Color Theory Cheat Sheet

By Dan Scott drawpaintacademy.com
Introduction

Hi there!

For those of you who don’t know me, I’m a landscape painter from Australia and the creator of Draw Paint Academy.

I have been painting for most of my life and writing about art for the last 3 years.

The purpose of this cheat sheet is to give you a brief overview of color and how it relates to us artists.

Color is amazing. It influences our decisions, evokes certain emotions and allows us to see the beautiful vibrancy of the world. But we tend to overlook the importance of color as it is so involved in our day-to-day lives.

I trust this cheat sheet will help you understand the importance of color and how it can be used to improve as an artist.

So anyway, let’s get into it.

Regards

Dan Scott

Draw Paint Academy
The 3 Components Of Color

Color is much easier to understand when you break it down into separate components, which are:

**Value:** How light or dark something is. This is generally measured on a scale of 1 to 9 or 10. Some artists will denote 1 to white and some will denote 1 to black - it doesn't really matter how you number the values.

The highest value is white and the lowest value is black. When you hear someone say that a painting is in a ‘high-key’ they are referring to the high (light) range of values used in the painting.

**Saturation:** A measure of how intense or vivid a color is. If you mix a color with gray, white or black, you will usually end up reducing the saturation of that color. On your left below is a high saturation red. As you can see it is very intense. Next to it is a low saturation red. It is the same hue but it has much less intensity.
**Hue:** Hue refers to the dominant color wavelength and ignores value and saturation. Red, blue, orange, green, yellow - these are all different hues.
### Other Color Theory Terms

**Tint**: A color plus white.

**Shade**: A color plus black.

**Tone**: A color which is not pure (tone usually refers to a color which has been mixed with gray).

**Vividness, Chroma, Richness, Purity**: Generally used to refer to the saturation of a color. To avoid any confusion, I will mostly be using the term saturation to refer to a color’s vividness.

**High-Key**: Refers to a range of colors in the high value range (light colors).

**Low-Key**: Refers to a range of colors in the low value range (dark colors).

**Temperature**: Refers to how warm or cool a color is.

**Color Scheme**: An arrangement of colors which is generally considered to be pleasing to look at. The popular color schemes used by artists are complementary, analogous, triadic, split-complementary and rectangular.

**Color Harmony**: How the colors interact and work together in your artwork.
The Color Wheel And How To Use It

Since the origination of the color wheel by Isaac Newton, it has become one of the most powerful tools available to artists for explaining the relationship between colors.

The color wheel is comprised of 3 primary colors, 3 secondary colors and 6 tertiary colors.

The three **primary colors** are red, blue and yellow.

The three **secondary colors** are green, orange and purple. These are made by mixing two of the primary colors.

The six other colors on the color wheel are the **tertiary colors**.
The Basics Of Color Mixing

You can mix pretty much any color using just the primary colors (red, blue and yellow) and white. This is why painting with a limited palette is such a recommended approach, as it forces you to learn how to mix your own colors rather than to rely on pre-mixed colors.

Here are some tips for color mixing:

- Mixing any two primary colors will create the color between them on the color wheel. For example, by mixing red and blue, you will get purple.
- You can reduce the saturation of a color by mixing it with the color on the opposite side of the color wheel. These are referred to as complementary colors. They compete for attention and will mute each other out. For example, you can reduce the saturation of an orange color by mixing it with some blue.
- To darken a color, you could add blue, black or an earthy color such as raw umber or burnt sienna.
- To lighten a color, you could add yellow or white.
- To mix a natural black, you could combine a dark blue with raw umber or burnt sienna (you do not need to use black straight from the tube).

Daniel Garber, The Wilderness, 1912. A wonderful display of high-key colors contrast against a dark foreground.
Color has a powerful influence over human behaviour, to the extent it can manipulate your perception of what is actually there.

Here are some colors and their psychological triggers:

- **Red**: Passion, love, anger and danger
- **Orange**: Vitality, creativity and activity
- **Yellow**: Energy, light and hope
- **Green**: Health, nature and wealth
- **Blue**: Trust, security and spirituality
- **Purple**: Creativity, royalty and wealth

However, please note that these psychological triggers are all subjective and vary from person to person.
How do these two paintings make you feel? Do you feel any different psychological triggers from them?
Thanks for reading!

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at dan@drawpaintacademy.com.