

Bedtime Tales: Good Light, Dear Reader, Good Night

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Do you read in bed? Ask that of the next 100 people you meet (all right, the next 10 persons), and you'd likely come up with a full range of answers, from "always" to "sometimes" to "never," with perhaps a "none of your business" thrown in. But if you are among those who do (after all, reading in bed is not like eating crackers in bed), or if you are one of those who would if you could do it more comfortably, then what follows should make interesting bedtime reading for you.

So 'fess up. Do you find that, in order to have the light fall onto your book, you have to contort yourself into a pretzel-like, hard-to-maintain position? This is often the case with bedside table lamps. It also can be true for those who have a "pin up" or wall lamp mounted to the headboard. The

use of a swing-arm lamp – either wall mounted or as a table lamp – can help. But all too often the swing is not great enough to overcome the basic problem.

Moreover, if you have a bed partner, can you read in bed without disturbing him or her? The common problem with ordinary lamps is that they create so much spill light that your partner trying to get some sleep probably can't. But, aha, you say, how about using "book lights," those mini lights (corded or battery powered) that clip onto the book itself and casts very little spill light? Well, some people like them, but others find them cumbersome. They require set-up and take-down with every use, and there's either the annoyance of another entangling electrical cord or the need for repeated battery replacements.

For the habitual, dedicated late-night reader, there are better solutions for achieving a comfortable bedtime reading environment. One employs the use of a halogen light source (say, a halogen MR16 or MR11) projected as a narrow spot light. The lamp can be mounted into a recessed ceiling can, on a short track or into the bed canopy as a mono-point light.

In a two-person situation there should be separate units, each with its own easy-to-reach switch. Light-dimming controls would make the system even more flexible.

The placement of the light source is critical to a successful reading-in-bed set-up. Most bed-reading lights are set too close to the head of the bed. Consequently, the light falls in a pattern that causes your head to cast a shadow onto whatever



Recessed ceiling can – probably the least conspicuous good source light



Ceiling track light – integrated lighting becoming part of the visual design



The bed canopy light – a well integrated reading light

you're reading, forcing you to turn your body in corkscrew fashion to unblock the light. This may be okay for short periods but becomes quite unacceptable over an extended time. The answer here is to move the light source a minimum of 24 inches and a maximum of 36 inches (we prefer a happy medium of about 30 inches) away from the head of the bed toward the foot. The result will be unblocked light on the reading material that, in turn, will permit you to assume a wide variety of comfortable reading positions.

A second approach substitutes a fluorescent light source for the halogen incandescent. (For general discussions on the relative merits of each of these types, we refer you to our earlier articles entitled [The Lay of the Land in Lighting](#) and [What's](#)

[Good About Fluorescent Lighting?](#)) Here we'll limit ourselves to just the main differences. For starters, halogen light can be tightly beamed, which means the lamp can be placed some distance away without spilling stray light all over the place. This is a good thing because halogen is also notoriously hot burning so you'd probably wouldn't want to get too close to it anyway.

Fluorescent lamps by contrast cast a diffused light that requires a close placement to the user to achieve a small pattern with little or no spill light. This presents no problem because fluorescents generate little heat. So here we can use a table or a wall-mounted fixture with a series of arms and swivels of the type often seen on draftsman's tables to bring the light to within a foot of the book. What works well

in this case would be a 9- to 13-watt compact fluorescent lamp in a shielded and baffled fixture. Whether wall-mounted or set on a table the fixture must be flexible enough to allow placement of the light directly over the book while you assume any comfortable body position you choose.

So which one to pick, halogen or fluorescent?

That's mostly a matter of personal preference and budget. The halogen approach tends to produce a less-conspicuous installation that fits more transparently into your existing decor. But because that installation might also be a bit more complicated, it could cost a little more. The fluorescent approach allows flexibility in positioning the light. And with the use of the new, compact, triphosphor-coated fluorescent now coming onto the market, you'll get man-made light of the highest quality that, at the same time, requires the least amount of maintenance. ■

About the Author

Bill Joel received his B.A. from Brown University with creative design courses at the Rhode Island School of Design. He did further studies in interior and lighting design at the New York School of Design and Pratt Institute.

A professional member of AID-ASID from 1963 to 1993, Bill received a Fellowship from ASID in 1978. In 1992, he became one of the first Certified Interior Designers of the Commonwealth of Virginia. His work experience includes residential, commercial and institutional remodeling and new structures, as well as a number of feasibility studies, all with an emphasis on effective, energy-conscious, quality-lit environments. For more details, consult *Marquis Who's Who in America*. Bill has also served as a member of the FIDER Board of Visitors and Accreditation Committee, Foundation for Interior Design Education and Research; set and lighting designer for the Richmond Forum and Barksdale Theatre; and guest speaker on various radio and TV spots. Bill may be reached at Rich@RichArtCo.com.



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