University of Idaho
College of Agriculture

Cooperative Extension Service
Agricultural Experiment Station

Current Information Series No. 733

Let Color Work for You

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When you shop for clothes, do you find that you're usually attracted to a certain color or group of colors. If so, you're very much like most shoppers. Color greatly influences buying habits.

Because most of us have limited funds for clothes, we must be sure to spend wisely. Since we don't start with a totally new wardrobe each season, we should look for versatile additions — items that combine for many outfits to help us look our best.

Color may be the most powerful tool in assembling pieces that work together. Color is also a forceful image maker. It can make you appear slimmer, fuller, shorter or taller. Color can enhance your complexion, add sparkle to your eyes or make others notice you. If you want the colors you wear to do these things for you, a few suggestions will help you get started. But first, let's take a look at the vocabulary of color.

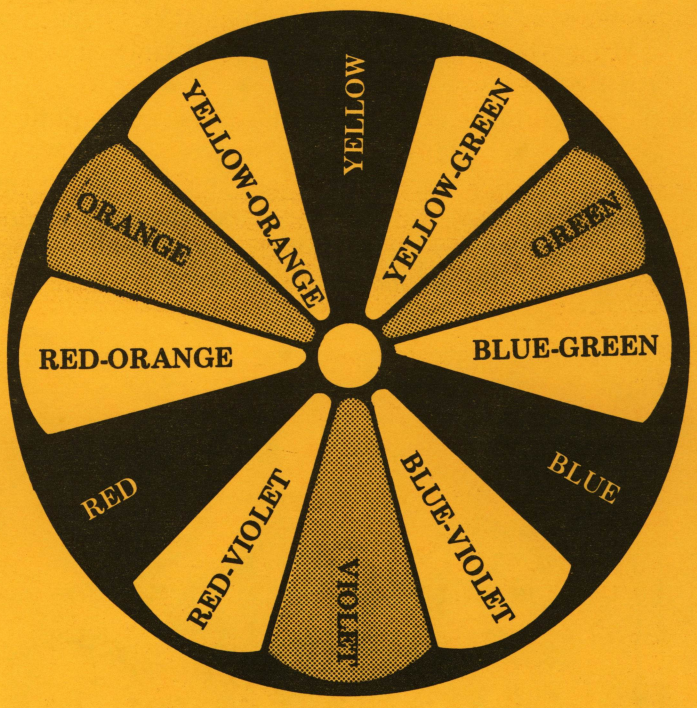
The Language of Color

Hue is another word for color. The three **primary** hues are yellow, red and blue. All colors are derived from these three basic hues.

Two primary hues can be combined to form a **secondary** hue. The three secondary hues are orange, violet and green.

When a primary and neighboring secondary hue are mixed, the result is a **tertiary** hue. Tertiary hues, also called intermediates, include red-violet, blue-violet, blue-green, yellow-green, yellow-orange and red-orange. Neighboring hues can be combined infinitely to make many other hues, but we will limit our discussion to the 12 colors shown on the basic color wheel.

Value is the lightness or darkness of a hue. Value is achieved by adding white or black to the hue. For example, the many variations of red range from pink to wine.



Intensity is the brilliance or dullness of a color. Highly intense yellows, for example, are neon yellow, and low intensity yellows occur such as goldenrod.

Colors may be combined in many ways. The three most common color schemes, however, are monochromatic, analogous and complementary.

Monochromatic schemes are developed around variations of one color. Any of the neutrals (white, black or gray) may be paired with one color, and the color will still be monochromatic. An outfit consisting of a navy shirt, a pastel blue shirt and a navy-and-white patterned vest is a good example.

Analogous schemes are formed from hues adjacent to each other on the color wheel. This color scheme has

a base hue common to all colors. An example is royal blue trousers, blue-green sport jacket, pastel blue shirt and a blue, blue-green and white necktie.

Complementary schemes are developed from two colors opposite each other on the color wheel. An example is violet slacks and a gold overblouse. The complementary color scheme you're probably most familiar with is the red-and-green color scheme of Christmas.

Color Impact

The optical illusions created by colors are influenced by the hues, their values and their intensities. Some hues, values and intensities attract much attention; others do not. Imagine the colors on the color wheel. Which ones catch your eye? You're like most people if you said the yellow, orange and red. These three hues stand out much more than blue, green and violet. Usually, striking colors make you look larger, and less noticeable colors make you look smaller. To create illusion of balance to smaller chest and larger hips, you might wear an orange top with blue slacks. Or, balance a larger chest and smaller hips with a violet shirt and red slacks.

As mentioned before, each hue has many variations or values. For example, within the green family, we see values ranging from pastel green to forest green and from kelly green to olive. In these ranges, medium values attract less attention than very light and dark values, and low intensity hues are less noticeable than high intensity hues. Pairing a kelly green sweater with grayish forest green slacks would balance a smaller chest to larger hips.

Influences on Color

Color doesn't stand alone. It is always related to light, fabric texture and other colors. These elements influence the optical effects of color.

The type of **light** under which color is seen has a direct effect on the clarity and purity of color perception. The effect of natural daylight changes throughout the day. Early morning light is warm; it projects red and yellow tones onto colors. At midday, natural daylight allows the true character of colors to emerge. Late afternoon sunlight creates an effect similar to that of early morning light. Incandescent lighting, much like early morning and late afternoon sunlight, projects red and yellow onto color. The most commonly used fluorescent bulbs cast blue to green tones on colors.

Because lighting can alter colors significantly, you should consider possible optical effects before buying clothes. For example, under fluorescent lights, the warm burgundy you thought you were wearing can appear to be a cold, blue-red shade. Under the special warm lighting many stores use to display their stock, the sweater you expected to be orange may really be red.

The effect of fabric **texture** on color can sometimes be quite dramatic. As a rule of thumb, rough surfaces absorb light, making colors appear deep and dull. Shiny surfaces reflect light, making colors appear clear and bright. Consider a lustrous, medium blue shirt and a wool tweed, medium blue skirt. By carefully combining textures, we create the illusion of a larger chest and smaller hips.

The relationship of a color to adjacent or surrounding colors greatly influences the **visual effect** of color. When two colors appear side by side, the differences between them seem greater. The visual difference is directly related to how much the colors differ in hue, value and intensity.

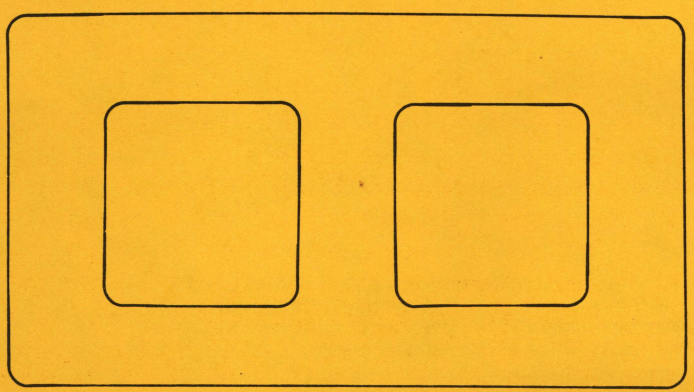
This principle contradicts the old theory that the most slenderizing color is "basic black." Black is often in extreme contrast to the typically medium range colors of the environment. This contrast actually makes black stand out and accentuate body proportions. Medium hues are better for creating a slenderizing illusion since they do not contrast strongly with background colors. Medium hues include slate gray, royal blue and olive green, among others.

The eye responds to protect itself from strong **afterimage** of color. To illustrate this point, color the left block in the illustration below an intense red, or paste a swatch of bright red fabric in it. Stare at the red spot for a few seconds; then gaze into the white block. An afterimage of green, the complement of red, will appear. The same response occurs with any color. Violet will yield the afterimage of its complement, yellow. Blue will produce an afterimage of orange, and so on.

As you consider color choices in clothing, recognize that bright magenta worn next to the face may impart a greenish cast to the skin. An intense orange sweater may make gray slacks appear blue, and black or very dark hues emphasize pale skin tones and could be overpowering.

Because the eye is quite sensitive to strong color, bright intense hues generally are used sparingly as **color accents**. When used near the face, an accent draws the eye vertically and has a slenderizing effect. When used elsewhere in the costume, an accent may cut apparent height and have a broadening effect.

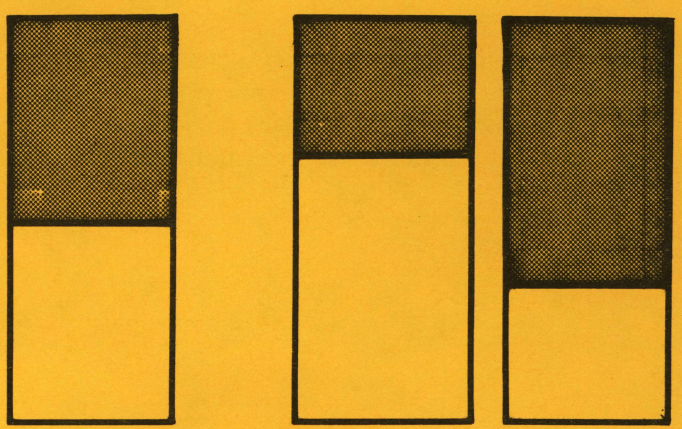
To call attention to a color, use a **color enhancer**. Do this by placing a color next to its complement, using it more than once in an outfit or using it next to a neutral. To enhance warm, bronze skin tones, you might wear a pastel blue dress. In the same way, a brown jacket calls attention to brown hair and eyes. Gray, black and white accentuate a rosy blush.



To call less attention to a color, use a color limiter. Do this by placing a color next to the hue that lies beside its complement on the color wheel, using the same color but in a deeper shade or using it next to an analogous color. For example, a ruddy complexion will appear less intense with a blue-green shirt, a gray-red suit or a red-violet dress. Minimize sallow skin tones with a blue-violet overblouse, old gold coat or yellow-green print.

Color and Your Wardrobe

There are always exceptions, but most people look best wearing outfits in which one color predominates. But whether you wear more than one color, add visual interest with contrast in values. For example, pair a medium gray flannel jacket with charcoal flannel slacks. Or, try a dark brown tweed suit with a lustrous, light green shirt. For the most interesting visual effect, use an unequal proportion of two or three hues or values in an outfit. The diagram below shows that the two equal shapes on the left are less visually interesting then either of the unequal arrangements on the right.



When your favorite color isn't one of your most attractive ones, you don't have to avoid it completely. But to use it and still look your best, wear it somewhere away from your face. Forest green in a skirt won't accentuate ruddy cheeks, and violet slacks are too far from sallow skin to affect the complexion.

Finally, don't be surprised if your best color when you're 20 years old isn't your best color at age 50. Your personal coloring becomes less intense with time, so you may need to make periodic color changes in your wardrobe. Although some people find they can wear clear, bright or deep hues after their hair turns gray, most adults find medium to lighter colors more flattering.

Finding Your Best Colors

Most people prefer wearing colors that flatter their skins tones. Because flattering colors often bring compliments, you already may have some idea about the colors that are best for you. To confirm your thoughts and possibly determine other hues you wear well, you might try the following experiment. Gather swatches of fabrics in several hues. If you don't have access to fabric scraps, use your own clothes and perhaps some in different colors borrowed from a neighbor or friend. Sit facing a mirror near an uncurtained window with a northern exposure. Try the colors next to your freshly cleansed face. Evaluate their visual effects of the colors on your skin, eyes and hair.

You will likely find several hues that you can wear well. Usually warm hues enhance warm skin tones (red or yellow undertones), and cool hues enhance cool skin tones (blue or violet undertones). If your personal coloring is intense, you can wear bright, clear and deep colors well. On the other hand, if your skin, hair and eyes aren't so intense, medium range hues will likely be more becoming. As you add new clothes to your wardrobe, choose them in flattering colors. You'll have mix-and-match potential and personal style, too.

Conclusion

Remember — choose colors carefully to make the most of your appearance and to build a useful wardrobe.

- Warm hues, light and deep values and bright intensities attract attention and appear larger than they are. Cool hues, medium values and low intensities don't attract attention and seem smaller than they are.
- The type and quality of light by which color is seen affect color perception. Incandescent lighting and daylight, except around noon, cast warm tones onto colors. The most widely used fluorescent lighting casts cool tones onto colors.
- Rough textures absorb light and reduce apparent size; shiny textures reflect light and increase apparent size.
- Two different colors placed side by side pull apart in relation to how much the colors differ in hue, value and intensity. Extreme differences make the color combination quite noticeable, while moderate differences are less noticeable.
- Because the eye is quite sensitive to strong color, bold, intense hues are generally most appealing when used sparingly.
- To emphasize a color, use it next to its complement or a neutral, or use it more than once in an outfit. To deemphasize a color, use it next to the hue that lies beside its complement on the color wheel, next to an analogous color or next to the same hue in a deeper shade.
- Warm skin tones generally are most flattered by warm colors in clothes, while cool skin tones are most flattered by cool colors.
- When one color predominates in an outfit, create visual interest with value contrasts.
- Because your personal coloring changes with time, your best colors at age 20 may not be your best colors at age 50.

Acknowledgment — This publication is an adaptation of a Pennsylvania State University publication by Pamela S. Cutright. Original material is used with permission of the Pennsylvania Cooperative Extension Service.

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