

Radiators and curtains live in the same corner of a room, but they don't share priorities. A radiator wants clear airflow and freedom for heat to move into the space. A curtain wants to cover, soften, and frame the window. When you hang a curtain over a radiator, you're asking fabric to do something slightly unnatural, which means the details matter more than people expect.

I've helped a few homes solve this the hard way, after installing the wrong track position or choosing a curtain that looked perfect in daylight but became a heat blocker at night. The difference between "looks right" and "works properly" usually comes down to spacing, fabric choice, and how you handle the curtain's fall line in front of the heat source.

First, decide what problem you're actually solving

"Over a radiator" can mean several different setups, and each has a different best answer.

Sometimes the radiator is directly under the window and you want the curtain to look continuous across both the glass and the heat. Other times the radiator is in a bay window or beside the window, and the curtain is meant to visually unify the wall. Then there's the practical reason: older homes often have unattractive radiator finishes or awkward pipe runs, and the curtain becomes an easy cover without rebuilding the wall.

If the radiator runs hot and you have cold spots near the window, your main concern is heat performance. If the radiator is newer and your comfort is fine, your focus may be aesthetics and control of light. Both are solvable, but "what works best" changes depending on which pain you feel most.

The physics you can feel: heat needs an exit path

Most radiators deliver heat by warming nearby air and by radiating warmth upward and outward. Either way, if you trap the air behind a curtain or force the warm air to travel through dense fabric without a way to move into the room, the radiator will still warm the space, but less efficiently. In practice, you'll notice it as slower heat-up, more thermostat time, or a room that feels cool right at the window area.

That's why the best hanging methods keep a meaningful gap between the radiator and the fabric, or they use a curtain style that does not "seal" the radiator behind a solid textile layer.

The tricky part is that people can't always visualize airflow patterns from a flat drawing. You end up relying on the obvious cues: does the curtain compress against the radiator when it's closed? Does it hang heavy enough to cling forward? Do you get condensation on the glass near the curtain edges in winter? Those signals usually tell you whether the setup is likely to work.

Three common approaches, and where each one shines

1) Float the curtain so it clears the radiator

This is the approach I recommend most often when comfort matters. The goal is simple: mount the curtain so that, even when closed, it does not press tightly over the radiator face. You can still achieve a full, classic window treatment, but the fabric must be "free-falling" rather than acting like a cover sheet.

In a practical sense, you'll want the bottom hem of the curtain not to sit directly on top of the radiator. If it drapes onto the radiator, it tends to create a barrier, and the radiator's top and sides become less effective. Instead, the

curtain should hang just in front of it, or you should use a length that falls below the radiator but starts its coverage lower down.

Floating doesn't mean leaving a visible gap everywhere, though. Depending on how the window and radiator are shaped, you can hide the clearance behind the radiator cover, behind a pelmet, or by using a curtain that has enough weight to hang straight without billowing.

2) Use a shorter curtain and keep the radiator visible

Sometimes the best-looking option is also the most functional. If the radiator is aesthetically acceptable, or if you're using a radiator cover that already integrates with the decor, a shorter curtain avoids the problem entirely.

A common version is a curtain that sits between the window sill and the radiator top, or a style that ends at about the radiator height and then visually continues with a valance. The result is that the curtain frames the window, but heat is not fighting a fabric layer directly in front of it.

The trade-off is that you lose the continuous curtain plane that many people want for a "hotel" look. Still, in rooms where cold near the glass is a real issue, this method often wins because it protects the radiator's heat delivery.

3) Cover the radiator intentionally with a top treatment (valance or pelmet)

If you want the radiator out of view but you do not want to block it with a full-length curtain, a pelmet strategy can work well. A pelmet or valance mounted above the radiator can conceal pipes or the radiator body while keeping the main curtain panel away from the hottest area.

This setup relies on the pelmet doing the visual job, not the curtain. A curtain that hangs lower can be configured so it falls in front of the wall rather than over the radiator face. It's the same idea as floating, but with more structure and control.

One caution: pelmets can become heat traps if they create a sealed pocket. If you're building or installing a pelmet, leave enough clearance and avoid tightly boxing the radiator. The aim is to provide a visual canopy, not a closed chamber.

Spacing is the detail that saves you

The distance between the radiator and curtain fabric is the difference between a "works best" system and a "looks fine, feels cold" system.

When a curtain [curtains for bedroom](#) panel falls naturally, it can be closer to the radiator at the bottom because fabric weight pulls it forward. When a curtain is slightly too wide or when the track sits low, it can bridge the gap and touch. When a curtain is too narrow, it may pull tight and form a sheet-like cover.

I've seen two setups where the difference came down to a few centimeters. One curtain hung with a gentle break that stayed off the radiator face. The other curtain sat closer, and during cold spells the area near the window always felt less comfortable, even though the room temperature elsewhere was stable.

So rather than chasing an exact measurement that depends on the radiator style, consider a clearance approach. The target is simple: aim for a noticeable air gap when the curtain is closed, and ensure the hem does not rest on the radiator. If you can, temporarily hang a flat scrap or an inexpensive test panel and observe how it behaves when tugged into position.

Fabric choice: weight helps, but sealing hurts

Curtains are not all the same. A curtain's fabric thickness, lining, and ability to move freely all change how it interacts with heat.

Heavier drapes can look more luxurious and hang with fewer wrinkles. They also tend to sag and touch surfaces if the track is positioned low or the fabric is cut with a narrow width. If you're using a heavier curtain, you usually need a bit more care in length and clearance so it doesn't slump into a tight block over the radiator.

Lined curtains are often marketed for insulation. In a radiator context, lining can be a blessing or a curse depending on placement. If the lined curtain hangs in a way that leaves space around the radiator, you gain light control and a thicker visual barrier. If the lined curtain creates direct contact or nearly direct contact, you reduce the radiator's ability to release heat into the room.

A practical middle ground is to use a curtain that has enough structure to fall neatly, but plan the hardware and length so it doesn't form a sealed layer over the radiator face. If you're unsure, choose a test hanging arrangement and see how it performs over a couple of heating cycles.

Track height and bracket placement: the quiet variable

Most "bad curtain over radiator" installs share one thing: the track is too low or too close to the window. People mount it where it looks right from the outside, then the curtain drops too near the radiator.

To get the best result, the track or rail height should prioritize the curtain's natural fall line. Mounting higher often allows the curtain to clear the radiator more reliably because the panel has more vertical space to hang straight before it reaches the radiator area. It also helps the curtain create better pooling below, if that's the look you want.

If you're using ceiling-mounted tracks, you can gain even more control over how the fabric drapes. A ceiling track can keep the curtain from sliding forward as easily, especially with heavier textiles. A wall-mounted rod works too, but you need to be more attentive to how the curtain behaves in a closed position.

The bottom hem matters more than you think

Many people choose curtain length based on how it looks when it's open, then forget how the hem behaves when the panels meet the wall. Over radiators, the hem line is a heat and airflow boundary.

If the hem rests on the radiator, it will likely compress against the warm metal or warm air currents. That contact increases the "cover effect" and encourages the curtain to act like a barrier. If the hem is too far above the radiator, you may end up with a visible gap that doesn't look intentional, and cold air can still feel like it comes down from the window area.

A good compromise is to aim for the hem to fall either below the radiator so it clears the radiator face or to stop at a height that frames the radiator without covering it directly. If you want a curtain that visually continues to the floor, you can often do that by keeping the radiator region largely unobstructed and letting the curtain finish the look below.

Radiator position and window type change the best solution

The same curtain will behave differently in each of these scenarios:

- Radiators centred under a standard sash window: you'll often get the cleanest look by floating the curtain and ensuring the hem clears the radiator.

- Radiators in bay windows: the curved walls can cause curtains to press toward the radiator, especially if the panels are wide and the track run is short. You may need to narrow the panel width or use tailored fullness so the fabric falls without “bridging” the radiator area.
- Radiators near the window side rather than directly below: here the curtain can sometimes clear the radiator well, but the corner can still create a pinch point where the fabric touches. Be sure to check the curtain when it’s fully closed, not just when it’s partially drawn.

This is where living with the solution matters. If you only test it in the middle of the day, you might miss how it behaves in winter when you close curtains for longer periods and the fabric relaxes as the temperature changes.

A quick reality check: can you keep the room comfortable?

If you want a straightforward “works best” mindset, treat this like a comfort engineering problem, not a style compromise. You can absolutely make a curtain look good over a radiator and keep heat performance reasonable, but you have to set it up so the radiator has a clear path to warm the room.

Here’s a simple test that takes less time than swapping hardware later. Hang the curtain exactly as you intend to use it, then run the heating for a normal period. Put a hand near the window area. You’re not checking the radiator temperature, you’re sensing whether the space feels trapped by fabric. If you notice a persistent cold band, the curtain may be sealing too much.

In some households, occupants also tend to close curtains tightly at night. That makes this check important. A setup that’s fine with curtains half-open can become less effective with curtains fully closed.

What about radiators with valves and covers?

Radiator valves are another edge case. If the valve position is exposed and the curtain hems or folds land in front of it, you may accidentally restrict access. More importantly, you might change the way the curtain drapes if it catches on knobs or protrusions.

If you’re using a radiator cover, you can gain flexibility. Some radiator covers are designed with slatted fronts or open patterns, which allow airflow while still hiding the metal. In those cases, a curtain can be closer without acting as a complete seal, because the cover already manages airflow.

But if your radiator cover is solid and already blocks a lot, adding a full-height curtain increases the barrier effect. It’s still possible to make it work, but you’ll likely need more clearance and a plan for how the curtain will hang when fully closed.

Light control and privacy, without creating a heat trap

Many people hang curtains over radiators for privacy, not just decoration. In bedrooms and living rooms, you might close the curtain for long stretches, especially at night.

If your goal is strong light blocking, you may lean toward thicker fabrics, potentially lined. The best way to protect performance is to keep the radiator itself out of the curtain’s immediate “zone of contact.” Use the curtain thickness to control light, not to seal heat.

Sometimes the answer is layered. For example, you can use a sheer or lighter inner panel that you keep open during heating, and a heavier outer curtain that you only close when you need privacy or darkness. That approach reduces how often you create a barrier between radiator and room.

It's not complicated, but it requires you to think about daily habits. If you always close the heavy curtain fully, choose a hanging method that keeps the radiator region clear, because you can't "schedule around physics" every day.

Hardware decisions that affect the final result

Curtains don't hang themselves. The rod thickness, the bracket depth, and the way the rings or hooks move can all change how the fabric settles.

If you're using curtain rings on a rod, the fabric can pull forward when you close it. If you're using a track with runners and appropriate gap clearance, you can often guide the curtain panels to land where you want them with less drifting.

Also, consider the curtain width. Too much fullness can cause fabric to billow into the radiator area. Too little fullness can pull the panels tight against the space. The "best" width is usually the one that allows the curtain to close smoothly while still dropping vertically rather than sweeping forward.

If you're fitting new hardware, one practical habit is to dry-fit the track and curtain without fully committing. Move the track up in small increments and watch how the hem line shifts relative to the radiator.

The best choice, framed as trade-offs

There's no single "best" solution for every home, but there are best fits. When people ask me what works best, I think in terms of their priorities: comfort first, aesthetics first, or a balance.

- If comfort is the priority, clear the radiator face and avoid hem contact.
- If aesthetics is the priority, choose a method that looks continuous but does not physically seal the radiator.
- If you need privacy and darkness, combine thicker fabric with a hanging position that keeps the heat path open.

That may sound like a slogan, but I'm using it because the trade-off is real. You can either block heat less, or you can block light less, and the hanging position determines which compromise feels acceptable.

A practical installation mindset (without overcomplicating it)

If you're planning a new curtain setup, the fastest way to avoid mistakes is to approach it like a small project, not a cosmetic task.

A quick pre-install checklist:

- Measure the radiator height, including any valve or pipe bumps that change where the curtain will land.
- Dry-hang the curtain at the intended length before final drilling, if possible.
- Ensure the curtain hem does not rest on the radiator when fully closed.
- Decide how you will handle the radiator area visually, either by floating, shortening, or using a valance or pelmet.

I've learned that the "dry hang" step saves the most time and money. It also prevents those frustrating moments when the curtain looks perfect in photos during installation, then you close it later and realize it's touching, pressing, or bridging.

Curtain styles that tend to work well over radiators

When selecting the curtain itself, think about movement and structure, not just color.

Tab tops and some loop styles can pull the fabric into a particular fall angle. Pencil pleat curtains often hang nicely straight when properly weighted and hung with a correct track height. Eyelet curtains can be more predictable visually, but they might not drape as evenly unless the fabric has enough weight.

Sheers can be a smart option for spaces that need gentler heat behavior, especially if you can keep them open while heating. Heavy curtains can still work, but the hanging method must prevent the fabric from acting like a blanket over the radiator.

If you're using curtain weights at the hem, you can reduce twisting and improve vertical fall. That can help keep the fabric from curling toward the radiator. Just be careful that adding weight doesn't make the hem slump too low.

Common mistakes people make (and what to do instead)

The best way to avoid problems is to recognize the patterns.

The most common issue is curtain panels that "bridge" across the radiator, especially when the curtain is too wide or too long. The second most common issue is track placement that makes the curtain fall into the radiator region. The third is choosing a fabric and lining combination that creates a dense barrier and then closing it tightly every evening without checking how it feels near the window.

When you see these mistakes, the fix is usually not to abandon curtains. It's to adjust one of the big levers, typically track height, curtain length, or panel width. Sometimes a simpler fix is to move the curtain's meeting point. Other times it's to switch from full-height curtains to a combination of curtain plus valance.

Putting it together: which approach works best for you?

If you want a quick decision guide based on what you care about most, here's a simple way to choose between floating, shortening, or using a valance.

Your priority	Usually best approach	What you watch out for	--- --- ---	Maximum comfort near the radiator
Floating curtain with hem clearance	Track height that makes the curtain slump forward			Continuous, elegant look
Floating curtain, with careful length	Fabric weight pressing too close when fully closed			Radiator hidden without heavy fabric contact
Valance or pelmet strategy plus lower curtain that clears	Pelmet that traps air or seals the radiator pocket			Easy maintenance and fewer variables
Short curtain that frames the window	Less coverage, depending on privacy needs			

A real-world example: the "it looked right until winter" story

One apartment I worked on had a radiator under a large window, and the tenant wanted a dramatic floor-length curtain. The initial install used a beautiful curtain fabric with lining. In the daytime, it draped perfectly and the window looked incredible. The problems showed up once temperatures dropped.

When they closed the curtains at night, the area near the window felt colder than the rest of the room. The curtain hem had settled onto the radiator cover by a small amount, just enough for the fabric to press and create a consistent barrier. It also slightly reduced airflow behind the curtain.

The fix was not a full rebuild. We raised the track, shortened the curtain by a modest amount, and adjusted the panel width so the fabric fell straighter. The tenant regained that continuous look, and the window felt warmer again. The curtain still controlled light, but it stopped acting like a sealed lid.

That's the pattern I keep seeing: once the curtain has the right relationship to the radiator, everything else becomes easier to live with.

Final thoughts on “best” results

Hanging curtains over radiators is one of those tasks where good taste and good function have to meet in the middle. The best setup is the one that keeps the curtain from sealing the radiator while still giving you the look you want.

If you remember just one principle, make it this: set the curtain so it clears the radiator when closed. From there, choose fabric and length to support that behavior. Then test it during normal heating, not just during the install moment.

When you get the details right, the curtain becomes an asset, not a heat blocker, and the window looks finished instead of compromised.