Cheat Sheet For Painting Under Different Kinds Of Light

The way you paint *should* vary significantly depending on the kind of light which is illuminating your subject. The way you paint an overcast landscape should not be the same as the way you paint a vivid sunset.

This cheat sheet is designed to provide you with some tips for painting under the different kinds of light. If you are ever unsure about how to paint a certain landscape, then you should try to answer these questions:

How *intense* is the light?	Weak	Medium	Strong
Where is the light coming from?	Overhead	Low	Ambient
What is the *color temperature* of the light?	Cool	Warm	Neutral

I will refer back to these questions throughout this cheat sheet.

Overcast Day

How *intense* is the light?	**Weak**	Medium	Strong
Where is the light coming from?	Overhead	Low	**Ambient**
What is the *color temperature* of the light?	**Cool**	Warm	Neutral

On an overcast day, the direct light from the sun is diffused by the clouds, so the intensity of the light is weak and the color temperature is usually cool.

In these conditions I would not use as many hard edges or strong highlights. This should mimic the *soft* appearance of the weather. For the colors, I would restrict the warm colors and paint the cool colors as normal.

John Singer Sargent, Coming Down From Mont Blanc, 1909-1911

Clear, Midday Sun

Painting under the clear, midday sun can be challenging as you actually have two different light sources: the direct light from the sun and the ambient light from the sky. You should treat these two light sources differently.

Direct Light From The Sun

How *intense* is the light?	Weak | Medium | **Strong**
Where is the light coming from?	**Overhead** | Low | Ambient
What is the *color temperature* of the light?	Cool | Warm | **Neutral**

Ambient Light From The Sky

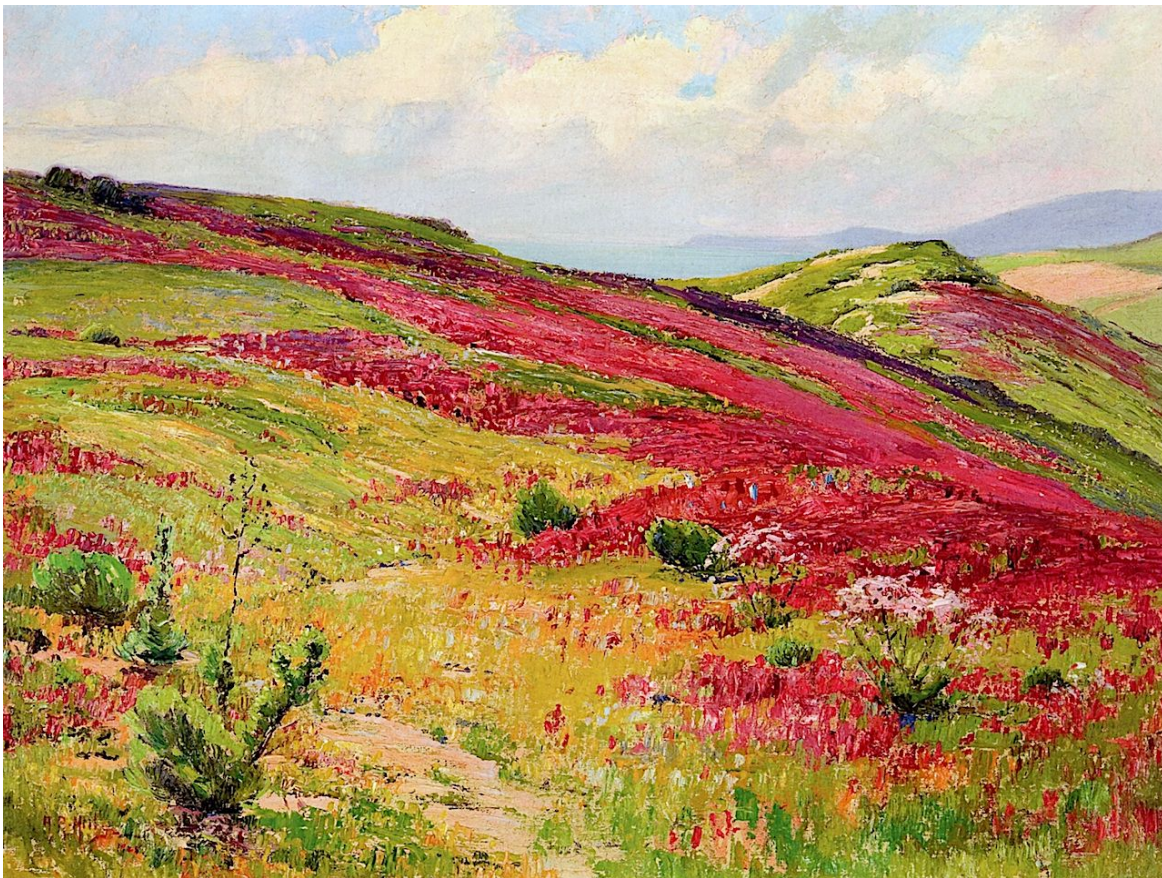|	
How *intense* is the light?	Weak | **Medium** | Strong
Where is the light coming from?	Overhead | Low | **Ambient**
What is the *color temperature* of the light?	**Cool** | Warm | Neutral

Under these conditions the direct light from the sun can be so intense that the lights are lost into brightness and the darks are lost into darkness. This is especially evident if you are painting from a photograph, as the camera will usually overexpose the lights and underexpose the darks.

The color temperature can also be difficult to judge as it is usually pretty close to neutral. For stylistic reasons, I suggest that you make an assumption that the light is either cool or warm and then paint under that assumption. This way you can ensure there is some kind of consistency throughout your painting in terms of color temperature.

Usually, I will assume the light is slightly warm and therefore paint with warm lights and cool shadows.

Anna Althea Hills, Radiant Spring, 1928

Sunset/Sunrise

How *intense* is the light?	Weak | Medium | **Strong**
Where is the light coming from?	Overhead | **Low** | Ambient
What is the *color temperature* of the light?	Cool | **Warm** | Neutral

During sunset/sunrise the sun is low-set and intense. The color temperature is also very warm, so your reds, oranges and yellows will appear at full strength, and the cooler colors will appear restricted.

You might also see a strong contrast between the lights and darks.

John Atkinson Grimshaw, Sunset From Chilworth Common, Hampshire

Storm

How *intense* is the light?   **Weak** | Medium | Strong
Where is the light coming from?   Overhead | Low | **Ambient**
What is the *color temperature* of the light?   **Cool** | Warm | Neutral

If I was painting a stormy scene, I would use mostly soft edges and relatively cool colors. I would also rely on suggestive brushwork to create interest throughout the painting, rather than saturated colors.

J.M.W. Turner, Snow Storm - Steam Boat Off A Harbour's Mouth, 1842

Night

How *intense* is the light?   **Weak** | Medium | Strong
Where is the light coming from?   Overhead | Low | **Ambient**
What is the *color temperature* of the light?   **Cool** | Warm | Neutral

Painting a night scene really depends on what kind of light source is present. It might be the moonlight or a street lamp. In general, I find the light is relatively weak and the temperature is cool. So I would paint with cool lights and warm shadows.

Ivan Shishkin, Forest