How to Draw a Cardinal

12 easy steps for beginners



What you'll need

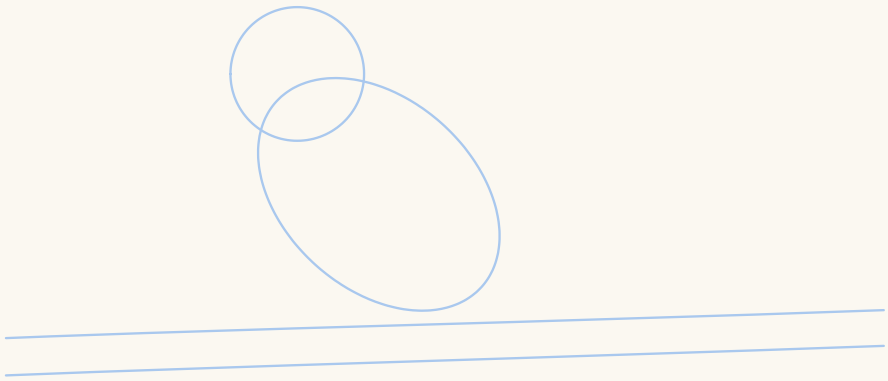
- A pencil
- An eraser
- A black fineliner
- Colored pencils
- Plain paper

How to use this guide

New lines for each step are shown in **blue**; lines you already drew are gray. Draw lightly first, then ink and erase near the end.

Read the full tutorial online →

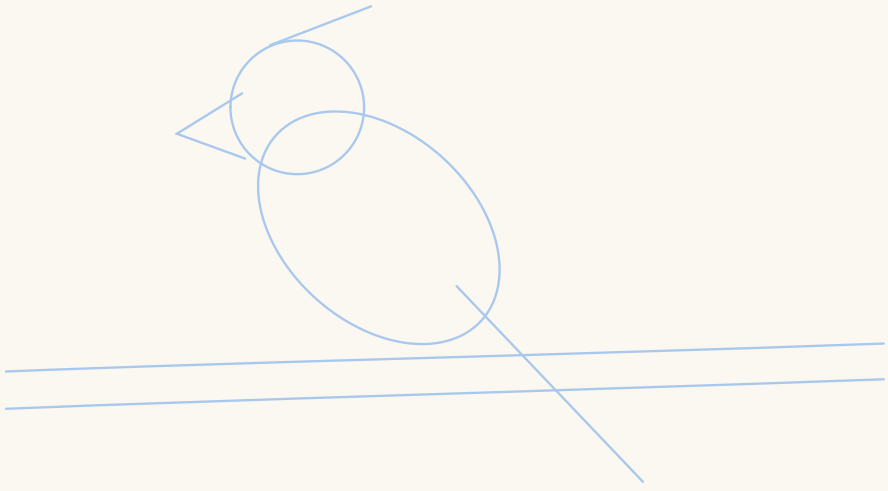
STEP 1 Sketch the branch and body guides



Draw two long, nearly flat lines across the lower part of the page for the branch. Above its left half, draw a circle for the head. Then add a big oval for the body that overlaps the circle and leans to the right, like an egg tipped on its side. Its bottom stops just above the branch.

💡 **Tip:** Keep the head circle about half the width of the body oval. A bigger head turns the bird into a chick.

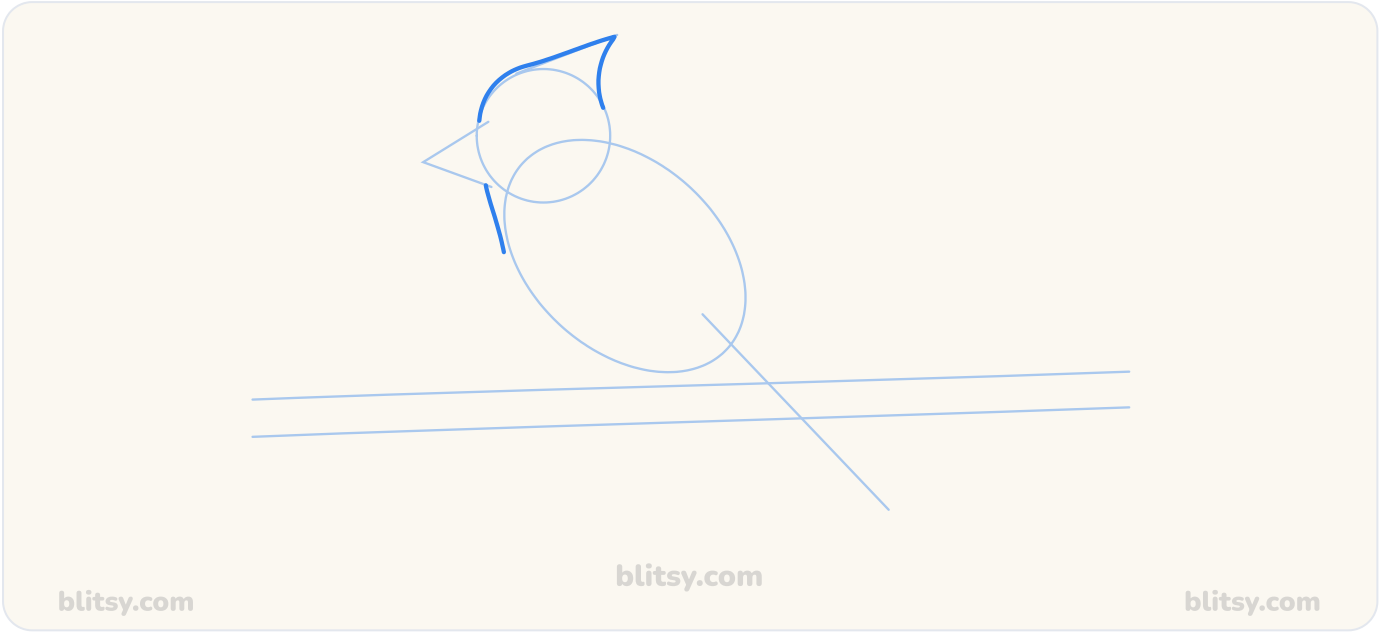
STEP 2 Add the crest, beak and tail guides



From the top of the head, draw one short slanted line going up and back for the crest. On the left side of the head, sketch a small triangle for the beak. Then draw a long straight line from the lower back of the body down past the branch for the tail.

💡 **Tip:** Point the tail line the opposite way from the beak. That diagonal is what makes the bird look balanced.

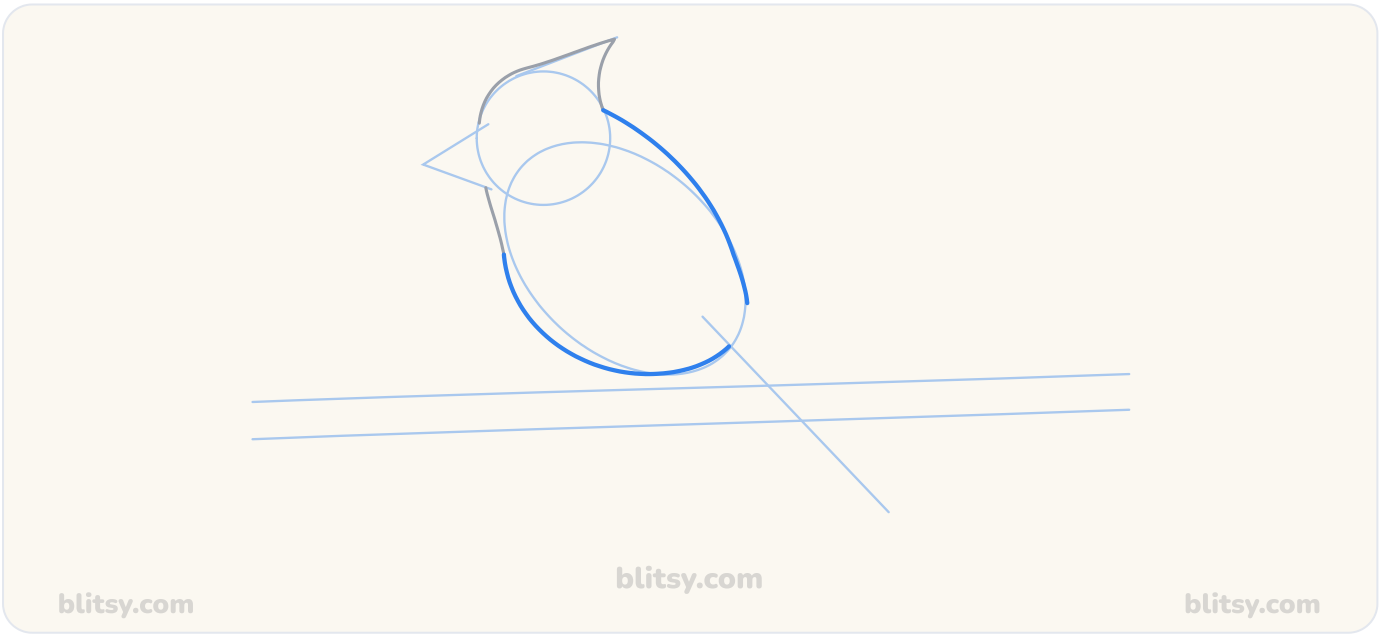
STEP 3 Draw the head and the pointed crest



Start at the beak guide and curve up over the forehead. At the crest line, follow it up to a sharp tip, then come back down in a slightly hollow curve to the back of the head. Add a short line under the beak for the throat. I make the crest tall on purpose, because it's the first thing people look for in a cardinal.

💡 **Tip:** Draw the crest tip with one quick flick so it ends in a clean point.

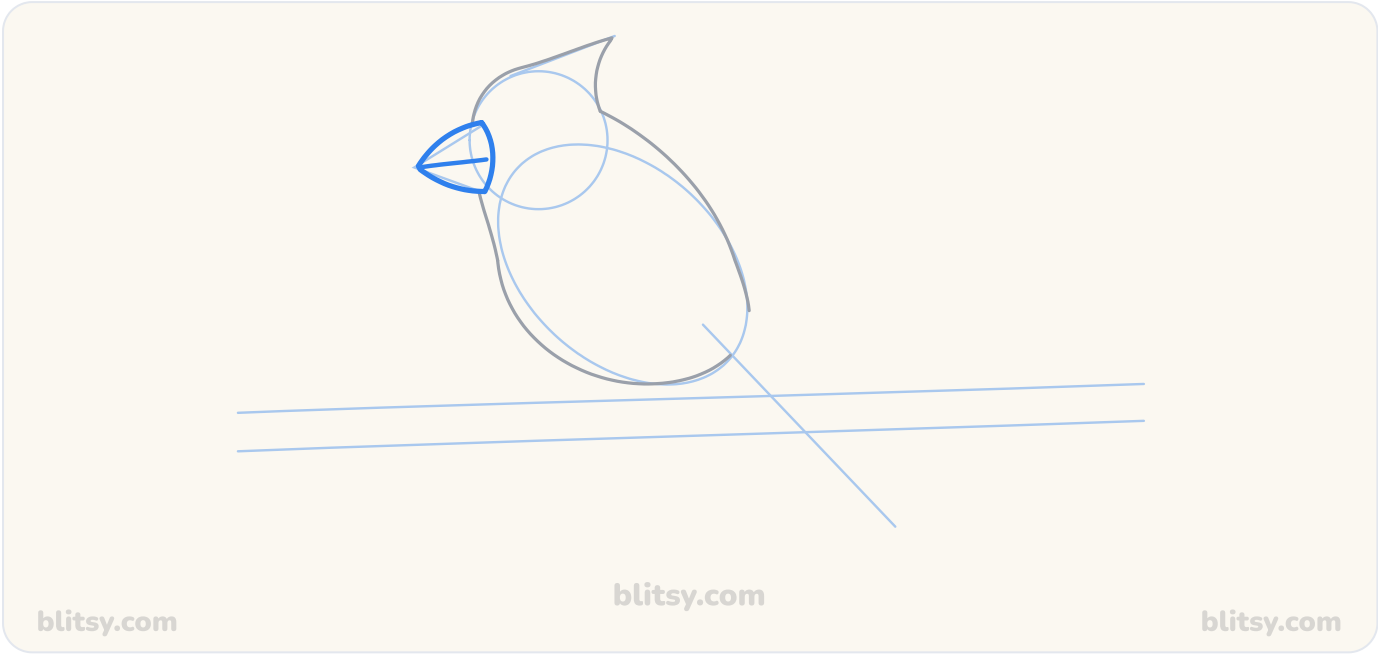
STEP 4 Shape the round chest and back



From the back of the head, draw a long smooth curve down the back to where the tail line starts. Then go back to the throat and bring a fuller curve out and around under the belly. Cardinals look puffy in cold weather, so let the chest bulge forward.

💡 **Tip:** If the chest looks flat, push the curve out a little further than feels right. Songbirds are rounder than you expect.

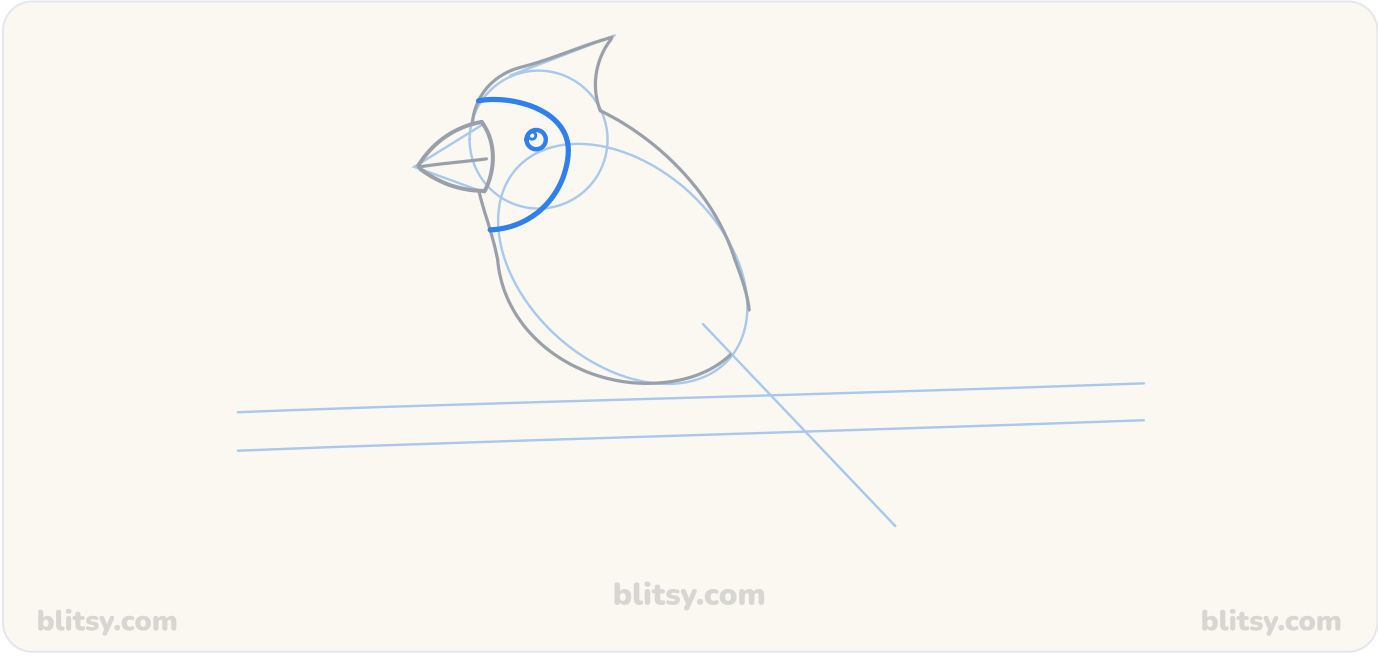
STEP 5 Draw the thick cone beak



Over the beak triangle, draw a short, thick cone with a closed back end against the face. Add one line through the middle where the two halves meet. Most beginners draw this beak too long and thin. A cardinal's beak is short and heavy because it cracks seeds.

💡 **Tip:** Make the back of the beak almost as tall as it is long. That chunky shape reads as cardinal right away.

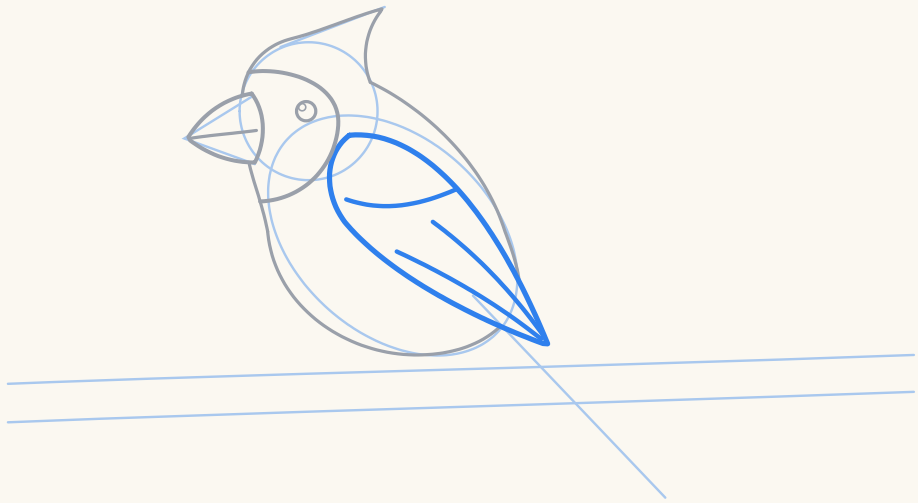
STEP 6 Outline the black mask and the eye



Begin on the forehead just above the beak and draw a rounded line back around where the eye goes, then down and forward to the chest under the chin. That area becomes the black mask. Near its top, draw a small circle for the eye with a tiny one inside for the shine.

💡 **Tip:** Leave the shine circle empty when you color, or the eye will vanish into the black mask.

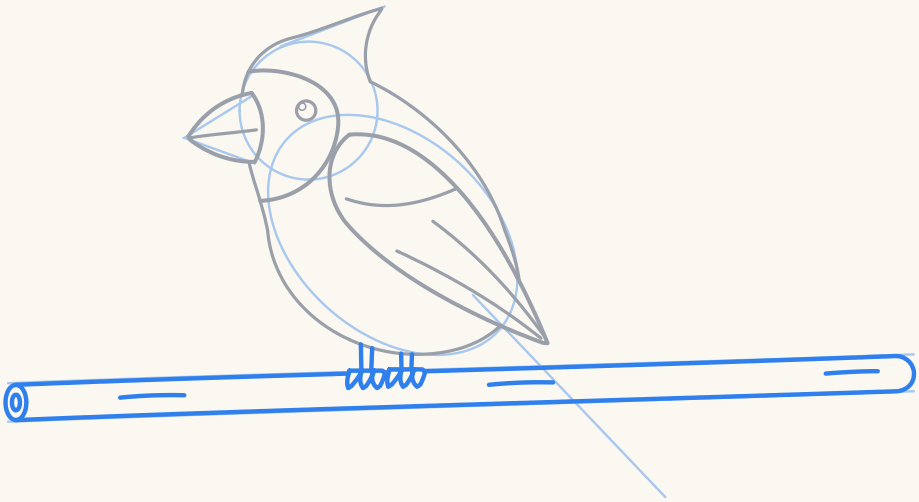
STEP 7 Draw the folded wing



The wing is a long leaf shape lying on the side of the body. Start it just behind the mask, run the top edge along the back and end in a point that pokes slightly past the body. Inside, draw one curve across the upper part and two long lines toward the tip for the flight feathers.

💡 **Tip:** Let the wing tip overlap the body edge a little. A wing that stays inside the oval looks pasted on.

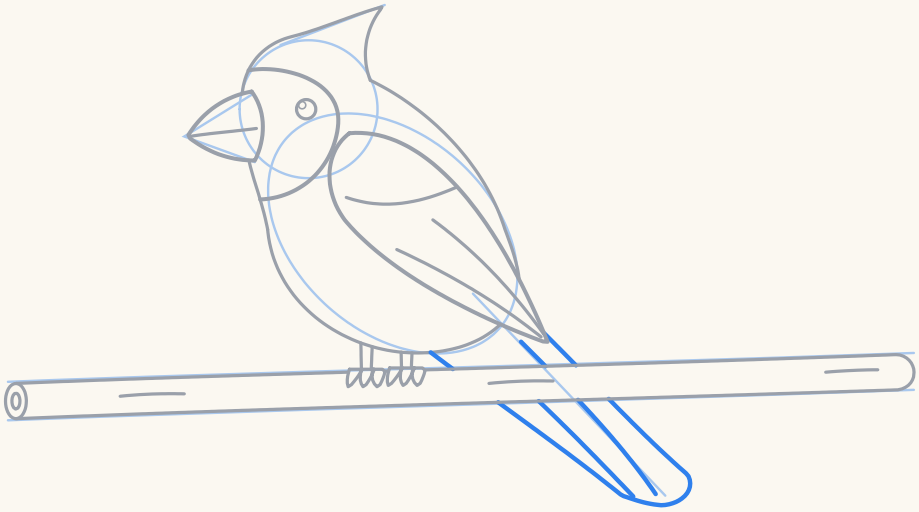
STEP 8 Draw the branch and the gripping feet



Go over the branch guides with firmer lines, round off the right end and draw a small oval with a ring on the left end, so it looks cut. Add a few bark dashes. Under the belly, draw two thin legs down to the branch, each ending in three curved toes over the front of the wood.

💡 **Tip:** Keep the legs short. Most of a songbird's leg is hidden under its belly feathers.

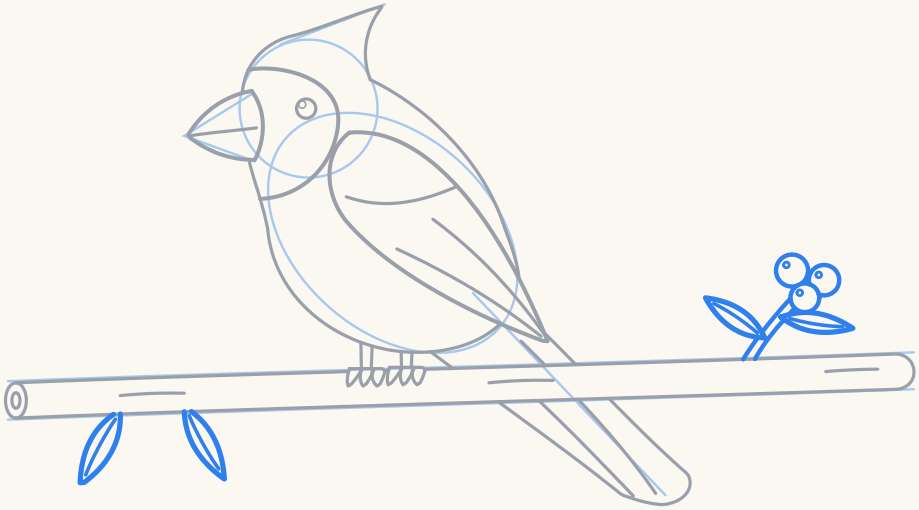
STEP 9 Add the long tail feathers



Follow the tail guide with two lines that start behind the body and end in a rounded tip near the bottom of the page. Stop each line where it meets the branch and pick it up again below, since the tail hangs behind the wood. Two long inner lines suggest separate feathers.

💡 **Tip:** Make the tail about as long as the body. A short tail makes the cardinal look like a robin.

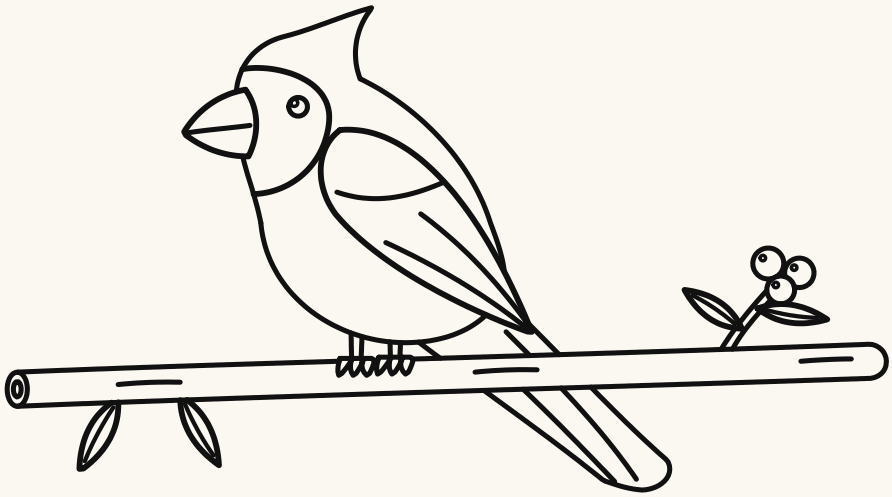
STEP 10 Add leaves and winter berries



Hang two narrow leaves under the left part of the branch, each with a center line. On the right, draw a short twig with a leaf on each side and three round berries at the end. The berries give the picture a winter feel and balance the red of the bird.

💡 **Tip:** Overlap the three berries slightly instead of lining them up. A small cluster looks more natural.

STEP 11 Ink the lines and erase the guides



Trace every line you want to keep with the black fineliner. I begin with the beak and mask while my hand is steady and finish with the branch. Skip the guides. Once the ink is fully dry, erase the circle, the oval and every guide line.

💡 **Tip:** Wait a full minute before erasing. Fineliner ink can smear even when it looks dry.

STEP 12 Color your cardinal



Fill the head and body with bright red, then use a darker red for the wing and tail. A deeper red along the bottom of the belly adds roundness. Color the mask black but skip the eye shine. Use orange for the beak and pinkish brown for the legs. The branch is brown, the leaves green, the berries crimson.

💡 **Tip:** Press harder on the wing red than on the body red. The difference in strength separates them even with one pencil.