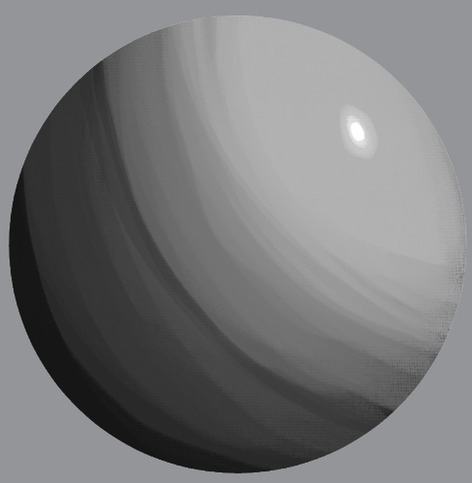
WHAT IS VALUE?

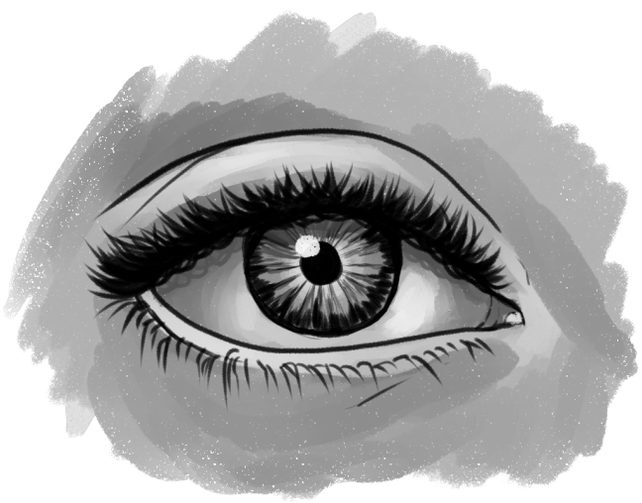


THE DEFINITION OF VALUE

Value means “light”. In art, value determines the tonal range of colours and contributes to how dark or light a colour, or shade, is.

Visual artists deal only in light when it comes to creating art. When you’re creating work, have light at the forefront of your mind, as you are deciding how much light is being shown, what the light is made of (artificial or natural), how intense the light is, how far away it is and how many different light sources there are.

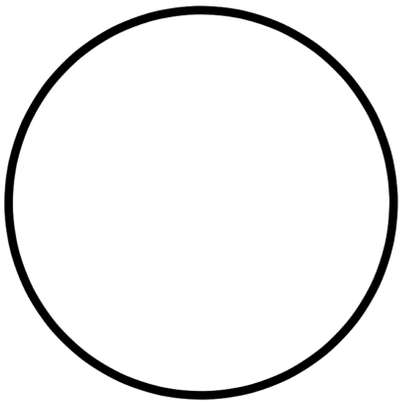
All of these factors will combine to show what the viewer is seeing. Not only that, it will tell them what the materials are made of and what condition they are in. This applies to all art styles, because it is a basic fundamental of human vision.



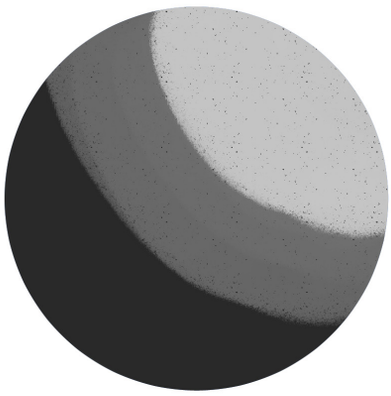
THE IMPACT OF VALUE

Value is a key fundamental in creating depth in our artwork, although is by no means the only way to do this.

A sphere with no value added is just a circle. You can change its overall shape to create an ellipse, which would give some sense of 3D space, but in order to sell it as a 3D object, some form of value needs to be added.

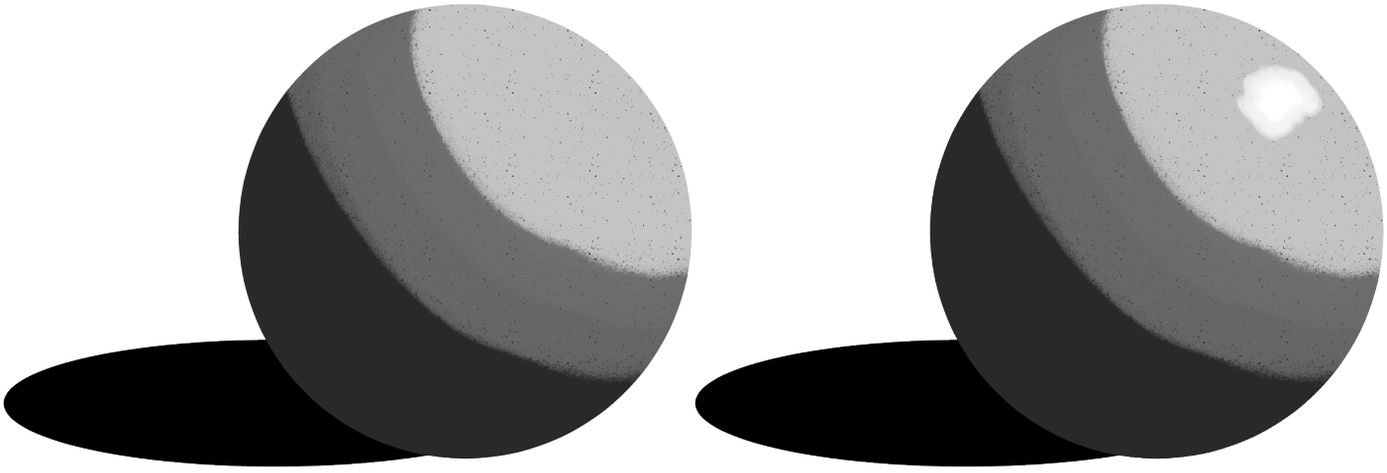


Adding a flat colour to this circle doesn't change how we see it as a shape. When applying value, we must be looking at applying more than one value to it.



With just 3 values applied, this circle is beginning to take on some 3D form. The information we're adding is more based on light and we've established the direction of the light hitting the top right of the circle.

VALUE AND MATERIALS



We can take our sphere a step further by introducing a cast shadow to show it is sitting on a surface and we can also add a highlight to help further sell the idea of light.

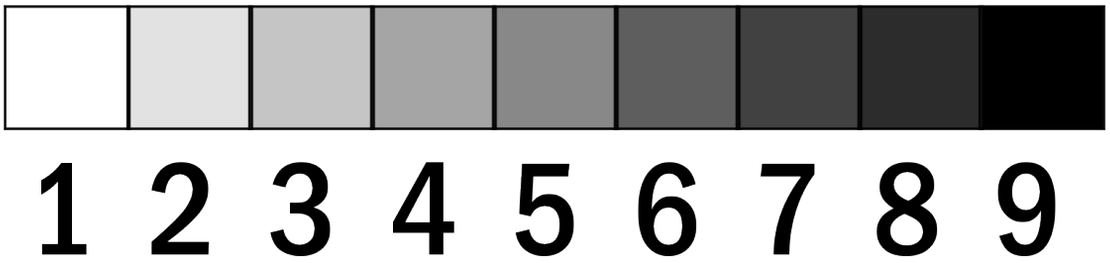
The addition of the highlight begins to imply what the material is made out of. Side-by-side, the sphere on the right seems to be made of a shinier material.

MATERIAL CHANGES

Let's see this principle in action. Above is an illustration of a hand. Skin is typically a matte material where light is diffused across its surface. But what if skin is wet? Here, value can help sell that idea by applying highlights to the skin. Water is a reflective material and sits on top of the skin, so would reflect the light, causing the highlights.

Diffuse means to "spread out". So if a light is being diffused, it is spreading out across a surface.

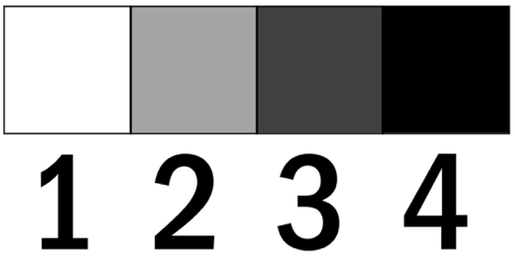
VALUE RANGE



When talking about value, we need to be familiar with a value range. This typically goes from 1, being the lightest, to 9, being the darkest. In reality, a value range can be as small or large as you want.

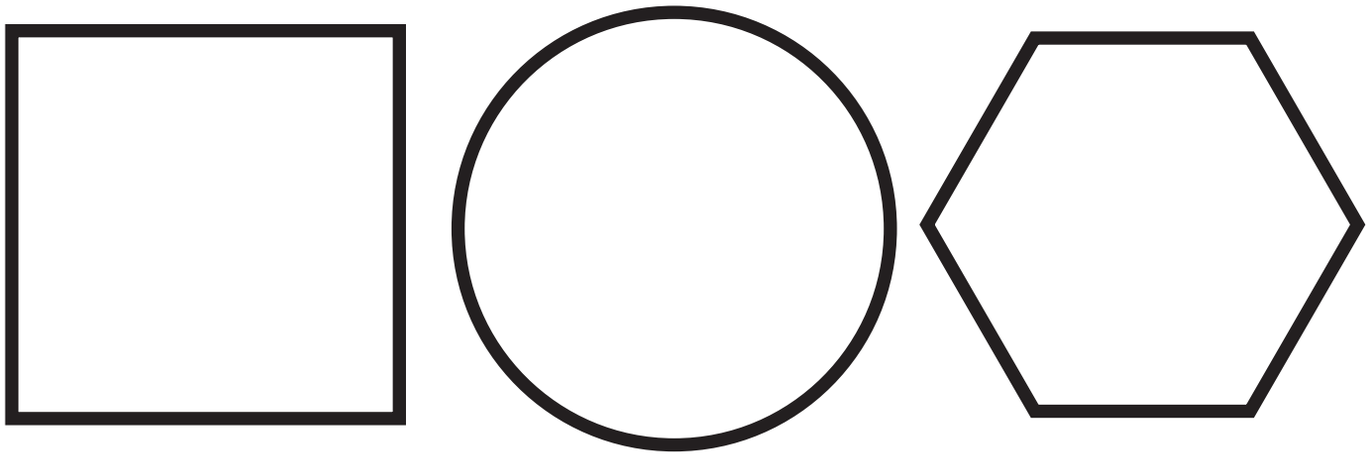
Small or large in terms of the number of shades you want to use, as well as how varied they are. Your lightest value doesn't need to be pure white nor your darkest be pure black.

This is a very small value range, which I recommend you start with. Typically a small value range will be used in a high contrast artwork, but more on that later.



APPLYING THE "RULES" OF VALUE

There are no rigid rules when it comes to applying value in art. It is largely up to you in how you apply it to your work. But, in order to get used to the fundamentals it can be useful to have some guidelines so that you can work out your own likes and dislikes.



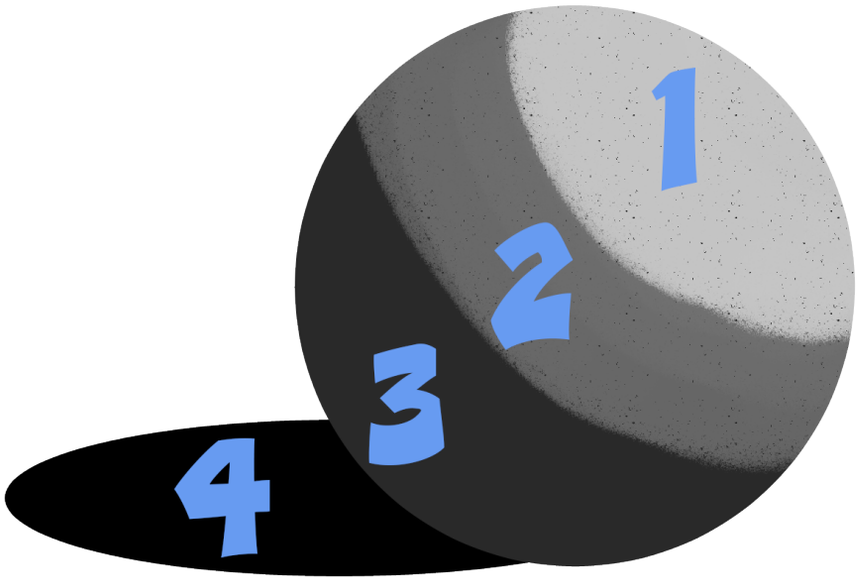
Start by drawing a simple shape. This can be any shape you're comfortable with and it doesn't need to be 2D. We're going to apply a simple directional light to our object using 4 different shades.

Using our 4-value range, we're going to assign each of them a job:
Number 1 is our Light
Number 2 is our Halftone
Number 3 is our Shadow
Number 4 is our Occlusion Shadow

We're also going to determine which direction the light is coming from. Let's start with the top right.

Occlusion shadows are created when one object is blocking the light from another. This is why cast shadows are often the darkest, as the object is blocking the light that is hitting the surface.

VALUE RANGE

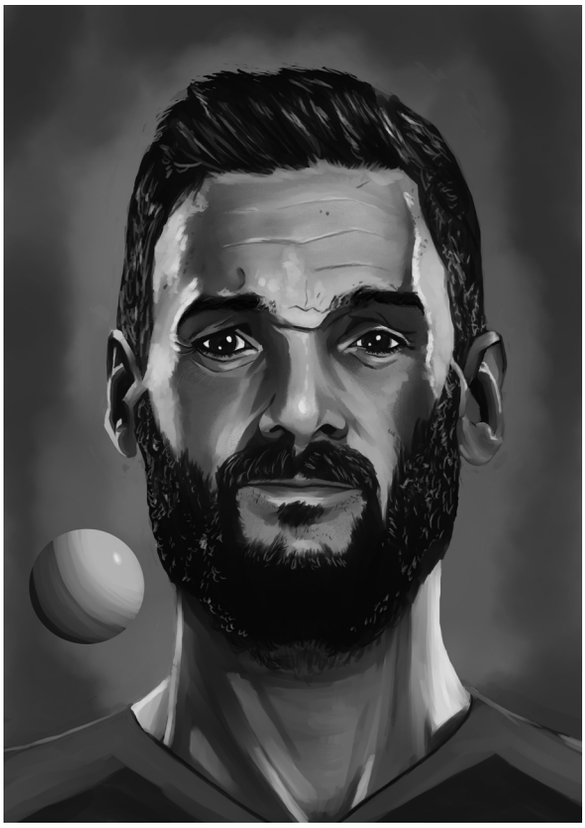


Try moving the direction of the light around your object and try applying these rules to various shapes to get a feel for it.

As you get used to applying values, try adding more values to create a smoother gradient between shades.

VALUE AND CONTRAST

I mentioned contrast before and value plays a big role in whether something is a high contrast or low contrast artwork. A high contrast piece would be one that has fewer variations in tone and a low contrast is a piece that has a higher variation in tone.



The image on the left uses around 5 or so different values, whereas the one on the right uses dozens of different tones. Whichever one you choose will depend on your personal preferences and goals.

High contrast = Fewer values. Low contrast = More values.

"FIXING" YOUR VALUES

If you're fortunate enough to receive a critique of your work, you may have heard from people that you need to "fix your values".

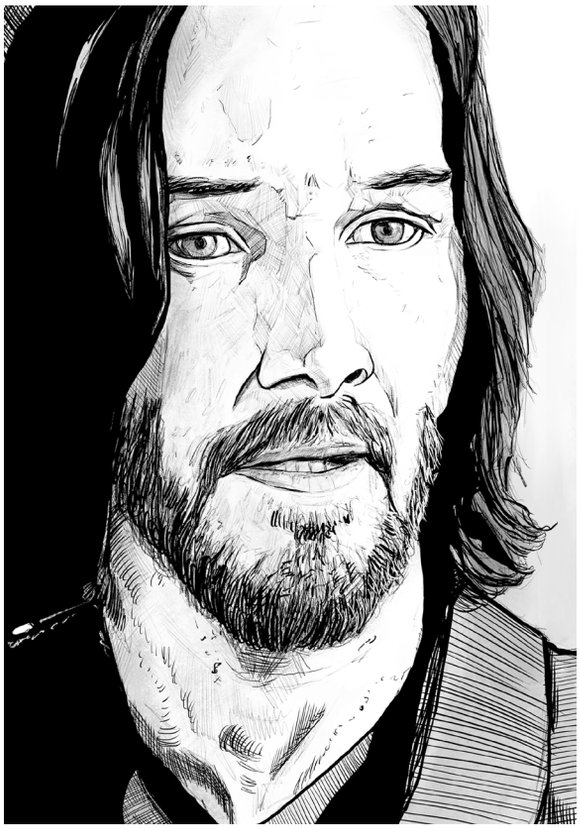
But what does that mean? Well, usually the person critiquing is suggesting that you need to increase the contrast of your artwork. That means that there needs to be more of a difference between your light and dark values to help separate forms.

The best way to see for yourself whether your values need fixing is by looking at your artwork from a distance. If the major forms are still readable, then your values are probably okay. However, if the major values become washed out, hard to understand or blurry, then they will need some work.

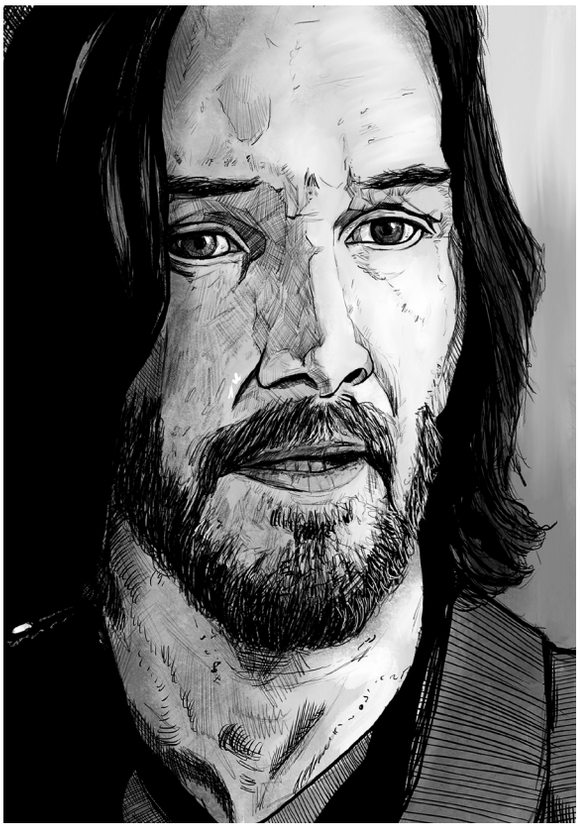
Unfortunately there is no specific formula, as each artwork will be different. But to start with, try adjusting your darkest values by making them slightly more dark. Then make the light values slightly more light. Adjust the halftones if needed to keep the gradients as smooth as you'd like and then keep going until you feel the artwork is more easy to read.

Let's take a look at an example on the next page.

"FIXING" YOUR VALUES



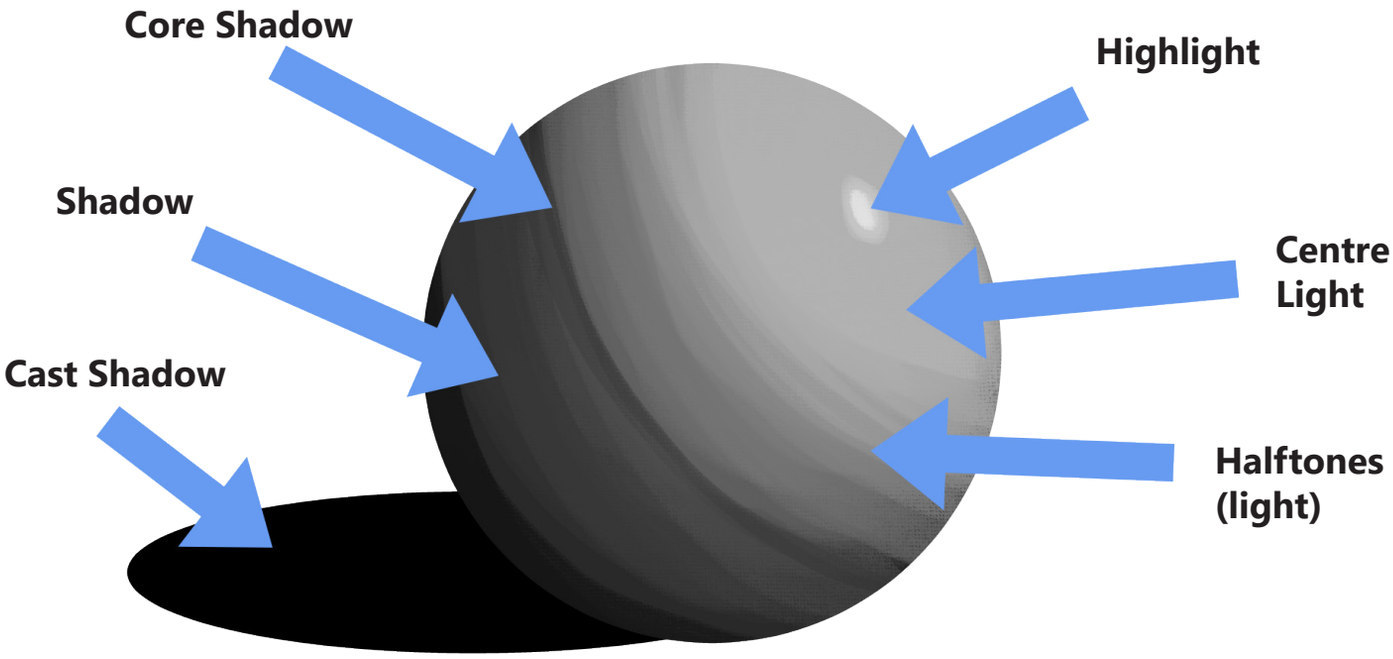
This illustration lacks tonal variety which makes his face look quite washed out, as if he were very close to an intense light. The line work helps sell the idea of form, but greater tonal variety will push this a little further.



By adding in some tones for the shadows, halftones and lights, this illustration now has more information and more depth to it. If you were to look at these from a distance, this version is easier to read.

ADVANCED VALUES

When you're ready to take value to the next level, there are more concepts that you should familiarise yourself with.



The halftones are the values that link the centre light to the shadows. They are always lighter than the shadows.

The core shadow, or terminator, is the darkest shadow on the form. Not necessarily in the centre of the form, it is the area that is not influenced by light in any way. The shadow side of the sphere is being lit from the bounce light on the ground, which is why it is lighter than the core shadow.

The lightest shadow is always darker than the darkest light.

HOW TO PRACTICE

This guide is a general overview of value but, like with anything related to art, requires study and practice from you. The only way you'll truly understand value is by applying it to your own practice.

Value can be confusing at first, but once you understand the core concept behind it, it can be your ally and can upgrade your drawings dramatically.

Remember to start simply. Here is a suggested breakdown of how you should practice value:

#1 Use a simple shape, one directional light source and only a handful of values.
#2 Increase the number of values until you're using all 9 in the value range.
#3 Change the shape, applying the same principle to a 3D object, such as a box.
#4 Get a simple object and place it under a light source and recreate it using values. Change the direction of the light source and repeat.
#5 Increase the complexity of the shapes you're creating, for example, from a box to a cylinder, to an object on your desk/in your room.
#6 Continue this process until you are creating very complex drawings, such as figures.
#7 Study how others have tackled value and re-create their artwork as studies.
#8 Apply all of these principles to your drawings and notice the difference.

Remember that understanding a principle is the easy part, but applying it to your own work takes time. Be patient and kind to yourself.

THANKS FOR READING!

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