

# How to photograph car light trails



Many people think it takes a lot of work to get an image of light trails, but that couldn't be further from the truth. With a tripod and a camera that allows you to play around in manual mode, you'll be ready to capture some colorful and vivacious images.



## How Light Trails Happen

With any night photography you need to keep your camera's shutter open for a long time in order to capture the light that reflects off of your surroundings. Why is that? Most of the available light sources at night aren't nearly as bright as the sun. While you might normally take a picture with a shutter speed of 1/125s during the day, you'll need a much slower shutter speed of 3 to 5 seconds to take the same picture at night.

When you keep your shutter open for such a long period of time, any light source in your image becomes a bright spot. These light sources, when they are moving, become light trails.

Think of your camera like it's an Etch A Sketch. As cars pass by the front of it, both the rear and front lights draw lines across your image sensor. Because there is no other light to compete with the cars, you get light trails that go on for as long as your shutter is open.



## Why It's Important To Have A Tripod

Your tripod keeps your camera still so your light trails remain as crisp and clean as possible. If you shake your camera while the lights pass by, they will blur, and you won't achieve the same effect. The tripod is also important because you won't simply want to take pictures of light trails. You'll want to capture buildings and anything else that is illuminated by the reflected the light. You don't want that part of the image to be blurry either.

## Which Manual Settings Work The Best?

Even if you're using a point-and-shoot camera, you'll still want to take your pictures in manual mode. Automatic modes don't allow you to use extremely long shutter speeds like 3s or 5s. In some cases, you'll be keeping your shutter open for as long as 30s.

I like to set my aperture to F8 first. As long as you pick an aperture higher than F8, you should be pretty well set. After that, I simply start experimenting with different shutter speeds, using the fastest one first.

You'll need to experiment because not all light sources move at the same speed. If your trails aren't long enough, keep your shutter open longer.

