

# RED: Color Communication

## How Do Colors Affect Us?

Colors have impact! Colors slip extra meaning into communication. As designers, we can make a clearer connection with our audience through knowledge of color meanings.

Red is a powerful primary color, and well—I'll admit personal interest—my favorite since I was a kid. This journey into the realm of red offers a peek at: Physical, Emotional, Psychological, Cultural, Phrases and clichés, Design communication, and Other Names for Red.

Although colors can convey different meanings in different eras, cultures, and for different individuals, in general, the following prevails for the color red. A few differences are noted under “Cultural Meanings.”

### Red—in the Concrete, Physical



Reds, in the concrete

What gives a color a meaning? We associate colors with physical things and the role those things play in our lives. Let's look at a few basic substances that are in the red area of the color sphere.

**Blood**—can elicit positive imagery, like the basic blood of life and robust health. It can imply fast heartbeat and breathing of exertion, passion, or anger. Blood may forebode injuries, wounds, or violence.

**Fire**—can encompass the beauty of light, like, sunrises and sunsets, to excitement, such as, bonfires and fireworks, to the violence of forest fires and volcanoes. Fire is hot, energetic, and powerful.

**Red clay earth**—is a timeless physical material associated with nature, heat, primitive scenarios, and other “earthy” imagery.

### Red—in Communication

**Emotional impacts:** the color red is hot, active and exciting! Red conveys feelings that are strong and alive: love, passion, anger, even embarrassment or shame.

**Psychological associations:** red conveys power, energy, boldness, importance, winning, dominance, and danger. It's a lively color, from stimulating to aggressive to violent.



Indian Hindu Bride

### Cultural meanings:

Chinese tradition uses red to symbolize good luck, celebration, and prosperity. Indian/Asian/Eastern brides often wear red. In Russian culture, red represents beauty. Throughout history, royalty have worn red. Some political

groups, particularly communism, are associated with red. Red is a patriotic color in many countries. Westerners depict financial losses in red ink and gains in green, but East Asian countries show gains in red, losses in green. Red signs, lights, and flags are used nearly universally to signify “stop,” “warning,” and “danger.”

**Phrases and clichés** are fun to ponder and to relate back to basic red substances and their meanings/associations. “Red-blooded” (healthy, rosy, robust), “red-handed” (caught in the act, originally, hands red in victim's blood), “red-faced” (embarrassed, ashamed), to “see red” (angry), “red-hot” (giving excitement, enthusiasm, or stimulation), “paint the town red” (go out celebrating), “red letter day” (special day of significance), “red herring” (something that draws attention from truth), “red light” (a light indicating danger, to stop, or a warning; also associated w/brothels), and “roll out the red carpet” (royal treatment).

### Design communication

Again and again, sources cite red as the “attention-getting” color, making it a top choice for designers to draw eyes to a **point** we wish to stress. And it's especially appropriate when our subject leans toward life, energy, earthiness, or other red associations listed earlier.

Yet, red is a color to handle with care. Small doses can express positive appeal, for instance, in an illustration or a graphic, a small amount of red can add a touch of life or passion. But if used heavily—like, in a page with a quantity of bold headlines, graphics, and text—it can feel overpowering and aggressive to the extreme of violence and anger. (Unless, that's what you wanted to communicate!)

To sum it up: highly-visible, powerful, alive, exciting, strong, intense. That's it, the color **RED!** —Boni



**A few of many names for RED**

This is a guide: colors appear differently on each monitor.

- rust
- brick
- vermillion
- venetian red
- scarlet/crimson
- carmine
- rose
- magenta
- fuchsia