

contour

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Contour

Cool-toned colour placed to imitate a shadow, and so to suggest structure that is not there. Contour is the most technically demanding product in makeup, because it is not decoration — it is a **drawing problem**, and it fails whenever the drawn shadow does not agree with the room's actual light.

The principle

The eye reads three-dimensional form from the pattern of light and shade across a surface. Darkening an area makes it appear to recede; lightening one makes it advance. Contour darkens; [Highlighter](#) lightens; together they sculpt.

For this to work the shadow must be the **colour a real shadow is**. Shadows on skin are cool, grey-brown and slightly desaturated — never orange. That is the single difference from [Bronzer](#) and the reason a warm bronzer used as contour reads as dirt rather than depth.

Where it goes

Following the bone, not a diagram:

- **Under the cheekbone**, in the hollow, stopping well before the corner of the mouth.
- **Temples and the outer forehead**, to narrow the top of the face.
- **Along the jaw**, blended down into the neck.
- **Sides of the nose**, very lightly — the most over-done placement in the category.
- **Under the lower lip** to define the chin.

Every face is different and the placements above are conventions rather than prescriptions. The one universal is **blending**: an unblended contour is a stripe, and a stripe reads as makeup rather than as structure.

The lighting problem nobody mentions

Contour is a painted illusion of shadow. It works when the viewing conditions resemble the ones it was designed for — even, frontal light, a camera, a stage. In **strong directional daylight**, real shadows fall across the face and disagree with the painted ones, and the painted shadow reads as a grey mark.

This is why heavy contour, developed for photography and film, translates badly to a sunny street; and why the fashion for heavy sculpting subsided in favour of a lighter hand.

Formats

- **Powder** — most forgiving, easiest to blend, best over a powdered base.
- **Cream and stick** — most natural, because the colour sits in the skin rather than on it; applied before powder and blended with a sponge.
- **Liquid** — strong and fast; best diluted or used with a damp sponge.

Pick by base: cream contour over a liquid foundation, powder contour over a powdered one. Mixing the order is what causes patchiness.

Where it sits in the rules

Cosmetic in the US — FDA primary category (08), makeup preparations (not eye). Colour additives must be approved for the intended use, and certified colours must come from **FDA-certified batches**. The pigments used — iron oxides in cool-shifted blends, sometimes with a trace of black or ultramarine to cool them — are standard.

Nothing in contour triggers drug status. It is a straightforward cosmetic, which is worth noting in a catalogue where so many neighbouring products are not.

Shelf life

Powder: **18–24 months** after opening. Cream and stick: **12 months**. The failure mode for a pressed powder contour is the glazed film that forms when a brush carrying sebum returns to the pan repeatedly — scrape it back. Cream sticks left in a hot car melt and re-set with a changed texture that no longer blends cleanly.

Related

- [Makeup](#) — the shelf this sits on, and the rest of it.
- [Cosmetics](#) — what the label is legally allowed to say, and the full catalogue.
- The rest of *Colour and contour* — [Blush](#) · [Bronzer](#) · [Highlighter](#) · [Face Paint](#) · [Body Paint](#) · [Leg Makeup](#).
- Regulatory statements here follow the FDA and EU sources listed on [Cosmetics](#), read 16 August 2026.