

Total time:
5-7 hours



Skill Points:

- Learning about the color wheel
- Identifying color contrast (contrasting colors)
- Composing with color contrast

UNDERSTANDING COLOR CONTRAST



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The word *contrast* is defined as the state of being strikingly different from something else, typically something in juxtaposition or in close association. To understand this, you must be familiar with the color wheel.

KEY LESSON: Color contrast has nothing to do with light to dark; that's tone contrast. Color contrast has nothing to do with saturation; that's color saturation contrast. There is a lot of confusion regarding color contrast and defining it. To help you, let's change around the terminology to "Contrasting Color".



RGB Color Wheel

There are numerous color wheels in existence. As a photographer, and to keep things simple, use the RGB color wheel.



RGB

Red, Green, Blue.
Used on screens
and the Internet.



CMYK

Used for printing
presses.



RYB

Red, Yellow, Blue.
Additively used in
pigment paints.



Red/Orange and Teal - High color contrast:

Left: This is a carefully crafted use of color contrast. The two primary colors are a teal blue and red/orange. Those three colors are polar opposites on the RGB color wheel.
Right: A teal window frame and an orange/red table. This shot has high color contrast. At first glance, it's not a likely conclusion. Remember, it's not tone contrast, or saturation, or brightness. It's where the colors fall on the color wheel.



Low color contrast:

Ignore tone contrast, brightness, and saturation. These colors are yellow through an orange/red. They are next to each other on the RGB color wheel. This creates low color contrast.



Crafted color contrast:

Left: We have red and black, or almost black...which isn't on the color wheel! Black, and white, are the extremes when judging any color contrast. Any color on the color wheel would be a high color contrast opposite to the colors black or white.
Right: These two colors are not on opposite sides of the RGB color wheel. Yet, they are polar opposites on the RYB color wheel. Color is a complex subject.



ACTION ASSIGNMENT!

- 1- Shoot some nature photography with high color contrast on the RGB color wheel. See how many you can find in an afternoon.
- 2- Organize a photo shoot where you photograph a model utilizing low color contrast. Accomplish this by planning out your props, clothing, background, and even less obvious details like make-up, eye color, and hair color. Share your results with your model.
- 3- Organize a still life photo shoot where you incorporate first high color contrast, and then low color contrast using the same subject.

HOW DID YOU DO?

- How many high color contrast nature photos did you find?
- Did you set up your low color contrast model shoot? Did you have any trouble with exposure?
- Did one color contrast scheme work better for your chosen subjects than the other?