



The Director

As director I felt the power of putting things in place so that I could give shape to the story. It's an intensely involved role, which requires management, artistic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, technological, and emotional skills. Yes, you have to capture images, move them around, line them up in a way that makes sense; but, perhaps more importantly, editing is about enhancing what is already powerful-- your own story.

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WORKING THE CAMERA

How to Get the Best Shot When You Begin Recording

At some point in the creation of your digital story, you will be required to begin the process of recording with a video camera. Usually, this happens when you have completed your narrative and are ready to record it for use in your digital story. Other times, you may find that someone else has information you need, and so you want to record an interview with them for use in your digital story. Sometimes, it may come down to needing a certain shot of an event or place that you want to capture.

In any case, whenever you get to that point, there are many factors to consider – lighting, shadows, background, etc. – in your work with a digital video camera that we want to outline here.

The Hardware

As you prepare to begin shooting, there are several items along with your camera that are very important to prepare. Using these items will help to insure that whatever you record will look and sound professional, adding to the depth and impact of your digital story.

Of course, some of the initial and most important items you want to make sure to have are your digital video camera, a charged camera battery and blank mini DV cassette tape(s). Without any of these pieces, it will be nearly impossible to move forward with recording.

You want to make sure before you begin that you have your camera, a battery and a tape ready, and that they are working properly – unfortunately,

many digital story producers overlook this item, and end up with no recording at all.

Your camera battery should be fully charged, allowing you to maximize the amount of time you have to record. Also, it is helpful to use a blank mini DV tape for recording, so that you don't accidentally lose any material from previous recordings by shooting over them on the tape.

The next important items to consider are a microphone system and a set of headphones, which will help you to capture the best audio for your digital story.

A separate external microphone system is highly recommended in order to record the best sound during your interviews or narrative reading. While most digital video cameras come equipped with their own internal microphones to capture audio, the quality of these is usually only average. These internal microphones also tend to pick up much of the surrounding ambient noise that can distract the viewer from the narrative or the interview you are recording.

There are several different types of external microphones including handheld, boom, and lavalier microphones, either of which can be used during the recording process. (Remember that each of these will also require batteries for operation!) Handheld microphones are helpful in that they allow the interviewee to control the microphone, and can be passed back and forth quickly between several people during an interview. Boom microphones are helpful in that they allow for direct recording of someone's voice without having them hold a microphone, thus eliminating the microphone from the shot. Lavalier microphones, which are usually wireless, are helpful in that they allow you to record someone's voice without having to deal with wires.

Headphones also become an important part of the recording process so that you can monitor the sound levels and quality of the captured audio. With the use of an external microphone on your camera, you want to use headphones

to make sure that audio is being recorded well, and is not scratchy or at a low volume.

A tripod is another important, yet often overlooked, part of the recording process that allows for a more professional presentation. By taking the camera out of your hand, you also remove the shaky and moving shots that come with natural human movement; tripods allow for stable, consistent shots, and create recordings that look and feel solid. When in question, always use a tripod.

Other items that can be useful in the recording process, though are not as necessary, include additional lighting sources and curtain backdrops. Each of these help to enhance the look of recordings by providing well-lit and aesthetically-pleasing spaces.

The Camera Setup

Once you have each of the items necessary for capturing video (camera, battery, tape, microphone, headphone, tripod) you need to make sure you set up your equipment properly to get the best recording possible.

At the onset, make sure your camera is working properly by connecting the battery to the camera and placing a blank mini DV tape into the camera. You should have a fully charged battery and a blank tape to work with.

Once the camera is ready for recording, the next step is to have your camera mounted onto your tripod. This is done by taking the tripod head (sometimes called tripod plate) off of the tripod and screwing it onto your camera. Most video cameras now include a receiving end for tripod heads, found on the bottom end of the camera body. Once the tripod head is connected to the camera, you can slide it onto the tripod to secure it.

Peripheral pieces, such as microphones and headphones, can now be connected to the camera. Most cameras will have specific input ports for each

these pieces. The input jack for your microphone will go into the port marked “microphone” or “mic.”; on some cameras this port is also labeled as AV. Your headphone input jack will be plugged into the headphone port, usually marked with the word “headphone” or with an image of headphones. You want to make sure that the jacks go all the way into the ports, or else they will not function properly and you risk losing any information you may be trying to record.

Once everything is connected, make sure all necessary items are powered on. At this point, you are ready to begin recording. It is usually helpful to capture a 10-20 second test recording of someone speaking with a microphone as a final measure of how well everything is functioning.

The Shot

With all the necessary pieces now in place and working properly, you are ready to capture the compelling audio and video you need for your digital story. Several factors, including angle, lighting and background, become important considerations at this point when figuring out how to “frame” your shot.

Framing your shot involves setting up the people and area in your camera lens in a specific way so that what you record looks and sounds aesthetically pleasing and professional.

When interviewing someone, we recommend setting up the camera about 2-4 feet away from the person, with the camera at about eye-level. This distance allows for optimal recording with the microphones, and allows for the shot to include mostly the interviewee’s upper body and face. Recording someone’s entire body during an interview is usually unnecessary, unless their body is directly related to their interview in some way; the best shot for an interview usually only has the person’s head and shoulders centered in the frame, allowing the audience to get a better view of facial expressions during the interview.

The space you record is the next important consideration, since lighting and background come into play.

You want to make sure to record in an area that has plenty of light that allows for the interviewee to be seen clearly by the camera. Dark areas tend to become blurry, or even blacked-out, when recorded by the camera, and you can lose video of an interviewee if there is little light. Outdoor light works very well, but be careful not to record with the sun in the background, as this can cause items or people in the foreground to become blacked out on your recording.

The background of your shot can be anything, but some backgrounds work better than others, especially when recording an interview. Stable backgrounds, like curtains or a solid-colored wall, work well because they bring more focus to the interviewee and do not distract the audience. Dynamic backgrounds that include a lot of space or action – such as a busy room or an outdoor scene – work well to give context to an interview; for instance, a digital story about nature may include an interview with someone that has a forest in the background. These backgrounds, though, can also tend to distract the audience from what is being said in the interview if they are too busy with action.

Now that you have captured the best quality video for your digital story, you are ready to begin the editing process.

You can jump to the following sections:

- [Producer](#)
- [Writer](#)
- [Editor](#)
- [Back to the Main Menu](#)