Color Theory for Non Designers

What Is Color Theory?

Color theory is the practical guide to color mixing and the visual effects of specific color combinations. Understanding these basics helps you create designs that communicate effectively and evoke the right emotions.

The Color Wheel: Your Starting Point

The color wheel is a simple tool that organizes colors in a circle, showing relationships between:

- **Primary colors**: Red, blue, and yellow (can't be created by mixing other colors)
- **Secondary colors**: Green, orange, and purple (created by mixing primary colors)
- **Tertiary colors**: The in-between colors (like red-orange) created by mixing primary and secondary colors

Color Relationships That Work

Complementary Colors

Colors opposite each other on the wheel. They create high contrast and vibrance when used together. *Example: Blue and orange, red and green*

Analogous Colors

Colors next to each other on the wheel. They create harmonious, comfortable designs. *Example: Blue, blue-green, and green*

Triadic Colors

Three colors evenly spaced around the wheel. They create vibrant designs even when unsaturated. *Example: Red, yellow, and blue*

Monochromatic Colors

Different shades and tints of a single color. They create a cohesive, elegant look. *Example: Light blue, blue, and dark blue*

When to Use Different Color Schemes

Complementary Colors (Colors opposite on the color wheel)

Best for: Creating high contrast and visual excitement

Use for:

- Book covers that need to pop on shelves or thumbnails
- Call-to-action buttons on websites
- Social media posts announcing important news or promotions
- Highlighting key information or statistics
- Creating energy and drawing immediate attention

Example contexts: Thriller book covers, sale announcements, event posters

Analogous Colors (Colors next to each other on the color wheel)

Best for: Creating harmony and cohesion

Use for:

- More subtle, sophisticated book covers
- Website designs that need to feel cohesive and calming
- Social media posts that tell a story or evoke a specific mood
- Creating depth without jarring contrast
- Establishing a clear theme or atmosphere

Example contexts: Literary fiction covers, personal blogs, lifestyle content, nature-themed designs

Triadic Colors (Three colors evenly spaced around the color wheel)

Best for: Creating vibrant designs that remain balanced

Use for:

- Children's book covers or young adult fiction
- Creative or artistic website designs
- Playful social media content
- When you need variety but still want harmony
- Designs that need to appeal to diverse audiences

Example contexts: Educational content, creative portfolios, diverse product lines

Monochromatic Colors (Different shades and tints of a single color)

Best for: Creating sophisticated, unified designs

Use for:

- Professional or minimalist book covers
- Corporate websites or serious subject matter
- Branded social media where consistency is key
- Creating focus without distraction

- Conveying elegance, professionalism, or simplicity

Example contexts: Business books, professional services websites, luxury brands, academic content

When it comes to monochromatic colors in a website project (particularly neutrals and soft grays) I refer to tailwindcss.com/docs/colors

Practical Tips

- **Book covers:** Consider where and how your book will be displayed. Complementary schemes work well for thumbnail visibility on Amazon, while monochromatic schemes can convey sophistication for literary works.

- **Websites:** Consider user experience—analogous or monochromatic schemes are easier on the eyes for content-heavy sites, while strategic use of complementary colors helps guide action.

- **Social media:** Match your color scheme to your content's emotional tone and your call to action. Use complementary colors when you need engagement, analogous when storytelling.

- **Always consider:** Your brand identity, your audience's expectations, and your content's purpose should guide your color scheme choices more than any design rule.

Color Psychology: How Colors Make Us Feel

- **Red**: Energy, passion, urgency
- **Orange**: Enthusiasm, creativity, warmth
- **Yellow**: Optimism, clarity, warmth
- **Green**: Growth, health, tranquility
- **Blue**: Trust, calm, security
- **Purple**: Luxury, creativity, wisdom
- **Black**: Sophistication, authority, elegance
- **White**: Simplicity, cleanliness, purity

The 60-30-10 Rule of Using Color

A simple formula for balanced color schemes:

- 60% dominant color (background)
- 30% secondary color (supporting elements)
- 10% accent color (call-to-action elements)

Purposeful Color Usage

Decorative color use means choosing colors simply because they look nice or match your personal preferences. While this might create an attractive design initially, it often fails to support your core message or goals.

Purposeful color use means every color choice serves a specific function in your design—guiding attention, creating meaning, or triggering specific responses from your audience.

1. Your Colors Guide the Eye

Colors strategically direct your viewer's attention in a specific order:

- Important information stands out through contrast or saturation
- Less crucial elements recede through softer colors

- The eye naturally follows a color-based path through your content

2. Your Colors Support Your Message

Colors reinforce what you're trying to communicate:

- A financial services website uses blues to convey trust and stability
- A children's book uses bright primary colors for energy and playfulness
- A luxury brand uses deep purples, blacks, or golds to signal sophistication

3. Your Colors Create Consistent Meaning

Colors maintain consistent meaning throughout your design:

- Red always indicates warnings or important notices
- Green consistently shows successful actions or progress
- Highlighted sections all use the same color treatment

4. Your Colors Enhance Usability

Colors make your design more functional:

- Related items share color traits, creating visual groupings
- Different sections have distinct but harmonious color identities
- Interactive elements are clearly distinguishable through color

How to Make the Shift

1. Ask "Why?" for Every Color Choice

For each element in your design, ask:

- Why am I using this specific color here?
- What function does this color serve?
- How does this color choice help my audience?

2. Create a Simple Color System

Develop a limited set of colors with clear roles:

- Primary color: Your main brand color
- Secondary color: Complementary or supporting color
- Accent color: For highlights and calls to action
- Neutrals: For text and background elements

3. Test Your Color Choices

Check if your color choices are working:

- Show your design to someone for 5 seconds, then ask what stood out
- Convert to grayscale—is the hierarchy still clear?
- Ask if the emotional feeling matches your message

Every color is sending a message, whether you intend it to or not. When you use color purposefully, you're ensuring that message aligns with your goals rather than working against them.

Using color purposefully doesn't mean your designs can't be beautiful or creative. In fact, purposeful color choices often result in more beautiful designs because they feel harmonious and intentional rather than random or chaotic.

5 Practical Tips for Non-Designers

1. Start with colors that already exist in your brand

2. Use color purposefully, *not just decoratively*
3. Less is more – limit your palette to 2-3 colors plus neutrals
4. Use contrast to highlight important information
5. Consider cultural meanings of colors for your audience

Tools to Help You with Color

- **Color palette generators**: Coolors.co, color.adobe.com
- **Accessibility checkers**: ColorContrast.cc or webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker
- **Pre-made palettes**: colorhunt.co, design-seeds.com
- **CSS Colors for web projects and monochromatic palettes**: tailwindcss.com/docs/colors

Good color choices aren't about personal preference—they're about creating designs that communicate effectively and evoke the right emotions for your audience.

Color Accessibility in Design

Why Accessibility Matters

Color choices don't just affect aesthetics—they determine whether everyone can access your content. Approximately 1 in 12 men and 1 in 200 women worldwide have some form of color vision deficiency.

Common Types of Color Vision Deficiency

Deuteranopia (Red-Green Color Blindness)

Most common type where reds and greens appear similar, often as muddy browns.

Protanopia

Another form of red-green color blindness where reds appear darker.

Tritanopia (Blue-Yellow Color Blindness)

Rarer condition where blues and yellows are difficult to distinguish.

Monochromacy

Complete color blindness where all colors appear as shades of gray.

Practical Accessibility Guidelines

1. Never Use Color Alone to Convey Information

Always pair color with:

- Text labels
- Patterns or textures
- Icons or symbols
- Different shapes

2. Maintain Strong Contrast

- Aim for a contrast ratio of at least 4.5:1 for normal text
- 3:1 for large text (18pt+) or bold text (14pt+)
- 3:1 for graphical objects and interface components

3. Choose Color-Safe Combinations

Good combinations:

- Dark blue & white
- Black & yellow
- Dark purple & white
- Dark blue & yellow

Problematic combinations:

- Red & green
- Blue & purple
- Green & brown
- Light blue & yellow

4. Use Color Simulators

Test your designs using tools that simulate different types of color blindness:

- Adobe Photoshop's Color Blindness Preview
- Stark plugin for design tools
- Colorblindly browser extension

Simple Testing Methods

The Greyscale Test

Convert your design to black and white. Can you still distinguish all elements and understand the information hierarchy?

The Squint Test

Squint until your design is blurry. Can you still make out the important elements and structure?

The Distance Test

View your design from a distance. Do the important elements still stand out?

Tools for Checking Color Accessibility

Contrast Checkers

- WebAIM Contrast Checker: webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker
- Contrast Ratio: contrast-ratio.com
- Accessible Colors: accessible-colors.com

Color Blindness Simulators

- Coblis: color-blindness.com/coblis-color-blindness-simulator
- Stark: getstark.co
- Who Can Use: whocanuse.com

Good design works for everyone. When your color choices are accessible, they benefit all users—not just those with color vision deficiencies.