

# Understanding shades and shadows

*These effects add dimension to your layouts*

This article has been on the back burner for several years. I started writing it before the computer software companies were developing shade/shadow software.

**Cast shadows make the letters appear to stand up on the background or make the background appear to lay back.**

I was hoping to influence the computer developers to use the correct terminology when they defined their examples. As it worked out, I did manage to send copies of the preliminary articles to a couple of them, and I hope it did some good.

Once in a while, Butch “Superfrog” Anton comes out to help during busy times. One evening we got into a major-league discussion about shades and

shadows—specifically drop shades. We headed back to the shop and searched through my entire library of early sign books for the definition. By the time it was over, we realized that we were both right and both wrong. It just depended on who taught you. I finally ran across a booklet written by C. J. Strong from the Detroit School of Lettering that had the best explanation. (He also illustrated a fantastic 1907 book called *Strong’s Book of Designs*.)

It appears that terminology differences existed as far back as 1907. Strong made an effort to document the various terms and effects. Unfortunately, the booklet was not as widely distributed as the current trade magazines! Many of the terms have been



blurred and incorrectly represented in countless books and journals over the years. Some of my college textbooks even had conflicting and ambiguous illustrations.

Essentially, there are two major categories. Shades attempt to show depth of a letter or element by showing either one side or a side and bottom (or top of a seemingly “dimensional” letter). Think of a shade as though you were looking at a two-inch-thick letter. On the other hand, a shadow is exactly what it sounds like. A shadow is cast onto something. A shadow usually makes the viewer think that the letters are standing off the background. Think of it as a thin metal letter with a small block holding the letter off the surface. A shadow is then cast onto the background.

The difference is quite simple if you can get a handle on those concepts. From that point on, you might get some slight variations on terminology. For example, sign painters often leave a small space between the letter and the shade. This space created is called a relief shade or offset shade. There may even be some more names for the same thing. You could have a relief shade or a relief shadow. Although such shades could be executed quickly since it's not necessary to wait for the letter to dry, a relief actually may decrease the legibility. Additional variations of perspective shades, split shades, and split-blended shades are also possible.

You can also be creative with shadows. Cast shadows make the letters appear to stand up on the background or make the background appear to lay back. If done properly, a shadow can make the letter appear curled up or make the background appear rounded.

In my experience, shadows should be a slightly darker representation of the background. In other words, if the background is white, use light gray for the shadow. If the background is bright red, the shade might be carmine or maroon. Using a bright,



Shading block letters on the left often saves strokes.

Always shade from the outline, not the original letter.



Scripts and italics often look better when shaded on the right. However, don't mix block letters shaded on the left and script letters shaded on the right on the same sign.

overpowering color for a shadow reduces the desired effect.

Often letters are outlined. It is still possible to shade or shadow them. A common and quick version uses the same color shadow or shade as the outline. This style eliminates the common line, which would separate the outline and the shade. If using a pattern, the resulting shade or shadow is made from the outlined letter, not the original letter. The pattern can be shifted to the appropriate side for quick hand lettering.

Several of my old books made a big deal about which side of the stroke to apply the shade. Many suggested putting the shade on the left and bottom of the letter to reduce the number of strokes required on letters such as E, F, and L (see the example above). A right-handed person can pull and snap those strokes quickly and effortlessly. A left-handed person like myself may feel more comfortable working on the right side of the letter, even if it takes more strokes. Many of the same books, which said it is better to shade on the left also, said it is better to shade scripts on the right. What? That's fine if the only thing

shaded is the script, but if both block text and script are shaded on the same sign, you must be consistent. No problem for me—I was shading everything on the right anyway! You might also consider where the sign goes and which way the sun shines during the most viewed periods. I have shadowed some double-sided signs opposite of each other (one to the left, one to the right) so they read better from the road.

By now you should have a pretty good idea of what shades and shadows look like and what they are called. What if the boss tells you to put a “drop shade” on the main copy? How about a drop shadow? If I had my way, I would eliminate those two terms from our vocabulary. More than likely, you could get away with just saying, “Put a shadow on it.” It might be a relief shadow, or a cast shadow, or a specialty curled shadow, but generally it would just be a shadow.

Shades and shadows can make major copy more attractive or draw the viewer's eye to the main wording. A good design shouldn't need a shade or shadow to do the job, though. Everyone has seen a sign where the painter had to use a shade to make the lettering centered. (They usually have a few starbursts, too!) Shades and shadows shouldn't be the most dominating elements on the sign—they should complement the message. They can also be used to give a sign a “period” look, as they were used extensively around the turn of the century.

Though we've discussed mostly the shades on the sides of letters or shadows cast by letters, they can also be used on the face of the letters to indicate depth of an indentation in the letters. Some hybrid variations may also make the edges of letters appear to be rounded over or beveled—but that's another story.

Many computers can now create the illusion of shades and shadows along with a grand variety of special effects. All examples in this article were executed with my computer, then output on the Gerber Edge®. You might notice a few blends on the fronts of the letters as a result of having a new toy to play with. The principles are still the same as in the days gone by. I think that C. J. Strong would be happy with the terminology used by most of the computer software, although he might look a bit dumbfounded if someone asks him what font he was going to use! •SC



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