

# Top 10 Tips for Shooting Video

Finally, you're ready to shoot. Life is happening, and you're raring to scoop it up. Have gear, will go! You've learned about the three basic kinds of shots, you understand what it takes to create sequences, and you know how to use your camcorder. Now you're going out to give it your best. You're visualizing the wonderful movie you'll make. And you're ready to get the best footage to make your editing a snap!

Here's a list of the top 10 things you need to know to have a great shoot.

## 1. Use a Tripod As Often As You Can

Why, you ask, would you want to use a tripod? Well, try shooting some footage without a tripod and then shooting the same scene with one. Look at the results. Which version would you rather watch? Unless you're a world-class cinematographer who's mastered the art of handheld shooting over years, you'll probably want to watch the footage you shot on the tripod.

The human eye is sensitive to motion, and we feel much more comfortable when things are steady, as they (usually) are in the real world. Remember to bring and use a tripod (or a monopod) on your video adventures, and your movies will be much, much better to watch.

Like videos that zoom in and out too often, shaky, handheld shots are one of the most common mistakes beginners make in shooting videos. You don't make yourself concentrate on learning how to hold the camera steady when you can leave that job to your tripod and focus your attention on more important aspects of your shoot. Free yourself—use a tripod!

If you can't bring a tripod, look for natural objects to use as tripods. Things like fences, chairs, big rocks, a ski pole, and a car hood all make good stable platforms.

If you make a tripod your constant companion, your shooting and your movies will be better for it.

## 2. Learn How to Shoot Stable Handheld Shots

There are some times when using a tripod is impractical or impossible. Only in those cases should you take handheld shots. To shoot well, brace the camera against your body in a way that's comfortable for you. Practice this. Watch the video you shoot. You can also lean against objects in your environment to help you steady yourself and your camera.

As you get better, you can try walking with the camera while you shoot. Walk slowly and deliberately, while holding the camera against your body. Again, watch your footage. You can practice this over time and see how your skill increases.

If you plan to walk and shoot often, you might want to learn more about the common camera shoulder braces and equipment that can make walking and shooting much easier. These cost about \$150 and up for a miniDV camcorder. Professional models start at \$700. Learning how to shoot handheld shots will also give you new appreciation for the skill of professionals when you see those shots on TV.

### 3. Avoid Frequent Panning and Zooming

*Panning* is moving a shot from side to side. *Zooming* is using the camera lens to move closer to and farther from the subject. One of the common mistakes beginners make is zooming and panning too often and too fast.

Why? No one knows, really, but it's so common that there must be a reason. Maybe it's because there's that Widen/Tighten button on your camcorder, and you feel like doing something rather than just standing there. Learning how to just stand there is a new skill you'll come to enjoy. Because you're not just standing there—you're shooting great video!

Of course, you can pan and zoom, but use these controls slowly and sparingly. Watch TV and see how few zooms and pans you see. You will generally see pans and zooms used very, very subtly or for some very good reason.

Panning and zooming can be very effective, but *only* when done *slowly* and generally with a tripod. When you are getting set up for a new shot, you may pan or zoom just to change your framing and your shot before the action continues.

### 4. Hold Your Shot

Another common mistake is not having a long enough shot. While you may use only 5 to 15 seconds in your edited program, you want to make sure that the focus is not changing during your shot, that there is no panning or zooming, and that you have enough extra footage on the ends of your edited shots to insert cross-dissolves or other transitions.

As a general rule, let each shot run at least 10 to 20 seconds or more.

### 5. Shoot a Lot

One of the secrets of making great movies is to shoot a lot. As one saying goes, "shoot relentlessly and edit ruthlessly."

Shooting a lot means getting lots of coverage. Remember that when you edit your footage, you will use only the best shots. You'll be *very* selective *then*—but not when you're shooting.

Tape is cheap. Shoot what attracts you. Tape several takes. If you videotape several takes, when you edit, you're more likely to find that one is better than the others. If in doubt, play a take back in the camera. But don't be afraid to shoot several takes.

In a typical documentary, it's common to shoot 10 times more tape than the length of the finished program—and that was true even in the days of film, when it cost a lot to shoot. So don't be surprised if you shoot 10 hours to edit a 1-hour movie or 1 hour of tape to make a 5-minute movie. You may, of course, shoot more than 10:1—and that would probably be a good thing.

## 6. Get Good Audio

After too much panning and zooming, and shaky cam (from not using a tripod) poor audio is one of the most common beginners' mistakes. One reason is the poor quality of a built-in camera microphone—and its location.

If you use only a camera mike, count on shooting a lot of medium or close-up shots or putting music over your movies from beginning to end.

To see how much better the audio is with a clip-on mike, try this experiment: Shoot a subject in a quiet room with your camera mike. Then shoot the subject with the clip-on mike. Hear the difference?

Use external microphones to get better audio.

## 7. Leave Headroom

Always leave a comfortable amount of headroom above your subject's head. *Headroom* is the space between the top of the subject's head and the movie frame.

If headroom is cramped, your subject will look squeezed in your movie and make viewers uncomfortable. If you leave too much headroom, your subject will appear smaller than people are used to seeing subjects in a movie. Watch television to see how professionals frame their head shots and try to shoot with a comfortable amount of space above your subject's head.

For most people, this will come fairly naturally. Just think of how you would take a photograph of someone's head and frame your movie the same way.

## 8. Know When to Use Manual Focus

Most of the time, you can use the autofocus on your camcorder. It's great when your subject is not moving. But if someone else walks into your shot, autofocus then tries to put that person in focus, which is not necessarily what you want. On the other hand, if you're shooting fast motion—like a sports game—you should use your autofocus because

it can focus faster than you can manually. Experiment to see how the different focus options work and what works best under different conditions.

## 9. Compose Your Shots

There is a commonly used formula called the *rule of thirds* that artists and camera people use as a guideline for composing interesting visuals. The rule of thirds says you should divide the screen into a grid that has two horizontal lines and two vertical lines—like a tic tac toe board. You should try to put your subject off-center, to make your shots more complex and interesting.

## 10. Watch Your Lighting

Like audio, lighting is a tricky bit to learn when you start shooting video. Everyone says "avoid backlighting," and that's good advice, but there's much more than that to lighting. It's not easy to make things look great without using lights to light your scene, but you can do the best you can with the conditions you have. Here are a few pointers:

- Look for the best light in a situation and ask your subjects to stand there—under a tree, for instance, where it's not too shady, but not as bright as glaring sunlight.
- Shoot with light on someone's face rather than light coming from behind the person.
- Try to avoid high-contrast light situations.
- If you're shooting indoors, you may need to turn on every light in the room in order to get enough light everywhere.
- Many cameras come with a low-light mode for shooting night scenes. Find out where this feature is and how to turn this control on if you are going to be shooting in a low-light situation. Compare what your footage looks like with and without using the low-light mode to better understand the difference.

Remember: Your lighting doesn't have to be perfect. It just needs to be as good as you can make it under the circumstances you're shooting in.