Color Glossary

Terms and Definitions

Introduction

Hi there! It's me, Greg. You know, the guy from the color course you're taking right now? Yep, that's the one.
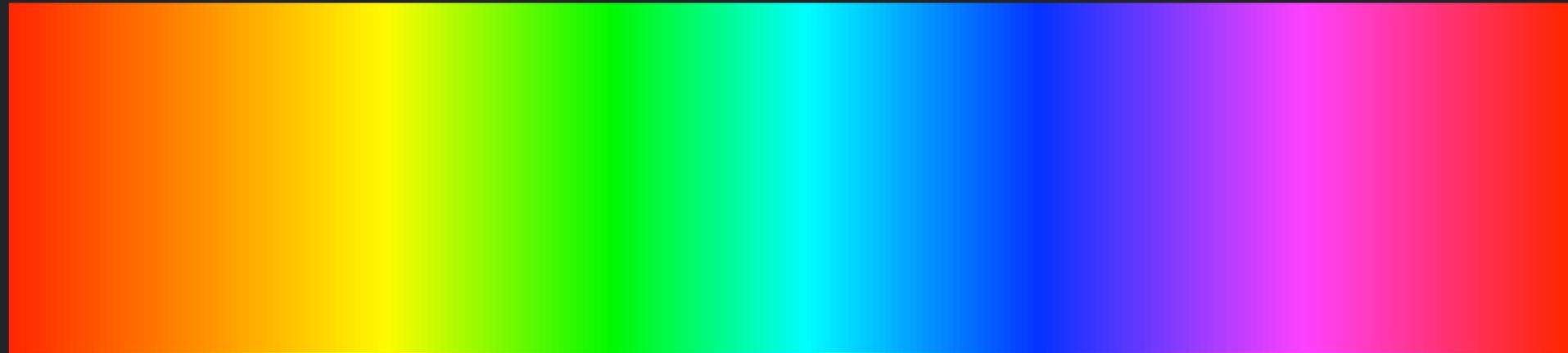
Anyway, I put together this Color Glossary of terms and concepts for you to read and reference. Some things might be obvious, some not so much. Either way, if you want to master color you've got to know how to speak the language.

Enjoy!

– Greg

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Hue

Hue is the main property of a color. Think of it like the the science term for a color, e.g. red, yellow, green, purple. If you've ever used the Hue & Saturation effect in Photoshop, and moved the Hue slider left or right, then you've changed all the hues in an image.

Saturation

Saturation is the intensity of a color. If a color is very saturated, it will look vibrant and pure. As saturation decreases the color loses that intensity, dulling in vibrance until it becomes gray.

Value

Also known as lightness or brightness, value is how illuminated a color appears. The higher the value, the brighter the color, all the way up to white. And vice versa for lower values. Changing the value doesn't affect a color's saturation or hue though.
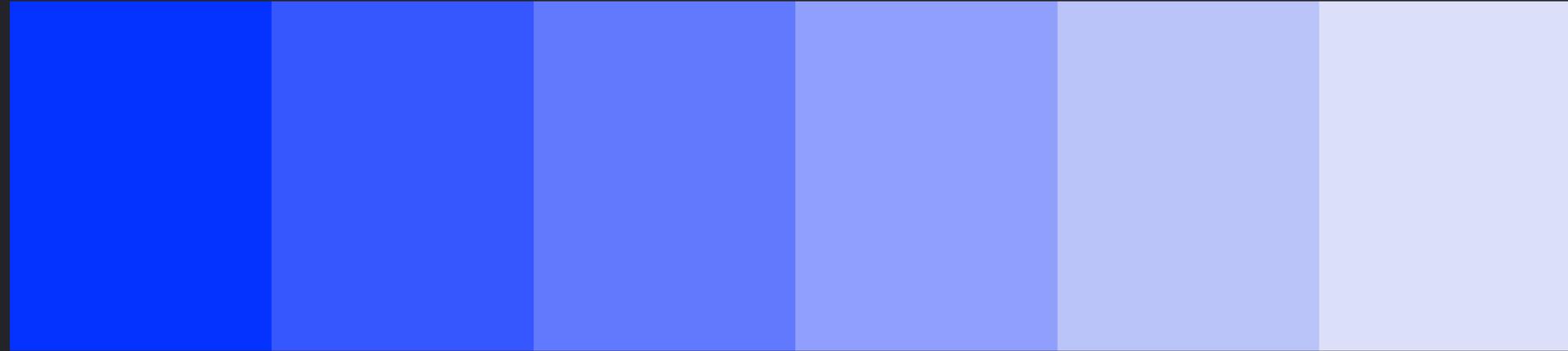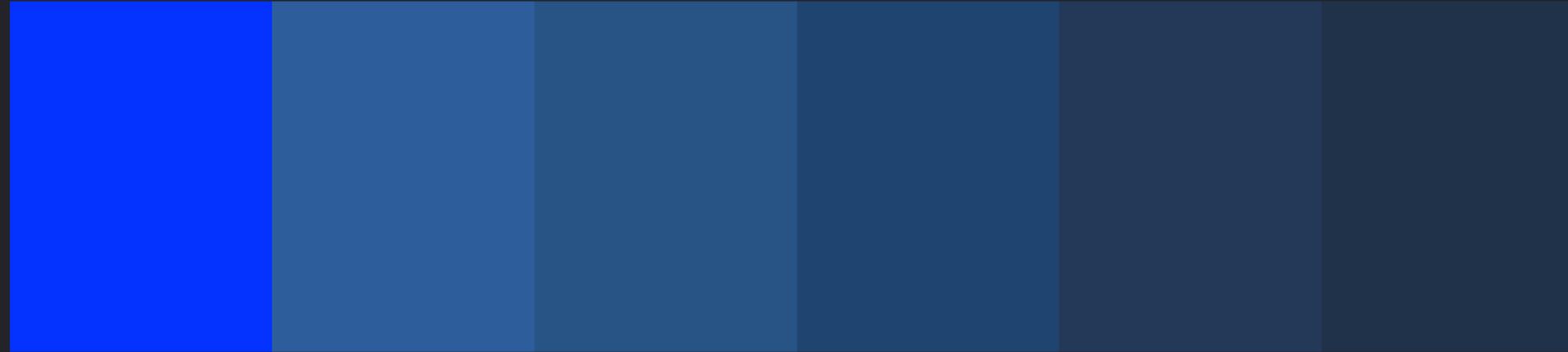
Tint

A tint is created when a color is mixed with white, making it brighter.

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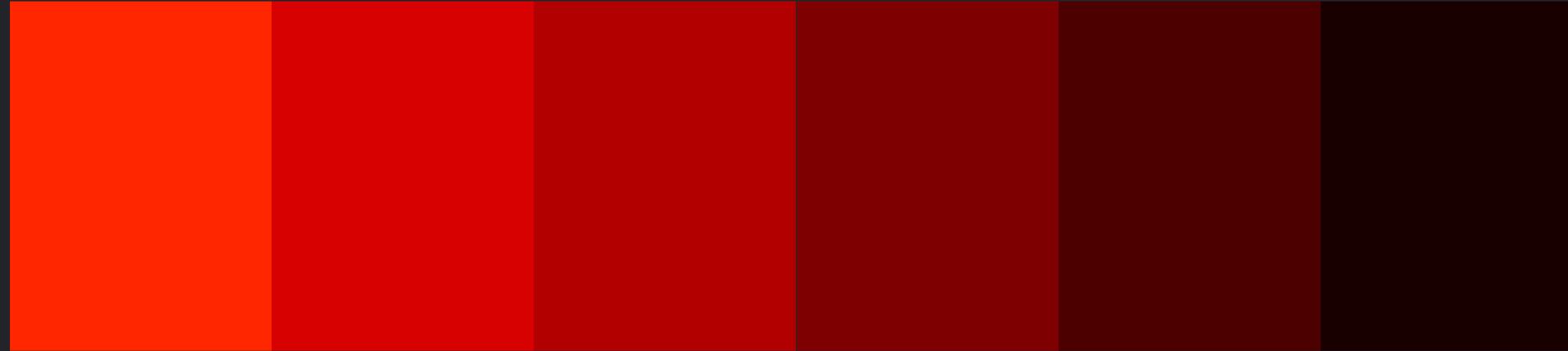
Shade

A shade is created when a color is mixed with black, making it darker.
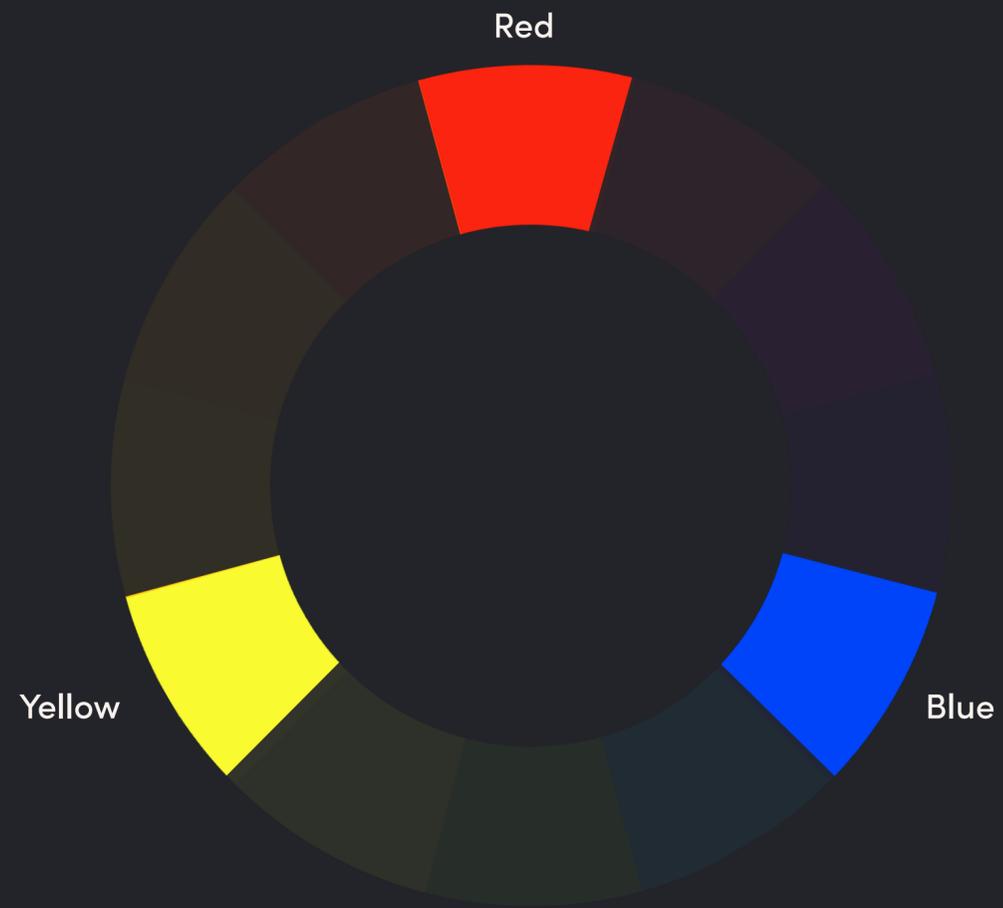
Tone

And a tone is produced when a color is mixed with gray making it darker and duller.
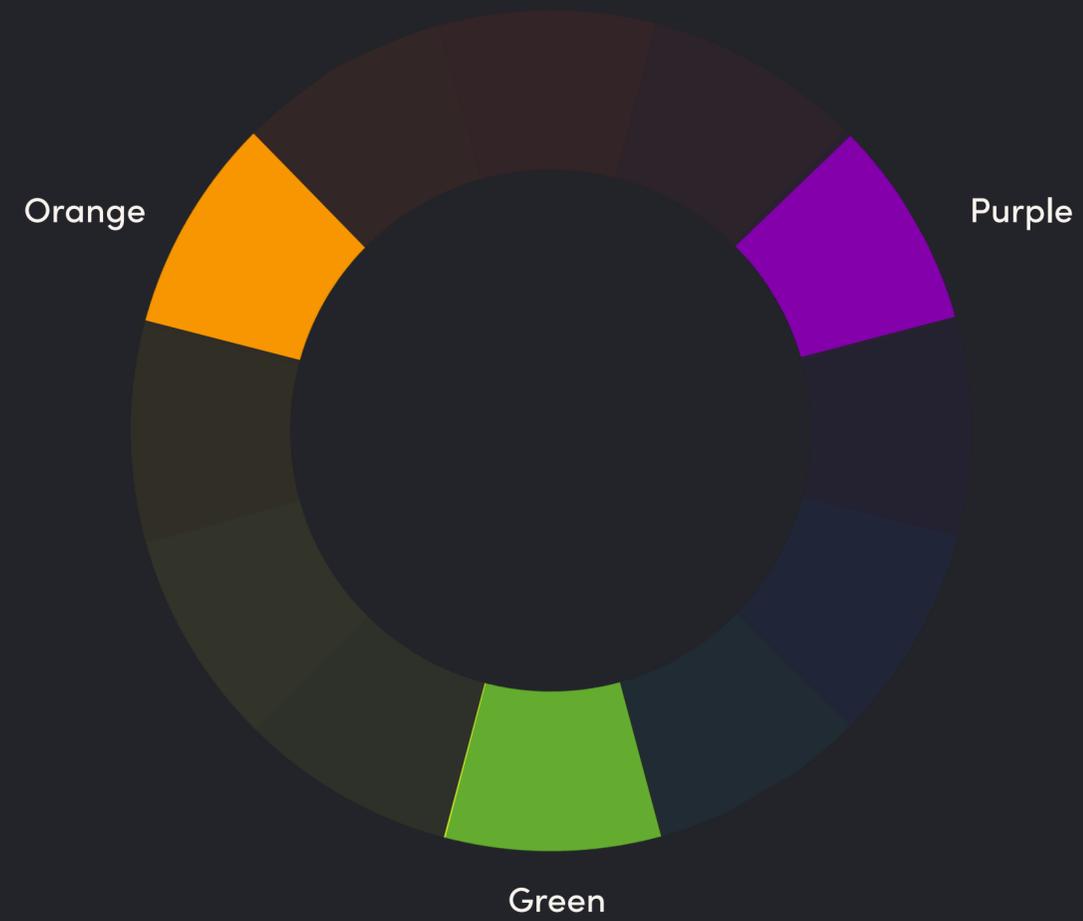
Color Wheel

The color wheel is a circular arrangement of all the color hues representing primary, secondary and tertiary colors.
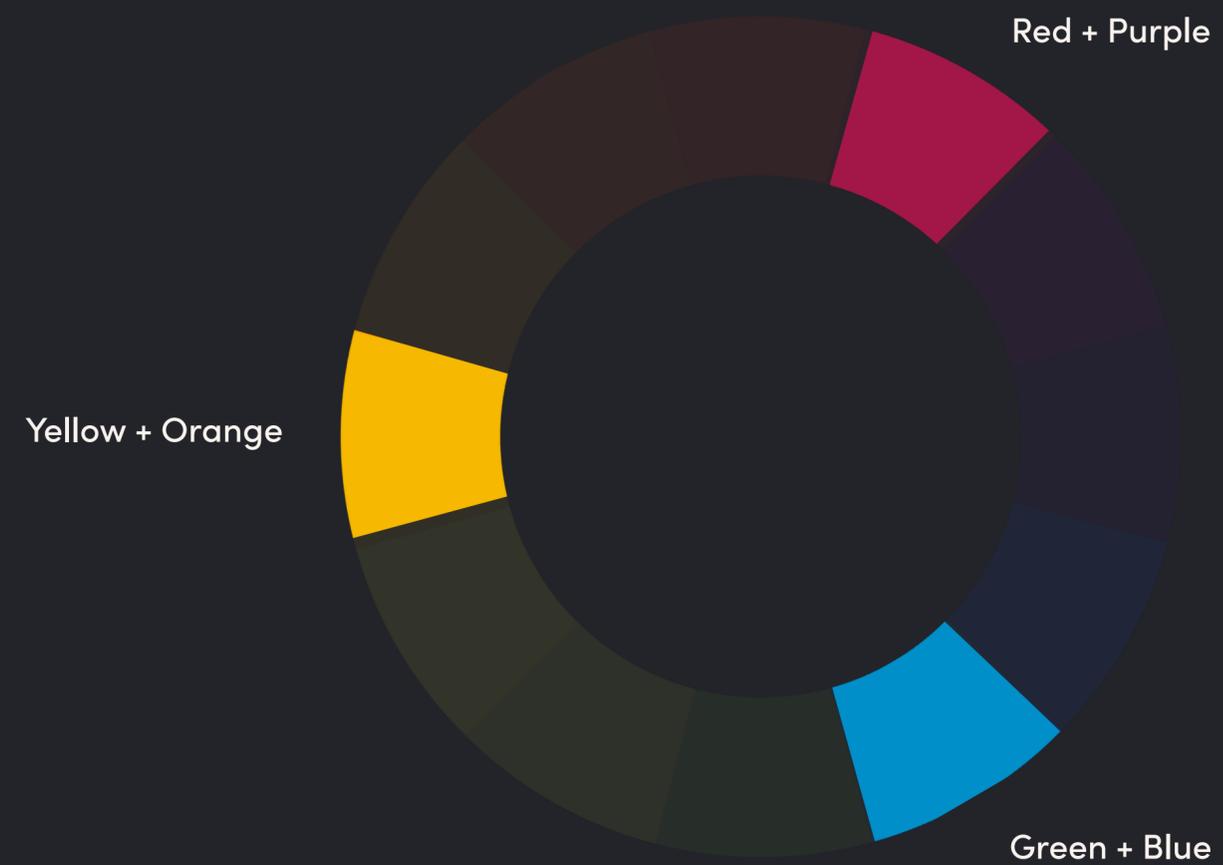
Primary Colors

Traditionally, red, yellow and blue are considered to be the primary colors. They can be mixed together to create secondary colors, but they themselves cannot be recreated.

Orange

Purple

Green

Secondary Colors

Orange, green and purple are considered secondary colors. They are created by mixing together the primary colors—red, yellow and blue—and are conveniently positioned directly in between the primaries.

Red + Purple

Yellow + Orange

Green + Blue

Tertiary Colors

Tertiary colors are created by mixing a primary and secondary color, or two secondary colors. Colors like marigold (yellow-orange), teal (blue-green) and magenta (red-purple) are examples of tertiary colors. And you'll notice that all tertiary colors are placed in between secondary ones.
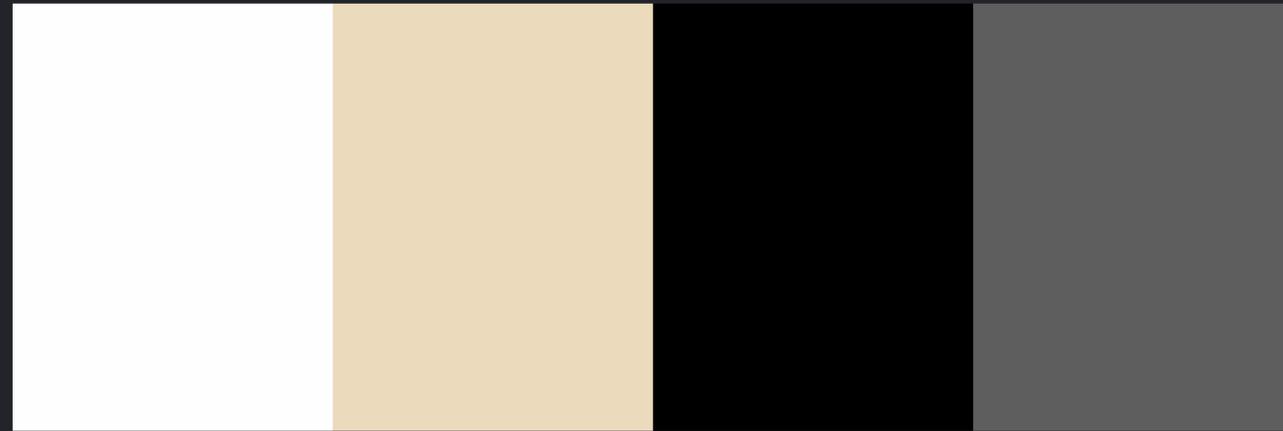
WARM

Warm Colors

If you draw a straight line through a color wheel, you can divide it into two color temperatures: warm and cool. The side with red, orange and yellow are the warm colors. Since we are programmed to see more warm colors in the spectrum, they tend to stand out more.
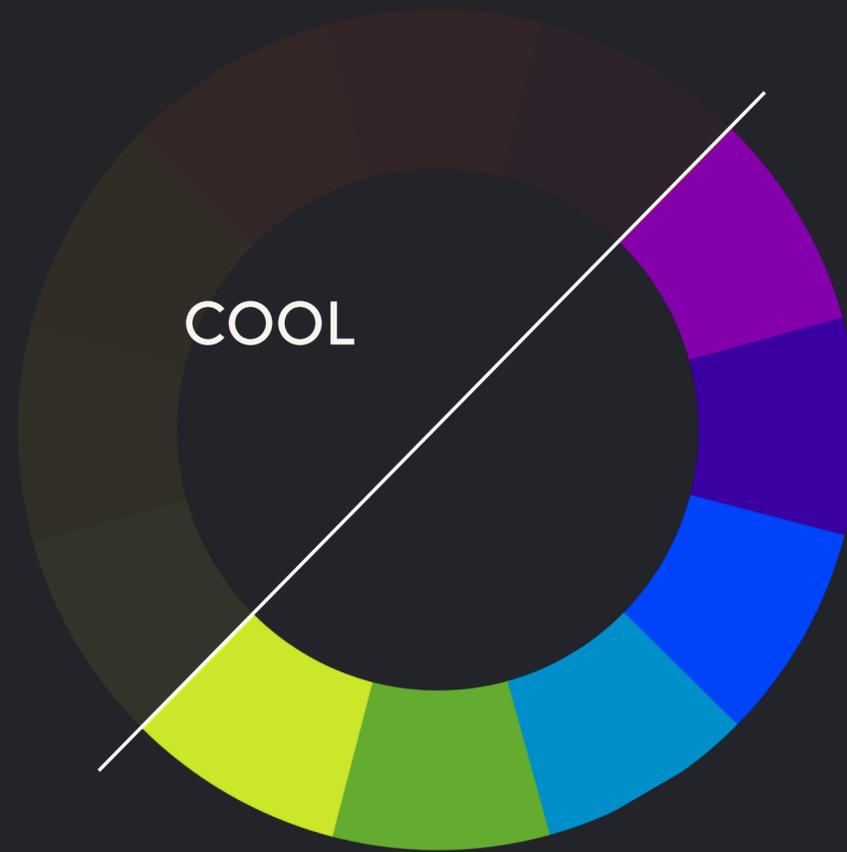
COOL

Cool Colors

The other side of the wheel is what's considered to be cooler in temperature. Most notably purples, blues and greens. Unlike warm colors, they tend to recede into an image.

White	Beige	Black	Grey

Neutral Colors

Colors that don't obviously fall into the warm or cool category are neutral; e.g. black, white and gray. Like denim, they pair well with most other colors. Earth tones, like beige and some browns are also considered to be neutral colors.

Neutral colors are great for balancing out a color palette and providing negative space in layouts.
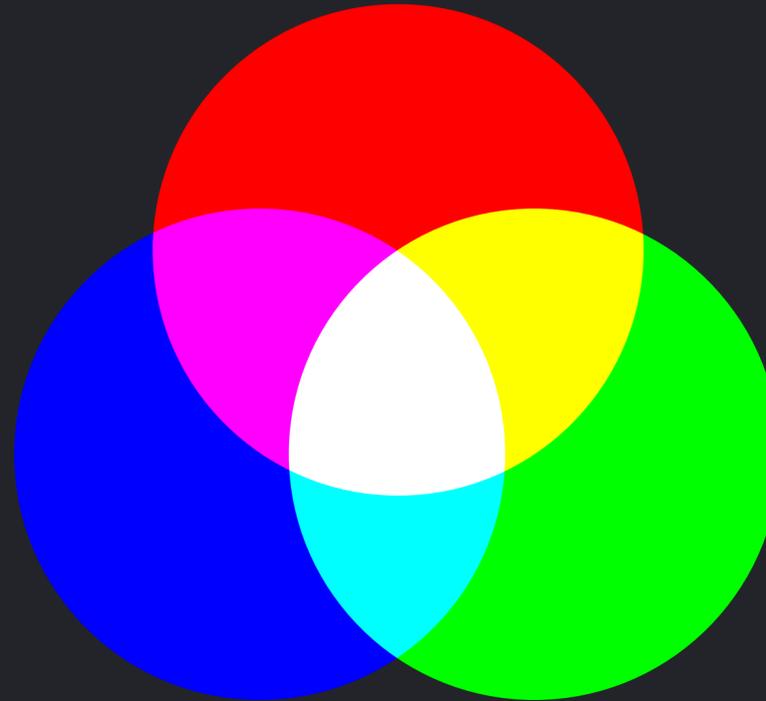
Additive Color

Additive Color is a technique using light to mix colors together. The more colors that are added to the mixture, the brighter it gets until ultimately it reaches white. Most of our screens use RGB and Additive Color to produce the array of colors we see.

This effect can be reproduced by using the Screen or Add blending modes in your favorite software.
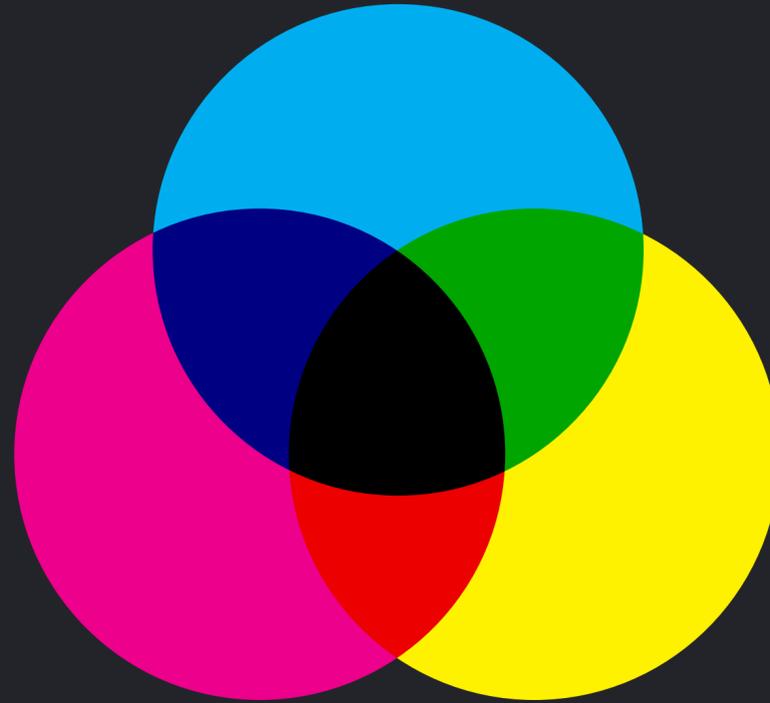
Subtractive Color

Subtractive Color is a color mixing technique found in paints, inks and printing (CMYK). Think of it like the opposite of Additive Color. When colors are mixed together—or printed over each other—the visible wavelengths are subtracted and darken.

Mix enough colors together and all visible color will be lost, leaving you with black. This mixing effect can be mimicked digitally by using the Multiply blending mode in your software of choice.

RGB   CMYK   Grayscale   Bitmap

Color Modes

Color modes are mathematical representations of color. RGB and CMYK are the most common models you will run into, but there are other value based ones you might see from time to time.

Grayscale is exactly what you think it is—an image without any color. And bitmap is similar to grayscale, except it uses a limited number of values and does not have anti-aliasing, which makes it look jagged edged and sharp.
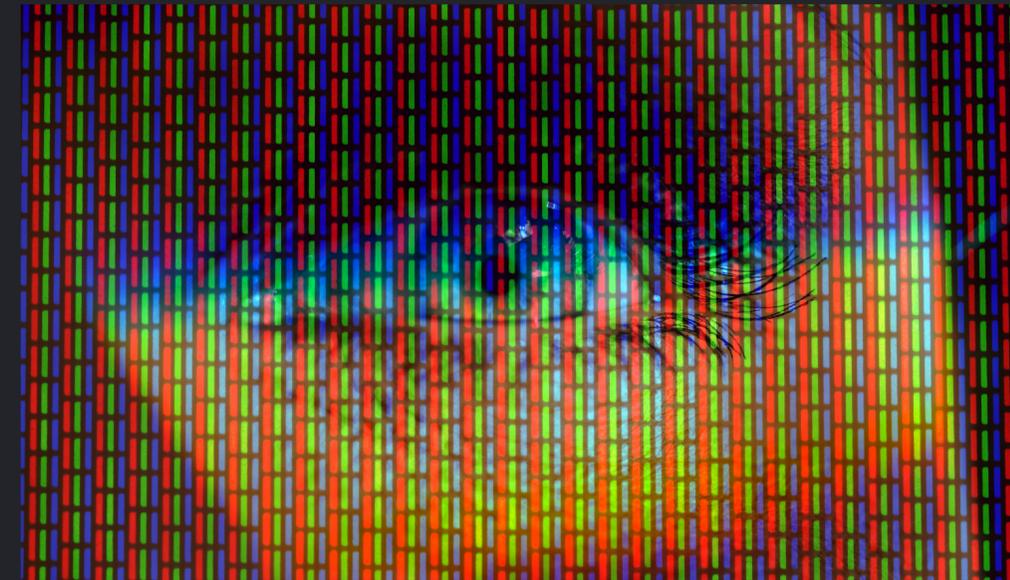
RGB

RGB is an Additive Color model that is used in most of the screens we stare at every day. It's short for Red, Green and Blue. RGB mixes these three colors emitted from light to create a wide range of color range that is difficult to reproduce in print.

RGB Pro Photo

Adobe RGB

sRGB
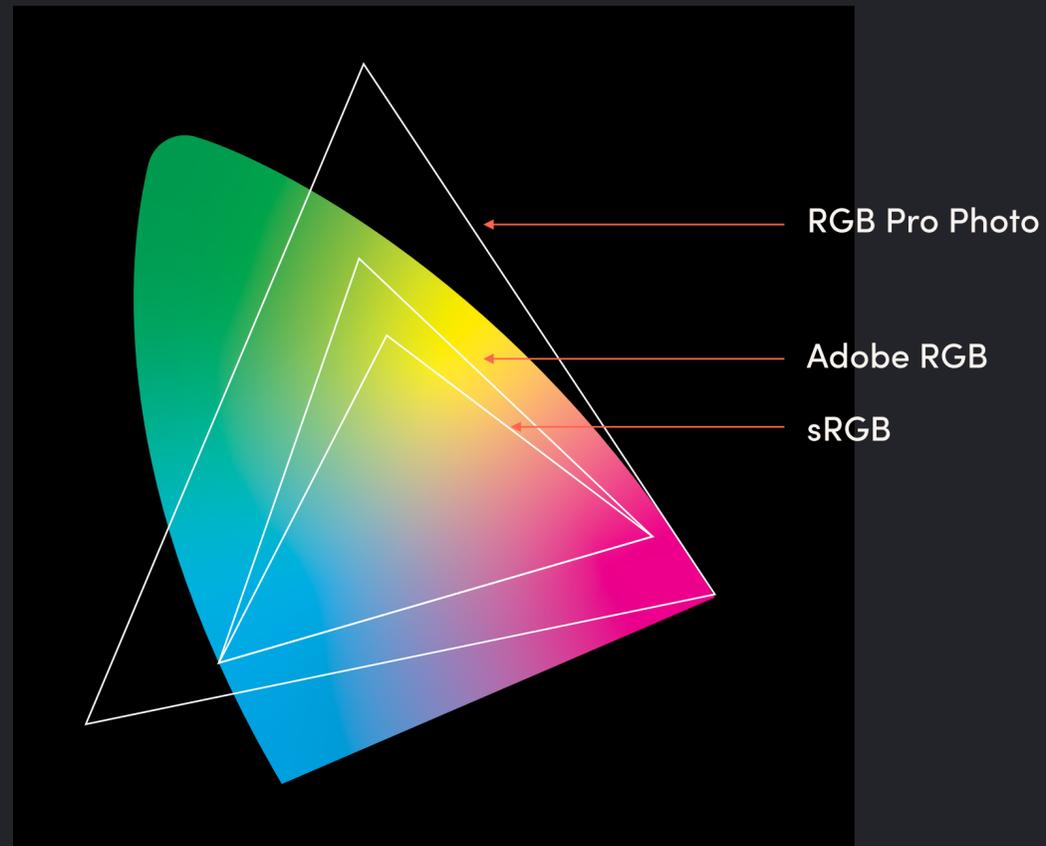
Color Profile

Also referred to as ICC profile and color space, a color profile is basically a device-agnostic tool that tells a screen how to interpret and display color. Color management is essential in creating consistent looking color across different devices and screens.
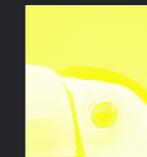
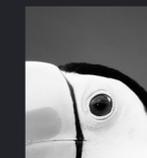The most ubiquitous color profile is sRGB.
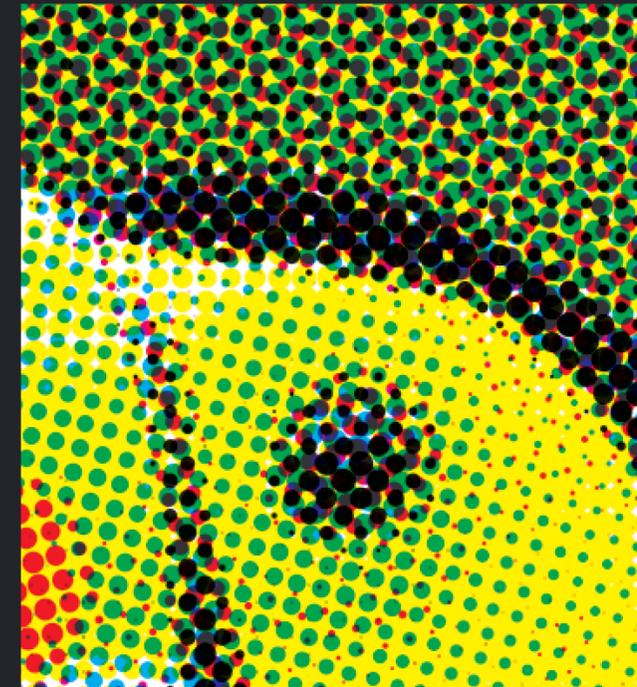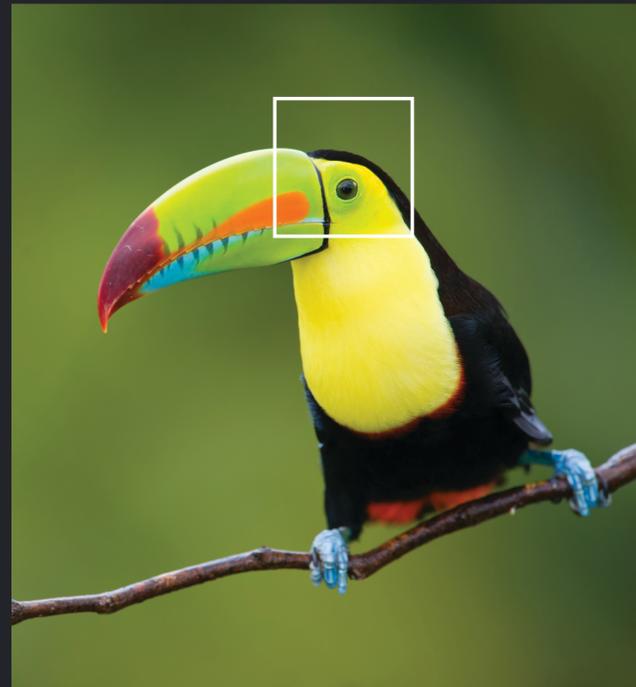
CMYK

CMYK is a Subtractive Color model used in four color process printing. It's short for Cyan, Magenta, yYellow and blacK which make up the four ink plates used to print.

Like you saw earlier, it's tough to reproduce the vibrant colors from an RGB source, so use a CMYK color mode with artwork you intended to print.

PMS Colors

Short for, Pantone Matching System, PMS is a standardized color space used to reproduce color across a variety of print mediums. It's similar to CMYK in that by using a few base pigments, you can create thousands of other colors.

You can learn more about how PMS colors work and why they're important by visiting pantone.com.
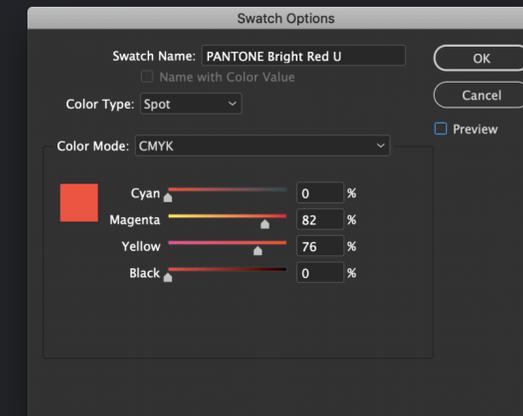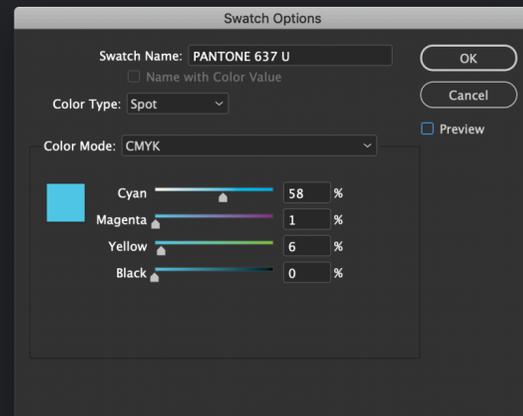
Spot Color

A spot color is a solid color created from ink (or a mixture of inks) that is used in offset printing. It's kind of like the opposite of CMYK in that it is a single, pure color ink versus several colors (CMYK) printed over each other to create a new one.
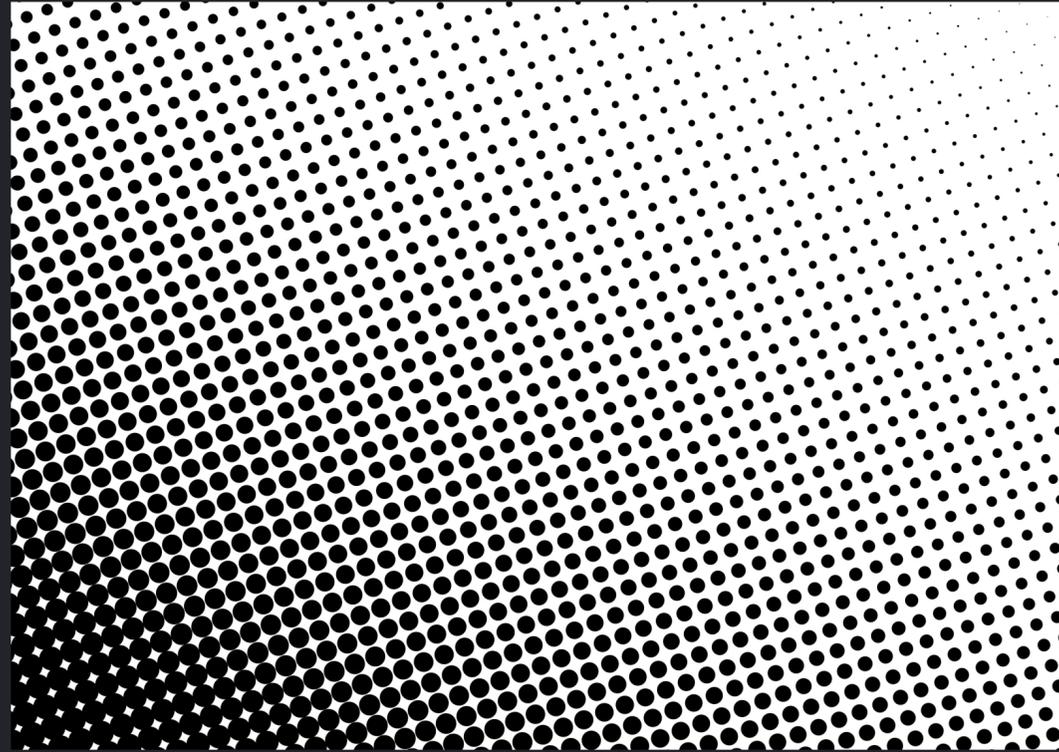
Halftone

You might recognize halftone from old comic books and Roy Roy Lichtenstein's pop art. Halftone is a printing technique using small dots that vary in both size and spacing to create a gradient effect. The approach is most commonly used in CMYK printing.