



You Didn't See What I Saw?

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Miscommunication is the default. We don't understand each other. Conflict is unavoidable.

One person in ten is technically color blind, but even for “normal” people, the ability to perceive differences between close colors varies wildly. Eyes have different number of cones (color detectors) and rods (light detectors) and the cones and rods are distributed differently. In addition, even if everyone could see with the same eyes, each person's brain interprets the information differently. Some people have a predator's sensitivity to movement, while others detect incredibly subtle variations in shade and pattern.

Your lime-green car is painted with completely different pigments than the rind of an actual green lime. Those pigments will not only react differently to each individual's eye structure and neural interpretation, but also will react differently with different illumination. Your spiffy ride and sour citrus may match perfectly in bright sunlight but clash horribly under a yellow street light.

Your verdigris vehicle looks lovely in a pastel yellow garage next to a powder blue truck. Park it against a bright red wall and soon, without fully knowing why, you'll like it less. Spend three weeks shoveling semi-rotten lime rinds from the back lot of a margarita factory, and you'll hate your car like you've never hated anything before in your entire life. But the paint hasn't changed. Only your perception.

Nobody sees what you saw. Nobody else sees what you're looking at, right now. You don't even see the same thing you saw yesterday.

So instead of color, let's talk about words. Simple words, like “sofa.” I envision a brown leather couch long enough to nap on, always clean and comfortable. My Canadian friends imagine a blue-flowered davenport in a Victorian parlor. Great place for a lovely spot of tea. Everyone's TV grandmother is happy to display a plastic-coated icon in the front room. No napping allowed. College kids see the worn plaid stain they found on the curb

and hauled up to their apartment so their friends would have a place to crash on weekends. The same simple word conjures divergent imagery.

So what? This: Color should be easy, but the details are hopeless. Words are simple, but agreeing on what they actually mean, especially when used in combination with other words? Unlikely.

Flawless communication is demonstrably impossible, yet the standard response to missed communication is offense and outrage. Instead, any form of useful communication should be celebrated as a miracle. Important communication should take several different forms, with follow-up, until the meaning is clear.

I don't see the world you see. I don't live in the world you live in. That's the reality. Deal with it.

Phil Rink is a [Professional Engineer and Inventor](#), and he writes [Jimi & Isaac Books](#) for Kids