

10 Quick and Dirty Tricks

For Getting Great Looking Footage Every Time

Tips for All Cameras

1. Level your camera.

Use an actual level if you can. Many tripods come equipped with them, but a toolbox level will work just as well. If you have no level, you can eyeball it using a reliable straight, horizontal line in your shot... the ceiling, a bookshelf, a floorboard, for example.

An unlevelled shot will result in a Dutch Angle, a film making technique designed to unsettle and alter the audience that something unnatural is afoot...probably not the tone you're aiming for in your library video program.

2. Shoot your subject at eye level.

To achieve this, align your camera's lens with your subject's eyes. If you don't have an adjustable tripod, use boxes or stacks of books to get the necessary height.

Again, filming your subject from above or below can communicate unintended emotions to your audience.... Think of a low angle villain shot or a high angle shot of a crying child. Furthermore, shooting your human subject from above or below can be unflattering.

3. Pick the right cut-off point.

When framing human subjects, there are points where you do and do not want to crop, either because it cuts off important visual information, or because it looks unsettling. A good general rule...don't decapitate your subject and don't cut them off at the joints.

4. Leave your subject room.

Headroom- In general, you want to leave your subject a little bit of headroom. This means leaving several inches of empty space above their head in the frame. This is a goldilocks measurement...you don't want to leave tons of empty space above their head, but you don't want to cut their hair or forehead off in the shot.

Lead Room (or look room)- Similarly, if your subject is looking off in one direction or moving through the frame. You want to leave them an ample amount of lead room. This means leaving more empty frame space in the direction your subject is moving or looking.

5. Use the Zoom correctly.

When filming with a phone or tablet, do not use the zoom, at least not to frame your initial shot. Make sure you are zoomed all the way out and move your camera instead. The Digital zoom on your phone or tablet will leave you with grainy, low-quality footage.

When filming with a traditional camera, you can use the zoom. In fact, depending on your lens, you probably don't want to film all the way zoomed out, since shorter focal lengths on your camera's optical zoom will distort your subject's features (think of a fish-eye lens). Ideally, human subjects should be filmed at 50-100 mm, never less than 30 mm if you can help it.

6. Always underexpose before you overexpose.

Although it's time-consuming, it's possible to fix underexposed footage in post-production. Overexposed footage is much harder to fix... once a pixel becomes completely white, the visual information is lost and cannot be repaired. If you must do one or the other, lean on the side of underexposed footage, especially when filming outdoors.

7. Double-check your focus!

The worst thing you can do is film an out of focus shot. Keeping your shot in focus is so important, on real film sets, there is a person assigned to every single camera whose only job is to pull focus. There is nothing you can do in post-production to fix an out of focus shot. Checking your focus should always be the very last thing you do before you begin filming. And you should recheck your focus before every new take, especially if you are filming with a narrow depth of field.

Tips for Traditional Cameras

8. White Balance before you shoot.

You should white balance your camera each time you change location or change the lighting conditions. This ensures that your footage's colors are bright and true to life.

You should white balance manually; do not use your camera's auto white balance feature. This setting can be useful when shooting still photography, but since this setting adjusts continually while filming, it has a tendency to change the color of your footage mid-scene.

All you will need to white balance manually is a sheet of white printer paper. If you don't know how to manually white balance, there will be a how-to guide in your camera's manual.

9. Match your shutter speed to your frame rate.

Your shutter speed should be a multiple of your frame rate. Ex, if you're filming at 30 fps, your shutter speed should be 1/30 or 1/60 (I prefer 60 because of tip 10)

10. Match your shutter speed to you're the building's Hertz.

If filming under fluorescent or LED lights, your shutter speed should be a multiple of the building's Hertz rate.

Fluorescents and some LED lights have a tendency to flicker at the same rate as the electrical current in the building. Matching your shutter speed to the building's Hertz rate will help your camera avoid capturing this flicker.

In the US, our electricity is 60hz, so your shutter speed should be a multiple of 60. For example, if you are filming at 30 fps under fluorescents, set your shutter speed to 1/60. If you are filming at 25 fps under fluorescents, you'll need to set your shutter speed to 1/300.