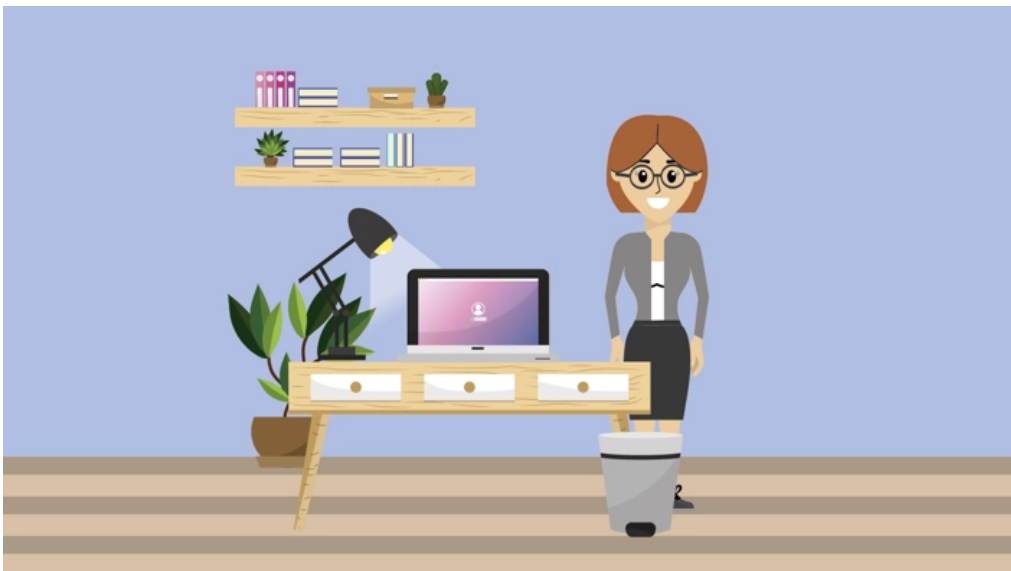

Why IT Matters to Higher Education

EDUCAUSE
REVIEW

Putting Your Best Self Forward: 6 Keys For Filming Quality Videos

Jered Borup Wednesday, February 3, 2021 Teaching & Learning



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What Not to Do

Before we talk about best practices, let's cover what not to do.

Table 1. Examples of common video missteps



People commonly record videos while sitting in front of a window or a lamp. When you do that, others may only see your silhouette.



If natural light is available, it is best to sit facing that light—so long as the window blinds do not cast shadows on your face. Stripes look better on tigers and zebras.



At times we may want to record a video at night. However, be careful because the light from your screen can make it look like you're telling scary stories by the campfire.



Video can be a great opportunity for others to get a glimpse into where you live or work. Too often we don't take advantage of that opportunity and record videos in front of a blank wall. As [Room Rater](#) frequently points out, these recordings can feel like a hostage video, as if at any time the person is going to look if the coast is clear and then whisper, "Help me!"



It's convenient to work with our laptops on...well, our laps. However, looking down at your laptop is a less-than-flattering angle, and you can even give students an unforgettable look up your nostrils.



Just as looking down on the webcam is less than flattering, looking up at the webcam looks like you need a booster seat.



Some people are just close talkers. **An entire episode of Seinfeld** [↗](#) covered the topic. Just like in-person close talkers invade people's personal space, online close talkers can get too close for comfort.



If The Close Talker is on one end of the spectrum, The Social Distancer is on the other. Social distancing is important during a pandemic, but is unnecessary online.




When we create a video we may feel tempted to watch ourselves or read a script on the screen rather than looking into the camera. This prevents us from creating eye contact and can make us look uninterested or inauthentic.



First-world problems, I know...but if you have two monitors you may find that you spend too much of your video looking at the monitor that is not recording the video. This will leave people staring at your profile. This is more common in live video calls but can still happen when recording videos.



Once we've finished talking, our smiles often vanish as we look for the stop button. Some tools will allow you to trim the ends of the video, but if not, keep smiling until you actually stop the recording. Niccole Thurman perfectly highlighted this in her [tweet](#). 

What to Do

I went back to my YouTube channel and found my first webcam video (Aug. 31, 2010) and then compared it to a more recent video (June 20, 2020). It's not by accident that the newer video looks better than the older one (see figure 3). In the first video, I

failed to consider (or care) how I was going to appear to my students. I was backlit by the lamp behind me. I was looking down on the laptop. In fact, I didn't even bother holding my laptop level, which made the picture in the background appear tilted. I wasn't even really looking into the webcam, although there was so much glare on my glasses it's hard to tell.

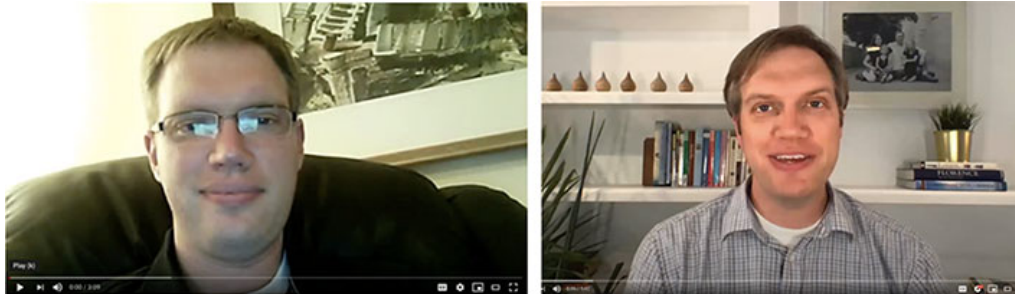


Figure 3. Then and now: How small changes can make big difference in video

In the newer video I took just five minutes to prepare. You can see in figure 4 that I put my laptop on a stack of my daughters' games, which raised the webcam to my eye level. I also used lamps specifically designed for recording webcam videos, though any lamp would work. Even better, you can sit facing a light-filled window. I also made sure that in the background there was a picture of my family, a small plant, and a few other little things.

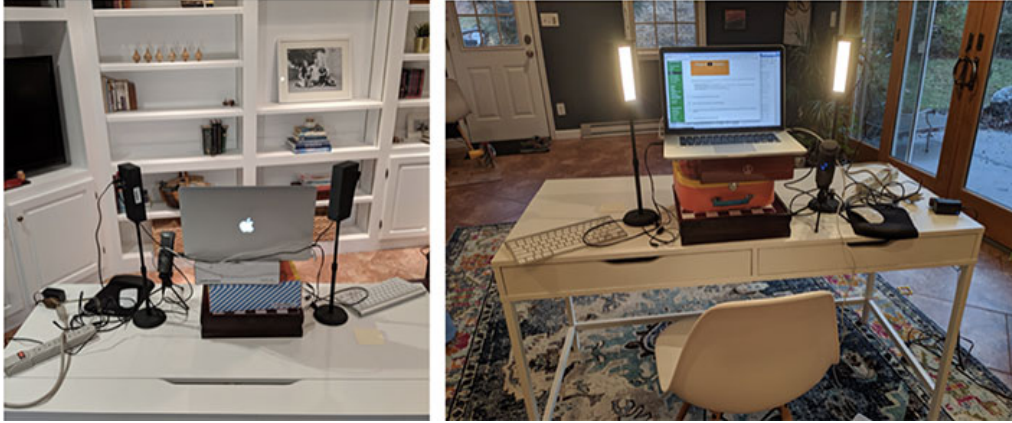


Figure 4. My home video setup


Keys to Quality Videos

The following simple keys can help you avoid these common pitfalls of amateur video production and create warm, engaging, effective footage that engages your students and communicates your interest them.

Key #1: Convey Your Voice

Looking good is important, but nothing is worse than bad audio. If the audio is distracting or unintelligible, your video will not be watched. If you are recording using your phone while outside, even a little breeze can be really distracting. If the built-in microphone is not great on your phone or computer, try using an external microphone. Most headphones now have pretty good microphones built in.

The audio doesn't need to be perfect, and most of the time, good audio is good enough. However, if you want to go the extra mile, relatively inexpensive high-quality external mics are available, **such as the Blue Snowball.** [↗](#) Furthermore, if you are

hearing reverberations or echoes from where you are recording, you can improve the sound quality by placing pillows behind and to the sides of your computer, as shown in [this NPR video](#). 

Key #2: Find the Light

For lighting, the best arrangement is to sit facing the primary light source in your room rather than having the primary light source behind you. Often the best approach is to sit toward a sun-filled window (if the light isn't so bright it blinds you). If that isn't an option, then lamps will do. If a lamp's light is not strong enough, try removing the lamp shade. An additional lamp can also be helpful if you are sitting directly under a strong light that casts shadows on your face.

Key #3: Frame and Maintain Eye Contact

Sit a little less than arm's length from the camera. From there your eyes should be about one-third of the distance from the top of the screen, as seen in figure 5. You should also position the camera so that it is at eye level (or slightly below). That will likely mean placing your laptop on something like a box or a stack of books.



Figure 5. Establishing an optimal vertical relationship of face and camera

Key #4: Stage

Before hitting the record button, take a few minutes to consider the surroundings that will be shown in your video. Personal items can be a good way for others to get to know you. Furthermore, plants, pictures, and bookshelves can add warmth to the video.

While working from home, it can be difficult to find a place to work and record videos. For instance, in [this CNN article](#) you can see people working everywhere from the closet to the bathtub. However, even Jessica Fleming, who was working in her walk-in closet, presented a professional background: "The best part? I've even hung a picture behind the desk so that my video conference calls don't look like I'm in my closet!" As a

side note, a closet is a great place to record audio. **Just don't get locked in.** 

Key #5: Be Prepared and Natural

Speak naturally, as if you were actually speaking to someone rather than a screen. If you are able to show that what you are saying is important and interesting to you, then others are more likely to feel the same way. You should know generally what you want to say before you start recording. However, in most cases it is not necessary or even recommended to write a script that you read. If you are reading from a script, it can be hard to sound natural and almost impossible to read while you are looking into the camera without a teleprompter. If you have ever taken a public speaking class, you know that a better approach is using notes to prompt you while speaking. If you are recording from a laptop or desktop, you can have the notes in a word processing document. However, even that will require you to look down frequently so try placing your notes as close to the top of the screen as possible. Another trick is to put your prompts on sticky notes that you then place right next to the webcam so you can glance over to them while still appearing to be looking into the webcam.

Key #6: Keep It Short

If you have mastered all five of the previous keys, you are more likely to keep others' attention, but even that attention will likely be limited.