



## Using words to describe colours

From the shimmering bluish-green wings of a beetle to the deep-purple hues of a rose or orchid, or the silvery-grey shade of a rock formation, colours are everywhere! Editing text that includes subtle colour descriptors can be challenging.

### Principles

Compound colours – don't hyphenate:

olive green navy blue

Colour combinations where each colour has equal weight – use an en dash:

Larvae are grey–green, with a shiny, black head.

Adults have a yellow–brown back.

Compound adjectives that include colours:

- with modifiers based on other colours (eg creamy, bluish, reddish) – use a hyphen when before the noun they modify; no hyphen when after

bluish-green wings the wings were bluish green

- with modifiers based on shade or intensity (eg pale, dull, dark, light, deep) – use a hyphen when before the noun they modify; no hyphen when after

pale-green stems the stems were pale green

Lists of adjectives that refer to the same noun – use commas between the adjectives:

small, brown spots spots that are small and brown

### Other examples of modifiers

To avoid any ambiguity, if a modifier is used with a colour to form a compound adjective preceding a noun, hyphenate the compound adjective. This applies whether the colour adjective in the compound is another colour, or a shade, intensity or hue:

They have a pale-cream panel on either side of the thorax.

Larvae have pale-red lines.

Pale-green to light-yellow spots appear on the upper leaf surface.

Bright-yellow patches give leaves a mottled appearance.

The defining symptom of rust is the presence of tan-to-dark-brown or reddish-brown spots on the leaves.

He bought a light-brown suit.

The people gazed at the deep-blue sea.

If a modifier is used with a colour as a compound adjective after the noun, do not use a hyphen. This applies whether the colour adjective in the compound is another colour, or a shade, intensity or hue:

Adults are bright green all over.

Eggs are dull purple.

Pupae are pale yellow.

Leaves are bluish green.

Larvae are initially creamy white but develop black marks.

Their hard wings are reddish yellow or reddish brown.

For a list of adjectives where *and* is intended, use a comma when before the noun:

Bright, yellow patches give leaves a mottled appearance.

He bought a light, brown suit.

[The suit was lightweight and brown.]

They looked out across the deep, blue sea.

Dark, slaty-grey larvae but larvae are dark, slaty grey

Adults are light-to-dark, olive green.

Adults have a dense covering of metallic, green or blue–green scales.

Brownish-red, dead spots occur in the yellow areas of the leaf.

**Note:** An author query will often be needed to determine what is being modified by what (eg deep-blue sea or deep, blue sea).

### When words just won't do ...



Of course, the guesswork could be taken out of all colour descriptions by quoting the relevant Pantone® colour! The Pantone Colour Matching System (PMS) is a standardised colour reproduction system. Pantone colour guides are used worldwide for accurate colour identification and design specification (see [www.pantone-colours.com](http://www.pantone-colours.com)).