EVERY-DAY

Design Dilemmas

25 Design Mis-guidelines you have permission to break. And how to do it.

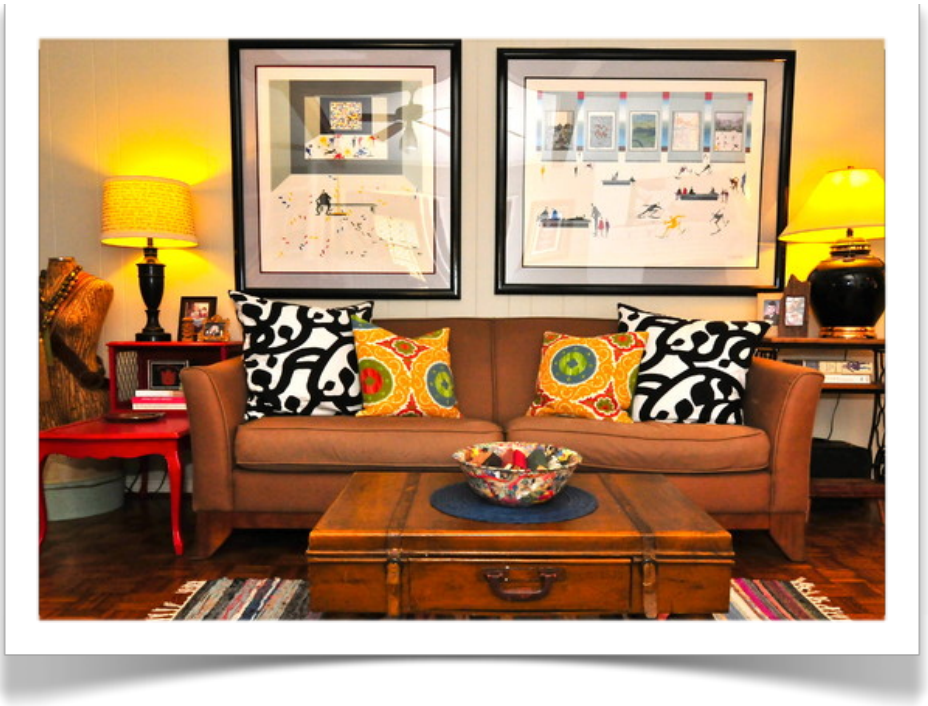
with: Linda Erlam
Design Sewlutions

Just after the long weekend last year a friend said she had quit wearing white because the fashion rule is no white after Labour day. When we were talking I was wearing my summer uniform: white capris and a white sleeveless blouse. Ten days later I was on the beach. In my mind summer was not over.

In my business, I go into a lot of homes and I see that many of you adhere to certain “design rules”. Some originate from design guidelines, but many of them are just myths. Lets get them straightened out.

1. **End tables must match.**

Match the era or style of end tables; match the visual weight and mood, or match the tables -- the choice is yours.



2. Trim must be white or natural-colored.

If the trim is an important part of the room and you want to draw attention to it, paint it a color that contrasts with the walls and floors or leave it as a high-contrast wood detail. In this room the trim is an architectural detail and the contrasting color draws attention to how unusual it is. If you want it to blend into the wall or floor color, paint it a similar color. Exception: trim that is visible from the outside should be neutral and in harmony with the undertones of your home's facade.

3.Windows must be covered or at least have a valance.

Decide what you need and proceed from there. Just because you have a window does not mean you have to cover it. If you install a valance just for the sake of putting something over the window, it will probably look like you put something up just for the sake of putting something up. Like these two. They draw attention to themselves and away from the focal point of the room. Both windows would look better without these fussy things.

4.All the wood in a room must match.

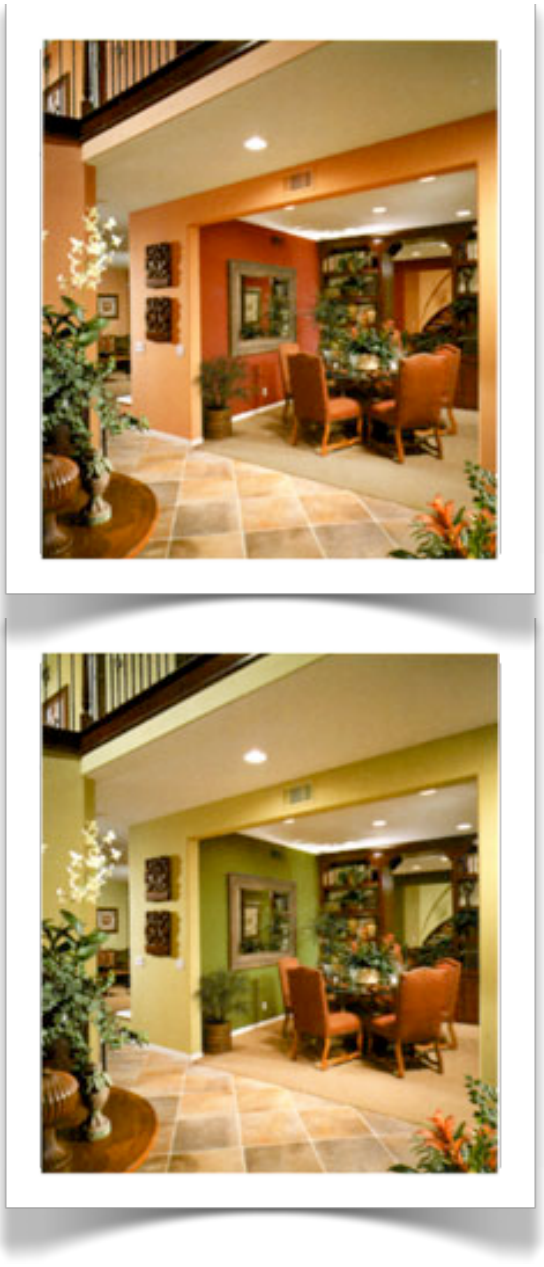
Try to limit the different woods to three, and use wood no more than five times in one room -- and that's pushing it. If the table and floor are the same wood, both loose some definition; varying the woods creates interest. There is too much mis-matched wood in the first photo, it's just wood for woods sake. In the second, at least there is contrast and texture.

5.**Wood must never be painted.**

Do what you want to do but remember that unless the wood is of exceptional quality, is unusual, or is very old, paint may be more interesting and more suited to your lifestyle and decor than natural colored wood. Take a moment and think back to the oak-in-every-corner era of the early '90's. Enough, already. This is an example of what can happen to nondescript wood when it's painted.

6.Warm colors advance, cool colors recede.

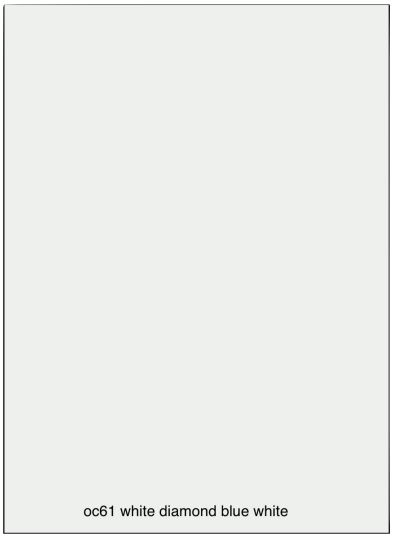
This guideline is typically used with regard to feature walls, the belief being that if you want the room to look longer, paint the far wall a cool color, if you want the room to appear smaller, paint the wall a warm color.

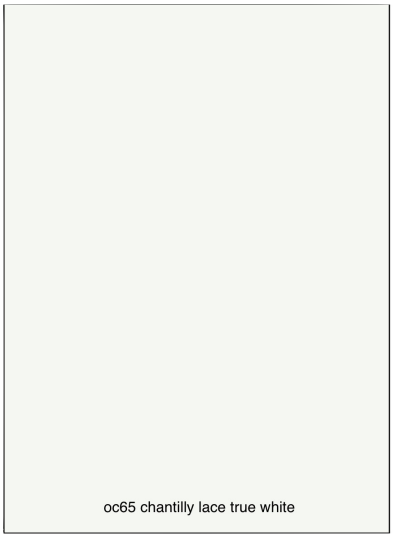


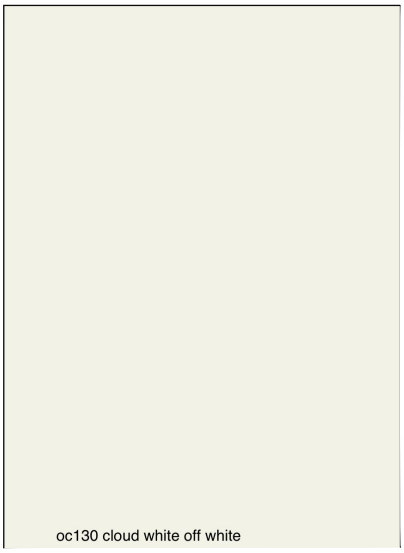
But this rule must be tempered with contrast. In this image, the warm-colored wall appears "closer" than the cool-colored wall. That's because the furniture against the cool-colored wall catches the eye first, making the furniture appear closer and the wall further away.

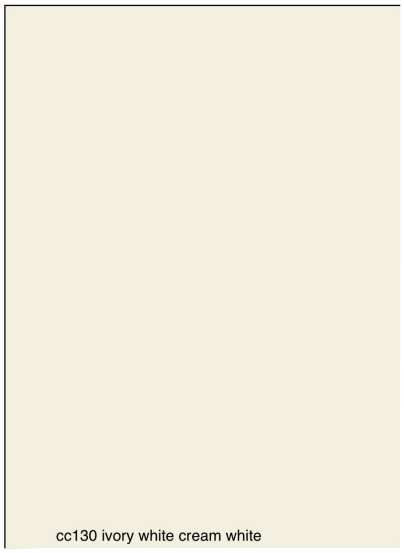
7.White is white.

No. Simply no. I subscribe to the " Four Colors of White" theory as taught by Maria Killam. There is blue-white, true-white, off-white and cream-white. The blue and true whites work with the grays and blacks of the world. The off and creams work with the earth tones. This is one guideline you should break only if you really know what you are are doing.









8.Pictures must not be wider than the sofa.

A 70-inch-wide picture over a 64-inch sofa is just wrong. It's top-heavy. The mirror, collection of images, or accessory collection should not be wider than the item it is over. You can bend this rule by visually expanding the perceived size of the sofa (or entry table, for example.)

9.Blinds should be the same color as the trim.

If you have white trim, a good idea is to install blinds the same color so when they are in the up position they do not create a horizontal line of high-contrast color that just sits there. However, if your blinds are going to be down most of the time, you may want to consider blinds that are closer to the wall color. The draw-back here is that if this is a high-contrast situation, the window frame might become a focal point. Which may be something you want. Like a little black dress, you can't go wrong with neutral blinds, you never have to worry about changing the decor colors, and resale is easier if your blinds are a neutral.

10. Light the room.

Light the tasks and objects in the room, not the room. One great big light fixture in the middle of the room may, indeed, provide lots of light, but it can also create many shadows and dark corners. Take the time to plan the room activities and place the right lighting for each activity. Include walking through the room and consider using light as accents, too. -- LIke an uplight on a large plant in a corner. A good guideline is three watts per square foot minimum (five for kitchens). If your room is 12-by-12 feet, you need a minimum of 430 watts to just light the room. If you have two reading lamps that each take a 60-watt bulb, you don't have enough light. It's much better to have too much light; it's easy to turn one lamp off when you don't need it.

11.Light-colored rooms feel larger than dark rooms.

Another NOPE. It's the contrast that makes a room feel larger or smaller. A room filled with stuff, all light colored, will feel smaller than a room with the clutter removed.

12 Big furniture in big rooms only.

Choose furniture based on the required function. If you need a long sofa, get the size you need as long as it will fit into the room without creating entry or exit problems. Large doesn't have to mean big and chunky. If long is what you need, there are lots of long sofas that aren't heavy-looking. And if you really want a 4-poster bed in your tiny bedroom, get one with small-scale posters. If you really must have the honkin' huge recliner in the tiny TV room don't expect there to be room for a lot of other stuff. The second chair may have to be much smaller; the coffee table will probably have to give way to stacking tables, and the TV might need to be mounted on the wall.

And try to keep the big furniture and the wall it sits on somewhat the same color; lack of contrast will help keep it from over-taking the room.

13.Furniture must be up against the wall.

I have an ex husband whose idea of rearranging the living room furniture was to line up everything along the walls. I know a fashion-forward lady with the same furniture arrangement in her living room. If you sit on the chair at one end, you have to lean way forward to see the person at the other end of the chair, sofa, chair arrangement. Furniture should be placed where it is needed, not necessarily where the walls are. Learn how to do a floor plan; it will be your saving grace.

This is not carte blanche to put things on angles across the room. That is a whole different ball game, and I strongly urge you not to angle your furniture unless you know a lot about furniture arrangement.

This is an amazing tip for you: If your room feels cramped, pull all the furniture out from the wall three inches.

14.Ceilings should be white.

The ceiling is 15 percent of the surface area of the room. Saying it must always be white is exactly the same as saying that all floors should be dark. White is a really tricky color. Unless your room has lots of natural light, white can very easily go gray and pick up undertones from the walls. A blue-white ceiling will look dirty against cream or off-white walls, or walls with earthy undertones. My best advice to you about your ceiling is get some professional color help when choosing the color.

15.All window treatments must match.

You don't have to make all the treatments the same, but they should at least be the same color. This applies to shades and blinds, too. If you are using cell shades on all the windows, but want a drape on the patio door, that's fine but either match the shade color or go high-contrast.

16. Don't mix patterns, metals or wood.

Old school is only one metal, a maximum of three wood pieces per room, preferably the same wood, and keep the patterns so color co-ordinated it's difficult to distinguish each from the other. Old School, good guidelines to bide by if you don't know how to mix patterns, metals or woods. But you certainly can mix them. You just need to learn a few other guidelines first; undertones it the biggie.

Once you get undertones figured out, mixing these things will no longer be rocket science and you can go ahead and do it. For example, no red-based wood floor and orange-based wood cabinets or coffee table unless you have a bridge between them -- like the patterned sofa or counter-top for example, that will make it look like you carefully planned the scheme. That's the rub, too. Most of the time, when you have to mix orange and red based wood it's because you inherited one part of the equation, or both, and can't renovate right now.

17.Stick to one color palette through the whole house.

If you have a small home with rooms that open onto the main living quadrant, you might want to have one palette through the whole house. You can switch the main color around for the rooms, and it's not hard to get away with the one-palette look.

For example, if you choose gray as the main color with aqua as the secondary color for your scheme, perhaps the main living area would be those colors and the bedrooms aqua main and gray secondary. But this falls apart if one of your children hates gray and aqua, or the room does not lend itself to a cool color scheme.

Please remember that you and your family are the ones who have to look at the colors every day. If you want every room different, go ahead and do it -- After you have learned about undertones.

18. Your dining room furniture must match.

A formal dining room typically has a table and chair set that matches. That's the formal way.

This is where the sets of antique furniture work, or the really good mid-century modern teak set you've had passed down from Gran. But if your look is modern eclectic, shabby chic, contemporary or just plain old comfortable, you can mix and match with the best of them.

Undertones play a part here, too and unless you are going for gypsy bo-ho, try to keep something common in all the chairs. A color, a curl, a chair cushion or the height of the back, for example.

19. **Wallpaper is old-fashioned.**

Only if you use 80‘s wallpaper you found in the thrift store in your attempt at a 2015 Parisian Gray decor reno. Wallpaper will never be old fashioned if you use it correctly; no trendy patterns, no trendy colors. Stick to classic colors that suit the style of your room. A purple accent wall will not update a living room filled with old furniture.

20. Drapes should be hung on the window frame.

The top of your curtains or drapes should be at least 1/3 of the way up the wall to the ceiling above the window frame. At least 1/3 of the way, more if you can manage it. Forgo the puddling on the floor for hanging the drapes higher. It makes the window look bigger and the walls taller.

21. Do not paint brick.

My friend the paint wizard recently decided to paint her mosaic travertine backsplash. Just a simple whitewash, but the end result is she isn't going to replace her backsplash now. She also painted the brick facade on her house, changing it from orange brick to mottled gray. The thing to remember about painting brick is that it is really difficult to un-do the paint. This is an example of finding someone who has the design software that can paint the color over the photographed brick. Then make your mind up. You can effect huge change in your room design plan by updating the brick.

22. The eye level of a picture should be at 59 inches from the floor or the corollary : It's OK to hang pictures

low. Confused? OK, typically pictures should hang with the center of the picture at about 59 inches from the floor because that is a good average eye level. However, if you are doing a grouping, some pictures will be higher, and some may be lower. That's expected. What we are talking about here is art propped on the floor, or hung below the table lamp. If that is the best viewing angle for the piece, then it's OK to hang it there.

23.Floors should be dark.

Floor and counter top colors should work together. Other than that, there really aren't any rules about floor color. In the first photo the dark floor and dark cabinets look rather cave-like and the light countertop is almost too high- contrast. Dark floors and light-colored furniture create high contrast -- like in the second photo -- but the counter top works with the floor so well that it all ties together.

24. Floor color must match your color scheme.

If your floors are a mid-tone wood, neither orange nor red, you can think of them as an old leather purse that goes with anything. If there are obvious undertones in the flooring you have to work with that color, but otherwise, they will work with any color scheme. If your floors are NOT mid-toned wood, they must be considered in the color scheme.

25. Rules must not be broken or

Interior design is a serious business. A Simple NO on this one, too. Please remember that you have to live in the space, not the interior decorator, the paint guy or the cable installer who tells YOU where your TV should go. Nonsense. It's your home and you can do what you want. If you like rooms full of furniture, book cases overflowing and walls all different colors, go ahead and do that. It's like making a cake. Follow the recipe a few times till you get the basics down and then change things around to make it your own. Some interior guidelines, particularly the ones pertaining to balance and scale, for example, are the back-bones of good design and they are the ones you really shouldn't break or bend. Get the book "Every-Day Design Dilemmas: How to take the guesswork out of decorating" (available on the website, Designsewlutions.ca) for some insights into these.