





Qualpal: Qualitative Color Palettes for Everyone

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Summary

qualpal is a [C++ library](#), command-line tool, [R package](#), and [web app](#) for creating qualitative color palettes with maximally distinct colors. It helps scientists and anyone working with data visualization choose colors that remain clear and accessible. qualpal features flexible palette generation from multiple input formats, such as the HSL and LCH_{ab} color spaces or fixed sets of RGB colors, and can adapt palettes to color vision deficiencies (CVD) across the full dichromacy spectrum at any severity. At its core, qualpal is a lightweight C++ library with no external dependencies, making it easy to integrate into other software and programming languages.

Statement of need

Effective visualization of categorical data requires color palettes with easily distinguishable colors—for both people with normal color vision and those with CVD. Designing a palette is therefore an optimization problem, where the goal is to maximize the minimum difference among the colors in the palette in order to make the palette as distinct as possible. This is a non-trivial problem, since the number of possible palettes grows exponentially with the number of colors in the palette. As a result, any given palette can, at best, be optimal only for a specific number of categories (colors). Since users may also have specific requirements in terms of, for instance, hue, lightness, saturation, adaptation to CVD, or background color, it is impossible to provide a set of fixed palettes to cover these needs. Therefore, there is a need for flexible palette generation tools that can accommodate a wide range of user requirements and preferences.

This problem has been tackled by, for instance, Glasbey et al. (2007), who developed an algorithm based on simulated annealing that is available in the Python package glasbey (McInnes, 2025). Other tools include iWantHue (Jacomy, 2013/2025), Colorgorical (Gramazio et al., 2016), distinctipy (Roberts et al., 2024), and Palettaylor (Lu et al., 2021). All of these packages rely on some metric to measure the distance between colors and use some form of optimization algorithm, such as simulated annealing, to find a set of colors that maximizes the minimum distance between them in the palette. We summarize these existing packages and their features in Table 1 and Table 2, respectively.

Table 1: Summary of related work and packages, in terms of their algorithms, metrics, input types, and implementation languages.

Package	Algorithm	Metrics	Input	Language
Glasbey	Simulated annealing	CIE76	LCH _{ab} , Fixed	Python
iWantHue	<i>k</i> -means, force vector	CIE76	LCH _{ab}	JavaScript
Colorgorical	Random sampling	CIEDE2000	LCH _{ab}	Python
distinctipy	Random sampling	L _{uv} approx	Pastel filter	Python

Package	Algorithm	Metrics	Input	Language
Palettaylor	Simulated annealing	CIEDE2000	Hue, lightness	JavaScript
qualpal	Farthest points	CIEDE2000, DIN99d, CIE76	HSL, LCH _{ab} , Fixed	C++

33 All of these existing packages have different strengths and weaknesses. qualpal is, however,
34 the first C++ library, CLI tool, and R package for generating qualitative color palettes. It is also
35 the first package to implement a farthest point sampling algorithm for generating qualitative
36 color palettes, and the only one to support multiple types of CVD. In addition, it is the only
37 package to support input from the HSL color space, which represents an intuitive way to
38 specify colors in terms of hue, saturation, and lightness. It also supports multiple metrics
39 for measuring color distance, including CIEDE2000 (Sharma et al., 2005) and DIN99d (Cui
40 et al., 2002), where the former is the current standard for color difference advocated by the
41 International Commission on Illumination (CIE) and the latter is based on Euclidean distances
42 in the DIN99d color space, which improves upon the CIE76 metric that uses the CIE_La_b color
43 space.

Table 2: Summary of features of existing packages, in terms of color vision adaptation (CVD), availability of a web app (Web), command-line interface (CLI), ability to extend existing palettes, option to adapt to a background color, and possibility to create palettes with related blocks (such as pairs).

Package	CVD	Web	CLI	Extend	Back-ground	Blocks
Glasbey	✓			✓		✓
iWantHue	✓	✓ ¹				✓
Colorgorical		✓ ²				
distinctipy	✓					
Palettaylor		✓ ³			✓	
qualpal	✓	✓ ⁴	✓	✓	✓	

44 Summary of the algorithm

45 Qualpal begins with a set of input colors. These can either be a fixed set of colors provided by
46 the user, one of the built-in palettes, or a subspace in the LCH_{ab} or HSL color spaces. In the
47 latter case, we use a quasi-random Halton sequence (Halton, 1964) to spread colors throughout
48 this subspace. The input colors are then (optionally) projected into a color space corresponding
49 to one or several CVD types, such as protanopia or deuteranopia, using simulation methods
50 described by Machado et al. (2009).

51 After this, we compute a full color distance matrix for the colors in the input set, using the
52 CIEDE2000 (Sharma et al., 2005) color difference metric by default. Finally, we run a farthest
53 point sampling algorithm loosely based on the work by Schlömer et al. (2011), which iteratively
54 swaps colors between a candidate palette and its complement set of colors until no swap
55 can improve the minimum distance between colors in the candidate palette. Optionally, a
56 background color can be included in this step, in which case the palette is optimized to be
57 distinct from it. The algorithm is deterministic (unlike the other algorithms from Table 1) and
58 takes roughly 0.1 seconds to generate a 10-color palette from a set of 1000 input colors.

¹<https://medialab.github.io/iwanthue/>

²<http://vrl.cs.brown.edu/color> (but down at the time of writing)

³<https://iamkecheng.github.io/palettaylor/>

⁴<https://qualpal.cc>

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