

What to do if you can't get the stovetop in your London apartment to turn on

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During our family summer vacation, we found ourselves unable to get the stovetop in our London apartment to work. The oven worked, but not the stovetop (known as a “hob” in England).

The property management company did leave the instructions for all of the appliances, and we found the instructions for the stovetop in what seemed like every European language except English.¹ I pulled out the German instructions, followed the steps, but the stovetop still didn't work.

One of my friends replied to my online appeal for help: Look around the kitchen for a switch that doesn't seem to do anything. That switch may very well control the stovetop.

Note that the switch may be nowhere near the stove.

I found an overlooked switch in the corner of the room. I turned it on. The stovetop started working.

Bonus chatter: The previous tenant appeared to be a vampire,² because many of the lamps had been rendered inoperative in various ways.

England appears to be partial to switched wall outlets, so trying to get a lamp to work involved trying out all eight combinations of

- the switch on the lamp itself,
- the switch on the outlet which controls the lamp, and
- the switch on the wall which controls the outlet.

There were two lamps which resisted even this brute-force algorithm.

One of them I never figured out. Maybe the bulb was burnt out, or the lamp was defective. Fortunately, there was more than enough light from the other lamps in the room that the loss of that corner lamp was not significant.

The second troublesome lamp didn't work because it had been unplugged. The mystery is that there appeared to be no outlet nearby for it ever to have been plugged into! The only nearby outlet took a BS 546 plug (round prongs), but the lamp plug was a BS 1363 (rectangular prongs).

Bonus chatter 2: In addition to driving on the opposite side of the road compared to the United States, England's switches are also the opposite of the United States. In England, down is on, and up is off.

In response to my confusion, a British colleague explained that it should have been obvious, because when the switch is in the *on* position, a little red light turns on.

Ah, but that's the problem: It was a red light. Does a red light mean "Stop! Don't use this outlet! (But I'm a light so you know that it's working.)" Or does a red light mean "Look, I have power!"³

It depends on which you consider to be more important: The fact that it's red, or the fact that it's a light.

Bonus chatter 3: A different friend confessed that she had been living in Ireland for six years before discovering that the stovetop be shut off from a wall switch.

¹ I later found the English instructions in a different cabinet.

² More likely, the previous tenant couldn't figure out how to turn off the lights, so they just unplugged everything in sight.

³ I have the same problem with car door locks. Does switching to red mean "Be careful! This door is locked!?" Or does it mean "Be careful! This door is unlocked!?"

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