A watercolor illustration of a window with a striped curtain. The curtain is on the left, hanging from a wooden rod with gold rings. It has vertical stripes in shades of green, yellow, and orange. The window is on the right, with a white frame and a view of a bright outdoor scene. The title 'Treatments for Problem Windows' is written in a large, blue, serif font across the top of the window.

Treatments for Problem Windows

These ten solutions will help you deal with impossible openings

BY DEB BARRETT

For all that windows add to a house—light, ventilation, and views—they also invite problems. Breezes become drafts, sunlight becomes glare, and pleasant neighborhood landscapes morph into ominous black holes at night.

The answer is, of course, window treatments. But the difficulty lies in finding treatments that enhance rather than detract from these “eyes” of the home. The question becomes more difficult when you consider the wide variety of windows found in homes today.


From among them, I’ve chosen five window types that commonly present window-dressing dilemmas: a bank of windows ganged together, very small windows, patio doors, arched windows, and bay and bow windows. For each type, I’ve offered two treatment approaches, along with professional pointers that will make the difference between a window dressing that simply covers up an opening and one that dramatically enhances it.

Scale and proportion

Scale and proportion are two design principles that are essential to great-looking window treatments. Proportion is how the

elements within the window treatment relate to each other: the valance to the panels; the swag drop to the cascades. Scale relates the size of the treatment to the size of the room. Ask yourself: Is the window in scale to the room? For instance, small windows look awkward because they are out of scale with the room. Window treatments can correct that.

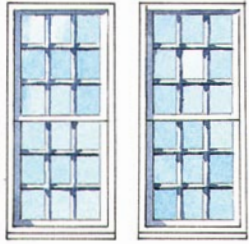
The Rule of Threes refers to the convention that items grouped together in threes or multiples of three are visually pleasing. Translate this to your window treatments by using three fabrics, three colors, or three components (a shade, a valance, and panels); by tying back draperies in the upper third or lower third of the window; by draping three rather than two swags over a window. Using three of something allows you to use one as a statement, one to contrast, and one to complement.

The Rule of Fifths and Sixths will help you determine how far a valance should drop. Take the total height of the treatment (96 inches, for example) divide it by 6 (16 inches) and then by 5 (19¼ inches). The valance drop should fall between these two measurements. 

Deb Barrett is a designer, speaker, and author on the subject of window treatments.

DESIGN DILEMMA

A bank of windows



A row of windows placed in a series, often a foot or less apart, is common in Georgian-style suburban architecture. Windows paired side-by-side

are even more common. You can treat each separately, but with so little space between, it makes more sense to treat them as if they were one wide opening, with a single valance and/or panels at each end. In this case, the greatest danger is that these windows will dominate the room, so choose fabrics and colors that harmonize with the entire space.

Considerations

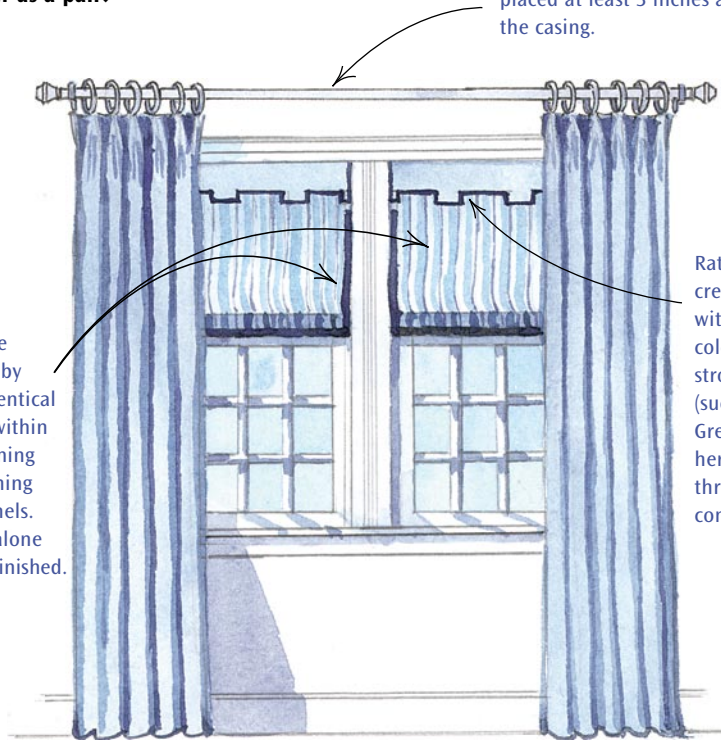
- ▶ If your windows take up most of the wall, let the treatments go corner to corner. Letting a sliver of wall show at the ends looks unfinished.
- ▶ Use a light fabric and simple patterns and color to give an airy feeling.
- ▶ If there are more than two windows, alternating panel colors creates rhythm.
- ▶ If the unifying valance is very wide, add a design element (box pleats, scallops, or dressmaker details) at intervals for variety.

SOLUTION 1

Unify

The roman shades and valances identify these windows as two separate openings, but the rod above and euro-pleated draperies pull them together as a pair.

Always mount rods above the window—never on the casing. Custom drapery rods are usually placed at least 3 inches above the casing.



Unify the window by using identical shades within and framing the opening with panels. Shades alone look unfinished.

Rather than create contrast with pattern or color, select a strong detail (such as the Greek key design here) that runs through the composition.

SOLUTION 2

Punctuate

Here a series of windows with very little wall space between has been dressed with alternating panels for color and woven wood blinds for privacy.



Repeat the same type of treatment from window to window. Only one element (color, pattern, or detail) should change.

When alternating colors or patterns, stick to two; more than that is confusing.

You need at least three windows in a series for this approach to be effective.

DESIGN DILEMMA

Too-small windows



Small windows can be as difficult to dress as big, dramatic windows. But the window itself is not really the problem. Most often, small windows are

awkwardly placed on the wall, falling into corners or set near the ceiling in a way that throws off the proportions of a room. Because of this, when dealing with small windows, you should first consider the window's placement in the room and think about how a treatment on the window can bring the room back into balance.

Considerations

- ▶ Scale your treatment to the window's size—fabric, trim, and the overall style shouldn't overwhelm it.
- ▶ Too much contrast and texture on the window will draw attention to its small size, so use fabrics that are light in weight and color.
- ▶ Does the window need a treatment at all? Pay attention to the window architecture and the furnishings; adding to the casing or shifting furniture might bring the room back into balance.

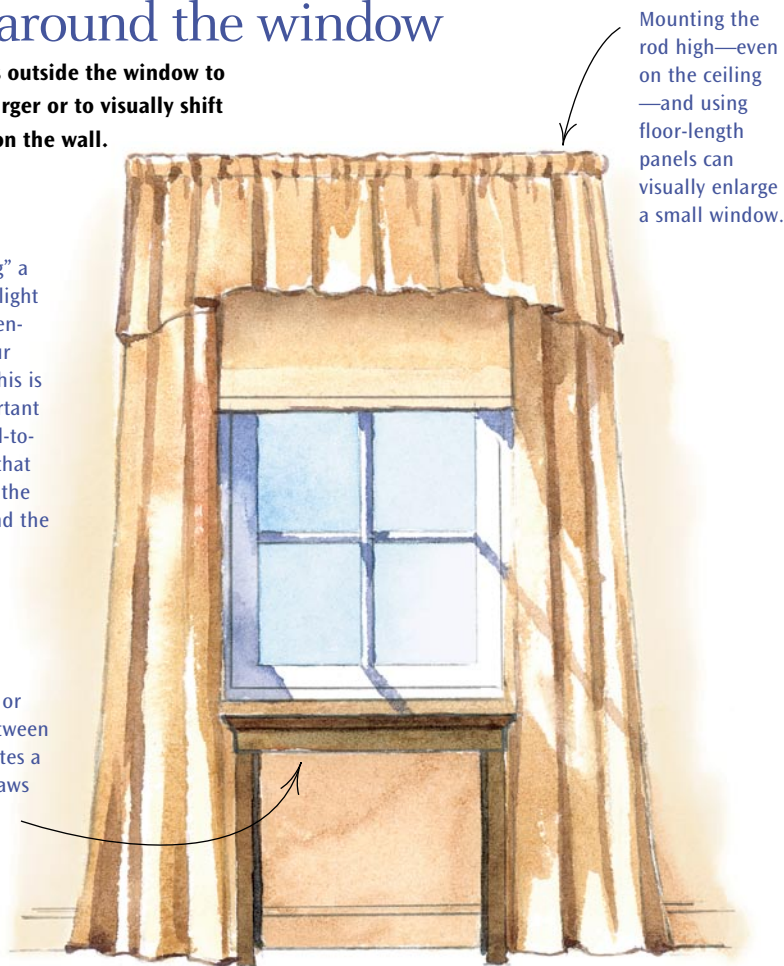
SOLUTION 1

Work around the window

Use treatments outside the window to make it look larger or to visually shift its placement on the wall.

Be sure to use blackout lining when "enlarging" a window, or the light defining the opening will give your illusion away. This is especially important if you use a wall-to-wall treatment that obscures where the window ends and the wall begins.

Adding a bench or table below, between the panels, creates a vignette that draws attention to the window.

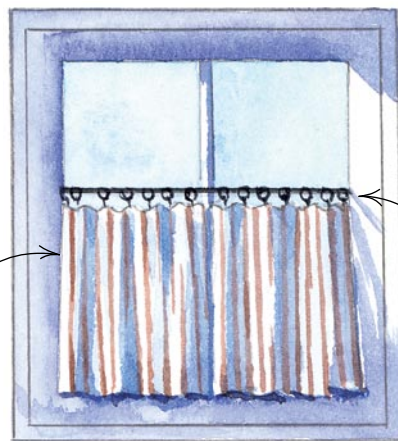


Mounting the rod high—even on the ceiling—and using floor-length panels can visually enlarge a small window.

SOLUTION 2

Work within the window

Deciding how to treat a small window is all about what type of mood you're aiming for in the room. If your look is clean and simple, you want to limit your treatment to match the window's diminutive size and scale.



Patterns should be small and subtle.

Keep projections, like curtain rods, close to the window.

Café curtains in a lightweight fabric, on a small-diameter rod, create a romantic, cottagey feel. For a more austere look, go with a simple shade.

Remember the rules of proportion and scale and make sure the elements of the treatment work together and in the room as a whole.

DESIGN DILEMMA

Patio doors



FRENCH DOORS



SLIDING DOORS

Treatments for patio doors are challenging because they require a design that not only controls light, drafts, and privacy but also allows the doors to open and close without interference. Doors are also an aesthetic challenge because of their squarish shape. Since the eye prefers rectangles to squares, your patio door will look better if you use your treatments to extend its height or width.

Considerations

- ▶ Take traffic patterns and the door swing into account. Mount top treatments so they hang no lower than the top door casing.
- ▶ If you're mounting treatments on the door, use similar treatments on the room's windows.
- ▶ Light switches are often on the wall next to the door; don't obscure them.

SOLUTION 1

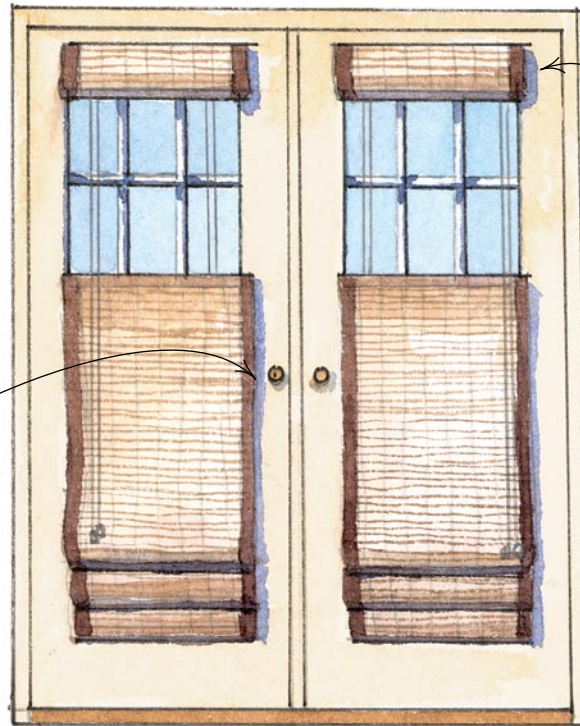
On the door

Mounted on the door, a top-down/bottom-up woven blind doesn't interfere with opening and closing, and when opened at the top, it balances light and privacy.

On-the-door solutions are a good choice when wall space around the door is limited or when draperies would cover wall space intended for art, furniture, or outlets.

Beware of projections when mounting hardware on the door, as they can interfere with operation.

Blinds and shades need hold-downs and clearance for levers and handles.



A valance hides the head rail and cord lock (cordless versions are available, but you need to be able to reach them in the "up" position).

SOLUTION 2

Off the door

Stacking draperies off to both sides of the door turns the monolithic square into a rectangle with more pleasing proportions. It's also the most practical approach for sliders. When the drapery stack-back clears the glass completely, you get maximum light inside and a cleaner look from the outside, because no fabric is hanging in the window.



An upholstered traverse rod eliminates the need for a valance, which can interfere with opening and closing.

In the case of sliders, one-way-draw draperies or vertical blinds are great choices for function, but they can look out of balance. Use an inoperable panel on the opposite side to balance the one-way draw.

DESIGN DILEMMA

Arched windows



Arches are dramatic, but they can be difficult to dress. The curve requires custom mounting applications and treatment styles. In addition, some tall arched windows are trimmed out with decorative moldings that are meant to be shown; furthermore, the trim can create projection and clearance problems for treatments that cover them.

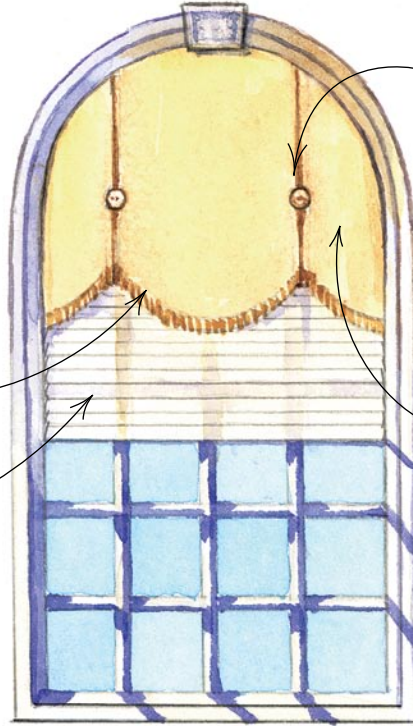
Considerations

- First ask, Do I really need to cover the arch? One choice is to just leave the window untreated and apply light- and heat-reflecting window film.
- If function is foremost, consider hard treatments made especially for arches, with a standard blind or shade placed underneath.
- Most arches are not completely symmetrical, so be sure you or your designer makes a template of the curve before ordering or making treatments.

SOLUTION 1

Play up the curve

Let the moldings and trim act as the frame for your window by choosing a simple, box-pleated arched valance paired with a shade or blind to provide light control and privacy when needed. When pulled up, it hides behind the valance.



Fine details enhance the overall look without drawing attention from the window itself. In this example, trim on the bottom and covered buttons two-thirds of the way down the pleat make the treatment pop.

Keep fabrics simple: Muted colors and tone-on-tone patterns won't overpower the architecture.

A shaped hem on the bottom mimics the curve of the window.

When mounting inside the window frame, choose a shade with a slim profile, such as a roller shade, a single-cell honeycomb, or a 1-inch mini-blind.

SOLUTION 2

Play down the curve

Straight panels hung on rings from a decorative rod play down the arch yet still allow it to be visible when the drapes are open.

In a high-ceilinged room, you might mount the rod across the window at the bottom of the arch (as long as light through the arch is not an issue) to bring the room height down to scale. In a room with a standard 8-foot ceiling, however, this treatment would be oppressive.



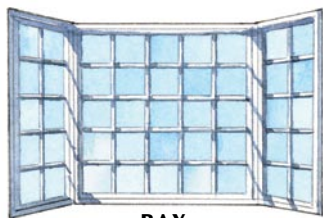
Use lots of fabric. Custom draperies are generally 2.5 times the width of the glass they cover.

Window films are an effective way to achieve light control and privacy, but they are best applied by a professional. Note that a window film can change the appearance of colors in a room.

A bold, large-scale pattern is fine here. It's the visual weight of the draperies that draws attention away from the arched window.

DESIGN DILEMMA

Bays and bows



BAY

Because they protrude from the house, bay windows and bow windows provide greater light and visual space to interiors. But their multiple sections and angles also make them confusing to treat.

Considerations

- The big question is whether to treat bays and bows as separate windows or as one. While you can treat each section separately, it is important that the window be perceived as a whole. A top treatment across the entire window or a repeating pattern are two ways to unify.
- Just as arched windows are rarely true, the angles on bows and bays are rarely uniform. So make sure angles, widths, and lengths are measured, and projections for each angle are checked.

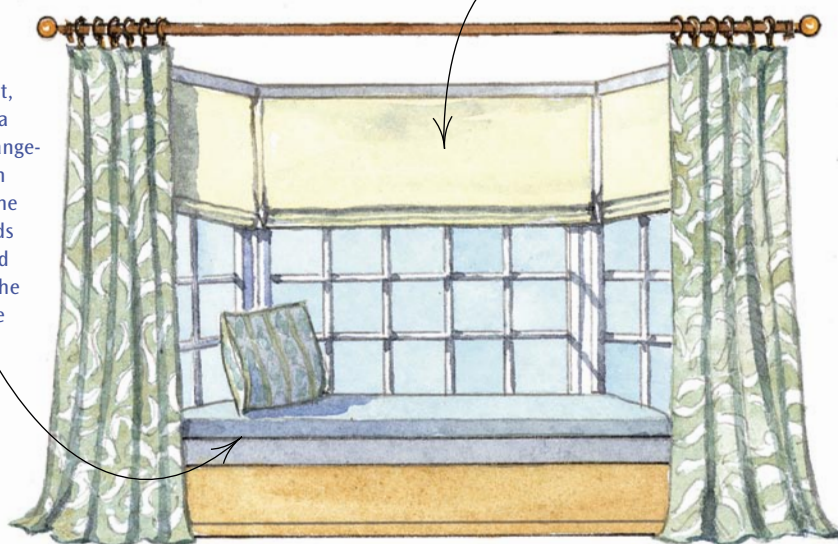
SOLUTION 1

The window as a stage

Roman shades in a solid textured fabric give light control and privacy to each window individually, while patterned panels on a decorative rod unify the bay as a whole.

Mounting panels on the interior wall like this treats the window as a stage and draws attention to it. This is a good strategy if the window seems at odds in a room, which sometimes happens when bays are added in a remodel.

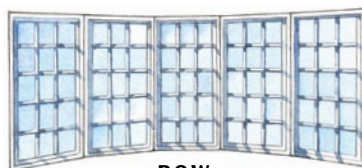
Creating a window seat, or nestling a seating arrangement within the arc of the window adds coziness and integrates the bay into the room.



SOLUTION 2

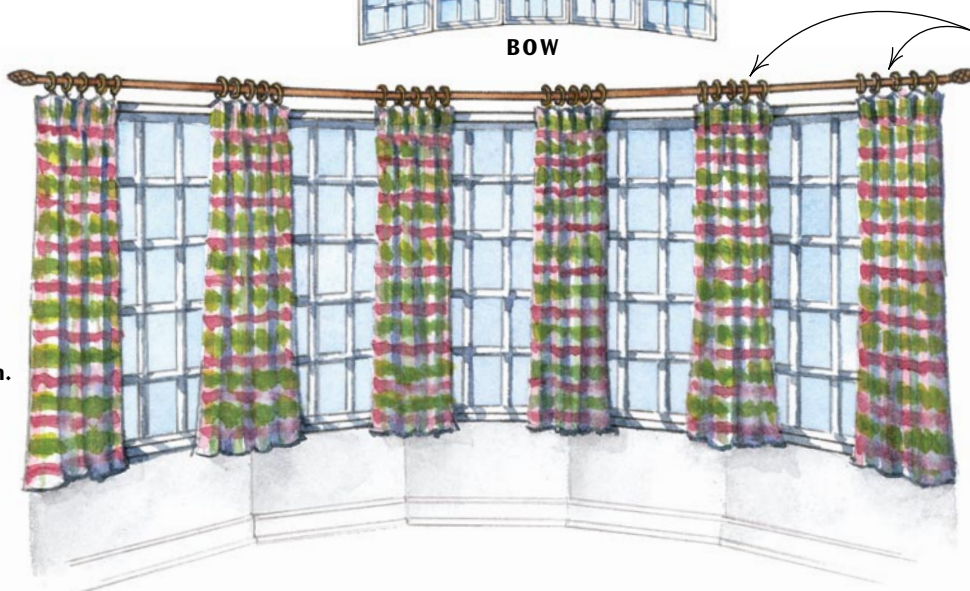
Following the curve

An alternative, shown on this bow window, is to have the primary treatment follow the angles of the window. Here, simple euro-pleated panels on a custom-bent decorative iron rod fill the wall space between the windows, unifying the design.



BOW

Introducing rhythm through color or details works for bows as well as for windows in a series.



Make sure that the panels are the same width so they look the same. This approach can help camouflage uneven wall areas, which are common in bays or bows.

For more, see Resources, page 82.