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Eight quick tips to shooting better

video

by Kirby Ferguson

Much as desktop publishing enabled people to create professional quality publications from their apartments, desktop video production is now possible on even the most basic computer configurations. So you've already got the technology: camera, computer and software to cut video and burn DVDs. But without a few extra items and some videography know-how, whatever you shoot will probably wind up looking like your parents' home movies.

If that's all you had in mind, then have fun. But for those of you who'd like to take your videos to the next level, the simple techniques and modest tools covered here will provide the foundation for getting results that can almost look like big budget productions.

Above all, remember this: your content is what counts. If you happen to shoot something funny or fascinating or amazing, you've got something worthwhile. Mediocre lighting or sound won't necessarily kill a good short film any more than mediocre printing or typography would kill a good book.

Desktop video is democratizing, but it can also be bankrupting. Better to embrace your limitations—borrow, rent or improvise—and be creative. So with that much out of the way, let's look at a few cheap(-ish) tips on getting the most out of your low-budget video productions.



Bad sound will quickly ruin a good video.

It might surprise the novice videographer to learn that audiences are much more tolerant of bad video than bad audio. This makes perfect sense: bad video is generally still decipherable, whereas bad audio is just gibberish.

Your camcorder's internal microphone simply isn't very useful. In addition to being a cheap, low-quality device, it will often pick up the sound of the camera's motor noise, or even the camera being handled. Most important, you can't move an internal microphone closer to your subject without moving the camera itself. That's obviously a huge problem because recording good sound is about getting that mic as close to your subject as possible.

Next to your camcorder, a good boom microphone will be your biggest expenditure. Expect to pay at least a couple hundred bucks for a model by [Sennheiser](#) or [Audio Technica](#). (If you haven't bought a camcorder yet or you're upgrading, make sure the one you choose has an external mic port; cheaper cams generally don't.)



If you want good sound, you need something like this: a good shotgun mic. Just make sure your camcorder has someplace to plug it in.



ILLUSTRATION BY SAM CORRIE (WWW.SAMCORRIE.COM)

Steady as she goes: use a tripod.

Second in indispensability is the humble tripod. Unless you want the handheld look, shaky camera work generally looks amateurish and adds needless distractions to your shots. Even a ten-dollar squeaky plastic tripod can be enormously useful. Static camera work can get dull, so be sure to do some panning. And take note that panning is often where cheap tripods exhibit their cheapness.

Bonus tip: if you're shooting handheld, consistently jiggle your shot. Don't try to suppress all movement because the motion that does occur will be much more noticeable.

Let there be light—and lots of it.

Next to bad sound, bad lighting is the chief culprit when it comes to wrecking footage. Professional lights aren't cheap, and I don't recommend them to start off unless you have professional aspirations. Better to get shooting, learn about light and types of lighting, then step it up when you want more finesse. In the meantime, there are cheap alternatives that will give you well-exposed shots with good color.

For years, I used work lights that I purchased at a hardware store. However, these lights are extremely harsh and much too bright (and hot) to point directly at your subject. But bounce them off the ceiling, and you'll get nice,

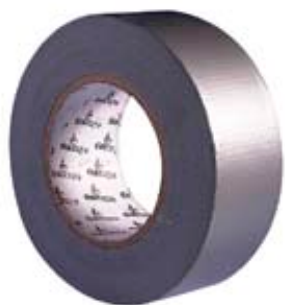
even lighting of a higher quality than most indoor lights. It may be a bit flat (much like you'd see on a sitcom), but it's still a major improvement over most indoor lighting.

Another cheap lighting alternative is Japanese lanterns (also called China balls), which produce soft pleasing light and can be purchased at home furnishing stores. Robert Rodriguez lit his no-budget hit *El Mariachi* entirely with these.

Bonus tip: beware of three-point lighting, which many people will tell you is the right way to light a scene. It actually makes everything look like a newscast. A single, soft light source is often all you need for a beautiful image with rich, shapely shadows.

4 Be prepared to stick stuff down.

There's one item that all filmmakers should have plenty of, and that's gaffer tape. Gaffer tape is much like duct tape, but a bit gentler, and it doesn't leave ick behind after you pull it off. You will *always* need to tape stuff up, down, together, apart, etc. Put a roll in your camera bag, and keep it there.

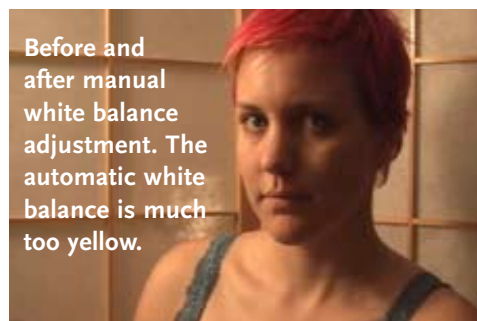


Gaffer tape. Every videographer needs it.

5 Crack open that manual and learn how to adjust your settings.

Modern camcorders do an excellent job with point-and-shoot, but their interpretation of light and focus is still crude compared to the human eye. If you have ambitions to shoot better quality footage, it won't be long before you're chafing at the way your camera's primitive optics makes potentially shot-ruining decisions for you. When you reach that point, it's time to open the manual and come to grips with at least a few of your camera's manual features.

Let's start with white balance, a simple feature that can elevate images out of mediocrity with the click of a button. Basically, white balance tells your camera what's white in the scene. Your camcorder will do this automatically, but it will frequently get confused, resulting in weird, drab color hues. Check out the image



comparison below for an example of a shot taken with automatic white balance versus one with manual. Every camera handles white balance a bit differently, so look it up in your manual and figure it out. (It generally just involves zooming in on something white and hitting a button.)

When shooting with auto focus and auto exposure, your camera will constantly seek out the best values and may shift them inappropriately when something in the frame changes. Focus and exposure lock solve this problem. You still use the automated features—zoom in to focus, frame the shot to establish exposure—but then you lock these values so they don't change when, for example, someone passes in front of your subject or opens a window. Again, every camera's different, so look it up, and figure it out.

Last but not least, turn off digital zoom, which gives you a bigger zoom range by magnifying pixels. It's a useless and unsightly feature.

6 Black is black, and white is white, and the camera hates them both.

You've got the essential gear, the lighting situation is under control, and you've mastered your camcorder's most important manual features. Now it's time to actually shoot. The first thing you must learn is how to work within the limitations of video. In other words, simply knowing



where *not* to point your camera.

Chief among video's shortcomings is its complete intolerance for solid white or black (worse yet, both at the same time). White tends to blow-out into pure white with no detail; black turns into pure black with no detail. Watch out for medium to large areas of black or white in your scenes and tell your subjects not to wear these colors. (While you're at it, tell them not to wear tiny patterns and logos. Small patterns tend to create weird patterns. Logos can't be used if you want to sell your work.)

7 Stay out of the sun.

Because of digital video's poor handling of strong highlights or shadows, you should generally avoid shooting in direct sunlight. Outdoor light can be beautiful—but only at certain times, like the morning and late afternoon. Basically, you want the sun low to the horizon, not directly overhead. Overcast weather also makes for soft, even lighting. In a pinch, you can shoot in the shade, but you'll need to use something to bounce sunlight at the subject, like a white sheet or a piece of foam core.

Beware of mixing indoor and outdoor light sources in the same scene. This will confuse your camera's white balance, resulting in weird blue-ish, yellow-ish, or pink-ish tints that you don't see with the naked eye. Try to go with natural light (which is prettier) and turn off the indoor lights. If that doesn't work, use the indoor

light and close the curtains, or if necessary, hang garbage bags in the window.

You should also avoid fluorescent lighting, which emits low quality illumination and tends to be buzzy.

8 Beware background noise.

What we've discussed so far are all video issues, but audio is every bit as complex, although it's somewhat easier to get good results. If you minimize the extraneous noise and get your mic as close to the subject as possible, you should be able to get a good audio track.

Some of the noisemakers you need to watch for are fans, computers, air conditioners and worst of all, refrigerators, which turn on and off so you don't even have consistent noise.

The key to getting the best sound possible is being able to control your environment. So keep in mind that if you have to do your shoot in an open restaurant or a bar, your audio will probably be a mess.

9 Now get shooting.

So there you are—a highly condensed set of basic videomaking principles that took me years to accumulate. If you start integrating these techniques and tools, you'll see immediate improvements in the quality of your footage.

Don't get discouraged when you're starting out. Your early results may not be "good", but with luck they'll be entertaining. Show your work to friends and other young filmmakers. Just listen, learn, and do your homework. Lots. •

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