

LIGHT PAINTING

By Kent DuFault



<https://www.pexels.com/photo/heart-shaped-lights-3049234/>

Nothing Ahead – Canon EOS 1100D, 18mm lens, f/16, ISO 100, no shutter EXIF

You've probably seen photos displaying this type of light painting before. Have you ever tried it? It's trickier than you might think.

However, there are many different forms of lighting painting and just as many variables of those forms to give you hours of fun creating light-painted pictures.

That's the goal in this Creativity Prompt: to inspire you to undergo hours of photo fun. Let's dive into it.

We'll start with the most fundamental challenge. The example photo (above) is light painting at its basic level.

Here's what you need:

- A camera that allows you to lock open the shutter (best option) or a camera that offers extended exposure times up to 30 seconds (second-best option)
- A lens in the 28mm to 55mm focal length range with a wide maximum aperture of f/3.5 or wider
- A sturdy tripod to support your camera (best option) or some other sturdy structure that you can place your camera down onto (second-best option)
- A wireless camera shutter release (best option), a wired external camera shutter release (second-best option), or a camera with a self-timer (third-best option, and it can only be used with a camera that offers extended shutter speeds up to 30 seconds)
- An 8x10 inch piece of matte black cardboard
- A light source (more on that in a second)
- Dark (preferably black) clothing
- Remove reflective surfaces from your body such as watches, belt buckles, or glasses
- A dark area to shoot in without a lot of extraneous light off in the background

Light Sources



<https://unsplash.com/photos/WgimhrWvbY>

Alessandro Skocir (left) – Nikon D500, 46mm setting on a zoom lens, f/3.5, 6/10th, ISO 100

<https://unsplash.com/photos/Q8EORX2I1UY>

Anton Darius (center) – Canon EOS 700D, 20mm lens, f/1.4, 1/60th, ISO 200

<https://unsplash.com/photos/GewlrE-mkk4>

Linus Sandvide (right) – Sony ILCE 7M3, 24mm lens, f/2.8, 4 seconds, ISO 8000

There are commercially produced light painting devices. However, if you're just giving it a try to see if you like it, you don't need that.

Start with a good flashlight and/or some glow sticks.

Try to select a powerful flashlight. I use a 10-inch Maglite flashlight.

Glow sticks are pretty easy to find and come in many varieties. Again, you want to select some that are bright. I use light sticks that are sold as a road hazard warning signal; these are very bright. The type used by cavers and mountain climbers is also very bright.

No matter what type you select, it will take you some time to learn how much time it takes for the camera to record the light source, and that will dictate how fast you can move the light around as you are painting.

If you move the light source over the same area more than once, it will build up exposure density.

For your first attempt, paint something simple. Try your name or create a heart shape. If you write words, you will have to flip the file in post-processing software as the camera will record it backward.

All the light painting techniques that we will discuss in this Creativity Prompt start with this basic setup:

- 1 Find your dark area to shoot in and dress appropriately
- 2 Support your camera
- 3 Attach a remote shutter release (if you have one)
- 4 Place your light source on the ground facing the camera while turned on
- 5 Manually focus the camera onto the light source and lock focus
- 6 Turn the light source off or cover it with your 8x10 black cardboard
- 7 If using the 'Bulb' function, set the camera shutter speed to B
- 8 If using an extended shutter speed, set the camera to 30 seconds
- 9 Set your aperture to the widest f/stop
- 10 Set your ISO to 800
- 11 Release the shutter and go pick up the light source. If it's a glow stick, keep it covered from the camera view until you're ready to start painting.
- 12 Expose the light source to the camera and make a simple shape such as a heart or a circle while counting for two seconds
- 13 Turn the light source off or cover it and place it in the same place on the ground
- 14 Close the shutter and review your picture
- 15 If the exposure is good, you then know that it takes about two seconds of exposure in any one place that you paint
- 16 If it is underexposed, you must slow the light source down as you move it or increase your ISO setting
- 17 If it is overexposed, you must speed up the movement of the light source or decrease the ISO setting
- 18 Once you feel that you have a handle on the exposure timing, repeat the above for your light painting masterpiece!

Here is some inspiration



<https://unsplash.com/photos/1XGlbRjt92Q>

Christian Wiediger – Canon EOS 77D, 18mm lens, f/4, 6.5 seconds, ISO 3200

Note: If light painting letters, you must cover the light source with your black card, or turn it off if that's an option, to stop exposure between letters, or use cursive. Notice how the density of exposure of the peace sign

changes based upon the photographer's movement. Light painting takes some practice. But it is so rewarding when you create a shot that you're excited about!

Light Painting as an Element of Composition



<https://www.pexels.com/photo/time-lapse-photo-of-semi-circle-light-painting-with-a-woman-in-the-center-3162989/>

Atiabii – No EXIF

When you first begin light painting, you will likely produce images that look primarily like squiggly lines with no defined structure. Imagine it. You're writing or drawing something in the dark, and you have no way to judge shape until you have some experience.

Using light painting as a composition tool for a different subject is easier to get started with satisfying results.

In the example photo (above), two light sources were used to create a moody frame around the subject. One light source was a sparkler, and the other was a flashlight. Varying the light sources used added additional visual interest.

If you are unfamiliar with the term 'sparkler,' here is a definition from Wikipedia:

"A sparkler is a type of hand-held firework that burns slowly while emitting colored flames, sparks, and other effects with no explosion."



Assignment:

Let's get started by using light painting as a frame around a subject. Follow the basic setup. Start with something simple (such as the example photo). Concentrate on figuring out the exposure settings, learn the timing of the movement, and gain some experience with getting everything in focus.



<https://www.pexels.com/photo/person-on-truck-s-roof-2449600/>

Aidan Roof – No EXIF

Now, let's make things a little bit more exciting and challenging.

The above example photo was created with two light sources. The first was a burst of light from an electronic flash that illuminated the subject. Once the area returned to darkness, the halo was then light painted into the picture using a flashlight.



Assignment:

Follow the basic setup procedures. Place your subject and then illuminate them with an electronic flash. When selecting your location, make sure that there aren't any objects close behind the subject. You want the background to remain dark. After the flash exposure, use a light source to 'paint' light around the subject before closing the shutter.

Here is a Quick Inspirational Gallery of Other Light Painting Options



<https://www.pexels.com/photo/orange-carnival-1782129/>

Sergio Souza – Canon EOS 6D, 35mm lens, f/4, ISO 800, no shutter EXIF

When lights are moving in a dark area, the resulting photo is light painting.



Assignment:

Bring a tripod to a carnival, fair, or zoo, and photograph the moving rides.



https://unsplash.com/photos/Nteclo9A_JQ

Joe Leahy – Sony ILCE-7SM2, no lens EXIF, 30 second exposure time, ISO 200

If you have lights or a bright night sky, you can still paint with light. Look for a location where the ambient lighting is minimal and the immediate area where you will paint is dark. (Study the example photo.)



Assignment:

This project is tricky. Don't feel bad if it takes several tries. Pick a location where there is some ambient (existing) lighting in the background. Choose a spot to paint where there is a dark, dense shadowed area. Give it a try!



<https://www.pexels.com/photo/time-lapse-photography-3119955/>

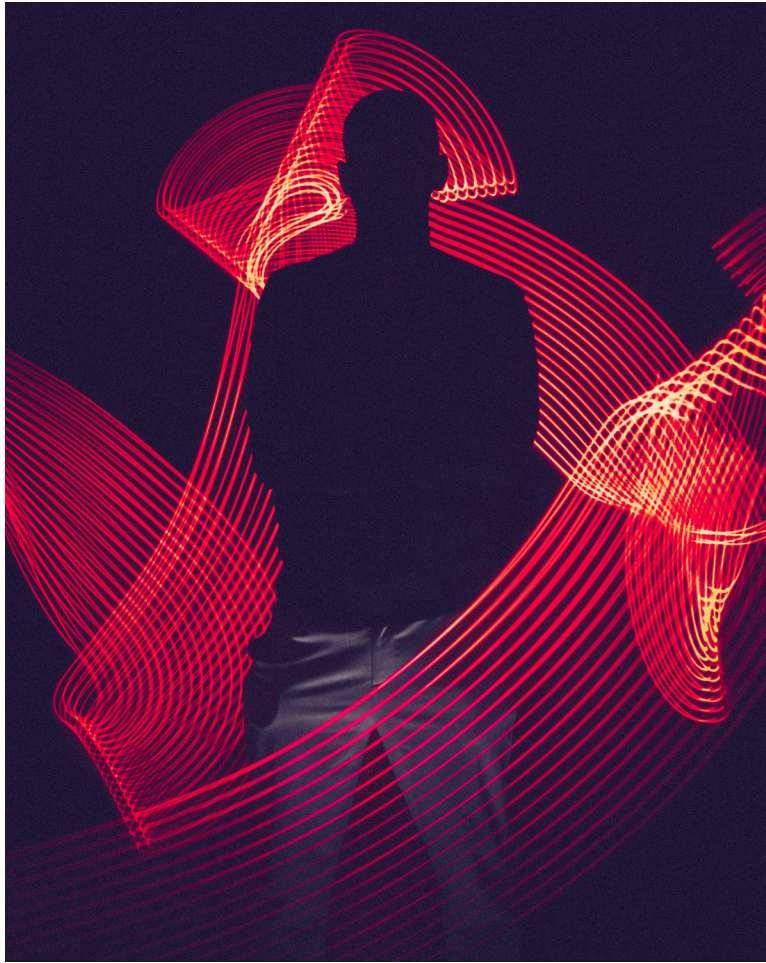
Kelly Lacy – Canon EOS 5D Mark III, 24mm lens, f/6.3, ISO 100, no shutter EXIF

Have you ever thought of light painting along with camera panning? Think about that. At night (a dark location) that includes some artificial lighting when moving the camera, you are dragging the exposure of the light sources across the frame. You are painting the frame with those existing light sources.



Assignment:

Go out at night and practice light painting with camera panning. Study the example photo!



<https://www.pexels.com/photo/red-led-light-with-silhouette-of-a-man-3094799/>

Akwice – No EXIF

There are commercially available light painting tools. One such tool is the light bar, also known as a light wand or a light stick. This tool consists of a tube with multiple lights on it.

It adds a level of creativity to the light painting process because it acts much like a paintbrush.

These light tubes cost anywhere from \$200 to \$300 USD.

Perhaps you don't want to invest that kind of money if you're giving this a try for the first time.

You can make a light wand by attaching several flashlights or a string of holiday lights to a board that is approximately two to three feet long.

I did this by wrapping a string of holiday lights around a wooden board. Yes, this is a bit cumbersome because your lights need to be plugged in.

However, it's a fantastic way to give it a try with little to no cost.



Assignment:

Try building a light wand and painting with light using your movement as brush strokes.