



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 | when 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, Edward  | <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   | jane    |
| 15 | moon to shine in it, because the glory of God    | lightens | it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. ¶ In the    | jane    |
| 16 | glory of God lightens it, and the Lamb is the    | light    | thereof. ¶ In the prayer following the chapter, a  | jane    |
| 17 | et not God regard it from above, neither let the | light    | shine upon it. Lo, let that night be solitary, let | Jude    |
| 18 | him, oh, God! she saw him in that dim evening    | light.   | Her brain reeled, her heart stopped beating. Sh    | LadyAud |
| 19 | who in heaven will for ever be in the immediate  | light    | of God's countenance. Errands of mercy--erran      | mary    |

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

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.

If you found this activity useful, why not share some of your findings using the hashtag **#CLiCCreative**, or tag us **@CLiC\_fiction** on Twitter?