

How colors got their names - Video transcript [Watch the video](#)

00:00 The earliest humans didn't have words for **colors**. They had words for objects and actions. And it took tens of thousands of years for those words to evolve into the names of the **colors** we use today.

00:12 Looking back, gives us a glimpse at how those early people saw the world around them.

00:16 We'll also answer that age old question: which came first? **Orange** the fruit, or **orange** the **color**?

00:22 I'm Dr. Erica Brozovsky and this is Otherwords.

00:36 The human eye can perceive millions of slight gradations of **color**. But unless you're a designer or an artist, you probably only regularly use about ten or so **color** words.

00:46 And they are remarkably similar across all cultures.

00:50 A landmark study by Brent Berlin and Paul Kay found that people across the world developed their words for **colors** in more or less the same chronological order.

01:00 For example, if a language only had two words for **colors**, they were always **black** and **white**. If a language had only three **color** words, they were **black**, **white** and **red**. **Yellow** and **green** came next in either order, then **blue**, **brown** and so on.

01:14 This hierarchy closely matches human psychology.

01:17 After all, what could be more visually fundamental than the **dichotomy** between light and darkness?

01:24 And we're hardwired to have a strong emotional reaction to **red**, as it has a lot of survival significance from food to sex to violence.

01:33 **Blue** is surprisingly far down the list, considering it's most people's favorite **color**.

01:38 But actually due to a chemical quirk, **blue** is very rare in nature, except, of course, for the sky.

01:46 But you don't really need a word to help identify the sky. Which sky do you mean? Oh, the **blue** sky!

01:53 The English word **white** can be traced all the way back to the **Proto-Indo-European** root ***kweit*** which meant to shine.

02:01 **Black** similarly goes back to the **P.I.E.** **bhleg**, which meant to burn, a reference to the **color** of what's left after burning.

02:09 **Red** is unique in that it's the only **color** that has a **P.I.E. root** that just meant the same thing: **red**.

02:16 Although it may have been used to describe anything that had a warm or interesting **color**.

02:21 **Yellow** came from the **P.I.E.** **ghel**, which also meant to shine and gave us many related words like **gold**, glimmer, glow and gleam.

02:31 **Green** comes from the **P.I.E.** **ghre**, which meant to grow for its obvious connection to plants and also gave us graze and grass.

02:39 Interestingly, even though humans can perceive more shades of **green** than any other **color**, we just use one word for them all.

02:47 Think about it. How many different kinds of **red** can you name compared to different kinds of **green**?

02:52 The reason is probably that even though our ancestors were surrounded by **green**, or rather because they were surrounded by **green**, it's just not that interesting to us.

03:02 A 2016 study by Hannah J. Haynie and Claire Bower found that humans across many different languages have an easier time communicating **warm colors** than **cool colors**.

03:13 This **color wheel**, for instance, has twice as many common **color** words on the warm side than the cool side.

03:19 To understand why, just picture with the world may have looked like to our early ancestors.

03:24 Which things in their field of view were worth talking about? The **cool colored** ones or the **warm colored** ones?

03:30 Perhaps for this reason, the word **blue** has been traced back to the **P.I.E. root** **bhle**, which meant **yellow**.

03:37 There simply wasn't a need to describe the **color blue** until much later on when humans started making **dyes** and **paints** from rare materials like lapis lazuli.

03:46 **Orange** was pretty late to the scene.

03:48 The Old English term for the **color** between **yellow** and **red** was **geoluhread**, which literally meant **yellow-red**.

03:55 But then sometime around the 15th or 16th century, Portuguese merchants began importing an exotic fruit to Europe, known by its **Sanskrit** name, **naranga**.

04:05 This came to be known **naranja** in Spanish, **arancia** in Italian, and **orange** in French.

04:11 The latter two likely dropped the N at the beginning through confusion about where the **article** ended.

04:16 It's the same way we got an apron from a napron and a nickname from an eke name.

04:22 Over the next couple hundred years, people went from saying things were **orange** colored or the **color** of an **orange** to just saying they were **orange**.

04:31 So there you have it. The fruit came first.

04:34 But we're still living with the effects of not having a proper name for the **color** for a long time.

04:39 It's why this is called a **redhead** and this a **red robin**, even though they're both clearly the **color** of an **orange**.

04:46 **Brown** comes from the **P.I.E.** **bher**, which meant bright, possibly in the sense of polished wood.

04:52 Indeed, it also gives us the word burnished.

04:56 The animal that we today call a bear went by a totally different word prior to the Middle Ages. But since it was considered dangerous to even mention the fearsome beast by name, ancient hunters came up with the **euphemism**: **bero**, which meant **brown** one.

05:10 They were so superstitious, in fact, that the true Old English word for bear is now lost to history.

05:17 **Purple** is one of the few common **color** words without a **root**.

05:21 It comes from the Latin **purpura**, which referred to a certain shellfish that was ground down to make a distinctly **colored dye**.

05:28 Because of its vibrance and rarity, **Purple** became very popular with the wealthy and powerful and is still associated with royalty today.

05:36 It wasn't really until humans became proficient artists that we started adding **colors** to our vocabulary by the hundreds.

05:43 Most are either based on the source of the **pigment**, like stones, plants and insects, or to what the **color** reminds us of, whether it's the sky, the birds or a beverage.

05:56 So how many unique **color** names are there? It's hard to say, but it's definitely in the hundreds, if not thousands.

06:04 Some have long histories dating back to the beginning of civilization, and some were made up recently by crayon marketing departments.

06:11 You may not need more than ten or so on a day to day basis, but the explosion of words shows that **color** has gone from something that we just used to survive to an integral part of expressing ourselves and making our imaginations a reality.