

Expert Interior Lighting Tips

By: Sarah Stebbins

Looking to create a flattering glow yet still have enough wattage to see what you're doing? This speedy lesson in lamps, fixtures, and bulbs (plus some room-by-room tips) will illuminate the way.

What Kind of Lighting Does Each Room Need?

There are two rules of thumb: You should have a mix of light sources at different levels to create a flattering ambience, and you need appropriate task lighting for whatever you do in that space (reading, sautéing, getting dressed). Here are tips for five key spots.

Living Room

Light three of the four corners, focusing one of those lights on an object (art, a plant, a striking chair). Use a combination of table lamps and floor lamps, some with a downward glow and some that shine upward. Allow for reading in as many seats as possible with down-glowing lamps on three-way switches. If you have an overhead fixture, put it on a dimmer.

Dining Room

To draw people in, make the table the brightest spot in the room. Use a chandelier or a pendant above the table, limiting the total wattage to 100. Elsewhere in the room, indirect lighting is best—it's relaxing and flattering. Give the space a subtle glow with a pair of small table lamps on a sideboard or matching sconces on the wall above.

Kitchen

Focus on overhead lighting (on a dimmer that you can crank up when cooking), and add lower sources to illuminate work surfaces. Use pendants, under-cabinet lights, or a sturdy table lamp (kept away from the sink).

Bedroom

Aim for a cozy, insular atmosphere: Place reading lamps or sconces by the bed—but not pointed directly at it. If you have recessed or track fixtures, angle them away from the bed, toward the dressing area. On a low table, include a small, intimate lamp with a tinted low-wattage bulb to mimic candlelight.

Bathroom

The best choice for applying makeup is sidelights, such as a pair of sconces flanking the mirror. An overhead light helps fill in any shadows on your face and also fully illuminates the room (important when cleaning). In a large space, you might also want a light directly over the shower.