

Long Exposure Photography

What Is a Long Exposure?

- A long exposure means the shutter stays open longer than it normally would.
- Instead of freezing movement, we're allowing movement to record over time.
- Long exposures can create:
 - Smooth, silky water
 - Motion blur
 - Light trails
 - Soft movement in clouds
 - Intentional movement and creative effects
- Tonight's focus: using shutter speed to show motion.

Why a Tripod?

- Use a sturdy tripod.
- Turn image stabilization off if your camera/lens/tripod combination recommends doing so.
- Don't touch the camera when taking the picture.
- Use a 2-second timer, remote shutter, or phone/app trigger.
- Remove the camera strap if it is windy and flapping around.
- Extend the tripod's center column as little as possible for stability.
- The tripod allows you to deliberately slow the shutter without introducing unwanted camera shake.

Camera Settings

Mode: Manual

- ISO: 100
- Aperture: f/8–f/11
- Shutter: Start around 1 second
- Focus: Autofocus to establish focus, then switch to manual focus
- Timer: 2 seconds

Mode: Shutter Priority

- Shutter: Start around 1 second
- Turn off Auto ISO

Shutter speed is the creative control:

- 1/30 sec — some movement, water texture remains
- 1/4 sec — noticeable movement
- 1 sec — smoother water
- 2–5 sec — very smooth, ethereal movement
- 10+ sec — extremely blurred movement, depending on how fast the water is moving

The Exposure Triangle Still Applies

If you slow the shutter down, you're letting in more light.

You can compensate by:

- Stopping down the aperture
- Lowering ISO
- Using a neutral density (ND) filter

Composition & Focus

- Long exposure doesn't magically make a photograph interesting. Composition still matters.
- Look for foreground interest.
- Use rocks, logs, reflections, or leading lines.
- Watch where the water is going.
- Try vertical and horizontal compositions.
- Leave space for the movement to lead the viewer through the frame.
- Compose first, focus second, slow the shutter third.

Demonstration: The Fountain

Photograph the same water at:

1/30 → 1/4 → 1 sec → 2 sec → 5 sec

Compare the images and look at how shutter speed changes the way the water's movement is recorded.

HANDS-ON: EXPERIMENTING WITH SHUTTER SPEED

Challenge 1: The Fountain

Create three versions of the same water:

1. Frozen/defined
2. Some motion
3. Smooth/blurred

Challenge 2: Moving People

Have one person stand still while another walks through the frame.

Try:

- 1/30 sec
- 1 sec
- 3 sec

Challenge 3: Intentional Camera Movement

Try 1/4–1 second and deliberately move the camera:

- Vertically
- Horizontally
- With a twist

Challenge 4: Moving Lights

Use a phone flashlight to create light trails.

Try 1–5 seconds and experiment with different movements.

Challenge 5: How Slow Can You Go?

Start at 1 second and keep slowing the shutter until you get an exposure you like.

Compensate with aperture and/or ISO as needed.

LONG EXPOSURE CHECKLIST

1. COMPOSE — What do I want in the frame?
2. STABILIZE — Tripod + stable surface.
3. ND FILTER — Sunglasses for your lens.
4. ISO — Start at ISO 100.
5. APERTURE — Start around f/8–f/11.
6. SHUTTER — Start around 1 second and experiment.
7. TRIGGER — 2-second timer or remote.
8. REVIEW — Is the movement what I envisioned?
9. ADJUST — Faster or slower shutter?

THE TAKEAWAY

There isn't a "correct" shutter speed for water.

A 1/2-second exposure might be perfect for one stream and completely different for another.

You're not trying to find the magic setting — you're using shutter speed to decide how you want movement to look.