BASICS: POSITIVE / NEGATIVE

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An Art Skills Tutorial

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Positive shapes are most commonly used to define the subject.

Draw a sphere and shade it. This would be a positive rendition of your subject.

Negative shapes can be immensely helpful in understanding, and can facilitate seeing, for the first time, the true shapes in front of you.

In this case you would draw the shapes between things. This can be helpful when you are dealing with complex forms like chairs, trees, and some plants.
Look at the shape and direction of the legs, branches and stems, but also observe the shapes between. Observing both positive and negative shapes will help you see more quickly and accurately.
The tree was drawn positively on the left and negatively on the right. On the left the branches are drawn. On the right the background is drawn. There are some positive accents added in the tree. It is very difficult to draw only negatively. It could be a fun experiment to try with your students.
When drawing with a pencil, we are making positive marks, again the most common way of drawing.

Negative drawing technique involves light being pulled out of or subtracted from the dark. You can draw with the edge of your eraser for key highlights.
For softer subtler lightening you can use the side of an eraser lightly drawn across your drawing.

A kneaded eraser is pressed onto your drawing and lifted, removing some of the graphite or charcoal. Kneaded erasers can be found at arts and craft supply stores.

To get a clean surface on the eraser after you have used it, you simply pull it, like taffy and stick it together.

Keep doing this until you again have a clean surface to use.
The upper limbs of the tree in the foreground were erased into the dark sky, allowing for strong and clear contrast.
Try this exercise with a tree or another object overlapping something behind it.

The object in front should be much lighter than the object in the background.

Build up your drawing within the middle value range of grays.

Then deepen the darkest areas, lastly pulling out the lightest with an eraser.
This drawing of a flower model includes both positive and negative rendering.

The areas that are shaded are the positive statements; the marks are made with pencil.

The highlights that are erased or left blank are the negative statements; the form is created by the lack of pencil marks.