

Choosing Interior Colors

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COLOR EFFECTS

Painting walls in complementary colors, like the deep red and gray-green at left, and furnishing with neutral hues of similar intensity creates a harmonious look. Red walls make this large dining room more intimate, while highlighting the white wainscoting and trim. Red overhead also lowers the ceiling visually, making the space feel cozier and more convivial—a plus in a room designed for conversation.

So you've rehabbed your house like a skilled surgeon, fixing structural flaws and preserving each room's distinct architectural character. But something's still missing. More than likely, that something is color—the renovator's secret weapon. Did you know that crown molding can visually raise the ceiling or lower it, depending on how it contrasts with the walls? Or that deft use of color can turn one room into a lively gathering place and another into a relaxing space for curling up with a book? If you're comfortable with saw, hammer, and drill but freeze in front of the aisle of color chips at the home center, you're not alone. So we went to readers—and our own resident renovators—to identify the color questions you're itching to ask. Then we pitched them to paint pros, colorists, and designers around the country and asked them to spill the tricks of their trades. Use this primer to make sense of those confounding chip strips, then pick out a palette that will bring out the best features of each wall, nook, and niche in your house. No more panic in the paint store.

Q: My downstairs walls are all off-white. It's so boring! Where's a good place to start adding color?

A: "Think of the space as a whole to be approached one room at a time," says Susan English, a specialty painter and color consultant in Cold Spring, New York. English often starts in the dining room, a social space where dramatic colors like red, gold, and terra-cotta seem apt, and the soft lighting appropriate there enhances their warmth. Then she cranks down the color in the adjoining spaces, with shades that play a supporting role. "Since the rooms typically flow into one another, keep in mind you'll be viewing them in combination," says English. She painted her own dining room a deep pumpkin, and the adjacent halls and rooms in muted shades of green, gray, and khaki.



COLOR TESTING

The paint chip strip is only a guide. To really see how a color will look on your walls, paint a large piece of foam-core board with it, then move it around the room for a few days. Different lighting will affect how it looks over the course of the day. While yellow looks cheerful in this sun-filled space, a similar warm color used in a room that gets no natural light can quickly start to look dingy.

Q: Our kitchen is open to both the dining room and the living room. What's an easy way to pick colors that will blend well together?

A: If varying your color choices from room to room is too much to tackle, try painting neighboring spaces two shades "just a rung away from each other on the paint-chip strip," advises color expert Mary Rice, vice president of marketing for Behr. Or use neutrals such as buff, taupe, or gray as a bridge between rooms painted in bolder, more contrasting colors. If rooms are typically closed off from one another—often the case with upstairs bedrooms, for example—coordination is less important than picking a color that makes you feel good. In private spaces, personal preference rules.

Q: We have an open plan on the first floor. Is it best to stick to a single paint color?

A: Continuity is important on the ground floor, but color can help "zone" a big open space, separating the dining area from the TV room, for instance. There's no need to stick to a single color or even a single color palette that is either all warm (reds, oranges, yellows) or all cool (blues, greens, bright whites). However, "by using muted, dustier values, there's a better chance the colors you choose will flow into one another," says Tami Ridgeway, a color stylist for Valspar. She recommends leaning toward colors softened by a bit of gray; these are often found in historical palettes. Bright colors can be injected in small doses as





COLOR COORDINATING

One way to give adjoining rooms in ground-floor living areas a harmonious look is to paint them in colors with the same undertones, like the yellow-based red, khaki, and pumpkin used here. Keeping trim color consistent from room to room helps avoid any jarring transitions. Private areas that typically remain closed off from view—home offices, bedrooms, and powder rooms, for example—don't need to tie in as closely with their neighboring spaces.

accents—in furnishings, floor coverings, even flowers.

Q: I always get confused when painting a door and its casing: Where do you stop one color and start the next?

A: It's not an open-and-shut case, but the rule of thumb goes something like this: Paint the face of the door the color of the trim in the room it faces when shut, and the edges of the door the same color as the trim in the room it swings into. This is a good example of why, if you're using different trim colors in adjoining rooms, they need to work well together.

"Doors tend to stay open, so you'll have the trim color from an adjoining room in any given space on a regular basis," observes painter Susan English. So, let's say you have a barn-red door opening into a room with pale yellow walls. "This can be an effective accent color in the space where it doesn't 'belong'—if it's carefully considered."

Q: What about an archway with no door or a pocket door?

A: Keeping trim color consistent in adjoining rooms that have open entryways offers a sense of cohesiveness, providing an unbroken line that is pleasing to the eye. In an open plan, consider painting all the trim white, even where wall colors vary.

Q: Got any advice for painting a wall with a chair rail?

A: First, figure out what effect you're after. Keeping color consistent above and below the rail keeps the look clean and highlights the molding itself. Opting for a lighter shade over the rail avoids a top-heavy look; lighter colors pull the eye upward, and darker shades, downward. So, if the room has a ceiling that's more than 9 feet high, you may want to consider painting the area above the rail a darker color than the portion below, to introduce a sense of intimacy.

Q: Should the trim color always be lighter than the walls?

A: For contemporary settings, Maxwell Gillingham-Ryan, co-founder and editor of the blog apartmenttherapy.com, suggests painting trim one shade lighter than walls—even if the walls are white—to bring out "complexity and detail." In most traditional interiors with colored walls, white trim creates a clean, classic look. That said, darker or stained wood trim may be historically appropriate in period house styles such as Craftsman and Queen Anne. Just keep in mind: "Dark trim creates visual interruption that can make a room look busier and smaller," points out Susan English.

Q: How close will the paint chip be to the color once it's up on the wall?

A: Those tiny blocks of color are a big source of frustration for many homeowners. "Any color you choose, unless it's a very light pastel, is going to look brighter on the wall," says Tami Ridgeway. On the strips, she says, colors are generally arranged from lighter to deeper, or from "cleaner" to a "dirtier," more neutral, value. Also, some colors tend to appear darker when used over a large expanse, so you might consider picking a paint chip a shade lighter than the one you're trying to achieve. Recognize, too, that any color will play off adjacent colors. That's why Becky Spak, senior designer with Sherwin-Williams, recommends cutting up the chip strip into individual boxes and looking at the variations case by case.

Q: What's the most reliable way to test a paint color?

A: "Live with it for a bit before you commit," says Spak. The size of the room, the amount of natural or artificial light, and competing elements—ranging from flooring to furnishings—can all affect the way a particular color is perceived. A number of paint companies sell small



COLOR PSYCHOLOGY

Colors evoke an emotional response. In general, cool colors (blues, greens, and clean whites) are perceived as restful and soothing while warm colors (like red, orange, and yellow) create a sense of drama and energy. Cool colors are calming in private rooms—like the ice-blue that covers the walls in this bath; warm colors are a good way to enliven social spaces.



COLOR ILLUSION

Use color to call attention to a room's architectural details or to distract from its negatives. In this bedroom, using a pale green all over elongates the short walls by blending them into the dramatically sloped ceiling. The color is nuanced enough to take on different shadings depending on how the light hits it, adding more depth and dimension. Crisp white trim highlights the room's built-in features, including the fireplace and a pair of French doors.

jars of paint for sampling: Use one to paint a big piece of foam-core board with your top choice. Place it in various spots around the room, and see how it reflects the upholstery and responds to the quality and amount of light in the room over the course of a few days.

Q: I really like red. How can I use it without channeling Stephen King?

A: Fear not. "People think small rooms have to be white," says Debbie Zimmer, a color expert with Rohm & Haas Paint Quality Institute. "But bold colors like cherry or burgundy can be spectacular in your smallest room, like a powder room." Even if the rest of the ground floor is open, an enclosed space can benefit from the "wow" factor that rich color offers without screaming for attention when the door is closed. In a bigger room, deep colors can effectively highlight architectural features and add visual interest. Try painting an alcove a rich reddish brown or using dark denim blue on just one wall, to create a focal point. Becky Spak likes to add drama to the wall opposite a fireplace as a way to "balance" a room, while Maxwell Gillingham-Ryan suggests heightening the color on the one with the fewest windows and doors to make a "show wall."

Q: Where else can I inject color, without painting the whole room?

A: Colorfully painted interior doors and accent walls seem most at home in contemporary settings, says painter Susan English. To freshen a traditional interior, she recommends painting the trim a deeper color than the walls or accenting the inside of a built-in with a deeper or lighter shade of the wall color. For more contrast, use a complementary color—with pale blue walls, for instance, line a bookcase with peach.

Q: How can I use paint color to "lift" a low ceiling?

A: To give low ceilings the illusion of height, paint them white and any crown molding the same color as the wall; this will keep from interrupting your gaze upward.

Q: So should all ceilings be white?

A: In a word, yes. But rules are meant to be broken. A touch of color on the ceiling can warm things up and give a space a more finished look. "Treat the ceiling as a fifth wall by painting it cream or beige," says Behr's Mary Rice. Just keep in mind something Kathleen Jewell, a color consultant in Orange Park Acres, California, has learned: "Warm shades lose their yellow tones on a surface where no sun ever falls, turning bluer and grayer," aka dingy.

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Q: How do I use color to make the most of a small space?

A: Generally, crisp whites can make a space feel bigger and more open, while warm colors create a sense of intimacy. At the most rudimentary level, large rooms generally can handle more color than small rooms. "Lighter hues can open up a small space, while darker colors give the perception that the surfaces are closer than they are," says Debbie Zimmer. Of

course, some small spaces don't need to feel big: If you're aiming to create a welcoming or cozy atmosphere in a foyer, study, or library, for example, hunter green or rust may serve you better than pale peach or celery.

Q: When I go to choose a white, I get overwhelmed by all the choices. How do I pick the right one?

A: Whites do come in a staggering variety. Pure, "clean" whites are formulated without tinted undertones. These are favored by designers looking to showcase artwork or furnishings and are often used on ceilings to create a neutral field overhead. Most other whites are either warm—with yellow, rust, pink, or brownish undertones—or cool, with green, blue, or gray undertones. Mary Rice says: "Use warmer whites in rooms without a lot of natural light, or to make larger spaces seem cozier." Cool whites, by contrast, can help open up a space. Test several at once to see which one works best with the other colors at play in the room.

Q: In general, are there any colors to steer clear of?

A: When it comes to emotional effect, of course, one person's welcome-home orange will be another person's signal to scam. Debbie Zimmer, for one, declares that "red will increase your appetite—and your blood pressure; blues and greens are naturelike and calming; purple is loved by children but not necessarily by adults; yellow is inviting; and orange can be welcoming but also a little irritating, depending on the tint, tone, or shade." Research done for Behr indicates that yellow can stimulate the brain, so it might be worth considering for rooms where homework is done; but avoid yellow in bedrooms, where the goal is generally to chill out.

Q: How much does paint color really matter?

A: The psychology of color is a minor obsession among paint professionals. Many say you should choose a color based at least in part on how a room is used and the mood you want to establish. So paint social rooms (dining rooms, kitchens, family and living areas) warm colors like daffodil-yellow, coral, or cranberry, suggests Gillingham-Ryan, and give private rooms (home offices, powder rooms, bedrooms) cooler hues like sage-green, violet, or sky-blue. Let the mood shift from room to room, he says, to establish a visual rhythm: "Warm, cool, warm, cool—it's like breathing in and out. It's flow."