

Value Comparison

Good control of value is the key to making your drawings and paintings look realistic. It's the key to creating space and depth, and the key to creating a convincing feeling of light.

Bad values are the single most common problem I see in beginners' work – and often in the work of more advanced artists who otherwise have strong drawing skills.

I've spent a lot of time on value, and the more I learn and practise value, the better my work becomes. Here's an example of the kind of value studies I was producing after I'd practised intensively with value for many months:



This is absolutely obtainable for you, too – with practice.

This drawing was done with mixed black and white chalk – almost like painting. It's a technique that I'll be teaching later in the exercises. But it's the value control that makes the drawing realistic and convincing, not the technique itself.

The Core Skill

The core skill of values is *value comparison*. Is this value lighter or darker than the one next to it? Is this the same value as I see in my subject, or is it too light or too dark?

With practice, these questions, and the answers to them, become automatic. It takes time to get to that stage. But it can be achieved, and the most effective way to get there is to develop your skill at value comparison.

That's just what this exercise is about.

Your Materials



You need very little in the way of materials for this exercise:

- A sheet of ordinary sketchpad paper
- A range of graphite pencils: 2H, B and 4B will be sufficient for most values.
- A piece of black or grey card about three inches across each side with a hole cut in the middle
- A value to match

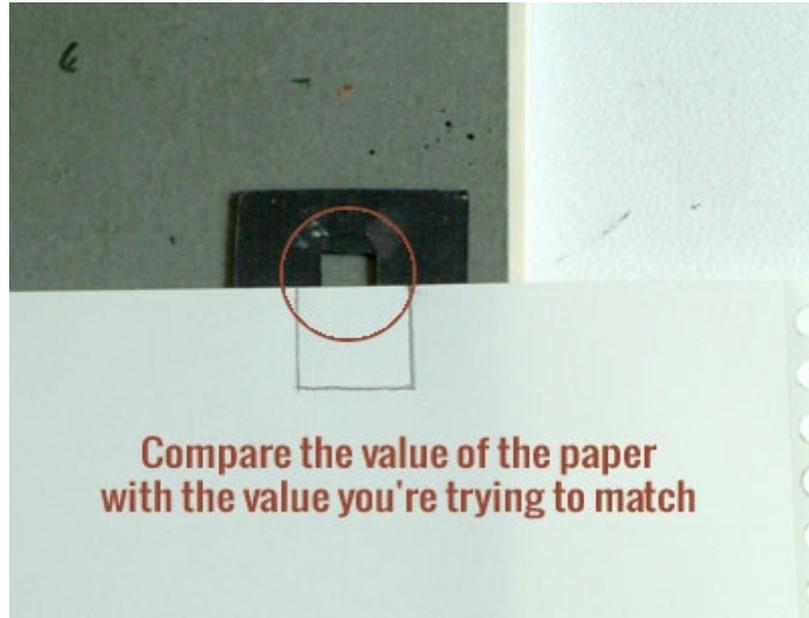
How to do it

Step One: Isolate the value to be matched

First, draw out a square about an inch across on a sheet of sketch pad paper. This is where we'll draw our value swatch.

Now place the piece of card with a hole in it (we'll call it a viewfinder) on the surface you're going to match the value of. For this exercise, I'm trying to match the value of a sketch pad cover. I've chosen this because it's almost grey – a very low chroma colour. I suggest you do the same to begin with, because high chroma colours are much harder to find the value of.

Place your sheet of paper with the square you've drawn so that the edge of the paper overlaps the hole in the viewfinder. Now you can compare the value you're trying to match with the value of your paper.



Obviously, at this point, the value of the paper is much lighter than the value of the sketch pad cover.

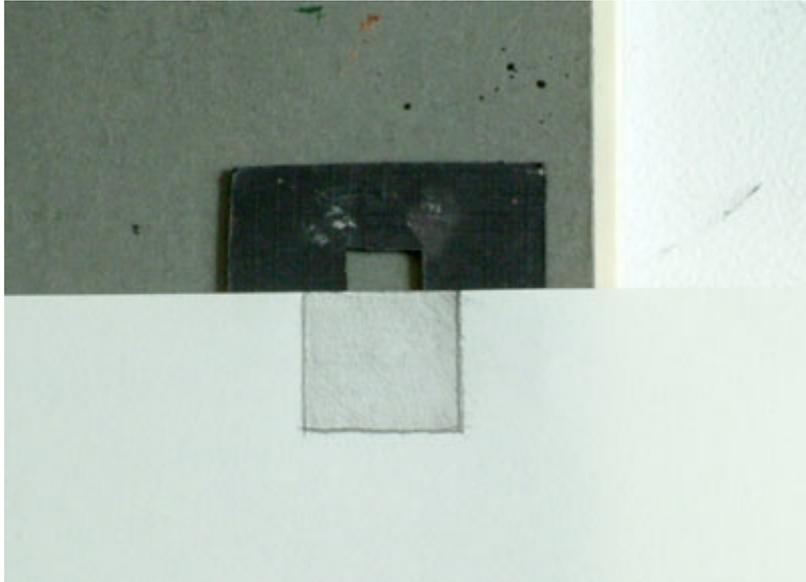
Step Two: Estimate the value

Take the paper away from the viewfinder and lay it flat. Now take a pencil and try to fill in the square to the same value as the value you're trying to match.

Do this carefully, don't rush. Try to get your value square as even as possible.

For all except darker values, you're better off using harder pencils until you find you can't get the value dark enough. You'll get a much smoother result this way. In the picture below, I've used only a 2H pencil.

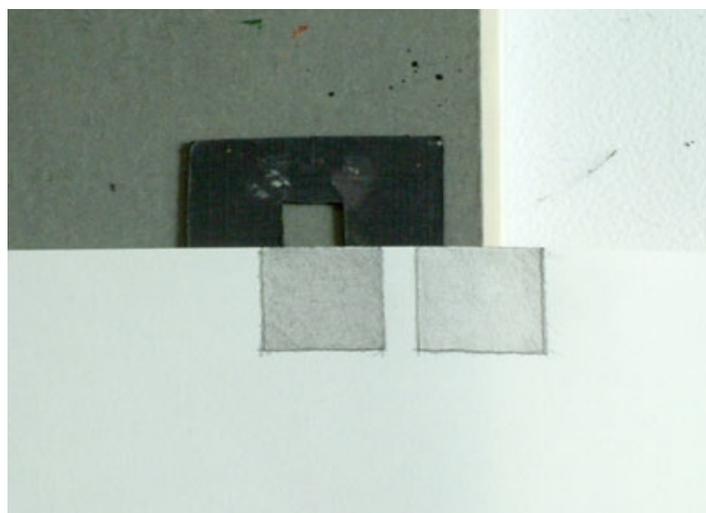
Once you've filled the square, lay it over the viewfinder again and compare the value.



This is where the real meat of this exercise happens. This is where you start to stretch your skill at value comparison – by repeatedly comparing the value you've got to the value you're trying to match.

Look at your value, and decide whether it's lighter or darker than the value you're trying to match.

In the example above, it's slightly lighter. So I'll draw another square and try again:



The closer you get, the harder it is to judge. It's the act of judging and comparing that stretches your sensitivity to value and your ability to correctly judge a given value.

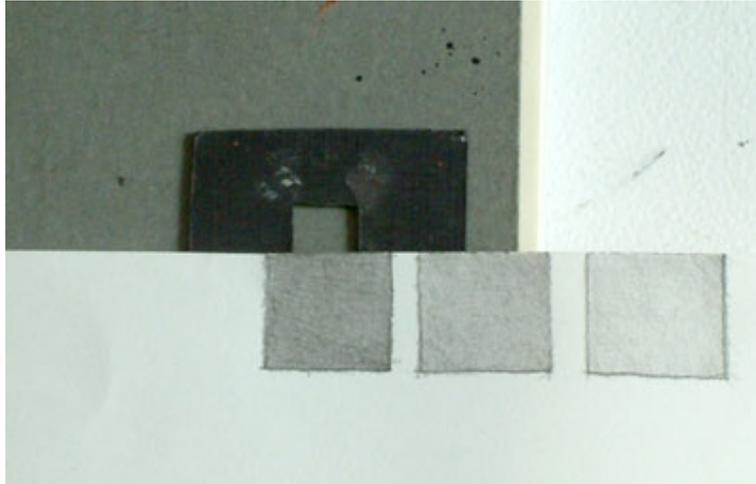
If you find this exercise hard – that's good, it's supposed to be hard! With time and practice, it will get easier. Right at the beginning, when it's the most difficult, is when you make the most improvement.

Although the value above looks fairly close, if I isolate just the two values in the photo you'll be able to see the difference between them more clearly:



My value is still much lighter than the one I'm trying to match. A good way to compare values more effectively is to throw your eyes out of focus or squint.

At this point I used a B pencil to darken the value a little further. Here's attempt number three:



This is much closer. At this point I stopped. Lets look at the value comparison close up:



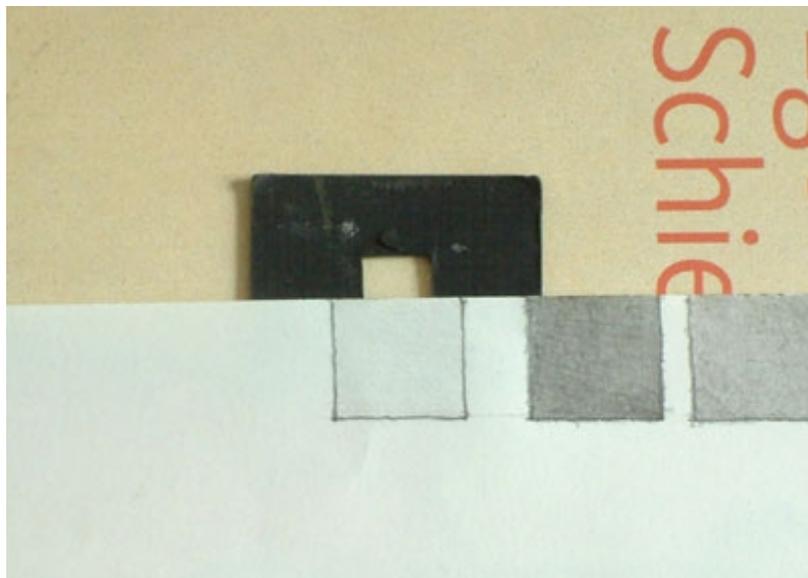
Even though I thought I'd got it very close, my value is still lighter!

Another Example

Here's another attempt, matching the value of the background of a book cover. This time the colour has a little more chroma, so it will be harder to match:



The paper is hardly any lighter than the value I'm trying to match, so just a whisper of 2H pencil should be enough to match it:



Not bad, but let's see close up:



It looks pretty good, but the real test is to look at it in grey-scale (I did this in photoshop):



As you can see, this is still a shade too light. It's a good illustration of how even low chroma colours can make it difficult to judge value – and why this is such an important skill to practise.

Do this repeatedly with various values, gradually increasing the chroma (brightness, or intensity) of the colours you try to match. If you've got a way to take digital photos and make a grey-scale version of your attempts, that will be a great check to see how well you're doing. Be prepared, it's a harsh critic! But the feedback is excellent, and will help you improve.

This exercise may seem very divorced from what you do when you paint or draw, but actually it's at the heart of it. By stretching this skill until it becomes automatic, you'll naturally find yourself producing better value relationships in your work – without having to think about it. But it does take practice to get to that point.

I hope you enjoy this exercise, and I hope it helps you. It's a part of a structured set of exercises from the Creative Triggers Art Practice Community, designed to help develop your core drawing and painting skills.

The most effective way to improve our art is to get into a daily practice habit of focused, effective exercises.

But it's not easy. Too often we practice in fits and starts, becoming discouraged and letting things slide. It's hard to know what to practice, where to start. Too many developing artists struggle to grow towards the artist they have the potential to be.

The value exercises that make up this short series will help you get more of a handle on value. But they will be effective in proportion to how often you do them, and for how long. It's much better to do a little every day over a long period than a big block all at once, then nothing for a while.

Creative Triggers is designed to help you get into a regular practice habit and then keep it going whilst you develop your core skills through exercises like these. There are exercises for design and composition, drawing accuracy, as well as value and, later, colour mixing and design.

<http://creativetriggers.com>

Best wishes,

Paul