

Ask Jon Eakes

Improving lighting for reading.

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"Our kitchen requires 3 to 5 light switches on to be able to read. The lighting is terrible even though we painted the cabinets white and added new fixtures. We don't know how to improve it. a skylight (roof not a very steep level) take down center hanging cabinets ??? or take down wall between dining room (behind maple hutch)."

"We live with lights and miss natural sunlight. The sun rises in front (dining room) and goes down in back (kitchen, family room). There is a approx. 2 ft. overhang around the house. I find that without the natural light my energy level is much lower. Might be in my mind as I love bright rooms but this is what I feel.

Hope you have an idea that we can have done. We are retired and spend a lot of time here so would like to turn off some lights.

Judy and John

Hello Judy,

Thanks for the photos, they really help. First, note that many of your lights are under the cupboards, great for working at the counter but almost useless for the rest of the room. Actually the light directly over the table appears to be your only "reading" light in the kitchen, and the table lamp the only reading light in the dinning room. Sure a skylight, even one narrow one for each room could be great to generally brighten up the place -- but remember that it doesn't do much on a cloudy day and nothing at night so you can't really consider a skylight a "reading" light -- just a great rather natural "mood" improver for the rest of the day. In fact, for reading, bright sunlight is often more of a blasting hindrance than an aid.

Take a look at your photos where the lights are on and you will see that they are quite yellow. The very first thing I would do is to replace all your bulbs with "full spectrum" bulbs, also sometimes called "daylight" bulbs. They give off a very white (rather than yellow) light and suddenly improve the contrast on a written page. They also give you the sense of that "sunshine" feeling. I won't live without them in my office.

Second, the three glob ceiling fixture looks like it hangs over your heads perhaps even creating a shadow on the table from your head. If possible, tilt them to shine over to the opposite side of the table, or replace it with some kind of track light that would allow directable spots. That way you can shine onto the book or the dinner plate from the centre or from the other side, coming in under your head.

By the way, reading lighting is always best from a health and ergonomic point of view if it comes over the non-dominant shoulder -- that is to say over the left shoulder for right handed people and over the right shoulder for lefties. This keeps it out of your eyes, avoids reflection from the book into your eyes but floods the page with clear contrast -- the key to easy reading. The left right thing is because we tend to tilt both our bodies and our books one way or the other according to our dominant side. That table lamp with a cute designer shade (I am more practical than designer) could be traded out for a specific reading lamp that actually directs the light over your shoulder onto the book. Why do you think all "student lamps" are "directable"? Actually this could lead to the most comfortable lighting of

all for reading, a rather toned down room (little light coming into your eyes, hence your iris doesn't close down) with a low powered but full spectrum white light coming over the shoulder fully lighting the book. This allows your eyes to be wide open with no glare from the room or the book but maximum black white contrast on the reading material. Some people discover that they don't need their glasses under these ideal conditions.

Along these lines, note that your sofa is placed looking directly at the bright patio door. This is terrible for daytime reading. Your book is shadowed dark while that sunshine is shutting down your eyes. A reading chair across from the TV tucked between the patio door and the kitchen counter and pointed into the room would give you that bright sunshine over your left shoulder -- bingo, you will enjoy daytime reading more. Don't let designer furniture layout concepts control your life -- juggle things around to put nature on your side.

I hope this helps

jon

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