

# How to Find Your Custom Color Codes with a Style Guide (and Decode the Jargon)



**ANN K. EMERY**

Updated on: Aug 15th, 2017

Data Visualization

Branding, CMYK, Color, How-To Tutorials, Pantone Colors, RGB Codes

## COLOR PALETTE

USAID has standards for reproducing colors so they will always look consistent, no matter where they appear. For example, the brandmark and logo should be reproduced in full color—USAID Blue, USAID Red, and Solid Black—whenever possible. These colors serve as the source for our standard color palette.

These colors should be employed throughout our communications and are equivalent to the PANTONE® numbers listed in the table below. For four-color process printing (also known as full-color printing), refer to the CMYK values shown. For desktop publishing, such as Microsoft® Word or Microsoft PowerPoint®, refer to RGB (print/on-screen). For Web applications, refer to the RGB Web values or Hexadecimal Web values.

The PANTONE and CMYK values provided can be used on both coated and uncoated paper when printing. Although variations in color will occur, try to match the colors as closely as possible. For applications in color systems not included here, use the PANTONE values for color matching.

### PRIMARY COLOR PALETTE

Used for brandmark, tags, text, color fields, and accent colors. USAID Blue and black may be used as tints. USAID Red may not be used as a tint.



COLOR DEFINITIONS	USAID BLUE	USAID RED	SOLID BLACK
SPOT COLORS	PANTONE 280	PANTONE 200	PROCESS BLACK
CMYK	100C 72M 0Y 18K	0C 100M 63Y 12K	0C 0M 0Y 100K
HEXADECIMAL WEB	#002A6C	#C2113A	#000000
RGB WEB	0R 42G 108B	194R 17G 58B	0R 0G 0B
RGB (PRINTION-SCREEN)	0R 42G 108B	194R 17G 58B	0R 0G 0B

### SECONDARY COLOR PALETTE

Used for color fields and accent colors. Dark gray may be used for text, but light gray and light blue may not. The secondary palette may not be used as tints.



COLOR DEFINITIONS	DARK GRAY	LIGHT GRAY	LIGHT BLUE
SPOT COLORS	PANTONE 425	PANTONE 420	PANTONE 2717
CMYK	0C 0M 0Y 70K	0C 0M 0Y 15K	29C 12M 0Y 0K
HEXADECIMAL WEB	#666666	#DDDDDD	#336799
RGB WEB	102R 102G 102B	221R 221G 221B	51R 103G 153B
RGB (PRINTION-SCREEN)	102R 102G 102B	221R 221G 221B	157R 191G 229B

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*“Ann, which colors should I use in my graphs?”* You should start with your organization’s existing color palette.

Consultants, I suggest using your client’s palette, not your own. Show that you’ve gone the extra mile in customizing your work especially for them. This is one of the primary reasons that I’ve been running my own company for three years and am just now thinking about the branding and logo process—I simply haven’t needed to because my work has been produced for a specific client with their unique color palette. Also, there’s nothing gaudier in the consulting world than plastering your firm’s logo on every single page you’ve made. Focus on doing good work, and clients will hunt you down.

*“Ann, I’m on board with using our palette. But when I’m designing graphs in my software program, I can’t seem to pick out colors that are a close enough match to our logo. How can I eyeball the colors better?”* No eyeballing! You need to find your color codes from an existing style guide.

## **Locate Your Existing Style Guide**

Most organizations already have a *style guide* (a.k.a. *design guide* or *graphic standards guide*). Your guide might talk about your logo, colors, or fonts. Your guide might even contain writing guidance, like whether you’re going to call it *decisionmaking* or *decision-making* or *decisionmaking* and that you should spell out numbers zero through nine and use numerals for number 10 and up.

I’m going to show off [USAID’s Graphic Standards Manual](#) as an example today. It’s publicly-available, but more importantly, it’s the most comprehensive guide I’ve seen and is worthy of showcasing here. In 94 pages, the guide covers everything—the logo’s history, its proper placement on a page, instructions for selecting images, fonts, colors, and much more. USAID has staff and consultants located all over the world, so this detailed manual helps all those people stay on the same page.

I'm not saying you need a 94-page style guide. Most of you can cover everything you need in about five pages.

**MINIMUM PRINT IDENTITY SIZE**

A minimum size has been established for the Standard Graphic Identity to ensure legibility. This size is only intended to be used for business cards. For translation of the tagline into local language, a comparable but legible minimum size must be created.

- Minimum height of horizontal Identity = 10 MM
- Minimum width of horizontal Identity = 34 MM
- Minimum height of vertical Identity = 18 MM
- Minimum width of vertical Identity = 22.5 MM



**MINIMUM ON-SCREEN IDENTITY SIZE**

An absolute minimum size has been established for the identity to ensure legibility in all on-screen applications.

- Minimum height of on-screen horizontal identity = 70 pixels
- Minimum width of on-screen horizontal identity = 238 pixels
- Minimum height of on-screen vertical identity = 126 pixels
- Minimum width of on-screen vertical identity = 158 pixels



**FIXED PROPORTIONS**

To accurately reproduce the Identity, the logo and brandmark must be scaled and placed in relation to each other exactly as shown here.

- H = Height of USAID name and tagline
- W = Width of USAID in logo



**MINIMUM IDENTITY CLEAR SPACE**

A minimum area within and surrounding the Identity must be kept clear of any other typography (except the sub-brands, as specified in Section 3 of this manual) as well as graphic elements such as photographs, illustrations, thematic images and patterns, and the trim edge of a printed piece. More than the minimum clear space is encouraged if applications provide the opportunity.

Minimum clear space on all sides is equal to height of the name, regardless of the language of the tagline. Within the rectangle so described, the entire area is clear space.

- H = Height of brand name



**Are You Sure I Have a Style Guide?**

Smaller organizations—food banks, afterschool programs, etc.—simply don't have the budget to hire a graphic designer to produce a style guide. They usually have a logo, though. My next post will teach you how to find color codes from your logo using an eyedropper tool.

Larger organizations almost always have a style guide. You just might not know where to find it. Ask your teammates who work in communications. Their title might be something like *Communications Specialist* rather than *Graphic Designer*. Part of their job involves making sure that your externally-facing materials have consistent formatting so that you look professional.

Your communications person usually knows exactly where to find your style guide. It's probably hiding within your company's intranet, perhaps beneath a few layers of folders or behind a password-protected wall. These aren't private documents exactly—anyone can tell what your logo, colors and fonts are just by looking at your website—so I'm finding that more style guides are available through a quick internet search.

Consultants, just email your client and ask for a copy of their style guide. I usually write, "Hi Client, could you please send me your style guide? I want to make sure all the products we're making reflect your brand's colors and fonts. Your style guide is probably 5 to 10 pages long, and it probably lives on your intranet. Your in-house communications team might also have a copy." Half of my clients can find their style guide right away, and the other half need to ask their communications person (who can find the guide right away).

## **Find the Color Section of Your Style Guide**

Page 28 is the important one:

## COLOR PALETTE

USAID has standards for reproducing colors so they will always look consistent, no matter where they appear. For example, the brandmark and logo should be reproduced in full color—USAID Blue, USAID Red, and Solid Black—whenever possible. These colors serve as the source for our standard color palette.

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### PRIMARY COLOR PALETTE

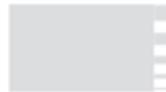
Used for brandmark, logo, text, color fields, and accent colors. USAID Blue and black may be used as tints. **USAID Red may not be used as a tint.**



COLOR DEFINITIONS	<b>USAID BLUE</b>	<b>USAID RED</b>	<b>SOLID BLACK</b>
SPOT COLORS	<b>PANTONE 280</b>	<b>PANTONE 200</b>	<b>PROCESS BLACK</b>
CMYK	<b>100C 72M 0Y 18K</b>	<b>0C 100M 63Y 12K</b>	<b>0C 0M 0Y 100K</b>
HEXADECIMAL WEB	<b>#002A6C</b>	<b>#C2113A</b>	<b>#000000</b>
RGB WEB	<b>0R 42G 108B</b>	<b>194R 17G 58B</b>	<b>0R 0G 0B</b>
RGB (PRINT/ON-SCREEN)	<b>0R 42G 108B</b>	<b>194R 17G 58B</b>	<b>0R 0G 0B</b>

### SECONDARY COLOR PALETTE

Used for color fields and accent colors. Dark gray may be used for text, but light gray and light blue may not. The secondary palette may not be used as tints.



COLOR DEFINITIONS	<b>DARK GRAY</b>	<b>LIGHT GRAY</b>	<b>LIGHT BLUE</b>
SPOT COLORS	<b>PANTONE 425</b>	<b>PANTONE 420</b>	<b>PANTONE 2717</b>
CMYK	<b>0C 0M 0Y 70K</b>	<b>0C 0M 0Y 15K</b>	<b>29C 12M 0Y 0K</b>
HEXADECIMAL WEB	<b>#666666</b>	<b>#DDDDDD</b>	<b>#336799</b>
RGB WEB	<b>102R 102G 102B</b>	<b>221R 221G 221B</b>	<b>51R 103G 153B</b>
RGB (PRINT/ON-SCREEN)	<b>102R 102G 102B</b>	<b>221R 221G 221B</b>	<b>157R 191G 229B</b>

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## Decode the Jargon in Your Style Guide

You've got your style guide. Now what?

- Style guides usually include both **primary colors** and **secondary**

**colors.** You'll recognize your primary colors right away. These are usually the two or three core colors from your logo. You might recognize your secondary colors from your website, newsletter, and other documents. These are colors that complement your logo. A professional graphic designer worked their magic and chose a blend of primary and secondary colors that match, i.e., the right blend of pastels, bright colors, or muted colors.

- **Color definitions** are the in-house name for your color. For example, they call their blue *USAID blue*. I see a few dozen style guides each year and only a fraction include color definitions.
- **SPOT colors**, aka **Pantone colors** tend to be used by your internal graphic design staff or your external graphic design consultants. They're also used in manufacturing, e.g., to make sure the physical objects you're building in your warehouse match the physical objects being built in another warehouse. You hold up your Pantone color swatches and make sure your plastic, metal, or fabric item matches the correct swatch. From my experience, Pantone colors aren't very common in style guides either, so don't panic if you don't see Pantone colors listed in yours. Just recently, I noticed that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control's style guide *only* listed Pantone colors—no CMYK, hex codes, or RGB codes—and it was so surprising that I feel compelled to share that rarity here.
- **CMYK** colors stand for cyan, magenta, yellow, and black. This is your photocopier machine's language. CMYK colors tell your printer which shades of ink to print on your papers.
- **Hexadecimal web** colors, or **hex codes**, are for your website. Hex codes begin with a number sign or hashtag, and they include six letters or numbers. These are the codes that your website people type into their HTML code to make sure your logo colors are reflected exactly right in your website. You might also find them in web-based data visualization programs. For example, [colorbrewer2.org](http://colorbrewer2.org) gives you the hex codes, CMYK codes, and RGB codes for each of their color palettes, but the hex codes are listed first. [Google Drive](#) products also ask for hex codes.
- **RGB** colors stand for red, green, and blue. This is Excel's main color language.

Don't have a style guide? Can't find it? In the next post, I'll teach you to

find color codes with an eyedropper tool.

Readers, is your company's style guide publicly available? If so, link to your guide here. They all look a little different, and the more varieties you see, the easier it is to decode your own.

### **More about [Ann K. Emery](#)**

Ann K. Emery is a sought-after speaker who is determined to get your data out of spreadsheets and into stakeholders' hands. Each year, she leads more than 100 workshops, webinars, and keynotes for thousands of people around the globe. Her design consultancy also overhauls graphs, publications, and slideshows with the goal of making technical information easier to understand for non-technical audiences.

## **6 Comments**

- [Ann K. Emery | How to Find Your Custom Color Codes with Paint](#) says:

**September 12, 2017 at 11:10 am**

[...] of my workshop participants are government employees who don't have or can't find style guides and/or they're not allowed to download eyedropper tools to locate color codes. Microsoft [...]

[Reply](#)

- [Ann K. Emery | Behind the Scenes: TechnoServe's 2016 Impact Report](#) says:

**December 5, 2017 at 4:55 pm**

[...] colors come from TechnoServe's style guide, but they do more than just reinforce the organization's branding. Colors are used intentionally to guide new readers through their

terminology so that the content [...]

Reply

- [Ann K. Emery | Giving Your Tableau Visualizations a Makeover: Custom Colors](#) says:

**February 21, 2018 at 1:31 pm**

[...] the colors you want to use. I suggest Adobe Color, which will allow you to upload a photo and get HEX codes (along with complementary colors and other fun things). Of course, you might be lucky and already [...]

Reply

- [Ann K. Emery | How to Find Your Custom Color Codes with an Eyedropper](#) says:

**March 7, 2018 at 1:25 pm**

[...] supposed to customize your color palette to match your organization's branding. You know you can find your color codes in your existing style guide. But what if you don't have a style guide? Or can't find it because it's buried within your [...]

Reply

- [Ann K. Emery | How to Enter Your Custom Color Codes in Excel](#) says:

**March 13, 2018 at 8:32 am**

[...] color palette. Don't worry—customizing your colors is an easy low-hanging-fruit edit. Locate your style guide, scroll down to the color section, and decode the jargon. If you don't have a style guide, or can't find it, identify your color codes with an [...]

Reply

- [Ann K. Emery | How to Visualize Workshop Evaluation Results](#) says:

**March 20, 2018 at 1:09 pm**

[...] would also use your own colors, not mine. Learn how to read your organization's style guide, locate your color codes with an eyedropper, or locate your color codes with Microsoft Paint. Then, [...]

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There are links to dozens of additional resources, too.

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