

# Using words to describe colours

Writing and editing content that includes subtle colour descriptors can be challenging.

## Principles

Compound colours – don't hyphenate:

olive green   navy blue

Colour combinations in which each colour has equal weight – use an en dash:

Larvae are grey–green, with a shiny, black head.

Adults have a yellow–brown back.

Compound adjectives that include colours:

- with modifiers based on other colours (e.g. creamy, bluish, reddish) – use a hyphen when before the noun they modify; no hyphen when after  
bluish–green wings   the wings were bluish green
- with modifiers based on shade or intensity (e.g. pale, dull, dark, light, deep) – use a hyphen when before the noun they modify; no hyphen when after  
pale–green stems   the stems were pale green

Lists of adjectives that refer to the same noun – use commas between the adjectives:

small, brown spots   spots that are small and brown

## Other examples of modifiers

To avoid any ambiguity, if a modifier is used with a colour to form a compound adjective preceding a noun, hyphenate the compound adjective. This applies whether the colour adjective in the compound is another colour, or a shade, intensity or hue:

They have a pale–cream panel on either side of the thorax.

Larvae have pale–red lines.

Pale–green to light–yellow spots appear on the upper leaf surface.

Bright–yellow patches give leaves a mottled appearance.

The defining symptom of rust is the presence of tan–to–dark–brown or reddish–brown spots on the leaves.

He bought a light–brown suit.

The people gazed at the deep–blue sea.

If a modifier is used with a colour as a compound adjective after the noun, do not use a hyphen. This applies whether the colour adjective in the compound is another colour, or a shade, intensity or hue:

Adults are bright green all over.

Eggs are dull purple.

Pupae are pale yellow.

Leaves are bluish green.

Larvae are initially creamy white but develop black marks.

Their hard wings are reddish yellow or reddish brown.

For a list of adjectives in which *and* is intended, use a comma when before the noun:

Bright, yellow patches give leaves a mottled appearance.

He bought a light, brown suit. [The suit was lightweight and brown.]

They looked out across the deep, blue sea.

Dark, slaty–grey larvae but larvae are dark, slaty grey

Adults are light–to–dark, olive green.

Adults have a dense covering of metallic, green or blue–green scales.

Brownish–red, dead spots occur in the yellow areas of the leaf.

Note: An author query will often be needed to determine what is being modified by what (e.g. deep–blue sea or deep, blue sea).