

Light Logic

BEGINNER

Light has rules, and it follows them consistently. Once you pick a light direction, everything in your drawing must be lit from that same source. The shadow on a box, on a person standing next to it, and on a tree in the background all come from the same sun. Beginning artists often light each object independently — the face is lit from the right but the neck from the left — because they are copying the look of shadow without understanding its source. Decide where the light is coming from, then apply that decision consistently everywhere.

HOBBYIST

Light logic extends beyond direction to quality: the character of the light source changes everything. Sunlight is directional and warm, creating hard-edged shadows with a warm-cool temperature relationship. Overcast sky is soft, diffuse, and cool, creating soft-edged shadows with little temperature contrast. Candlelight is warm, small, and falls off rapidly with distance. Getting these qualities consistent across a drawing makes it feel like a coherent, believable environment rather than a collection of individually lit objects.

PROFESSIONAL

Light logic is the language of cinematography applied to static images. Rembrandt lighting — key light at 45 degrees, one full eye in shadow, the triangle of light on the shadowed cheek — is a specific formula professional portrait photographers and painters still use. In concept art, lighting establishes mood and narrative: high-key for hope and discovery; low-key for menace and tragedy. For illustrators working in narrative contexts, light logic communicates time of day, weather, and indoor or outdoor setting — all without words.