

DEEP DIVE

Five Elements of Shading

The complete vocabulary of how light falls on a three-dimensional form.

Invented by master instructor Andrew Loomis and refined by countless teachers since, the Five Elements of Shading provide a complete framework for describing light on any form. Once internalized, these five elements become an automatic lens through which you see every object. They are not a formula — they are an observation system.

1. HIGHLIGHT

The highlight is the point or area of direct light reflection. On a shiny surface, it is small and sharp. On a matte surface, it is broad and diffused. The highlight sits at the exact point where the angle between your eye and the light source is most direct (the specular reflection angle). Beginners often paint highlights too large and too white — in reality, highlights rarely reach pure white unless the surface is mirror-like. Reserve your lightest lights for the highlight, but be selective.

2. LIGHT (HALFTONE)

The halftone is the broad area of the lit surface that is not quite at the highlight angle. It transitions from the highlight toward the terminator. Halftones contain the most color information in a form — the local color of the object is most visible here, not at the highlight (which tends toward the color of the light source) and not in the shadow (which absorbs ambient light). Careful attention to halftone gradation creates the sense of form curving through space.

3. CORE SHADOW / TERMINATOR

The core shadow is the darkest region on the form itself — darker than even the cast shadow in many lighting conditions. It sits at the terminator: the boundary between the lit and shadow sides. Because no direct light reaches this area and the reflected light has not yet begun, the core shadow is the value anchor of your shadow family. Squinting will show the core shadow as the darkest shape on the form. Many beginners make their cast shadow darkest, but the core shadow usually wins.

4. REFLECTED LIGHT

Reflected light bounces back onto the shadow side of the form from nearby surfaces (the ground, walls, other objects). It lightens the shadow side but must stay firmly within the shadow family — lighter than the core shadow but darker than any lit area. Reflected light is most visible on the underside of rounded forms (chin, bottom of a nose, underside of a forearm). It gives the shadow side life and prevents it from reading as a flat

silhouette.

5. CAST SHADOW

The cast shadow is the shadow thrown by the object onto another surface. Its edge sharpness depends on the light source: a point source creates a hard edge, a diffuse source creates a soft edge. The cast shadow is darkest nearest the object and lightens as it moves away (due to indirect light contamination). Inside the cast shadow, the value is typically between the core shadow and reflected light — not as dark as you might expect.

EXERCISES

Day 1: Draw a sphere and label all five elements before rendering a single tone. Day 2: Draw the same sphere under five different light source types (sun, lamp, overcast, candle, backlit). Day 3: Draw a human hand and identify all five elements on each finger. Day 4: Work from a master study — identify which element the artist emphasized most. Day 5: Draw a still life of three objects and unify them under a single light source, making sure all five elements are present on at least one object.