

# Understanding Photographic Color

When creating a photograph the use of color can either make or break your image. You need to both select what colors appear in your images and what colors do not. Perhaps by moving your position or the position of your subject you can change the feel of a photograph. Is there a red stop sign in the background of your photo of a cute puppy? Could you eliminate it? Think about your backgrounds, the color of the background can dramatically change the mood of a photo and the mood of the viewer. We can't always change the colors that appear in our images but we can do what ever is possible using our arsenal of photographic tools to adjust the result. Therefore it would be helpful to know exactly what the basic colors communicate to the viewer. Here then are some simple descriptions of colors and how we humans subconsciously perceive them.

**YELLOW** is the color nearest to "light" and leaves a warm and satisfying impression. It's lively and stimulating, and in many cultures symbolized deity. Dark yellow can be oppressive, while light yellow is breezy. Yellow's stimulating nature and high visibility to the eye is the reason why many road signs are bold yellow (contrasted by black text). Yellow birds, flowers and skies are sure to be eye catchers just because of the way the mind and eyes work!

**BLUE** represents temperature, sky, water and ice. It is the second most powerful color, and it obviously represents coolness, mist, and shadows. In some applications, it can represent peacefulness and calmness. And as pink represents femininity, blue represents masculinity. Blue is often associated with somber emotions like sadness, gloom, and fear. Blue is a contemplative color, meaning intelligence and strength. It is one of the most politically correct colors there is, with no negative connotations of it anywhere on the planet.

**GREEN** is the most restful color for the human eye. It is the universal color of nature, and represents fertility, rebirth, and freedom. Bright green can be uplifting, while dark green evokes a mental picture of a pine forest. Street signs are painted with a metallic green background contrasted with white letters because the combination is believed to be the easiest to read and recognize for the human brain. However, as with most colors, green also brings forth some negative connotations. The phrase "green with envy" also gives way to guilt, ghastliness, sickness and disease.

**ORANGE** is a good balance between the passionate red and the yellow of wisdom. Orange is symbolic of endurance, strength, and ambition. It can represent the fire and flame of the sun. It is said to also have the cheerful effect of yellow, but is intensified in its closeness to red.

**RED** is a bold color that commands attention. Red gives the impression of seriousness and dignity, represents heat, fire, and rage and is known to escalate the body's metabolism. Red can also signify passion and love. Red promotes excitement and action. It is a bold color that signifies danger, which is why it is used on stop signs. Using too much red should be done with caution because of its domineering qualities. Red is the most powerful of colors.

**PINK** is the most gender specific. Pink represents femininity and has a gentle nature (which is not a bad thing). It is associated with sweets like candy and bubble gum. It also symbolizes softness. Because it is so “feminine” the use of pink should be well planned. Pink and blue combinations are most associated with babies, soaps and detergents.

**PURPLE** is a mixture of somber blue and active red. Like blue, it can represent coolness, mist and shadows. It symbolizes royalty and dignity, and can be mournful, yet soft and lonely. Purple is described as an “unquiet color,” being mysterious and mystic in a cultural sort of way. A study revealed that purple, the color of mourning among many peoples, meets with disapproval in six Asian countries.

**BROWN** is associated with nature, trees and wood. It represents conservancy and humility. Next to grey, brown, in one of its many shades, is one of the most neutral of the colors. It is useful in balancing out stronger colors and because it is one of the most predominate hues in nature, it gives a sense of familiarity. Light brown confers genuineness, while dark brown is reminiscent of fine wood and leather.

**GREY** give the stamp of exclusivity. It is the color around which creative people are most creative. Grey is a neutral color that can enhance and intensify any other color it surrounds. It can enhance the psychological response of the other colors it supports.

**BLACK** is associated with elegance and class (as in a black tie affair). It is the traditional color of fear, death, and mourning. Look at the many terms using the word black to understand how it is perceived: black sheep, black heart, black and blue. Despite the negative imagery that black brings, it is a preferred color in many designs, since it contrasts with most colors quite well. If used correctly, it promotes distinction and clarity in your images and designs.

**WHITE** symbolizes purity, innocence and birth. It is closely associated with winter and can also represent surrender or truth. In the color spectrum, white is the union of all the colors. Its neutrality and conservative nature is widely accepted. Its simplicity and subtle quality makes it an ideal color for establishing clarity and contrast in images.

“The camera doesn’t make a bit of difference. All of them can record what you are seeing. But YOU have to SEE.”

Ernst Haas (Comment at a workshop in 1990)