

Introduction to Color Theory: Color & Rhetorical Purpose



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Brought to you in cooperation with the Purdue Online Writing Lab



Color Theory is a system of rules and guidance for mixing various colors in order to:

- **Create Aesthetically Pleasing Blends**
- **Produce Maximum Readability and Clarity**
- **Draw on Cultural Associations to Effect Meaning**

OWL Why Learn Color Theory?

Many people choose not to consult color theory. They think, “Well, I’ve got a good eye for these things.”

The “good eye” for color may or may not be true based on who’s thinking it...

...but in order **to justify your choices it is good to have some theory to fall back on.**





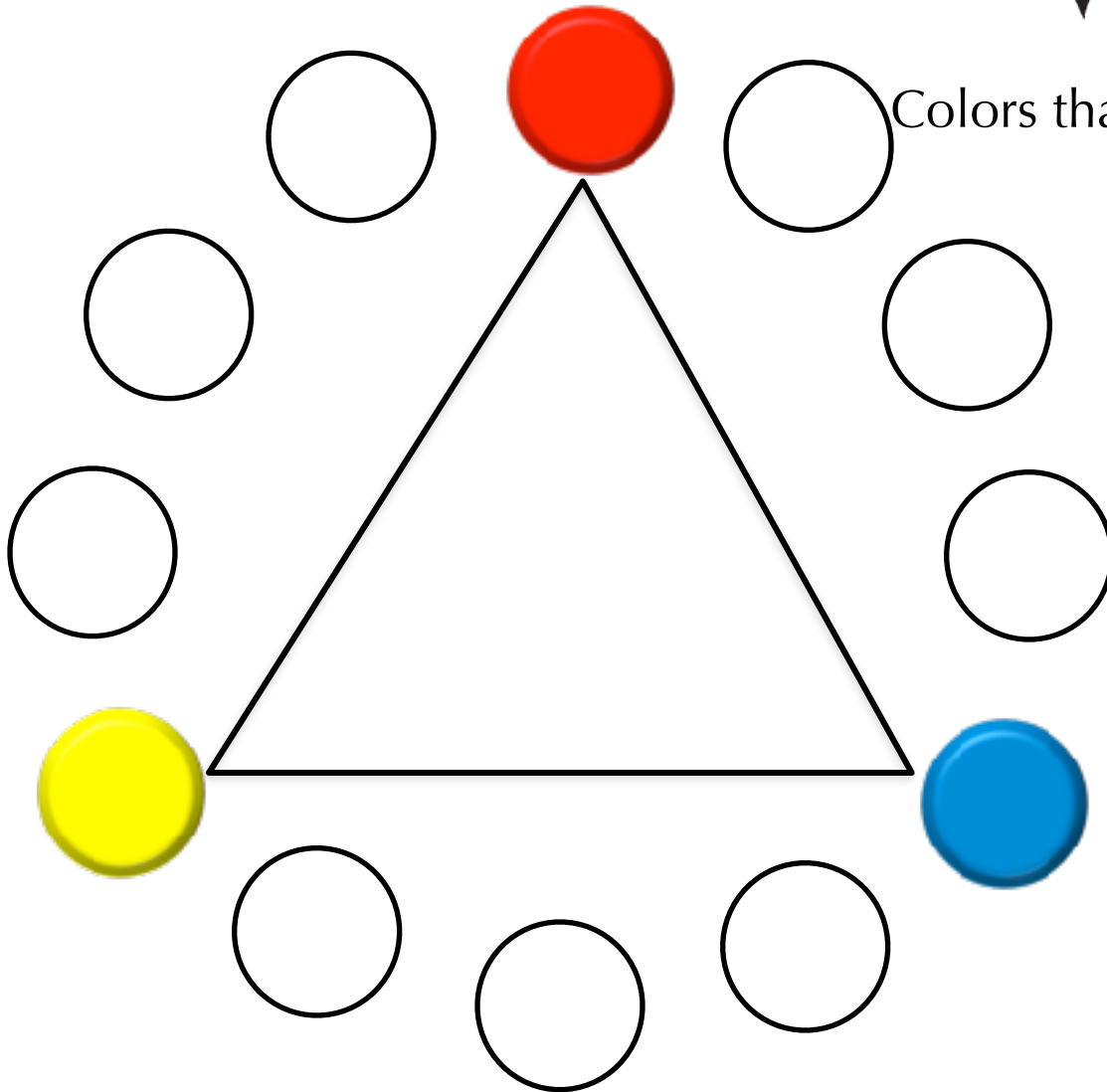
At its core, **color is light.**

Light is composed of many different colors and the various mixtures of light compose the colors that we can see.





Primary Colors

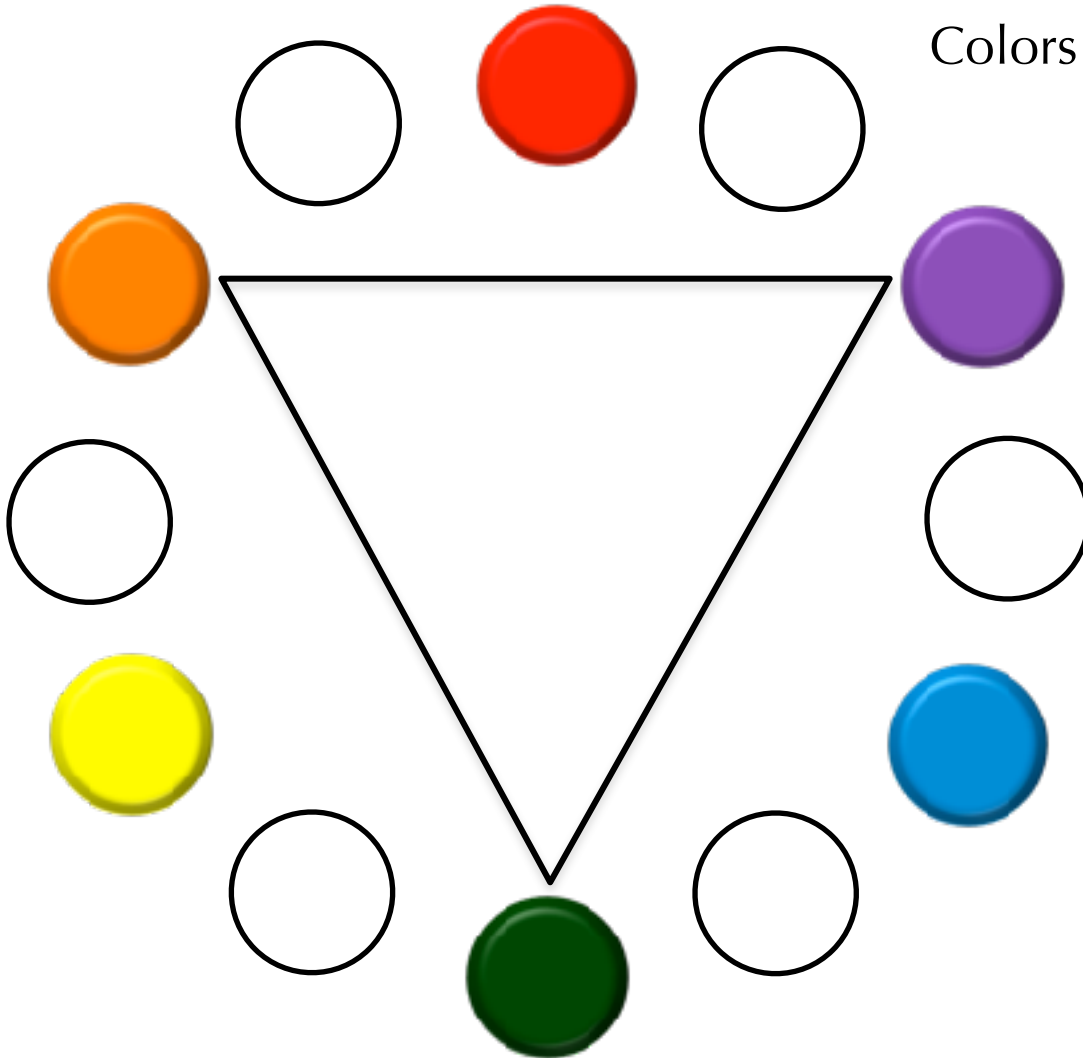


Colors that can not be created by mixing other colors)



Secondary Colors

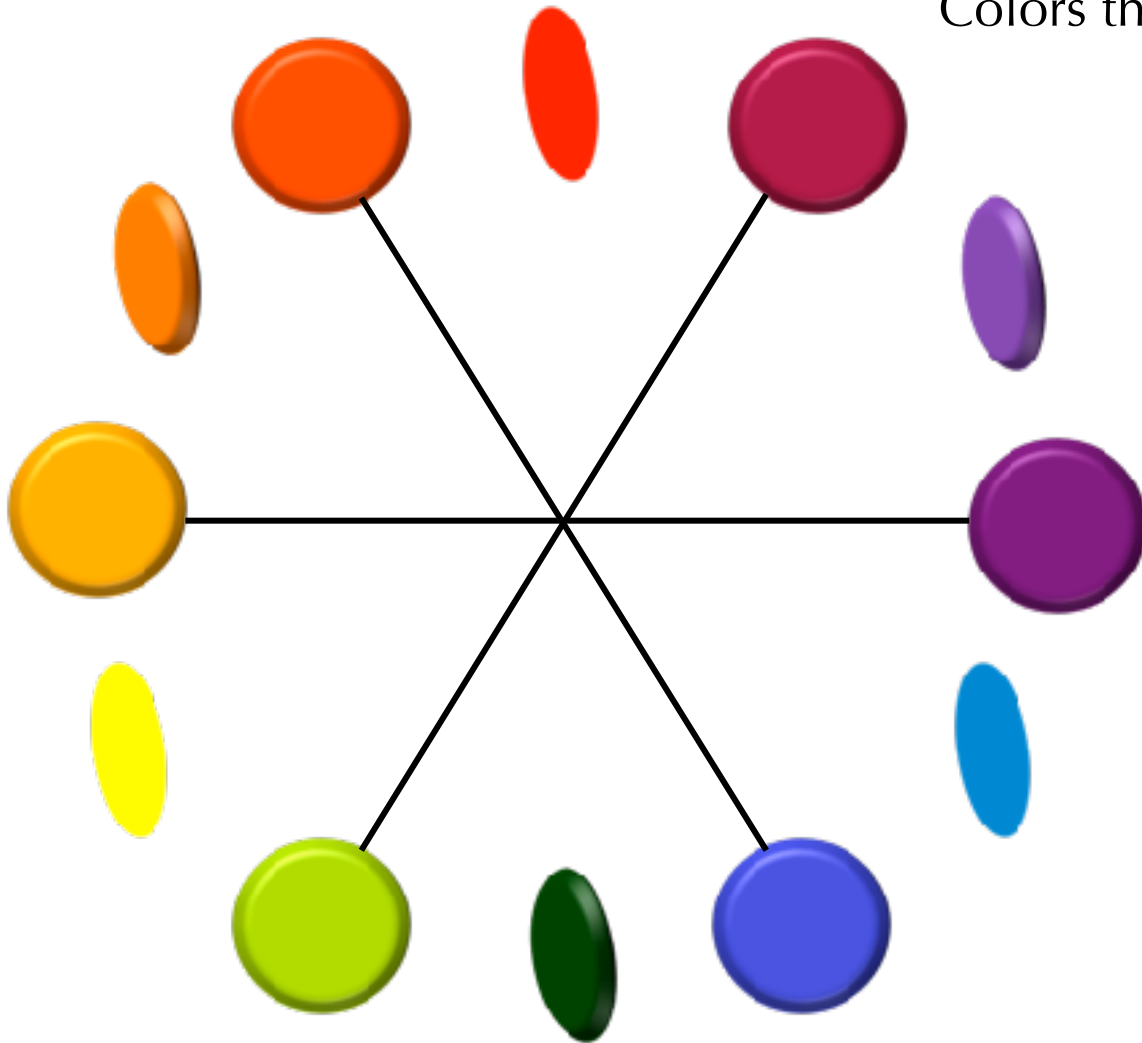
Colors made by mixing primary colors





Tertiary Colors

Colors that mix primary and secondary colors





Taken Together...
The Color Wheel





Using the Wheel



Colors are arranged on the wheel in such a way that purposeful color choices can be made.

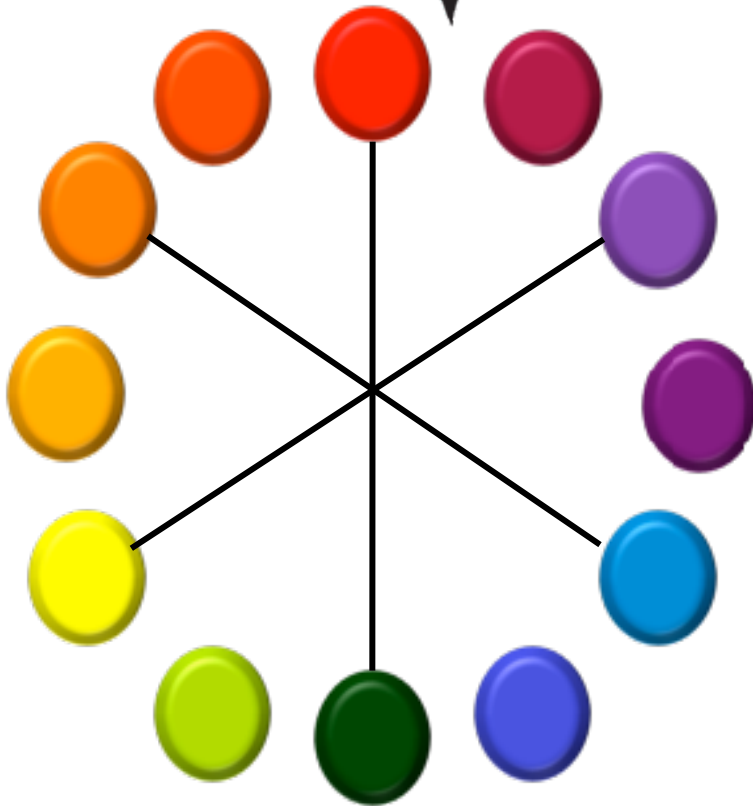
Choices of color combination depend on what you are trying to accomplish.

Such as:

- Contrast
- Blending
- Affect



Using the Wheel



Complementary Colors are the colors opposite from one another on the wheel.

These colors provide the **most** visual contrast.

Contrast is the noticeable level of difference between two colors.



Contrast with Text

The more a color contrasts with the colors around it, the more easily visible that color will appear. This fact is extremely important when using different colored texts and backgrounds

This is why **black text on a white background** is so popular and effective. There's a **high degree of contrast**.

On the other hand, **blue and black offer little contrast**. An extended read of this combination **could be painful**.



But be careful, **even though colors may contrast they may not always work well for text** and background pairing.

“Simultaneous Contrast” occurs when a color like red is foregrounded on blue. Note how the text appears to slightly vibrate. This would get **annoying** really quickly.

But simultaneously be aware of extreme lack of contrast in your text and background choices.

Honestly, this is just **painful**. Do not make your readers struggle with this!



Contrast draws attention to the item that is most contrasting (or different) among a number of other design elements.

Therefore, you can use color contrast to draw attention to an element of your design that is **more important**, **relevant**, or **immediately pressing**.



Practical Example



Neither of these flyers is completely ineffective and both provide shape contrast with the text box.

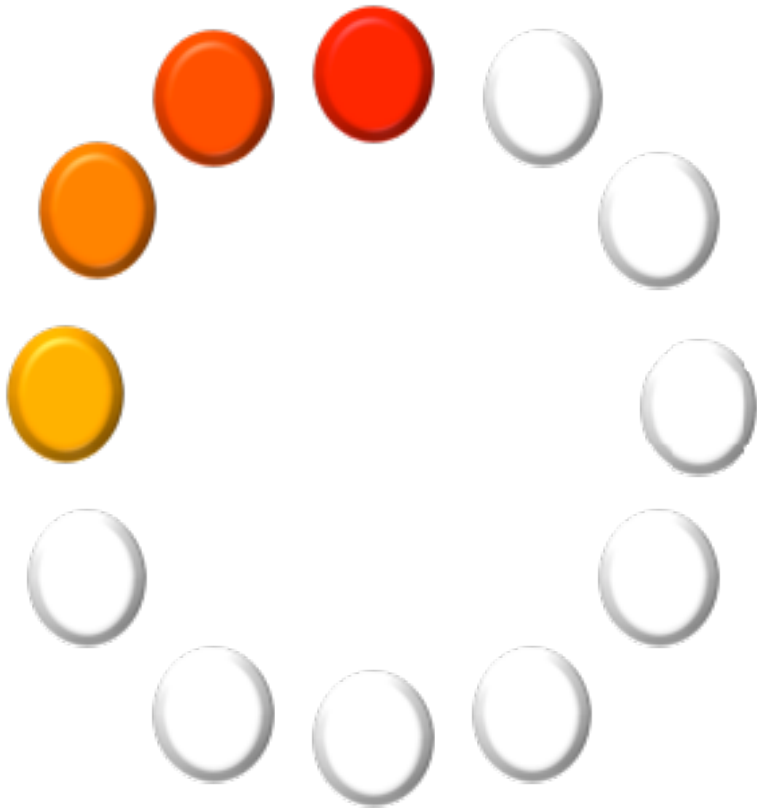
But the **orange box** above provides a nice contrast with the **blues** and grays of the clothes rack.



The blue box here, however, is too similar to the clothes' color palette.



Analogous Colors



Analogous Colors are colors positioned next to each other on the color wheel.

These colors have very **little contrast**; therefore, they will **provide harmonious blends**.



Analogous Colors in Nature



Nature offers an excellent look at analogous colors in action.

Question: what color of flower could be added to this photo to provide a strong and attention drawing contrast?





Color's often come with feelings, moods, and associations that you can draw on.



For example, the color **Red** is largely associated with **danger**, **aggression**, **stimulation**, and **excitement**.

Red stop signs signify danger if you don't stop, and stimulate your senses with excitement if you don't see one coming up!



It's an important to remember that **these color associations do not come from the color itself**. Without us to interpret it, red is simply light without any meaning laden characteristics.

Because **these associations** depend on us, they can **differ from culture to culture, and** they can also **change over time**.

For example, purple use to be associated with solely belonging to royalty. This PowerPoint could now be beheaded if it weren't made by a King or Queen!



There are a number of sources that list and suggest color associations commonly agreed upon by many people.

- **[Color in Motion](#)**: A particularly interesting and useful one, contains a number of fun Flash videos that illustrate these associations with music and animation.