

## **Eye for Design: Essentials of Color in Print Design** **Part I: Key Concepts**

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On a mission to distribute flyers for some workshops our library was hosting, I traversed out of my comfortable library environs to another building on campus, where I walked by one of the college's community bulletin boards. I would wager you could find something comparable to it on your campus-- a wall covered from floor to ceiling, comprised mostly of printed advertisements, touting everything from the Student Union's movie night to used textbooks for sale by students. From my short distance away from it, the wall was a chaotic sea of black and white text forms interrupted by various islands of color. Unsurprisingly, I was immediately drawn to the flyers and posters that had color. Aside from the other advantages of size and location on the bulletin board, color proved to be key in not only catching my attention, but truly focusing it.

Whether you are planning to hang a couple of large posters, distribute a hundred 8 ½ x 11 flyers, or any other print design job, a little color can give your image an edge. Certainly, one does not require color to have a great design, but when it is appropriate and affordable to use, think of it as an added value! Color may catch your audience's attention, and skillful use of it in combination with other well-used design elements will hold their concentration long enough to receive the message you wish to convey.

The usability guru Jakob Nielsen has said "Print design is based on letting the eyes walk over the information, selectively looking at information objects and using spatial juxtaposition to make page elements enhance and explain each other." Color is one of those important elements that the graphic artist (or the fearless librarian who dares to wear that hat) can manipulate to "enhance and explain" the other elements of the design as well as the content.

Most of what we understand about color in images we see is intuitive. At a basic level, even those of us without formal training can usually identify what works and what does not. Nevertheless, the effective use of color in any design is a thoughtful process. Understanding a few important concepts about color can help even a non-expert make careful use of it.

### **Define your purpose**

Remember, color does not stand alone; it functions as an integral part of your composition. The first step in using color effectively is defining its purpose and thinking about how it works in relation to your content as well as the other design elements. Do you wish to convey a particular mood? Perhaps you wish to emphasize a specific graphic element or maybe you need to create a contrast to reinforce a theme of opposing forces. Simply understanding what you want to accomplish with color will lead you to a good strategy for how you execute your idea.

### **Consider your audience and their response**

As a designer, it is best practice to identify your audience and make appropriate choices to communicate your message effectively. With regard to color, this means having an understanding of how individuals or groups might respond to the use of color in your composition.

Research has shown that certain colors have different meanings, and thus, varying impact across cultures and social contexts. For example, in America, the colors red (Republican) and blue (Democrat) have a very particular connotation within the political sphere as opposed to one rooted in nature and the environment. Clearly, it is important to consider audience, and socio-cultural context, and try to anticipate how your use of color might be interpreted.

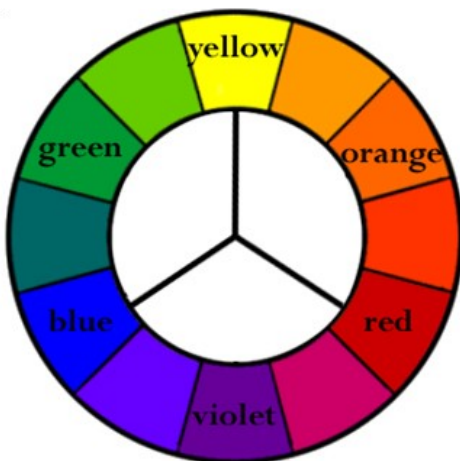
Furthermore, studies on the psychological aspects of color show that color can, in fact, affect an individual's emotions, even if subconsciously. While no two people might experience color in exactly the same way, they may very well share similar elicitations. Generally-speaking, *warm* colors, such as red, orange, or yellow might be characterized as passionate, vibrant, and/or energetic. They may rouse one's emotions or raise one's blood pressure. Whereas *cool* colors such as blue, green, and violet are more subdued and may produce a more calming effect.

## Learn the lingo

Like any discipline, color has its own vocabulary which describes both its form and function. Understanding how color works and knowing a bit of color jargon will prove useful to the design process as you begin thinking about color's relationship to other design elements, developing color schemes, and using tools to implement color management and manipulation techniques.

At some point in your education, you probably learned that color is a property of light. By passing a white light wave through a prism, one can see the color spectrum which consists of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet. If you bend that band of color into a circle, the result is the *color wheel*, an image that is most often utilized to represent and explain the principles of color theory.

Most people know that *primary colors* are red, yellow, and blue. These three colors form a triangle on the color wheel and are the base colors for every other color on the wheel. *Secondary colors*, or orange, green, and violet, are the result of mixing two primary colors together. On the color wheel, they are located in between the two primary colors from which they are generated. For example, green can be found between yellow and blue. Lastly, *tertiary colors* are made by mixing a primary color with a secondary color (i.e., tertiary = 3 primary colors together, since a secondary = 2 primary colors), and there can be countless combinations of tertiary colors, depending on how they are mixed (e.g., brown can be red and green or blue and orange).



**The Color Wheel**

## Notice how colors work

The more you observe and experiment with color, the easier it becomes to predict how colors will “behave” in relation to other colors. Each color has properties that affect our perception of two-dimensional space. Individually, warm colors appear to advance, while cool colors seem to recede. More often than not, you will use more than one color in your design. Take notice of how colors affect each other, as they interact with one another and alter each others' appearance. For example, place a blue square on a larger, dark blue square. Then, place that same exact blue square on a larger, light blue square. You will notice that even though the hue of the smaller square is exactly the same it *appears* lighter on the dark blue square and darker on the light blue square.

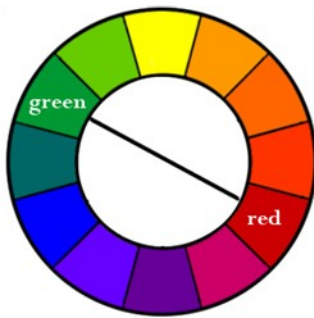
Take a purposeful look at the palettes or color schemes you find in other good designs. Did the designer achieve an artful and seamless color harmony, something apparent to you only after you began thinking about why it's a successful design? Or did the designer smartly employ color dissidence (clashing colors), drawing your attention directly to the colors used as a means of grabbing interest? A designer can often predict how a color will interact with other colors based on each color's position on the color wheel. There are as many color schemes as there are colors, but on the next page are four of the more common types of combinations that ensure harmony:



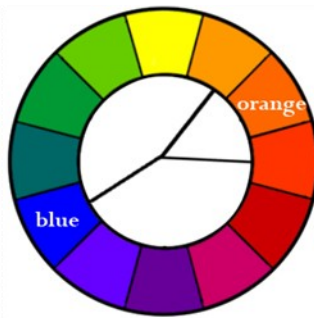
*Center square appears lighter*    *Center square appears darker*

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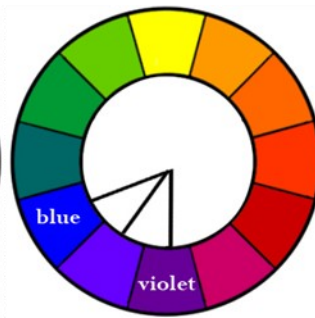
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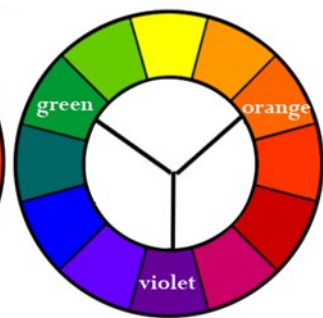
*A complementary color scheme uses colors directly across from each other.*



*A split complementary scheme uses one color and two other colors adjacent to its complement.*



*An analogous scheme uses colors that are next to each other on the color wheel.*



*A triad scheme uses colors that are evenly spaced around the color wheel.*

While there are no set rules about how many colors you can use in a design at once, generally designers employ a three color scheme, consisting of three separate colors used in varying percentages--60, 30, and 10%. The first color or main color, taking up 60% of the space reserved for color, anchors the design and unifies themes. The second color, taking up 30% of the space, provides contrast and keeps the image visually interesting. The third color, taking up 10% of the space, works as an accent color. If any additional colors are needed, they should be shades or tints of those three colors. A little color analysis will provide you with a lot of useful information about using color successfully!

With a clear vision of what you hope to accomplish, a basic understanding of some color theory terms and concepts, and simply being aware of how colors work, you can use color to produce a visually engaging design that effectively communicates your message. Look for Part II of this article, where we will examine the practical application of using color in the print design process.

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you should be ready to go in about a half hour or so. However, for those who prefer demonstrations and/or written instructions, the “Jing Learning Center” (<http://www.techsmith.com/learn/jing/>) should prove helpful.

Although not suitable for large projects that require precise and/or extensive editing, Jing is a great option for librarians who want to get started creating short, simple instructional videos or online guides with annotated screenshots. With a relatively modest investment in terms of time and money, you can use Jing to enhance your online instructional materials with fairly good quality graphics and video content.

1 Adobe Captivate: Single User License - \$799, Education Price - \$299 ; Camtasia Studio: \$299, Education Price - \$179