

DEEP DIVE

Form Shadow vs. Cast Shadow

Two different kinds of darkness — and why confusing them flattens your drawings.

Shadows are not all the same. There are two fundamentally different types of shadow in drawing, and conflating them is one of the most common errors that keeps work looking flat. Understanding the distinction — and rendering each appropriately — is a significant step toward professional-looking light. Form shadows live on the object. Cast shadows are thrown by the object.

FORM SHADOW (SELF-SHADOW)

A form shadow is the shadow on the part of an object's own surface that faces away from the light source. It is not separate from the object — it is the unlit side of the object itself. Form shadows have soft, gradual edges on curved surfaces (because the surface curves gradually away from the light), and sharp, abrupt edges on angular objects (because the surface makes a sudden direction change). The transition from light to form shadow passes through the terminator, which is the darkest region on the form.

CAST SHADOW

A cast shadow is what an object throws onto another surface — or onto itself. A nose casts a shadow on the upper lip. A cylinder casts an elliptical shadow on the ground. Cast shadows belong to the surfaces they fall on, not to the object casting them. The critical characteristic of a cast shadow: it follows the contour of the surface it falls upon. A cast shadow falling across a bumpy surface becomes bumpy. This is how shadows reveal the terrain beneath them.

EDGE QUALITY

Form shadows always have soft edges — there is no abrupt edge where an object stops being lit (except on angular surfaces). Cast shadows have harder edges near the casting object and softer edges farther away. The source of this softening: the light source has physical size, so it partially illuminates the edge of the cast shadow at a distance. Use edge quality to distinguish the two shadow types immediately — hard edges almost always indicate cast shadows.

VALUE COMPARISON

Which is darker? It depends. Generally, the core shadow (darkest part of the form shadow) is darker than the cast shadow because the cast shadow receives more ambient and reflected light. However, where the cast shadow begins at the base of the casting object — the "shadow root" — the two types meet and merge, often creating the darkest point in the entire drawing. This darkest-at-the-base characteristic is a powerful realism

signal.

EXERCISES

Day 1: Draw a cylinder. Carefully render the form shadow gradation — soft edge, gradual darkening toward the core, lightening toward reflected light on the opposite edge. Day 2: Draw the same cylinder with its cast shadow. Make the cast shadow follow the ground plane. Day 3: Draw a hand — analyze where form shadows and cast shadows overlap and separate. Day 4: Draw a simple architectural element (a box on a surface). Use edge quality alone to distinguish the shadow types. Day 5: Working from imagination, draw two objects where one casts a shadow onto the other, revealing the second object's surface topography through the shadow shape.