Tip Sheet

Color Matters

Color choice and combination are important factors to keep in mind when developing an educational material. Thoughtfully selected color schemes engage your audience and make them more receptive to the message you are conveying.[1] Color selection may vary based on target demographics, regions, and cultures. Remember, different colors may have different meanings to your audience.

Here are some color selection DOs and DONTs for printed materials.

DOs

- Use relevant images and diagrams as your primary sources of color.

- Research any demographic or cultural preferences and use culturally appropriate colors.

- Consider the goals of your material. For informative materials, start with neutral colors and add simple colors to accentuate or highlight special information.[2]

- Make a strong distinction between the background and the text through contrast. Contrast increases readability, especially for audience members with limited color perception.[3] Black text on a white background is best.

- Consider how you will produce the material. If it will be photocopied, then the colors used should be compatible with grayscale printing.

DON'Ts

- Don't use colored text on a colored background because it limits readability.[4]

- Don't be afraid to use color. Without color, the material might appear boring and lose audience interest.

- Don't use too many colors in a single document, as it appears chaotic and distracting. Stick to no more than three main colors consistently throughout a document. Try starting with a dominant color and develop a palette from there, shifting to warm or cool colors for variation.[2]

color

gray scale

team**lab**

Online Materials

The use of color is especially important online in order to capture the reader's interest. Limit your color scheme to 2 or 3 colors, and use shades of those colors to complement your design. Generally, you should use colors sparingly to guide the reader's eyes.

If you are distributing the material via a website, then you will need to design the material with this in mind.[4] Consider producing two versions of the material--one in color and one in black and white for printing.

Resources

The following online resources can help you choose colors for your materials.
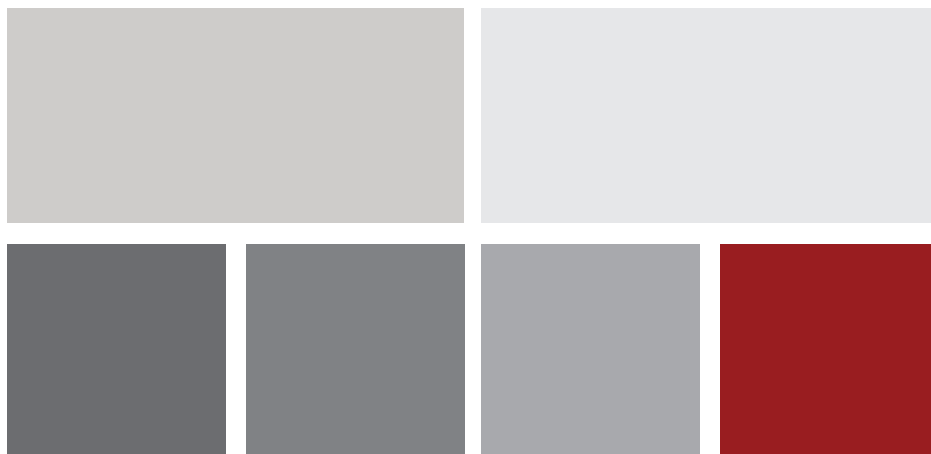
Color Scheme Designer (colorschemedesigner.com)
A user-friendly online tool that generates color schemes.

Color Blender (www.colorblender.com)
This site lets you choose a starting color and then it suggests a 6 color scheme based on your selection.

Contact Us

Whether you have general questions about layout and design, or more specific concerns about making your materials attractive and readable, TEAM Lab is here to help. Visit teamlab.usc.edu or email us at teamlab@usc.edu.

References
1. http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/design/colors-web-design-right-combination
2. http://chrome47.com/color
3. http://veerle-v2.duoh.com/blog/comments/choosing_color_combinations
4. http://www.cms.gov/Outreach-and-Education/Outreach/WrittenMaterialsToolkit/Downloads/ToolkitPart05Chapter05.pdf