



Andy's Photoshop Tip #43 - Lightning Tutorial

This **REALISTIC LIGHTNING** tips was originally created by [Tom Nelson](#). I have just provided pictures of each step so it would be a little easier to understand and to follow.

Here's a procedure to make very realistic lightning. Start with a new file which you've filled with black, or a new layer which is transparent. You probably want to set up your Commands palette for the commands "New Path," "Stroke Path," and "Turn Off Path." You'll be using those commands a lot.



1

Use the lasso to draw a long jagged line where you want the main lightning bolt to go. It's **easy** to make an irregular line with the lasso; just jiggle your hand a bit. Don't let go of the mouse button when you get to the end. Instead, drag at right angles to your line and then let go. The reason is immediately obvious: Photoshop draws a line back to your starting point to close the selection. If you don't drag away from the line you want, the resulting long, thin selection has gaps in the middle. If this is confusing, just try it.



2

In the Paths palette choose Make Path, or use the Commands palette to do the same thing. Your lasso selection becomes "Work Path" in the Paths palette. Photoshop prompts you for a tolerance setting - 1 pixel is good enough.



3

With the minus-pen tool (the pen tip with a "-" next to it), click on the **unwanted** line, near one of the ends. Hit the Delete key to delete it. This selects all the other points, unfortunately. If you hit Delete again, you delete the whole path. Instead, click away from the path to deselect it. Then click on the unwanted segment near the other end of your path and delete that too. You now have two paths, the lightning bolt and a separate unwanted path. Click again anywhere on the unwanted path and hit Delete **twice.** The first time deletes part of the path, the second time deletes the rest of it. You now have a path of the main lightning bolt. Choose "Save Path" and name your path "Main Bolt" or something.

I haven't figured out how to make a forked path. You need to repeat the above procedure for all of the major branches of your lightning bolt. Use the lasso, then Make Path, then delete the unwanted part, then Save Path. The minor branches should come off the main bolt at a place where the main bolt changes direction abruptly, and should not come as far to the ground as the main bolt. This is the way it happens in nature. Don't worry about making all the little sparks that will come off the lightning bolt. Just make 3-6 main branches.



4

Now the fun starts. Set up your foreground and background colors as fairly dark colors. I used shades of purple with about 55% brightness. Double-click the

airbrush tool to get the options palette. Set 50% pressure, click the "fade" checkbox and set about 200 steps to background color. When you stroke the path with the airbrush tool, and the color will go from foreground to background, darkening as it descends. The effect is very cool. I set the airbrush to 8 pixels and 0% hardness, but your own settings will depend on the size of your picture.



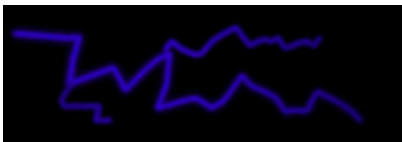
5

Click on the main bolt in the Paths palette to make it active. In the Paths palette or the Commands palette, choose "Stroke Path" to stroke with the airbrush. You may want to "Turn Off Path" (or select another path) to see what it looks like.



6

Repeat the stroking process with the other branches, making them narrower (smaller airbrush) the shorter they are. Because they take off from the main bolt, and the main bolt changes color as it goes, you'll need to change the foreground color for each smaller branch. While you're at it, darken the background color as well. The smaller bolts are cooler in temperature and thus darker. You'll probably want to reduce the number of fade steps in the Airbrush Options palette. Stroking the branches is easier to do than to describe.



7

Go back to your main bolt, reset your foreground and background colors to the original ones you used, then *lighten* those colors by clicking each swatch and dialing up the lightness in the Picker palette. I used about 80% brightness for the second stroke.

Set a considerably smaller brush size for the airbrush (I used 3 pixels, 0% hardness). Stroke the main bolt again with the lighter colors, then do the same for the other branches.



8

Set the colors to white or a very light color (I used 95%) for the final stroking. Stroke only the main bolt, or also the most major of the branches. The lightning takes on a look of reality.



9

Now you will need to pull "sparks" off the lightning with the smudge tool set to 90-95% and a small brush setting. click on a part where the bolt changes direction, hold down the mouse button and pull off a jaggy line. You can also pull the main lightning bolt color down into the branches a ways if you like.



10

For the final step, you can create a radial gradient from a really light purple to transparent. Click on the top of the main spark, and drag out a centimeter or so. Now you are done with your lightning bolt.





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