Holiday Lights: Glowing, Not Blown Out

A one-page cheat sheet for photographing string lights and indoor gatherings with the phone you already have.

Safe and tidy first. Photograph lights that are already up and working; do not climb on a chair or ladder for a shot. Keep hands and phone away from hot bulbs, keep anything that can burn well clear of real candles and never leave them unattended (flameless candles are fine for practice). Do not cover a lamp with fabric to dim it. Keep mail, screens and addresses out of the background, and ask before sharing a photo of people.

1 Tap, then lower the exposure

Tap the screen on the lights. Many phones show a brightness control (often a small sun or slider) beside the box: drag it down a little at a time. Stop when bulbs look like warm points of light, not white blobs, and the mantel or branches are still readable. If the room goes nearly black, nudge it back up. Press and hold may lock focus and exposure on some phones.

2 Skip the flash

A phone flash is a small bright light next to the lens. Indoors it tends to flatten the scene and drown the glow. For a table or decoration, bring the subject near a lamp with the lamp to one side, not behind it, and let the string lights glow behind.

3 Hold steady

Dim rooms often mean a longer exposure, so movement can smear lights into streaks. Tuck elbows in, breathe out before you press, lean on a wall or rest the phone on a shelf or books. Tap to set exposure, wait a moment, then press. A short self-timer lets you let go before the picture is taken.

4 Watch mixed colors

Warm string lights, a cooler ceiling bulb and a bluish screen can pull colors in different directions. Where practical, switch off one source you can safely reach, such as the overhead light. Treat this as something to try, not a rule.

✓ Before every shot: the 5-point check

- [ ] Lights are safe, already up, and I am not on a chair
- [ ] Flash is off
- [ ] I tapped the lights
- [ ] I lowered the exposure a little at a time
- [ ] I braced the phone and waited a moment
- [ ] One extra light switched off, if safe

Phone controls and wording differ; check your phone’s help if you cannot find a control. There is no single right setting: judge by the picture you saved. A dark, moody shot with a few glowing bulbs can be exactly what you wanted.

Practice Log: Three Frames of One Corner

About ten minutes in one room. A household comparison, not a laboratory test.

Pick one corner with string lights (a mantel, window or shelf). Use ordinary Photo mode and stand in the same spot for all three frames.

- ☐ **A. Point and shoot.** No taps, flash off. Save it.
- ☐ **B. Tap and lower.** Tap the lights, lower exposure a little at a time, shoot.
- ☐ **C. Braced and calmer.** Lean on something steady, switch off one extra light if safe, tap, wait, shoot.

View all three at the same size. Look at the bulbs first: distinct points or white blobs? Then look nearby: can you still see the branches, shelf or table?

Write it down

Frame	What I tapped	How far I lowered exposure	What changed
A			
B			
C			

Best frame and why: _____

Next try: _____

If you see this, try this

What you observe	A sensible next try
Bulbs are white blobs in A and clearer in B	Keep the tap-and-lower habit. Next time lower a bit less so the room stays readable.
Bulbs are clear but the surroundings are nearly black	Raise the exposure slightly, or move a lamp closer to the surroundings.
Lights look smeared or streaky	Brace the phone more firmly, wait after tapping, or try the self-timer.
Colors look orange on one side and bluish on the other	Switch off one light source you can safely reach and try again.

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