

# Highlight Color

*"My purpose is,  
indeed, a horse of  
that color."*

William Shakespeare

Color is a valuable commodity, providing it has a function in a document.

Remember the first time people had access to many different fonts on their PC's? The result was often too many typefaces on a single page, making such documents less reader friendly.

The same situation could develop today with color. However, used properly, color helps produce documents that make people take notice and respond more quickly and more effectively.

Using highlight color means adding just one color – and all its tints and shades – to a black-and-white document. It is a powerful

tool for helping readers navigate through a document and leading them to important information.

You can produce a highlight color document either by using a printer designed for the purpose or simply by restricting the colors you use on a full-color printer. Use as few colors as you need – not as many as you have.

Always plan ahead. Think what color can do for your document or slide before you use it, and be consistent throughout. Don't treat it as an afterthought. Build it into the composition in conjunction with the words, space, layout and typography.



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## What can a second color do for me?

A second, or highlight, color on a page works because it is different. So use the difference to make information more effective.

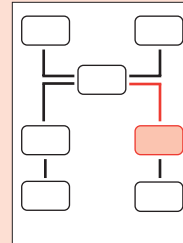
- Highlight color can **emphasize a word**, a phrase or a line.

- Color can emphasize the most significant **parts of a diagram**.

This is a world of color where all media are saturated with hues of every shade. And what is more important, we can print in color on our desk top.

Color is attractive, exciting, fun. And because we prefer some colors over others, it can subtly focus us on selected parts of a text or table.

It is emotional and the responses vary from country to country. But remember that **color is no substitute for a good idea!**



- It can emphasize an **action**.

- It can highlight specific **numbers** in a table, a column of numbers or a total.

When did you last watch a black & white television or read a magazine with no color pictures in it?

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Consider a few observations on how to get the most out of color before we open our paint box - or is it Pandora's box, full of demons?

For many aspects of document design, black really is the Queen of color - as Renoir discovered.

*Smokers and non-smokers by sex and age*

Group	smoke	non-smoke
male	37.4%	62.6%
18-32	38.4%	61.6%
33-47	34.7%	65.3%
48-62	28.9%	71.1%
63+	30.4%	69.6%
female	18.5%	72.5%
18-32	34.6%	65.4%
33-47	21.3%	78.7%
48-62	14.8%	85.2%
63+	16.0%	84.0%

- It can **link** related information in text or tables.

- Color can **differentiate** types of information on a page and direct people to them.

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- It can also **identify** sections of a report or chapters in a book.

- And it can make a report **more inviting** and easy to read.



A little color goes a long way.

## Basic guidelines

- **Add color to make a document more usable.** Highlight only the material that's of importance to the readers, and use color to lead them to key information.
- **Black must be the dominant color** (usually for type) for the highlighting to work.
- For your highlight color, **choose a saturated color** that contrasts well against both white and black. Bright red is particularly good.
- **Apply color consistently and logically.** When you do this, it builds confidence and establishes a framework for the document. Your readers can expect similar types of information to be presented in similar ways.

Use color to link elements. For example, labels on graphs and charts should be in the same color as the lines they describe.

- **Control your color.** If, for example, you have a large colored area with a background shade, then the color should be pale. The smaller the area, the brighter it can be, but be sure not to overwhelm the text.



## The color of text

Most documents that contain text and numbers can benefit from highlight color. Just remember a few things:

- A single highlight color can be quite **versatile**. It can be used for text and graphics in the same document, or even different kinds of textual information (as long as the fonts, type sizes and/or styles clearly differ).
- Use **solid color** for text, especially for small text. Small letters can be harder to decipher when printed with the dots of a tint.
- Use **sans serif typefaces** for small colored text, especially when using a four-color printer.
- To add even more emphasis to highlighted text, put **more space** around it.
- All colors are lighter than black. So when we use colored text on a white background, we may need to **make the words bolder** to compensate for their lighter value. Otherwise they could be “low-lighted” despite their vividness.
- The relative lightness of color also means that **colored text isn’t as easy to read as black text** – so don’t be tempted to write great chunks of text in color. The reader will scan over them in search of the next piece of familiar and comfortable black text. In this case, black becomes the highlight color.

## Made in the shade

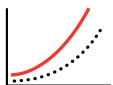
Using various tints (shades) of the highlight color can be very effective. Remember, black, too, can be treated this way – we can add white to it to produce a range of grays and patterns.

- **Distinguish sections of a page** with tinted areas, and distinguish bars in a graph with shades or patterns. Tints behind rows, or groups of rows, in a complex document such as a stock status report can help the reader scan across the page.
- Use **solid color for important objects** and lighter tints of the color or black for less important items.



- But **don’t rely on color alone** to make a distinction. Wherever possible, combine color with symbols, shapes or type styles that reinforce your message. That way your meaning will be preserved if the document is copied in black and white.

4,283  
-2,390  
9,844



**Heading**  
This is the  
body copy

## Two-color...

**Two-color** documents can make aspects of text and numbers more effective. In these cases more than two colors may appear busy and therefore reduce rather than enhance the effect.

- **Memos & letters** – Highlight key numbers, information and actions.
- **Reports** – Highlight important messages and conclusions, link related information, guide the reader through sections and make the whole document more approachable.
- **Invoices & statements** – Highlight amounts to pay and balances as well as reference data and actions.
- **Tables & diagrams** – Reveal trends and emphasize significant data.

## ... or full-color?

**Full-color** printing – also called **four-color** – is more applicable to complex graphs, illustrations and applications such as advertising and presentation materials.

- **Graphics & technical diagrams** – Identify parts in a machine, show routes on a map and unravel trends in complex data.
- **Illustrations** – Use colors to help reveal 3-D structures and add value to an image.
- **Presentation material** – Be aware that four-color may improve the image and explain complex graphics, but two-color is probably best for text.

## Pick your paper

Remember that printing on white paper is not the only option open to you. With **colored paper**, some printing contrasts work well, such as blue on yellow. Others aren't so effective. If in doubt, ask yourself: Is it legible? Is it comfortable to look at? If you're still in doubt, ask a colleague.

## "In the red"

Although red is a good highlight color, be aware of its connotations and cultural values. We all know that it can mean danger – and in financial applications, it literally means you're in the red! So be careful of highlighting a current balance with red when you don't know if it's going to have a positive or negative effect.

## What is a highlight color printer?

Highlight color printers use black toner and a second toner of a specific color to produce two-color documents. In contrast, when you use a full-color (four-color) printer to print a two-color document, the printer may need to combine tiny dots of two, three or all four of its colored toners – cyan, magenta, yellow and black – to make up the highlight color you've chosen.

Highlight color printers reproduce two-color documents much more quickly than today's full-color printers (they lay down only two colors instead of four). However, the choices for the second color will be limited to the printer's available palette.

## QuickCheck

- ☐ Is highlight color used consistently and logically?
- ☐ Is black the dominant color?
- ☐ Is colored text legible, and does it stand out from black text?
- ☐ Are tints of color and tints of black used to their best advantage?
- ☐ Will there be a problem photocopying it on a black-and-white copier?
- ☐ Does the final document or slide look good?

## Further reading

*Color for Impact* by Jan White, available only from the author: (203) 227-2774

*Color for the Electronic Age* by Jan White

"Designer's Guide to Using Color"  
*Step-by-Step Graphics*, Vol. 7, No. 2

Other related articles in the *Documents at Work* series cover full color, design, and graphics and tables.

## Further information

For further information or ideas for future topics, please contact:  
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*Documents at Work* are written and designed by a team from Xerox with Cavendish Consultants in Cavendish UK and Inside Out Design in New York. Illustrations are by Susan Smith. The articles are created with QuarkXPress page layout software and a Xerox 8808 printer.

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