

THE DRAWING PATH

---

# Value & Contrast Control

A Complete Lesson Plan

---

BEGINNER

HOBBYIST

PROFESSIONAL

Lesson 5 · Shading & Texture

---

*Teach Yourself to See*

thedrawingpath.com

# Contents

---

## BEGINNER

- Value Hierarchy
- Contrast and Attention
- Squint Testing
- Exercises 1–4
- Common Mistakes
- Resources

## HOBBYIST

- Simultaneous Contrast
- Value and Depth
- Managing Value in Complex Scenes
- Exercises 5–8
- Common Mistakes
- Resources

## PROFESSIONAL

- Value as Narrative Language
- Value Control in Production
- Exercises 9–12
- Common Mistakes
- Resources

SKILL LEVEL 1

# BEGINNER

Controlling where the eye goes through value.

---

1

# Value & Contrast Control — Beginner

---

## Value Hierarchy

Every drawing or painting has a value hierarchy — the ranking of areas from lightest to darkest. This hierarchy should be intentional: the lightest lights and darkest darks should be placed deliberately where you want the viewer's eye to go first. Value hierarchy is the primary tool for visual communication: the area of highest contrast (lightest light next to darkest dark) is where the eye goes first and stays longest. If your focal subject doesn't have the highest contrast in the composition, it will struggle to compete for attention.

### [ VISUAL EXAMPLE ]

*A simple composition (a figure in a room) shown twice: left = no value hierarchy (everything mid-grey to dark grey, no clear focal point). Right = designed value hierarchy (brightest light next to darkest dark at the face/focal area; everything else mid-range contrast).*

## Contrast and Attention

The human visual system is calibrated to detect contrast — differences between adjacent values — not absolute values. A mid-grey square on a white background appears very dark; the same mid-grey square on a black background appears very light. This simultaneous contrast effect means the appearance of any value depends on its surroundings. In practical terms: you can make a value appear darker by placing a lighter value next to it, without changing the value itself.

## The Squint Test

Squinting at a drawing reduces the detailed information and leaves only the broad value masses. This is the most reliable method for checking value structure: (1) squint and identify which area the eye goes to first — this should be your focal area. (2) Check that you can identify the three main value masses (light, mid, dark) as distinct areas. (3) Check that the background and foreground don't merge (they should be different enough in value to separate). The squint test should be performed every 15–20 minutes during a drawing session.

## Common Mistakes

### High contrast everywhere (visual noise)

Every area having maximum contrast produces visual noise with no hierarchy. The eye bounces everywhere with no place to rest.

### Focal area with medium contrast (too quiet)

The subject placed in a mid-range contrast zone surrounded by higher-contrast areas. The eye avoids the subject and goes to the higher-contrast areas instead.

## Values not checked with the squint test

Rendering detailed texture and line without periodically checking the overall value structure. Squint regularly to maintain control of the broad value masses.

# Beginner Exercises

## Squint Test Practice

30 min

**TRAINS:** Reading value structure from your work

### STEPS

1. Draw a simple scene (3 objects on a surface).
2. Every 10 minutes: stop, squint hard, and ask: (1) where does my eye go first? (2) Can I identify 3 distinct value masses? (3) Are the background and foreground clearly separated?
3. If any answer is no: identify the problem and fix it before continuing.
4. Document what you found and fixed at each squint check.

### SELF-EVALUATE:

*Did the squint test reveal value problems that weren't visible at full resolution? How many squint-test corrections did you make during the drawing?*

## High-Contrast Focal Point

25 min

**TRAINS:** Placing maximum contrast at the subject

### STEPS

1. Draw a composition with one clear focal subject (a face, an object, a figure).
2. Rule: the lightest light and darkest dark in the composition must touch or be adjacent in the focal area.
3. All other areas must have lower contrast — either predominantly light, or predominantly dark, but not both.
4. Squint test: the eye should go directly to the focal area.

### SELF-EVALUATE:

*Does the squint test confirm the focal area? What contrast level in the secondary areas most effectively supports the focal area without competing?*

## 3-Value Squint Study

20 min

**TRAINS:** Designing for the squint test from the start

### STEPS

1. Design a composition using only 3 values: white, grey, black.
2. Assign: white = background, grey = supporting elements, black = focal subject (or any other combination that creates a strong focal area).
3. Draw the composition using only these 3 flat values.
4. Does the squint test work perfectly with only 3 values?

### SELF-EVALUATE:

*Does the 3-value composition work from the squint test? Is a 3-value design sufficient for the intended visual communication?*

## Value Inversion Study

25 min

**TRAINS:** Finding where contrast controls attention

### STEPS

1. Draw a simple portrait.
2. Version 1: light face on dark background (maximum face contrast).
3. Version 2: dark face on light background (still high contrast but different quality).
4. Compare: where does the eye go in each version? Is the contrast equally effective in both?
5. Note: both have maximum contrast; the difference is the key (light vs dark).

### SELF-EVALUATE:

*Does the eye direction differ between the two versions? Which version feels more natural for communicating the subject?*

## Beginner Resources

### Ctrl+Paint — Value Control

[ctrlpaint.com](http://ctrlpaint.com)

Free. The definitive beginner treatment of value hierarchy and contrast control. Watch the entire value series.

### Proko — Value and Focus

[youtube.com/user/ProkoTV](https://youtube.com/user/ProkoTV)

Proko's treatment of value hierarchy applied to figure and portrait. Free.

## The Virtual Instructor — Contrast Exercises

[thevirtualinstructor.com](http://thevirtualinstructor.com)

Step-by-step beginner exercises on contrast and value. Clear and practical.

---

SKILL LEVEL 2

# HOBBYIST

Simultaneous contrast, depth, and complex scenes.

---

2

# Value & Contrast Control — Hobbyist

---

## Simultaneous Contrast

Simultaneous contrast — the phenomenon where a value appears lighter or darker depending on its surroundings — is a practical tool for value manipulation without changing the actual value. Placing a medium value on a white background makes it appear dark; the same value on a black background appears light. In illustration, you can make a subject appear prominently lit by keeping the surrounding values darker, even if the subject's value is only a medium grey. Understanding simultaneous contrast allows you to work with a limited value range while creating a wide apparent contrast.

## Value and Depth

Atmospheric perspective (aerial perspective) is the progressive lightening and desaturation of values at increasing distances. This is caused by atmospheric particles scattering light: the more atmosphere between the viewer and the object, the lighter and less contrasty the object appears. In drawing terms: foreground has the most contrast (darkest darks), background has the least (values approach a light mid-grey). This depth value gradient should be a planned part of the value composition, not discovered accidentally during rendering.

## Common Mistakes

### Background darker than foreground

Darkening the background in an attempt to add drama, which eliminates aerial perspective and makes the background appear closer than the foreground.

### Simultaneous contrast working against the composition

Placing a dark subject against a dark background (equal values) so the simultaneous contrast effect doesn't occur — the subject disappears.

### High contrast in the background competing with the focal area

Strong contrast in the background (dark-dark patterns, architectural detail) competing visually with the focal subject.

## Hobbyist Exercises

## Simultaneous Contrast Study

30 min

**TRAINS:** Making the same value appear different

### STEPS

1. Paint 5 identical 3cm grey squares (same grey).
2. Place each on a different background: pure white, light grey, medium grey, dark grey, pure black.
3. Observe: the same grey square appears to change value dramatically with background change.
4. Now apply this to a drawing: design a composition where a mid-grey subject is made to appear much lighter or darker by strategic background value choice.

### SELF-EVALUATE:

*How dramatically does the grey square appear to change value across the 5 backgrounds? Can you successfully apply simultaneous contrast in a composition to enhance subject prominence?*

## Atmospheric Depth Value Plan

45 min

**TRAINS:** Designing depth through value contrast compression

### STEPS

1. Design a landscape or cityscape with 4 depth planes.
2. Depth plane 1 (foreground): maximum value contrast (darkest darks and lightest lights).
3. Depth plane 2: contrast reduced by 30%.
4. Depth plane 3: contrast reduced by 60%.
5. Depth plane 4 (background): only mid-values, no dark darks or bright lights.
6. Draw from this plan and compare to a version without the value compression.

### SELF-EVALUATE:

*Does the value contrast compression successfully create atmospheric depth? Can you identify the 4 depth planes from value contrast level alone?*

## Complex Scene Value Map

55 min

**TRAINS:** Planning value for a 5+ element scene

### STEPS

1. Before drawing a complex multi-element scene, create a value map.
2. Assign each element to a value range: 1–3 (dark), 4–6 (mid), 7–9 (light).
3. Ensure: focal element has highest contrast, background elements are compressed toward mid-range, no two adjacent elements of exactly equal value.
4. Draw from the value map.
5. Compare to a version drawn without a pre-plan.

### SELF-EVALUATE:

*Does the value-mapped version have clearer spatial separation and a more intentional focal area? How many value assignment conflicts did you identify during planning?*

## Portrait Value Control Study

45 min

**TRAINS:** Face against different value backgrounds

### STEPS

1. Draw the same portrait face 3 times with 3 different background values: (1) light background, (2) mid-value background, (3) dark background.
2. Keep the face values identical in all 3.
3. Compare: which version most effectively communicates the face as the focal element? Which has the most natural feel?
4. Note: facial value range typically has both lights and darks, so each background will affect different parts of the face differently.

### SELF-EVALUATE:

*Which background value produces the most effective face-to-background contrast? Do simultaneous contrast effects make specific parts of the face look different in each version?*

## Hobbyist Resources

### Josef Albers — Interaction of Color

[amazon.com/search?q=albers+interaction+of+color](https://amazon.com/search?q=albers+interaction+of+color)

The definitive study of simultaneous contrast and how values and colours interact. Essential for serious students.

## **Ctrl+Paint — Atmospheric Perspective**

[ctrlpaint.com](http://ctrlpaint.com)

Free library. Clear treatment of aerial perspective and value contrast compression for depth.

---

## **James Gurney — Color and Light**

[gurneyjourney.com](http://gurneyjourney.com)

Value control and atmospheric depth in the context of full illustration. Professional standard.

---

SKILL LEVEL 3

# PROFESSIONAL

Value as narrative language and production system.

---

3

# Value & Contrast Control — Professional

---

## Value as Narrative Language

At the professional level, value control is narrative language. The value system of an illustration communicates before the viewer reads any text or identifies any subject: the emotional register (high-key = light; low-key = dark and dramatic), the time of day and environment, the subject's relationship to their world (prominent vs. absorbed), and the overall story. A professional illustrator controls value at this narrative level — asking first what story the value structure should tell, then designing the value composition to tell that story.

## Value Control in Production

In production illustration (publishing, games, film), value control is both an aesthetic and a technical requirement. Printed illustrations must maintain their value contrast across different paper types and printing conditions. Digital illustrations must work on screens ranging from high-end professional monitors to low-quality phone screens. Professional value decisions are made with the final output medium in mind — not just how the illustration looks on screen during creation, but how it will appear in its final production context.

## Common Mistakes

### Value control only for aesthetics, not narrative

Designing value composition for visual appeal without considering the narrative communication. Value should always be in service of the story.

### Value not tested for the final output medium

An illustration that looks perfect on a wide-gamut monitor may print with washed-out values or too-dark shadow areas. Test under output conditions.

### Value hierarchy that shifts between revisions

An illustration that starts with a clear focal area but loses it during revision as other areas are developed. The value hierarchy must be protected throughout the revision process.

## Professional Exercises

## Value Narrative Brief

120 min

**TRAINS:** Designing value for a specific story

### STEPS

1. Write a 100-word narrative brief for a scene: who is in it, what is happening, what is the emotional tone.
2. From the brief: write a 50-word value brief specifying the value key (high/low/middle), contrast distribution, and focal area.
3. Create the illustration from the two briefs.
4. Evaluate: does the finished value structure communicate the narrative brief?
5. Would a viewer unfamiliar with the written brief understand the scene's emotional register from the value alone?

### SELF-EVALUATE:

*Does the value brief produce an illustration that communicates the narrative brief? Does the value structure tell the story?*

## Output Medium Test

90 min

**TRAINS:** Verifying value control across delivery contexts

### STEPS

1. Create a full illustration for a specific production context: editorial print.
2. Test the value range: (1) print a greyscale version on a standard home inkjet printer. (2) View on a mobile phone screen at 50% brightness. (3) View on a calibrated monitor.
3. Do the values hold across all 3 output conditions? Identify any values that need adjustment for print versus screen.
4. Document the adjustments required.

### SELF-EVALUATE:

*Do the values hold convincingly across all 3 output conditions? Which specific values required adjustment for print vs. screen, and in which direction?*

## Value Revision Discipline

4 hours (across stages)

**TRAINS:** Protecting value hierarchy through the revision process

### STEPS

1. Create an illustration at the thumbnail stage with a clear value hierarchy.
2. Develop through 3 revision stages (rough, tight, final).
3. At each stage: squint-test and verify the original value hierarchy is intact.
4. Document any value hierarchy changes and their reasons.
5. Compare the thumbnail value structure to the final value structure: are they the same?

### SELF-EVALUATE:

*Did the original value hierarchy survive the revision process? Where and why did the value structure drift, and was each change intentional?*

## Value Grammar in Sequential Art

150 min

**TRAINS:** Value language across a narrative series

### STEPS

1. Design a 6-panel narrative sequence with a deliberate value grammar: a rule system specifying how value changes across panels to communicate the narrative arc.
2. Example grammar: "Opening panels: high key (hope). Crisis panel: low key. Resolution: return to high key."
3. Execute the sequence with the value grammar consistently applied.
4. The grammar should be readable by a viewer without any text.

### SELF-EVALUATE:

*Is the value grammar readable in the sequence without text? Does the value shift from high to low key communicate the narrative turning point?*

## Professional Resources

### Ctrl+Paint — Professional Value Control

[ctrlpaint.com](http://ctrlpaint.com)

The complete free value library. At the professional level, all segments are relevant.

## Andrew Loomis — Creative Illustration

[archive.org/search?query=loomis+creative+illustration](https://archive.org/search?query=loomis+creative+illustration)

Loomis's value design chapters are the classical professional reference. Free on Archive.org.

## Watts Atelier — Value Design Program

[wattsatelier.com](https://wattsatelier.com)

Professional value design curriculum. The most systematic available for value as narrative language.

# Master Exercise Index

*All exercises consolidated for quick reference.*

## Beginner

#	Exercise Name	What It Trains	Duration
B1	Squint Test Practice	Reading value structure	30 min
B2	High-Contrast Focal Point	Maximum contrast at subject	25 min
B3	3-Value Squint Study	Designing for squint test	20 min
B4	Value Inversion Study	Contrast direction effect	25 min

## Hobbyist

#	Exercise Name	What It Trains	Duration
H1	Simultaneous Contrast Study	Same value different contexts	30 min
H2	Atmospheric Depth Value Plan	Contrast compression	45 min
H3	Complex Scene Value Map	Pre-planning complex scene	55 min
H4	Portrait Value Control	Face against backgrounds	45 min

## Professional

#	Exercise Name	What It Trains	Duration
P1	Value Narrative Brief	Designing value for story	120 min

<b>P2</b>	Output Medium Test	Delivery context verification	90 min
<b>P3</b>	Revision Discipline	Protecting value hierarchy	4 hours
<b>P4</b>	Sequential Value Grammar	Value language narrative	150 min

# Resource Directory

---

All recommended resources, consolidated.

## Beginner

Resource	URL	Notes
Ctrl+Paint Value Control	<a href="http://ctrlpaint.com">ctrlpaint.com</a>	Definitive free series
Proko Value Focus	<a href="https://youtube.com/user/ProkoTV">youtube.com/user/ProkoTV</a>	Free applied hierarchy
Virtual Instructor Contrast	<a href="http://thevirtualinstructor.com">thevirtualinstructor.com</a>	Step-by-step exercises

## Hobbyist

Resource	URL	Notes
Albers Interaction of Color	<a href="http://amazon.com">amazon.com</a>	Definitive simultaneous contrast
Ctrl+Paint Atmospheric	<a href="http://ctrlpaint.com">ctrlpaint.com</a>	Free aerial perspective
James Gurney Color Light	<a href="http://gurneyjourney.com">gurneyjourney.com</a>	Professional value depth

## Professional

Resource	URL	Notes
Ctrl+Paint Professional Library	<a href="http://ctrlpaint.com">ctrlpaint.com</a>	Complete value library
Loomis Creative Illustration	<a href="http://archive.org">archive.org</a>	Classical value design
Watts Atelier Value Design	<a href="http://wattsatelier.com">wattsatelier.com</a>	Narrative value curriculum