



PAINT COLOR CONFIDENCE

Choosing paint can be as fun as, well, watching it dry. With thousands of options, the selection process is often overwhelming. Experts weigh in to help cut the hassle.

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIAN HENN



FIND YOUR COLOR

Many popular decor styles are associated with a handful of shades, so start here if you want to lean into a vibe.

FARMHOUSE OR SCANDINAVIAN

Creamy whites, beiges, and browns



COASTAL OR TRADITIONAL Sky blues, navy, grays, and pure or creamy whites



MIDCENTURY MODERN OR BOHEMIAN

Terra-cotta, teal blues, emerald greens, and lime greens



INDUSTRIAL Chocolate browns, silvery gray, and charcoal



Trend Alert

Dusky, moody shades have been replacing the bright whites that once dominated so many rooms in our social media feeds. To balance out the darkness, bring in light-colored furniture and soft textiles, says Julie Dodson of Julie Dodson Interiors in Houston. Afraid of using a dark shade on all four walls? Consider just applying it to moldings, doors, a piece of furniture, or an architectural feature, like a fireplace.

A WORLD OF WHITES

So many whites, so little time to figure out the subtle differences between each. This basic hue can be the trickiest of all. You look at a swatch and think it's perfectly neutral, but once it's on the wall—oof!—it's yellow. To save you from hemming and hawing (and repainting), we polled designers for their favorites.

WARM WHITES

(THE PINK AND YELLOW END OF THE SPECTRUM)

White Dove

by Benjamin Moore

Polar Bear

by Behr

School House White

by Farrow & Ball

PURE WHITES

(TRUE NEUTRALS WITH NO DISCERNIBLE UNDERTONE)

Ultra Pure White

by Behr

High Reflective White

by Sherwin-Williams

Chantilly Lace

by Benjamin Moore

COOL WHITES

(THE LIGHT BLUE AND GRAY END OF THE SPECTRUM)

Decorator's White

by Benjamin Moore

Polar White

by Benjamin Moore

Du Jour

by Valspar

When you've selected the white that's right for you, stick with it throughout your whole house. That way, future touch-ups won't be a complicated matching game. When using white on walls, keep in mind that furniture, sunlight, overhead lighting, and lamplight may influence the appearance of the shade, so it's imperative you test it. (See "Test It Out," opposite page.)





Test It Out

A swatch is to paint what a three-way mirror is to a pair of jeans: It lets you “try on” paint and see it from all angles. Brush paint onto a 24-inch poster board, leaving a two-inch white border to keep the existing wall shade from skewing your perception. Move the board from wall to wall throughout the day to get the best sense of color. Beth Webb, an Atlanta-based interior designer, says you can also order 12-inch peel-and-stick swatches (\$6 each; [samplize.com](https://www.samplize.com)) in hues from four major paint brands. If you’re painting two rooms the same color, test the shade in both spaces, because lighting will vary, says Katie Davis, an interior designer in Houston, who learned her lesson the hard way: “My son’s room is a pretty gray-blue, and mine looks purple—even though they’re the same color!”

FINISH IS EVERYTHING

“Color never stands alone. Any kind of light—natural or electric—changes the appearance of every paint. The type of finish you choose also has an impact,” says Rick Watson, director of product information and technical services at Sherwin-Williams. Your choice will depend on what your needs are.

YOU WANT TO DOWNPLAY IMPERFECTIONS ON WALLS FLAT

Ideal for ceilings and low-traffic spaces, like a home office, this finish creates a uniform surface appearance, so it’s more forgiving of nicks and flaws. Because it reflects no light, your pigment may appear chalky. The big downsides? It scuffs easily and can be hard to clean.

YOU WANT EASY MAINTENANCE EGGSHELL OR SATIN

A cinch to clean and more durable than flat, these finishes are good for living rooms, dining rooms, and hallways. The slight sheen reflects just enough light to make colors appear more vibrant. (Satin is a bit glossier than eggshell.) Be warned, though, that it can be difficult to touch up small spots without leaving a patchy look—you may need to repaint an entire wall.

YOU WANT TO HIGHLIGHT ARCHITECTURAL DETAILS SEMIGLOSS OR HIGH GLOSS

Use one of these finishes for doors, trim, furniture, or other accent features you’d like to draw attention to. They’re also great for areas that are susceptible to mold, mildew, and stains, like kitchens and bathrooms. Dark shades tend to appear shinier in a glossy finish than lighter ones. Make sure your surface is smooth, as every imperfection will be super visible.

Tried-and-True Hues

If you just want someone to tell you which color to choose, here are industry insiders' go-to shades.



SWEET SLUMBER BY VALSPAR

"It's my no-fail blue that works everywhere. The color pairs exceptionally well with any neutral crown molding, but also with analogous colors, such as green and purple."

KEVIN ISBELL,
KEVIN ISBELL INTERIORS,
LOS ANGELES



PEPPERCORN BY SHERWIN-WILLIAMS

"Peppercorn is a good color when you want a moodier room. It's perfect in a sophisticated study, on cabinets in a bar area, or if you want the opposite of the all-white kitchen. Combine it with light-colored furniture and finishes, like a white marble counter in your kitchen."

JULIE DODSON,
DODSON INTERIORS,
HOUSTON



COLLINGWOOD BY BENJAMIN MOORE

"This taupe-beige gives a room a lot of warmth, and it works well as a neutral foundation without being too stark. I've paired this color with blush or blue-and-green accents."

KATIE DAVIS,
KATIE DAVIS DESIGN,
HOUSTON



TIME OUT BY BEHR

"This is great for a guest bedroom or formal dining room. It gives a space a traditional, inviting feel."

LINDA HAYSLETT,
L.H. DESIGNS,
LOS ANGELES



CRABAPPLE WINE BY VALSPAR

"A rich blend of purple and red, this versatile color goes well with cool blues and warm beiges. I'd use it to give drama to a powder bath or make over a well-worn piece of furniture."

STEPHANIE SISCO,
HOME DIRECTOR AT REAL SIMPLE



HAGUE BLUE BY FARROW & BALL

"This exudes drama and makes a small room feel like a jewel box. Painting everything, even the woodwork, creates instant glamour."

BETH WEBB,
BETH WEBB INTERIORS,
ATLANTA

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YOUR PAINT QUESTIONS, ANSWERED

On social media, we asked for your biggest challenges when it comes to picking a paint color, and we got an astonishing number of replies.

Below, a few helpful pointers for some of the most intriguing conundrums.

“Is the accent wall outdated? Where do you end one color and start the other?” ALICIA A., COHOES, NEW YORK

Wallpapered accent walls are becoming more popular than painted ones, but the latter aren't totally passé. To keep the treatment from looking busy, only accentuate self-contained rectangular or square walls.

“What neutral, trendproof color can be used throughout my home? Is there a standard white for baseboards, trim, and doors?”

KRYS A., ONTARIO, CANADA

Pick an off-white that plays well with your flooring or carpeting. With warm-toned floors (say, tan carpet or red oak hardwood), opt for a white that's fairly bright but not cold, like Sherwin-Williams's Greek Villa, suggests Lisa Moon, owner of Paper Moon Painting in San Antonio. Benjamin Moore's Simply White is reliable for trim and doors.

“I love the look of contrasting cabinets in kitchens. What are good color options? I see a lot of black, gray, and white, but I'd love more variety.”

LEAH B., KINGSTON, NEW HAMPSHIRE

The most successful combination is usually darker paint on lower cabinets and white on upper cabinets; this prevents colors from competing with each other. “A pale gray can be used instead of white,” Hayslett adds. For the lower half of your cabinetry, deep blues, like Sherwin-Williams's Indigo Batik and Benjamin Moore's Hale Navy, and rich greens, like Benjamin Moore's Backwoods and Cedar Mountains, are popular now, Moon says.

“My kitchen is open to my family room. Should I pick the same color for both?” KRIS B., ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

“Yes! This helps make the space feel bigger and cohesive,” Hayslett says. If you're set on varying the colors, “stick to shades on one strip from a paint deck,” advises Taniya Nayak of Taniya Nayak Design in Boston.

“All our trim is stained, and I want to paint it. Is that still the thing to do, or should I stay with the stained look?”

LUMI C., BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

We say go for it. “Unless you're in a mountain lodge, a true ranch house, or a heritage Craftsman, there's no reason to leave the trim stained if you don't like it,” Moon says. Painted trim can be just as classic and will brighten up your space. It doesn't occupy much visual square footage, but it does carry a lot of visual weight.

“Many of us worry about the longevity of our choices. Is there an average ‘your paint choice should last this long’?” EMILY B., CHICAGO

Updating every 10 or 15 years is inevitable. Paint is one of the more budget-friendly home upgrades, so it's a doable project for most homeowners every decade or so, Moon says.

“Compared with neutrals, do bolder colors hurt your chances at resale? Are there certain shades to use for a better showing?”

PETER L., TAMPA, FLORIDA

Nearly 7 in 10 members of the National Association of Realtors (NAR) recommend that a seller paint before listing. “There's a stronger reliance now on photos and video tours, and a fresh paint job will be apparent in the virtual world and in person,” says Jessica Lautz, NAR's vice president of demographics and behavioral insights. Most buyers can visualize their own things in a new space much more easily if they don't have to imagine a color change on the walls as well. Neutrals are the way to go, and the lighter the better, Moon advises.

