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Introduction

“What clothing colors go together?”

“Which color should I wear for an important meeting?”

“Why is red the color of romance?”

These questions – and others like them – fill my inbox on a regular basis as readers try to understand how to use color in their wardrobes.

While some just want a quick and dirty answer, others seek a greater understanding.

Which is why I created this report.

There are many facets to color theory, some of which I've covered on my blog.

But to get a true understanding requires more than a blog post.

It requires delving into the human nature to see how people respond to color – and how you can use that information to achieve your image goals.

Once you understand how color works, you'll see the world in a whole new light.

So grab a drink and relax.

Here's how to use clothing color to influence and delight.

Enjoy!

Diana Pemberton-Sikes
FashionForRealWomen.com
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The Basics of Color

Let's start at the beginning.

Sir Isaac Newton developed the color wheel back in the 1660s as a way of recording the way light passed through prisms. Over-achiever that he was, he tried to assign a musical note to each color, but later abandoned that.

He noted that there were three primary colors – red, yellow, and blue – and that all other colors were a combination of those three.

Secondary colors are created by mixing the primary colors, and tertiary (or immediate) colors come from mixing the secondary colors with the primary colors.

Colors that are next to each other on the color wheel are called analogous. Those that are directly opposite each other are called complementary. Those that are split opposite are called split complementary.

The basic color is called a hue. When you add white, it tints it; when you add black, it shades it.
If you work in a creative industry, all of this is just a review.

But for most women, they haven't really thought about color much since they were introduced to it in a grade school art class.

Want to stretch your clothing budget and look like you have a lot of clothes when you really don't?

Then go back and look at the color wheel and all the different ways to combine colors. If you master what I'm about to teach you, you'll be shocked by how many different outfits you really have already sitting in your closet.

The good news is that the color wheel is the most difficult part of understanding color, so now that we've got it out of the way, it will be easy from here on out.
Matching Clothing Colors

Now that you know how the color wheel works, it makes putting together outfits a snap. All you have to do is reference it to see which colors go together.

So if you like red, for example, here are some ways to wear it:

- Primary colors
- Complementary colors
- Analogous colors

Prefer blue?

- Split Complementary + Tertiary
- Primary Colors
- Analogous colors
Green?

Analogous Colors

Secondary Colors

Complementary Colors

Orange?

Complementary Colors

Primary and Secondary

Analogous Colors

Whatever your favorite color, just start with the color wheel and see where it takes you. You're only limited by your imagination.
Monochromatic

Monochromatic - or all the same color – can mean a variety of things.

It can be the same color from head to toe...

Or it can be different variations of the same color from head to toe. This is where shading (add black) and tinting (add white) come in, and why you can have so many different colors in one color family.
Or, you can use different fabric textures, as in this Ferragamo ad:

See how subtle this is?

So what's so great about monochromatic looks?

They're both lengthening and slimming.

So if you want to look taller and thinner, give monochromatic a try.
Black, White, and Other Neutrals

So far, we've only talked about colors found on the color wheel. But what about colors not found on the color wheel, like black, white, and other neutrals? And what are neutrals, by the way?

Neutrals are colors that work well with most colors and don't call attention to themselves.

They include:                          ...and variations thereof, like:
Black                                Charcoal
White                                Ivory
Brown                                Beige
Gray                                 Taupe

Let's start with black and white.

They work great together...
...and with most colors.

Same with brown, gray, and their variations. They work well with each other and other neutrals...

All photos courtesy of NeimanMarcus.com
...and with various colors as well.

See how this works?

Once you understand how colors and neutrals work, it opens up a whole world of color combining possibilities.
Metallics

So where do metallics like silver, gold, and bronze fit into all of this?

They're neutrals.

But while silver, gold, and other metallic jewelry may be worn any time of day – and with each other – metallic clothing, by “old school” standards, is strictly after 5. Yes, you'll see people wearing it at all times of day, but traditionally, shiny, reflective clothing, trims, or embellishments are usually worn for evening only.
Inspiration from Nature

So where else can you draw color inspiration from - especially if you don't always have a color wheel handy?

Nature!

You'll find color combinations aplenty, thanks to Mother Nature. For example...
See how pretty these are?

When you think of your favorite scenes from nature – a flower garden, the woods, a mountain top, the beach – you can re-create the color scheme with your clothes. Sometimes in the clothing print itself, like the examples above, or through mixing and matching separates. Again, you're only limited by your imagination.
Colors of the Season

You know how flowers, fruits, and vegetables come into season at specific times of year?

Well, you can use those seasonal colors for inspiration on how to dress. For example:

Spring

Summer

Clothing photos courtesy of NeimanMarcus.com
What you'll find is that both clothing and textile designers have taken a lot of the
guesswork out of color coordinating by doing the hard work for you with their prints. All you have to do is add appropriate accessories.

Which leads me to my next topic...
Shoe Color

What are the “rules” for shoe color? How do you know what goes with what?

Here's the “old school” rule: Your shoe color should be equal to or darker than your hem color.

This grounds the look and doesn't draw attention to the feet. Because for most people, the focus should be on their face, not their feet. For example:

Yes

Photos courtesy of FarFetch.com

In each example, your eyes look over the ensemble, down at the shoes, then back up at the dress. The look is grounded.

In the far left picture, you could have used any of the colors in that dress to tie the look together. The pink is fun and festive.

On the far right picture, it looks like you've got a complementary color (color wheel opposite) situation going on, which you do. There are little red dots in those white flowers on the dress, but I wanted to show you that you can also use the color wheel to create interesting color combinations with your shoes and other accessories as well.
How do you know a shoe doesn't go with an ensemble?

When your eyes look over the clothes and linger on the shoes, wondering what's wrong with this picture. It's your brain telling you that the aesthetic is off, that there's disharmony in the combination.

Our minds seek balance. When we don't have it, it nags at us.

Let's start with the gold shoes on either end.

Aside from the general rule that metallics are an evening fabric, as I said before, there's also that fact that there is little or no gold in the respective dress prints. The dress on the left should have a black shoe to match the belt, and the shoe on the right should be navy.

With the gray shoes in the middle, your eyes go straight to the feet. It's work from the ankles up, party from the ankles down. They're not in sync.
Flesh Colored Shoes

Now I said earlier that shoe color should be equal to or darker than hem color to ground the look.

There are two exceptions to this rule: flesh colored shoes and athletic shoes.

Let's start with flesh colored shoes.

When you wear flesh colored shoes with your garments, it makes your legs look longer and it puts the focus on the garment.

 Again, your eyes scan over the ensemble, then go back to the garment. They don't linger on the feet.

While many women like the idea of visually elongating their legs and wear flesh-colored shoes all the time, I wouldn't recommend it. You don't want to be known as a “one trick pony” with your shoes. Mix it up and opt for some variety. Your wardrobe will be more cohesive for it.
Athletic Shoes
The other exception to the “equal to or darker than your hem” shoe color rule is white athletic shoes. These can be worn year 'round with athletic or active wear clothing.

When are athletic shoes inappropriate?

For use with anything other than athletic or active wear, like:

Photos courtesy of FarFetch.com

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Yes, it's a trend and you see it all the time, but tennis shoes were designed for sport use, just as flip flops were designed for beach use. Wearing them for other activities – while common – is incorrect.

But that's a whole other topic.

For now, wear athletic shoes with athletic and active wear clothing, and you'll be fine.
Organize Your Closet by Color

While we're on the topic of color, the best way to organize your closet is by item, by color. So you put all your white blouses together, all your gray blazers together, all your red dresses together, etc., like this:

![Closet Organization Example](image)

Why?

So you know at a glance what you have to work with. It's like a store. You can pull pieces easily and mix and match with ease.

When you have everything lumped together in a hodgepodge, you can't tell *what* you have. Or, when you hang outfits together, it's hard to see how to use them in different ways.

But when you organize by item and color, you'll find that you wear what you have much more often in different ways and don't need to buy new so often. You'll also think twice about adding new items when you know you already have 5 or 6 of something at home.

Organize your shoes and other accessories the same way.

Once you do, getting discover that getting dressed quickly becomes a snap.
Now that you have the basics of color down pat, it's time to dig a little deeper.

Let's start with the theory of advancing and receding colors.

Which color did you notice more in both pictures?

Chances are, the red.

That's because it's an “advancing color,” which means it tends to look near or advance in space. Advancing colors are light and bright and include white and the “fire” colors on the “warm” side of the color wheel.

Receding colors are those that tend to look far away or recede in space, like blue. Receding colors are dark and muted and include black and the “cool” side of the color wheel.
So what does all this means?

It means that you can use color to create optical illusions when you dress (or paint or decorate).

If you want to look bigger, wear warm colors. If you want to look smaller, wear cool colors.

For example:

Photos courtesy of FarFetch.com

Similar dress styles, similar model size. But the one on the right looks thinner because of the dark, receding color.

See the difference?

So the recommendation is to always put a light or bright color on the body parts you want to emphasize, and a dark or muted color on the parts you want to minimize.

Make sense?
Color Psychology

Have you ever wondered why police officers wear blue or the clergy wear black? Or why purple and red are colors of passion while white and yellow denote innocence and cheer?

It’s because different colors evoke different emotions in people. Scientists have studied the effects of color for centuries, and savvy people have used these findings to create buildings that inspire awe, furnish rooms that make you gasp, and build wardrobes that command attention.

So can you.

This is how, according to color psychologists, the majority of people in western civilizations respond to different colors:

**BLACK** is the color of authority, power, and drama. But it can also make its wearer appear aloof, over-powering, or even evil (bad guys wear black), so avoid it when interviewing, unless in small amounts or as an accent color.

**WHITE** is symbolic of purity, chastity, and cleanliness. It’s worn by brides to convey innocence and doctors and nurses to imply sterility. It’s usually worn in shirts and blouses year round, but confined to the summer months when worn in large doses.

**BLUE** denotes tranquility, authority, trust, and loyalty. It’s the best-selling color in the world, and the one with the biggest success rate in interviews and sales calls. A favorite of law enforcement and the military, dark blue is the ultimate “power color,” but avoid pastel blues for business situations.
**RED** symbolizes heat, danger, power, passion, and strength. When used as an accent color, it can motivate people to make quick decisions and increase expectations. However, it can also heighten emotions during negotiations and confrontations, so avoid wearing large amounts of red when faced with one of those situations.

**GREEN** signifies nature, success, wealth, and security. A calming, refreshing color, people waiting to appear on TV sit in “green rooms” to relax. But green can also be associated with illness and envy. Avoid wearing it if you make a lot more than your client.

**YELLOW** inspires a wide range of emotions, from cheer and goodwill to caution, decay, and jealousy. It enhances concentration, which is why it’s used for legal pads, but people also lose their tempers more often in yellow rooms than in rooms of other colors. Yellow also stimulates appetites, because it’s associated with happiness.

**ORANGE**, like red, stimulates strong emotions. Bright orange, like bright red, will attract attention and evoke intense emotions, so wear it sparingly in job interviews, negotiations, and when expecting confrontation. Wear it in small doses in business situations.

**PURPLE** symbolizes royalty, richness, power and sensitivity. It’s also the color of passion and love. But it’s often viewed as a “feminine” color, so avoid wearing purple when negotiating with men - particularly in situations where there’s strong gender bias.

**PINK** can inspire a variety of emotions, from fun and excitement (vibrant pinks) to calm and low energy (pale pinks). Pink is viewed as a feminine color, and, like purple, should be worn with discretion in business situations.
**BROWN** communicates strength, stability, and reliability. It’s also a good color to wear when gathering information, as it creates a neutral environment for open discussion. But brown can also create feelings of sadness and isolation, so avoid wearing it when dealing with those who are sad, lonely, or depressed.

**BEIGE** and **TAN**, like brown, are seen as calming and reliable. They're perceived as non-assertive and invite communication. Wear them when comforting others or gathering information. But they may also allow a strong opponent to view you as weak. Avoid wearing them when negotiating deals.

**GRAY** symbolizes intellect, knowledge, and wisdom. It's perceived as classic, long-lasting, sleek, and sophisticated. It's the color of compromise, probably because it's a mixture of black and white. After blue, it’s the second most popular color to wear to an interview. If you want to look authoritative without being oppressive in black, opt for gray. Avoid wearing it with people who are depressed.

So now that you know some facts about color, here's some everyday color psychology at play:

Authority/Trust    Danger    Caution
Here's some more:

See how much thought goes into all of this?

Road signs, buildings, company logos – there's so much more meaning to all of them than you realize.

So how can you use color psychology in your life?

Let's look at two popular areas...
The Best Colors for Business

If you go back and look at the psychology of colors, you'll see that to conduct serious business and be seen as a trusted authority, you should wear:

- Dark blue
- Gray
- Black (can be intense)
- Purple (disliked by men)

To ease tensions and get people to open up, wear:

- Green
- Brown
- Beige
- Gray

To get people happy and excited, wear (in small quantities):

- Red
- Yellow
- Orange
- Pink

The best one-on-one sales converting combination for men is navy suit, white shirt, red tie. You'll see it on the most successful sales people and on many political leaders.

Gray is a close second. It denotes authority but also encourages communication.

All black can be overwhelming. Wear it in small quantities in business.

See how interesting color theory is?

You can control how others relate to you based on the colors you wear.

Use this knowledge wisely.
The Best Colors to Attract Men

Want to get a guy “in the mood” or get more attention from men in general?

Then try these:

Soft Pink  
Peach/Coral  
Red  
Blue  
Green  
Black  
Gold  
Silver

Studies show that soft and mid-tone pinks score highest with men because pink is seen as feminine and girly. Men tend to buy more drinks for women dressed in pink than any other color.

Since peach and coral are closely related to pink, they also scored highly.

In the animal kingdom, red signifies female sexual availability, which is why it also scores highly with human males. Waitresses who wore red lipstick in one study consistently got higher tips than those wearing any other color. But red is also associated with sexual promiscuity, so wear it in small doses when dating someone new.

Cool, huh?
Summary

We've covered a lot in this little report, so let me recap, and then I'll give you some final thoughts.

To recap:

- Use the color wheel to determine which colors go together.
- Try different combinations, like primary, complementary, analogous, etc.
- Use monochromatic combinations to look taller and thinner.
- Use neutral colors with each other and other colors to extend your wardrobe.
- Play around with metallics.
- Draw inspiration from nature and the seasons.
- Remember the shoe color rule - and its two exceptions.
- Organize your closet by item, by color, so you know what you have to work with.
- Think about which colors seem to advance and recede.
- Consider color psychology when assembling outfits for work and romance.

Yes, it is a lot to remember, but once you start incorporating more color into your everyday clothes, you'll be delighted by how much you can do with so few pieces. It will also get your creative juices flowing.

Then, once you thoroughly understand color combining and master color psychology, you'll not only be able to influence others, you'll be able to delight them with your fashion savvy as well.

To Dressing Well!

Diana Pemberton-Sikes
FashionForRealWomen.com
Resources for Further Study

Learning about color is just one of the facets of dressing well.

If you want to master the art of dress, check out my other products here.

Current offerings include:

**Executive Style Bootcamp**  
*Look Like a Leader*

![Executive Style Bootcamp Image]

**Fashion Style Blueprint**  
*Style Yourself Like a Pro*

![Fashion Style Blueprint Image]

Again, you can see my current products here.