

So, You Want to Produce a Video?

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A Student's Guide to Video Production

*A Publication of the Media Center, School of Social Work
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A great man once said, "Give me small enough bites and I could eat the Empire State Building". To the uninitiated, a video production appears to be just as monumental - and often unpalatable - an undertaking. The key to successful film and video production is to break the whole into bites small enough to digest.

Making an effective video presentation is quite a bit more than simply turning on a camcorder and letting it run; a video project is a lot of work, but can be very rewarding. The Media Center at the School of Social Work has written this production guide to assist students in the most efficient means to produce a videotape.

This guide is detailed, but has been simplified to explain in (hopefully) plain language the production process. If you have any questions, the folks in the Media Center will be happy to meet with you or your group.

But first...

Policies and Procedures

The Media Center makes available to all students, free of charge, equipment and services to make a professional-quality videotape. Camcorders may be signed out, and the footage that is shot for student projects can be edited by the Media Center. In order to ensure that all students have equal access to equipment and services, the Media Center has adopted policies and procedures to which we adhere strictly:

1. Equipment is available on a first come, first served basis. However, we will take reservations and recommend them highly. Students must present a valid UMB identification card and fill in a form (available in the Media Center) which will ask for the following information: home address and telephone number, supervising professor/instructor and class for which the equipment is being used. We recommend that you reserve the equipment as far ahead of the date needed as possible. Reservation may be made in person, by phone, e-mail or online.
2. An Equipment Removal Authorization form must be filled out fully for any and all equipment that is to be removed from the School of Social Work building (Kaplan Hall). This form, available in the Media Center, is to be signed by the Associate Dean for Administration. The Student is responsible for having this form signed. Students must present a valid UMB student identification card and supply the same information as outlined above.
3. The Media Center requires a minimum of 1 week notice for studio time and/or editing services (This includes student role-plays). We highly recommend booking time in advance, especially toward the end of the semester.
4. Equipment is due back in the Media Center the following business day, before noon. Failure to return equipment when due may result in revocation of Media Center privileges.
5. Students must provide their own tape in standard VHS format for field shooting and duplications after the editing is completed. The Media Center will provide tape in the appropriate format for editing, but that tape will remain the property of the Media Center. A duplication of this tape will be made after editing and given to you.
6. Students signing out equipment agree to accept full responsibility for the care, safety and well-being of that equipment. If the equipment signed out is damaged, lost, stolen or otherwise rendered unusable by the Media Center while in the student's charge, the student agrees to replace the equipment **at the student's expense.**
7. Students who are having their projects edited must provide, on the day of the session, a completed tape log, a completed edit decision list (both complete with timecode reference numbers), and a final, typewritten script. The Media Center will provide one copy of each of the appropriate forms to assist the students in this chore. Further, we will provide any training necessary to assist the student in this process.
8. Only one (1) student representative from each group who has the authority to make editing decisions will be present at the time of editing to supervise the editing process. This rule is not hard and fast, but the Media Center will not edit and will immediately cease work on projects which require debate among the group during editing.
9. The Media Center will not begin any video projects with less than one month remaining in the semester.
10. Equipment and services will only be provided for valid projects done by registered students in conjunction with classes offered by the UMB School of Social Work. **Personal use of equipment is not sanctioned.**

Media Center personnel are available for consultation by appointment. Call (410) 706-7232.

End of the bad stuff.

This guide is broken into the following areas:

Media Choice

Production Roles

Production Goals

Production Phases

 Pre-production

 Production

 Post-production

Media Choice

The first order of business is to understand what you are intending to do: communicate information in the most succinct and expeditious manner possible. Then ask the question, "why film or video?". Is this the best medium to convey your ideas? Complex thoughts which require time to absorb are best conveyed in print. Examples of this can be found in the scientific community; also, facts, figures and other data are poorly conveyed in the video medium. However, video is an excellent medium to convey visual information, such as a pained expression on a client's face as he explains how he became homeless. Words cannot capture such emotion.

Production Roles

To avoid confusion on the part of those outside the student group, it is important to assign one person as "producer". This person will

take the lead in the project, make arrangements and be the central contact for all involved: interviewees, talent, crew, other group members and the Media Center. Because productions are broken into three phases, it is possible to assign a leader to each of these phases, for example: producer/writer, director and post-production supervisor. However, this approach doesn't always work; the success of this method depends on the members involved and a shared common vision. The key is to decide on a unified communication goal for the production as a whole, which will permeate all production phases. This will ensure that the message doesn't become confused with the different viewpoints of the group members. Decide and agree before pre-production begins, or the project will reflect the poor direction, attitude and attention to this "detail".

Production Goals

The single most important aspect of a successful video production is that there be a clear message. For this reason, it is important for the student group to identify **precisely** what is to be said, then decide how to say it.

Video productions have three central goals: To persuade, to entertain and to inform. Sometimes one of these is emphasized over the other; effective productions have elements of all three, and can motivate the viewer to take a desired action. We reiterate: it is important for you, as producer, to know what it is you want to accomplish and how you want to go about it.

There are three approaches to production, each with its own strengths and, likewise, each is more appropriate to certain communication goals.

Narrative is a story-telling approach that encompasses dramatic productions. This is the most difficult type to produce because a detailed screenplay-format script must be written, actors hired and rehearsed, crew hired and rehearsed, etc. This style requires extensive pre-production planning and is rigorous in production. However, the narrative affords the most control over content and it is the most involving to the audience.

Documentary is a style which uses interviews extensively, and essentially allows the story to tell itself; the audience is left to judge for itself the merits of the message. These productions can be very effective at motivating people, but often afford less control over content because the producer cannot be absolutely certain what the interviewee will say. Documentaries are "guided" in pre-production, but essentially "written" in post-production. Post-production for this type can be very time-consuming, in the logging of tapes and generation of edit decision lists (EDLs) which are essential to the documentary production process.

Expository is the type of production which uses a voiced-over narration. While this approach offers great control, is considered the easiest to write and produce and can be very effective, it is considered the least involving and motivating to the audience.

Production Phases

There are three phases in producing a piece of video media: pre-production, production and post-production. It is important to note that each phase hinges on the quality of work done in the phase preceding it. The most important phase, however, is that of pre-production.

THE PRE-PRODUCTION PHASE

Alfred Hitchcock once said that after the pre-production work was finished, he wasn't really interested in the film any longer because the creation had already been done - the rest was all by rote. The pre-production phase is of paramount importance because it is the planning stage, and all subsequent actions and therefore the entire communicated message hinge on the planning and forethought which take place here. Some of the considerations are:

- What message are you trying to convey?
- Is film or video the best medium to convey that message?
- Who is your audience?
- What must they learn, understand, know better or do as a result of seeing the production?
- What is the audience's educational level?
- What is the best approach to interest the audience and keep their interest?
- What language must you use to reach the audience? (Can you use jargon?)
- How much time, money and effort can you reasonably spend on the creation of the project?

These are questions you must ask of yourself **before** you even **begin** to write the script. Why? Because you have to know what to say and how to say it. Pre-production is like a road map that you create: you can't reach your destination if you don't know where you're going or how you're going to get there. Thorough pre-production answers the questions of where and how.

Scripting Considerations

The scripting process usually takes place even before pre-production, and is used to guide all phases of the overall production. However, there are times (such as in documentary production) when scripts will be written based on the information

received from interviews taped during production. During these times scripting takes place in between production and post-production. Still, the writer, producer and director must have some idea of the subject matter and content prior to production. If they don't, there is no way to communicate a clear message because no one knows what the message is. It is therefore necessary for the writer to do thorough research to become familiar with as much of the topic as possible **before** production takes place.

The bottom line is that, whether the script is written before or after production, under no circumstances can a project be edited without a final script. It is required that scripts be clear and written out fully, with no mistakes, especially if they are to be voiced-over. The Media Center will not edit projects that do not have fully developed and prepared scripts.

The Budget

Another aspect of pre-production involves budgeting funds. There is no faster way to look like a fool than to run out of money in mid-production. Compound this with the legal ramifications encountered if one fails to finish a project for which one was paid. For example, suppose you have been awarded a grant to produce a program on a certain topic. The suppliers of that grant expect results; they need to see a finished work to justify their expenditures. Even though you have acted in good faith, if you have budgeted poorly and can't finish the piece you might be charged with fraud. At the minimum, you're not likely to get another grant for subsequent projects.

Even though student projects are essentially funded by the school, the concept of a budget extends to small-scale student projects as well. How much tape will be needed, and who will pay for it? What

about time: how much time does each member have to devote to the project? Allocate time as if it were money. Be sure to allow for unexpected contingencies; this means more time spent and translates to a budgetary item

Schedules

Scheduling of production and post-production activities is a major concern in pre-production. The producer must arrange for rehearsals, shoots, and editing all the while working around the schedules of the principals involved. In the production phase, for example, talent, crew and equipment must be coordinated to shoot at the same time in the same place, often for multiple days at multiple locations. After that, an editing facility must be located at a price which the budget allows which can still do the job required. Sound easy? Try it.

Fortunately for you, student projects are relatively easy to schedule because they are usually small in scale. Also, the Media Center makes special provisions because it is understood that students are generally not schooled in media production and are on tight timelines.

Production Considerations

Some aspects of the production phase which need to be coordinated in pre-production are:

- talent (actors, interviewees, on-camera hosts, etc.)
- crew (cameramen, grips, gaffers, etc.)
- equipment (camera, lights, microphones, tape, etc.)

Post-production Considerations

Post-production must also be planned and scheduled. Post-production is the editing and other manipulation (usually by electronic means) of the footage shot during production.

The primary consideration is estimating how much time to allow for the editing process. This varies greatly, depending on the complexity of the finished product. For example, allow considerable time for generation of computer graphics, setup of A/B transitions (dissolves, wipes, etc.), etc. However, cuts-only editing with no graphics can be done quickly and at low cost in most facilities. Generally speaking, student projects will be cuts-only unless special provision has been made.

THE PRODUCTION PHASE

The term "production" involves the actual filming and/or taping of the program's content. Considerations are direction, lighting, camerawork and audio.

Who's the Boss?

On location the most important aspect for non-professionals to recognize is that all members of the cast and crew acknowledge who the director is and that his/her authority on location is absolute. Challenges to this authority confuse cast and crew, waste time and ensure poor results. Don't do it.

Directing

Entire lifetimes have been devoted to becoming a merely "good" director. Poor Ed Wood, who died making pictures, never even made it that far. Suffice it to say that the best approach for a non-

professional director is to put talent and crew at ease in an effort to make them feel comfortable. Clearly explain what is required of them, and if there is a difficulty, stop the tape and (calmly) explain again. The director should remember at all times that he/she is dealing with **people** who deserve respect and courtesy. Prima Donna directatorial behavior is a myth and is considered unacceptable, unless very large sums of money are being paid for the privilege of enduring poor direction.

The best performances will be gotten from non-professional talent with a soft approach. The emphasis should be for the talent to act as naturally on-camera as possible. However, the director is in charge on a shoot and all should behave accordingly.

Lighting

There are certain technical considerations regarding lighting for video. Fortunately, most modern camcorders (such as those provided by the Media Center) do most, if not all, of the work for you.

First, be sure there is enough light in the scene for the camcorder to operate (if you are shooting an interior at night it is advisable to turn on all the lights in the room.) Avoid situations where the subject is lit strongly from behind - such as the subject seated in front of a window at daytime. This will confuse the automatic exposure in the camcorder and cause the image to be recorded improperly, usually resulting in the subject appearing as a silhouette. Change the camera angle so that the dominant lighting source is coming from behind the camera, illuminating the front of the subject. Of course, artistic considerations will need to be considered as well, so play around with the lighting setup until you get what you want.

Because different light sources (incandescent and halogen bulbs, fluorescent tubes, sunlight, etc.) each emit light wavelengths in different frequencies, the apparent color of things illuminated with different lighting types may look different. On video, sunlight looks bluish, while incandescent looks more orange; fluorescent lighting tends to look green. Video cameras compensate for this with a feature called "white balance", and this color correction is automatically done on camcorders supplied by the Media Center. However, mixed lighting sources can confuse the circuitry in the camcorder; for this reason it is recommended that mixed lighting sources be avoided. Unless you can't help it, don't illuminate the subject with both sunlight and incandescent light; the camcorder won't know for which to correct. If you are shooting indoors and the sunlight coming through the window looks blue or bluish, the camera has corrected (or color balanced) itself for the incandescent lighting in the room rather than the outdoor sunlight. An easy way to correct this is to either turn off the indoor lights or draw the curtains to block out the sunlight.

Camera Work

Use a tripod when initially setting up the camera. Camera shake is an incredible distraction and, believe it or not, in severe cases has been known to cause motion sickness in some audience members. Be certain the camcorder on the tripod is level. This can be adjusted by lengthening/shortening individual tripod legs.

Look for the most flattering shot of your subject.

Keep the composition simple. Don't include background objects that aren't relevant to the content. The goal here is to minimize distraction.

Keep on-tape camera movements to a minimum. Pans and zooms look good in moderation, but non-professionals rarely have the experience to know when it is appropriate to do so. A well-composed static shot is far more elegant and easier to edit than a series of poorly planned and executed pans and zooms. Further, the equipment available from the school (specifically, the tripod head) is not of the type to produce the best results.

Use the widest angle lens possible. This means that, rather than placing the camera far away from the subject and zooming in, place the camera as close to the subject and zoom out. The shot will look more natural and, if the microphone on the camera is the only one in use, will provide considerably better audio quality.

Audio

Good, clear audio is absolutely essential to an effective presentation, since most of the information delivered to the audience will come from this communication channel. Whenever possible, put a microphone on or near the speaker. The microphones on the camcorders are actually quite good, but the mic location (on the camcorder itself, and therefore some distance from the subject) is usually so far from the speaker that more sound reverberating from around the room enters the mike than that coming directly from the subject.

Microphone Placement

The best method is to use a separate microphone placed as close as possible to the speaker's mouth. If there are multiple speakers a microphone can be placed in a central location. If you cannot place

a microphone near the speaker, then position the camcorder as close to the speaker as possible and use the camera mic.

Video

Be certain to record your tape at the fastest speed (sometimes called two-hour mode, or SP speed). Some camcorders have selectable speeds; the camera operator should check to be sure. The Media Center **cannot** edit tapes shot at any speed other than SP. Camcorders provided by the Media Center are single SP speed so you don't have to worry about this if using our equipment.

Wherever possible, spread out your shots over at least two tapes, organized by the primary material (e.g., interviews) and the "filler" (called B-roll). It is recommended that you record no more than 30 minutes on one cassette. Tape is cheap and using multiple tapes will save you a great deal of time in post-production editing by not forcing you to constantly rewind and fast-forward from beginning to end of tape. (For a reference, it takes approximately five minutes to fast forward from the start to the end of a T-120 VHS tape. If you have to do this twelve times in an editing session then you've wasted an hour.)

Miscellaneous (but very important) bits:

People who are interviewed on tape or otherwise recorded for the project should sign a release form, which grants you the right to use their image and words in your production. For further information or to see an example of our standard release form, stop by the Media Center.

THE POST-PRODUCTION PHASE

Post-production is arguably the most demanding of all three production phases. After the footage has been shot, depending on your requirements, it may need to be edited. If this is the case, considerable planning must be done **before the edit session** to ensure a smooth, efficient session.

Tape Logging

The first step is to log the footage. This involves writing down, in detail, each shot on each tape referenced by the time at which it occurred. This is done by using a playback VCR which reads tape location in hours, minutes and seconds. **DO NOT ATTEMPT TO DO THIS ON A MACHINE WHICH ONLY READS OUT IN FOUR-DIGIT NUMERALS!** These numbers are useless on professional equipment such as that used in the Media Center. The proper procedure is to rewind the tape to the start, zero the real-time counter, and begin to log the events on the tape relative to the timecode indicated on the deck. If your deck does not have this type of readout, the Media center can arrange some provision for you specifically for this purpose. This is a time-consuming process, but is imperative to your familiarity with your footage and the next phase: making an EDL.

Edit Decision List Construction

The Edit Decision List - or EDL - is used to make all editing decisions "off-line". This means that, after the tapes have been logged, the timecode numbers of the desired video segments are written down in sequential order. Be sure to also write in where on-screen graphics, B-roll and additional audio (such as narration or music) will go, as well as anything else that will be in the final edit.

What is being done is the video is being assembled on paper rather than on tape. This is a great time-saver in that the producer/director can put the project together in many ways before he/she even gets to the studio. Upon arrival at the studio, the EDL is given to the editor, who enters the timecode numbers and begins putting the video together, under the direction of the producer/director.

The Media Center's policies regarding editing are these: **No projects will be edited without a completed EDL and final script, and only one student representative from the group will be present during editing. This student must have authority from the group to make decisions relative to the editing of the project. All groups will also deliver to the Media Center a written list of credits. In disputes regarding matters of editing, the decision of the director of the Media Center will be final.**

Note: The University policy on copyright protection is very clear: No tape or other media will be edited or otherwise duplicated by any means which is not the sole intellectual property of the student/student group making the production.

In Conclusion

Producing a video is a painstaking and time consuming endeavor, and will usually require more effort than writing a paper. However, how does one communicate in print the emotion behind a desperate client, or the brutishness of homeless life, or the sobs of a hungry child? Video is the medium of choice for these applications, and as such is particularly appropriate for social work. We hope you use our resources in the pursuit of not only your education, but in the ultimate pursuit of social work: helping others.