



ELECTRONOTES

WEBNOTE 07/10/2012

PROBLEMS WITH CFL LIGHT BULBS?

Seemed like a good idea. What is your experience with them? Mine – not so good.

I guess it was about two years ago when I decided that the Compact Fluorescent Light (CFL) bulbs were something I should try. I was sold on the claimed energy savings. The drawbacks were that they were more expensive, could not be used in some of my lamps (the ones that had a wire bail clipping the shade to the bulb), and they might be a disposal problem. Well, I convinced myself that the cost was pretty much a wash, since they lasted longer, and I don't like changing bulbs that much anyway. I figured I could use regular bulbs in the lamps with clip-on shades. And as for disposal, well they were supposed to last 5 years! So the long-term lower costs of electricity won. As usual, I went overboard and bought 4 boxes (24 bulbs) and installed about half of them. Everything started out fine (doesn't it always?).

Then, one of the "60 watt" bulbs flickered and died in about a week. Fluke? The second one that went after about 6 months went out with a disturbing "pop". A third one went out with an even more disturbing "bang" right over my head about a week later. Now, ordinary incandescent bulbs

usually (always?) blow out with a flash and a soft “plink” at exactly the time they turn on. We are used to that. The CFL went out with a bang right over my head while it was on and I was working under it. Kind of a different experience.

What was I doing wrong – or are these just a silly cheat? One thing, I found out was that they are not supposed to be mounted down (base up), or in an enclosed fixture. The rising or trapped heat kills them young. No – it doesn’t say this on the box. You find out these sorts of things online – perhaps. I also learned that they weren’t saving me anything if you only had them on for a short time (like less than 15 minutes). And they made RF noise.

I now have lost 7 bulbs. Four of them in my basement lampholders (“100 watts” mounted base up). It seems like heat should not be a problem with these, as they are in open porcelain holders below metal boxes that are already offset an additional 5 inches below the bottoms of floor joists. The “60 watt” CFL’s in the closed ceiling fixtures are still running, but I think they are getting very dim.

So I was feeling cheated. What to do. One thing, recognize that LED’s will be much better (but be careful) when they become affordable. Secondly, stock up on incandescent before they are outlawed (done). Thirdly, don’t be afraid to point out the problems.

One opportunity came a few months back. It was announced in the media that some green group had purchased a bunch of CFL’s and was bringing them around to houses, and were going to give every household one as a sample (and presumably, a free lecture). I put all the duds I had (six at that time) in a paper bag and had it by the door. I was going to

refuse the free bulb but insist that they take away the duds. RATS – they never showed. Others got their bulbs – or so the news said.

So why am I writing tonight? What prompted me right now? Well, it was that I found another bad switch. This was one the more expensive “Three Way” switches. [Incidentally, why do they call it three-way? It is two switch locations controlling one light (or set of lights)]. Why did I say “another” bad switch. Because this is the fourth one. How often do we encounter bad switches? Depends roughly on how old your house is – actually on how much the switch is used, of course. Possibly you replace one every three years on average? Something like that. Not four in a year. What is killing the switches?

Two observations. (1) All the four switches that died were controlling CFL’s. (2) Did you ever notice that when you are switching a CFL, you frequently hear arcing? Once in a while (every 100 times perhaps) this happens with incandescent. But with CFL’s, I think about every third time. Searching online indeed we find problems with switch arcing and CFL’s – with people equally blaming the CFL’s themselves, or CFL’s with cheap switches. Not enough data.

So, I have to change out two three-way switches. You always have to change them both – just makes sense rather than trouble-shoot for the one bad one. Of course, the second one was probably about to go anyway.

What have others found?