



Accessibility TipSheet

The Color Red in Design

FROM THE ACCESS OFFICE

The issue of whether or not to use the color red on the cover of a book arose. Several people with low vision or who work with people with low vision offered the following suggestions.



Katharine Bond, Museum Access & Education

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The issue for a book cover is a short-term identification and reading task, more similar to designing a wall label than making choices about long reading-text within a book.



Light letters against a darker color red jacket would generally be preferred by anyone with Retinitis Pigmentosa; other individuals with partial sight also prefer reverse contrast. Give added weight to the idea of light color letters on the red cover rather than the black letters. Also short-term identification task research shows that reverse contrast color choices do make the task easier for the partially sighted user across a wide spectrum of different vision conditions.



Readability is of interest to all partially sighted readers. Have your graphics person check in his or her graphic design software and make sure 1) that the two colors you are contrasting have a gray scale differential of at least 70% on the color wheel chart and 2) that the paper chosen for the cover is not glossy. Focus on clear typeface and generous leading.



Rebecca McGinnis, Access Coordinator, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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I would recommend avoiding red as background color for materials with standard size text. It is very difficult to achieve good contrast between text and background using red, and white text on red is quite difficult for many partially sighted people to see unless the white is very bold and the text is very large. Otherwise, the white text tends to get “swallowed” by the strong red. Having said that, a very deep, dark red would provide better contrast and less brightness than a “true” red, so a modified red might work.



Rene Cummins, Arts Access, Inc.

<http://www.artsaccessinc.org>

Red is problematic for many vision loss conditions. Complications from diseases, such as diabetes, involve the loss of ability to see red. You may think the red on black or black on red is high contrast, but copy it on a black and white copier and see what happens to the hues that result. We had a transit system that used an electronic display of red lettering on a black background, and they modified this to bright yellow on a black background after consumers registered their difficulties with reading the displays.



Anyone with cone dystrophy complications eventually has problems with colors that are not a strong field, so pastels and light tints are not a good idea. The question of high contrast can be tricky if you are accustomed to keying in on the colors you are seeing and not thinking of the contrast in terms of the difference between white and black and various shades of gray along the continuum.



David Lingbach, Outasight

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My experience is that you will get a number of preferences. For example, some see black letters on white background just fine, but others, like me, prefer white letters on black background (or reverse screen). Red is a difficult color. If I had my choice, bright yellow lettering on a black background (on non-glossy paper) would be the best choice.



Ann Ellen-Lesser, Consultant

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Red should be avoided because so many people are color blind and red becomes muddy brown.



Comments from People with Low Vision:

- Red is difficult for low vision folks like me, but if contrasted with a bold white, it might work. Black would get lost in the red, I think. I know red is a wonderful color for theaters and I like it, but a bright, bold white would be my choice. Other good contrasts are yellow background with black lettering.
- As long as it is 70-100% contrast I haven't experienced it as difficult. It's the red/black combo that is impossible.
- As someone with low vision, I can say that the shade of red you choose, along with the paper, can make a big difference. If the red is too bright & shiny, the glare will make it difficult to read any text on the cover. Using a red background may be okay as long as you make sure the text creates enough contrast. Sometime outlining the text in white (if it is black text) or black (if it is white text) aides in this effort.



RESOURCES

Designing brochures, calendars, books, labels, etc., with accessibility in mind is an interesting challenge. There are two excellent brochures produced by Lighthouse International that give guidance on accessible publication design:

“Making Text Legible: Designing for People with Partial Sight” and “Effective Color Contrast: Designing for People with Partial Sight and Color Deficiencies”.

Copies are available for a small fee from:
Lighthouse International, Arlene R. Gordon Research Institute
111 East 59th Street, New York, NY 10022-1202
(212) 821-9200 voice
(212) 821-9713 TTY
(800) 829-0500 voice
<http://www.lighthouse.org>

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