



6 PILLARS TO RECORDING GREAT (AMATEUR) VIDEO

With the rise of B-schools requesting video essays, I've decided to help my students out with some guidelines and tips on how to record great video – or at least, to have a strong basis for recording decent content. Note that we are not diving deep into film school or production theory here. We're simply exploring the tip of the iceberg.

There are 6 very important factors to consider when recording your video. Let's take a quick look in each one. Except maybe the first.

THE CAMERA

Let's start with my absolute favorite camera for amateur use. It is easy to use, readily available, and it rests in your pocket for numerous other uses. It is, your smartphone. Traditional and pro video makers will likely disagree. And yes, smartphone cameras indeed have their limitations. But the sheer versatility, ease of use, and accessibility of a smartphone makes it one of an amateur video maker's most useful tools. Let's get real here. We're talking about amateur videos. You might be reading this to make a testimonial video, a 2-minute application video essay, or even just a short clip of your niece dancing at a wedding. You shouldn't feel like you HAVE TO go out and spend hundreds of dollars on a semi-pro or pro camera. This is not something you need to INVEST in if you don't plan on recording videos on a constant basis. So what better device than your smartphone to record a short video? Most of us keep up with current technology; great. But there are still many people who have smartphones from 5 years ago. And you know what? Those cameras are STILL pretty good for an amateur video! The beauty of using a smartphone is in its simplicity. You can share it without having to worry too much about file conversion or codecs. Some are still even better than the next camera I'll be talking about.

The second camera you can and should use is your laptop camera. What I like about a laptop or desktop camera is that you can have your script right in front of you on your screen. Another thing I like about a laptop camera is that you don't need a separate tripod to keep your video still. Shakiness, when not used properly or for action capture videos, can really damage the quality of a good spoken video. A downfall here is that resolution and image quality will suffer depending on the age of your laptop. But again, if you are on a tight budget, one camera that is easily within reach for a quick video is the one you have on your computer. It is VERY unlikely that you don't have one today. Especially because video conferencing, video chatting, and Skype calls are so commonly used! Don't have a good laptop camera? Go to your office on a Sunday and use one of the conference room's computers there. Let's be resourceful! Less money spent is more money saved.

Finally, we come to the mother of all cameras: the semi-pro and pro cameras. Granted, these are expensive. But that quality!! Crisp and detailed images of whatever you are recording, zooming capabilities for depth and visual impact, and the endless possibilities that these cameras can bring to your video are simply breathtaking. But, these cameras are not for everyone. Sure, you can go out and buy one and take up the hobby of creating amazing videos. You can spend the time to learn techniques and improve your director-like vision. But don't go out and buy one to record one short video, please. I love these cameras and I am a content creator. I enjoy making videos of my sons and videos for my courses. But even for that I use a GoPro action cam. Not a DSLR. Maybe I'm not worthy. Or maybe I'm just lazy. But the fact of the matter for me is that when my sons start dancing or goofing off, I want something I can pull out of my pocket to record the moment as quickly as possible. I am not one to carry a semi-pro camera hanging from my neck wherever I go, especially not where I live – too dangerous! And if I have to pull my badass camera out and store it 15 times a day, I may even damage a lens or drop something. It happens. If you really want to use a high-end camera, go for it! It will infinitely help your video look beautiful! Borrow it from a photographer friend, or better yet, ask that friend to record you. If you can get your hands on one, then a DSLR is surely your go-to camera.

But! For the sake of this guideline, I will be focusing on the first two cameras – I need to cater to my target audience.

Quick Tips:

1. Use the main camera of your smartphone and NOT the front ("selfie") camera for best results.
2. Need to use a script? Tape your script to your smartphone near the back camera lens. That way, you're looking close to the camera as you read.
3. Many smartphone platforms come with inbuilt video recording software.
4. Look for the video camera symbol or camera lens button on your smartphone.
5. For the iPhone, the video camera mode is in the same app as the still camera. Use the slider to toggle between the two.
6. Some smartphone cameras have inbuilt lights.
7. Select light on/off or auto.
8. Close down all other apps on your phone. Because of radio waves the input might get noisy.
9. Turn on airplane-mode before you start.
10. Make sure you've tested your smartphone and video camera apps and are familiar with how to get the best recording.
11. Charge your phone and bring the adaptor just in case. Don't forget your headphones.
12. Use a tripod. Some adapters on market can fit your smartphone to a standard tripod.
13. Look for something to lean on - a table, the top of a chair, a wall, anything to give your body and arm holding the camera some stability. If you can rest the camera itself on something, even better.
14. Hold the camera or phone close to your body rather than too far out in front.
15. Shoot wide and close and move your body in and out rather than zooming with your camera.
16. Give yourself some time to focus. It's easy to lose concentration if you're shooting in an exciting environment so make sure you take a second to think about what you're trying to achieve and concentrate.

The most **IMPORTANT** rule when recording with your smartphone: **DO NOT FILM VERTICALLY!** Position your phone horizontally (landscape mode) **ALWAYS** when recording. When you film vertically, there is no way to get rid of the black sidebars when editing. Trust me, your video will use full screen capacity when you record horizontally. If there is one thing you take away from this guideline, learn that you should **NEVER RECORD VERTICALLY!!**

Here's a humorous PSA to understand this rule better:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bt9zSfinwFA>

THE LIGHT

Basic of basics in lighting: the more light, the better your image. Lack of light will make your footage darker and grainier.

Like I said, I'm giving you some basic tips here for your amateur video so I won't get into three-point lighting or other technical points like the differences between hard light and soft light. But lighting is indeed very important.

It's always best to use natural light or the lights around you. Shoot outdoors, where even a cloudy day produces enough ambient light to keep your video crisp and colorful. If it's sunny, try to shoot in the morning or late afternoon when the sun is lower in the sky. When it's directly overhead, it casts unflattering shadows on subjects' faces.

Do you need to go out and purchase specific gear for better lighting? I would say, NO. But then, it all depends on what type of video you want to record. What's your vision? I remember editing a video for a client who wanted to do an interrogation video where he sat on a chair and one light bulb directly above his head. His friend would ask some pressure questions and he had to answer them in that setting. Talk about a challenging lighting set up! For this, we had to have 6 different lighting angles (even though the focus was on that ONE light bulb). If you plan to go on an artistic route for your video, I would suggest you hire a professional video crew instead of going out and purchasing every single item. Either way, be ready to spend some money! I'll go back to what I said earlier: if you are simply recording an amateur 2-minute video for your application essay, then consider your budget before deciding on your storyboard.

THE SOUND

In regards to sound: Avoid windy areas, especially if you are using the internal smartphone mic. You can even try using your parked car as a mobile insulated audio booth. I'm not sure where you plan to record your video. But if possible, the absolute best way to ensure great audio quality is to have an extra smartphone (borrow from a friend!) with you. Use the extra smartphone (or yours depending on which is an older model – use the newer one for video) to dedicate it strictly for audio. Have it close to your mouth (but without it showing in the video). It can be tricky, especially if you are outdoors. You will have to record and test and re-record several times. But trust me, your video will not work well with bad audio! Bad audio equals bad video! So, be good. Record good. Have good audio!

THE FRAME

Understand that framing your subject in your shot is also extremely important for the quality of your video! There are more advanced framing techniques and you can visit the extra links for further reading, but DEFINITELY learn about the Rule of Thirds first. This is the basic of basics that will give you great tools to make an artistic video. Watch the quick tutorial in the link below.

Rule of Thirds

<http://www.desktop-documentaries.com/rule-of-thirds.html>

For further reading on more advanced techniques

<http://www.untamedscience.com/filmmaking/production-shooting/camera/>
<http://www.journographica.com/2011/05/15/basic-photo-tips-framing-your-shots/>

THE CONTENT

Let's focus on the MIT video essay here. With more schools set to take this approach, I believe this is a great way to start. As we go along, I will add other school profiles to this guideline. But for now, let's see what your content should include.

The main purpose here is to convey all other aspects of your life and mainly demonstrate that you know how to enjoy life and will most certainly have a phenomenal time at MIT! With a considerable number of quant-driven guys at the school, MIT wants to make sure you have a balanced and holistic approach to life!

You need to build a solid, creative, and inspiring plot for a video – the most effective way we have found in the last 3 years to position you well amidst the competition.

Initially, bullet for main activities you believe demonstrate **who you are** and **what you enjoy**, focusing on non-professional and some professional aspects! Bullet point for these activities and make a suggestion on several different plots before deciding on your final storyboard.

Last year, most successful students developed a video either with several snap shots of their lives or with one or two emblematic moments of their existence; a two-minute video is the goal!

THE DIRECTION

Finally, I want to describe several different styles you can use as your direction.

One moment – this video would highlight one specific moment that was pivotal in your progression as a person and/or a professional.

Snapshots – these videos show snapshots of a candidate's life in a presentation style video.

Narration – in these types of videos, candidates normally record specific locations or events as they narrate their stories in a voice-over style video (think Morgan Freeman talking about each moment).

Straight Interview – candidates speak directly to the video and talk about what differentiates them or other topics that highlight their different talents

Flashback – an in-depth look into the past life of a candidate, aiming at showing what were the factors that shaped this person the candidate is today.

Further Information

Here are two more links to help show you the way to making great video!! Remember, the more content and better quality of the content you send me, the more I can do with your video!

<http://www.desktop-documentaries.com/videography-tips.html>

<https://wistia.com/library/shooting-video-with-an-iphone>