How to find the
perfect
color

Getting that just-right
color is part art, part science.
We'll show you. *Continued* ▶

How to find the perfect color

Hidden in your photo is the color palette you need. Here's how to get it out.

No single visual element has more effect on a viewer than color. Color gets attention, sets a mood, sends a message. But what colors are the right ones? The key is that *color is relational.* Colors don't exist in a vacuum but are always seen with other colors. Because of this, you can design a color-coordinated document based on the colors in any element on the page. Here's how.

Here's the situation: We have an academic schedule for a women's college to design, and for a photo we have this no-nonsense, freckle-faced model. The goal is to look fresh, alive and personal (no buildings and grounds shots) while conveying the sense that the program is serious and businesslike. A note of trendiness will be good. Color is involved in all of it.

Look close, closer, closest

Every photo has a natural color palette. First step is to find it and organize it. Zoom in on your photo, and you'll be astonished by how many colors you see.

At normal viewing distance (left) we see a few dozen colors: skin tones, red hair, blue eyes, blue jacket, but zoom closer, and we see millions! First step is to reduce all those colors to a manageable few; you want 16, 32, 64 tops. In Photoshop, first duplicate the photo layer (so you don't lose the original), then select Filter> Pixelate> Mosaic (right). A large Cell Size gives you very few colors; if you need more, reduce the size.

Pull out the colors

Now extract colors with the eyedropper tool. Work from the biggest color (the one you see most of) to the smallest. For contrast, pick up dark, medium and light pixels of each.

Work first on the big colors. These are the ones you see at a glance; her skin and hair colors and blue jacket. Then do the small colors—her eyes, lips, the highlights in her hair and soft shadows. You can see in this image a light side and a shadow side; it's subtle, but pay attention. Finish each area before moving on. Sort your results by color, then each color by value (light to dark). Discard lookalikes. You'll be thrilled by what you find.

Light side

Hair   Face

Shadow side

Hair

Jacket
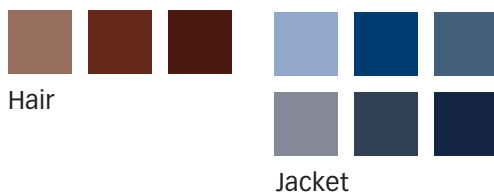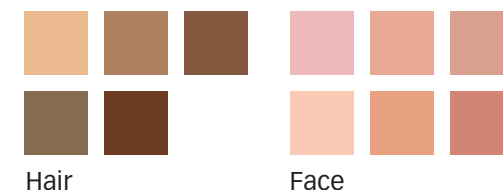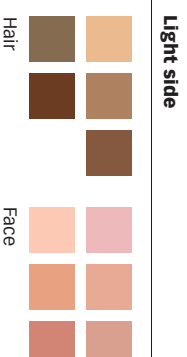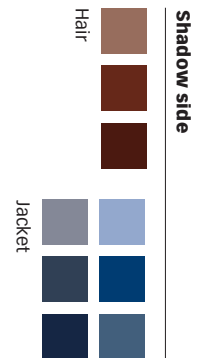
Try each one on

Place the photo on a swatch of each color. The results are pretty, aren't they? What's fun is that this will always look good, because the colors you're using are *already there.*

Warm colors

These are the warm colors—pinks, salmons, sepias, browns—of the red-haired model. The warmer colors make her look softer and more feminine. These colors would be good for a cosmetic message or a caring message.
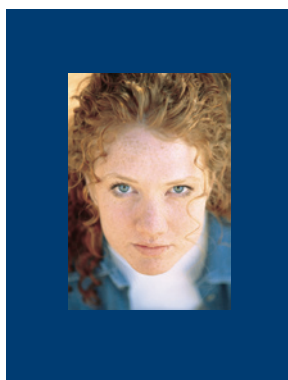
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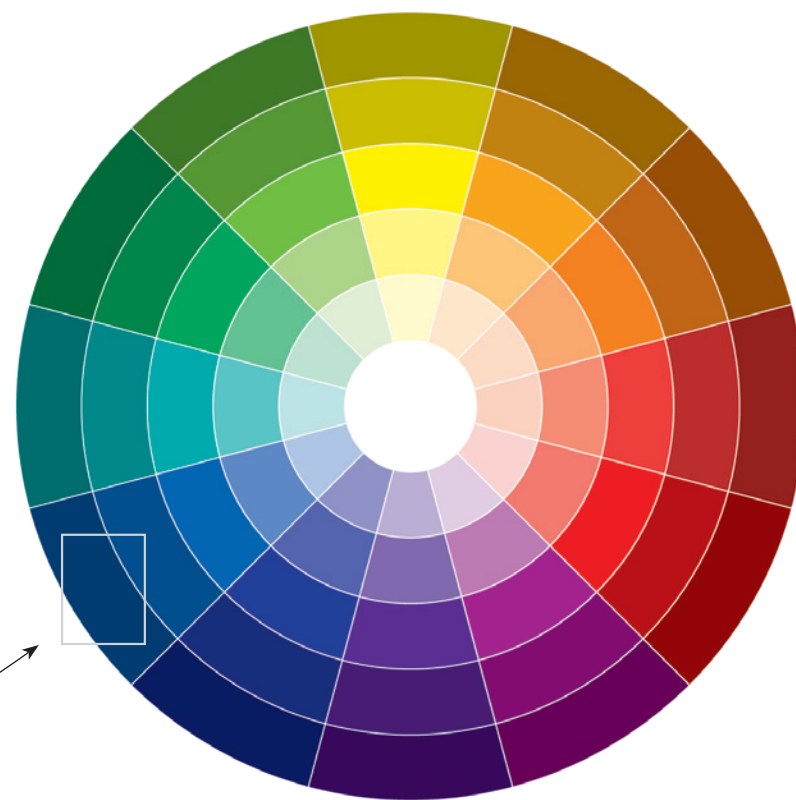
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Pick any of the photo's colors— let's use this blue—and find its general vicinity* on the color wheel. We'll call this the base color. We already know that the base color goes with the photo. Our job now is to find colors that go with the base color. Keep in mind that if type or other graphic is involved (pretty typical), you'll need both dark and light colors for contrast.

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From your base color, you can now create an exciting range of coordinated color palettes. Values can mix. For example, *medium* blue works with *light* teal and *dark* violet.

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First are the dark, medium and light values of the base color. This is a monochromatic palette. It has no color depth, but it provides the contrast of dark, medium and light that's so important to good design.
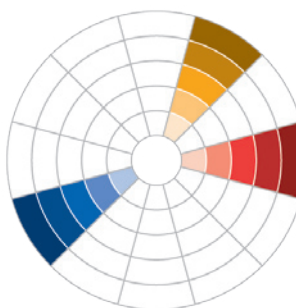
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One color step either side of the base color are its analogous colors. Analogous colors share undertones (here, blue-green, blue, and blue-violet), which create beautiful, low-contrast harmony. Analogous palettes are rich and always easy to work with.

Complement
Directly opposite the base color is its complement—in this case, the orange range. What the complement brings is *contrast.* A color and its complement convey energy, vigor and excitement. Typically, the complement is used in a smaller amount as an accent; a spot of orange on a blue field, as shown above.

Split complement
One step either way are the complement's own analogous colors. This palette is called a split complement. Its strength is in the low-contrast beauty of analogous colors, plus the added punctuation of an opposite color. In this case, the blue would most likely be used as the accent.

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This mixed palette is the same as the split complement but with more color. Its added range yields soft, rich harmony on the warm side and sharp, icy contrast on the cold side, an intense and exciting combination.

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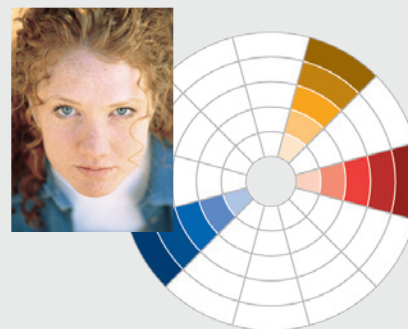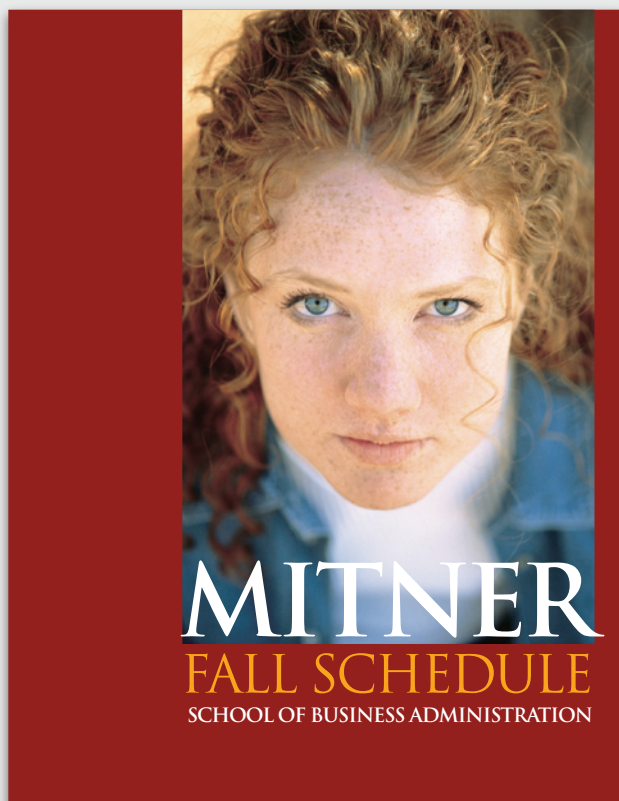**Opposite colors, different values**

Edit and apply

Design the page, and now it's time to make color choices. How to pick? The key is to think *message.* Weigh each against the original purpose by asking, *which colors meet the goal?**

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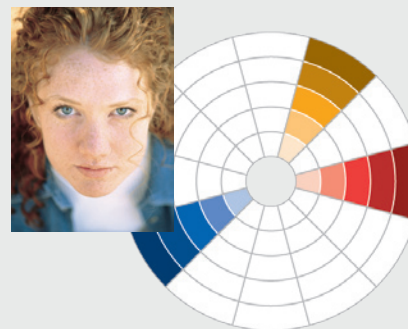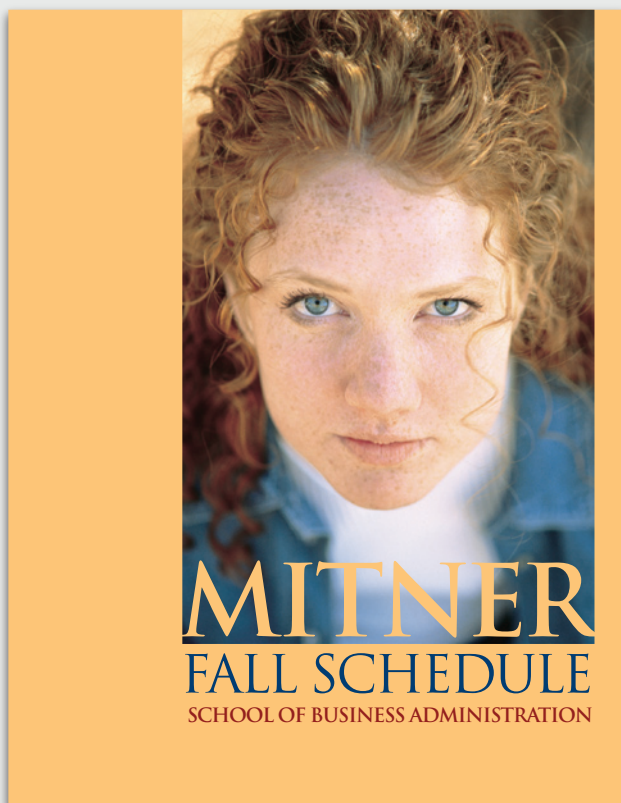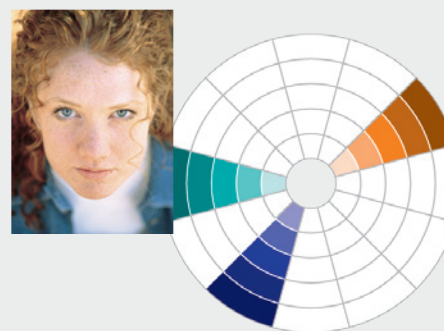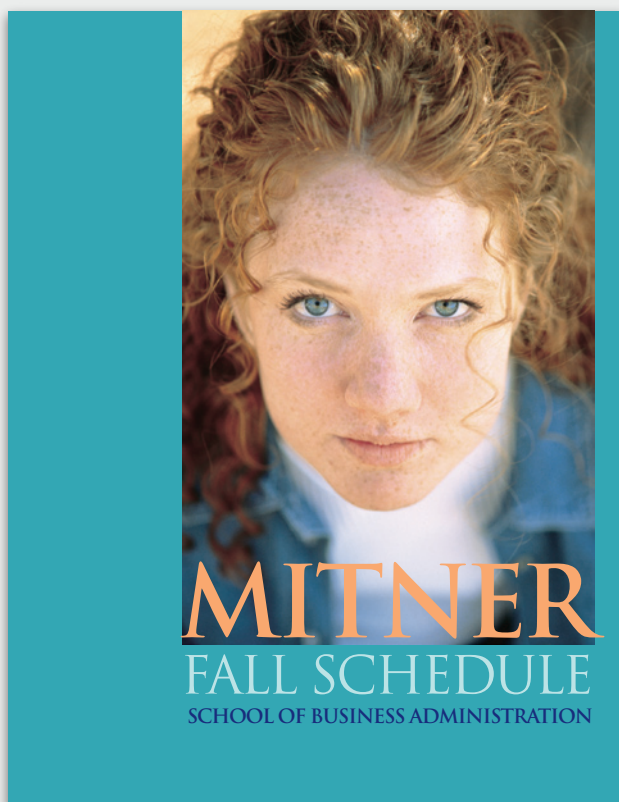
Serious—This palette began in the deep red of her hair, and for an accent took two steps toward yellow. Her eyes and jacket, which on blue receded into the background, now stand in contrast. Note that the red in her hair is a mere highlight, but filling the page it acquires real weight. Serious, warm, draws the reader in.

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Intense—The highlights in her hair carry this page; the blue accent lends contrast and depth. An unexpected point of interest is the yellow headline, which seems cut out of the photo. Dimensionally flat, this mix is intense and engaging (and would win the design contest), but it takes a daring client to choose it.
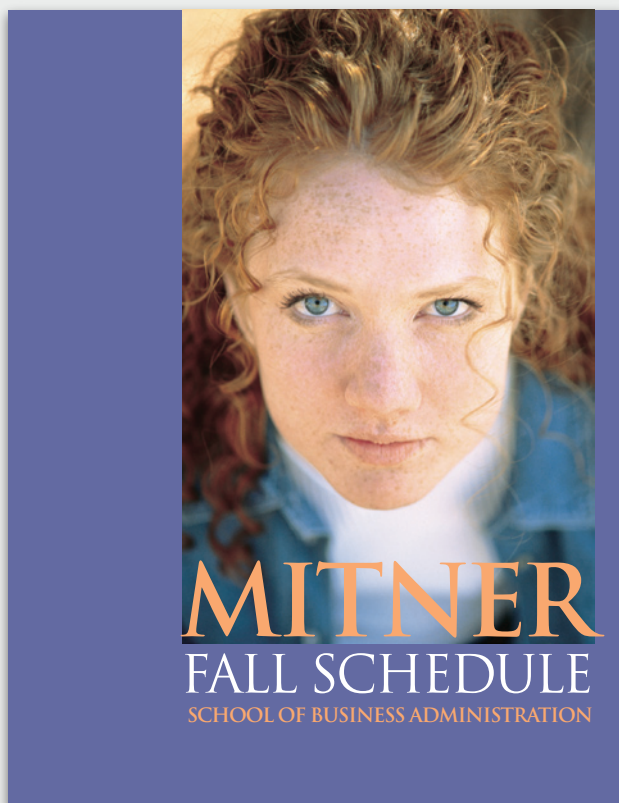
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Reminder: Values mix. You can always use dark, medium and light of any color. Note here both medium and light teal.

Pretty—One step the other way is blue-violet, another color not in the photo. Blue-violet is a shift toward red; the result is a slightly flatter image, because face, hair and background are now more alike. Blue-violet is a cool color normally associated with softness, femininity, and springtime (with undertones of freshness).

Article resources

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8	C**0** M**25** Y**60** K**0**
9	C**60** M**0** Y**20** K**15**
10	C**30** M**0** Y**12** K**0**
11	C**100** M**90** Y**0** K**25**
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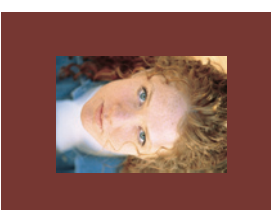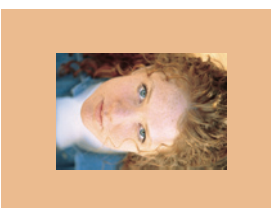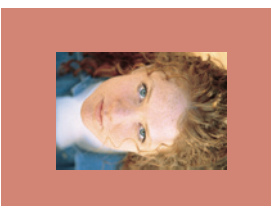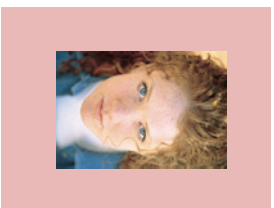
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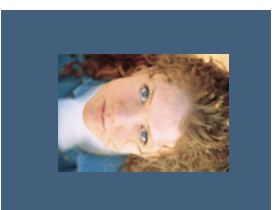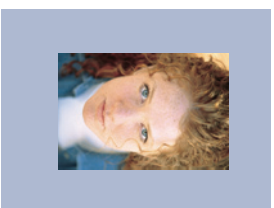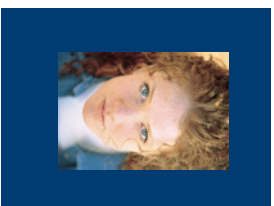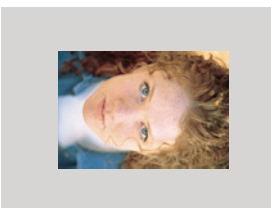
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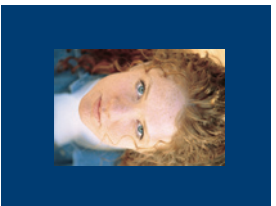
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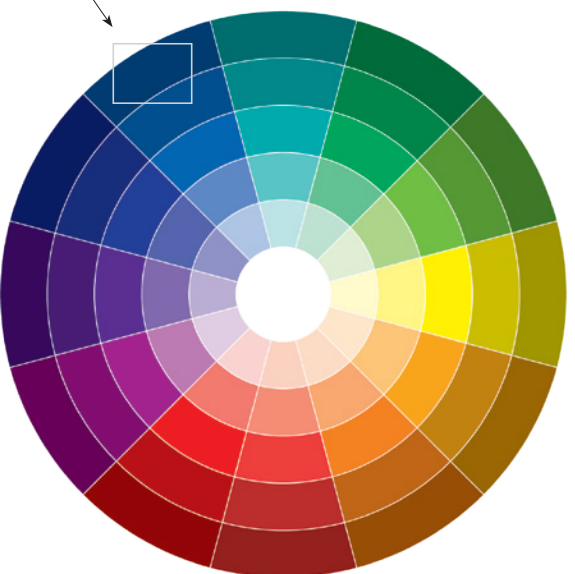
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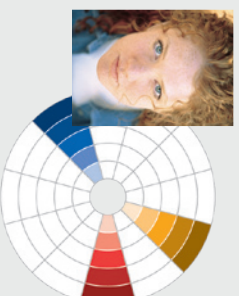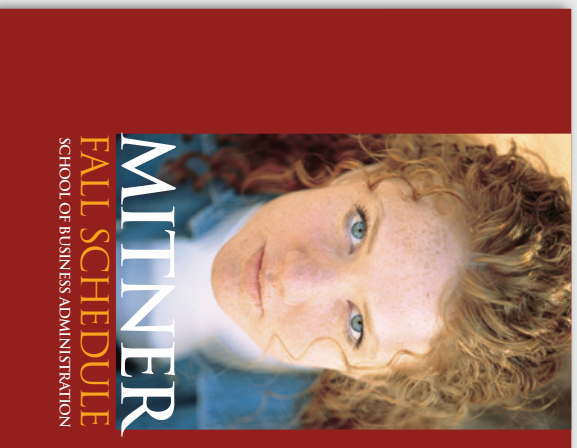
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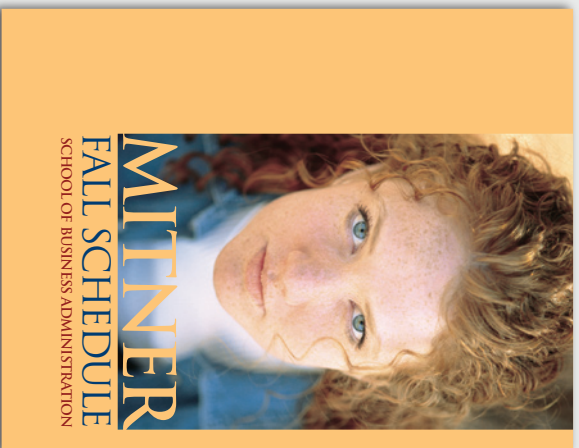
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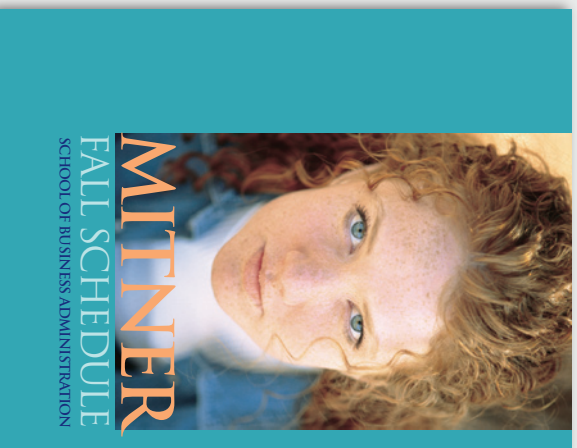SCHOOL OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

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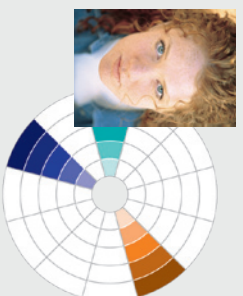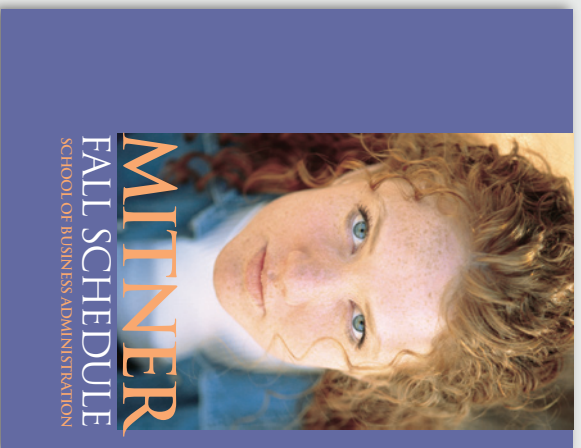
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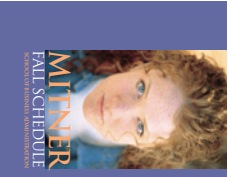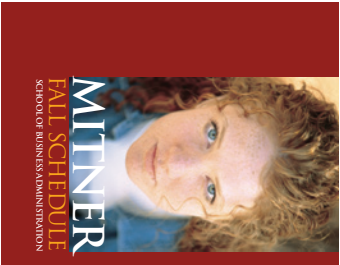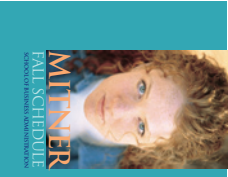
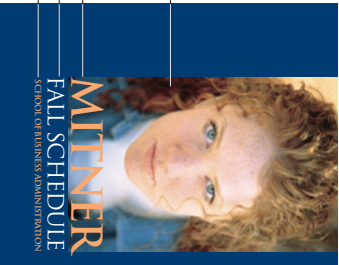**Reminder: Values mix. You can always use dark, medium and light of any color. Note here both medium and light teal.**

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10 C30 M0 Y12 K0
11 C100 M90 Y0 K25
12 C60 M50 Y0 K15

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