



Handwritten Text using Photoshop and After Effects

Text that seemingly writes itself on is a cool effect and one of those techniques that a motion graphics artist just has to know. But just how do you do it? Well there are a number of ways to create this effect in After Effects, you could use the Write On effect, Vector Paint or masks for example, but in this tutorial I'll show you my favourite technique using After Effects' Brush tool.

The key to great looking handwritten text is to break the word up into individual strokes then reveal each stroke one-by-one. This ensures that you don't accidentally reveal parts of later strokes which can ruin the effect, and also makes the painting step of the animation process very fast. And the advantage of using After Effects' Brush tool is that each stroke has it's own keyframes making it very easy to fine-tune the look once all the strokes have been painted.

Step One: Prepare text in Photoshop

First we'll use Photoshop to prepare our text layer. This step takes a little time but once the file is prepared, the animation step is quick, easy and very precise.

1. Open the file erika_start.psd. This word has 13 strokes including an extra stroke for the top of the letter K which crosses over itself. I've chosen the following stroke order but you may prefer a different order.

Name your layers in Photoshop according to the order they will be revealed in After Effects.



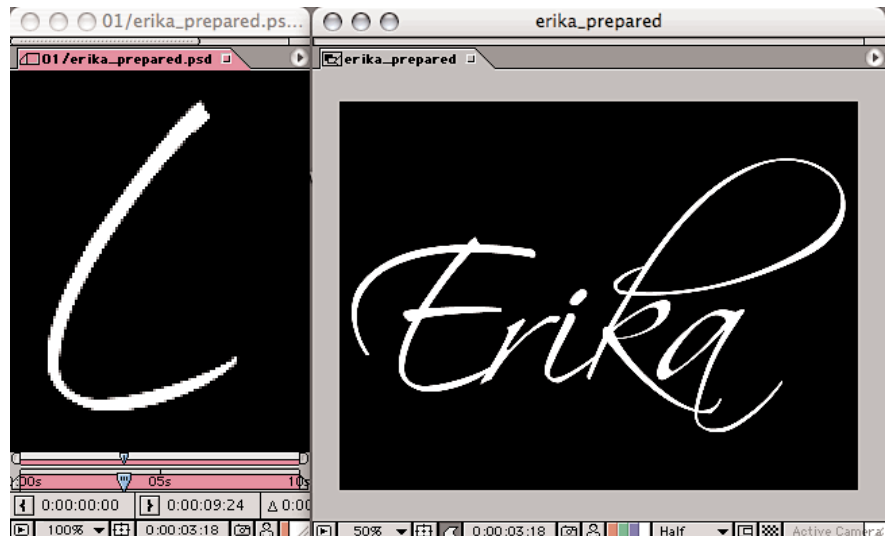
2. Duplicate the erika layer 12 times and name the layers from 01 to 13.
3. Turn off visibility for all the layers except stroke 01 and the background layer. Leaving the black background visible makes it easier to see the text and any stray pixels you may otherwise have missed.
4. Select Layer 1 and use the Eraser tool (or another tool if you prefer) to remove everything on the layer except stroke 01. Pay particular attention to the strokes which cross over stroke 01. You may like to open erika_prepared.psd and use that as a guide.
5. Now repeat steps 3 and 4 to prepare the other layers.

Step Two: Import Photoshop file and set up for Painting

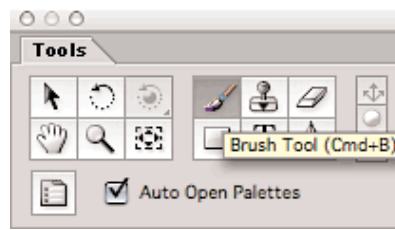
1. Import your prepared file or erika_prepared.psd into After Effects (File > Import > File) and from the **Import As** pop-up menu select **Composition**.
2. Double click the comp to open it and change its duration to 10 seconds (Composition > Composition Settings).

- The actual painting happens in the Layer window so double click Layer 1 to open its Layer window then drag its tab to position it beside the comp window.

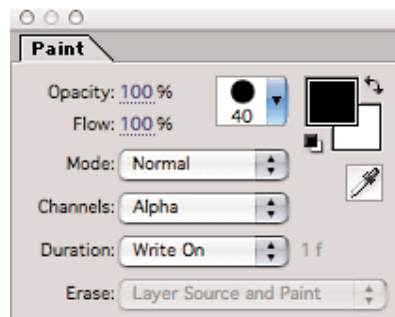
Having both the Layer and Comp windows visible allows you to work on the stroke and see how it looks in relation to the other layers.



- Next from the Tools palette select the Brush tool.



- If **Auto Open Palettes** was checked in the Tools palette the Paint palette will appear when you select the Brush tool. If not, open the palette (Window > Paint) and set the **foreground color** to black, **Mode** to Normal, **Channels** to Alpha and **Duration** to Write On.



- Now when you move your cursor over the Layer window it will change to a circle. This circle represents the size of the brush selected in the Paint palette.

A quick way to resize the brush is to hold down the Command key on Mac or Control on PC then click and drag in the Layer window.

Keep in mind, you must hold down the modifier key *before* dragging or you'll create a brush stroke. If you do create a brush stroke just select it in the timeline and delete it.

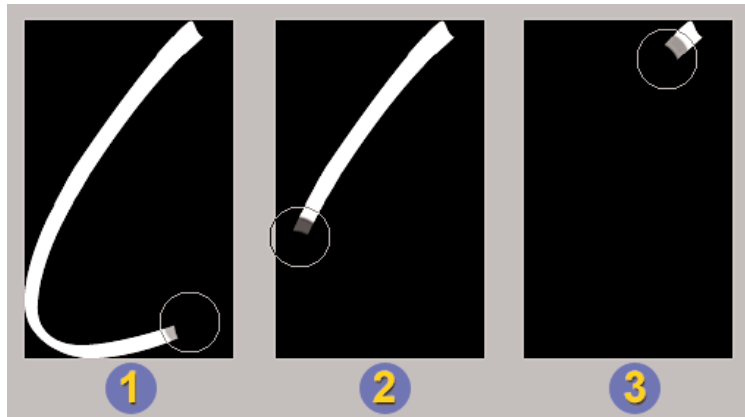
If you want to add some feather to your brush keep your finger on the mouse button but release the Command key and tap the Option key on Mac or Alt on PC, then continue dragging. Now you'll see a second inner circle which represents the feather amount. Being able to dynamically scale and feather a brush is a great feature that really speeds up paint work.

Step Three: Paint strokes

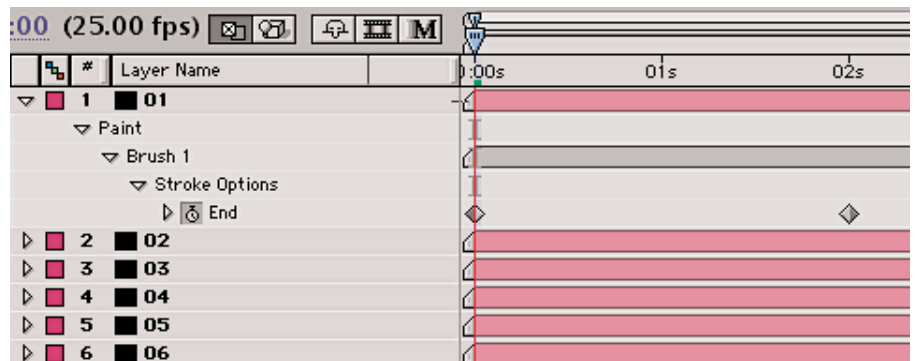
Now we're ready to paint the first stroke. The trick is to paint the stroke in the opposite direction to how it would normally be written and then reverse the resulting keyframes.

1. Make sure the time indicator is at the start of the comp then click at the end of the stroke and drag back to the beginning. Don't worry about how fast you paint because we'll adjust the playback speed later. If you're not happy with the stroke just undo (Command z on Mac or Control z on PC) and try again.

With the Write On option the stroke is erased as you paint, but reappears when you release the mouse button.



Now take a look in the timeline and you'll see that two keyframes were created for the stroke's End parameter. You can reveal the keyframes quickly by pressing the "U" key on the keyboard.

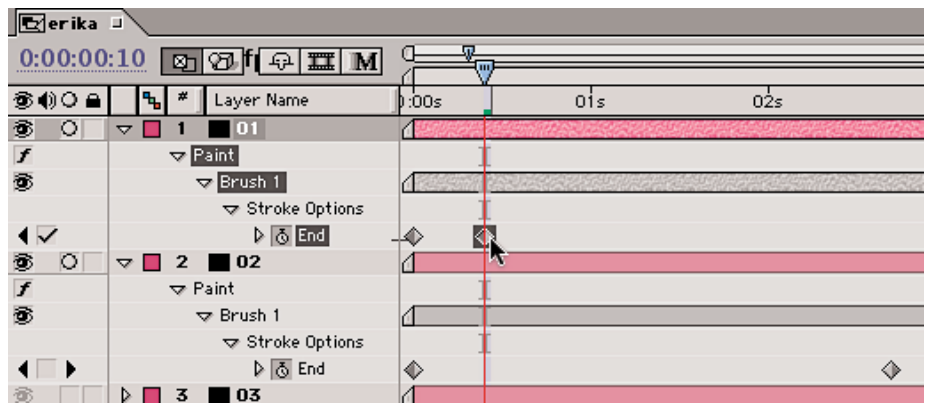


2. Click and drag the time indicator and you'll notice that the stroke is being erased not painted. To fix this, click the word "End" to select both keyframes, then from the Animation menu choose **Keyframe Assistant > Time-Reverse Keyframes**. The stroke will now look as if it's being written on.
3. So that's the first stroke done. Now go ahead and paint the rest of the strokes. Remember to make sure that your time indicator is at the start of the comp before painting each stroke, paint the stroke in the opposite direction to the way it would actually be written and time-reverse the resulting keyframes.

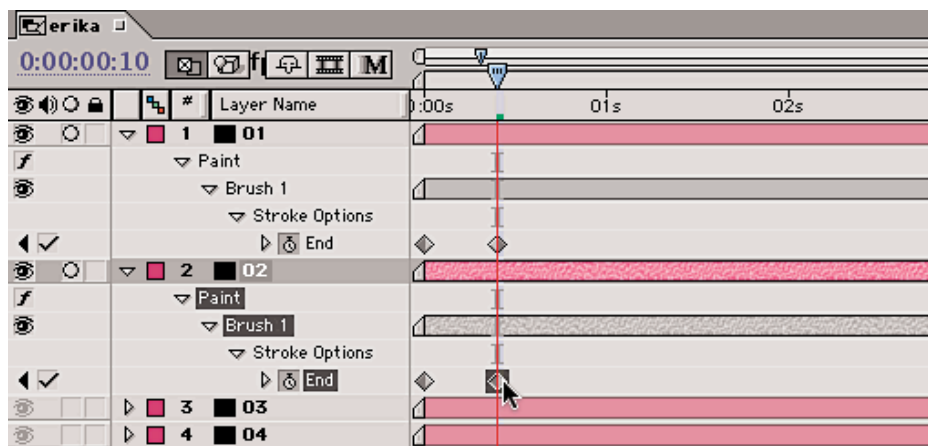
Step Four: Adjust timing of stroke playback

Now each layer should have one brush stroke with two "End" parameter keyframes. In this step we'll adjust each stroke's playback speed then offset the keyframes in time so that the strokes are revealed in order.

1. Starting with stroke 01, move the time indicator to 10 frames, then click and drag the second keyframe back to the time indicator to accelerate the playback of the stroke.

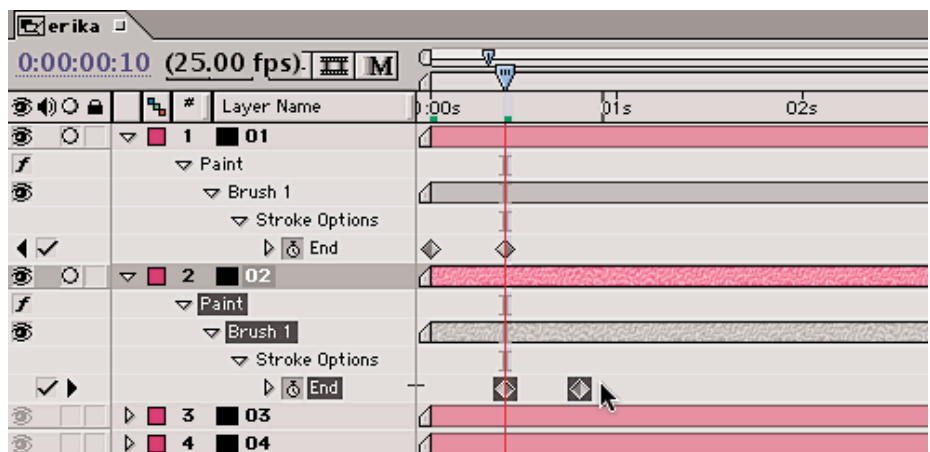


- Stroke 02 is about the same length as stroke 01, so click and drag the second keyframe on Layer 2 back so that it's also at 10 frames.



Now both strokes will take 10 frames to write on. Remember, you can always come back and fine tune this later once all of the strokes have been adjusted.

- To offset stroke 02, select both keyframes and click and drag them so that the first keyframe is in line with the second keyframe for stroke 01.



Do a RAM Preview and you'll see they now draw on one after the other.

See how easy it is to adjust the strokes once they've been drawn. And because each stroke is on a separate layer, problem areas where they touch or cross over one another are no problem at all.

4. Now adjust the playback speed and offset for the keyframes on the remaining layers. Shorter strokes should playback faster than longer strokes. You may also like to leave one or two frames between the second keyframe on one layer and the first keyframe on the next layer to allow for your virtual pen to be lifted off the page — just as it would if the text was actually being handwritten (although for script fonts this isn't really necessary).

Take a look at the finished project file (erika_prepared.aep) included with this tutorial and don't hesitate to contact me at john@motionworks.com.au if you have any questions. Have fun!

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