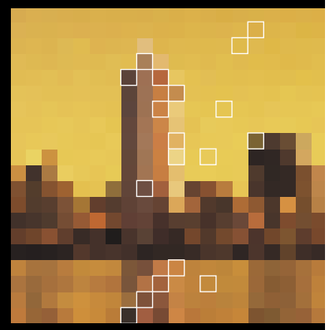
The color whirl!

How to cool a hot skyline

Whew! You can almost feel the heat. Reds, oranges, yellows and golds radiate from every molecule; even the water is hot. San Diego, a famously balmy city, never looked like this in real life. But the assignment is to create a brochure cover—one a convention bureau would like, or for any event in which the city itself is part of the attraction—and this dramatic, golden skyline is the photo we have. So the challenge is, how do we cool it off so visitors won't come expecting to swelter? The answer is found on the color wheel between ice blue and yellow, in the turquoise blues and verdant greens of springtime. Watch.

Find the palette in your photo Every photo has a natural color palette; first step is to find it and organize it. First reduce the photo to a manageable number of colors; easiest way is to create a mosaic using Illustrator's Object Mosaic function (Filter>Object Mosaic). Working from the biggest areas (sky, skyline, water) to the smallest, extract colors with the eyedropper tool. For contrast, pick up dark, medium and light pixels of each color. Sort your selections by color and each color by value. It's obvious just by looking that this palette is very narrow.



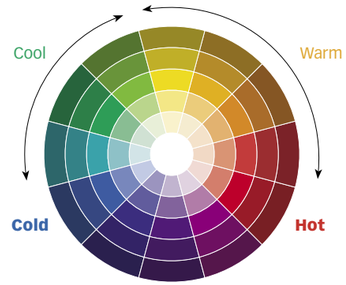
Sky

Skyline dark

Skyline light

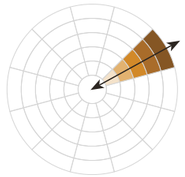
Water

Position your selections on the color wheel. (Hues are the middle ring; shades outer, tints inner.) All the colors in this image are in the yellow-orange, orange-red range, quite unusual. The sky is somewhat yellower, some shades are darker than our chart, but this is the zone.



The color wheel is an artificial device, good but not perfect—colors in nature aren't so evenly distributed, whose purpose is to show color relationships. Also visible are values (dark-light) and temperature.

Now widen the range . . .



Color is made darker or lighter by adding black (a shade) or white (a tint). Black and white, being color neutral, do not change the color . . .

but only the value. As a result, any one color plus its own tints and shades always coordinate naturally. Such a palette is called **monochromatic.**

The opposite, or complement, of the warm oranges is blue, the coldest color.

Adding yellow to blue yields the **cool** range—the colors of water, new growth, springtime. These are peaceful colors, tranquil and refreshing.

As with a single color, all the hues that share a color (blue in this case) coordinate naturally. Any color in this range will work with any other.

Coldest Monochromatic blue—note the dark, medium and light—is very cold and has the highest contrast. Blue and orange are opposites; they have *nothing* in common. High contrast means high energy.

Warmest Because of its proximity to yellow, monochromatic yellow-green has the most color in common with the photo and yields the warmest image; it doesn't really cool the skyline very much.

Cool Coolest, prettiest and most refreshing is a mix of blues and greens; the greens share yellows with the photo, while the blues provide the ice. The colors shown here have similar value, soothing low contrast.

Moving toward yellow warms the image slightly; the dark blue-green corner adds contrast. Now that you have the idea, you're on your own; working in just this narrow range you'll find many interesting variations:

Low-contrast tints are soft and undemanding. A baby products convention.

High-contrast corner highlights the checkerboard; light colors recede.

Vivid green freshens like damp grass, dark corner is a visual anchor.

Light yellow-green downplays the name, drawing attention to the city.