PRACTICAL GUIDE

Dark and Light Skin

How to expose both skin tones properly in the same shot



by Luis Taveras · Colorist

Why one blows out and the other gets lost

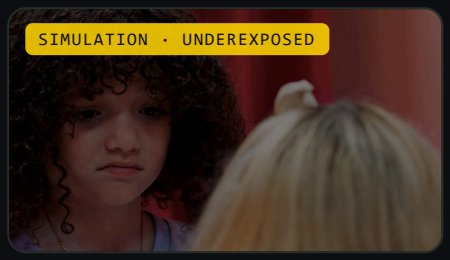
Light skin reflects much more light than dark skin. Under the same light, the camera sees them very differently: if you expose for one, the other suffers. And in color grading you can't recover what blew out, or pull detail out of a shadow that went to black.



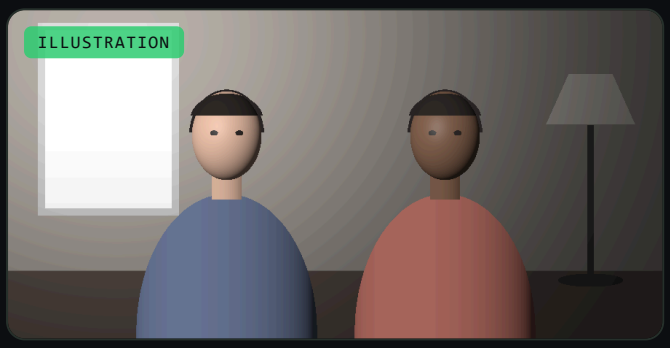
Bright areas blow out: no information.



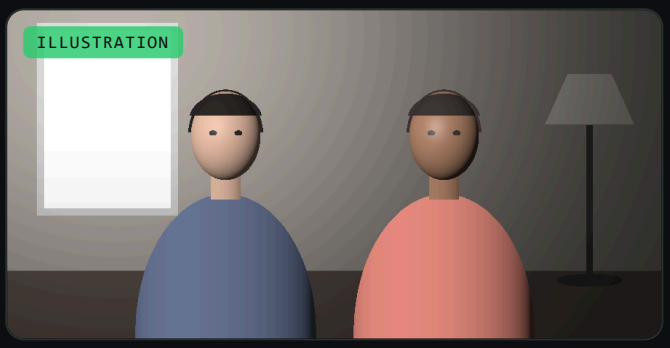
Correct exposure, with the final grade.



Shadows sink: skin loses detail.



Same light for both: light skin too bright, dark skin too dark.

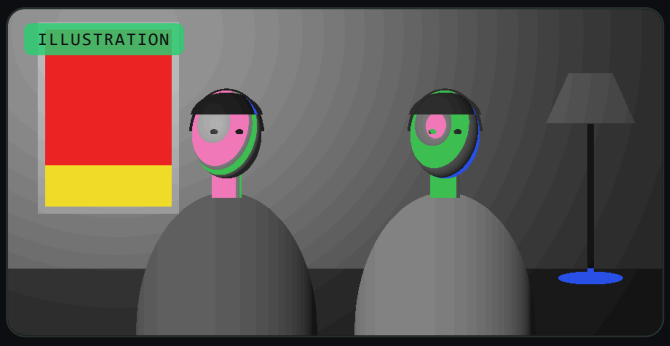


Light split: each skin in its place.

Frames from *Madre* and *La Fábrica de Bodas*, color graded by Luis Taveras.

1 · Measure properly

Use your camera's or monitor's false color or waveform. As a reference, light skin usually sits about one stop above middle gray (pink), and dark skin closer to middle gray (green). Every skin tone is different: what matters is that none blows out (red) and none sinks (purple/blue).



False color: light skin in pink, dark skin in green.



False color over a well-exposed real frame.



The same image overexposed: red and yellow appear.

Color guide (general reference; every brand has its own): **purple** black with no detail · **blue** shadows at the edge · **green** middle gray · **pink** ≈1 stop above gray · **yellow** almost blown · **red** blown out.

Want more on false color?

We have a full false color guide, with each brand's colors (Canon, RED, ARRI, Sony, Blackmagic…). Ask for it by commenting FALSE on the false color video.

Frames from *Madre* and *La Fábrica de Bodas*, color graded by Luis Taveras.

2 · Split the light

- [ ] **Don't raise the light for everyone.** Split it: each skin needs its own amount of light.
- [ ] **Bring the source closer to dark skin**, or move the camera so it sits a little closer to the light.
- [ ] **Give it a fill light of its own**: a bounce, a small panel or an LED with diffusion.
- [ ] **Bring light skin down a little** with a fabric, a diffuser or a flag.

3 · Watch the background

A very bright background behind dark skin fools auto exposure and makes the skin darker. A very dark background behind light skin makes it glow too much. Look for mid-tone backgrounds and lock exposure in manual.

Warm bounce and makeup

For dark skin, a soft, warm bounce light brings out its natural glow and texture. And be careful with makeup: a powder that's too light or too shiny makes skin look gray or greasy on camera.

If you have to choose, protect the highlights

It's better for skin to be a little darker with detail than blown out with no information. With detail, the colorist can lift it later and make it look natural.

Real films: each skin with its own light

In these frames every skin tone keeps its detail and natural color, because the light was planned on set.



Two skin tones in the same shot, neither blown out.



Grandmother and girl: detail in both skins, at night.



Dark skin with natural glow.



Light skin without blowing out.



Two actresses, two skin tones in the same shot.

Before you shoot: quick checklist

- [ ] **Measure each skin** with false color or a waveform.
- [ ] **Split the light**: fill for dark skin, flag or diffuser for light skin.
- [ ] **Pick a mid-tone background** and lock exposure in manual.
- [ ] **Check makeup** on camera: neither gray nor greasy.
- [ ] **When in doubt, protect the highlights.**

Frames from *Madre* and *La Fábrica de Bodas*, color graded by Luis Taveras.



Luis Taveras

COLORIST

Luis Taveras is a colorist, member of the Colorist Society International, with five feature films and more than 500 music videos. His credits include *Madre: a dos centímetros de ti*, winner of five awards at the 2025 New York Dominican Film Festival, and *La Fábrica de Bodas*, which premiered at the United Palace in New York. For him, color is the last place where a film can still change its emotion, and the skin always has to feel true.

5	500+	10
feature films	music videos	years in the craft

What I do

- Color grading for film
- Music videos
- Commercials and brands
- Cinema mastering and delivery (DCP)

Member, Colorist Society International · ID 98523302

DGCINE Film Agent · SIRECINE AC-PTA 18224

Planning your next shoot?

I'd love to collaborate with you on the color of your next project. Write to me and watch my demo reel.

DEMO REEL	vimeo.com/1224666204	WEBSITE	luistaverascolorist.com
EMAIL	contact@luistaverascolorist.com	INSTAGRAM	@luistaveras.colorist
YOUTUBE	@LuisTaverasColorista	LINKEDIN	luistaveras-colorist
IMDB	nm18370016		

#skintones #exposure #colorist #colorgrading #cinematography #luistaverascolorist