

Colour Theory for Artists

The Colour Wheel · Harmony · Mixing · Applying Colour

BravArt Studio · hello@bravartstudio.com · bravartstudio.com

Introduction

Colour is one of the most powerful tools in an artist's vocabulary - and one of the most misunderstood. This guide covers the foundational principles of colour theory that apply across all media: watercolour, acrylic, oil, pastel, and digital work.

1. The Colour Wheel

Primary Colours

The three primary colours are Red, Blue, and Yellow. They cannot be mixed from other colours - they are the source colours from which all others are created.

Secondary Colours

Secondary colours are made by mixing two primaries:

- Red + Yellow = Orange
- Blue + Yellow = Green
- Red + Blue = Violet/Purple

Tertiary Colours

Tertiary colours are made by mixing a primary with an adjacent secondary: Red-Orange, Yellow-Orange, Yellow-Green, Blue-Green, Blue-Violet, Red-Violet.

2. Colour Properties

Hue

Hue is the pure colour itself - what we mean when we say "red" or "blue". It is the colour at its most saturated, without any white, black, or grey added.

Value (Tone)

Value is how light or dark a colour is. Adding white creates a tint. Adding black creates a shade. Adding grey creates a tone. Controlling value gives your work depth and three-dimensionality.

Saturation (Chroma)

Saturation is how intense or pure a colour is. A highly saturated colour is vivid. A desaturated colour is closer to grey. Mixing a colour with its complementary (opposite on the wheel) desaturates both.

■ *Common student mistake: making shadows by adding black. This deadens the colour. Instead, add the complementary colour, or a darker adjacent hue, to create rich, luminous shadows.*

3. Colour Harmony Schemes

Complementary

Colours directly opposite each other on the wheel (e.g. Red/Green, Blue/Orange). Creates strong contrast and visual vibration. Used carefully, complementary colour makes both colours appear more vivid.

Analogous

Three or more colours that sit next to each other on the wheel (e.g. Red, Red-Orange, Orange). Creates harmony and cohesion. Naturally pleasing and easy to control.

Triadic

Three colours equally spaced around the wheel (e.g. Red, Yellow, Blue). Vibrant and balanced. Works best when one colour dominates and the others are used as accents.

Split Complementary

A base colour plus the two colours adjacent to its complement. Less tension than true complementary, but retains visual contrast.

Monochromatic

Variations in value and saturation of a single hue. Elegant and sophisticated. Forces attention to form, light, and texture rather than colour.

4. Warm and Cool Colours

Warm colours (reds, oranges, yellows) appear to advance toward the viewer. Cool colours (blues, greens, violets) appear to recede. This property is essential in creating depth.

■ *In landscapes: warm colours (yellows, oranges) in the foreground, cool colours (blues, muted greens) in the background, creates atmospheric perspective.*

5. Mixing Colours Practically

- Always mix from light to dark - it is easier to darken than to lighten
 - Clean your brush/water between mixes to keep colours pure
 - Test mixes on a scrap piece before applying to your work
 - Mix more than you need - remixing the exact same colour later is difficult
 - Keep a mixing record: note the ratios of any successful colour mixes
-

6. Applying This to IGCSE 0400 (AO1 & AO2)

In the Cambridge IGCSE 0400 specification, colour awareness supports both AO1 (artist analysis) and AO2 (experimentation). When analysing an artist's work, discuss their specific colour choices, harmony scheme, and how colour affects mood. In your own experiments, demonstrate that you understand how to use colour intentionally.

■ *Examiners respond strongly to colour studies that show clear intent - where a student can explain WHY they made specific colour choices, not just that they liked how it looked.*
