

By [Peter Stern](#)

In an effort to do my part and help increase the world's number of well-designed presentations, I'm starting a series called "Design Tips For Non-Designers." These tips aren't intended to make designers out of non-designers. They are simply to help folks who don't have design training become better at visual communications. This is for all the Project Managers, Researchers, and Marketing folks out there who want to improve their deliverables. You know who you are.



[Eyedropper icon](#) by Timothy Dilich Evanston, Illinois, US 2013

Using color

One of the most common issues I see is color usage. I have a theory that many people are intimidated or overwhelmed by choosing colors, particularly strong colors. This leads to the proliferation of pale, pastel, and generally watered-down color palettes.

The solution is simpler than you may think

Choosing great colors doesn't require extensive training. It requires being observant, using a few simple tools, and knowing where to look. We're not talking about color theory, or the psychology of color here... we're just talking about making presentations that look great.

The whole process can be broken down to a few simple steps:

- Finding great color
- Tools for capturing color values
- Understanding how to use custom colors in your applications

A quick word about color formats: Colors are referenced in a variety of ways for different purposes. You have probably heard the terms CMYK, RGB, Pantone, and Hex colors. These are simply different ways of codifying or quantifying colors. Some are used in printing or silk-screening, others are used specifically for computer screens. They are all ways of describing colors, and for the most part they're interchangeable.

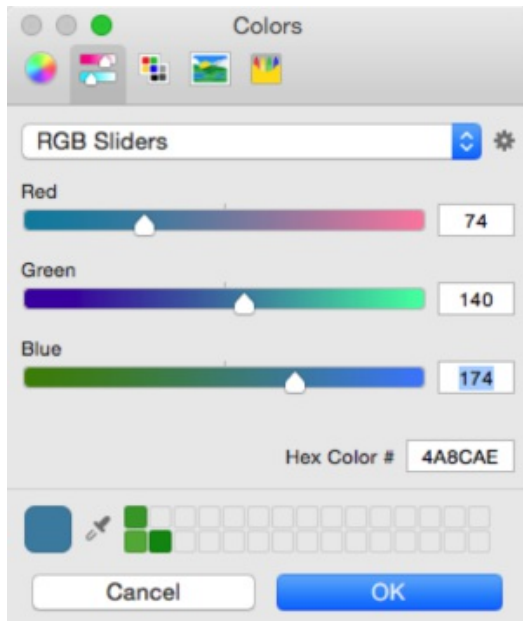
For example this color blue can be described in multiple ways:



- The Hex number, which is used in web design and many applications like Microsoft Office, is #4A8CAE
- The RGB (Red, Green, Blue) value is R74 G140 B174
- The CMYK (Cyan, Magenta, Yellow, Black) value is C72% M35% Y20% K0%

The important point is that they are all ways of describing the same color. It's not dissimilar to describing a color in different languages — Blue, Azul, Bleu, for example.

Most applications (Microsoft PowerPoint, Apple Keynote, etc.) use either RGB or Hex number. I personally think the Hex value is the easiest to use simply because it's easier to copy and paste 1 value.



Color picker from PowerPoint for iOS

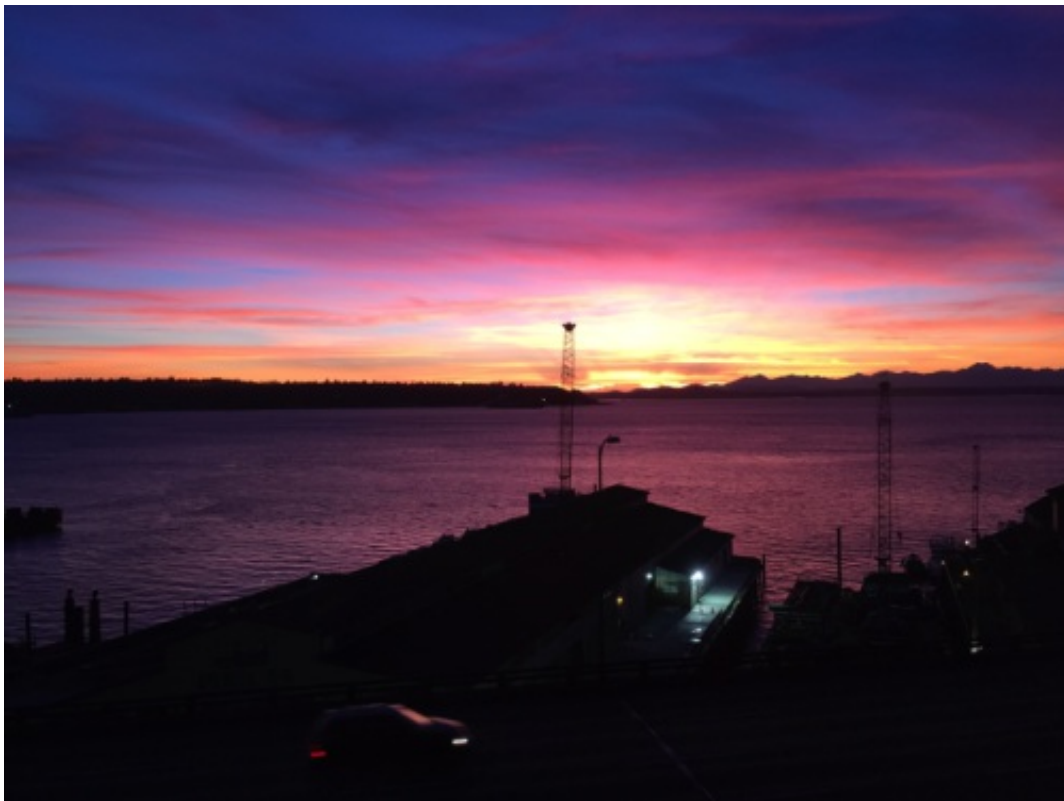
Finding great color

Great color combinations are all around you

I often take pictures with my phone specifically to capture interesting colors or color combinations. Here is a really obvious example: My wife dragged me reluctantly into her favorite yarn store and, to my surprise, eventually had to drag me out. This is one of several dozen pictures I took specifically to use in my design work.



Skeins of yarn



The view from the Blink office

There are many apps and websites that will analyze photos and distill them into a palette. Or... just use one of the color picker tools listed below to pick out the colors you want.

There are endless resources online for great palettes

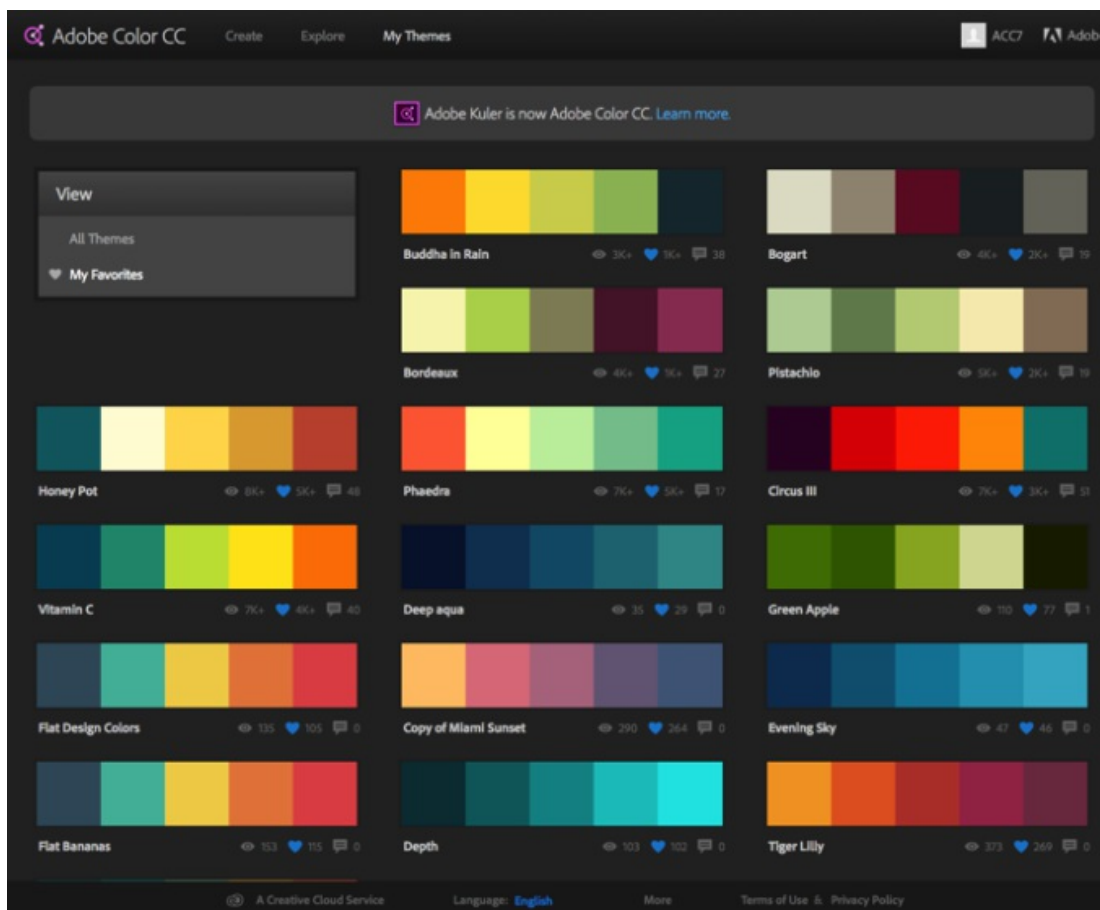
Pinterest is a great place to start:

- <https://www.pinterest.com/search/pins/?q=Color%20Palettes>
- <https://www.pinterest.com/starweaverm/color-palettes/>

There are also quite a few sites dedicated to creating and sharing palettes

- <https://color.adobe.com/explore/most-popular/?time=all>
- <https://www.design-seeds.com/by-color/>
- <http://colrd.com/palette/>
- <https://www.colourlovers.com/palettes/most-loved/all-time/meta>
- <https://www.color-hex.com/color-palettes/popular.php>

I personally use color.adobe.com because it works seamlessly with all the Adobe products that I use and there is a big community of talented folks creating and sharing palettes. Here is an example from my “favorite” palettes. Notice there aren’t a lot of soft or subtle colors. Perhaps if I designed wedding dresses... but in my world of visual communications and user interface design, bolder is often better. People respond to it, and [bold colors create greater contrast](#) for text overlays, making it easier to read.



What to do when working with brand colors

I think it goes without saying, but I’ll mention it anyway: If you are working within a brand system (and you likely are) someone has already created a color palette. It’s often broken into primary and secondary colors and is usually part of a larger set of brand guidelines. Find the page that defines the colors, print it out, and keep it handy.

Tools for capturing color values

The Number One indispensable tool you'll need is a color picker app or utility

It is simply a matter of having the ability to click on any pixel on your screen and capture the exact color value. Believe it or not, there are still professional web developers who “eyeball” colors rather than use a tool.

This doesn't work. Trust me on this — get a tool.

There are a lot of options, from utilities that are already installed with your operating system, to browser plugins, to iPhone and Android Apps. Microsoft Office apps have a color picker/eyedropper tool built in but it can be cumbersome to use.

Here are a few options, don't be shy to try a few. They're free or cheap.

Browser Based

This is a cool tool but limited to things in your web browser, which is fine most of the time.

- <https://www.colorzilla.com/chrome/>

Mac

- <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/contrast-color-accessibility/id1254981365?mt=12>

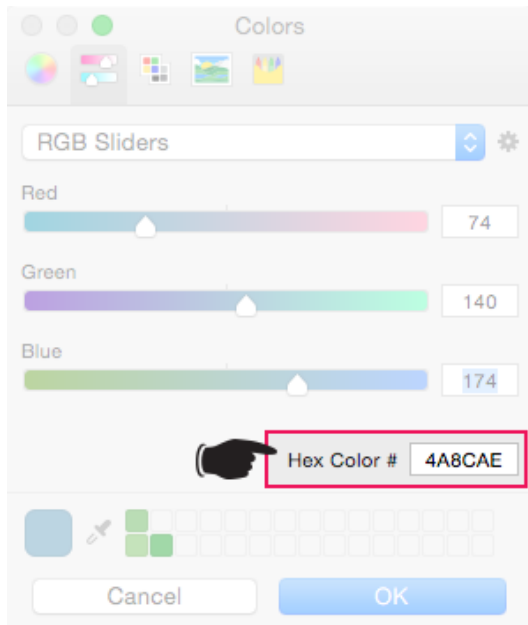
Windows

- <http://instant-eyedropper.com/>
- http://download.cnet.com/Quick-HTML-Color-Picker/3000-2192_4-10400979.html
- http://download.cnet.com/Just-Color-Picker/3000-2191_4-10428271.html
- <http://colorcop.net/>

Understanding how to use colors in your applications

Most applications have color pickers that work pretty similarly. They basically allow you to

- Pick from a tired, old, predefined palette that everyone else is using
- Pick colors from a spectrum or wheel of some sort
- Change or adjust colors by manipulating knobs or levers
- And, most importantly, they allow you to plug in a specific numerical value



Just use your color selector (eyedropper) tool to choose the color you want, copy the Hex number, paste it into your application color chooser. Boom!... done.

Monochromatic palettes

Here's a useful technique I use when I want to create a range of values for a particular hue. This is useful when you need something like this:

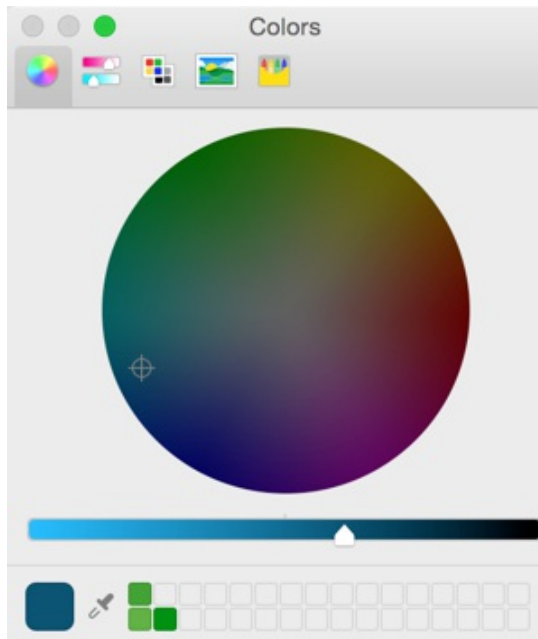


or even when you just want a secondary color like this:

peter@blinkux.com

First – color all the objects or text the same color

Next – select one of the objects, click “change color,” and find the view in the color editor that looks something like this:



Then adjust the slider up or down to achieve a darker or lighter value without changing the hue. It's a quick and simple way to get a consistent range of colors.

One final tip about saving and managing color palettes

There are now many ways to save your collection of palettes. There are ways to save them within your applications, there are tools and websites dedicated to color palette management. All great, but... they can be difficult to set up and nearly impossible to share.

One simple method is to create a PowerPoint deck with your color swatch collection. I have a deck called "PowerPoint Goodies" where I collect color swatches, gradient swatches, and my favorite graphic elements (icons, arrows, etc.). When I start a new presentation I also open my goodies file and simply copy and paste the pieces and colors that I need. Usually I'll use the format painter feature to copy the fill and stroke from my swatches. Side note: If you don't utilize the [format painter feature](#) you *really* should. It's the single best feature in Office for creating presentations quickly.

I'm not giving out my goodies file, it's an important part of my secret sauce, but... here is an example to get you moving in the right direction

That's it. I expect great looking presentations from here on out. Don't be afraid to be bold.

Peter has designed experiences for lots of great folks including Microsoft, Amazon, Intel, MTV, Jimmy Buffett, and Steven Spielberg. When he's not at work he likes welding, boat building, carpentry, and spending time with his wife and three girls... preferably on the water. He makes a mean margarita and his favorite color is #f7941d.