Fullname: _____

01. Use Color to Create Depth

Color alone can be a great way to create the illusion of lightness or darkness — without resorting to pre-packaged effects. In particular, layering various shades of the same color can create the appearance of depth or distance. That's because, to our eyes, light colors recede while dark colors advance.

The illustrations below demonstrate this idea perfectly. Notice how the mountains start off darker closer to the foreground, but then lighten and look like they're off in the misty distance in the background.



There's also a lot of other great light and color going on here. The color temperatures the designer chose for each panel do a lot to enhance the impression of light and darkness. The subtle gradients in the sky also create the impression of different times of day and types of light (e.g., the warm glow of sunrise versus the cool, white moonlight). Speaking of gradients, on to the next tip...

02. Add a Gradient to Your Background

Turn on a lamp in your house and look at the nearest wall...It's not all one, flat color, is it? The part of the wall closest the lamp might look lighter or warmer in color, while the farther away you get from the light, the darker it looks. You might think you're looking at a plain, blue wall — but look closely, and you might see shades of gray, green, blue, or purple. The point is that rarely does light make an object or surface look like one even, unvarying color.

And one way to create that type of dynamic color variation is to add a gradient to a background or other large area in your design. Now, gradients may make you think of a horrible multi-colored background on a 1990s website that makes the text impossible to read — but that's a gradient gone bad. When done well, gradients can add some subtle color variation (as already mentioned), help soften/fade out shadows, or create the appearance of light shining on a certain area of your design (particularly with radial, or round, gradients).

Below, this radial gradient on a website's landing page is serving multiple purposes. The lighter part of the gradient makes it look like a light is shining from above, and also makes the shadow the phone is casting more visible. Combined, these effects make the scene here seem true to life — it looks like you could reach out and touch that phone; it has shape and dimension. Also notice how the highlight at the top right corner, along with the shadow, really helps give the phone a 3D appearance.



03. Use Highlighting to Draw Attention

Light glinting off of something always catches your eye, doesn't it? In a design, highlights can act like a subtle spotlight, making certain elements a little extra visible — in addition to helping items looks more realistic, as discussed in the previous point. If you want to highlight multiple things in your design, do remember to think about your imaginary light source, and make your highlights consistent.



Check out the simple highlighting on the "801" logo on the product packaging below. It's really just lines of color that are slightly lighter than the primary color of the numbers, but it gives extra visibility and visual interest to the focal point of the design.

04. Master Shadows: Shading



Shading is another term for the shadows *on* an object, like the core shadow we defined at the top of the article. Shading can give shape and dimension to flat design elements or lettering.

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Here, the textured shading on a flat, white typographic logo makes it look layered and complex:

05. Master Shadows: Cast & Drop Shadows

Remember the apple diagram earlier in the article? The cast shadow was the shadow that the apple itself caused by blocking the light, creating a shadow off to the side. Drop shadows are just a particular type of cast shadow where the light source is more or less directly overhead, which casts a shadow behind or underneath an object. This makes the object look like it's floating above a surface.

From a design standpoint, drop shadows can help items or information "rise" to the top of a layout, making them stand out. They're also useful for improving the visibility of light-colored design elements, especially text. For example, on this webpage design, drop shadows help make featured content more prominent:



Drop shadows are very common in design projects of all kinds, but also commonly misused. A typical drop shadow faux pas is to make them too large, too dark, and/or too sharp. Using shadows in a design generally shouldn't make viewers think: "Oh look, there's a shadow!" Instead, they should blend in seamlessly with the rest of the design.

06. Adjust Opacity

In real life, shadows aren't opaque, and light isn't a flat wash of white or yellow — they're transparent; it should be the same in your designs. For a subtle, realistic look, opacity and transparency settings are your best friend when applying effects. It's good practice to start off with a really understated application, and then build it up slightly as needed; this will make it less likely that you'll accidentally overdo it.

07. Combine Light & Shadow for Eye-Popping Typography

Your typography is a great place to add light and shadow effects, either on or off the letters. Particularly for designs where typography is the focal point, this can really make the words come alive in an eye-catching way.



Take this typographic logo as an example: it uses both highlights and shading on the letters that fade in and out (gradients) to create a chiseled, 3D logo look. There's also a nice drop shadow below. (Notice the consistent use of an imaginary light source coming from the upper left hand side: the main highlights fall on the top and left sides of the letters, and the drop shadow points down and right, away from the light, as it should). Some subtle textures pull everything together.

08. More Typography Shadow Options: Try Raised and Recessed Styles

Your fonts are one place where you can really get creative with shadow styles. They're easy to apply for the most part (some fonts even come with a shadow style built in) and can give your typography a custom look. Let's look at two more options:



1) Raised: Embossing is a printing technique that physically raises a design feature (usually text) above the paper's (or other material's) surface. This is usually done with a metal stamp of some kind. You can copy that effect digitally with some well-placed shadows (outside the boundaries of the letter shapes) and highlights (on the letters themselves).

2) Recessed: People use a variety of words to describe text that is engraved or pressed into a surface. Letterpress in a common one — it's a printing technique that uses metal plates to press a design (either with or without ink) into soft, thick paper — but the word is also frequently applied to digital effects that replicate that look. For example, this logo design:

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The shadows and highlights are placed in opposite positions as an embossed look: the shadows are inside the letters, and the highlights outside, marking where the surface is pressed down.

09. What About Flat Design?

Flat design has turned into a trend that has staying power: from Apple's transition to a flat mobile design to Google's new flat logo, it seems here to stay, for a while at least. One of the defining characteristics of flat design is its lack of depth, which generally means you won't be seeing many shadows or highlights. But what if you want to keep flat design's minimalism while adding some dynamic lighting or shadows? Designers have been tweaking the trend to allow for that; here are a couple common approaches:

- Color: Using color variations or gradients can add a sense of dimension or light/shadow interaction while still technically sticking to a flat design concept.



This 404 page design layers lighter and darker colors to create the appearance of depth (a technique we discussed in point #1).



- Long Shadows: This particular shadow style is often paired with flat design, especially for text and icons. Long shadows generally extend off the edge of the design.

10. For the Web: Make Things Look Clickable

For web design, how users interact with the site is naturally an important consideration. The user interface (or UI) should be easy to use and understand, and knowing what you can and can't click on is a big part of that. That's where shadows and highlights can be useful, especially when designing buttons.

Notice how the buttons below use a combination of many of the features we've discussed throughout the article — gradients, highlights, shading, shadows — to create shape and dimension. The highlights especially do a good job here; on the left button, the thin highlight on the edge makes it look like the button rises slightly above the surface (it's pressable), and the rounded highlight on the top half gives it a convex shape. The left button uses an inner shadow technique to make it appear pressed down.



These types of design choices may be small and subtle, but they subconsciously help viewers interact with your design.

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Matching Test: Understanding Design Principles with Light and Color

Match the design principle or technique with the corresponding description or effect.

1. Color Depth _____
2. Gradient Background _____
3. Highlighting _____
4. Shading _____
5. Cast & Drop Shadows _____
6. Opacity Adjustment _____
7. Typography Effects _____
8. Raised and Recessed Styles _____
9. Dynamic Lighting in Flat Design _____
10. Clickable Web Design _____

a. Creating shadows on objects to give them shape and dimension.
b. Using shadows, highlights, and shading to make interactive elements on a website more visually intuitive.
c. Techniques involving shadows and highlights to mimic raised or recessed text effects.
d. Adding gradual color transitions to a background to achieve dynamic color variation.
e. Using highlights to draw attention to specific elements and enhance realism.
f. Gradually adjusting transparency to achieve subtle and realistic effects.
g. Incorporating variations or gradients of color to introduce depth in flat design.
h. Using variations of the same color to create the perception of distance and depth.
i. Shadows created by objects blocking light, with drop shadows specifically cast directly below objects.
j. Applying light and shadow effects to text to make it visually engaging.

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