

THE DRAWING PATH

Negative Space

A Complete Lesson Plan

BEGINNER

HOBBYIST

PROFESSIONAL

Lesson 3 · Proportions

Teach Yourself to See

thedrawingpath.com

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SKILL LEVEL 1

BEGINNER

The shape of what isn't there.



Negative Space — Beginner

What Is Negative Space?

Negative space is the space around and between the subjects of a drawing — the background, the gaps, the "empty" areas. The subjects themselves (a figure, an object, a building) are the positive space. The negative space is defined by the edges of the positive space. When you draw the negative spaces correctly, the positive spaces appear correctly as a consequence. This is the key insight: you can describe a subject perfectly by drawing the shapes that surround it, never drawing the subject itself.

This is not a trick or a workaround — it is an alternate mode of visual perception. When you draw the negative spaces, you bypass the symbol-drawing habit (the brain's tendency to draw what it knows rather than what it sees) and see the actual shapes in front of you.

[VISUAL EXAMPLE]

A chair drawn in two ways: Left — the chair itself outlined as a positive form. Right — only the negative spaces (the gaps between the rungs, the space under the seat) are filled in black. The chair emerges from the surrounding dark.

Drawing What Isn't There

To draw negative spaces: identify the shape of the gap or background area, then draw that shape as if it were a positive object. The gap between a figure's arm and body is a shape — probably a roughly triangular or irregular quadrilateral shape. Draw that shape correctly and the arm's position becomes correct as a side effect. This works because the negative shape is simpler than the positive form — no symbol-drawing habit interferes with drawing abstract gaps.

Common Mistakes

Not committing to seeing negative space as shapes

Half-heartedly observing negative space but still drawing the positive form out of habit. To use negative space properly, it must replace — not supplement — your observation of the positive form.

Negative spaces that are too small to see clearly

Choosing subjects where the negative spaces are tiny and complex. Start with subjects that have large, clear negative shapes: a chair, a tree against sky, a figure with arms away from the body.

Forgetting that negative spaces also have proportion relationships

Drawing negative spaces as shapes without checking their proportional relationships to each other. Negative spaces have the same proportion requirements as positive forms.

Beginner Exercises

Chair Negative Space Study

20 min

TRAINS: Drawing the gaps, not the chair

STEPS

1. Set up a simple chair against a plain wall.
2. Do NOT draw the chair. Draw only the negative spaces: the shapes visible through the rungs, the gap under the seat, the space between the legs.
3. Fill each negative shape with solid grey or hatching.
4. At the end, you should see a recognizable chair, defined entirely by its surrounding spaces.

SELF-EVALUATE:

Does the chair appear convincingly without drawing it directly? Which negative spaces were hardest to see as abstract shapes?

Profile Negative Space

20 min

TRAINS: Figuring faces from surrounding shapes

STEPS

1. Find a high-contrast profile photograph (dark figure against light background, or vice versa).
2. Draw only the background shape — the space surrounding the head and shoulders.
3. The profile should appear as the remaining white space.
4. Check: does the profile match the reference when viewed through negative space?

SELF-EVALUATE:

Does the profile emerge accurately from the negative space drawing? Was this approach easier or harder than drawing the face directly?

Vase/Faces Ambiguous Figure

25 min

TRAINS: Understanding figure-ground ambiguity

STEPS

1. The classic Rubin vase: a black vase shape on white, where the negative spaces create two facing profiles.
2. Draw 3 variations: vase prominent, profiles prominent, and a balanced version where both readings are equally strong.
3. Analyse: what determines which reading dominates?

SELF-EVALUATE:

Can you control which reading (vase or faces) is dominant by adjusting values and proportions? What determines which interpretation emerges first?

Tree Against Sky

25 min

TRAINS: Complex natural negative spaces

STEPS

1. Draw a bare tree in winter (no leaves) against a light sky.
2. Draw only the sky shapes — the irregular patches of sky visible between and around the branches.
3. The branches should appear as the remaining blank paper.
4. Compare to a drawing where you start with the branches.

SELF-EVALUATE:

Which method — branches first or sky-patches first — produces more accurately proportioned branches? Why might negative space work better for irregular organic subjects?

Beginner Resources

Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain — B. Edwards

amazon.com/search?q=drawing+right+side+brain

Edwards' book dedicates several chapters specifically to negative space as a perceptual mode. The original detailed treatment of this concept.

Ctrl+Paint — Negative Space

ctrlpaint.com

Free video. Clear explanation of negative space with practical application to digital painting.

Kline — Negative Space Drawing

youtube.com/search?q=negative+space+drawing+tutorial

Several clear tutorial videos on negative space drawing on YouTube. Search for the term directly.

SKILL LEVEL 2

HOBBYIST

Composition, reversal, and complex environments.

2

Negative Space — Hobbyist

Negative Space as Composition Tool

Strong compositions pay as much attention to the shapes of the negative spaces as to the positive forms. A portrait where the dark background shape is an undifferentiated blob feels less composed than one where the background is divided into a few deliberate, interesting shapes. The negative space is not empty — it is designed. In thumbnail sketching, considering the shape of the negative space is as important as considering the placement of the subject.

Figure-Ground Reversal

Figure-ground reversal is a technique where the intended "foreground" and "background" of a composition can switch depending on what the viewer focuses on. Escher's tessellations are the most famous example — birds become fish, black becomes white. In illustration and graphic design, controlled figure-ground ambiguity creates visual interest and rewards multiple viewings. Uncontrolled figure-ground ambiguity creates confusion.

Common Mistakes

Treating negative space as "just background"

Not designing the background shape, leading to an undefined, arbitrary negative space that weakens the composition.

Negative space that fights the subject

A background shape that accidentally creates a competing focal point equal to or stronger than the intended subject.

Ignoring negative space in the thumbnail stage

Developing the subject in detail before considering whether the surrounding space is well-designed.

Hobbyist Exercises

Background Shape Design

45 min

TRAINS: Designing the negative space deliberately

STEPS

1. Choose a portrait or figure reference.
2. Before drawing the figure, design the background shape as if it were an interesting abstract form.
3. The background should: (1) be divided into 2–3 interesting areas, (2) contrast with the figure's shape, (3) not compete with the figure for attention.
4. Draw the figure and background together.
5. Test: if you fill the figure black, is the background shape interesting on its own?

SELF-EVALUATE:

Is the background shape interesting as a stand-alone abstract shape? Does the designed background improve the composition over an undesigned background?

Cropping for Negative Space

35 min

TRAINS: Finding the best composition through cropping

STEPS

1. Take a photograph and make 6 different crops, each with a different negative space result.
2. For each crop, evaluate the shape of the negative spaces created.
3. Identify the crop with the most interesting and well-balanced figure-ground relationship.
4. Draw that composition.

SELF-EVALUATE:

Does cropping significantly improve the figure-ground balance of the original photograph? Which crop produced the best negative space?

Complex Interior — Negative Space Map

45 min

TRAINS: Seeing space in environmental subjects

STEPS

1. Draw an interior environment.
2. After the initial sketch, create a second layer (or a separate drawing) showing only the negative spaces: the openings between furniture, the areas of floor visible between legs, the windows and doorways.
3. Does this negative space map reveal any proportion or placement errors in the original sketch?

SELF-EVALUATE:

Did the negative space map reveal errors that you hadn't noticed in the positive-space drawing? Is there a correlation between well-designed negative spaces and a convincing sense of interior space?

Two-Value Composition Study

40 min

TRAINS: Notan principles for hobbyists

STEPS

1. Choose a reference or design an original composition.
2. Draw it using only two values: pure black and pure white — no grey.
3. All mid-tones must be assigned to either black or white.
4. The assignment must produce a composition that works in both high-key (mostly white) and low-key (mostly black) versions.
5. The figure-ground relationship must be clear and deliberate.

SELF-EVALUATE:

Does the two-value version reveal compositional strengths or weaknesses not visible in the full-value version? Are the positive and negative shapes both interesting?

Hobbyist Resources

Notan: The Dark-Light Principle — Arthur Wesley Dow

amazon.com/search?q=notan+dow

The foundational text on figure-ground relationships in design. Essential reading for hobbyists engaging seriously with negative space.

Ctrl+Paint — Shape and Silhouette

ctrlpaint.com

Free video library. The silhouette and shape segments cover figure-ground composition clearly.

James Gurney — Composition

gurneyjourney.com

Gurney's blog has strong content on figure-ground and notan in composition. Free and professional quality.

SKILL LEVEL 3

PROFESSIONAL

Notan, figure-ground as design system, and narrative.

3

Negative Space — Professional

Notan and Figure-Ground as Design System

Notan is the Japanese concept of dark-light harmony — the balance and relationship between dark and light masses in a composition. It is not simply contrast; it is the designed relationship between the shapes of the dark areas and the shapes of the light areas. A strong notan design is one where both the dark shapes and the light shapes are interesting, balanced, and complementary. The notan plan is typically established in the earliest thumbnail sketch and maintained throughout the development of a painting or illustration.

Negative Space as Storytelling

In illustration and sequential art, negative space communicates isolation, emptiness, silence, and vulnerability. A tiny figure in a vast white or dark field is a statement about smallness and exposure. A face emerging from darkness implies secrecy or threat. The deliberate use of empty negative space is not a failure to fill the image — it is the most powerful tool available for emotional silence in visual storytelling. It requires confidence to leave large areas empty when the instinct is to fill them.

Common Mistakes

Notan design as afterthought

Developing a full value composition, then evaluating the notan. Notan should be established in 2 values at the thumbnail stage, before any tonal development begins.

Filling empty space out of fear

Adding texture, detail, or secondary elements to negative space that is working well as empty. Trust the emptiness.

Dark and light shapes with equal weight

A composition where dark and light areas are perfectly balanced in area but neither is designed to carry the visual weight. One value family should dominate.

Professional Exercises

Notan Design Series

120 min

TRAINS: Building figure-ground balance from the start

STEPS

1. Design 8 compositions as 2-value notan thumbnails (2×2 cm each) before any subject design.
2. Each thumbnail should work as an abstract black-and-white shape study.
3. Select the 2 strongest notan designs.
4. For each selected notan, design a subject that fits within its figure-ground structure — not the reverse.
5. Develop each to a finished illustration.

SELF-EVALUATE:

Does designing the notan first constrain the subject in productive ways? Is there a correlation between strong notan design and strong final composition?

Sequential Art — Negative Space Pacing

90 min

TRAINS: Using empty space to control narrative rhythm

STEPS

1. Design a 6-panel comic sequence with deliberate negative space pacing.
2. Panels 1–2: dense, full composition (action, complexity). Panels 3–4: mostly empty (stillness, aftermath, pause). Panels 5–6: return to complexity (continuation).
3. The empty panels must feel like deliberate silence, not unfinished drawings.
4. The transition between dense and empty should feel like a breath.

SELF-EVALUATE:

Does the empty space in panels 3–4 communicate stillness effectively? Does the density/emptiness contrast enhance the narrative pacing?

Master Notan Analysis

75 min

TRAINS: Extracting figure-ground grammar from master works

STEPS

1. Select 6 paintings or illustrations with strong figure-ground design.
2. For each, create a 2-value notan study: black for dark areas, white for light areas.
3. Analyse: what are the shapes of the dark masses? Do the light shapes balance them? Is there a dominant value?
4. Apply one notan principle to an original composition.

SELF-EVALUATE:

Can you identify the notan grammar of each master composition? Does the analysis reveal structure that you hadn't noticed in the full-value version?

Negative Space Portrait

90 min

TRAINS: Face from surrounding dark or light

STEPS

1. Design a portrait where the face is described almost entirely by surrounding values — very little detail on the face itself.
2. The face should emerge from either (a) a dark surrounding that gives it its shape, or (b) a light surrounding where only the shadows define the face.
3. The negative-space-defined face should feel more expressive, not less, than a fully detailed portrait.
4. Render to a finished portrait standard.

SELF-EVALUATE:

Does the negative-space approach produce a more atmospheric portrait than full detail? What is the minimum amount of positive-space detail needed to identify the face?

Professional Resources

Notan — Arthur Wesley Dow

amazon.com/search?q=notan+dow

The foundational text. Dow's system influenced Matisse and is still taught in professional programs.

James Gurney — Color and Light

gurneyjourney.com

Gurney's book and blog cover notan planning and value design at a professional level.

Hensche on Painting — John W. Robichaux

amazon.com/search?q=hensche+on+painting

Henry Hensche's figure-ground and value mass approach. Professional plein air painting tradition.

Master Exercise Index

All exercises consolidated for quick reference.

Beginner

#	Exercise Name	What It Trains	Duration
B1	Chair Negative Space	Drawing the gaps only	20 min
B2	Profile Negative Space	Face from surrounding shapes	20 min
B3	Vase/Faces Ambiguous Figure	Figure-ground reversal intro	25 min
B4	Tree Against Sky	Complex natural negative spaces	25 min

Hobbyist

#	Exercise Name	What It Trains	Duration
H1	Background Shape Design	Designing the negative deliberately	45 min
H2	Cropping for Negative Space	Finding best figure-ground	35 min
H3	Interior Negative Space Map	Space in environments	45 min
H4	Two-Value Composition	Notan for hobbyists	40 min

Professional

#	Exercise Name	What It Trains	Duration
P1	Notan Design Series	Figure-ground from the start	120 min

P2	Sequential Negative Space Pacing	Empty space as narrative	90 min
P3	Master Notan Analysis	Extracting figure-ground grammar	75 min
P4	Negative Space Portrait	Face from surrounding values	90 min

Resource Directory

All recommended resources, consolidated.

Beginner

Resource	URL	Notes
Drawing on Right Side	amazon.com	Original negative space treatment
Ctrl+Paint Negative Space	ctrlpaint.com	Free video
YouTube Tutorials	youtube.com	Search negative space drawing

Hobbyist

Resource	URL	Notes
Notan — Dow	amazon.com	Foundational text
Ctrl+Paint Shape Silhouette	ctrlpaint.com	Free figure-ground video
James Gurney Composition	gurneyjourney.com	Free professional quality blog

Professional

Resource	URL	Notes
Notan — Dow	amazon.com	Professional figure-ground design
James Gurney Color and Light	gurneyjourney.com	Notan planning professional
Hensche on Painting	amazon.com	Value mass tradition