

Color Guide to Interior Decorating

by Allison Havill Todd

Color Guide to Interior Decorating

Have you struggled with choosing a color palette for your home? Are your walls covered with “test” patches of different paint colors and nothing is quite working right?

This guide will help you:

- Understand the basic properties of color and why some colors work better together than others.
- Learn how color, light and mood all work together.
- Select a color scheme for your home.

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Introduction

Does choosing a color scheme for your home make you want to “run for the hills”? How many times have you repainted a room (or entire home) because the color didn’t come out looking quite like it did on the one-inch paint sample in the store? This guide is designed to help you avoid these frustrating mistakes by providing you with a basic knowledge of how colors work with each other and in different environments.

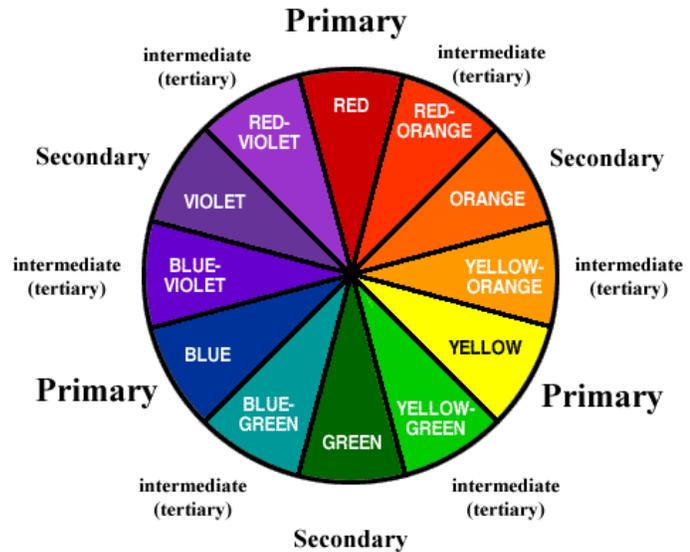
Color is one of the most useful tools in a decorator’s arsenal for transforming environments. When used properly it can help us create harmonious and enjoyable places to live and work. However, without a proper understanding of how color works and careful planning, we can end up with costly mistakes and poorly designed spaces that are unsettling.

Color selection is just *part* of the overall design concept for a home or business but a most important one that deserves time and attention. Different color schemes can make a room feel warm and inviting or bold and dramatic depending on the preferences of those using the space.

While we cannot cover everything there is to know about working with color in this guide, it will provide a good base and a better understanding of how different hues work together and help you uncover the palette that is most suitable for you.

Color Basics

Understanding some of the underlying properties and terms associated with color will give you the confidence to create successful color schemes.



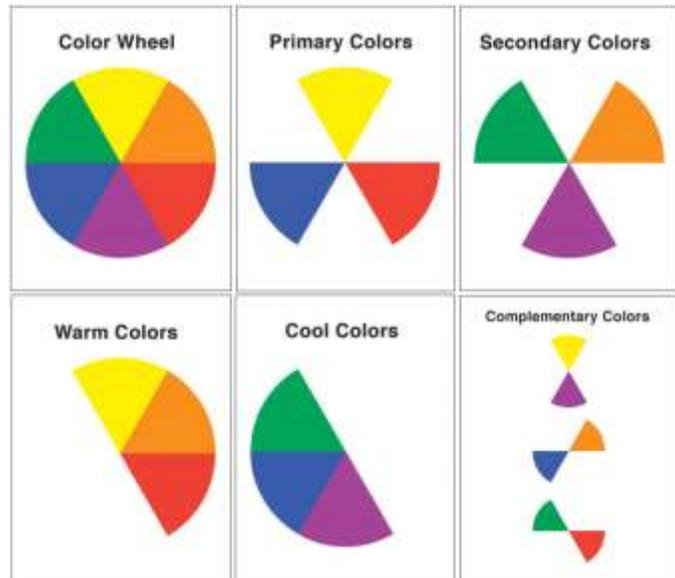
Perhaps the best place to start is by visiting the **Color Wheel**. The human eye can detect some 10 million plus colors, all based on the colors of the rainbow. The Color Wheel shows how these base colors relate to one another and how they combine.

The **primary colors**, Red, Yellow and Blue, are the basis of all other colors we see. They cannot be created from other colors, but all other colors are created by mixing these colors in varying degrees.

The **secondary colors**, Orange, Green and Violet, are mixed from equal amounts of two primary colors. Endless combinations of intermediate colors can be created from mixing these in varying quantities with their neighbor colors. The acronym, **R.O.Y. G. B.I.V.**, is an easy way to remember the colors that make up the rainbow spectrum (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet). When formed into a circle they make up the color wheel.

The **Complementary, or contrast colors**, are located directly opposite from each other on the color wheel. Red-Green, Orange-Blue combinations are an example of complementary color pairings. These create a very strong, contrasting palette when paired together. When one of the complements is toned down with gray, lightened with white or darkened with black, they can co-exist quite harmoniously as part of a decorating scheme.

Analogous, or harmonious hues, lie next to one another on the color wheel and share a common base color. For example, blue, blue-violet and violet all have the base shade of blue in common. Because there is little to no contrast between these hues, they can make for a very harmonious family of color. This is a common theme in interior decorating plans. The secret to success, when using this type of monochromatic palette, is to use materials in varying textures throughout the room and add small accents of contrasting colors (see the room image on the following page).



Value is the relative lightness or darkness of a hue. When a hue is lightened by the addition of white this is called a “tint”. When it is darkened by the addition of black it is called a “shade”. A hue can be lightened or darkened to such a degree that its original color is indistinguishable. For example, cream is a tint of yellow containing more white than yellow. In reverse, olive is a shade of green that has been moderately darkened by the addition of black.

Tone is the result of adding gray to a hue. Many colors that have a more subdued effect are hues that have been toned down by the addition of gray. For example, if lavender is a tint of violet, then mauve is a tone of violet. This can be one of a decorator’s most successful tricks when creating an overall pleasing environment.

Intensity is a term that indicates the strength and brightness of a hue when unchanged by tinting or toning. The more dominant the hue is, the more intense it appears to your eye. A strong hue can seem even more intense when used with a complementary (or contrast) color of equal intensity. For example, pairing royal blue with bright orange intensifies the strength of each

color. Combinations of intense colors may work well for retail marketing purposes or sports uniforms but are not suggested for the walls of a room (sorry all you Gator fans)! When an intense color (i.e. purple) is paired with its complementary



color that has been tinted or shaded it can be a very satisfactory combination. Think of the same royal blue but now paired with a soft, dusty peach tone as opposed to the original bright orange. The key is to make sure only one color dominates and is paired with neutrals such as white, tan or gray. The photo above demonstrates the use of an intense accent color in small doses (pillows and small table) in an overall subdued, neutral scheme.

Color, Light and Mood

It is important to understand how light affects color and how color affects mood. Have you ever noticed when you walk into a room that has been professionally planned how everything just feels cohesive? Sometimes it is hard to put your finger on just what is causing this inviting feeling, and quite often it is the proper use of light and color to create the desired mood.



While we won't spend too much time on the properties of light (look for more on that in future guides), it is important to understand some of the basics.

Natural Light showcases colors in their truest form. It is the desired source of light whenever possible. The effect of natural light on any given space is directly related to the exposure of that room. For example, the light entering a room with a northern exposure is a "cooler" light towards the blue end of the spectrum, and the result of natural light on a room with a southern exposure is a warmer one. The exposure of a room and the general climate of that area, are important considerations to take into account when planning the color scheme for those interiors. A home in southwest Arizona with a southern exposure would feel like it was on fire if painted in colors from the warmer end of the spectrum such as yellow, orange and red. The reverse is true for homes, or rooms, with a northern exposure in Vermont. Because there is very little direct natural light with a northern exposure and the climate can be quite cold, a color palette comprised of cooler hues (blue, green) would not be the best choice to dominate the color scheme.

Artificial Light is what most of us use in our homes and businesses. Have you ever noticed how the entire mood of a room can change from daylight hours to evening when the room is properly lit? Even the most beautifully

designed spaces are lacking if not properly lit. While there are many different types of artificial light bulbs available today, we are going to touch upon the three major sources.

Incandescent bulbs give off a warmer, yellowish cast and work well with warm hued rooms but can leave colors from the cooler end of the spectrum feeling dull and lifeless.

Flourescent bulbs have the opposite effect. They give off a cooler light with a blue/green cast which works well to enhance similar cooler colors but can make warmer, red-toned hues look “off”. Not to mention what it does to our complexions!

Halogen bulbs offer the most natural form of artificial light and show colors in their truest form. This type of lighting works well for spotlighting artwork or for lighting task areas such as the kitchen.

Now that we have covered some of the basic forms of light and their overall effect on an interior space, it is time to discuss how color affects mood. While some decisions about what color to use are dictated by environment (exposure and climate), most decisions are made based on personal preference. Research shows that certain colors evoke certain emotions and much thought should be given to color schemes. Very careful planning goes into determining the appropriate color schemes for newer restaurants and hospitals that understand the relationship between color and mood.

Warmer colors (red, yellow, orange based) energize and stimulate. While these are not good choices for medical environments, or an overactive child’s room as they raise pulse rates and body temperatures, they can be quite effective for dining areas since they stimulate the appetite as well as the conversation! Yellow based hues are cheery and bright and have been used to increase creativity. Yellow is a very versatile because it can be used in its purest form or become almost neutral with a heavy dose of white. The closer a color is to a warm primary on the color wheel (red or yellow), the stronger it is and should be used in limited doses.

Cooler colors (green, blue, violet based) evoke a sense of peace, calm and tranquility. Softer, lighter versions of these hues, paired with neutral shades, provide a good color base for bedrooms, spas and other environments where relaxation is a priority. These colors are best used in areas that receive a lot of natural light to keep from appearing cold. They also work very well when they dominate the color palette in a warmer environment with a southern exposure.



This sunroom allows for a lot of natural light and has a southern exposure. The use of a light creamy wall color and fabrics in cooler hues of blue work together to create a balanced, harmonious space.

4 Steps to Choosing Your Own Color Scheme

Now that we have provided a basic understanding about how different colors work together and the effects of light on color and color on mood, the next step is to give you some suggestions on establishing your own personal color scheme.

The first thing to remember is there is no formula or set of fast rules. There is also no absolute right or wrong. Color preference is a very personal choice and can vary widely from one individual to another. This is an easier process for experienced design professionals because we work with this every day, we know what questions to ask, and we understand how color works with all of the other design elements that go into completing a space. But here some tips to get you started!

1. **Research.** You will need to spend some time looking around at other homes, businesses, restaurants and even hotels to get a feel for what is appealing to you. Look through home magazines, check out design specific sites such as Houzz.com for inspiration. Pay attention to how some of the principles we have mentioned previously are working together in these spaces. Remember you are looking for inspiring color combinations, not so much the design style of the furnishings. Save pages and book mark sites and then revisit them in a few days to see if you still like them. Take note of common color schemes that are appealing to you. After some time, you should start to see a recurring theme.
2. **Warm or Cool.** An easy way to start narrowing down choices is to pay attention to whether you prefer an overall warmer or cooler palette. As mentioned earlier, climate, exposure and personal preference are all

points to consider when making this decision. This is not to say that an entire home will be in shades of blue, for example. Any harmonious environment will ultimately be the result of a carefully planned layering of colors. One approach is to select the background wall color from hues that are on the opposite side of the color wheel from the orientation of the room and accent with colors of the same orientation. For example, if you live in a warmer climate and your room has a southern exposure to the sun, consider painting the walls in a cooler based hue (spa blue, dove gray, sage green) and adding colors from the warmer spectrum (reds, yellows, oranges) in fabrics, pillows, rugs or artwork. Neutral shades work very well on walls in general living areas, but make sure you understand whether the neutral color is based on a warm or cool hue. Are you drawn to bolder, more dramatic hues or do you prefer a more muted, subtle backdrop? This will help you determine whether to work with a more analogous color scheme for a subtle, monochromatic look or a more complementary color scheme which offers more contrast.

3. Existing Color Scheme. Unless you are moving into a new home, chances are you already have some pieces that can be used as a jumping off point. What are your favorite fabrics that are currently being used? What colors can be pulled out of those patterns? Do you have a beautiful area rug or piece of artwork that is particularly attractive to you? Do not plan the entire color scheme of a room around a piece you happen to have unless you really like it!

4. Sample, Sample, Sample. There is no substitute for testing your choices out before making expensive purchases or mistakes. Test out your paint selections on a large-sized poster board. The colors will look quite different than they do on the paint deck sample you see in the store. The sample board can be moved around the room to see how it looks at different levels of light and at different times of the day, and you won't end up with a bunch of paint samples on your walls. Many of the

paint manufacturers offer a tool on their websites that will allow you to upload a photo of your room and preview one of their paint colors on the walls. While this is no substitute for viewing it in your own room in your own lighting, it can help narrow down choices. If you are also selecting other materials for the room such as fabrics, rugs, etc., get swatches of samples of these items and create a “vision board”. This is what professional designers do!

Conclusion

Have fun, don't be afraid to experiment (before actually implementing), and keep in mind that paint colors are just *part* of the equation for creating a harmonious environment. If the whole process is just too time consuming or overwhelming, you will find it to be money well spent to enlist the services of an experienced professional. We are trained to do this; we take the whole room into account: and we can achieve the desired results in a fraction of the time.

Check back with us for future design guides as we help navigate the waters of proper lighting, area rug selection and many more design dilemmas!

Be Well and Happy Decorating!

Allison Havill Todd, President and Director of Design



**Allison Havill Todd is
the President and
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AHT Interiors.**



The “A” team focuses on making the entire process from design through completion, a seamless, fun and

rewarding experience. From our spacious design studio and resource library conveniently located in Alpharetta, GA, we serve clients in the North Atlanta area and beyond and continue to be recognized for our passion for working with clients in lakefront homes.

Our belief is that rooms are for living! Good design improves comfort and functionality. Time and money invested in interior design should yield tangible rewards. These are the main reasons that our biggest advocates are our customers, many of whom have turned to AHT Interiors for job after job.

We know our success relies on our community, so we share our talents through the work of *Designing Dreams*. It’s a 501 (c) 3 foundation established by AHT Interiors to re-do a room for people experiencing a physical or emotional crisis or the organizations that serve them. Because beautiful interior spaces feed the soul and knowing that others care is what lifts us all up.

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