Guidelines for Shooting Better Video

Organize your digital files or tapes

Organize your movie files and/or label all of your tapes so that you can easily find them when you need them. Pick a label that will make it easy to identify later (date, subject, etc.). If you use several tapes, be sure to label each one. Keep each mini-DV tape in its plastic box to avoid getting dust on the tape.

Shift the little white switch on the tape from record mode to save mode to avoid accidentally recording over a tape. If later you want to record over the tape, move the switch back to record mode.

Prepare to shoot

Make sure your battery is charged and that you have enough tape or memory on your camera's hard drive or flash card. (If you are using a new tape, shoot a little blank tape to avoid any dropouts at the beginning.)

Check your audio. If you have connected an external microphone, plug in a set of headphones to make sure you are getting audio. Whether or not you record with an external mic, check to make sure you can hear your subjects.

Shooting tips

Hold your shots. Holding a shot for 15 seconds or more before moving the camera or zooming in or out is a good rule of thumb. This will ensure that you have good clips to work from if you want to cut between shots.

Avoid excessive panning and zooming. This only makes your video disorienting and harder to watch. Practice zooming in and out slowly and smoothly (which is harder to do on small cameras with tiny controls).

Compose your shots. Try to frame your shot in ways that highlight your subject. Pay attention to the background: Try to shoot against a plain background. Avoid having things appear to come out of your subject's head. If you're shooting toward the light, use the "background light" feature or your subject will appear dark or in silhouette.

Pay attention to the light. Avoid shots of areas of high contrast such as dark and light settings or bright sunlight and shadows. If the sun is directly overhead, hold your hand over the top edge of the camera lens. This will extend the sun screen and prevent the camera from misreading the amount of sunlight.

It's usually best to shoot with the sun or window(s) to your back. Back light is problematic for the automatic exposure feature of the camera. If the camera focuses on the light in the background, the face of the subject will be dark and indistinct. If the camera focuses on the person's face, the background will be washed out in light. If you can't avoid shooting toward the light, use the camera's "back light" setting if possible.

Change angles and perspectives. Shooting everything at eye level or from the same distance can be boring and may not draw viewers' attention to what you consider most important in your video. Try to change point or angle of view frequently. Look for interesting perspectives. Try shots where you hold your camera low and shoot up toward your subject. The small size of digital video cameras makes these shots very easy to take.

If you're shooting children at work, try starting with wide angle shots to establish the context and show their environment. (Perhaps hold the camera above your head to get an aerial view on the scene.) Then move in closer to get shots from over their shoulders, close-ups of their hands at work, low angle shots looking up at them, and then a close-up facial shots.

Move the camera in close to the action. The camera (especially Flip cameras) will pick up better audio this way and your video will be more compelling. Don't talk when you're shooting unless you want to include your voice in your video. The camera will pick up your voice even if it's not pointed directly at you.

Including close up shots provides a more intimate view and makes the viewer feel connected to the subject. This is especially important with video on the Web, because Web viewers use small windows and wide-angle shots won't display much detail.

Taking shots from different perspectives will make it easier when you edit your video to cut between shots. If everything is shot from the same angle, it will appear jumpy between shots.

Use a tripod to get a steady shot, particularly if you're shooting something that is not moving or a formal interview. If you don't have a tripod, find a way to steady your camera such as leaning against a wall or putting the camera on top of a table or stack of books.

If you must shoot without a tripod or other support, shoot a wider angle shot (the wider the focal length, the steadier the shot).