



The Ruckus Society

Video Camera Tips Training Manual

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Video Production • Video Witnessing • Issue Promotion

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Batteries & Tape

Charged and ready? Ask yourself what you are going to need for your shoot - ahead of time (see Checklist). Actually turning the camera off and removing the battery will keep them charged a lot longer than having the camera on standby or off with the battery attached. Carry lens paper and clean your lens frequently.

Date & Time / Ends Of Tape

At the beginning of each shooting situation, have the date and time appear for 3 seconds and then get rid of it. Don't leave the date/time on for much longer or it will make the footage less valuable for use later in making videos or using on the news. Another way to establish important facts quickly (without having to press any buttons) is by simply speaking into the camera's microphone (e.g.. "so-and-so is getting arrested for xxx, it is Friday, May 7, 1pm...Union Square ..."), then go back to being quiet and letting the camera record what is happening. For legal value within the court system, in-camera date & time stamps are more credible. Be sure and check that the camera is programed for the current time.

Allow 1 minute to run at the beginning of a new tape before you start recording. Know that the tape at the very beginning and end of your cassette will have more glitches and sound and color irregularities. If you are near the end of your tape, and you like what you are recording - get a new tape.

Keep Your Tapes Organized

Keep a list of what you record and label your tapes promptly. Do it. Make sure you label the date, location, camera person, brief description and tape's number if there is more than one. Keep extra blank tapes on you and ready to use. Keep sensitive (e.g. "The Bust") material separate from other tapes in case they are confiscated or subpoenaed. Try to use professional quality tapes and always keep your tapes clean, dry, cool and away from the sun or extreme heat. Videotapes are extremely fragile things and should be treated delicately.

Frame Up And Establish

As an action, bust-scenario, or any shooting situation gets underway, scan the scene for shots that will establish for viewers where you are, what the issue is, etc. Is there a sign or building or tree or vehicle or tripod, etc. that indicates where you are or what the issue is? Frame up on subjects (i.e. banners, people) so that nothing is cut-off and so that there is not too much empty space. Hold still. Get a good, long shot - 10 seconds or more on each



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important shot. Video editors and journalists will love you if you give them enough to work with and allow them to edit it. Get good "stills" - shots that don't zoom or pan.

Focus on identifying features and pan from them to the action (e.g. the sign near the government building where people are protesting). When you pan across a scene or from one subject to another, move slow and steady, with a consistent panning speed. Take time to start the pan where you want to, and to end where you want to also, without overshooting your ending subject and having to move the camera back. Practice your pan with the camera in the standby mode - maybe pan twice at different speeds, but don't pan too much. The same goes for zooming in and out. Going from a good wide shot of an action area and zooming in (at a steady pace) to a tighter shot of an arrest happening etc. can be a good way to place the smaller scene in context for viewers. But again, don't zoom too frequently. It is easier to find things quickly and your footage will be more stable, if your camera is open wide and not left in a zoom position. Get close to your subjects and let the camera be an objective eye, getting good images without putting the focus on the act of filming itself. And remember, TV viewers aren't browsing over snapshots and they won't have the benefit of the real context. You must establish that for them.

Witness Safely And Effectively

Every action and shooting situation is different; be ready to move fast or to stay still, to let authorities know that they are being filmed or to stay hidden. Consider all your options. Take steps to ensure that you are able to stay on site and document what occurs. Dress appropriately. This might mean warm clothes, rain gear, layers or shorts and t-shirts. Or this may mean looking "mainstream and respectable," so as to attract as little attention to yourself as possible. In some situations you might want to obtain a press pass and present yourself as an "objective" journalist type. In other situations this might entail "setting up a blind" - a place where you can film the action area and remain hidden to authorities.

Get as close to the action or the subject as possible without getting caught or arrested or hurt. If you cannot get close, keep the subject/action framed as tightly and aesthetically as possible by filling the screen. Zooming in is often necessary, but increases the chances of shaking and an "artificial" look.

If the police are wrongfully arresting someone - or whenever you need to identify the police on hand - read off their badge #s into the camera; this is faster than trying to zoom in and out on people that are moving.

Be mentally and physically prepared to remain non-violent in threatening situations and stick to the camera. Stay calm and focused. Having an assistant can be very helpful. They



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can run out hot footage, watch your back while you stare into your viewfinder and look out for important shots that you might be missing.

Don't try to fulfill any other roles when you are the video witness support person. Activists, organizers and legal staff will be needing good video documentation of what occurs. Things may be getting crazy and violence may be happening, but the worse the situation gets, the more important it is for you to record the event on tape. If you will be the only person who can help people in danger, you did not plan your action well. You must remain taping to get that footage out of there and to the news, your legal help, even the cops if they were not involved. Be quiet and be attentive to getting good footage. A runner might help you by running dead batteries to a nearby car with an AC Power Inverter plugged into its cigarette lighter, ready to charge people's batteries.

Civil Disobedience

There will be times when people involved in direct action will be planning on getting arrested. In these situations it may be very helpful to interview them before the arrest and on-site in order to document their reasons for breaking the law. If they will be using a "Necessity Defense" in court (i.e. they had to commit this small crime in order to prevent a larger one), then establishing evidence of their intent will be valuable. Ask them who they are, what the date is, what they are doing here, how important are the issues to them, and what extreme conditions and frustrated attempts to work within the system (if any) have led them to this point in their campaign. Focus on what they perceive to be the larger issues involved. Try to put these interviews on a separate tape in case the whole tape is subpoenaed.

Discretion And Courtesy

There are some things you simply should not tape. Be clear about which actions and situations are meant for the record and which might better be left undocumented. Video tapes can easily become evidence for the police if the videographer is sloppy. Announce to everyone that you have a camera and would like to start taping. When in doubt, ask; and don't take it personally if people are suspicious or hostile to the camera - sometimes people are shy, other times they have very good reasons for not being videotaped. Distinguish between what is important for the action itself and what is nice to have for other purposes (like a documentary).

Sometimes you can get incredible footage by pretending that the camera is not on. Practice taping with the camera in your hand near your hip and pointed up at the person, as if you are simply resting it there. Keep a wide zoom and hold steady, while trying to act "natural." Put electrical tape over the recording indicator light so no one knows it's on. Sometimes the audio alone is priceless.



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Get Good Audio

Sound is so important in good video and typically underestimated in non-professional documentation. If you have some time get samples of police radio, support people talking to authorities, authorities issuing commands, etc. Think of the video camera as a tape recorder also. Editors can sometimes do wonders with just the audio. And, radio shows are often dying for good audio to use.

Two types of microphones are going to greatly enhance the quality of your audio: 1) Unidirectional Microphone - this type of mic. can be pointed at the source of sound that you are aiming for and filter out the sounds you don't want. This type of mic. will also allow an audio monitor to sample violent epithets, comments and conversations that authorities and/or workers might not say with a camera up close. 2) Wireless - Remote/Clip-On Microphone - Primary support people, peace keepers, activists who go inside government buildings, etc. can get precious sound samples and the authorities may never even know that they are being recorded by a camera that is 200 feet away. The clip-on mic. plugs into a small transmitter - the receiver plugs into the camera's mic. jack.

Monitor audio with headphones to be sure things are okay. Buzzing and even radio interference can occur with external microphones (be careful not to cross headphone wires with microphone wires / also try to keep the mic. away from the running/moving parts of your camera).

Built-in mics aren't great. But if you only have your camera mic., get close (real close) to your audio subjects. You have the option of forfeiting the visual all together and placing the camera mic. near your speaker's mouth. You can also shoot from the bottom of their head - (trying to frame-up a nice upward shot while keeping the mic. close) . . .

Tell A Story

If you are filming a banner hang, for example, get good long shots of the banner being painted, of the climbers preparing and climbing, of the banner coming out of their pack, of the people looking up at the banner, of the cops arriving, etc. Don't forget to get people's reactions to what is happening. Now your visual images will tell a story and a skilled editor will be able to set it to music or add narration. Ideally, you will have both video and audio that will tell the story on their own.



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Interviews

When you have some free time, try to interview people as much as possible. People are often reluctant at first, but they soon get used to it and they themselves are usually glad to see it later. Interviews can be a great source of narration or "voice over" material. Get the camera microphone close to their mouth or use a directional mic. for better sound

Get Cutaways (Visuals) Later

When your subject is talking about something, and points to the object they are describing or commenting on, keep the camera on their face as they talk. When they finish, take a few moments to get a clear shot of what they were talking about.

Take Care Of Source Tapes

Now that you've got the great footage - keep it usable! Play it through a clean camera - one time - while making VHS view tapes through a VCR - then put it away. If you must make copies for people, copy from your VHS copy using two VCR's. Save your source tapes for editing with later. Glitches are the videographer's nightmare and they mostly come from the source tapes that have been played & rewound too much, or banged around, etc. . .



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