

Use this system to choose colors that work

Color can make or break your layout

By Doug Downey

We deal with color every day—whether we're sign makers or not. From the color of the vehicle we choose to the color of our clothes to the color we use on the walls in our kitchen.

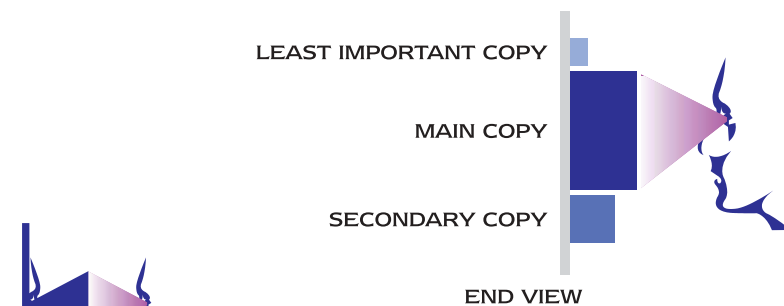
Color is important. It is a part of everything we see. Yet, the effective use of color is a chal-

lenge to teach and learn.

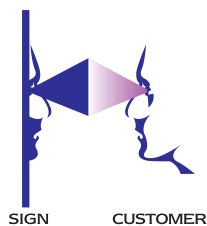
Being the father of five children, teaching and learning are an integral part of my life. Looking into the eyes of Christena, our newborn, I wonder what and how she sees. Her eyes of blue look out at the world, seeing light and color. Jenna and Lisa, her older sisters, consult with me about the color combinations of clothes they are choosing. At four, Evan is learning the names of colors. Derek, our eldest son, is color blind, so seeing contrasts impacts him the most.

This past year, I did some teaching for the Sign Graphics program at George Brown College in Toronto. In fourteen weeks, students were expected to design the logo for an imaginary company, make its sign, letter the vehicle, paint, produce and apply vinyl. With obvious time restrictions, I was forced to condense and simplify the understanding and use of color.

To succeed, signs need the appropriate impact to get their message across in the



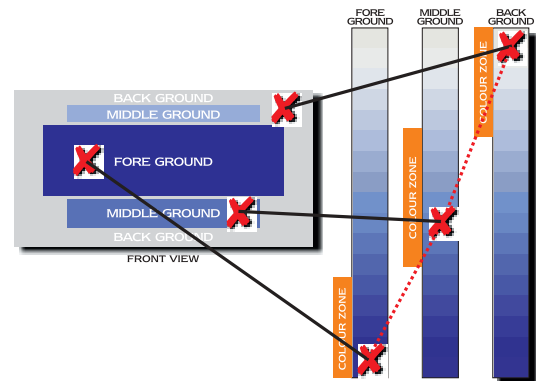
Imagine size, color and weight (boldness) giving thickness to the copy. When you looked at the sign from the side, it would look like this. The main copy must clearly dominate the layout—jumping or pushing out toward readers, so they know where you want them to start reading.



This concept comes from the late Mike Stevens, author of *Mastering Layout*. I recall him saying that we had to become the sign looking at the reader. This turns the idea of “thinking like the reader” inside out, and it was helpful to me in learning about layout and color.



In class, I explained this concept of foreground, middle-ground and background to the students. We were focusing on color, so I asked them to make some small samples using no copy—just rectangles to represent the copy blocks. Then we used gradient color bars to see where the colors in their efforts fit.



I keep these gradient color bars in my head when I'm choosing colors for a layout. The orange bars beside the gradient bars show the preferred color zone for the fore-, middle- and background portions of the layout. Let's say I'm doing a monochromatic (one color in different values) layout and know I want to use a light background. Obviously, I must then go to the opposite end to of the scale for my main copy if I want it to be the focal point of my layout. Now, I must choose a shade of the third color that is in the mid-tones for my secondary copy.

order it should be read and understood. Type, contrast and color create the impact.

For signs, you can't use the same approach for color as is common in print media or the Web. Signs are seen in a completely different environment than print or Web. A sign must use impact to get its point across on the street in a few seconds. Print and Web are viewed in different environments altogether, with different viewing constraints. Interestingly, though, I find that the sign-maker's approach to layout

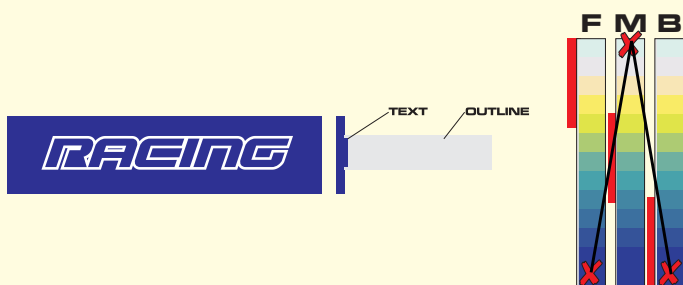


Print your designs out in gray scale. It lets you look at values rather than colors, and it can make weaknesses very apparent. You may discover that some of your copy virtually disappears.

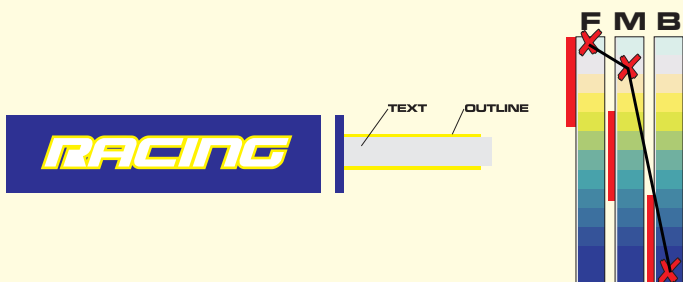
A bold outline can become the background

When you use a bold outline, it becomes the background color for the lettering. If you're not careful when choosing the letter color, the outline will overpower the text and damage readability. On medium-value backgrounds, you're often forced to use a bold outline because neither black nor white colors have enough contrast to jump out from it.

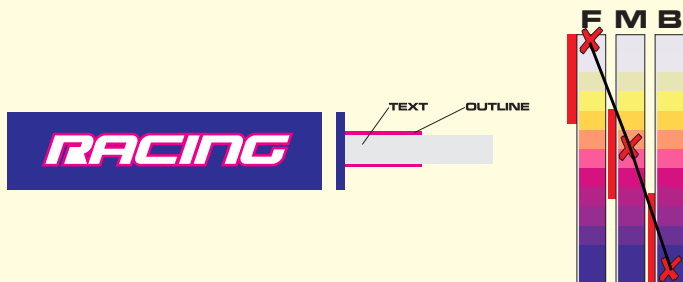
This is a common challenge on vehicles. Chevrolet trucks are available in a medium metallic blue that is a very difficult background color.



1. Here, the white outline overpowers the blue lettering, and the text is hard to read.



2. The yellow outline is almost the same value as the white letters, so it still isn't effective.



3. Once we change the outline to a midtone, like this magenta, the lettering finally pushes out to be read more easily.



1. If you visualize the end view of this layout, you see that all the wrong things are jumping out at the reader.



2. If we reverse the order of the lettering colors, things look a lot better. Compare the end views and the color scales to the first example. Note that the trim line around the edge has the least amount of punch of all the colors.



3. If we reverse these colors completely so that we have a dark background, everything still works.



4. But, if we reverse the order of the lettering colors, readability goes downhill. You see a lot of good layouts that are weakened by colors that are just in the wrong order like this.



Here's a design done by a friend of mine, Eric Skinner, of Stratford Signworks, Stratford, Ontario. Using the approach outlined in this article, I changed the foreground—the company name and phone number—to white in my version (below) to improve the contrast. Eric had used white for the outlines, which I switched to red.



and color usually works very well for print and Web because it often has more impact comparatively.

To illustrate this complex triangle to the students and to show how color affects a sign layout, I used many of the illustrations you see here. The result was a system that helped them make color decisions that helped their layouts do their job—or at least, didn't hurt their layouts. I hope you find it helpful, too. •SC



Doug Downey is a designer of signs, Web sites and print media. His studio, Freshink Image & Graphic Design, is located in Stratford, Ontario, Canada. His Web address is www.freshink.net.