

INSTALL A DIMMER SWITCH

AH, DIMMER SWITCHES—ONE OF OUR favorite little tricks to add ambiance to any room. Installing a dimmer switch allows you to adjust the degree of lighting in the room. Whether it's for softening the harsh make-up lights around your bathroom mirror while you're trying to relax in the tub, or over your dining room table for that romantic dinner, dimmers really do give more bang for the buck to any fixture. They are not that expensive and very easy to install.



ELECTRICAL

Install a Dimmer Switch

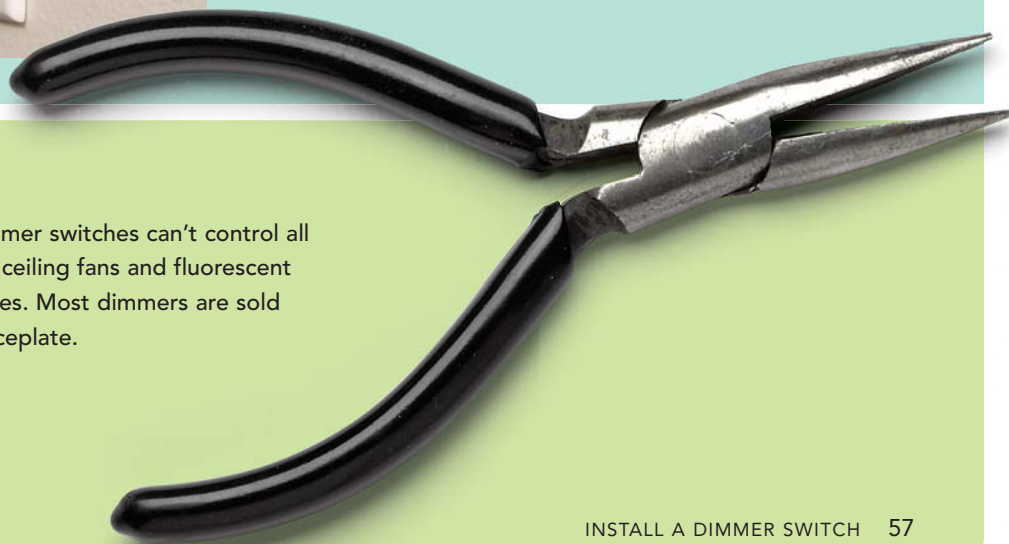
TIME: 15 minutes

EFFORT LEVEL: Basic

TOOLS AND MATERIALS:

- Screwdrivers — Flat head and Phillips
- Voltage tester
- Needle nose pliers
- Wire cutters or wire strippers
- Wire nuts
- Dimmer switch
- New switch plate

DIMMER TIP Standard dimmer switches can't control all types of fixtures. Fixtures such as ceiling fans and fluorescent lights need special dimmer switches. Most dimmers are sold separately from their matching faceplate.



1 First and foremost, turn off the power at the breaker box to the light switch you are working on. If you have a fuse box, remove the fuse and set it aside.

2 Have all your tools set out and within reach to make the project go smoothly. One tool I use every time I am doing an electrical project is my circuit tester. It's an absolute must!

3 Remove the faceplate of the switch using your screwdriver. A good tip is to tape the tiny screws to the inside of the plate so you can find them later.

4 Remove the longer screws of the switch that secure it to the switch box. I also hang on to these in case my new switch does not come with new screws.





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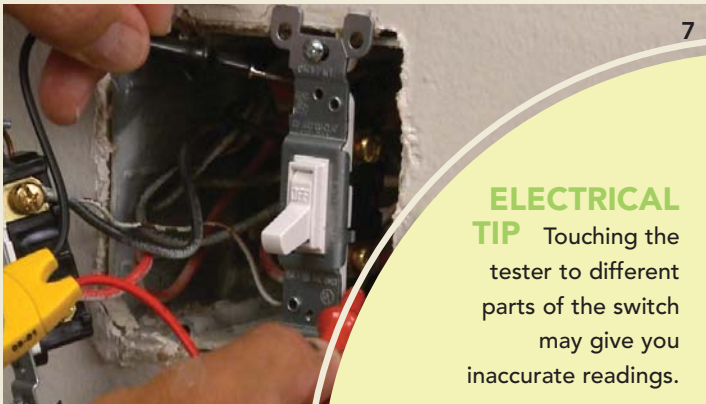
5 Without touching the wire connections on the side of the old switch, gently pull out the switch you are replacing. In our case, we had two switches there, but only wanted to make one of them a dimmer switch.



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ELECTRICAL TIP Follow all instructions that come with tester!

6 With your invaluable circuit tester, touch both sides of the switch on the terminal screws to double check that the power is indeed turned off to the switch. If you get a red light or a warning light you still have power coming to that switch. Do not proceed! Try another breaker.

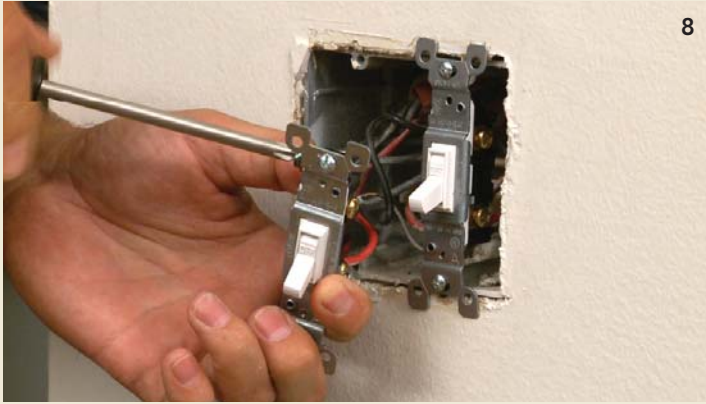


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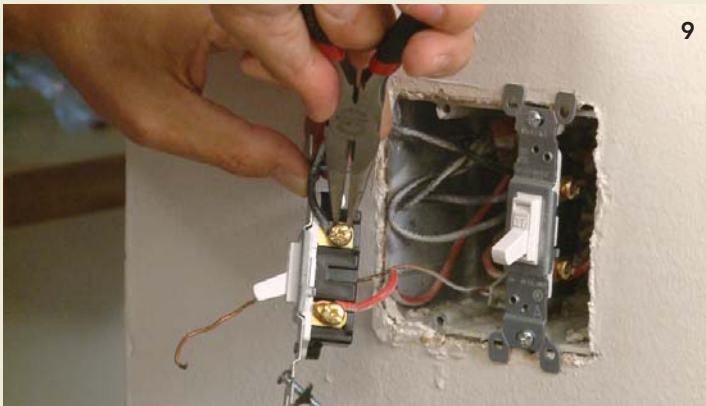
ELECTRICAL TIP Touching the tester to different parts of the switch may give you inaccurate readings.

7 If you have another switch at the location you are working like we do, check to make sure the power is killed at that switch too. You don't want to be working around a switch box that has any power coming to it.

DIMMER TIP Most people think that when they want to add a dimmer switch to a fixture that has two different switch locations, they need to install a 2-way switch. Actually, if a fixture has two or more switch locations controlling the light, it's called a 3-way switch and requires you to install a 3-way dimmer switch. If you want both locations to control the dimmer, you will have to purchase a dimmer switch that is designed specifically for that. It is referred to as a master-slave combination dimmer. It can be expensive, so if your budget is tight, install a 3-way dimmer switch in only one of the switch locations.



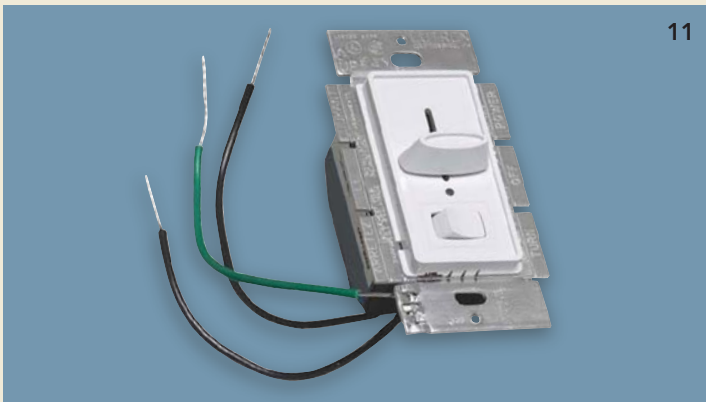
8 Once the coast is clear that the power is off at the switch or switches, use your screwdriver to loosen the terminal screws holding the wires.



9 You may even have to use a pair of needle nose pliers to pry the wires away from the old switch. If the wires are connected directly into the back of the switch, use a flathead screwdriver and push it into the slots to release the wires.



10 On a dimmer switch, there are three wires already attached for you to make the connections to the wires in the wall. You do not need to make a U-shape at the ends of the wires to wrap around terminal screws. In fact, you'll likely need to straighten the ends of the wires coming from the wall with a pair of needle nose pliers.



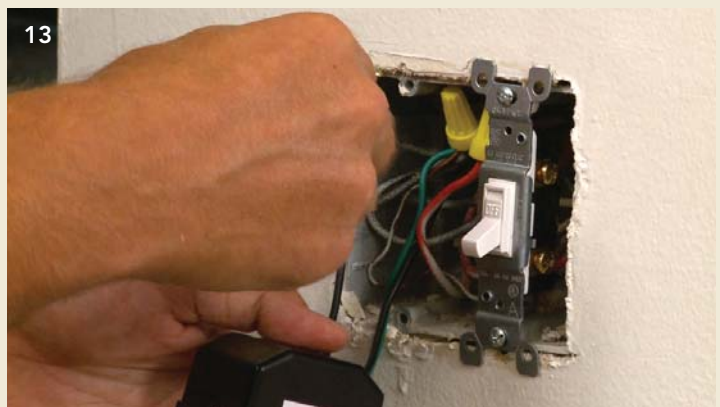
11 Remember, both wires coming from the wall are considered "hot", except, of course, the green one which is your ground wire. So it doesn't matter if your wires are black or red, whichever two wires that were connected to your old switch are the two that you are going to connect to the two "hot" wires attached to your dimmer.

12 To make the connections, take a hot wire from the wall and a hot wire from the dimmer and place them side by side. You can even wrap the exposed wires around each other, just make sure you wrap them in a clock-wise direction. Using a wire nut, twist it onto the exposed wires and turn it clock-wise until it stops. Do this for the other hot wire and the ground wire as well.

13 Gently, push all the wires back into the switch box making sure that the wire nuts do not become loose and twist off. This will break the connection and expose hot wires inside the switch box once the power is turned back on...and we don't want that!

14 Tighten down the screws that secure the dimmer switch to the switch plate. The slot may not be a perfect circle, it may offer you a bit of wiggle room to align the dimmer switch so you tweak it and make sure it is perfectly straight.

15 Turn the breaker back on or replace the fuse in the fuse box.



16 Test your dimmer switch. Make sure that the lights dim correctly. If they don't, turn the power back off and double check your connections. They may have come loose.

17 Everything is working fine, so we've got dimmer lighting for when we're just looking for a snack ...

18 ... and full lighting for when we're making a full dinner.

19 With our test complete, replace the faceplate made for the new dimmer. Most are sold separately, and they can come in a variety of styles and configurations depending on your situation.





The New Look of Dimmer Switches

Remember the push-and-turn dimmer switches? They're still around, but rather than a turn, the slide (above left) is a much more common sight for dimmer switches today. Both still work fine, but dimmers are getting smarter.

The dimmer shown above center matches the paddle-style designer switches frequently used in homes today. But it's more than an on/off switch. The little lever to the right is also a slide dimmer switch! It allows you to set the lighting intensity, and each time the switch is turned on by the paddle switch, that's the intensity you get.

Shown at the top right of the page is a variation on this same concept, but it uses a standard toggle-style switch, to fit in with that style, if that's what's in your house.

At right is a variation on the switch/slide design, but the slide is the larger part of the whole, with the push on/off switch tucked nicely below.

And lastly, a switch that's more a touch switch with the dimmer slide a rocker switch on the right. Even more fun, it comes with a remote control. Perfect for watching TV!

