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## Table Lamp Design

Cooperative Extension South Dakota State University

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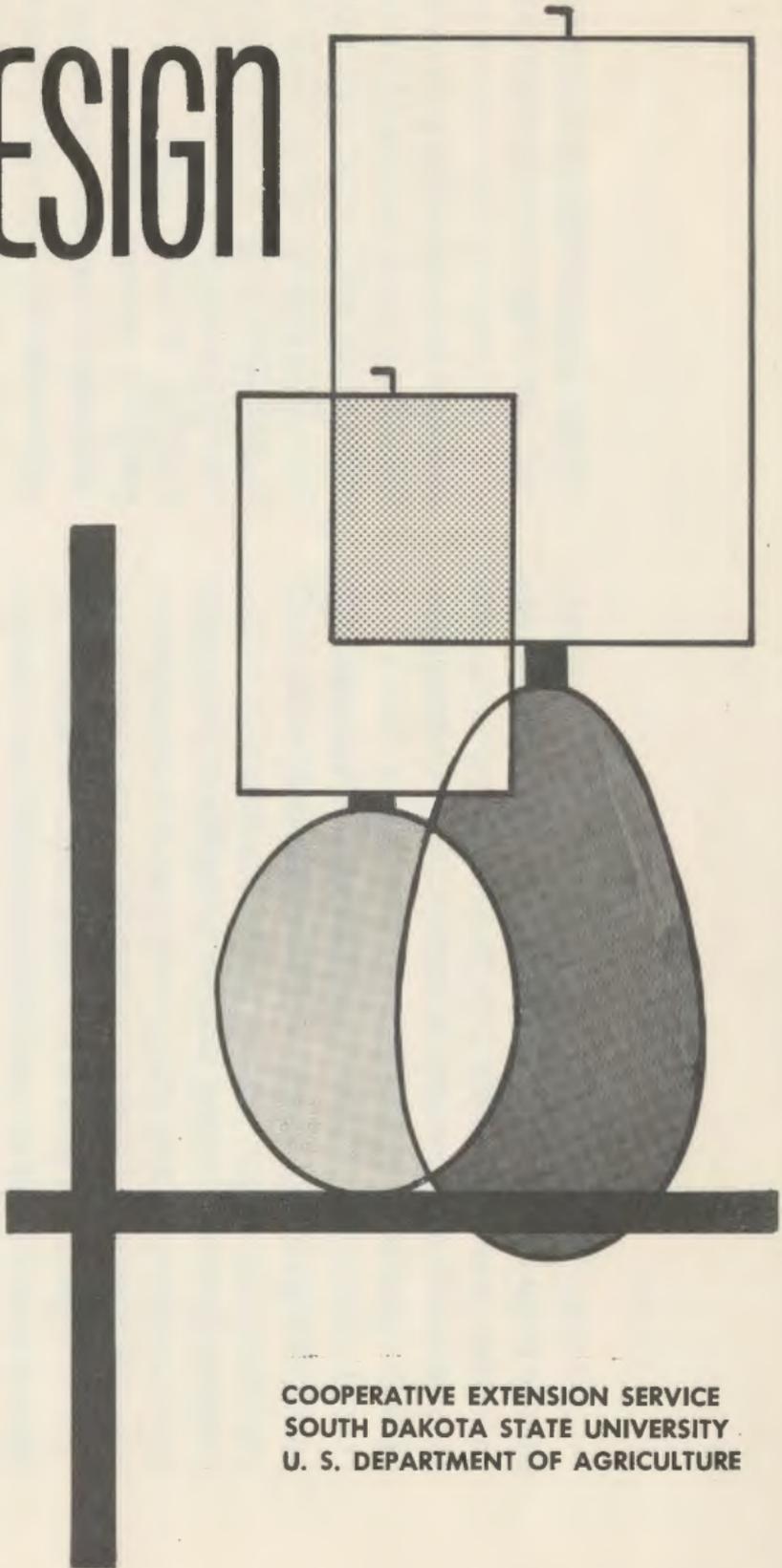
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# TABLE LAMP DESIGN



COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE  
SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY  
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

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# TABLE LAMP DESIGN

by DONNA M. SPOONER, extension home furnishings specialist

Lamps, properly used, can add more magic to a home than Aladdin's lamp. They contribute more to the spirit of a room and can influence and enhance the atmosphere of a home more than any other decorative accessory. Consider them as sound an investment as your furniture. They are an integral part of a furniture grouping, and their bases and shades should contribute to the loveliness of the total room decor. Although good lighting is their primary purpose, lamps should be decorative as well as functional. They should look as well lighted as unlighted.

## FUNCTIONS OF LIGHTING

Few people have really adequate light where they need it. Consider the functions of good home lighting:

1. **General lighting**, which provides the over-all "background" effect, is supplied by lighted valances, wall brackets, floor and table lamps. Ceiling fixtures function as "fill-in" lighting and serve to soften undesirable glare.

2. **Focal or task lighting** is carefully chosen to meet specific visual needs—sewing, reading, studying, etc.

Good lighting can dramatize and lend charm to home decorating. It is as possible to create the desired mood or atmosphere with a well-planned lighting system as with flickering candle or crackling fire. To achieve a good lighting plan specific lighting recommendations should be followed. Remember these key elements of good lighting—where, how much, and what kind.

## NUMBER OF LAMPS

In living rooms about one-half the light may come from floor and table lamps and the other half from hanging fixtures and fluorescent valances and brackets.

One portable lamp provides enough light for only one particular activity such as reading or sewing, because it can light only a relatively small area or center—up to about 40 to 50 square feet. Five lamps are considered adequate for an average-sized

living room—240 square feet or a room about 12x20 feet. A larger living room with more centers may require six or more lamps to provide adequate task-lighting at centers. Each lamp should contribute to the general lighting of the entire room.

## LAMP PLACEMENT

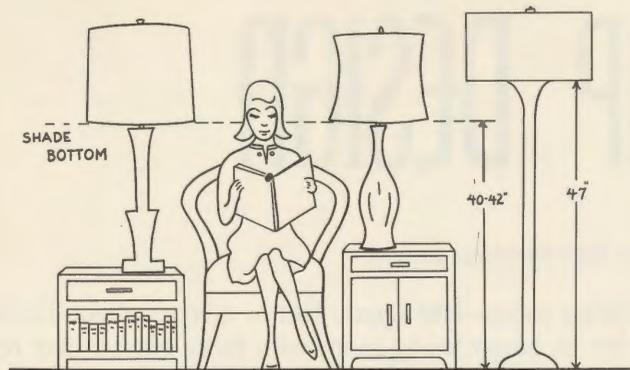
Place lamps to provide both visual and decorative light. The correct placement of lamps eliminates sharp, contrasting pools of light and shadow. The room will appear larger because corners will not be dim. Properly placed lamps create balanced points of interest to give a room an inviting atmosphere. With proper grouping of furniture several people can use the same lamp. When lamps are placed for various activities each family member can pursue his activity separately.

Usually a table lamp is placed near the edge of the table by the chair with base about in line with the shoulder of the seated person. Very tall lamps are placed toward the rear of the chair behind the shoulder in floor lamp position. The light source should not be more than 36 inches from the object to be lighted. Remember to place a lamp opposite the working hand to avoid shading the object.

## LAMP HEIGHT

Move uniformity is achieved in a room by having the bottom of all table lamp shades the same height from the floor. The suggested over-all height from floor to lower edge of the shade is 40 inches for women and 42 inches for men. The lower height is used to prevent the visual discomfort of viewing the bright, lower inside surface of the shade or other luminous elements intended to be hidden by the shade.

Use a tape measure to determine the proper height of lamps for your room. First, determine the *sitting height* of your davenport. Other furnishings usually are related to the davenport in height—lounge chairs are about the same height, and end tables are no higher than the arms of the chairs and davenport. It is the height of lamp tables, however, which largely predicts lamp size. In general, the lower the table the longer the lamp base and the wider the shade required.



RULE: TABLE HEIGHT + LAMP HEIGHT = CHEEKBONE HEIGHT

To determine the height of lamp base required, subtract the table height from approximately 40 to 42 inches. For example, a 21-inch table needs about a 21-inch lamp base (bottom of lamp to bottom of shade). The shade is somewhat shorter in depth.

As a final test, sit on your chair or davenport, especially if you have contemporary furnishings whose arms are lower than traditional furniture. The bottom of the lamp shade should be even with the cheekbone of the person using the light; he should not be able to see the bulb or light source. This test also can be used to determine proper lamp height for different sized persons.

At dressing tables a pair of lamps should evenly light both sides of the face. In this case, the middle of the shade should be at cheekbone height.

## LAMP BASES

### DESIGN

The lamp base is one of the most conspicuous decorative objects in a room because it often is bathed in light. It is important that it be of good design and harmonize with its surroundings and other furnishings.

Lamps should suggest their purpose, so avoid eccentric shapes. Realistic statuary or electrified obsolete forms from past eras used as bases are not considered in good taste. One often sees grotesque figures or cute and childish forms intended to be clever used as lamp bases. Shapes and forms representative of the present period and technology are a better choice.

Choose simple bases constructed from materials easily cleaned or replaced. A relatively heavy base will make a lamp more stable.

Bases which are plain and deeply colored contrast well against cool backgrounds; bases of cool tones in white, ivory, or cream are affective against warm backgrounds.

A 15-inch base with a 10-inch shade depth is about the smallest serviceable lamp.

## LAMP PAIRS

Harmony is achieved easily by choosing lamps which go together. In addition one avoids having too many different shapes and colors in a room. It is easier to locate pairs of lamps in a room so that they balance each other. Two pairs should relate to each other in form, construction, and styling. A fifth lamp may be of the same material but varied in shape. Psychologically a pair of lamps when used in symmetrical or formal arrangement, as on either side of a sofa, seems to give the impression of added space—like looking into a mirror.

## SHADES

There are two basic types of lamp shades: *fabric* or “soft” and *hard*. The fabric type is a firm, wire frame over which one of a variety of fabrics is stretched, shirred, or pleated. This type requires a fabric lining. Hard shades made of firm materials such as parchment paper require fewer wires for support. Fiberglass and nearly clear plastics which are too thin should be laminated or covered with fabric or other material.

Translucent shades, but not transparent, are ideal for diffusing, transmitting, and directing light to the task. General room illumination is increased, and the impression of space is enhanced. Translucent shades should be sufficiently dense so that the bulb or light source cannot be seen through the shade as a distracting bright spot. Translucent shades are necessary for adequate and normal face illumination, especially at dressing tables.

Opaque shades, on the other hand, seldom are suitable because they usually violate the basic function of a lamp to provide good light. They emit no side light and confine the light to a relatively small area. If general room illumination is not provided, eye fatigue usually results. High intensity lamps or “mini” lamps, for example, may be used only for short periods of time for intense work; additional general lighting is needed in the room.

### COLOR

First, consider effect in the room in daylight so that the shade ties in with the color scheme. Then consider the color effect at night when the lamp is lit. Color distortion of fabric, foods, make-up, etc. is undesirable. For example, blue, purple, and green shades tend to make people appear pallid.

A shade of contrasting color sometimes is used against a muted or monotone wall to give decorative spice. At best highly colored shades or excessive color

contrast between shades and adjacent walls are seldom desirable. Intensely bright shades, such as red or rose, are not pleasing. A deep green, opaque shade, used with dark wood and walls creates a dark and gloomy room. Deep and dark colors absorb light and waste electricity. To compensate for light absorbed by dark colors the number of lamps, the wattages of bulbs, or both, must be increased.

Tinted shades should be alike or similar in hue to the room color scheme in order to blend with the background against which they will be seen; this preserves decorative unity. When lighted, the color cast can ruin an otherwise good color scheme. Softened tints of yellow-beige, pinkish-beige, and straw are acceptable if very light in color. Tinted shades generally are difficult to use, however.

Lamp shades of similar color and material create harmony. Off-white shades are decoratively suitable for all rooms, particularly small rooms. Creamy white usually harmonizes with any color scheme.

Being able to match lamp shades or closely relate them is helpful if you have accumulated miscellaneous styles of lamp bases over the years.

#### TRIM

Shades sometimes are decorated to key in with light walls. This is difficult to do well, however, since shades look better with little or no trimming. Decorations such as tassels and fringe are superfluous; contrasting fabric, tape binding, or lacing may tend to make a room appear fussy, since detail distracts the eye. Keep shades simple to compliment their bases—the lamp shade and its base should not compete for attention.

#### LINES AND PROPORTIONS

Straight lines currently are preferred in lamp shades. Cones and cylinders often are seen in more contemporary designs, however. The contour of the base determines whether the shade should be straight or slightly curved. Proper shade lines will set the base off to its best advantage, and a new shade often can bring an old lamp “up-to-date.”

The depth of the shade should be somewhat shorter in proportion than the exposed lamp base. The bottom diameter of the shade should be about two-thirds of the lamp base height (bottom of lamp to bottom of shade). A diameter of 16 inches across the bottom and a depth of 10 inches is often specified as minimum. The bottom of the shade should cover the lamp socket and the top should throw light upward on walls and ceiling. This will provide reflected light for general room illumination and make the room appear more cheerful.

Small and narrow shades do not allow an adequate spread of light on the task. Shades and shield-

ing devices should shield the bulb from the view of a person seated or standing.

#### INTERIORS

White interiors in shades reflect light most efficiently. A translucent shade lined with white gives a good quality light, whereas an opaque shade lined with white reflects a bright, intense light. Although available light needs to be reflected, reflected light is a poor source of illumination and is not recommended; hence, avoid opaque shades.

#### CARE

Remember to take off the cellophane from a new shade. Lamp shades soil rapidly and wear out more quickly than do bases. Therefore, frequent cleaning and replacement of shades helps keep a room's appearance fresh and attractive. Occasionally brush the shade outdoors with a very soft brush or use your vacuum cleaner attachment (the soft round brush). This will suck out and remove the dust from the fabric.

#### LIGHT SOURCES

Lamps designed with three-way sockets provide varying levels of light. With three-way bulbs lighting can be adjusted to *high* for task work, *medium* for casual eye use, and *low* for relaxation. Most common are the 50-100-150 watt and the 100-200-300 watt bulbs. The 30-70-100 watt bulbs are intended for dressing table and night stand lamps.

For the best distribution of light the bulb is positioned with the bottom of the socket about even with the bottom of the shade. Baffles and diffusers such as bowls and discs of metal, glass, or plastic spread and soften the light by reducing reflected glare. Often a shielding disc above the bulb is used to conceal it from view of a person standing. On the whole, these devices reduce eye fatigue by shielding the bare bulb, modifying and directing intense light, and diffusing light to eliminate glare.

At the dressing table no diffusing devices are needed and the position of the bulb is not critical as long as it is two inches below the top of the shade.

Incandescent light gives a good quality light and emphasizes warm colors. There is less change in color rendition using it or a delux warm white fluorescent light. Fluorescent light throws softer shadows and produces less glaring light. (The color of the white fluorescent is printed on the tube.)

Lamp bulbs darken and deteriorate with age. In addition they may become soiled. Dust can absorb as much as 50 percent of the light otherwise available. Bulbs need to be wiped occasionally with a damp cloth.

## LAMP STYLES

A well-chosen lamp does not distract or stand out as an individual accessory. If it does, it has not been tied in with your decorating scheme. Certain lamp styles and materials harmonize with certain styles of rooms.

*Informal* or *provincial* rooms are best decorated with lamps of plain and simple design. They include Early American and French and Italian Provincial styles. Designs which carry the flavor or essence of a style are better than exact replicas of past periods. Informal rooms call for plain or painted ironstone; glazed or unglazed pottery; copper; brass; pewter; and tin. Wood matched to the color of wood used in the room, such as maple or pine, is an excellent choice. Textured shades such as burlap or linen tie in well with this type of decor.

*Traditional* rooms are usually *formal*. These include 18th and 19th Century English, French, and American styles. They call for gilded wood, fine porcelain, marble, and crystal. Oriental and classical designs are appropriate, as well. Bases often are simply silvered or decorated. Shades are of silk, taffeta, or other quality fabrics stretched, shirred, or pleated on their frames.

*Contemporary* rooms may be either formal or informal in feeling. These rooms call for lamp bases which are simple and plain. Oriental or classical designs void of all superficial and ornate decorations often are used. Abstractions in ceramics, glass or metals, as well as carved and plain woods, decorative leather, bamboo, and textured material, are appropriate.

ate. Shades are plain and tailored to relate to the lamp bases.

## IN CONCLUSION

Strict adherence to an informal, traditional, or contemporary style is a matter of individual taste. When selecting a lamp, use the degree of formality desired in the decorative scheme as your main guide. Keep the room as a whole and the desired effect uppermost in mind. Choose your lamps for long and consistent use; they will serve you both as accessories and necessities and fulfill both your decorating plan and your basic lighting needs.

Remember—select lamps first for the good light they provide, and second, for their decorative value. Choosing an appropriate style need not increase the cost of the lamp—one is sure to find an attractive lamp at reasonable cost which also provides the proper quantity, quality, and distribution of light.

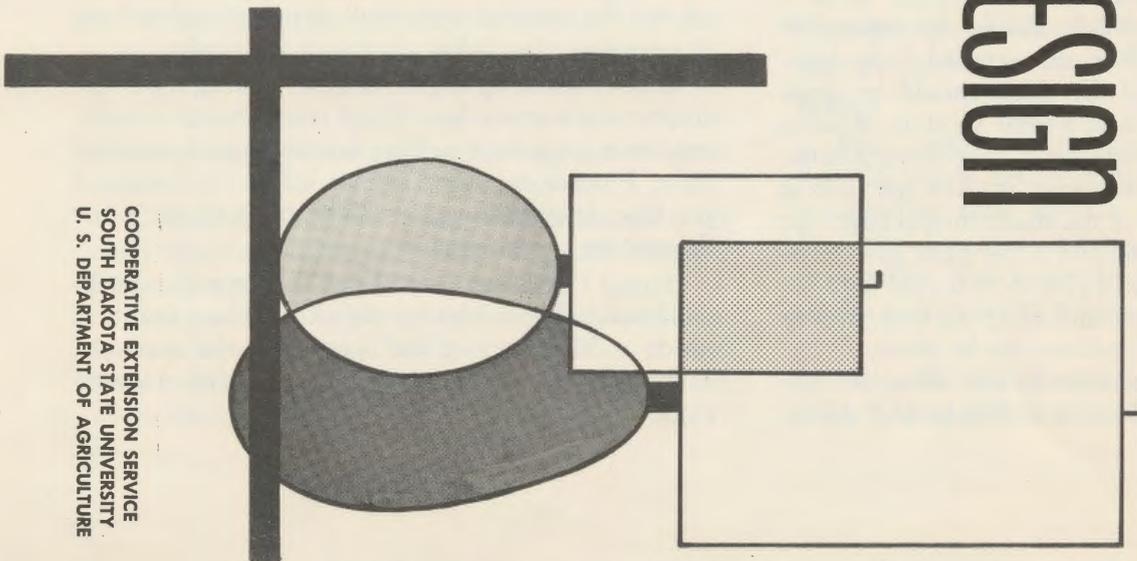
## SEALS OF APPROVAL

**BLBS Tag**—The manufacturer warrants that the lamp is a duplicate of those which Electrical Testing Laboratories, Inc., in tests of random samples, have found to comply (when equipped with a 200-watt, A-23 bulb) with the specifications of the Better Light Better Sight Bureau, which includes the lighting performance recommendations of the Illuminating Engineering Society.

**UL Seal**—Underwriters' Laboratories, Inc. award seals or labels to lamps and cords which meet their standards of safety against fire and shock. If the UL seal appears only on the cord, it does not mean the lamp is approved, only the cord.

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