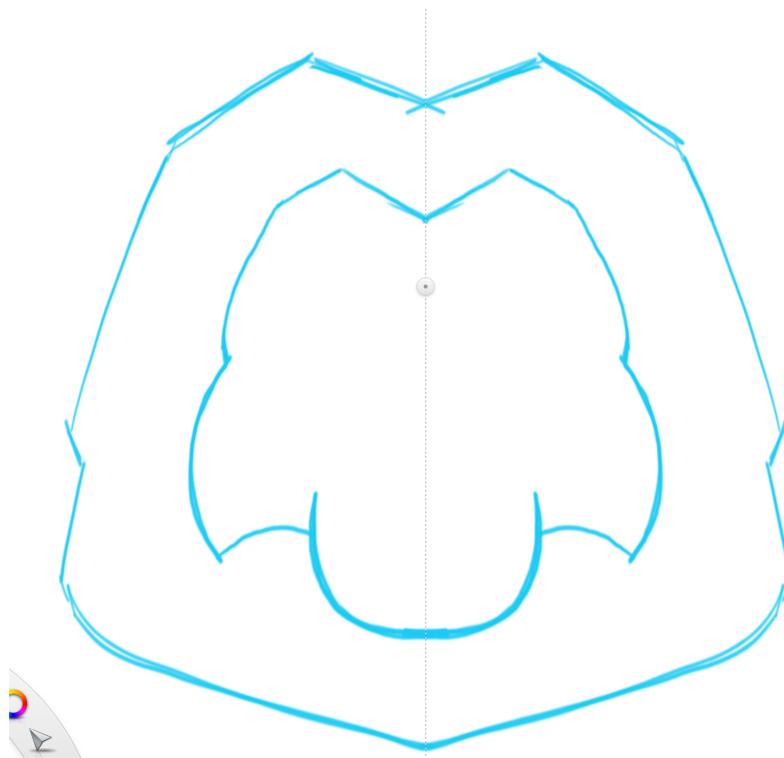
The ears now look like they belong to this base.

I like this sketch, but I think I'll do one more emoji base sketch before I move on to the next part to illustrate a few different principles of emoji design. **I'm going to do an emoji base that has a much "higher effort" look.**

I move my symmetry line to a new spot and turn off line smoothing. This base is going to look more geometric; it's easier for me to add blocks of hair when everything looks like geometric blocks. Like before, I start with the **silhouette**. I pull up the image of Mufasa in my image editor, and build this silhouette by eyeballing the respective proportions of the face.

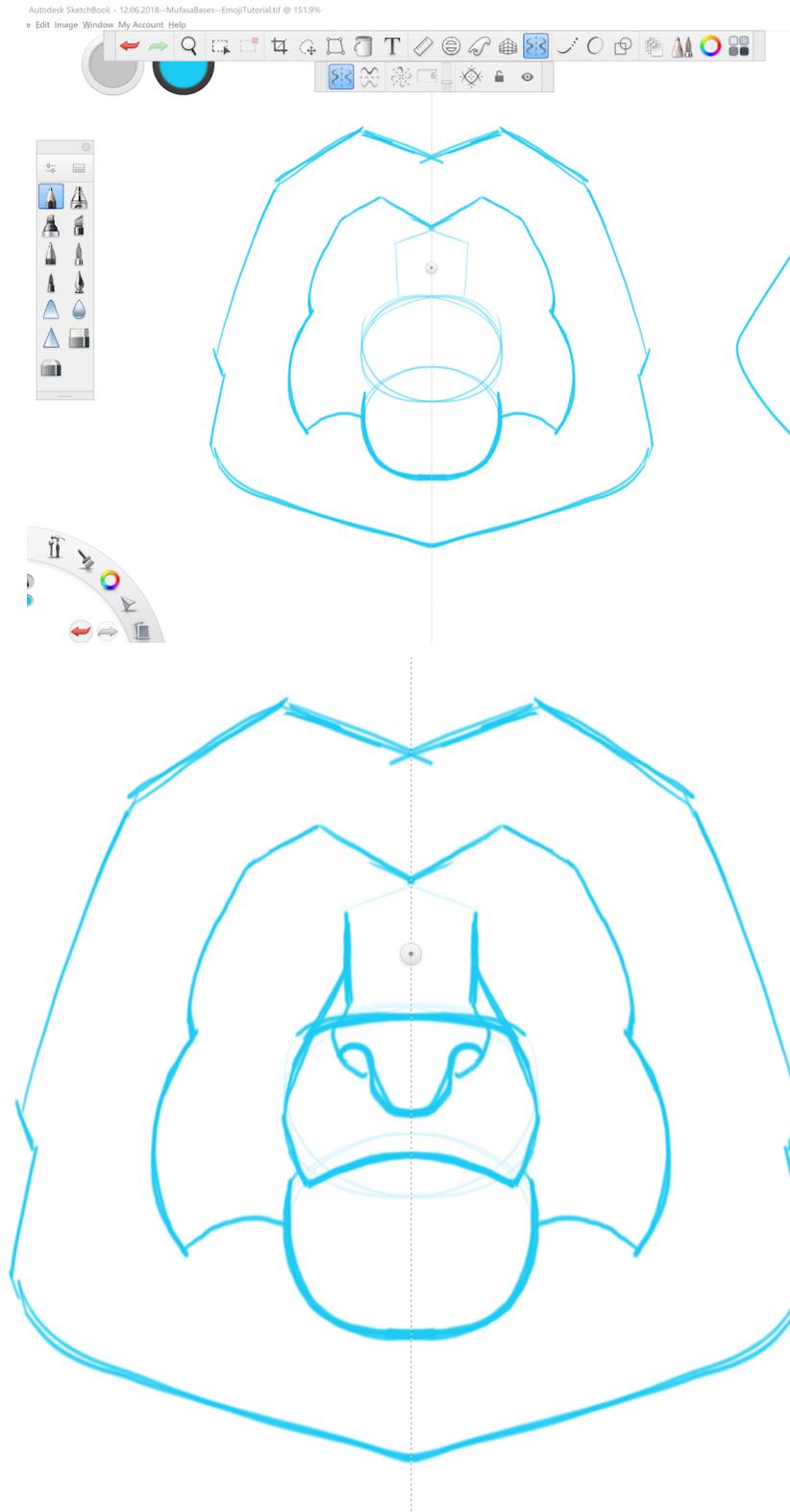


Next, I add the **face shape**.



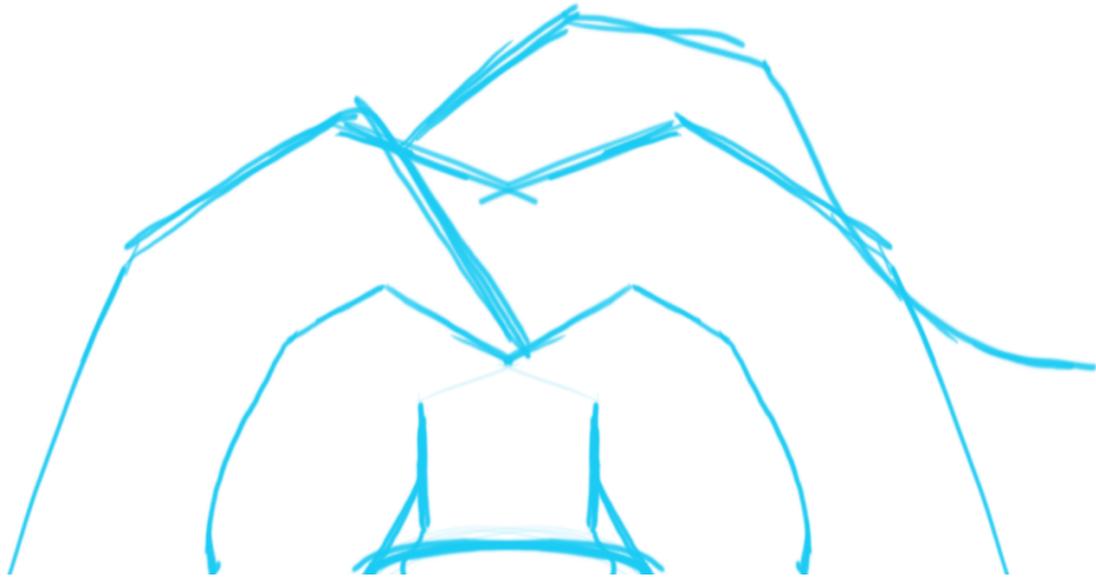
Now, I add the **muzzle**. This is where the two bases are really going to start diverging in their look. Instead of using the extreme closure I did before, I'm going to draw a more substantial-looking muzzle.

There are three "masses" in the muzzle. I lay those down first as guidelines. Then I draw the muzzle over these guides.



So far, the symmetry has been pleasing. But I reach this stage, and it looks too unnatural for the emoji base I want to make. It's time to turn off the symmetry line, and start laying in the **mane**.

Locate where Mufasa's main part is, and start by laying in the big lock that springs off of it.



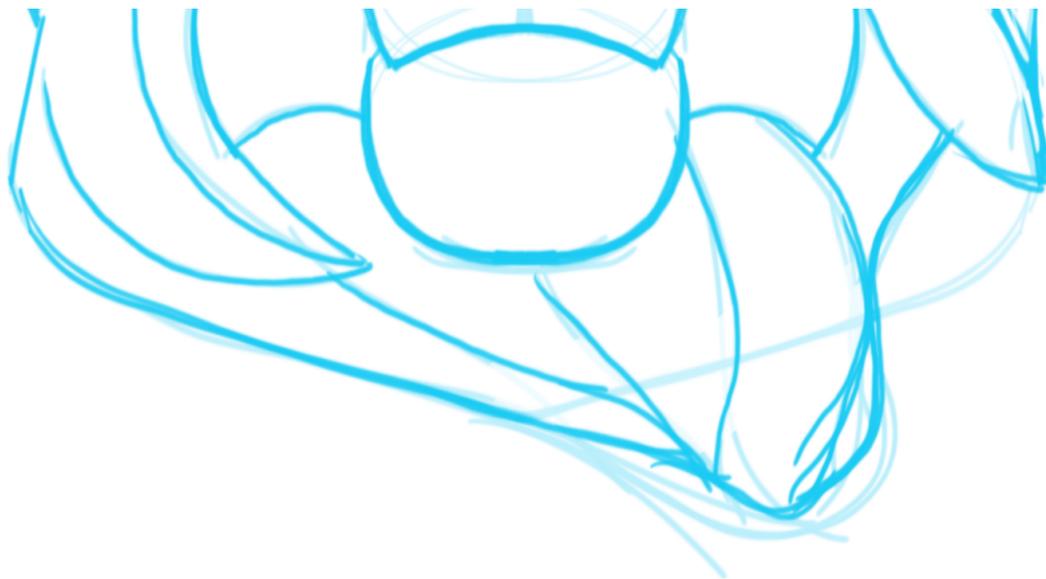
Give the lock dimension. I've painted the original silhouette out with white on a layer set to 75% opacity, so I can see the old line underneath it, but not be too bothered by it. I've added Mufasa's little spit-curl lock over his forehead.



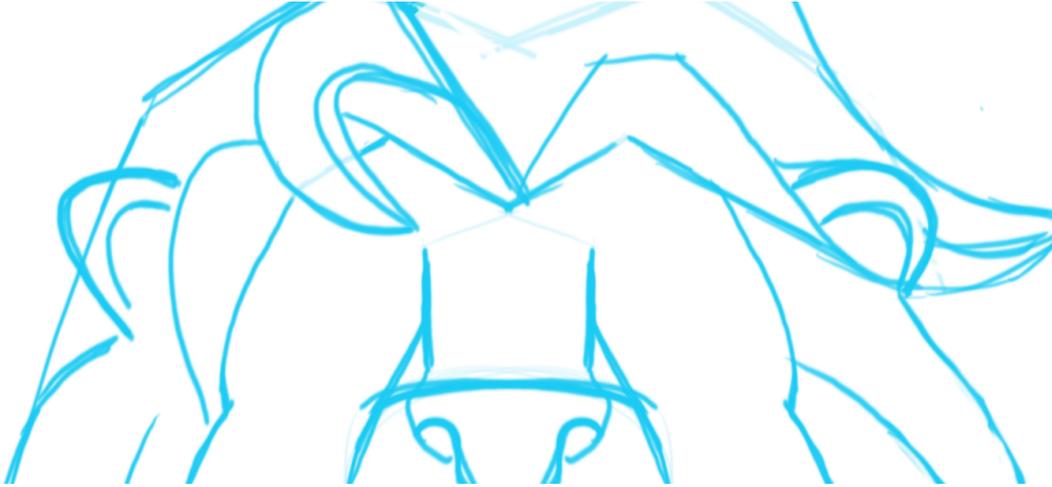
Tackle the sides of the mane next. Add enough locks so that the entire mane looks active. I've added one big lock on the right side; and one big lock that sweeps down on the left side. I also have added one curve to imply a lock near where the left ear is going to be.



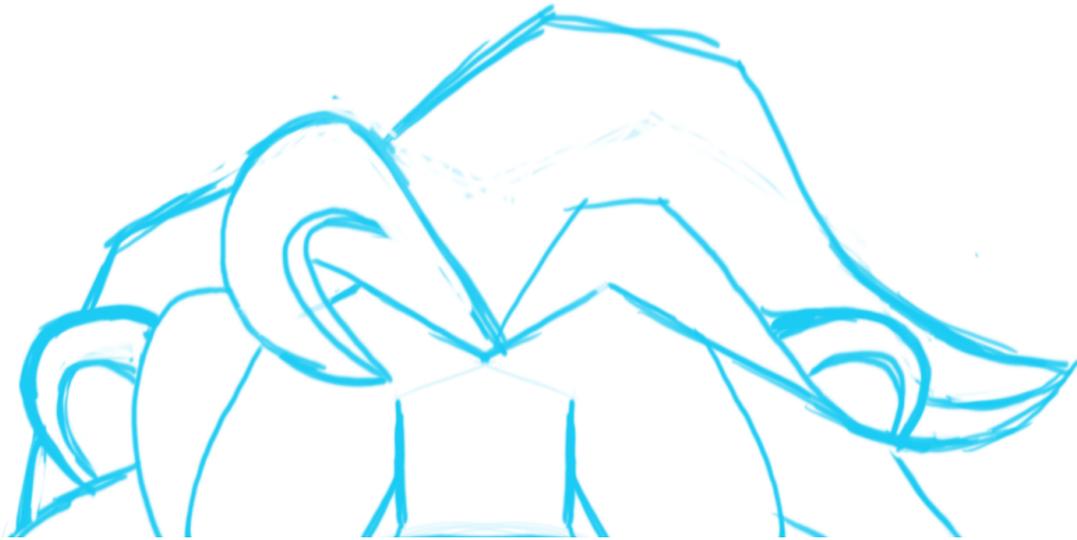
To my eye, Mufasa looks wind-blown, so I want the bottom of his mane to stream out to the right. If this ends up adding too much visual noise to the base, I can come back later and crop it out of the final emoji. I am painting out the background silhouette as I go on the 75% opacity layer.



Time to add the ears! The ears will be interacting with the mane. They'll look like little circle protrusions from the activity of the mane. They're not meant to be prominent.



Now it's time to clean up all of the unnecessary lines, and pay attention to the lines I've drawn. I'm not too happy with the left ear. It needs to be more rounded to match the right ear. I also clean up [any tangents](#) that appear in my drawing. I clarify where shapes overlap a little better.



Cleaning up your lines can be pretty time-consuming. Remember that this is just a rough sketch. No one needs to see any of these stages.

Once you have a sketch you're satisfied with, it's time to compare your two base sketches.

Here are the two base sketches we completed side by side. Our very complex Mufasa (left) and our very simple, more "emojified" Mufasa (right).



...And then after a fit of dissatisfaction with Complex Mufasa's mane where I decided I needed it to look fluffier...



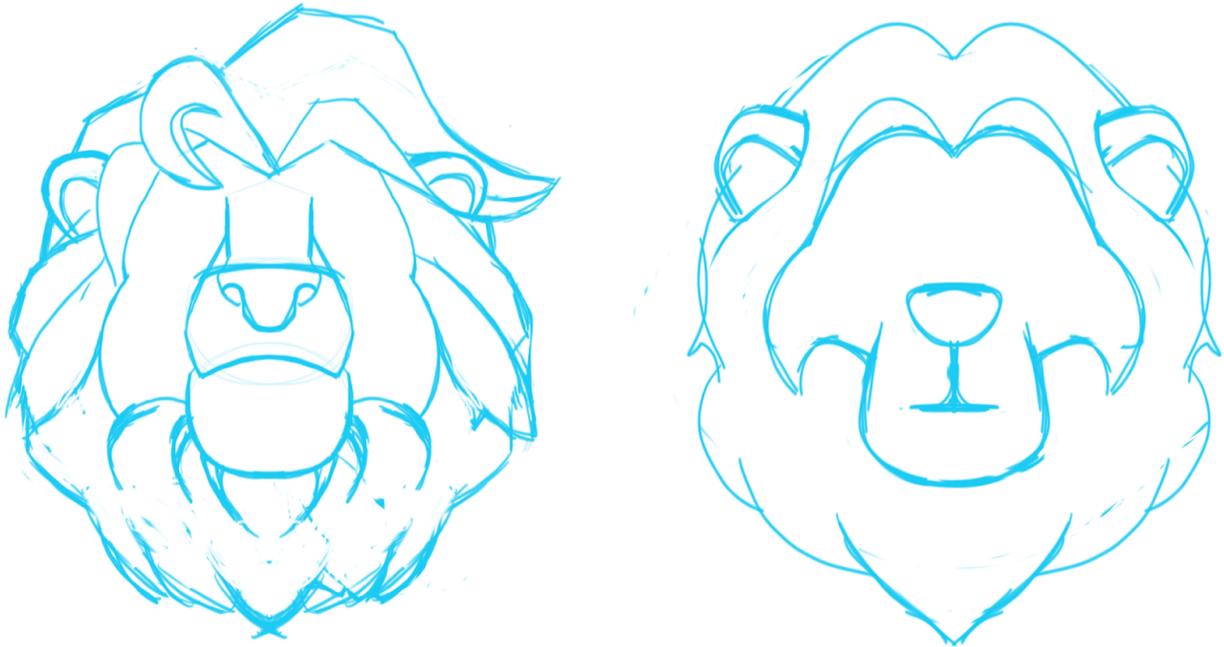
I notice the right ear is still wonky on the Mufasa base. It can be fixed later. xD

Now's the time to examine their **impact**. How does each base--without color, without any other expression markers--make you *feel*? What kind of impact are you hoping to make with your emoji? Are you excited about the hilarity of a very polished and regal-looking Mufasa face contrasted with a very simple thinky hand? Do you like the harmless/gentle vibes of the second emoji base?

You can also try iterating the design. Try even more abstract shapes: like a rounded square with mane. Or a thong base with a shaggy lion mane. Learning to make solid designs is all about learning how to manipulate shapes. If you don't have a solid handle on shape design, there are

plenty of tutorials you can look at to help sharpen your skills. You can also try design borrowing. If you're interested in getting the best possible base, your best bet is to iterate the design.

Merge all of your layers, and then set your sketch layer's opacity to 30%. Sketch another design over your last, keeping the shapes that work and trying new shapes over it. Borrow elements from both of the bases. Simplify the shapes of the Complex Mufasa and add complexity to the Simple Lion.

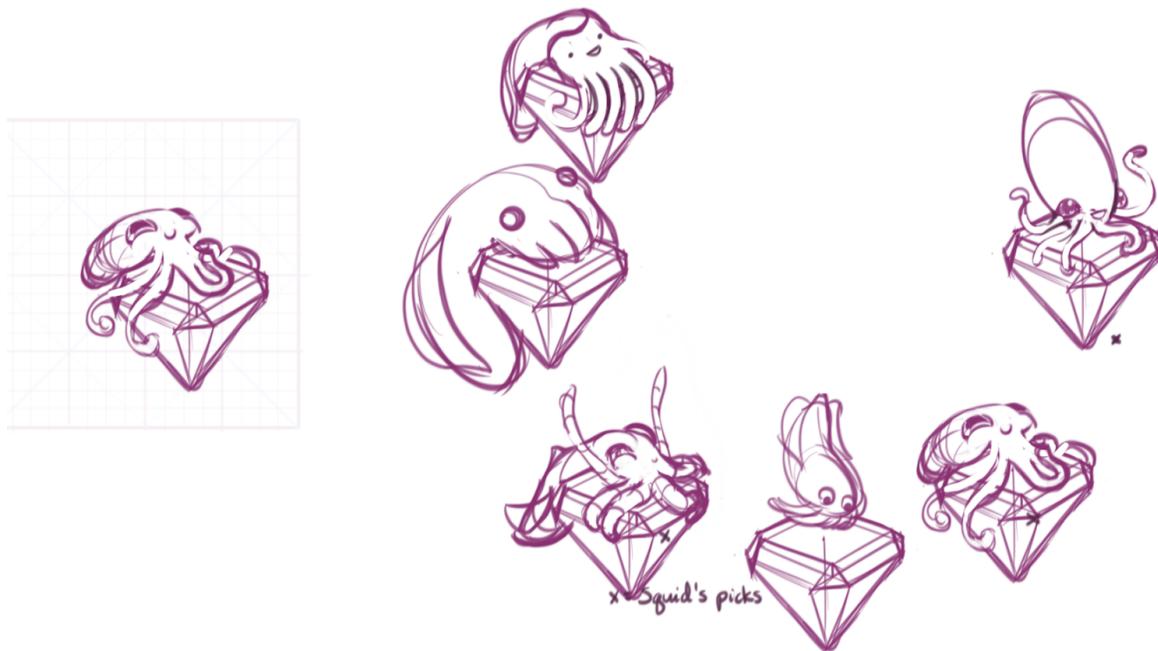


The two bases after another round of **design iteration**. I've added more symmetry to the Complex Mufasa's mane, and I've added complexity and detail to Simple Lion's face shape and silhouette. I could keep iterating the design from here, but I like the results of this phase and will stop here for the tutorial.

Note on High Effort Emojis. If you want to develop a completely one-off emoji that doesn't look **generic**, you're likely designing an emoji that is more than just a face shape. For these complex emoji, you need to design the mood/shape/tone from the ground up. This is the most difficult and time consuming path (though it'll get easier with practice).

Like any good illustration project, a high effort emoji starts with some development sketches that explores a range of possibilities of your concept.

High Effort Emoji: Developing an Undersketch



Pictured: gemsquid development sketches. The sketch selected to be the gemsquid emoji is set off to the left.

Take the case of :gemsquid:. I knew I wanted to have a tiny squid on a gem, but I didn't know how I wanted to convey the tiny squid's feeling about its shiny loot. I knew what I wanted the gem to look like. Big, triangular, blue. So I drew a gem in a perspective I liked, and then I duplicated it a bunch of times and drew a bunch of different squid on it having very different feelings about it. I asked Squid for his input about which ones he liked best. From this narrowing-down process, I was able to settle on the drawing that embodied the "I GOT IT, YESSSS IT IS MINE" feeling.

In a high effort emoji, the process looks almost exactly like a digital painting process...except you cut it out from its background at the end. So don't bother to refine a sketch any further than rough lines that are basically correct; you are going to be painting over this sketch during the emoji-making process.

For the sake of keeping this tutorial a reasonable length, I won't be showing you the full process. If you want to know more about High Effort emoji, [check out the High Effort Emoji Guide here](#). But I will touch on some key points that set high effort emoji apart from other types of emoji-making in **Step Seven**.

>> STEP Five : Making a Low-Effort Emoji in Photoshop <<

In this step, we're going to make a **low effort emoji**. This is going to be easy! You can use whatever program you feel most comfortable for the rest of these steps. If your workflow involves multiple programs--go nuts! The main considerations you want to keep in mind are:

- You should pick a program that can export transparent pngs or gifs if you are making a non-animated emoji. Photoshop works well. So does any vector program with a png export function, like Illustrator or Affinity Designer.
- You will need a program that has animation timeline controls if you are making an animated gif.
- Ideally, your program should let you zoom way the fuck in and let you set out guides or grids and it should tell you what your document dimension are and allow you to crop your work more tightly so that you can maximize the size of your emoji in Discord.
- I'll be giving instructions for the **low effort emoji in Photoshop / a pixel workflow**.

Starting With an Already-Existing Base

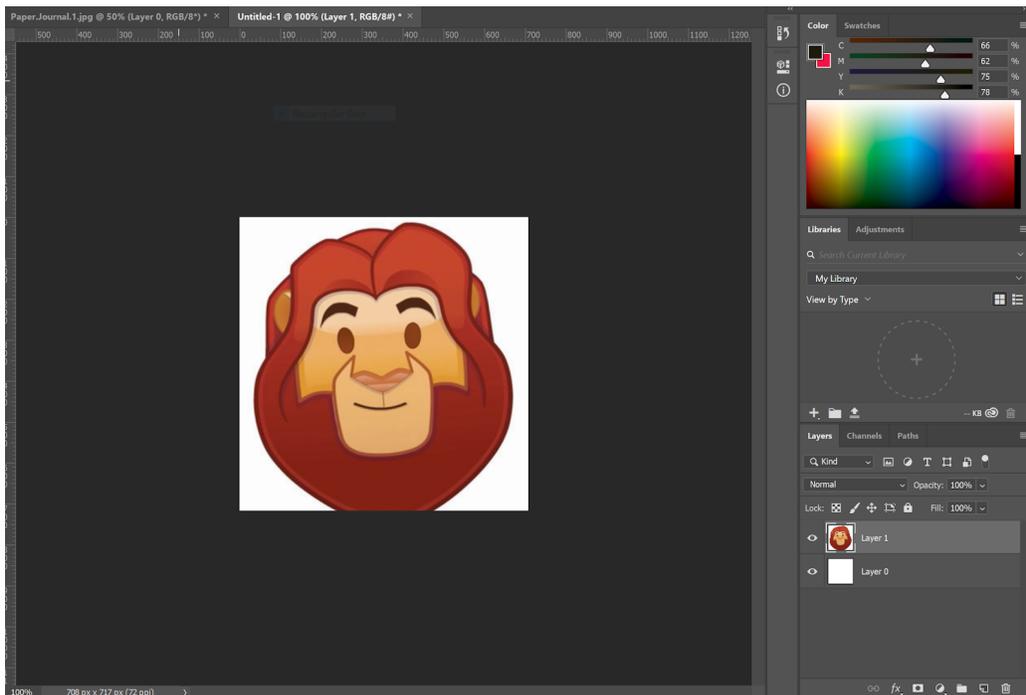
Here's the image I'm starting with. It appears to be an emoji from a Disney game. It's designed to be seen at large and small sizes.



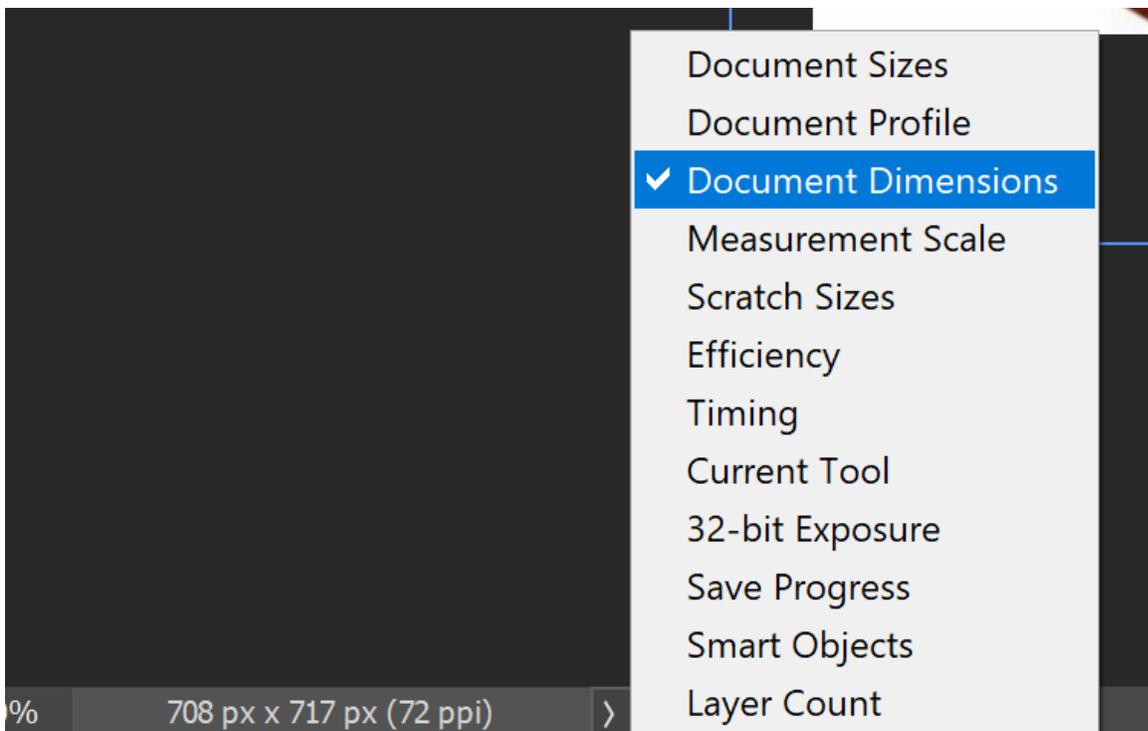
I have two concerns about this base right away. Will it look good against Discord's dark theme? Will the mane fade too much into the background? And will the face be visible at 32x32 pixels? There's a lot of mane. I want to decrease the size of the mane at the bottom of the image. I can do this by cropping more tightly, or changing the shape of the mane to a more flat curve.

I set up my image into a square (or near-square) format. I don't mind that Mufasa's mane is a little cropped; I'm about to change its shape.

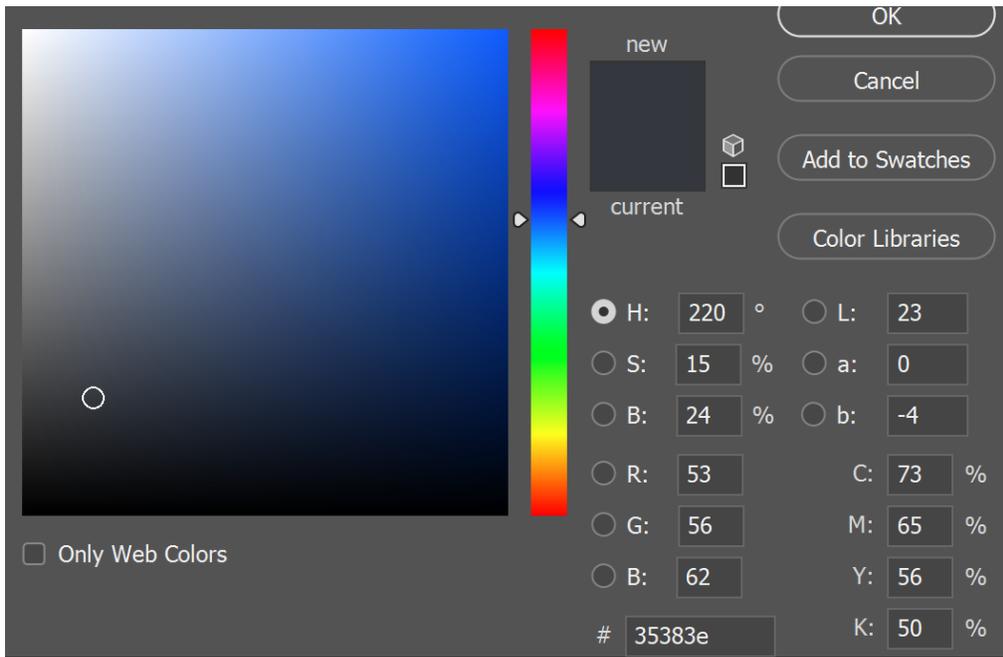
Setting up a workspace in Photoshop.



I like to set up the document dimensions so that I can see them through all possible resizing.



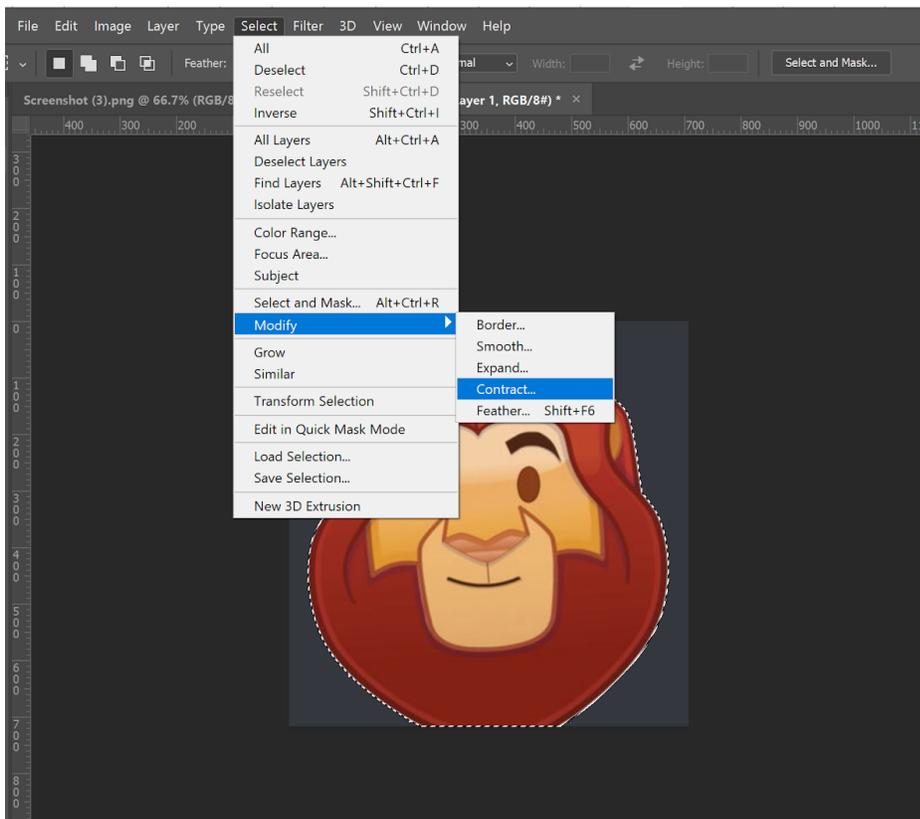
I turn off the white background for now, and fill in a new layer with Discord's dark theme color. (#35383e).



If your base isn't a transparent PNG, you'll need to get rid of the color around it. Using the **magic wand tool in Photoshop**, select all of the white around Mufasa and delete it. This has left a white pixel halo around Mufasa.



I select everything on the Mufasa layer with **Ctrl+Left Click on Layer 1**. Then I go to **Menu > Select > Modify > Contract**.

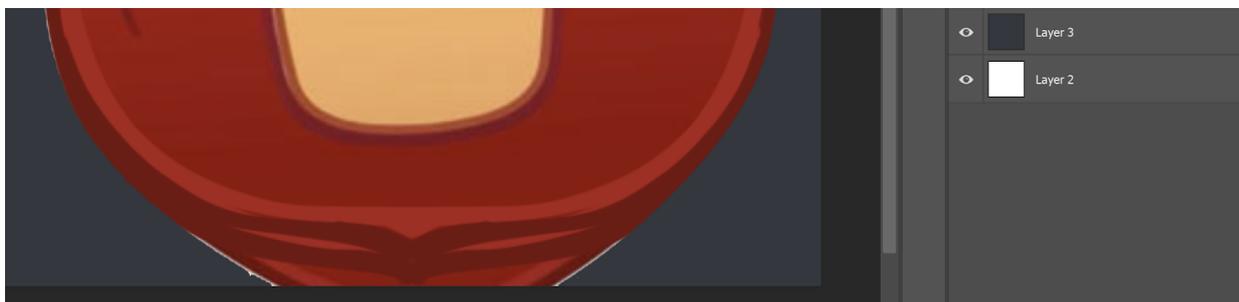


Contract the selection by one or two pixels, then apply a layer mask. The layer mask should mask out everything that isn't Mufasa's face. Most of the white halo should be gone.

If a small number of white pixels remain, you can paint them out using a small brush using the outline color around the outline of Mufasa's mane during the final phase of emoji touch-ups.

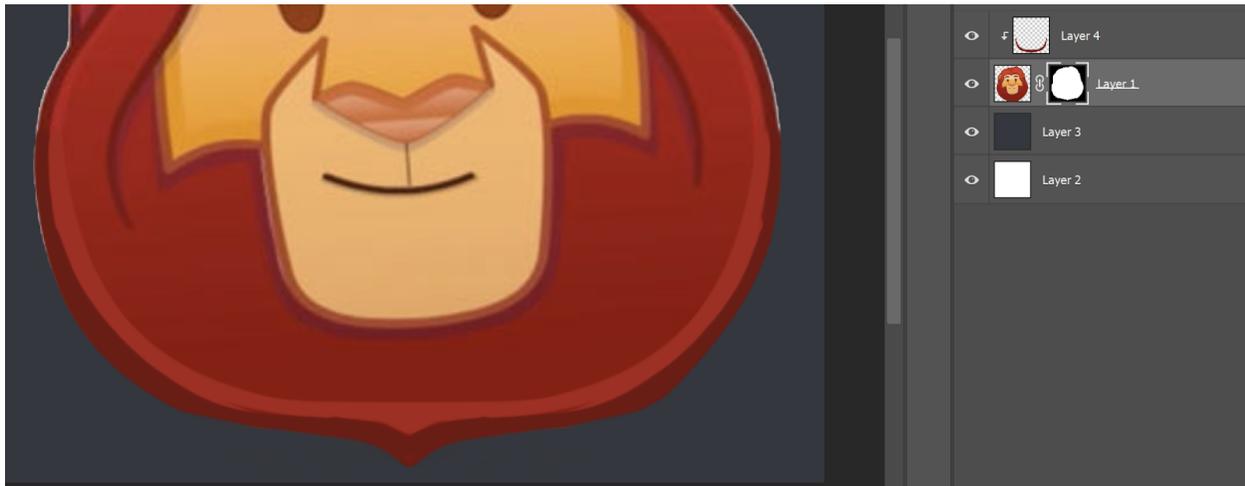
Before doing any touch ups, let's focus on the emoji shape. We need to shrink his mane to a more emoji-friendly size. **On a clipping mask layer, using a brush that is as thick as the outline (12pixel hard round), paint a new beard line.** You can rethink the mane line as many times as you want. If the first one looks too low, paint a second one higher up. Bring the dark outline and the light outline of the mane across. **If your image editor has vertical symmetry tools or line smoothing tools**, now would be a good time to use them.

Drawing several new mane lines until I find the one that gives me the best shape.



Once you have the mane line you line, **mask out the extra by painting on the layer mask for Mufasa's face** (Layer One in my screenshots). Painting on the layer mask will allow you to change your mind later about the shape of mufasa's face if you make a mistake now.

Now you've got a nice, clean mane that allows you to more tightly crop the emoji when you're done working on it. With a smaller mane, the face will appear subtly larger than it had before when the emoji is shrunk to Discord sizes.



Let's exaggerate this effect. Let's move Mufasa's face down a little further into the mane.

On a new clipping mask layer, make rectangular selection of Mufasa's nose and cheeks and then move the whole area down. This effect should be subtle, so don't move it too far down. Paint over any errors in the lines where they connect, erase anywhere on the clipping mask layer where a gradient doesn't match up and make any other adjustments that you know you'll need. (Mufasa's mouth will need to be larger and more visible to be seen in emoji form, and his nose doesn't need to be so complex. Paint it a solid color)



This emoji is going to be a think, so now you need to select your preferred think hand and think expression.

Work on the expression next. The expression's mood and mouth size will change where the think hand will be placed.

Create a new clipping mask layer (clipping masks are your friend). Paint any expression details directly onto this clipping layer. If you don't like your changes, delete them and/or throw out the whole clipping layer and start again.

Let's make a different choice about Mufasa's smile--let's go for a more pensive look. Repaint the smile into more of a downward turned frown. Let's modify the eyes as well so they're easier to see at small sizes. Large, rounded eyes make the emoji feel more "Disney". The small semi-circle under both eyes are This expression now has a "yeesh, what is THAT" and/or "Oh no, I don't really want to know what they're talking about, do I" energy.

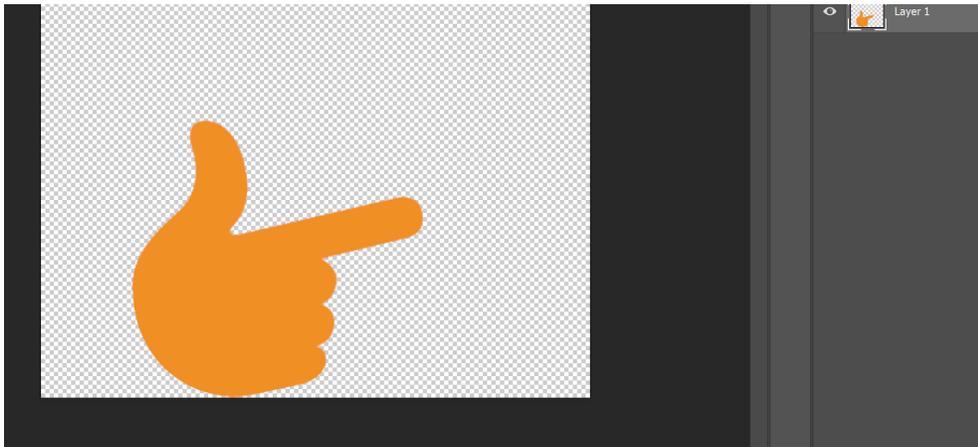


Because of that new expression, I think that the :thinking: emoji from Discord will provide the best think energy for this new emoji. Grab this image here:

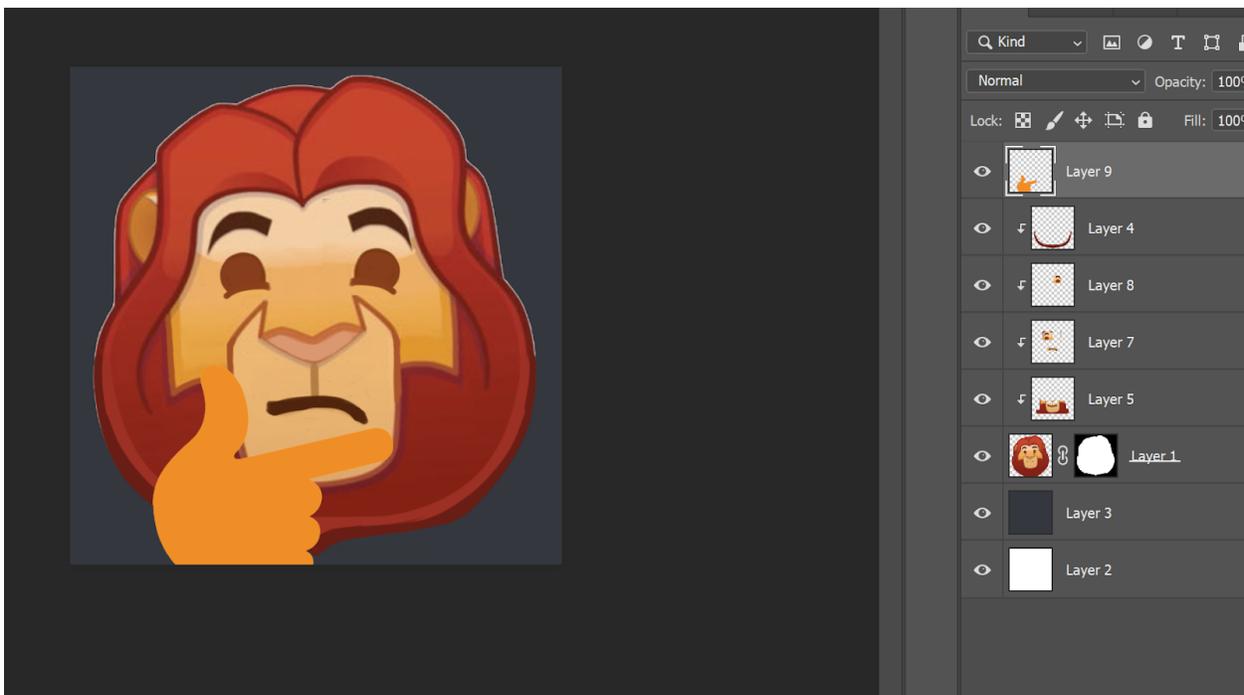
<https://images.emojiterra.com/twitter/v11/512px/1f914.png>

Open it in a new window, use the magic wand tool to select it, and mask out all other parts of the emoji. This will give you a think hand you can use anywhere. If you're too lazy to do that yourself, please borrow my transparent emoji think hand.

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1cvWdlhSi40nl-Lt7Xyoh04w1nNNkJqnw>

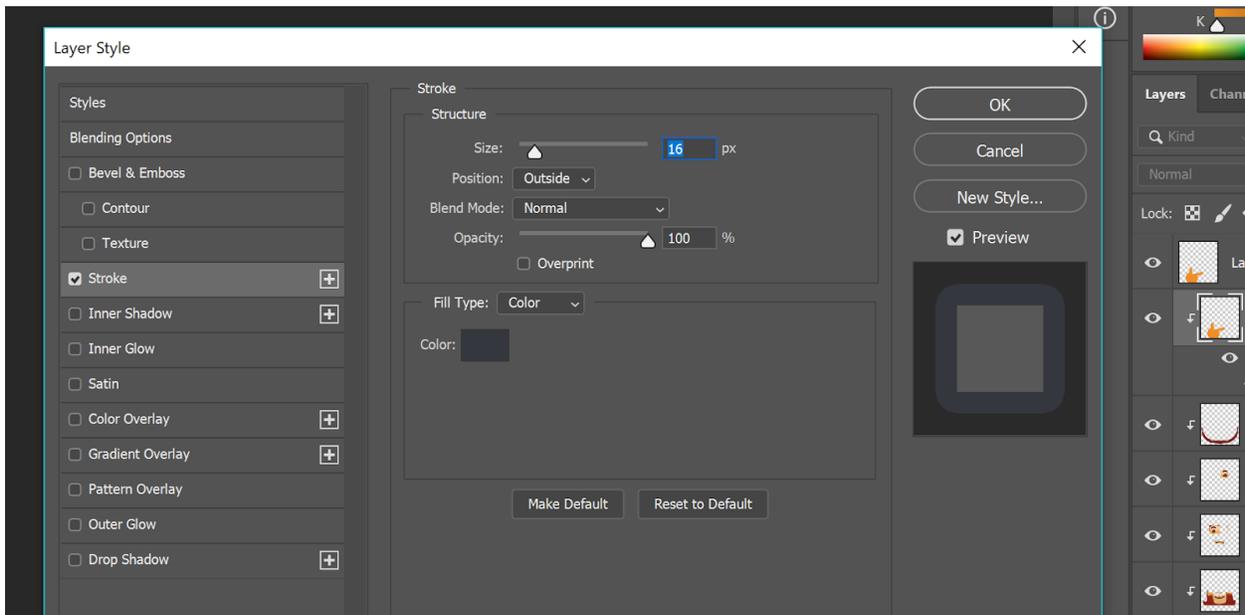


Copy/paste that image into a new layer (not a clipping mask) on your Mufasa emoji. Reposition the hand until you like how it interacts with his expression.

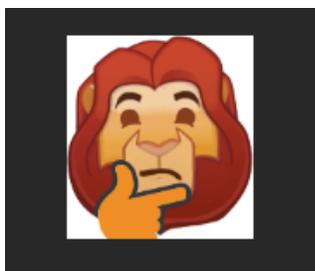


Perfect! However, that orange hand is going to blend right into Mufasa's face at small sizes. To make it stand out, you can change its color, or give it a very dark, heavy outline (or both!). The orange thinking hand is a bit of a meme, so I will opt for the heavy, dark outline to offset it from the face. In this case, I will use Discord's natural dark theme to provide the outline.

You can add an outline in many ways. I will choose this particular way not because it's the best, but because it offers me the most flexibility. I fiddle with the hand's placement a little more. I don't want the hand or its outline to obscure Mufasa's expression. I duplicate the thinking hand, and set it to be a clipping mask of Mufasa's face. I add an outline to that hand that is in the clipping mask using Layer Styles panel. I choose a very thick, bold outline that is the color of Discord's dark theme.



The reason I've chosen to do is that ... some people do use the Light theme. Having a dark outline around only the hand will look odd on a white screen. But when the layer style is added to a layer that is clipped, you get:



The think hand is separated from the face, but the line doesn't bleed outside of the emoji's silhouette. Thus making this emoji more light-theme friendly.

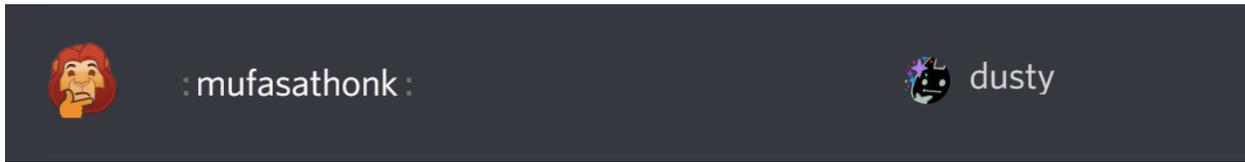
I'm almost done with this emoji. Before I export it, I'm going to paint out the white halo. You can use a **clipping mask** or **paint directly onto the Mufasa Face layer**. As long as you're painting on a layer that is transparency locked in some way, you're good to go.

Once you have painted out your pixel halo, disable both the gray and white background layers, and save as or export as a png.



Mufasa Think #1

If you don't already have your own server, make yourself one right now. I'll wait. Once you have a server set up, dub it your first test emoji server. Now upload your first emoji, and give it a clever name!



Now test it out at big sizes and very small reaction sizes. How does it look. Can you tell what it is?



If someone can't tell what it is, they can mouse over it. "Mufasathonk" is a pretty descriptive name.

The next thing to do would be to test your emoji out on a willing friend or sever. See if they can tell what it is. If it's the middle of the night and everyone of the server is asleep, as may often be the case for all of us, you might need to wait a few hours before you can unleash your new emoji on someone. It's valuable to get feedback on your emoji from outside observers. They'll be able to spot if something doesn't look right... especially if an expression is unclear. They won't know what to make of it, or in an extreme case, what it even is. xD

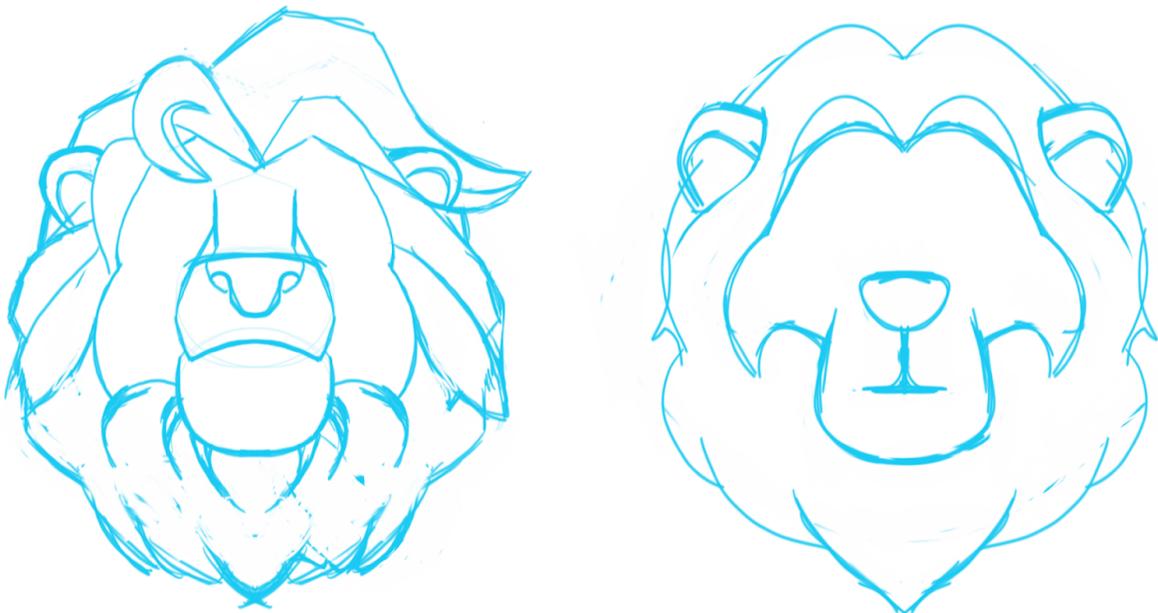
>> STEP Six : Making an Medium-Effort Emoji<<

You've picked a **medium effort base!** You got this. Let's prepare the sketch for illustration. You can use whatever program you feel most comfortable for the rest of these steps. If your workflow involves multiple programs--go nuts! The main considerations you want to keep in mind are:

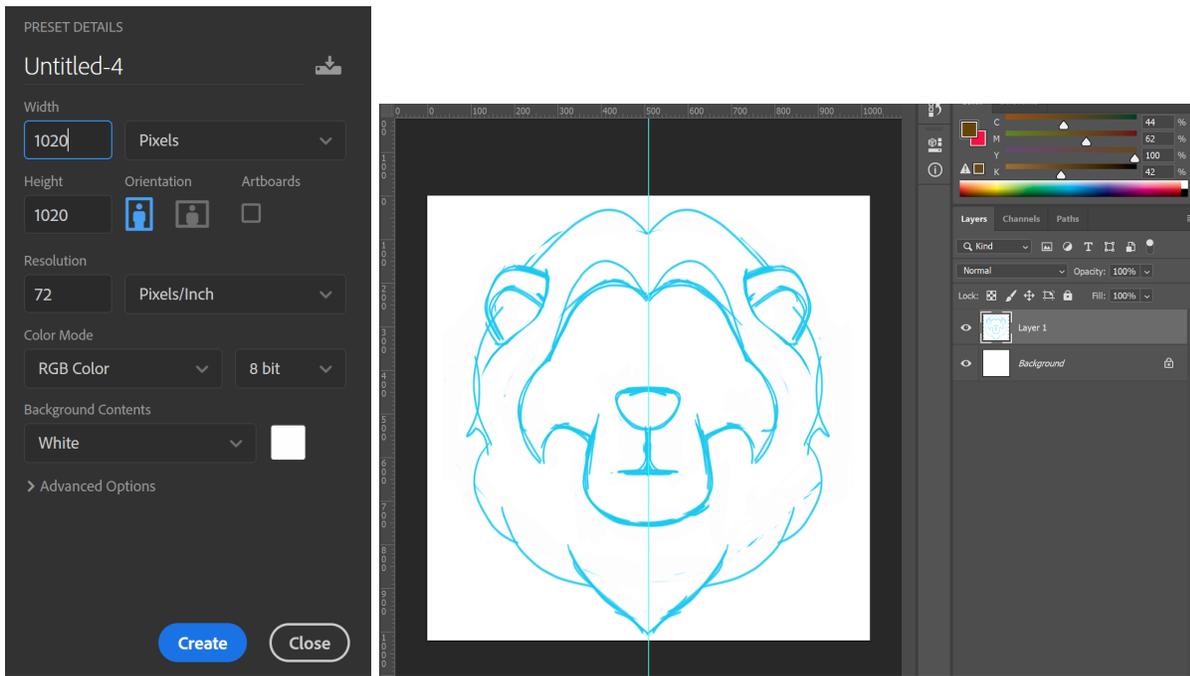
- You should pick a program that can export transparent pngs or gifs if you are making a non-animated emoji.
- Ideally, your program should let you zoom way the fuck in and let you set out guides or grids and it should tell you what your document dimension are and allow you to crop your work more tightly so that you can maximize the size of your emoji in Discord.
- I'll be giving instructions for the **medium effort emoji in Photoshop / a pixel workflow.**

Starting With a Sketch

Here are the sketches that we're starting with. I designed them earlier in Step Four. Just looking at them, I can tell I will want to refine the shapes even more as I move forward with the artwork.

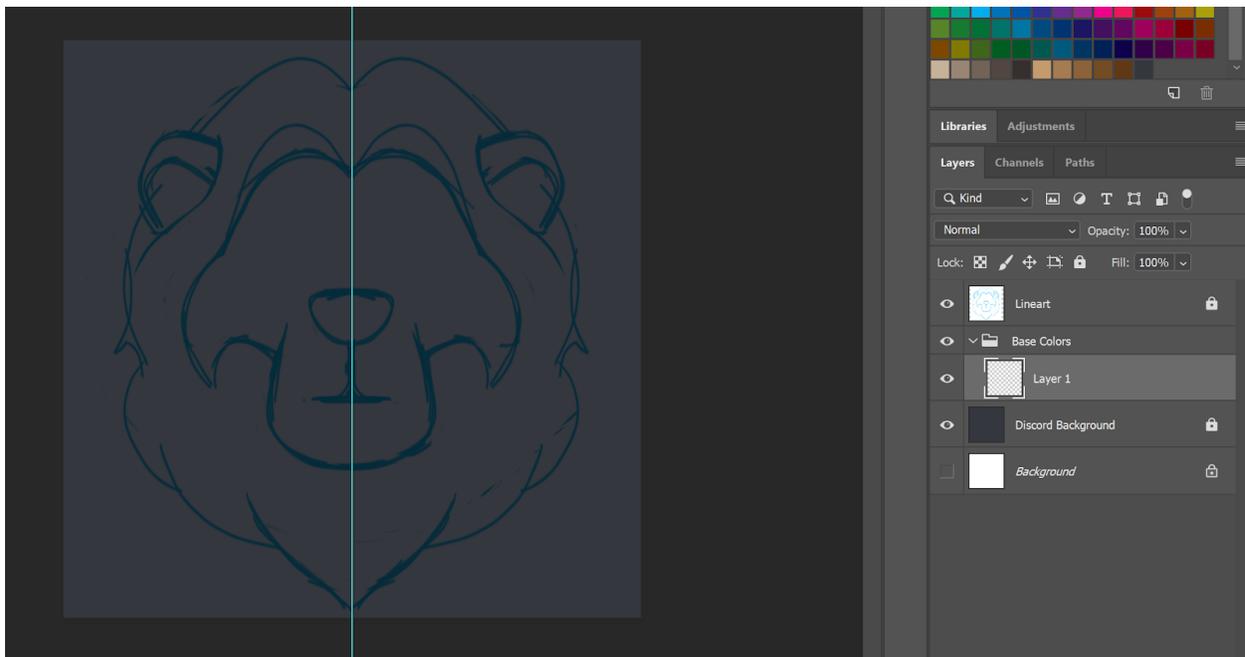


Create a **new document**. Pixel dimensions that are larger than 800x800 will help smooth over any bumps and odd shapes that you might have. **1020x1020 pixels** sounds like the perfect size. Once the new document is open, I paste the lineart I want to use into a new layer and center it.



Fill a layer with Discord Grey (**#35383e**), and set your lineart layer to **multiply**.

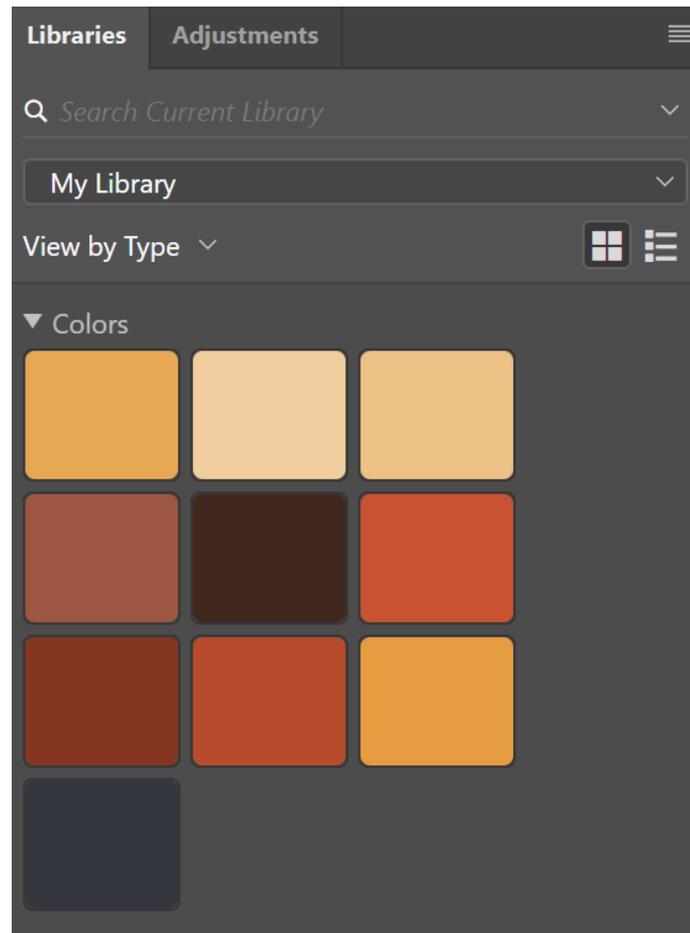
Prepare your workspace for illustration. **Lock the layers you won't be painting on**, and create your new layer for the base colors. I've put mine into a layer group, just to keep things tidy.



Load up your **color palette**.

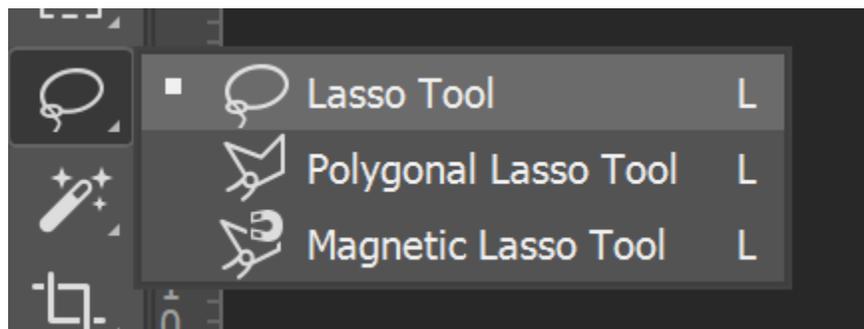
If you don't have your palette picked out yet, find a pic of Mufasa with a color palette you like, then take point samples (using the **Eyedropper**, or **alt** key) of Mufasa's face, muzzle, mane, ears,

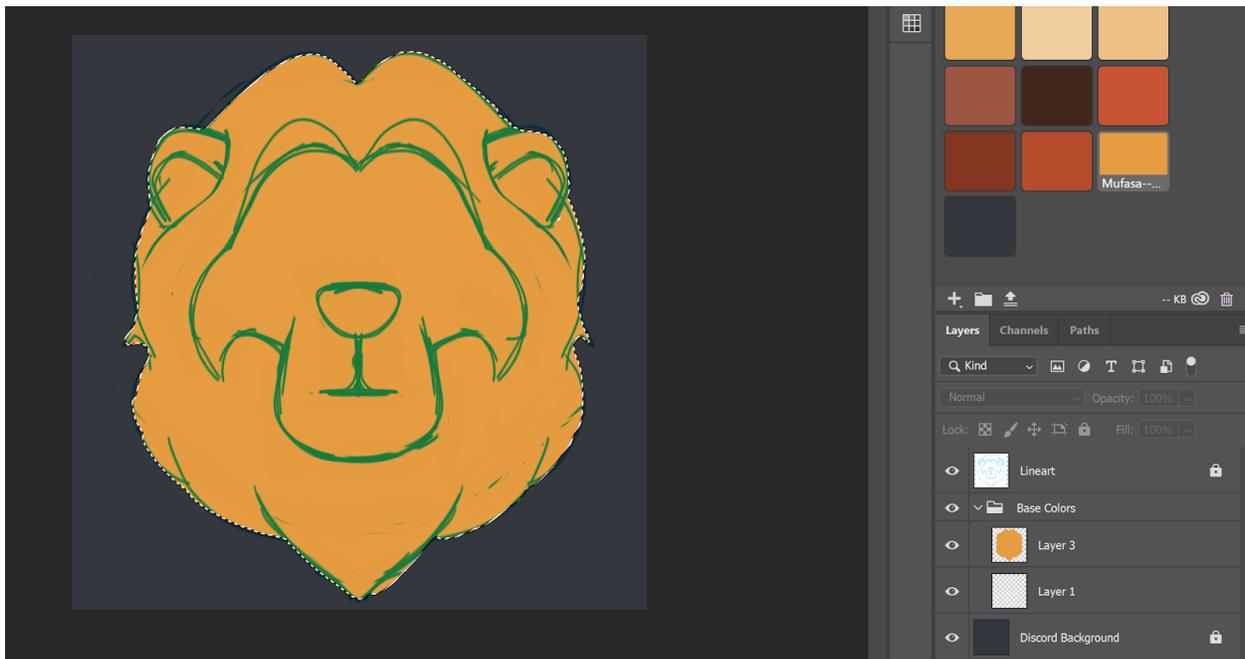
and any shadow or highlight colors that appear on him. As an animated character, his colors should already be fairly simple. You should select 5-10 colors for your palette.



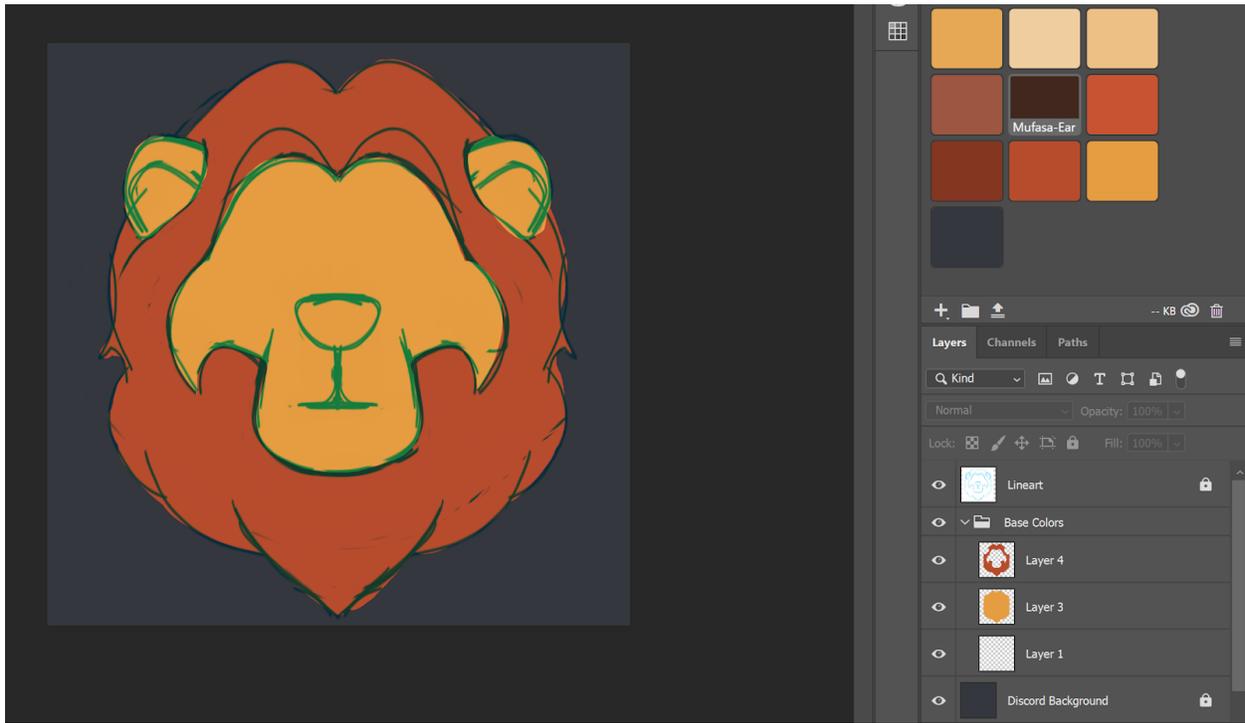
Got your palette? Excellent! We'll need it in the next step. Using the **lasso select tool**, draw around the silhouette of your base. When it's been selected, fill it in with the color for **Mufasa's face** (your base yellow. For me, it's **#e79e3f**).

Ctrl+Backspace and **Alt+Backspace** are the shortcuts to fill a selected area (for Photoshop CC 2018 on Windows).





Create a new layer, and fill in the mane. One of the quickest ways to do this is to use the subtract from current selection shortcut (hold down **Alt+your cursor**) and fill it in with the mane's base color.



On a new layer, add nose color, inner ear color, and outline the mouth. At this point, you can turn off the lineart layer (click the little eye icon on the layer) if you'd like to work to refine the shapes without the lines getting in your way.



Using a hard brush, I clean up the details and add a few more flourishes on a new layer.



And now, using some highlight and shadow colors from my palette, I add some highlights and shadows to the mane to make it look fluffy, as though the mane were made up of smaller clumps of fur. I spend a lot of time on this stage. The highlights/shadows will be abstract shapes. They shouldn't be overwhelming. But they should be visible when the emoji is very tiny.

(I painted and discarded three different attempts at highlights and shadows before I settled on this one. This stage will take some time. You could, alternatively, completely skip the shading. A lot of emoji use flat color only.)



This base is still a little rough, but it's basically ready to be used as an emoji. Flatten the layers and Ctrl+click the layer to select everything. Add a layer mask. If you want to touch it up, use the layer mask to shape the silhouette and clipping masks to clean up the details on the base.



I've cleaned up the base's silhouette and details before moving on to the expression.

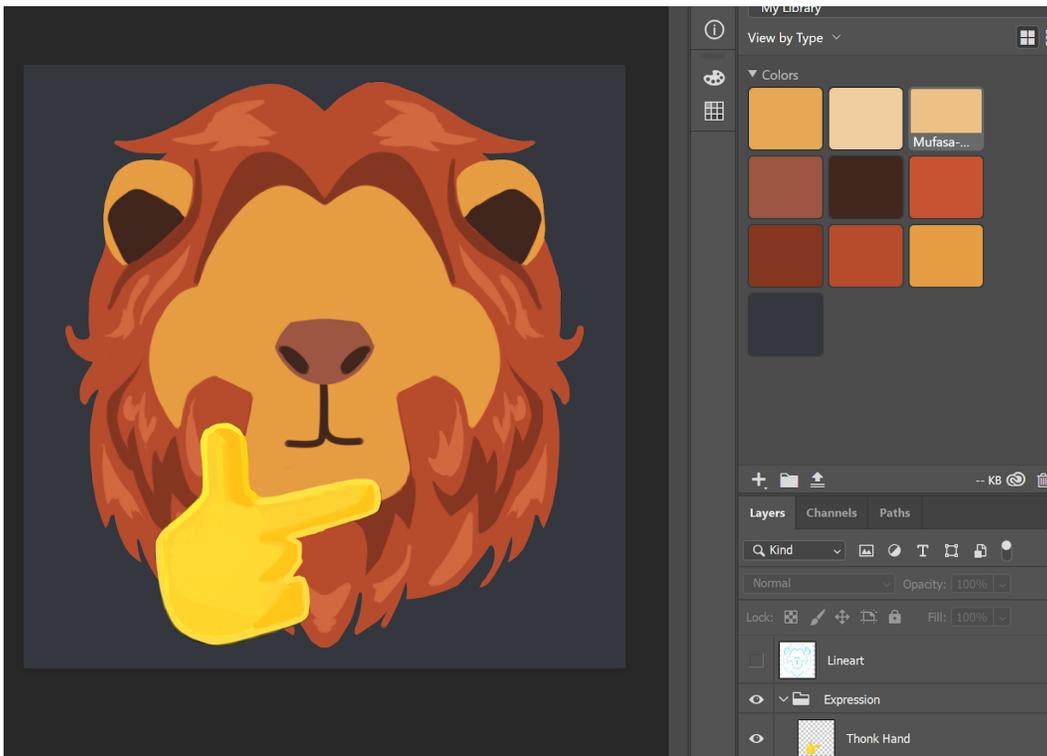


Let's start on our thinks. Create a new **layer group**. We'll be adding a **think hand layer, an eyes layer, a mouth layer, and an extras layer**. You can copy/paste your preferred think expression parts in from your preferred think, or you can paint them in by hand...whichever one you prefer!

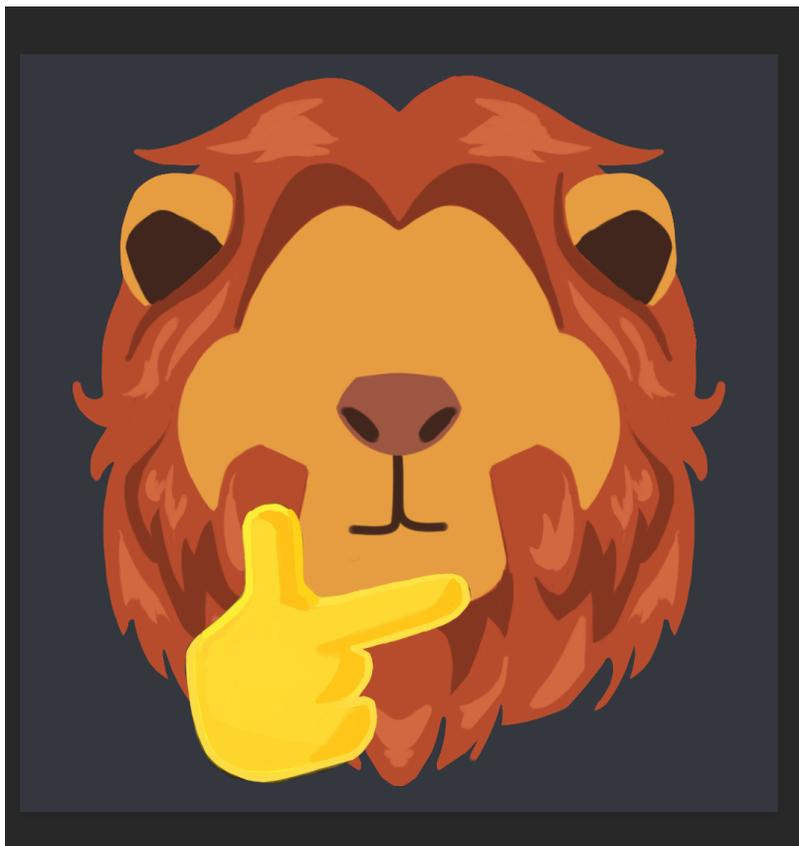
My inspiration and source of of the think hand is :thinkyface:. Thinkyface doesn't have eyebrows (eyes will be simple round circles) but it does have a question mark for the extras layer.



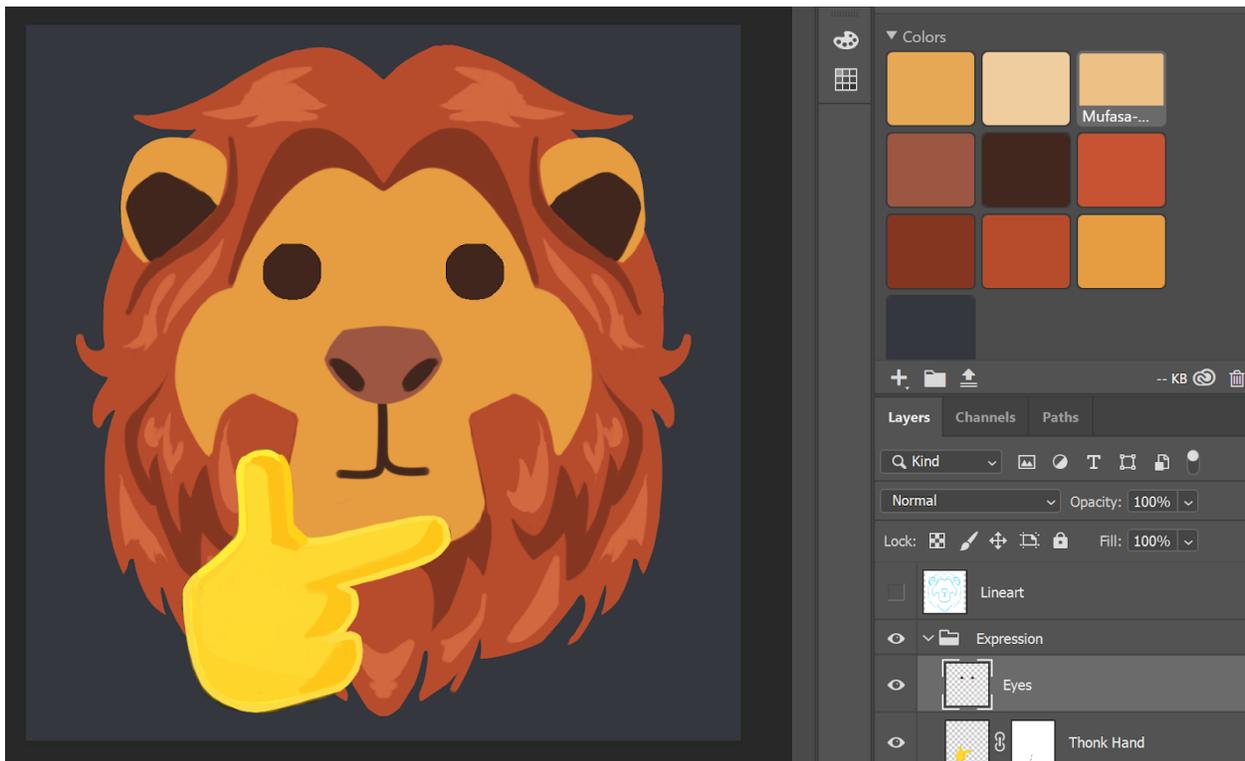
Let's tackle the thinky hand first. I load :thinkyface: into its own file, I select the hand, and then I copy/paste it into the Mufasa Think file.



I will need to reposition it after I paint the mouth. The shading on the thinky hand is very soft and blurred when it is first enlarged and pasted in. For now, I repaint the hand into the same blocky shading that the rest of the emoji uses. Make sure that the bright yellow outline of the hand is emphasized to help separate the thinky hand from the face visually.



Next up, the eyes. Thinkyface's eyes are simply round circles. I opt for very large eyes, so they're still visible when the emoji is shrunk.



The mouth might be fine as it is, but will probably disappear when it's shrunk to Discord sizes. Thicken the line, and make it look a little more like thinkyface's benign smile.



The extra question mark is going to give us some trouble. At this stage, it is smart to create a group to hold all of your emoji layers, as this step will require you to move your emoji around.

Paste your question mark in from your thinkyface emoji, and position it next to Mufasa. You will see how much space it will take up if its allowed to project too far away from the emoji. Time to move the emoji around and crop off as much background as you can. Try to position the question mark over as much of the emoji as you feel comfortable with blocking.

Scale your question mark larger or smaller depending on how dominant you want it to be in the emoji.



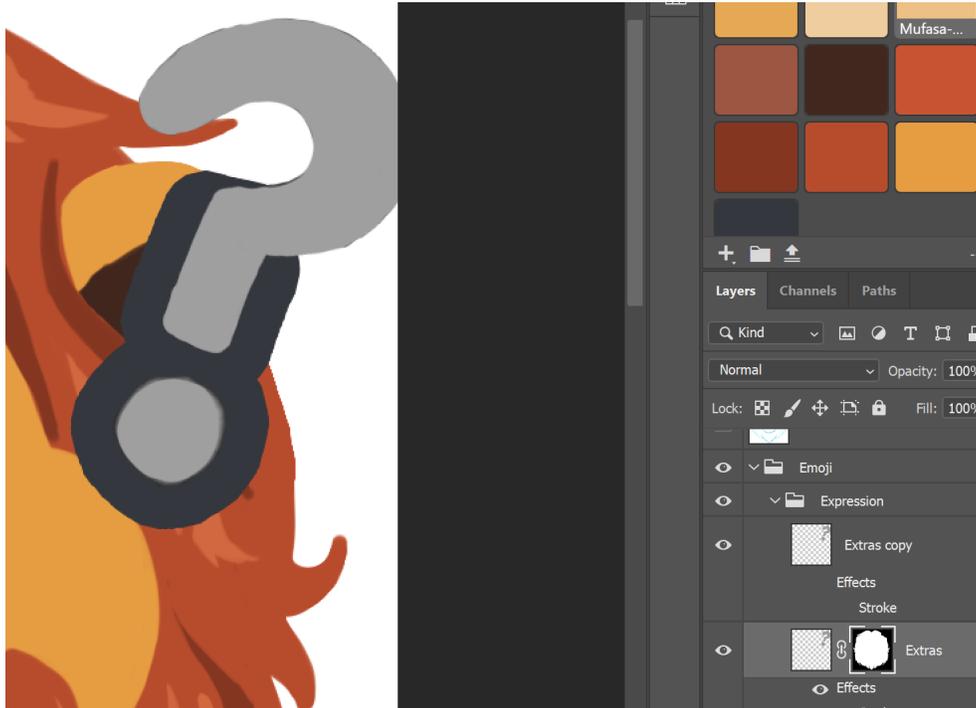
The question mark shouldn't compete with the emoji's eyes. Make sure that the dot on the question mark is far enough away from the right eye so it doesn't create an uncomfortable proximity.



When you're happy with the position of your think hand and question mark, duplicate both layers. Ctrl+Click the layer for the Mufasa face. That should create a selection around your base's silhouette. Select your think hand. Now click create a layer mask button. Repeat this process for the question mark. This should apply a layer mask to both your think hand and question mark that make it so the **stroke** you will apply to it using Layer Styles won't spill out of the emoji. (This allows the emoji to be friendly for the Light and Dark themes). **Add a 32px dark grey stroke to the think hand and question mark with these layer masks.** Check your emoji against a white background to see that the grey doesn't spill out of the emoji's mask.



The think hand looks okay. The question mark looks pretty awful. Paint out any areas that you think look bad on the question mark layer's layer mask.



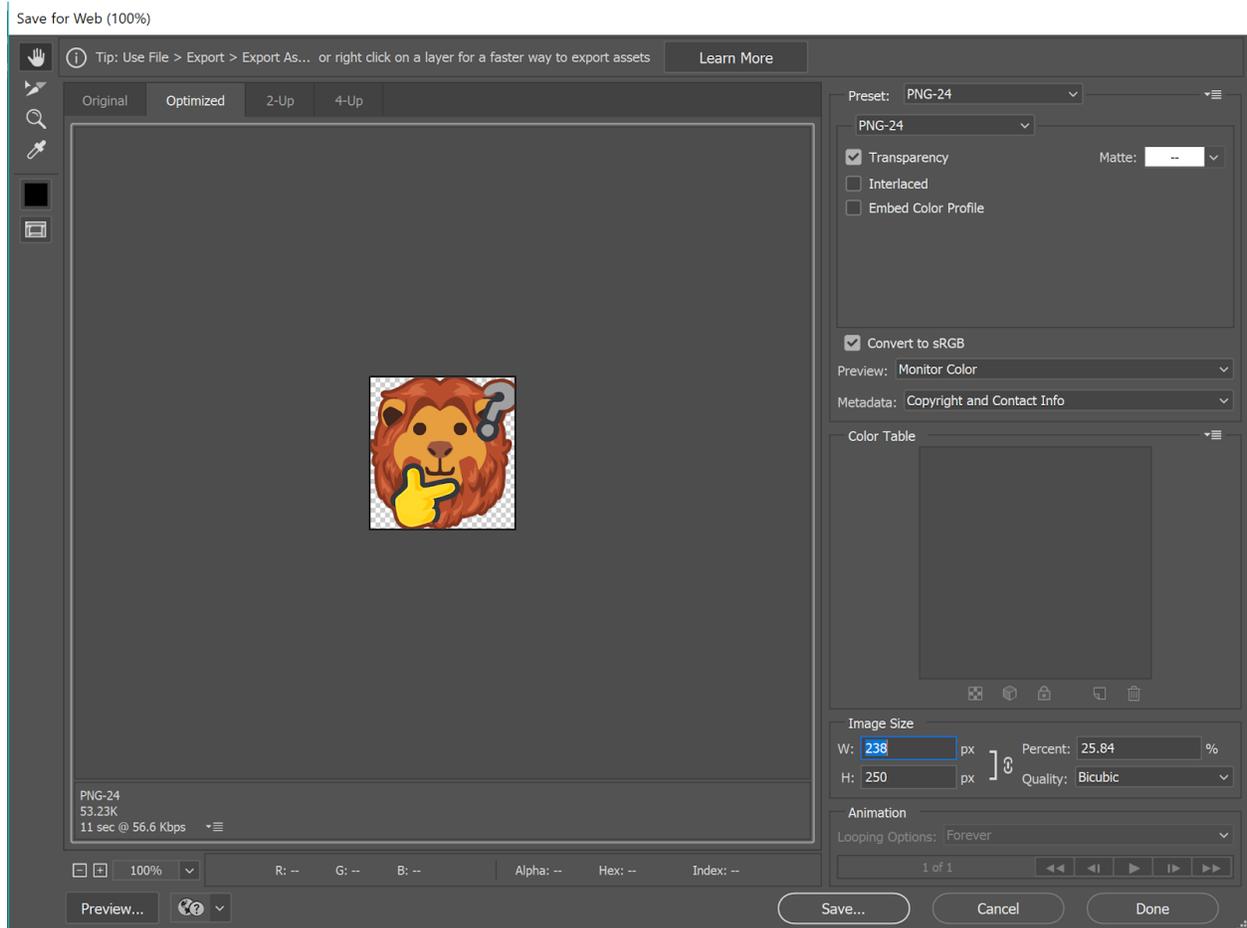
Now, it's time to add an outline to the entire emoji. **Duplicate all of your layers.** If you have everything in a single layer group, duplicate that, and merge all of those layers together. Move this merged layer to the bottom of your layer stack.

Add a layer style to it. Give your emoji a thick, dark outline. Choose a color that harmonizes with your emoji, or that is already used in your emoji. I am going to try out the color of the mane shadows. **24px outline, mane shadow color.**

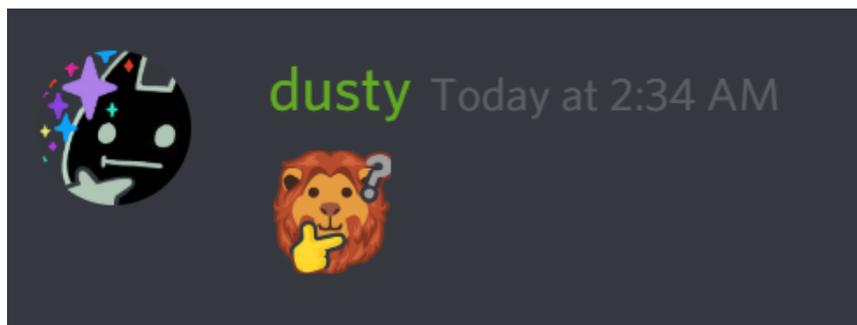


If you want to paint over the outline around the hand or the question mark, feel free to do so. When the emoji is shrunk, the color change between the outlines will barely be noticeable.

The emoji looks ready to be tested! I export to as a transparent png. (Notice that the emoji is no longer a perfect square. During the question mark positioning phase, the image became a tall rectangle.)



Upload the emoji to your emoji test server, and check it out.

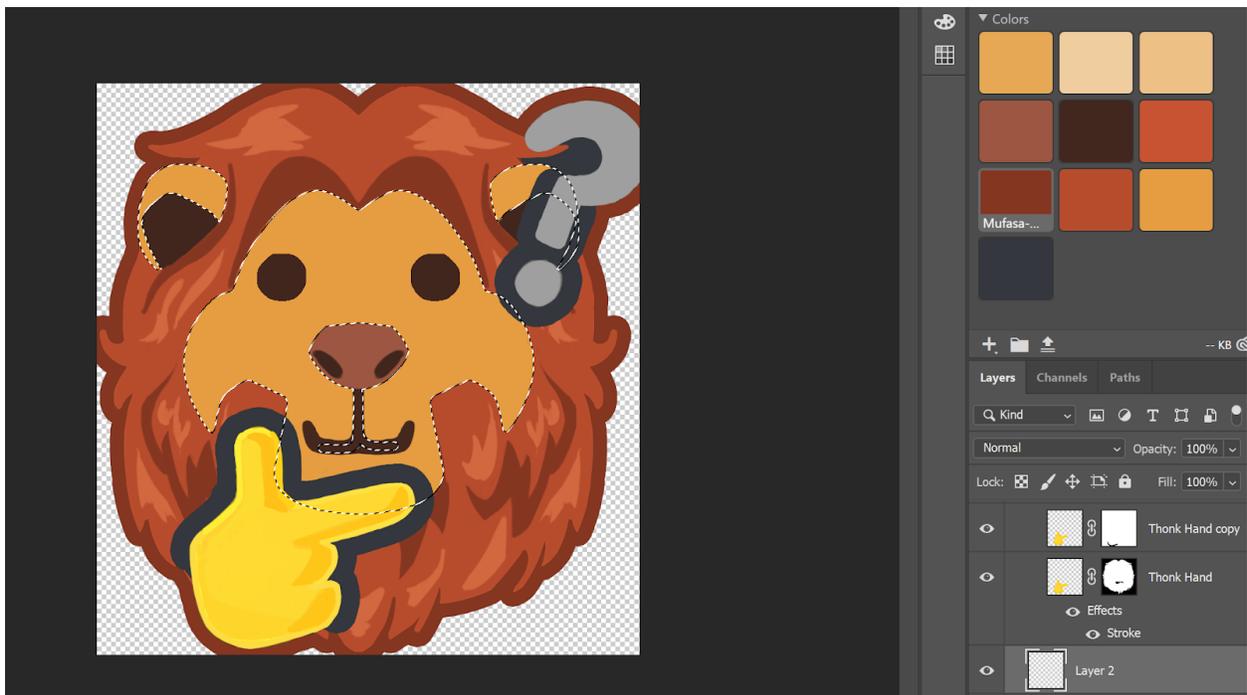


The emoji looks okay, but I immediately notice there's a contrast issue. Mufasa's face color is too close to the eye/nose color and too different from the hand color. The orange think hand might be a meme, but the yellow thinkyface hand isn't. So when I look at this image, my brain is not getting the same meme joy that it did from the low effort emoji.

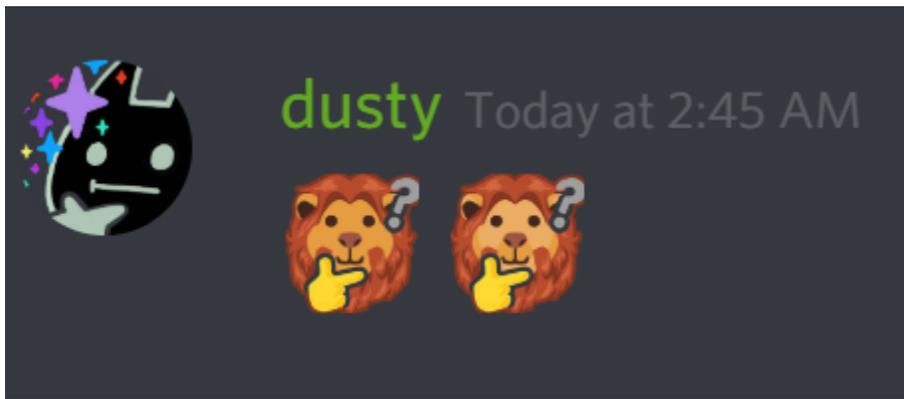
Check them out side-by-side.



Looking at the low effort Mufasa, I can see right away that there was a greater contrast between the face color and the expression. I'm going to steal that color, and see what I think my emoji afterward. Sample the color from the Low Effort Mufasa. Next, **use the Magic Wand Tool on the Mufasa base layer**. Select all of the areas of the face that are orange. Then, create a new layer. On that layer, fill in with the new face fur color.



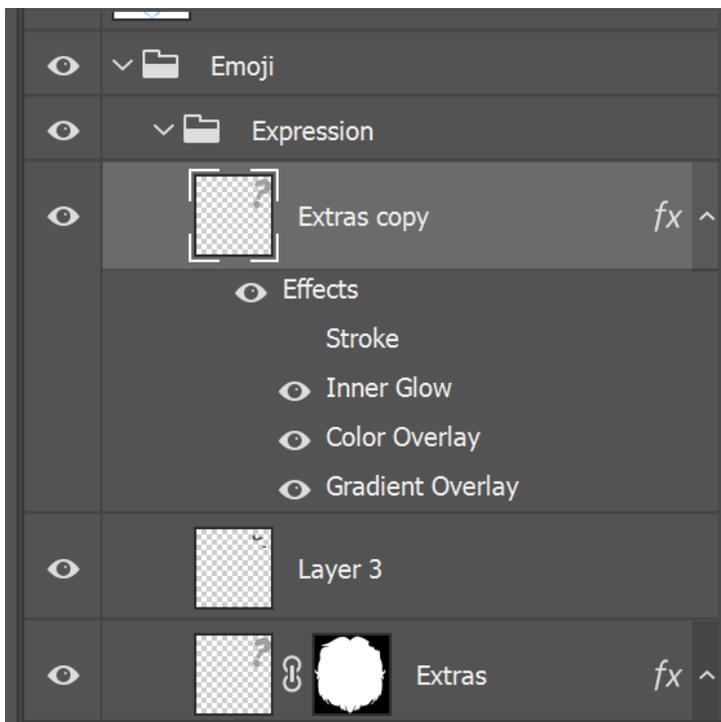
You can mask out some of the areas of the new fur color to create shadows, if you want!



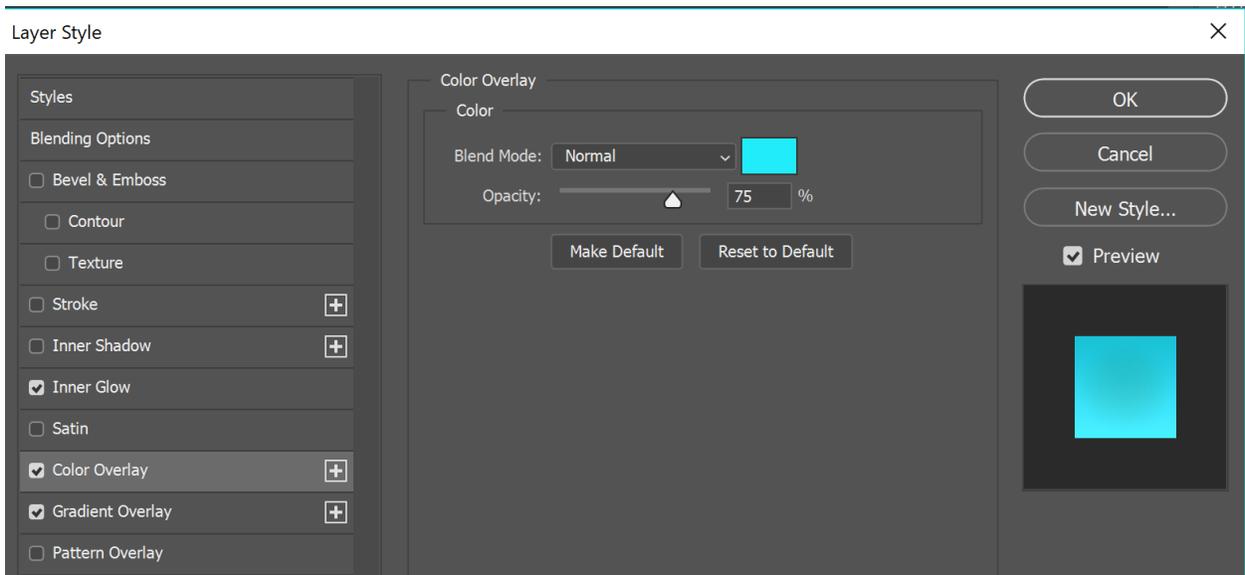
The contrast on the new emoji looks much better. Because now when the emoji is absolutely tiny, you can still see the eyes and nose. The question mark isn't as visible as I'd like it to be.



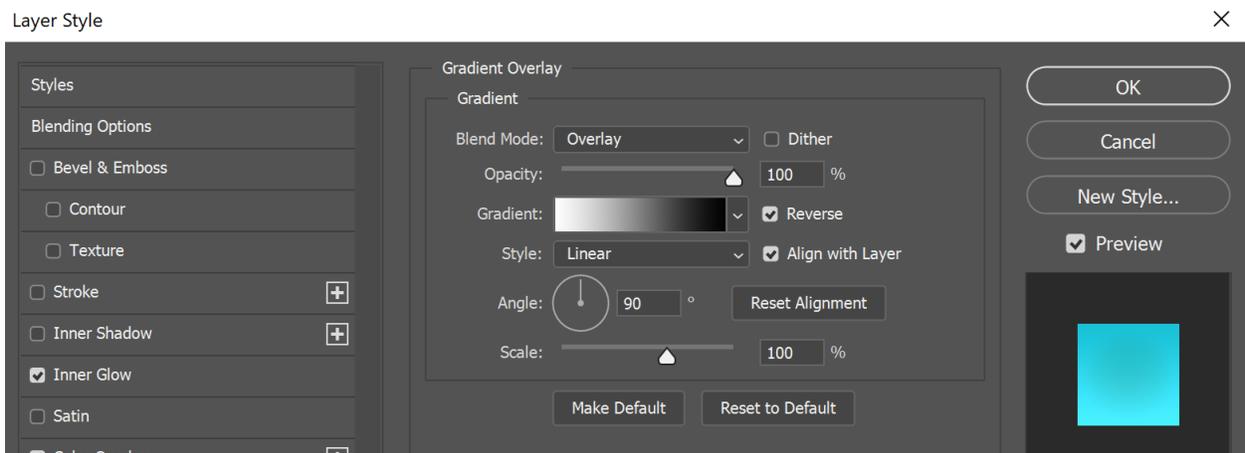
Select the top question mark layer. We're going to add a **Color Overlay**, a **Gradient Overlay**, and an **Inner Glow** to make the grey question mark a bright cyan.



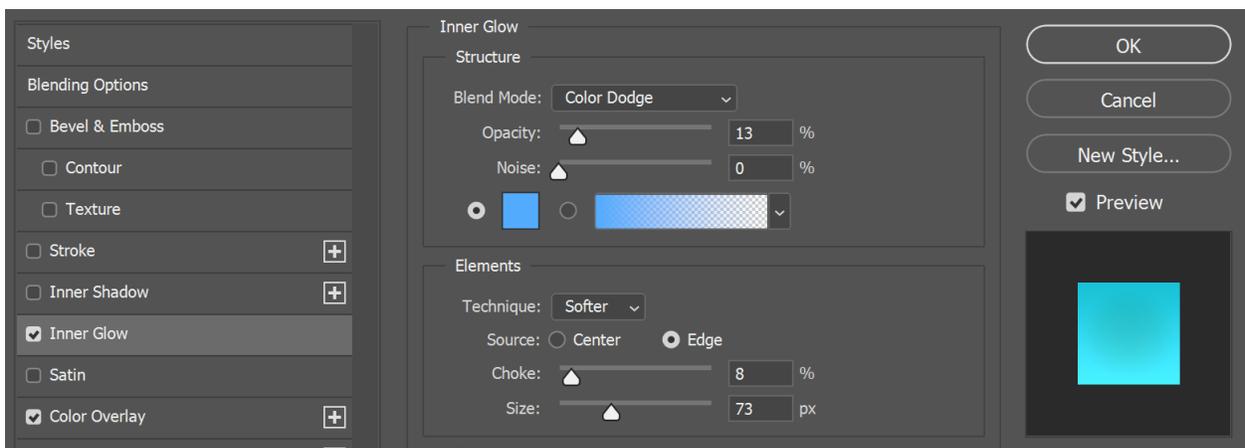
First, we add the **color overlay**. Choose a nice, bright cyan. Then set the opacity to 75%. This will allow the Gradient Overlay to peek through.



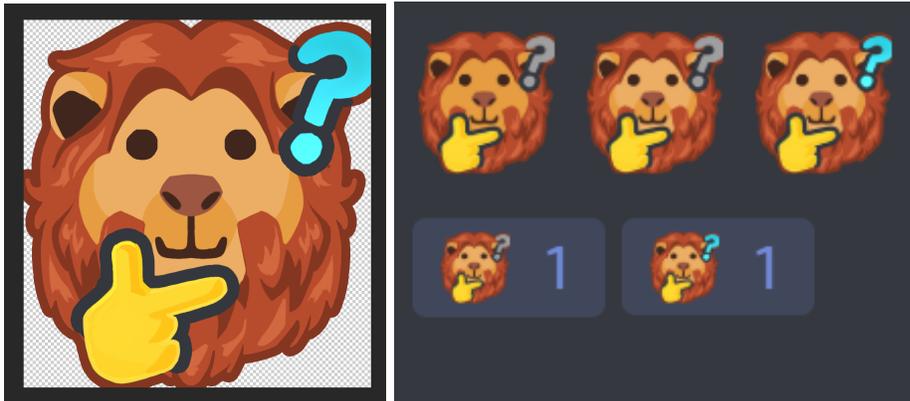
Next, add the Gradient Overlay. Set the style to overlay or multiply, depending on how strong you want the effect to show through. Pick the white-to-black gradient. Set it to reverse. Now your question mark will appear subtly lighter over the mane, and darker away from it.



Next, add an inner glow. The settings aren't as important as the impact: you want a glowy halo around its edge. Use a blue of your choosing set to Color Dodge. Make the size large (73px).



The result:



It looks pretty great on discord. I show off the emoji to friends and colleagues. It is a triumph. I am making a note here, "huge success".

And that does it! Another thinky emoji completed. If I was feeling particularly sly, the process could be repeated with the other lineart. For now, I'll consider my emoji duties completed on the Mufasa Thank front.

>> STEP Seven : Digitally Painting a High-Effort Emoji<<

You've decided to make a **high effort emoji**! Take a deep breath. You've already created your undersketch in Step Four. If not, please head back to **Step Four > Developing an Undersketch**. Let's prepare the undersketch for painting. You can use whatever program you feel most comfortable for the rest of these steps. The main considerations you want to keep in mind are:

- You should pick a program that can handle large pixel dimensions/file sizes without lagging your machine. We will be painting in sizes between 1000x1000 to 4000x4000 pixels.
- I don't have step-by-step instructions for this tier. The ending--especially the color-adjusting phase--doesn't have any layers that remain to show you what process I used. So, instead I will focus on giving you a general overview of a past **high effort emoji** that I painted in **Sketchbook and Photoshop using a pixel workflow, gemsquid**.

Starting With an Undersketch

The thing that sets an undersketch apart from a regular sketch is that an undersketch is almost never meant to be seen. Its ideas may not be completely formed. Its execution may be lacking. But it does what it needs to: sets out the important emoji features, like volume and/or where shading might go on the painting. Make sure your undersketch has this information before you embark on emoji-painting--or you might end up spending hours undoing your work later on.



Paste the undersketch into a **3000x4000 document**--or whatever size document that will give you the appropriate amount of space to noodle around and develop the undersketch.

Time to analyze the sketch. There are several problems with this one: the squid arms are too narrow, and there's really no sense of 3D form on the gemsquid's limbs. The squid is all too small compared to the gem. From experience, I can tell this won't lead to a good final emoji.

Set the opacity of the sketch to 20%, and then create a new layer on top of the undersketch. Sketch a new version that fixes the problems you've identified.

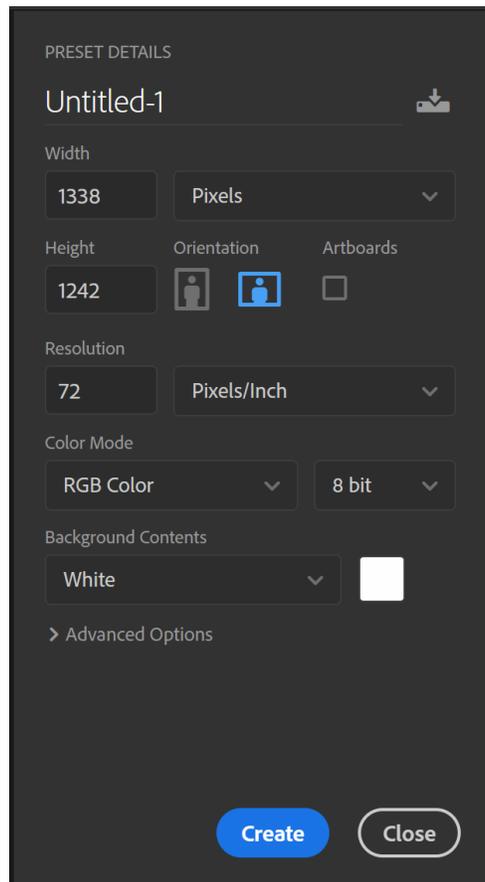


The new sketch has more substantial arms, a sense of volume, and the arm that is coming up to the mouth in utter delight is more pronounced. The expression of the squid should be easier to read at its final Discord size!

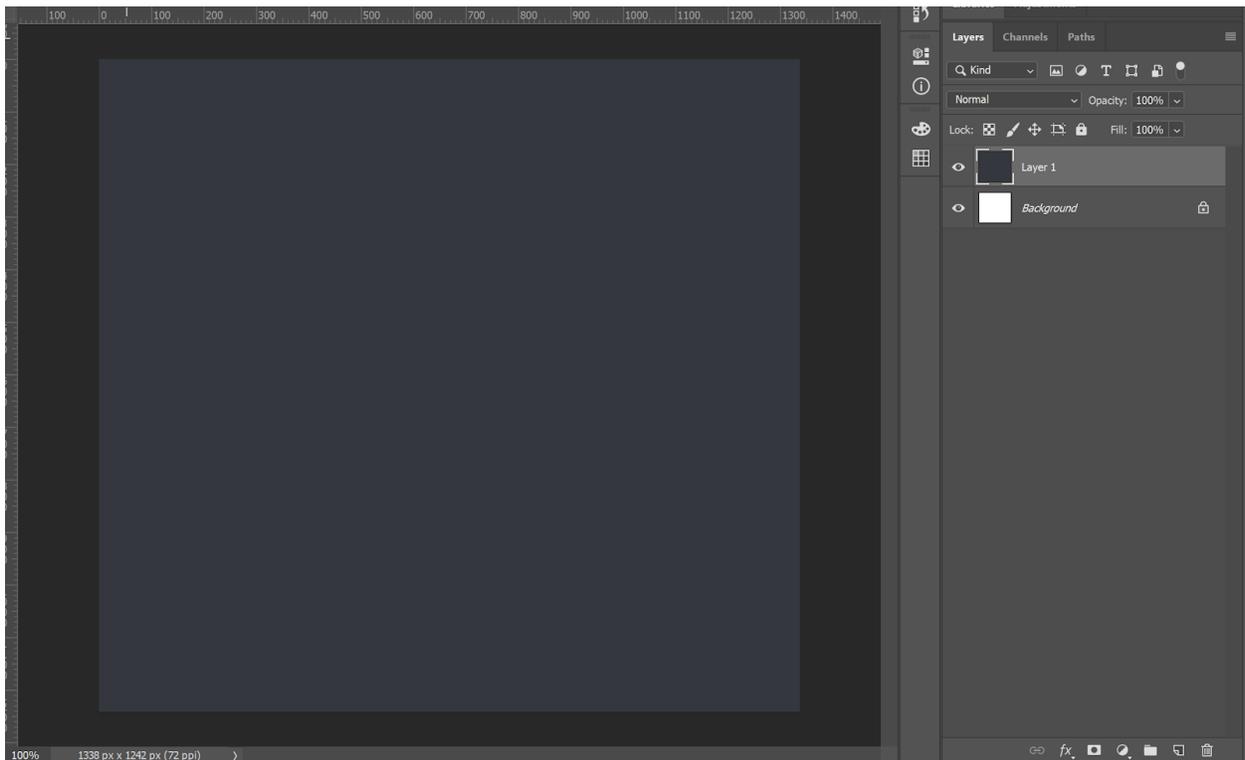
Playing around with expression is highly encouraged. It's much easier to try out new expressions now than have to meticulously repaint them later.

(That said, I definitely end up repainting this expression later. xD)

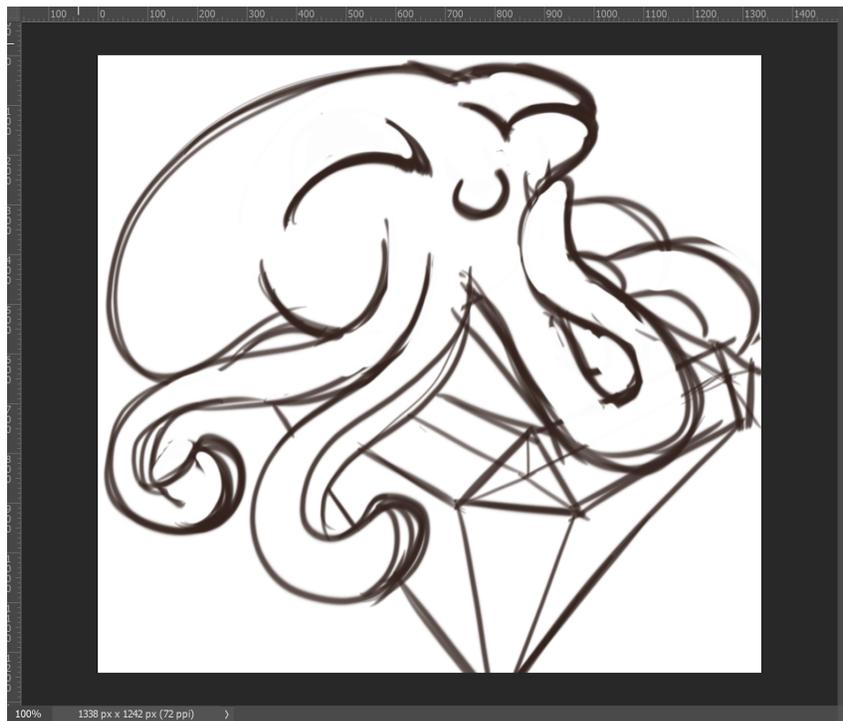
When you're ready to move to the next step, create a new document that is roughly square-ish. It's wider than it is tall, to account for how much is going on with the gem squid across the horizontal.



Prepare a background with **Discord grey (#35383e)** or another grey of your choice.



Paste the lineart into a new layer. Expand the lineart until the squid takes up most of the space in the document.



The gem's tip projects off the edge of the emoji. I could encourage that direction by enlarging the squid again and cropping off more of the gem. Or I could tip the emoji onto its diagonal. When I do that, I notice how much more pleased the gemsquid seems. Look at how much more delighted it seems. Excellent. :Dc



Set the lineart layer to **multiply**. We're now going to be **laying color in under the lineart layer** in a moment. Take a minute set up your palettes by sampling colors from the gem emoji from Discord and some colors that you think look appropriately squid-like. **Then, choose a different color than your desired final colors for your underpainting.** I picked a dark yellow to give the final squid a yellow-ish tone. (The final squid will be green.)

Next, create a new layer under your lineart. Lasso select the squid and fill it in with your base color. Then, do so with the gem. Make sure you fill in all of the area that will make up the squid.



Once the base colors are in, it's time to start painting on a new layer **over the lineart**. Select the area covered by your base colors, then apply that selection to a **new layer group's layer mask** above the lineart. All painting that I do over the lineart will not be able to stray outside of the layer mask as long as those layers are inside of the layer group.

The expression doesn't feel quite delighted enough, so I rethink the eyes. I add in the volumetric shadows and paint in the gem lines. Almost no linework can be seen at this stage.



(At this point, I realize that the grey background isn't the right color, so I change the background to proper Discord grey.)

I begin laying in my painting with a 40% opacity, 30% fill brush, and I layer color over the layers of underpainting. Each color isn't strongly separated on a new layer. I generally switch layers when I want to change a color effect (e.g. I realize the shadows aren't dark enough, so I switch to painting in a multiply layer.) Paint is layered in very light applications in a way that is akin to glazing semi-transparent color over a physical canvas.





Special attention is paid to laying down some squid-like detail: subtle squid spots, and the pattern of specular highlights caused by light diffracting through water (e.g. caustics). When you are adding realism to a painting, it's good to work from reference. Squid are often deep enough in the ocean that their photography doesn't feature caustics, but I really like them.

The main bulk of the digital painting is done now. **Painting a high-effort emoji usually takes between 4-10 hours.**

At this point, I feel like the gemsquid *could* be done, but I need to test it on Discord first. With very complex emoji, it's good to get feedback from an expert.

TheNaughtyList 05/26/2018
xDDDDDDDDDDc

wow he looks really good on my phone xD

May 27, 2018

Squid 05/27/2018
The posture works but I think you might need to clarify the expression.
Like, you can tell that's a squid on a gem, but the full extent of its :Dc is not clear.

The expression IS hard to read at this size. So now we need to pay attention to the problem areas: the eyes and the mouth. The mouth will be too small, too light, too indistinct at emoji sizes. Likewise, the eyes don't have enough contrast with the squid's body to really stand out.

The eyes are lightened with a screen layer, and an arm is moved and the mouth is redrawn to be bigger and darker.



This emoji could also work, but I feel it's lacking something. So I up the contrast between the eyes and mouth (by adding a color halo around the mouth and darkening the lines around the eyes). Then, I add some sparkle to the gem. I also tweak the colors by using color adjustment layers.



Gemsquid *could* be done, as I've thought at many stages of this process, but to confirm, I need to test it on Discord first.



And it looks great! Here's the final gemsquid emoji:



The painting would win me no prizes at larger sizes, but it looks amazing as an emoji.

If there's interest, I could write up a step-by-step tutorial for the next high effort squid emoji that I paint. I would love to detail the color adjustment phase, which is by far the most finicky part of the emoji design process.

>> More Reading on Emoji and Emoji Making <<

I hope you found something in this tutorial useful! If you'd like to read more about how to make emoji, or specific emoji-making processes for specific cases, please check out the following tutorials:

How to Create a Set of Superhero Emoji (Illustrator)

This tutorial focuses on how you make a set of emoji in a vector workflow. This tutorial is good if you want practice in keeping a consistent "look" between emoji, without using a detailed base. (Yes, I'm aware that Batman looks especially horrifying here.)



<https://design.tutsplus.com/tutorials/how-to-create-a-set-of-superhero-emoji--cms-29597>

How to Create Your Own Emoji (Photoshop)

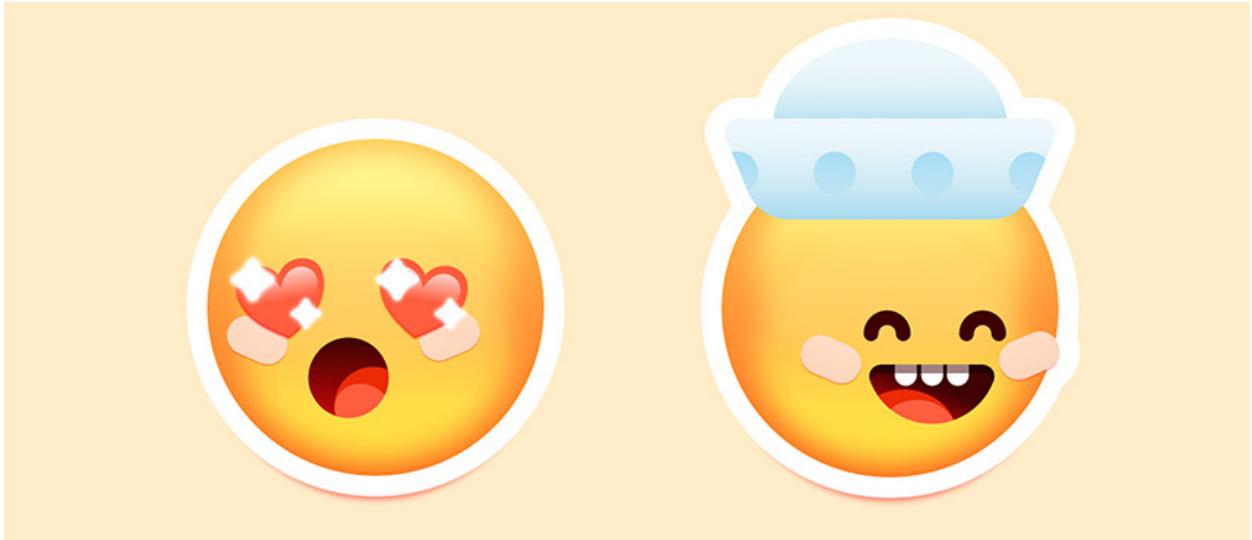
If you're interested in creating emoji in an iOS style, this tutorial looks at how to create a family of generic-looking emoji. This tutorial is aimed at professionals who want to design emoji for paid apps/wide audiences.



<https://theblog.adobe.com/how-to-create-emoji/>

How to Create a Stylish Emoji in Affinity Designer

If you need to create vector emoji (or emoji stickers), and you absolutely loathe illustrator, check out this tutorial! I'm still learning Affinity Designer, but I much prefer its friendlier approach to vector control.



<https://design.tutsplus.com/tutorials/how-to-create-an-emoji-in-affinity-designer--cms-31691>

ILLUSTRATOR TUTORIAL HOW TO DESIGN A ZOMBIE EMOJI (Youtube vid)

If watching things is more your speed, this is a pretty chill (wordless) vid. It's a speedpaint, but for vectors, basically. This tutorial starts right in, skipping the sketch phase and just getting down to the emoji!



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEUxsoTtayc>

And that's it from me! Hit me up on Discord if you're interested in more emoji tutorials, or you'd like a tutorial on a specific part of emoji design. Cheers!

--TKodami