

Light Trails – tricks and experiments

Intro...

Light trails are best tried by experimentation. The length of the exposure is the critical setting. So concentrate on that. Experience will tell you what will work and what will not. Most of the results are from your own artistic input.

Equipment...

Most SLR cameras, bridge cameras and some compacts will let you have long enough exposures to do light trails. No special lenses are used. Longer focal length lenses are good if you are working at distance. Wide angles are best close up and mid-range lenses will pretty much let you do any one of these.

It is important to have a go with a tripod at some time. Tripods are not necessary. However, it helps if you have done a few good shots using one. Any way of fixing your camera in a steady position will suffice.

Lens hoods are helpful; sometimes you can get quite bad lens flare. However, some people consider this an advantage. You make your own artistic choice!

If your camera has 'bulb' mode and the traffic is light it's helpful to try multiple exposures. Use a black card – more below. Bulb mode is not necessary, but it is another technique to try. Once learned you can use light trail techniques in other situations – capturing firework shots or doing light-painting are examples.

Basics...

Set up your tripod, or fix your camera to a firm point. Shutter speed to about 2 seconds if there is lots of light. Wait until your traffic comes past and push your shutter as it passes.

Check the shot. No trail; too much of the car; under-exposed; black? Try a longer shutter speed. Most dark situations will involve shutter speeds of about 2 to 25 seconds. This depends on the background light and the amount of traffic. Your light meter will not be useful in light traffic as the lights coming past will change everything for the duration of the pass. Experiments are the key to getting the shot you want.

Experiment with aperture. In a High Street you will need to work quite close - so apertures of around f5.6 to f8 will work. For greater distance use a higher f stop to get sharpness right through. Higher F stop numbers will need longer exposures. Experimentation is the name of the game.

Extending yourself...

Light levels – You can use almost any low-light situation. Try any time just after sunset into deepest night.

Creativity – stand up; lie down; up a ladder, from above, on a corner, from the opposite side of an obstacle; jumping up and down; slowly panning the camera; from a bridge or building... Anything goes. Try it all.

Location – Any dark location with moving lights. Keep safe in the dark – consider wearing a reflective jacket.

Framing – use the normal 'rules' of composition until you have a measure of the colours and tracks at each location. Then try a range of framing types. Light trails each have wildly different exposure characteristics.

Ideas – Put '**Light Trails**' into Google images ([Light Trails in Google images](#)); Try converting to black and white.

Experiment, experiment, experiment! Did I mention that it helps to do some experiments?

Bulb setting...

Set your camera to 'bulb' (read the manual). While in bulb mode the shutter will stay open. Your manual will tell you how your camera closes bulb mode. Then:

- Place a black card in front of the lens
- Put the camera into bulb mode
- Take the card away from the lens when you want to capture a light trail
- Put the card back when the vehicle has passed
- Repeat until you have enough trails (be careful not to overexpose the shot with too many exposures).
- Take the camera out of bulb mode and look at your picture.

By repeated card removal you will get multiple trails in one exposure. Experience will tell you when you have built up enough trails to make a picture (four or five as a rough guide). Again, experiment to get it right.

Comment...

Now you will always have something to do after the sun goes down !

Have fun with your camera!

Damon