How to Shade for Complete Beginners

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When you add light and shadow to your line-drawings, you can make your subject come to life by creating the illusion of form and depth.

You can make a flat line drawing jump right off the page or push things far away into the distance!

In order to shade better, here are 3 things you’ll need to learn...

- Pressure control
- How to shade smoothly
- Understand how light behaves

There are more, but let’s keep things simple! I’m going to walk you through all 3 topics and then we’ll shade something together, step by step!

This blog post is a written version of my video tutorial below:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-WR-FyUQc6I

Let’s begin!
Pressure Control

Realistic shading is done by creating a series of values/shades ranging from light to dark. The harder I press down on my pencil, the darker the strokes will be.

Portraits displaying a limited value range, can end up looking very flat. While portraits with a wider value range will pop:

To have good pressure control, practice shading from one end of your sketchbook to the other while pressing harder and harder until the values get darker gradually.

Another way to practice is to draw a long rectangle and divide it into several squares. Fill the squares from right to left, start with the darkest value you can possibly make and work your way towards the lightest.
It’s important to maintain a consistent pressure between each back and forth stroke or each individual stroke. This will take some practice and concentration to develop the muscle memory for. Here’s an example of what I mean:

If you’re interested in the tools I use and want to learn more about the different pencil types. Check this page out.

Some tools can make shading easier for you, but you absolutely DO NOT need any special pencils to get started. Because you can draw and shade realistically with pretty much anything that can make light to dark marks! Here, let me show you! I’m gonna draw using this random stick I found in my kitchen. Once it’s burnt, I can use it just like a regular pencil. And it erasable too!
My point, is that any old pencil will do. There is no reason why you can’t start shading today. Really, the most important thing is just to start!

**How to Shade Smoothly**

To shade smoothly, try to keep your pencil strokes close together. Eliminate major gaps between your strokes while maintaining good pressure control.

Now, it’s difficult to eliminate gaps if your pencil is **sharp**. So what you can do is wear the pencil down until the tip is **dull** or use the **side of the lead** to draw so your strokes come out thicker:

If you’re shading a large area and want to avoid dark stripes (the ones that form when your strokes overlap each other), avoid using the **writing grip**
while pivoting at the wrist. When you pivot from the wrist, your stroke length is very limited:

Instead, try using an **overhand grip** and pivot from your **elbow and shoulder** to achieve much longer strokes:

This is very useful for shading large areas such as backgrounds. Just remember to keep your strokes close together, eliminating gaps that can make your drawing look scratchy.
Understand How Light Behaves

Have you ever tried shading something over and over without it looking even close to your subject? For most beginners, shading is probably a guessing game. That’s totally what was for me! Until I learned a few basics about light. Things just started making more sense!

Knowing **where** to correctly add light or shadow can make a really big difference in how realistic your artwork will come across.

I’m going to use a sphere to point out the different elements of light because the patterns are a lot easier to point out than a complex form such as... a nose for example.

Here we have a plain wooden ball, with a light source coming down from the top left.
We have two distinct sides, the light side which is facing the light source and the shadow side which is turned away from the light.

Here we have something called a **core shadow** which is a dark strip running along the boundary between the two sides.

The core shadow is most visible on a white table because white is highly reflective. Light rays come down, bounce off the table and illuminate the shadow side of the ball, leaving a dark band.
So as you can see, we have two types of light. **Direct light** and **reflected light**.

That’s why shadows are rarely all black. There are so many things in the environment that light can reflect off of: walls, nearby objects or even dust particles floating around in the air!

Do keep in mind that **black surfaces absorb light**, so in the example image below, the core shadow is no longer visible:
Looking at the image below, can you tell which areas are lit by reflections and where the core shadows are?

Answer.....
As mentioned earlier, light rays can reflect off of many things in the environment, but they have a difficult time bouncing their way into tight spaces such as the area where the ball touches the table. This is called an **occlusion shadow**.

And where a form blocks light from reaching another, that’s called a **cast shadow**. In this case, the ball is blocking light from reaching the table.
The cast shadow can tell you where the light source is coming from. All you have to do is trace the edges against your object, like so:

You can also flip this around...If you’re drawing an entire scene from your imagination, you can specify a light source and create a set of lines resting against the edges of your object to find the cast shadow’s length.
How many **cast shadows** can you find in the image below?

**Answer.....**
Let’s take a closer look at the **light side** of the ball.

On this side, there are only 3 things I need to point out. There’s the **core light** which is the area facing the light directly. Then there’s the **highlight** which is actually a reflection of the light source. This is the brightest point on an object. The edges of a highlight can appear soft on matte surfaces like this wooden ball or hard on shiny surfaces such as a polished plastic ball.

And as unintuitive as it seems, the highlight can change position depending on where you’re standing.

The very last thing are **mid-tones** or **half-tones**. Mid-tones are the darkest values on the light side of the ball where the edges start curving away from the light source. These areas of the ball receive less and less light the more they angle away.
Can you point out the core light, highlight and mid-tones on the nose?

Answer.....
Shade With Me: Step by Step Shading for Beginners!

Let’s shade an apple together without looking at any reference images. With our basic knowledge of how light behaves, we can essentially draw from our imagination! It’s a great way to actively think about how light behaves.

Step 1

First sketch your apple. It doesn’t have to be perfect at all just try to get something down on your sketchbook. Try to keep your outlines as light as possible. My sketch is extra dark so you guys can see it better.

You can use any pencil you want :) To learn more about the different pencil types, click here.
If you look closely, I started out by drawing a very light circle and then used that as a base to draw the apple.

**Step 2**

We want it to be sitting on a table, so draw the edge of that table behind your apple. Then erase any unneeded lines.
Step 3

The next step is to determine where the light is coming from. Let’s have one shining down from the top left. Draw a little flashlight or sun just to remember where the light source is.

![Sketch of an apple with a shadow]

Step 4

Where the apple blocks light from reaching the table, let’s draw a cast shadow. You can use a ruler to find the cast shadow’s length. Just align the ruler to your light source and the edge of the apple. Now we know how long to draw the cast shadow. I’m just going to draw a long oval shape on the table’s surface.
Step 5

Where the dotted lines touch the apple, we have our boundary between the light and shadow side.
Let’s say the apple is sitting on a white table. How do you think the shadow side will look, taking reflected light into consideration? Don’t forget that light can bounce off of walls, nearby objects or even dust particles.

Once you’re done visualizing, draw a core shadow. My core shadow is thinner on the left side because there are more reflections on that side (yours might look different depending on the apple’s surroundings).

Make sure the thickest section of the core shadow is darkest.
Step 6

Where the apple touches the table, there is less light. So let's shade that area darker.

Step 7

Now that I’ve taken care of those two areas, I’m going to fill in the rest of the shadow side by laying down a flat layer of graphite that is much lighter in value.
The 3 areas we just shaded look very separate from each other, so let’s soften the transition between each one to avoid the abrupt changes between light and dark. I like to shade from the darkest area into the lighter one, using medium pressure to start.

Now the apple looks a lot rounder!
If you’re shading an object with a matte surface, an abrupt or immediate transition can indicate a sharp edge while a gradual transition can indicate a round edge.

Value Transitions

Abrupt  Gradual  More Gradual

Step 8

Let’s shade the cast shadow now. The further the cast shadow is from the apple, the more open it is to being hit by reflected light rays, so I’m gonna shade the area directly under the apple darker and then lighter as the shadow stretches away.
Step 9

How bright do you want the light side of your apple to be? It’s totally up to you! Pick a light value and then shade the entire space flatly. Just focus on your pressure control and stroke spacing.
Step 10

The next thing we need to do is blend the two distinct sides of our apple so it all comes together nicely. Where the form turns away from direct light, add your mid-tones which will immediately make the surface appear rounder.

The more the surface of the apple turns away from direct light, the darker it becomes.
**Step 11**

When you’re done, use an eraser to indicate the highlight.

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**Step 12: Bonus**

If you want your drawing to pop out, exaggerate your values to create depth (make dark areas darker, light areas even lighter).

You can only go so dark with graphite pencils. If you wanna achieve a deep black, try adding charcoal to the drawing.
Outlines can make a drawing look cartoony, so if you want your apple to look more realistic, make sure the outlines blend in with your shading or erase them as you go along.

Definitely try to make your initial sketches as light as possible so they don’t show through in the end. If they’re too dark to erase, you can add a dark background until they disappear!

**Practice!**

Place a few objects on a table under a single light source. These objects can be various fruit, vegetables, eggs, etc. Observe the patterns of light and shadow on each object as you move the light around to try and understand what you’re looking at. Then draw the scene in a fairly organized manner. For example, start with the core shadow first, then the occlusion shadow etc.

Sometimes it can help to pick an object up and turn it around to study it from different angles.

If you want a bigger challenge, ask a willing friend or family member to be your study subject. Use only one light source on his or her face. It really helps to draw people that you know very well!