Mixing flesh tones in oil paint can be a tricky business; getting just the right shade can sometimes seem impossible. In this mini-guide (or ‘cheat sheet’!) I’m going to give you a series of quick hints and tips that should have you painting portraits with confidence in your colour mixing!

Red + White
You could call this the childish approach because it’s what children tend to do when they paint pictures of people – they mix red and white to give them a lovely pink colour.

Here I’ve mixed titanium white and cadmium red...

On the canvas it doesn’t look too bad.

Let’s see what it looks like on my hand...

Wow! That’s pretty luminous!

Testing the colour before you put in on your canvas is essential. You can do this next to your reference picture so you can match your colours.

I think we’ve got a bit of work to do here, so let’s carry on mixing!

Adding Yellow
Let’s add some cadmium yellow and a bit more white into our mix.

This is a much warmer colour, but it’s not a natural skin tone.

More mixing needed!
Naples Yellow
I absolutely love Naples Yellow when I’m mixing flesh tones. I’m going to add some, along with more white, into our existing mix.

You can see how it’s much lighter in tone than our previous two mixes.

You might think that this still looks too light on the back of my hand, but this is actually really useful for highlights.

Now we’ve mixed our lightest tone, let’s mix our darkest tones...

Yellow Ochre + Burnt Umber + Ultramarine Blue
So taking our lightest mix, let’s add in the three colours above. You may think it’s odd to add blue when mixing a flesh colour, but remember we have veins!

That’s so close you can hardly see it on my hand!

Rose Madder
We’re going to finish with a mid-tone that’s a little warmer. For this I’m going to add some rose madder to our darkest tone. If we use the blue for veins, we can use the red to represent our blood vessels.

This is very similar in tone to my previous mix, but it is much warmer. By adjusting the quantities of each, you’ll find you have a very versatile palette of flesh tones.
The Basic Flesh Tone Cheat Sheet

1. Cadmium red + cadmium yellow + titanium white
   *This is your starting point*

2. **Add:** Naples yellow + white
   *This is your highlight tone*

3. **Add:** Yellow ochre + burnt umber + ultramarine blue
   *This is your cool, dark tone*

4. **Add:** Rose madder
   *This is your warmer mid-tone*

Darker Skin Tones
If you’re painting darker flesh you might want to add in burnt umber and burnt sienna, but don’t fall into the trap of thinking you don’t need to mix you light, mid and dark tone too!

Look at this lovely picture. The girl on the right has a wonderful rich colour to her skin, but there are plenty of highlight areas – if you overlook those, her face will end up looking very flat.

Reference Material
In the same way that dark flesh has lots of highlight areas, light-coloured flesh can be very dark! Let’s have a look at this reference photograph...

The lighting is such that we have extremes of tone – our highlights are almost pure white, our darkest darks are very intense, and we have a wonderful peach mid-tone.

So when you use reference material bear in mind two things:
- Keep your lighting consistent or it will completely change the colours in your portrait.
- **Always test your colours!** Stick your reference to a piece of paper where you can compare the colour on your palette to the colours within your photograph.