

USING COLOR TO ENHANCE THE READABILITY OF YOUR CONTENT*

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Abstract

Using Color to enhance the readability of your content

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Even those of us who have a natural flare for color combinations in our wardrobes or interiors may have something to learn when it comes to choosing effective color combinations for online courses. Few people realize the impact a poor color combination can have on the viewer or how readability of content can be improved with a good color choice. We will address how to select colors for your course that:

- are not fatiguing to the eye
 - make it easy to read content
 - work together harmoniously
 - set a tone that is appropriate for your course material
- What does Color Communicate?

When selecting colors for your course pages, consider first what you are trying to communicate. Color can help you to set the "mood" of your site. It can communicate emotions or feelings such as energy, joy, seriousness, sorrow, etc.

Just as color can convey mood, it can also convey meaning based upon:

- an individual's culture
- a person's stage in life
- hobbies, personal interests
- current trends
- universal symbols, such as water, grass, sky, etc.

What do you think about certain colors? Keep mood in mind when selecting color.

Choosing Foreground and Background Colors

The general rules for selecting good foreground/background color combinations include the following:

- Provide adequate contrast between foreground and background colors
- Avoid color combinations or a level of contrast that hurts the eyes
- Avoid using green and red as a foreground/background color combination
- Do not rely on color alone for visual emphasis
- Adequate Contrast

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It's a delicate balance!

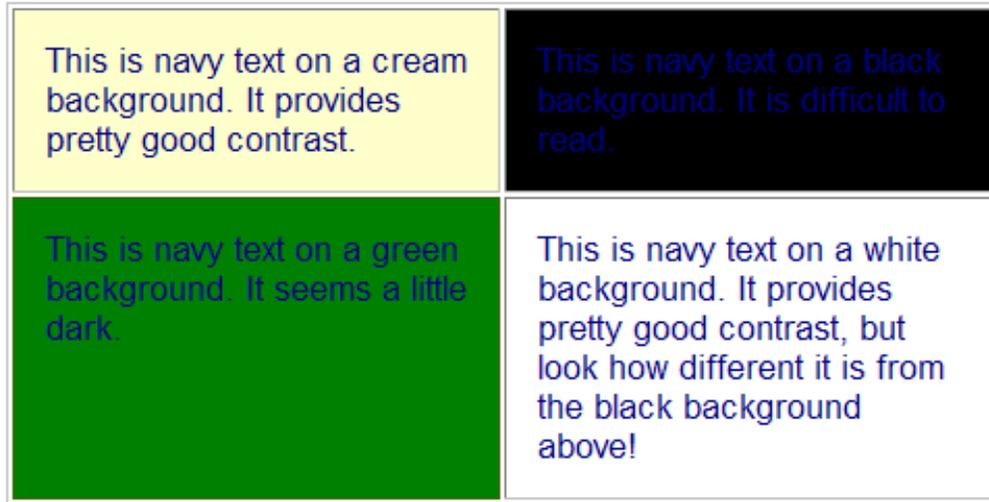


Figure 1

Be sure to avoid the red and green color combination for foreground/background. Colorblind¹ users will have difficulty with this particular combination. Also, be sure to use other means of visual cues for emphasis, such as heading styles, bold, or graphic icons. Visually impaired students may not be able to distinguish between colors of text well enough to understand the emphasis.

There has to be adequate contrast between foreground and background in order for your viewer to be able to distinguish one from the other easily. At the same time, you need to avoid so much contrast that reading is uncomfortable. Colors look different when placed next to another color. You'll need to experiment to come up with a combination that works.

¹<http://colorvisiontesting.com/>

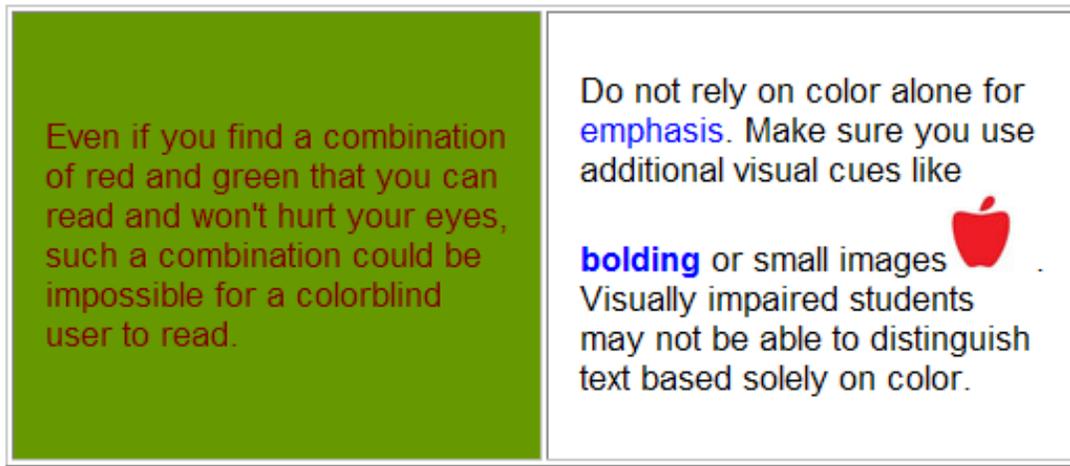


Figure 2

Even if you find a combination of red and green that you can read and won't hurt your eyes, such a combination could be impossible for a colorblind user to read. Do not rely on color alone for emphasis. Make sure you use additional visual cues like bolding or small images. Visually impaired students may not be able to distinguish text based solely on color.

How to Choose a Color Scheme

For some people, choosing a pleasing color scheme is simply intuitive, while others find it much more difficult. If you're having trouble, choose a single color that you like. Try it out on headings, table borders or backgrounds, etc., and see how you like it.

Be sure that it works well in combination with the foreground or background. Is there adequate contrast?

Avoid color discord. Does it hurt your eyes to look at?

Use it consistently for headings or table borders throughout your pages. This creates a unified monochromatic color scheme.

Combining Colors

If you want to use more than one color, start with a color you like and then use a color wheel to find other colors that work well with that color. Colors opposite one another on a color wheel can be used together to create a complementary color scheme. Those next to one another can be used together to create an analogous color scheme.

More Color Schemes

There are many ways to apply color schemes based on the color wheel, but for many people this is too complicated. If you feel totally befuddled by the color wheel and the myriad choices it presents, there are certainly other ways to come up with good colors for your site! Many designers recommend looking at nature for clues. Think of lush landscapes, of tropical jungles, or flower bouquets. There are so many places to look for examples. You can also peruse your favorite web pages and look for color combinations you like.

Color and Eye Fatigue

Intense Colors

It is important to know that certain colors—particularly when used for large expanses of page space—are fatiguing to the human eye and may make it more difficult for your students to read through the lessons. Bright yellow and bright red are the most fatiguing, but others available on your color palettes including

lime green also fit into this category. Please avoid using them for page, table, or navigation bar backgrounds.

Avoid using intense colors for large expanses of space on your page such as page, table, or navigation bar backgrounds.

Reserve these colors for small accents on your pages.

Intense Color Combinations

Some colors are not fatiguing on their own, but become difficult to look at when combined with other colors. These unharmonious color combinations create color discord and should also be avoided in your course design.

You will often know color discord as soon as you see it simply because it may be disturbing to your eyes. This disturbing effect is heightened when the colors are not only used together, but combined as text and background.

For an interesting article about colors that cause eye fatigue, see [Color and Vision²](http://www.colormatters.com/optics.html) from [Colormatters.com](http://www.colormatters.com)

²<http://www.colormatters.com/optics.html>