**[Color Theory for Designers, Part 1: The Meaning of Color](http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2010/01/28/color-theory-for-designers-part-1-the-meaning-of-color/)**

Color in design is very subjective. What evokes one reaction in one person may evoke a very different reaction in somone else. Sometimes this is due to personal preference, and other times due to cultural background. Color theory is a science in itself. Studying how colors affect different people, either individually or as a group, is something some people build their careers on. And there’s a lot to it. Something as simple as changing the exact hue or saturation of a color can evoke a completely different feeling. Cultural differences mean that something that’s happy and uplifting in one country can be depressing in another.

### Warm Colors

Warm colors include red, orange, and yellow, and variations of those three colors. These are the colors of fire, of fall leaves, and of sunsets and sunrises, and are generally energizing, passionate, and positive.

Red and yellow are both primary colors, with orange falling in the middle, which means warm colors are all truly warm and aren’t created by combining a warm color with a cool color. Use warm colors in your designs to reflect passion, happiness, enthusiasm, and energy.

#### Red (Primary Color)

Red is a very hot color. It’s associated with fire, violence, and warfare. It’s also associated with love and passion. In history, it’s been associated with both the Devil and Cupid. Red can actually have a physical effect on people, raising blood pressure and respiration rates. It’s been shown to enhance human metabolism, too.

Red can be associated with anger, but is also associated with importance (think of the red carpet at awards shows and celebrity events). Red also indicates danger (the reason stop lights and signs are red, and that most warning labels are red).

Outside the western world, red has different associations. For example, in China, red is the color of prosperity and happiness. It can also be used to attract good luck. In other eastern cultures, red is worn by brides on their wedding days. In South Africa, however, red is the color of mourning. Red is also associated with communism. Red has become the color associated with AIDS awareness in Africa due to the popularity of the [RED] campaign.

In design, red can be a powerful accent color. It can have an overwhelming effect if it’s used too much in designs, especially in its purest form. It’s a great color to use when power or passion want to be portrayed in the design. Red can be very versatile, though, with brighter versions being more energetic and darker shades being more powerful and elegant.

#### Orange (Secondary Color)

Orange is a very vibrant and energetic color. In its muted forms, it can be associated with the earth and with autumn. Because of its association with the changing seasons, orange can represent change and movement in general.

Because orange is associated with the fruit of the same name, it can be associated with health and vitality. In designs, orange commands attention without being as overpowering as red. It’s often considered more friendly and inviting, and less in-your-face.

#### Yellow (Primary Color)

Yellow is often considered the brightest and most energizing of the warm colors. It’s associated with happiness and sunshine. Yellow can also be associated with deceit and cowardice, though (calling someone yellow is calling them a coward).

Yellow is also associated with hope, as can be seen in some countries when yellow ribbons are displayed by families who have loved ones at war. Yellow is also associated with danger, though not as strongly as red.

In some countries, yellow has very different connotations. In Egypt, for example, yellow is for mourning. In Japan, it represents courage, and in India it’s a color for merchants.

In your designs, bright yellow can lend a sense of happiness and cheerfulness. Softer yellows are commonly used as a gender-neutral color for babies (rather than blue or pink) and young children. Light yellows also give a more calm feeling of happiness than bright yellows. Dark yellows and gold-hued yellows can sometimes look antique and be used in designs where a sense of permanence is desired.

### Cool Colors

Cool colors include green, blue, and purple, are often more subdued than warm colors. They are the colors of night, of water, of nature, and are usually calming, relaxing, and somewhat reserved.

Blue is the only primary color within the cool spectrum, which means the other colors are created by combining blue with a warm color (yellow for green and red for purple). Greens take on some of the attributes of yellow, and purple takes on some of the attributes of red. Use cool colors in your designs to give a sense of calm or professionalism.

#### Green (Secondary Color)

Green is a very down-to-earth color. It can represent new beginnings and growth. It also signifies renewal and abundance. Alternatively, green can also represent envy or jealousy, and a lack of experience.

Green has many of the same calming attributes that blue has, but it also incorporates some of the energy of yellow. In design, green can have a balancing and harmonizing effect, and is very stable. It’s appropriate for designs related to wealth, stability, renewal, and nature. Brighter greens are more energizing and vibrant, while olive greens are more representative of the natural world. Dark greens are the most stable and representative of affluence.

#### Blue (Primary Color)

Blue is often associated with sadness in the English language. Blue is also used extensively to represent calmness and responsibility. Light blues can be refreshing and friendly. Dark blues are more strong and reliable. Blue is also associated with peace, and has spiritual and religious connotations in many cultures and traditions (for example, the Virgin Mary is generally depicted wearing blue robes).

The meaning of blue is widely affected depending on the exact shade and hue. In design, the exact shade of blue you select will have a huge impact on how your designs are perceived. Light blues are often relaxed and calming. Bright blues can be energizing and refreshing. Dark blues are excellent for corporate sites or designs where strength and reliability are important.

#### Purple (Secondary Color)

Purple was long associated with royalty. It’s a combination of red and blue, and takes on some attributes of both. It’s associated with creativity and imagination, too.

In Thailand, purple is the color of mourning for widows. Dark purples are traditionally associated with wealth and royalty, while lighter purples (like lavendar) are considered more romantic.

In design, dark purples can give a sense wealth and luxury. Light purples are softer and are associated with spring and romance.

### Neutrals

Neutral colors often serve as the backdrop in design. They’re commonly combined with brighter accent colors. But they can also be used on their own in designs, and can create very sophisticated layouts. The meanings and impressions of neutral colors are much more affected by the colors that surround them than are warm and cool colors.

#### Black

Black is the strongest of the neutral colors. On the positive side, it’s commonly associated with power, elegance, and formality. On the negative side, it can be associated with evil, death, and mystery. Black is the traditional color of mourning in many Western countries. It’s also associated with rebellion in some cultures, and is associated with Halloween and the occult.

Black is commonly used in edgier designs, as well as in very elegant designs. It can be either conservative or modern, traditional or unconventional, depending on the colors it’s combined with. In design, black is commonly used for typography and other functional parts, because of it’s neutrality. Black can make it easier to convey a sense of sophistication and mystery in a design.

#### White

White is at the opposite end of the spectrum from black, but like black, it can work well with just about any other color. White is often associated with purity, cleanliness, and virtue. In the West, white is commonly worn by brides on their wedding day. It’s also associated with the health care industry, especially with doctors, nurses and dentists. White is associated with goodness, and angels are often depicted in white.

In design, white is generally considered a neutral backdrop that lets other colors in a design have a larger voice. It can help to convey cleanliness and simplicity, though, and is popular in minimalist designs. White in designs can also portray either winter or summer, depending on the other design motifs and colors that surround it.

#### Gray

Gray is a neutral color, generally considered on the cool end of the color spectrum. It can sometimes be considered moody or depressing. Light grays can be used in place of white in some designs, and dark grays can be used in place of black.

Gray is generally conservative and formal, but can also be modern. It is sometimes considered a color of mourning. It’s commonly used in corporate designs, where formality and professionalism are key. It can be a very sophisticated color. Pure grays are shades of black, though other grays may have blue or brown hues mixed in. In design, gray backgrounds are very common, as is gray typography.

#### Brown

Brown is associated with the earth, wood, and stone. It’s a completely natural color and a warm neutral. Brown can be associated with dependability and reliability, with steadfastness, and with earthiness. It can also be considered dull.

In design, brown is commonly used as a background color. It’s also seen in wood textures and sometimes in stone textures. It helps bring a feeling of warmth and wholesomeness to designs. It’s sometimes used in its darkest forms as a replacement for black, either in backgrounds or typography.

#### Beige and Tan

Beige is somewhat unique in the color spectrum, as it can take on cool or warm tones depending on the colors surrounding it. It has the warmth of brown and the coolness of white, and, like brown, is sometimes seen as dull. It’s a conservative color in most instances, and is usually reserved for backgrounds. It can also symbolize piety.

Beige in design is generally used in backgrounds, and is commonly seen in backgrounds with a paper texture. It will take on the characteristics of colors around it, meaning it has little effect in itself on the final impression a design gives when used with other colors.

#### Cream and Ivory

Ivory and cream are sophisticated colors, with some of the warmth of brown and a lot of the coolness of white. They’re generally quiet, and can often evoke a sense of history. Ivory is a calm color, with some of the pureness associated with white, though it’s a bit warmer.

In design, ivory can lend a sense of elegance and calm to a site. When combined with earthy colors like peach or brown, it can take on an earthy quality. It can also be used to lighten darker colors, without the stark contrast of using white.

### In Brief…

While the information contained here might seem just a bit overwhelming, color theory is as much about the feeling a particular shade evokes than anything else. But here’s a quick reference guide for the common meanings of the colors discussed above:

* **Red:** Passion, Love, Anger
* **Orange:** Energy, Happiness, Vitality
* **Yellow:** Happiness, Hope, Deceit
* **Green:** New Beginnings, Abundance, Nature
* **Blue:** Calm, Responsible, Sadness
* **Purple:** Creativity, Royalty, Wealth
* **Black:** Mystery, Elegance, Evil
* **Gray:** Moody, Conservative, Formality
* **White:** Purity, Cleanliness, Virtue
* **Brown:** Nature, Wholesomeness, Dependability
* **Tan or Beige:** Conservative, Piety, Dull
* **Cream or Ivory:** Calm, Elegant, Purity