

Colour Theory

Simple tips every coloured pencil artist needs to know

Colour theory is complicated. Sir Isaac Newton's theory in 1666 based on prisms has come a long way and there is so much information to take in that it becomes impossible to understand everything.

I like to make things simple, so I use very basic rules in my drawings and my teaching when it comes to colour mixing.

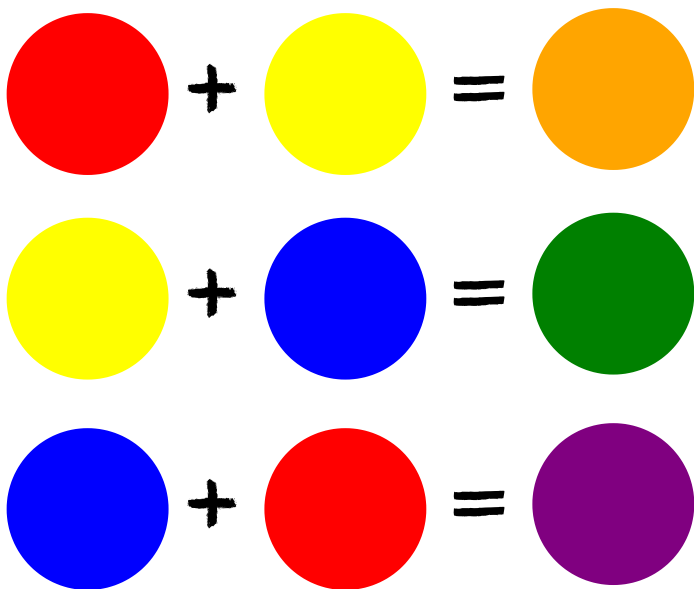
In the following guide, I share some tips to really help your coloured pencil work come to life.



Colour Theory - the very basics

Knowing the basics of colour theory is important. Understanding how colours mix and what colours you get when mixed is key to your coloured pencil success.

Most of us were taught the basics at school.



All colours are created from the three primary colours: red, yellow and blue. However, when it comes to coloured pencils you have hundreds of colours at your fingertips, so there's no need to mix the basics unless you really want to.

You could probably find the perfect colour if you had all the pencils. But, with coloured pencils, it is all in the layering. To create rich vibrant drawings, mixing your colours instead of just using one will give you a much more realistic result.

Colours used for animals

As I am predominantly an animal artist, I tend to work with a range of fur colours that include browns, oranges, greys, blacks and whites, so it's really important to understand the colour theory around these colours if you want to create deep shadows, vibrant mid-tones and highlights. Nobody wants to see muddy colours.

Let's talk colour mixing and how you can use complementary, split-complementary, and triadic colours to create different shades, shadows and generally a richer feel to your coloured pencil work.

Complementary Colours

These are the colours directly opposite each other on the colour wheel. These colours tend to be bold and work very well together. For example, the complementary colour for blue is orange.

Split-Complementary Colours

These are on either side of the complementary colour and are useful when a complementary won't work. For example, if using blue with orange.

Triadic Colours

On either side of the split-complementary colour. Again, when talking about mixing with coloured pencils, these are useful when the complementary and split-complementary colours don't work well.



How to use simple colour theory with coloured pencil drawings

When creating a realistic drawing with coloured pencils, it's vital that you build layers that create texture, values and eventually realistic texture like skin or fur. Of course, the most important part of realism is your values, but colour is important, and knowing how to use your colours together will save you from creating muddy-looking colours.

Regardless of what colour you are using and what colour your subject is, there will always be highlights, mid-tones and shadows. Usually, there is a base colour. For example, if we take an animal like a dog, you might expect it to be tan, black, brown or grey/white (with a multitude of colours in between, but I'm keeping it simple here).

Let's look at tan, which is basically orange - a colour that is used a huge amount in animal portraits, like Cadmium Orange, Burnt Ochre and Burnt Sienna. The complementary colour for orange is blue, split-complimentary colours are blue violet and blue green, and triadic colours are violet and green.



Generally, I would suggest using complementary colours for shadows but as you can tell if we mix orange and blue we'll get a sludgy green, so I would recommend using the triadic colour Violet as you'll get a much nicer darker colour. You can see in the picture above that we have some really dark shadows and some lovely vibrant highlights. Keeping clean oranges in the highlights makes them much brighter. Adding split-complementary and triadic colours into the shadows and the mid tones really helps to keep the orange tones but enhances the darker value so you get a lovely depth.

When it comes to drawing white fur, you basically have a whole rainbow of colours at your disposal. Anything is going to work with white, as white fur absorbs the colours around the subject. However, you should work with the lighting you have in your photograph, using blues and purples for your shadow areas, and yellows and pinks for your warmer highlights.

The sky is the limit when it comes to colour, however, using the very basics of colour theory will enable you to create vibrant pieces that really do look real.

