



HOW TO CHOOSE
P A I N T
C O L O R S
WITH CONFIDENCE

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A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO CHOOSING

PAINT COLORS

WITHOUT REGRET

Choosing paint shades for your home should feel exciting, not like a months-long spiral of swatches and second-guessing.

The secret is this: paint doesn't live on a chip—it lives in a room, next to everything else you already own. That means the “right” color is the one that agrees with your room's undertones, looks right in your light, and doesn't fight your finishes ... not necessarily the top paint brand's Color of the Year, or the shade that's all over social media.

This guide walks you through a simple, repeatable process for choosing paint colors, especially neutrals, that you can use for any space.



The most important step in paint color selection is sampling the paint in your room. Click [here](#) to order **Samplize** peel-and-stick paint swatches of each of the colors I mention in this book.

STEP 1:

Identify the undertones already in the room

Paint works when the undertones of your chosen color match or complement the undertones already present.

Before you even look at paint, take stock of your room's existing colors, especially:

Fixed elements (hardest to change)

These are the items paint must work with, because they're usually staying:

- flooring (wood, tile, carpet)
- countertops
- tile (bathroom, backsplash)
- stone (fireplace surround, exterior stone)
- cabinets
- large built-ins

Decorative elements (easier to change—but still influential)

These are movable, but they still influence how paint reads:

- rugs
- upholstery
- drapery
- bedding
- art
- big furniture pieces

Your paint has to agree with both. If it clashes with the floor or the tile, the room will never feel "right," no matter how pretty the color is online.

Undertone, explained simply

According to Merriam-Webster, an undertone is “a color seen through and modifying another color, i.e. a shade of blue with gray undertones.”

In paint terms: it’s the hidden color that shows up once you put a shade on the wall—especially next to other finishes. These undertones are most often “hidden” in neutral paint colors. i.e., you put a shade of white on that wall that *looks* like a clean, bright white in the store, but once it’s on the wall, you notice a blue undertone that makes your kitchen cabinets appear yellow by comparison. Or, you choose a shade of taupe, only to have it look like a pale purple once the first coat dries

This is why it’s important to identify these undertones before you commit, by testing them in your home first.

Use the “white paper test” to identify undertones already in your home

Grab a sheet of bright white printer paper and hold it right up against:

- floor
- countertop
- tile
- cabinet finish

Ask: What color shows up next to the paper?

- If the element suddenly looks creamy/yellow/golden → warm undertone
- If it looks pink/peachy → warm undertone (red/pink family)
- If it looks greenish → can be warm or cool depending on the green (warm olive vs cool mint)
- If it looks blue/icy → cool undertone
- If it looks purple/violet → cool undertone

This works because white paper gives you a “neutral reference,” so the hidden color becomes more obvious.

Your paint color should complement your finishes, again, especially if you are choosing a neutral paint color.

If you have a warm beige tile and you paint the walls a cool blue-gray, the tile can suddenly look peachy or pink—and the whole room feels “off,” even though both choices were pretty on their own. That’s undertone clash.

Consider the photos, below, which feels like a typical early-2000s kitchen with lots of orangey-oak colors. The photo on the left shows a warm greige color, which makes the entire room feel harmonious. The one on the right, on the other hand, shows a cool gray color. While it’s not *bad*, per se, it feels off in the room given the warm-toned countertops, flooring, and cabinetry. The color on the left unites the warm elements in the room and emphasizes the overall design.



STEP 2:

Learn the 3 ways to evaluate color (so you can narrow it down fast)

Instead of drowning in paint names and influencer recommendations, evaluate any paint color using these three simple comparisons:

1) Lighter vs. darker

- Does it read airy and bright, or deeper and moodier?
- Will it match the contrast you want with trim, furniture, and floors?

2) Warmer vs. cooler

- Warm colors tend to lean yellow, red, orange, or warm green.
- Cool colors tend to lean blue, violet, or cool green/gray.

This is where most “something feels off” paint choices happen—because warm floors + cool paint (or vice versa) can look harsh.

Take a look at the swatches, below. The color inside the circle is the same in each picture, Sherwin Williams Creamy. But notice how its orange-y undertones show up more on the left, against the cool-toned Benjamin Moore Decorator’s White, than on the right, against the warm-toned Benjamin Moore Simply White? That’s because the blue undertones contrast the warm tones, making them more obvious.

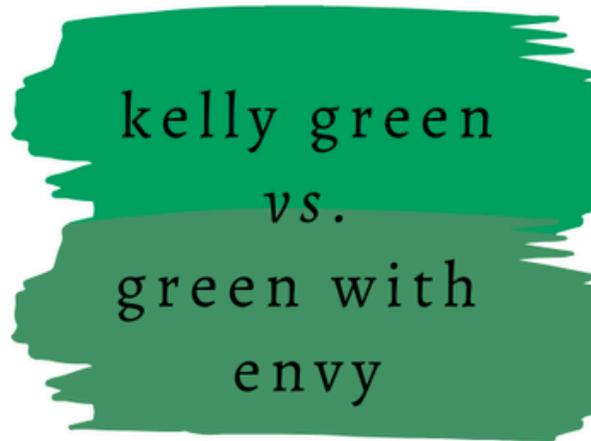


3) Cleaner vs. dirtier (muted)

This one is a game-changer.

- Clean = clearer, crisper, less gray mixed in
- Dirty = muted, softened, “grayed down” (NOT bad!)

In the photo, below, you can see that Green With Envy is “dirtier” than Kelly Green.



Again, neither is bad. The issue is mixing clean and dirty finishes. A clean paint color next to a muted rug can make that rug look even muddier—and that’s when the whole room starts to feel “off” and harder to style.

Quick rule:

If your room has lots of muted, earthy, weathered, or vintage tones, you’ll usually want a dirtier/more complex paint.

If your room has crisp whites, black accents, marble, chrome, or modern finishes, you’ll usually want a cleaner paint.

STEP 3:

Stop choosing paint in isolation (comparison is the rule)

This is the part most people skip: you can't accurately describe a paint color by itself. "Warm," "cool," "clean," and "dirty" only make sense when you compare one color to another.

The right way to compare?

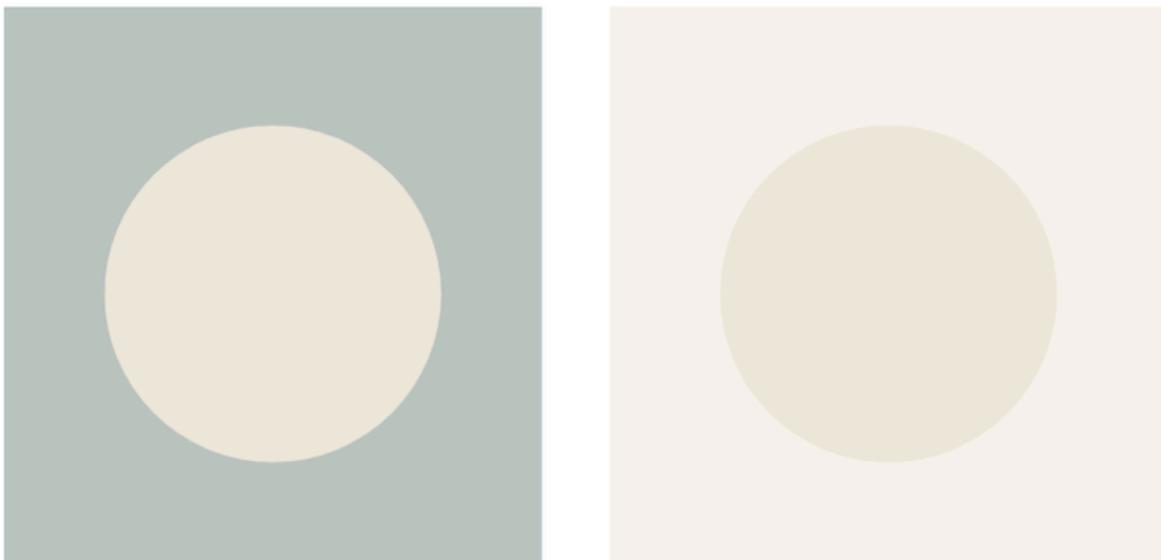
Pick 3-5 candidates, not 25. Then compare them:

- against each other
- against your fixed finishes
- against your key decorative items (rug/sofa/curtains)

You're not looking for the "prettiest paint." You're looking for the paint that makes everything else in the room look better.

When the undertone is wrong, it becomes obvious fast: the color can suddenly look purple, peachy, minty, dirty, or icy.

Look at the two pictures, below, for example. The color in the circle is the same, Sherwin Williams Creamy, but it looks darker on the right, compared to the Benjamin Moore Simply White square around it, than it does in the middle of the Benjamin Moore Wale Gray swatch on the left.



STEP 4:

Test paint correctly

This is why it's so important to test paint in the room, not on the internet, and not from a tiny chip.

The best way to test:

- Use a large painted sample (I love **Samplize peel-and-stick paint swatches**, but you can also use poster board). You can also paint large samples directly on the walls.
- Move it around the room (or paint swatches on multiple walls).
- Look at the sample throughout the day, at morning, midday, and night.

Where to test :

Most people test a paint swatch directly in the center of the wall. This is fine, but there is a better way to do it.

Instead test:

- near the floor (next to the flooring)
- near the backsplash/tile/stone
- in the darkest corner of the room and on the brightest wall

This will give you a better idea of how the color will act in real life.

Pro tip: If you feel like your current wall color is skewing your perception of your samples, paint a square in the middle of white poster board and then hold it up to the wall.

STEP 5:

Understand how lighting will change your paint

Paint color shifts dramatically depending on:

- direction of light (north/south/east/west)
- time of day
- amount of natural light
- your bulbs at night (warm vs cool LEDs)
- what your finishes reflect (warm wood will “warm up” the wall)

Important note: light colors don't magically brighten dark rooms

In low-light rooms, barely-there whites often turn gray and shadowy. If you keep sampling pale neutrals and everything looks dull, you're not crazy, you might just need a paint with more pigment. Try a gentle green-gray, or a soft beige, instead of a near-white.

STEP 6:

Make sure your “undertone mix” isn’t fighting itself

One of the easiest ways to create a cohesive room is to limit competing undertones. A helpful rule of thumb: try not to combine more than two dominant undertones in one space.

Example: If your fixed elements lean warm (gold/beige wood tones), and your rug is muted/greige, adding an icy blue-gray paint can introduce a third undertone that makes everything look disconnected.

Why rooms look “muddy”

It’s often not the paint itself—it’s a mismatch between:

- clean paint + dirty finishes

or

- warm paint + cool fixed elements

When that happens, the room can feel dull, and suddenly nothing “pops” the way you wanted.

So there you have it! I hope you learned a little (or a lot) more about how to choose a paint color in an objective way, and that the process feels simpler and more straightforward.

Feel free to come back to this book as often as you need, and check out the [paint section of my website](#) for more help on choosing color, my favorite shades, and more.



For more advice on choosing paint color, visit my site <https://kaitlinmadden.com/category/paint-colors>

ABOUT ME

As a longtime interior design writer and editor, I've written about all things home, including paint color, for publications like Architectural Digest, Martha Stewart Living, Homes & Gardens, New England Home, Parade, and many, many more. Now, as a blogger and color consultant, I write about paint and offer advice on my site, kaitlinmadden.com.

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