



Utrecht Art Supplies

Ask the Expert: Value Contrast and Overlap

There is a finite range of value available between paper white and the black of charcoal. These tips will help assign values early so you won't "run out" of lights and darks!



Ask the Expert: "I always seem to need something darker than pure charcoal. I really grind it into the shadows but can never seem to go dark enough. What am I doing wrong?"

A: We suspect you misjudged the value contrasts and used your lightest lights and darkest darks in areas where they weren't appropriate. Having reached the actual darkest passage or an overlap where a strong contrast was required, you'd already reached the bottom of your value scale.

It's really important to establish value structure early in the drawing or painting process. This means identifying lightest light, darkest dark and strongest contrast from the very beginning. Of particular importance is the overlap of greatest value contrast.

The overlap where the greatest value contrast occurs isn't necessarily going to be the lightest light and darkest dark together; more likely, it will be a fairly dark tone juxtaposed against a fairly light tone, but the difference between the two will be more dramatic than any other edge relationship.

A good technique for identifying the most extreme contrast in the subject involves squinting through one eye until your vision is very diminished, and all you can see are broad shapes. As you squint out all but the most basic patterns, the last visible element will be the strongest contrast.

It helps to make a note of this overlap as soon as you identify it, so you can "key" all other values accordingly. In other words, all other contrasts in the drawing or painting will be more subtle than this. Once you've established this basic relationship, you'll be a lot less likely to "run out" of darks!

Questions? [Ask the Expert](#)

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