Biotext

Being precise in describing colour – in biological sciences and more

Biological sciences and other scientific disciplines often need to decribe colour precisely. These tips help ensure your descriptions are accurate and understood.

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 before the noun they modify; no hyphen 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 before the noun they modify; no hyphen 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

Modifiers

To avoid any ambiguity, if a modifier is used with a colour to form a compound adjective before a noun, use a hyphen:

Larvae have pale-red lines.

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

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 suit was coloured light brown.]

If a modifier is used with a colour as a compound adjective after a noun, don't use a hyphen:

Adults are bright green all over.

Pupae are pale yellow.

Leaves are bluish green.

Their hard wings are reddish yellow or reddish brown.

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

Bright, yellow patches give leaves a mottled appearance.

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

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

Consider what is being meant by the phrase to identify if you need a hyphen (e.g. deep-blue sea or deep, blue sea).