



Old 1800s letter read by candle light, Adobe Stock.

**TIP:** When writing about light take into account intensity, hue, and temperature. Remember smaller, more intimate sources of light (like candles and oil-lamps) only cast light on a limited area. What is being illuminated and from what direction? Are there shadows produced? Backlit objects, for example, might appear to have a glow around them.

## RESEARCH ACTIVITY: LET THERE BE LIGHT

Using light as an example, this handout will demonstrate how the **CLiC Web App** can be used as an innovative research tool for creative writers.

From foreboding storms and moonlit moorland strolls to jovial fireside gatherings, lighting is a critical character in the Victorian novel.

In art, chiaroscuro (Italian for "light-dark") refers to the balance or contrast between light and shadow in a painting or drawing. It is a powerful technique that can inform the atmosphere, mood and even genre of one's subject. The presence of light or darkness can play a similar role in literature: creating suspense, drama and mystery or signalling life, hope and salvation.

Unlike modern methods of illumination, nineteenth-century sources of light were dim, smoky and could often be dangerous. Cheaper tallow candles (made from animal fat rather than beeswax) had a strong odour and produced copious amounts of smoke. While the wealthy dwelt in large well-lit rooms (illuminated by the latest gas lamps or large chandeliers) the poor often gathered around a single hearthside or worked long hours in sparsely lit factories.

“The city clocks had only just gone three, but it was quite *dark* already—it had not been *light* all day—and *candles* were *flaring* in the windows of the neighbouring offices, like ruddy smears upon the *palpable brown* air. The *fog* came pouring in at every chink and keyhole, and was so *dense* without, that although the court was of the narrowest, the houses opposite were mere *phantoms*.”  
- Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*.

**INSTRUCTIONS:**

Using our earlier handouts for guidance, select a number of texts according to the period in which your novel takes place. (This is called building your corpora).

Go to [clic.bham.ac.uk](http://clic.bham.ac.uk), click 'concordance', and select these texts from the drop-down menu under 'search the corpora'. You can automatically select a sample of texts in a given era by using the following links:

- [works set in the Georgian era \(1714-1837\)](#)
- [works set in the Regency era \(1811-1820\)](#)
- [works set in the early nineteenth century \(1800-1837\)](#)
- [works set in the mid-Victorian era \(1837-1880\)](#)
- [works set in the fin de siècle \(1880-1900\)](#)

Select 'all text' under the subsets option.

Think of a term relating to light that fits your chosen historical period. You can use the following list for inspiration.

*beam, candle, flash, fire, glow, glimmer, gleam,  
glint, lamp, lantern, light, lit, moon, shine, sun.*

Type this term under 'search for terms' and hit enter. An asterisk can be used as a wildcard – so *candle\** would also find *candles* or *candlestick*; and *light\** would also find *lights* and *lightning*.

What can you learn from your concordance results in terms of what it would have been like to live in your chosen time period?

Pay close attention to the words that sit on either side of your chosen term (in corpus linguistics, these are called collocates). Keep in mind the book each concordance line originates from (this is listed on the right-hand side).

If you detect a pattern, you can filter your results further using the filter rows option.

What is the light source they are using? Lanterns, the fireside, a paraffin oil lamp?

It is expensive?

1	--except my father's favourite dishes; our coals and	candles	were painfully economized--the pair of candles red.	<a href="#">AgnesG</a>
2	and candles were painfully economized--the pair of	candles	reduced to one, and that most sparingly used; the	<a href="#">AgnesG</a>

How are they obtaining this source of light? From the servants via bell?

1	possible, I'll go to bed." And so she took her	candle	and went. ¶ When Bell came up, Lily was still a	<a href="#">alli</a>
2	in my own room." ¶ "I'll ring the bell for a	candle,"	said the host. Then the colonel went, and as th	<a href="#">alli</a>
3	But I do," said Bell, ¶ "And I shall ring for	candles."	But he stopped her as she put her hand out	<a href="#">alli</a>
4	'Stop a moment, Bell. You need hardly have the	candles	before I go, and you need not begrudge my sta	<a href="#">alli</a>
5	the bell-rope is, sat down beside it to trim the	candle.	¶ 'I sat down to trim the candle, and when I	<a href="#">BR</a>
6	had come. I rang the bell, for I wanted a	candle;	and I wanted, too, to get an account of this	<a href="#">jane</a>
7	bell. When the butler would have lit his master's	candle,	however, he was forbidden. The latter was not	<a href="#">northanger</a>
8	cut.' ¶ 'You needn't stand between me and the	candle	for all that,' retorted Bella. 'This is another of th	<a href="#">OMF</a>
9	ell, purchased the tickets, and ordered chamber	candlesticks.	In another quarter of an hour the stranger was	<a href="#">PP</a>
10	s retired for the night, desiring Sam to fetch his	candle	when he rung. The bell did ring in due course	<a href="#">PP</a>
11	ur eyes--will you ring the bell for some working	candles?	My poor little girl would be sadly disappointed,	<a href="#">sense</a>
12	e Hollow." ¶ Then she rang the bell, asked for a	candle	and some bread and milk--Miss Keeldar's usual	<a href="#">shirley</a>

How is the source of light presented? Lace-covered and illuminating fine china (as in *Dorian Gray*)? Or cheerful and from a blazing fire (as in *Pride and Prejudice*)?

What is light itself associated with?

Reason, revelation, and scientific discovery?

2	ven your ugly furniture by lifting it into the serene	light	of science, has shown me this pregnant little fact	<a href="#">middlesmarch</a>
3	ception,--that she, that every one, saw him in the	light	of an exception. ¶ But Maggie was conscience-str	<a href="#">mill</a>
4	ur conscience and your heart have given you true	light	on this point, Miss Tulliver; and I have said all	<a href="#">mill</a>
5	ant growth of peaceful Arts and Sciences. ¶ What	light	is shed upon the world, at this day, from amidst	<a href="#">pictures</a>
6	ond measure, and caused him to be considered a	light	of science ever afterwards. ¶ CHAPTER XL. INTR	<a href="#">PP</a>
7	most romantic of all romantic young ladies, as the	light	of science seated himself beside her, 'Oh, Edwar	<a href="#">sketches</a>

### Religious fervour?

14	systems there swept space like a soft trace of	light	-- I felt the might and strength of God. Sure wa	<a href="#">jane</a>
15	moon to shine in it, because the glory of God	lightens	it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. ¶ In the	<a href="#">jane</a>
16	glory of God lightens it, and the Lamb is the	light	thereof. ¶ In the prayer following the chapter, a	<a href="#">jane</a>
17	et not God regard it from above, neither let the	light	shine upon it. Lo, let that night be solitary, let	<a href="#">Jude</a>
18	him, oh, God! she saw him in that dim evening	light.	Her brain reeled, her heart stopped beating. Sh	<a href="#">LadyAud</a>
19	who in heaven will for ever be in the immediate	light	of God's countenance. Errands of mercy--erran	<a href="#">mary</a>

### Or ghosts, spirits and the supernatural?

2a3a120	Left	Node	Right	Book	In bk.
1	I shut them, the darkness seemed to open as if	lightning	had split it; and the ghosts of _those other men_	<a href="#">arma</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	were the balustrades of the Ghost's Walk and one	lighted	window that might be my mother's. ¶ The way was	<a href="#">BH</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	enriched with figures, grinning and grotesque. After	lighting	with his own hands the faggots which were heape	<a href="#">BR</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	aircase like a ghostly summons, and made the dull	light	tremble in the drowsy lamp. ¶ 'Do you think he wa	<a href="#">BR</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	wiped the perspiration from his brow. ¶ "That is no	light	part of my penance," pursued the Ghost. "I am he	<a href="#">carol</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	me again; but it was evening, and the streets were	lighted	up. ¶ The Ghost stopped at a certain warehouse d	<a href="#">carol</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	whose eyes there were tears, which sparkled in the	light	that shone out of the Ghost of Christmas Past. ¶ "	<a href="#">carol</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	e clock proclaimed the hour; and which, being only	light,	was more alarming than a dozen ghosts, as he wa	<a href="#">carol</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9	to think that the source and secret of this ghostly	light	might be in the adjoining room, from whence, on f	<a href="#">carol</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	are sitting. Suppose we were suddenly to see the	lights	burning low and the ghosts of the old monks risin	<a href="#">Deronda</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11	omething?" again demanded Bessie. ¶ "Oh! I saw a	light,	and I thought a ghost would come." I had now	<a href="#">jane</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12	ngly opened, and there entered--Sue. ¶ She was in	light	spring clothing, and her advent seemed ghostly--	<a href="#">Jude</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13	oak corridors were dim in the ghostly twilight--the	light	carried by Phoebe looking only a poor speck in the	<a href="#">LadyAud</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Alternatively, what doesn't come up – what words would be an anachronism?

### OVER TO YOU...

How can you weave what you have learnt into your own writing? Would your character be able to afford many candlesticks? Would they have been rich enough to send for a servant to fetch one in the middle of the night? If their lamp was powered by electricity rather than gas would this have been novel enough for them to expressly mention?

You can write your answers in the space overleaf.



