

10 top shooting techniques

Follow our 10 golden shooting rules and you'll never make a video nasty again

Using a digital camcorder is surprisingly easy. Just pick it up, point it at something and press the red button.

Video cameras now come packed to the gills with all manner of automated settings to aid the amateur videographer. These settings might be able to compensate for low light levels and wobbly shots, but a good video

they do not make. If your raw footage is blurry or the sound is muffled there's little you can do to correct it at the editing stage. Think of video as being the same as stills photography – once you've pressed the shutter button, you're stuck with what you've shot.

Whatever you decide to tape, be it the latest low-budget blockbuster or your annual holiday, there are

several things to bear in mind if you want the production to run smoothly and the finished results to look professional. We don't expect you to sit down and storyboard your entire video, but it certainly helps to have a strong

framework in mind before you start shooting.

For best results, keep your wits about you when shooting and follow our 10 golden rules to capture the kind of quality footage that comprises a polished movie.

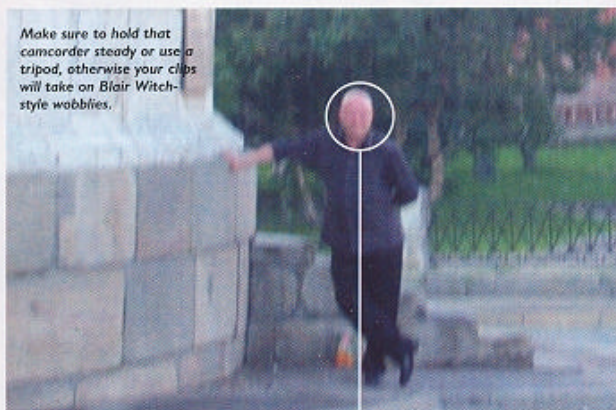
2. CONTROL THAT ZOOM

When you first get a camcorder, it can be great fun playing with the zoom control to capture extreme close-ups of anything and everything. Your camera may feature huge 10x optical and 500x digital zoom facilities, but this doesn't mean you have to use them. Zooming in exaggerates camera movement, even when the camera is mounted on a tripod, and constant use is likely to induce a state of nausea in your viewers.

If you do feel your finger flexing towards the zoom button, remember to use it slowly and sparingly, keeping it in reserve for dramatic effect. But don't bother with digital zoom at all. This function uses the camera's in-built software to expand the image, leaving you with ill-defined, pixellated footage.

If you want to get closer to your subject, stop taping and physically move closer, then take another shot.

Make sure to hold that camcorder steady or use a tripod, otherwise your clips will take on Blair Witch-style wobbles.



1. KEEP THE CAMERA STEADY

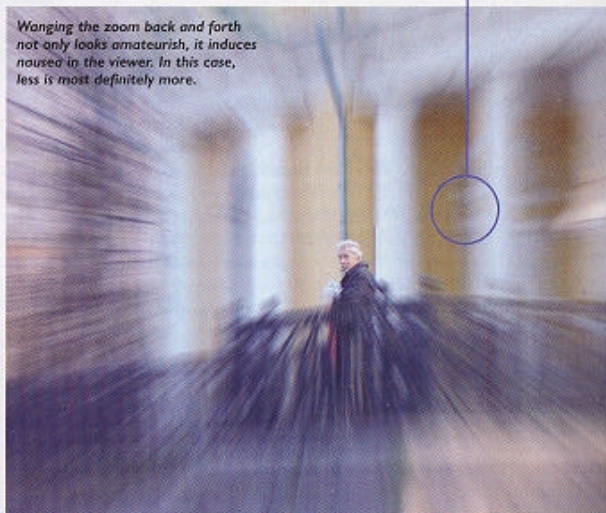
It's only when you pick up a video camera that you realise just how much your hands shake. A wobbly camera can be a real shot-ruiner, so it's a good idea to mount your camcorder on a sturdy tripod or, if you want something a little more portable, try a monopod (a small tripod with one leg).

Of course, it's often impractical to carry a tripod

around when you're out on a shoot so it's worth learning how to handle a camcorder properly to avoid the wobbles.

The main thing is to hold the camera firmly in both hands to minimize any lateral movement. Draw your arms into your body and keep your elbows tucked in to stabilise the camcorder, then bend your knees slightly to absorb any sudden movement.

Wagging the zoom back and forth not only looks amateurish, it induces nausea in the viewer. In this case, less is most definitely more.





3. IN THE FRAME

Start to think about composition and the way the objects in the frame sit in relation to each other. The easiest way to produce pleasing footage is to use the rule of thirds when shooting – it's the most popular composition technique. Divide the frame up into thirds using imaginary horizontal and vertical lines, and place your subjects on the points where these lines intersect. This gives a balanced composition that's pleasing to the eye.

Take a look at professional photos and movies and you'll start to notice just how much this technique is used. It draws the eye

into the picture without anything dominating the frame.

Of course, this rule is just a compositional aid and you don't have to always follow it to the letter – it's just something worth considering when setting up your shots. Try experimenting with different compositions to create unusual effects.

Another thing to take into account is overscan, which occurs on some television sets. It cuts off a certain amount of the video signal, beheading your subject, so try to compensate for this by leaving some space at the top of the frame when shooting.



It pays to check the background before shooting the foreground subject.

5. BACKGROUND TO FOREGROUND

While it's important to make sure that your subject is nicely positioned in the frame, care and attention should also be paid to what's in the background and foreground of the shot. If you place your subject in front of a lively background the whole emphasis of the scene will change.

For example, filming someone in front of a Mardi Gras procession will draw attention away from

your subject because viewers will tend to focus on what's going on in the background. Also, watch out for intrusive background objects, such as trees growing out of people's heads. The same principle can be applied to the foreground too. You will need eyes everywhere to stop someone – or something – wandering into the foreground when you have just started shooting the perfect take.

QUICKSTART

4. CONTINUITY

Get into the mindset of the videomaker and think in terms of scenes, capturing short segments of footage that can be spliced together at the editing stage. You need to lead the viewer through the narrative in a logical fashion.

Remember to open scenes with an establishing shot, perhaps a wide-angle image of the location, a close-up of a local sign or medium shot of a famous monument. Don't be afraid to use different angles and mix several shots of the same object together – throwing in close-ups, half-shots and wide-angle views will make the finished movie much more interesting to watch.

The trick is to make sure that your film flows nicely, with each shot following on logically from the next. For example, if you're filming outdoors, make sure that all your footage features similar lighting conditions. If some shots are sunny and others are dull, the film will jar when you edit the clips together.

Here's a typical establishing shot for a London movie.



Avoid making a horse's rear end of your pan shots – anticipate where the subject is going.

6. PLAN THE PAN

The pan – a shot that moves along a plane – can be used in two ways. Its first use is to capture a large area of space that cannot fit into the frame, like a beautiful vista or piece of architecture. The second is when you want to follow a moving object along a predetermined path.

The trick with all pans is to underplay the movement and work

exactly where you want the shot to end. Most beginners pan too quickly or slowly and undershoot or overshoot their intended targets, so practice a couple of times before you take the shot and keep the camera steady.

A good pan is also dependent on the quality of your tripod, which should have a fluid head to aid graceful moves.

QUICKSTART

7. NOT SO SPECIAL FX

Modern digital camcorders have in-built video effects that are designed to add a little extra sparkle to your footage. Unfortunately, the quickest and easiest way to ruin a shot is to rely on these on-board tools. It's best to refrain from using these unless you want your production to resemble a *Top of the Pops* Christmas special from the early 1980s.

This also goes for the fade-in/fade-out feature used by some cameras. The

effects might look nice when viewed on the video camera's screen, but if you change your mind later and want to revert back to normal-looking footage then you'll be stuck.

Instead, effects should be applied at the editing stage using a non-destructive digital editing system. This means that the original footage will not be altered and you'll be free to experiment with special effects and titles without being saddled with them.

While it may be tempting to play with on-camera special effects such as 'solarization', you won't be able to normalise the image later should you change your mind.



Use the camcorder's Backlight function to compensate for foreground murk-out when strong light is behind the subject.

8. LIGHT FANTASTIC

Lighting is one of the most important elements to consider when shooting. Too much light and your subjects will be overexposed and look like ghosts; too little and you won't be able to make out anything. Fortunately, most cameras have automatic exposure settings but, for best results, try to have the sun behind you when filming.

Check where the sun is in the sky. Will it cast any shadows on your subject? If the

background is brighter than the foreground, turn on the camera's backlight feature to compensate. When filming indoors, even if it appears bright to the naked eye, use as much light as possible. If you do a lot of shooting indoors, it might be a thought to invest in a small lighting kit.

Always check light conditions by looking through the camera's eyepiece rather than using the LCD display, which will often makes things look a lot brighter than they are.

9. SOUND AND VISION

Now that the visual side of your production is sorted, it's time to turn attention to the audio. It's easy to forget that a good video relies on the perfect union of sound and vision.

Camcorder microphones are very good at picking up sound; the problem is that they tend to pick up a lot of background noise too, including wind and the breath of the cameraman. Some cameras have a 'wind cut' feature that should be turned on whenever you're filming outside.

Better still, if your camera has a microphone input socket, invest in an external microphone with a wind muffler and boom. If you're recording indoors or are filming an interview, a small lapel mic will usually do the job.

The best way to ensure you've got a good-quality soundtrack is to use a MiniDisc player or tape recorder to capture a second version of the sound while shooting. This way you can dub the good sound over the bad at the editing stage.

10. BE PREPARED

There's nothing worse than going away on a shoot and only to find that you've left something behind – usually a spare battery or set of tapes. Prepare a checklist of the things you'll need: spare batteries and charger, lights, tapes and so on, and buy a kit bag to put all the gear in. If you

get into the regime of packing the kit bag before a shoot and reserving a space for each item, you'll soon learn to realise when something is missing.

If you don't have enough space, do a bit of research before you set out to see if there are any camcorder supply shops near your location and make a note of

the address and phone number. This can also help if there is an unforeseen emergency.

If you're travelling abroad, check that your battery charger is a multi-current adaptor and buy a universal travelling plug. Having followed our advice, you should be ready to step out into the big wide world and start filming.

