Positive and Negative Space Cat Drawing: Figure-Ground Contrast Exercise

Original tasks 1, 2, 3 / complete keys

Task 1

On a 12 cm by 16 cm panel, draw a closed cat silhouette with a curved tail. Shade the surround with horizontal strokes, leaving a 1 cm unshaded gap around the cat. State your convention.

Answer: A closed cat silhouette with an even horizontal shaded surround and a consistent 1 cm gap. Convention stated as light cat on dark surround with a gap.

Reason: The gap separates figure and ground while the horizontal field unifies the negative space. The closed silhouette keeps the cat readable.

Check: View from two meters: cat reads as one shape; gap is even; no shade inside the cat; strokes are consistently horizontal.

Task 2

Draw a cat silhouette on a 10 cm by 10 cm panel and shade the surround right up to the cat edge with vertical strokes. The cat remains unshaded. Check that no shade enters the cat.

Answer: A closed cat silhouette with a vertical shaded surround touching the cat edge and no shade inside the cat.

Reason: Shading to the edge maximizes contrast; vertical strokes create an even field. Keeping the cat unshaded preserves positive space.

Check: Squint at the drawing: cat stands out; inspect the edge for stray marks; confirm stroke direction is vertical throughout.

Task 3

Make a dark cat on a light surround: draw a closed cat silhouette, shade the cat evenly, and leave the surround unshaded. State the convention and check contrast from two meters.

Answer: A dark, evenly shaded cat silhouette on an unshaded surround, with the convention stated as dark cat on light surround.

Reason: Reversing the convention still creates figure-ground contrast if the cat is closed and evenly shaded. The surround remains a continuous light field.

Check: From two meters the cat reads clearly; cat shading is even; surround has no stray marks; convention is stated.

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Original tasks 4 / complete keys

Task 4

Draw a cat silhouette with a 2 cm gap on one side and no gap on the other. Explain why this is inconsistent and redraw with a consistent convention.

Answer: The first drawing is inconsistent because the gap convention changes around the silhouette. The redraw uses either a consistent gap all around or no gap all around.

Reason: A consistent convention makes the figure-ground relationship deliberate rather than accidental. Inconsistent gaps make the surround look uneven.

Check: Compare gap width at four points around the cat; confirm it is either even or absent everywhere; check contrast from two meters.

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Source rubric / reflection

- [ ] Cat silhouette is closed and reads as a single positive shape.
- [ ] Surround is shaded as a continuous negative-space field.
- [ ] Figure-ground contrast is clear from a distance of about two meters.
- [ ] Shading convention (gap or no gap, light or dark cat) is applied consistently.
- [ ] No shading crosses into the cat silhouette.
- [ ] Valid alternatives are accepted: light cat on dark surround or dark cat on light surround.

Reflection: What did you check, what did you change, and what will you try next?