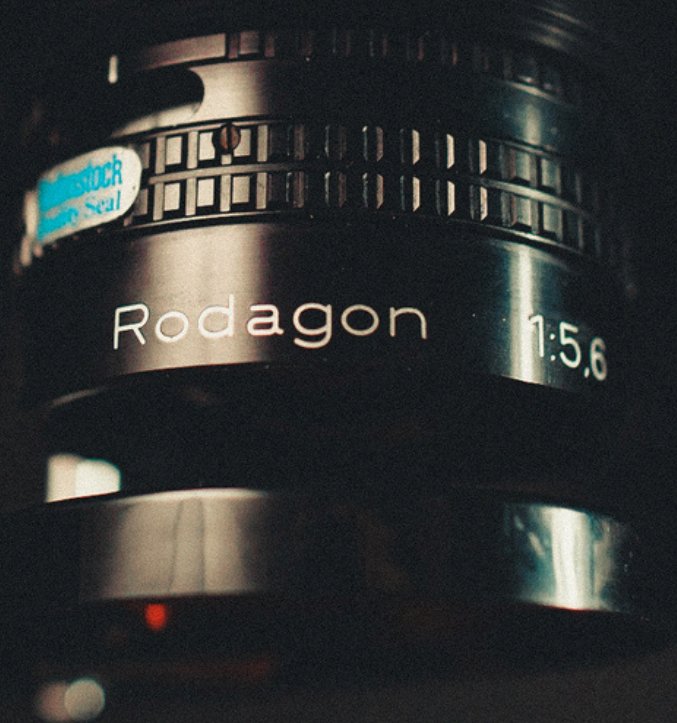

DARKROOM SET UP GUIDE



DARKROOM SETUP GUIDE

Whether you have an entire basement or just a spare bathroom, this guide will walk you through the step-by-step process of planning and setting up a black-and-white darkroom that is efficient, comfortable, and optimized for creative success.



Over the years, I've built several darkrooms in all kinds of spaces — from spare bedrooms and closets to full custom setups. I know what it's like to piece things together with limited space, a tight budget, and more questions than answers. And I also know how powerful and fulfilling it is to finally create prints you're proud of.

This guide is everything I wish I had when I was first starting out.

If you're dreaming of having your own darkroom — even in a tiny corner of your home — you're in the right place.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink.

Matthew Koller



PART 1 - YOUR SPACE

The perfect darkroom starts with the right space. Whether it's a spare room, closet, or bathroom, this section shows you how to plan, adapt, and optimize any space for printing success.



PART 1: CHOOSING YOUR SPACE

Whether you're setting up in a spacious basement or adapting a bathroom or closet, this section will help you choose and plan the right space for your darkroom.

CHOOSING YOUR SPACE

PERMANENT DARKROOM



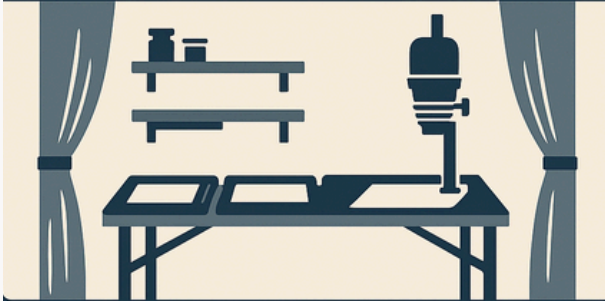
PERMANENT DARKROOM

Ideal: Dedicated room, basement, or shed

Benefits: Consistent setup, room to expand

Must-Have: Water supply, ventilation, electrical outlets

COMPACT/CLOSET DARKROOM



TEMPORARY DARKROOM

Ideal: Bathroom or laundry room

Benefits: Built-in plumbing and ventilation

Tips: Use blackout fabric or hardboard panels on windows. Velcro strips work well for removable blackout curtains.

COMPACT / CLOSET DARKROOM

Ideal: Closets, small utility rooms, or a corner of another space

Benefits: Easy to isolate and cost-effective

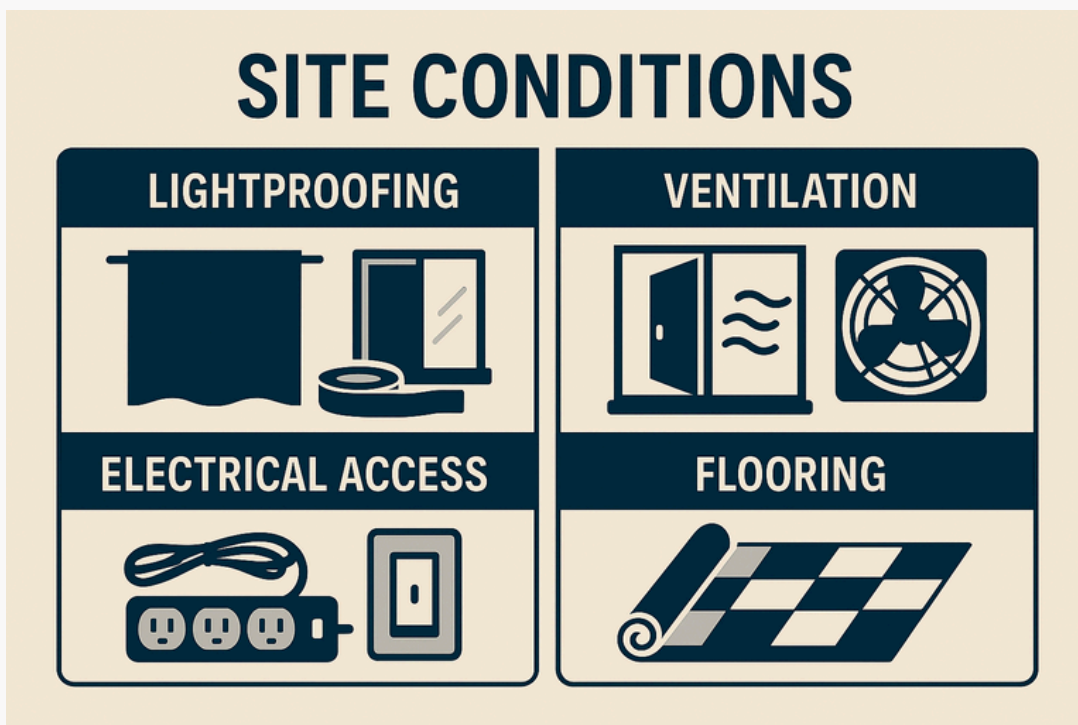
Tips: Use folding tables, stackable storage, and wall-mounted shelves

PART 1: CHOOSING YOUR SPACE

SITE CONDITIONS

Lightproofing: Use blackout fabric, foam, or tape to block all light leaks. Sit in the space for 10 minutes in daylight to test for leaks.

Ventilation: Install a fan, open a window, or use an air extractor. If installing a fan, include a light baffle to block stray light.



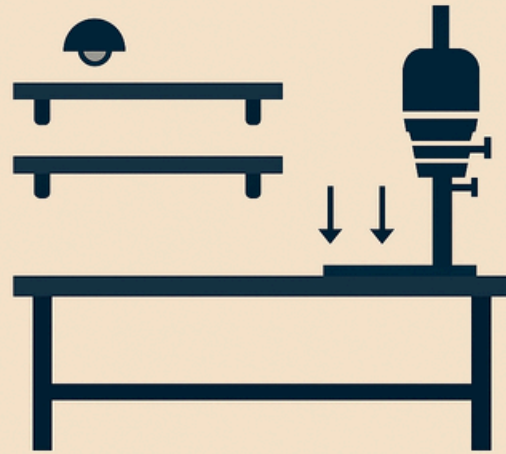
Electrical Access: Use a power strip with surge protection. Install waterproof switches in wet zones.

Flooring: Soft vinyl is ideal. Avoid rugs or carpets, which trap dust and moisture.

START WITH A FLOOR PLAN



DRAW ELEVATIONS

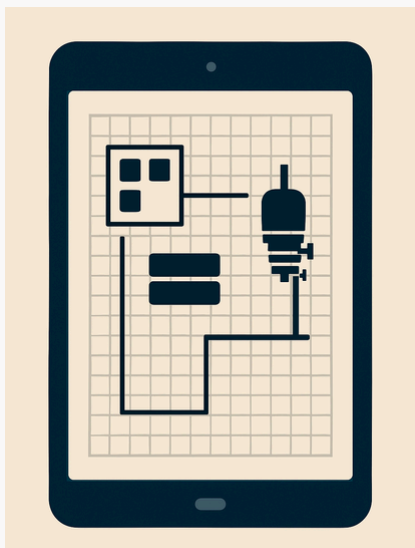


Start with a Floor Plan

Sketch your layout using graph paper or a printable grid.

- If your space is fixed (like a closet or bathroom), draw the actual room dimensions first.
- If you're creating a space (like part of a basement), place the equipment first, then build the space around it.

Use paper cutouts (to scale) for your enlarger, trays, shelves, etc. to test different configurations.



Prefer digital? Try these free tools:

- [Floorplanner](#) – great for quick, drag-and-drop 2D layouts.
- [SketchUp Free](#) – perfect for both floor plans and vertical wall elevations.

Both are free, browser-based, and easy to learn.

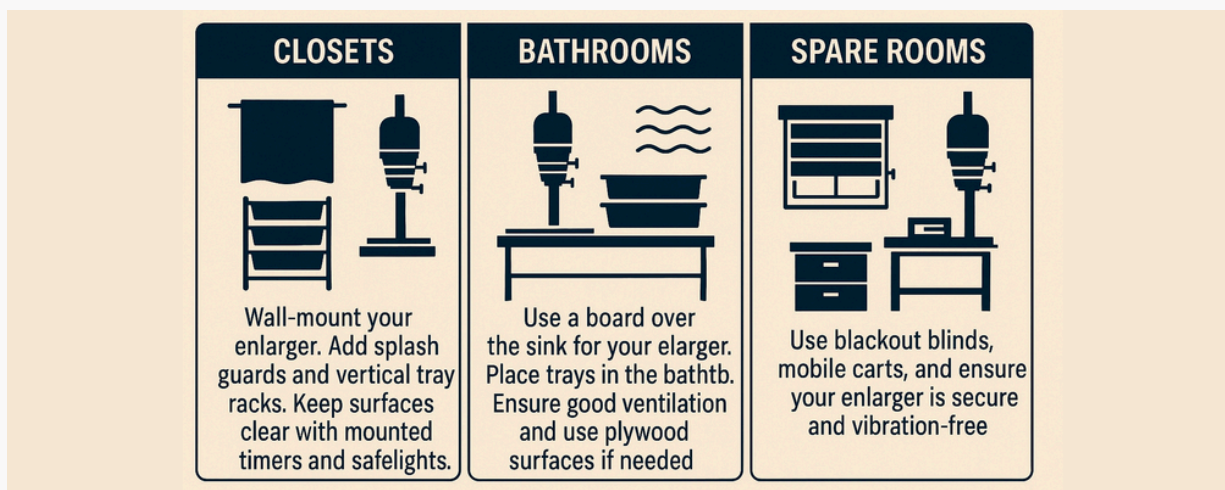
PART 1: CHOOSING YOUR SPACE

Vertical layouts

vertical layouts (side views) help you plan vertical space, including:

- Shelf and safelight placement
- Counter heights
- Enlarger positioning and stability
- Paper and chemical storage

Vertical planning is critical in tight or multi-use spaces.



Small Space Pro Tips

Closets: Wall-mount your enlarger. Add splash guards and vertical tray racks. Keep surfaces clear with mounted timers and safelights.

Bathrooms: Use a board over the sink for your enlarger. Place trays in the bathtub. Ensure good ventilation and use plywood surfaces if needed.

Spare Rooms: Use blackout blinds, mobile carts, and ensure your enlarger is secure and vibration-free.



PART 2 - LAYOUT

A great print starts with a smart setup. This section helps you design your darkroom layout for comfort, efficiency, and clean separation between your wet and dry zones.



PART 2: DARKROOM LAYOUT

Wet vs. Dry Zones

Dry Zone

Your clean, chemical-free workspace.

Includes:

- Enlarger
- Negative carriers and filters
- Paper safes and boxes (stored flat)
- Focusing tools
- Dodging/burning tools
- Trimmer or paper cutter
- Logbook and notes

Keep this area as dust-free and dry as possible. Use shelving above or beside the enlarger to store commonly used tools. A drawer under the enlarger baseboard is great for storing paper.

Wet Zone

Where chemical processing and washing happen.

Includes:

- Trays (developer, stop, fixer)
- Print washer or holding tray
- Drying rack or line
- Water supply and sink
- Optional: squeegee panel for prints

Tips:

- Keep wet and dry areas 3+ feet apart
- Opposite walls work best
- Add splash guards or lips on sinks
- Store large chemical jugs on the floor
- Use vertical storage under the sink when needed

PART 2: DARKROOM LAYOUT

Working Height

- Ideal counter height: 36–40 inches
- Test with books or blocks to find what feels natural

Sink Height

- Should be slightly lower than your counter test with books or blocks to find what feels natural
- Test with books or blocks to find what feels natural

Flooring

- Use soft vinyl or anti-fatigue mats
- Easy to clean and comfortable for long sessions

Ventilation

- Use an extractor fan to remove air
- Bring clean air across the wet bench
- Always ventilate before and after printing

Lighting & Safety

- Use pull cords instead of wall switches near wet areas
- Mark cords or switches with glow tape
- Consider a foot switch for your enlarger

Storage & Workflow

- Store tools close to where you'll use them
- Use labeled drawers, bins, and wall shelves
- Add folding surfaces or rolling carts for extra space



PART 3 - EQUIPMENT

Everything you need, all in one place.

This definitive checklist covers every piece of gear for your darkroom — from essentials to advanced tools — so you can build with confidence at any level.



PART 3: EQUIPMENT CHECKLIST

Enlarging & Exposure

Essentials:

- Enlarger (matched to your film format)
- Enlarging lens (50mm for 35mm, 75–105mm for medium format, 135mm+ for large format)
- Negative carrier
- Easel (2-blade or 4-blade)
- Grain focuser
- Enlarger timer
- Safelight (correct color for your paper)
- Paper safe or light-tight drawer
- VC filters or filter drawer
- Anti-static brush or blower

Nice-to-Have:

- Foot switch for enlarger
- Loupes or light table

Advanced Upgrades

- Cold light/diffusion head
- F-stop enlarger timer
- Enlarger alignment tools

Print Development

Essentials:

- Developing trays (3 minimum)
- Tongs (1 per tray)
- Thermometer
- Timer or stopwatch
- Print washer or tray siphon
- Measuring graduates
- Storage bottles (light-tight, labeled)
- Funnel and mixing rod
- Print drying rack or line
- Print squeegee or blotter book

Nice-to-Have:

- Holding tray with running water
- Funnel with filter
- Tray covers

Advanced Upgrades:

- Archival washer
- Heated tray or water bath
- Plumbed-in sink
- Print flattening press

PART 3: EQUIPMENT CHECKLIST

Paper & Chemistry

Essentials:

- RC or fiber-based photo paper
- Developer
- Stop bath
- Fixer
- Archival wash aid
- Gloves
- Apron

Nice-to-Have:

- Toners
- Test paper or scrap strips
- Light-tight paper storage
- Labeled mixing jugs

Advanced Upgrades:

- Bulk chemistry/mixing kits
- Digital thermometer with alarm

Logging & Print Control

Essentials

- Darkroom logbook
- Pencil or waterproof pen
- Masking tape or labels

Nice-to-Have:

- Print map templates
- Contact sheet frame and glass
- Exposure record cards

Advanced Upgrades:

- Digital logging system
- Custom workflow template

Maintenance & Safety

Essentials:

- Ventilation system (fan/filter)
- Lightproof entry system
- Trash bin (chemical-safe)

Nice-to-Have:

- UV light for safelight testing
- Dust cloths or antistatic wipes
- Compressed air blower

Advanced Upgrades:

- Lab-grade chemical cabinet



PART 4 - SMALL SPACES

Don't let space stop you. With the right layout and a few clever tools, even a bathroom or closet can become a powerful darkroom. This section shows you how to build smart, efficient setups in the smallest of spaces.



PART 4: SMALL SPACES

Solutions

You don't need a massive space to create beautiful prints — just smart design. Whether you're working in a closet, a bathroom, or a corner of a spare room, this section will help you turn tight quarters into a fully functional darkroom.

Closet Darkrooms

Closet darkrooms are an excellent solution for tight spaces — with the right setup, even a 3' x 4' space can be made functional.

- **Enlarger Placement:** Wall-mount the enlarger, or place it on a sturdy built-in shelf or old desk. Add a splash board between it and any wet-side gear to prevent contamination.
- **Trays & Chemicals:** Use a vertical tray rack system or staggered shelves. Keep trays for developer, stop, and fixer tightly stacked but accessible.
- **Timers & Safelights:** Wall-mount your timer and use a safelight bulb in the ceiling socket, or a clamp-on safelight.

- **Power & Ventilation:** Run an extension cord carefully under the door and avoid crushing it. Ventilation is essential — a small fan with a light baffle can help reduce fumes in these enclosed spaces.

- **Storage Ideas:** Store chemicals below the counter and photo paper above the enlarger. Shelving inside the closet door can maximize unused wall space.

Pro Tip: In extremely tight setups, split wet/dry workflows into different areas — print exposures in the closet, and process elsewhere.

PART 4: SMALL SPACES

Bathroom Darkrooms

Bathrooms are among the most practical temporary darkroom options due to built-in plumbing, tiled floors, and access to hot/cold water.

- **Dry Side Options:** Use a plywood board over the sink or toilet to create a dry bench for your enlarger. Some setups box in the toilet to serve as an adjustable enlarger base .
- **Wet Side Options:** Place trays directly in the bathtub, or build a custom wooden sink that sits on rails above the tub and drains directly below .
- **Faucet Adapters:** Use diverters or Y-adapters to connect hoses or washers to the sink or shower for easy water access .

- **Ventilation & Safety:**

Bathrooms often have windows or fans, but remember — water and electricity don't mix. Keep enlargers far from the tub and install safelights properly to avoid accidents .

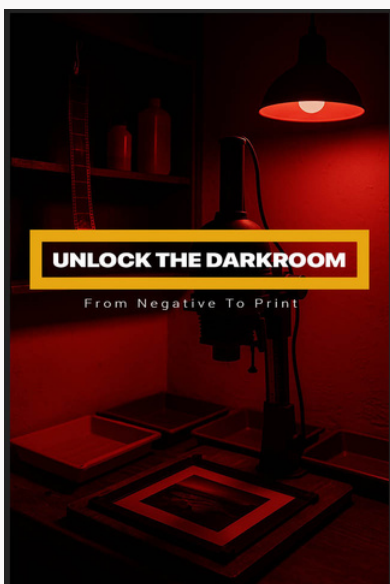
Pro Tip: A fold-down table in front of the toilet is ideal for a seated enlarger station in small bathrooms.

SUMMARY & NEXT STEPS



Key Takeaways:

- Plan your darkroom space carefully.
- Keep wet and dry areas separate.
- Ventilation, lighting, and ergonomics are critical for efficiency.
- Maintain a clean and organized space for consistent results.



If this guide helped, the full **Unlock the Darkroom** workshop goes even deeper into testing, calibration, split-grade printing, and archival workflows. Watch your darkroom go from functional to phenomenal.

[JOIN THE WORKSHOP!](#)