

# Can you see what I see?

## Understanding colour blindness or colour defective vision

Colour blindness implies people can only see in black and white and not in colour. This is not true, well for ninety-nine per cent of us anyhow. By us, I mean one in twelve males and one in 200 females (one million Australians). We see the world in our own colours, or perceived colours — not unlike normal people, except that some of our colours tend to merge. That is, certain colours like reds and greens, in my case, may look the same colour but vary in intensity or shading — a bit like a colour TV with the red and green tuning knobs broken.

Colour blindness is hereditary and it is not curable or treatable, therefore the medical community tends to pay little attention to it. Like my grandson today, when I was diagnosed with colour blindness, I was told that that was it. Can we do anything about it?

Most authors on the subject (usually not colour blind themselves) state that people with colour blindness will adapt without any serious inconvenience or problems. Colour blindness is inconvenient; it does affect every day living, and does limit career opportunities. How would you like it not to be able to read off the blackboard or out of a book and not know why? Or not to be able to distinguish ripe or unripe fruit or follow colour coded instructions. Perhaps for your clothes to be co-ordinated by some one else every day, or to

be excluded from a career with the police, fire or ambulance services, or as a marine or air pilot?

Some people may not even be aware of their colour perception problem. Did you know that up to forty-seven per cent of colour blind children leave school without being diagnosed? Most people with colour blindness suffer in silence. Why? Because non-colour blind people fail to understand colour blindness. I don't know how many times I am asked how do I differentiate between the red and green traffic lights (I'm colour blind, not an idiot — red at top and green at bottom). However, no one ever asks what colours we do see at the traffic lights? For me, the red is orange and the green is white! I was also asked on one occasion if I saw in outline — and that was by a doctor.

I have used the term colour blind, however, to be politically correct, the terminology is *Colour Defective Vision (CDV)*, which covers a number of specific colour defective conditions, the most common of which is red-green.

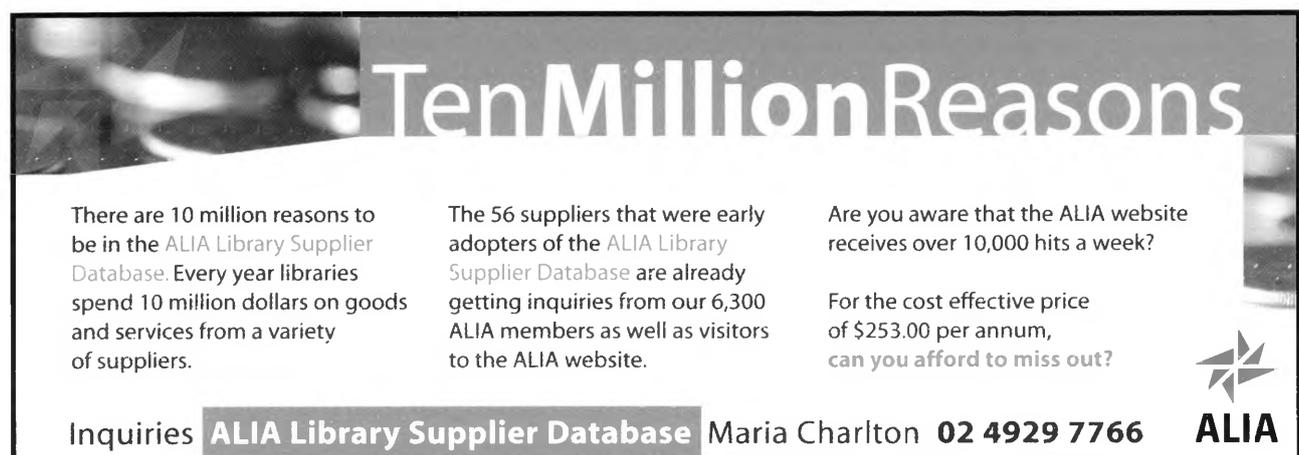
Today, at work and even leisure, with computers, maps, information, coding, timetables, weather maps, advertisement and games, colour is more prevalent than thirty years ago. Colour should be used to guide us through or to important information. The community, including teachers, employers and parents, fail to fully understand colour defective vision.

As I said before, a child may not be able to read off the blackboard or out of a book or follow colour-coded work sheets. Employees may get orders mixed up. Travellers may not be able to understand colour-coded train or bus timetables or routes.

What can you do? Well, designing for people with different types of colour defective vision is not easy, as you are not going to please them all. But at least by being aware there are colour deficiencies in the world, is a start, and keeping to some basic rules of colour then colour compensating, will result in a lot more people accessing the product and or information. By basic colour rules, I mean, use bright colours like yellow, black, blue and white. Keep away from low intensity colours on small bands. Colour compensate means you can still use red and green but not together. Instead use red or green with different intensity of colour. Use shading instead of colour or use secondary navigation clues.

If you would like to know more about Colour Defective Vision or if you need assistance. Please contact me at [doverton@optusnet.com.au](mailto:doverton@optusnet.com.au). I have also produced a hand book I wrote especially for parents, teachers, career advisers and employers which may be previewed on my web page at <http://members.optusnet.com.au/~doverton/>.

**Dennis R Overton**



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