

Top 10 Video Tips

By Pieter de Vries

Wherever you point your camcorder, you are placing a rectangular frame around a particular part of the scene.

You have the choice to record some parts of the scene and to exclude unwanted parts.

Choose to include an object or person in the frame and it becomes important to your audience. Leave it out, and for your viewers, it will never exist. You become totally responsible for what will be on the screen. The edit begins before the card or tape even leaves the camcorder.

To tell your story successfully, you should also be in a position to get the best image and sound that your camcorder can deliver. To some degree, corrections of exposure or white balance can be partially fixed later during the edit, but throw in unimaginative angles, bad composition and poor sequence coverage and it is not going to work.

To avoid disappointing footage you should aim to get things right at this shooting stage.

The aim of these tips is to help you to take your shooting beyond point-and-shoot, to show you fresh ways to think about your video photography.

Your work will never be the same.



Capture the warm colours of the last light

Tip 1: When Not to White Balance

Most video shooters are aware of white balance and what it does. It works on the principle that if white objects in the scene are recorded as “true” white (with no colour tint), then colours in the same scene will also render accurately.

Using a white card as a point of reference, and executing the white balance function, you are essentially instructing the camera to perform the internal colour corrections needed to render the white card as true white, regardless of the colour of the light illuminating it. These settings are then stored in the camera’s internal memory. Doing a white balance will always neutralize unwanted colour tints and give you the ‘right’ colour balance. However, there are exceptions.



Early morning and late afternoon light are good examples. White balancing at these times will “balance out” or neutralize these beautiful early morning colours, correcting them back to what the camera knows is “white” – you’ll be throwing away the very warm early morning colours that make this time of the day so appealing.

Those warmer hues that we see here are flattering, and the low angle of the sun ensures that the light is also soft and diffused – we want to keep this.

Tip 2: Panning to Reveal

If you are planning to take shots of a landscape then there are a few things that can be very useful later in the edit.

Begin by composing a nice shot and, before you hit the record button, check to see if there is another part of that scene where you could start your shot – another part of the scene that could let you pan and reveal and so lead your viewers into the scene that you’ve composed.



Pan from one part of the scene to the other

Pans like this will offer up helpful choices in the edit, so don’t be tempted to stop recording as soon as you arrive at your final glorious composition. Leave a good ten seconds static shot at the end. Later in the edit room you will have a choice to use the pan and reveal shot if you need to gain extended screen time – e.g. for additional narration. The final cut may be better suited to using just a well composed static shot, however, there is no doubt that the editing process is more satisfying when you have a few options.

Tip 3: Auto = Average

Correct exposure is a critical part of shooting great videos – creating images that can have strong impact on your audience. This is why

it's so important to have control over the iris. Using the Auto setting leaves you very little control and could better be known as the Average setting.



Set the iris for the area that is lit and ignore the shadows

Based on what it is being composed in your viewfinder, your camcorder's circuitry takes a stab at finding the best exposure setting, opening or closing the iris based on what it "sees". Sometimes it gets it right, however, at other times the recorded images can be quite forgettable.

Your camcorder does not know, or even care, about mood or the character of what is in the frame so it can only ever hope to deliver little better than average results. In flat front-lit scenes it manages quite well, but beyond that it's video blands-ville.

Take Control: When you take control of the iris, you take control of your story. You gain the ability to saturate colours, to add depth by recording rich blacks, and images with solid blacks make it easy to compose scenes naturally.

For all these reasons it's a good practice to ensure that you have the right exposure at the time of shooting.

Expose for Lit Areas: A way to do this is to set your iris based on a part of the scene that has the strongest light falling on it. Look for the mid tones rather than highlights. You'll be able to use the resulting darker areas

of the composition as a means of creating contrast.

Correct exposure is a critical part of recording images that can transform the ordinary to something far more interesting for your audience.

Tip 4: Lens Perspective

It is important to appreciate how lenses and their fields-of-view work. It helps when you consider that your zoom lens is the equivalent of having a whole bag of fixed focal length lenses – a 10mm, a 25, a 28, a 35 or a 200mm lens.

Why different fields-of-view?: In most sequences there should be a combination of different shots – wide, medium and telephoto. A sequence made up of little more than a swag of wide angle shots taken from similar positions will result a series of awkward jump-cuts which are tricky to piece together.

On the other hand, a series of shots edited from a mix of wide-angle and telephoto along with tripod and hand held shots, will always work brilliantly and your edited sequences will have the potential to affect the emotions of your audience.



Above, a telephoto compressed perspective and right a wide-angle shot

Even if you are not intending to edit your own footage, shooting with a mixture of zoom sizes will make your footage, even if viewed straight from the camera, far more engaging – and you'll never have to change a lens.

Tip 5: Zooming

When to Use & Not to Use the Zoom

Button: Almost all digital video camcorders have a zoom lens. The zoom lens makes available a useful range of focal lengths, all nested neatly into a compact lens built into the camera body. There is also the temptation to over-use it by zooming in and out continuously. Doing that will just devalue your work. The zoom was not designed solely for that reason, and there are ways to use it for your advantage.



Zoom out when you are going to reveal something to your viewers. The end of the zoom should always be more interesting than the start, if not, you lead your audience nowhere.

A tool for composing: During your next outing zoom in and zoom out as much as you like but only when the camera is not recording. Instead, use it as a framing tool. Use it to find a more interesting composition or an unusual or stronger framing. Find your shot, set the zoom's position and then start recording and put your hand anywhere but near the zoom lever.

The mark of a good cinematographer is someone who knows how to zoom but chooses not to.



Tip 6: Hand held – Energising Your Work

The best advice that I can offer on hand held shooting is to use the wider angle portion of the zoom when you take the camera off the tripod. The wider end of the zoom lens gives you minimum camera wobble.

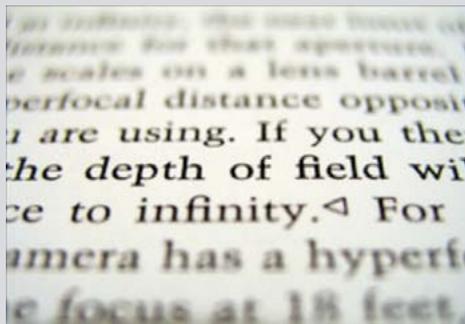
Stay Close & Wide: As you cover action, keep the camera close to your subject and leave the zoom at the wide-angle position. This technique is used to minimize the wobbles because the camera will engage and follow the action, disguising much of the aforementioned. Horizontal oscillations and camera shakes are absorbed in the momentum of the activity in front of the camera.

When you are shooting in the wide screen 16:9 format, jerky movement and camera wobbles can be tough on the audience.

Tip 7: Depth-of-Field

Perfect out-of-focus images: Detail, and lots of it, is what we usually think of when we shoot High Definition video. Is this such a good thing?

Not always, because there is a lot to see in a wide-screen frame and sequences lose impact when they are cluttered with too much unwanted picture information. There are times when it can be worth remembering, as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe said, "Less is More".



Depth-of-Field

Shallow Depth-of-Field: Depth-of-Field (DoF) refers to the distance in front and behind your focused subject that appears to be in acceptable focus. There is always less in focus in front of your focused subject than behind it.

We hear a lot about DoF in the context of video cameras these days, but

Right: The point of focus is set and locked in

Below: Focus holds from front to back



photographers and cinematographers shooting on motion picture film alike, have always loved shallow DoF in certain images as it creates a very pleasing look, blurring or defocusing distracting backgrounds and foregrounds and importantly drawing attention to the focused subject.

DoF and Small Sensors: Compact camcorder formats have almost unlimited depth-of-field. Wide shots result in most things in the scene being in sharp focus, regardless of their distance from the camera.

This includes specks of dust resting on the front element of the lens, to trees on the far horizon. It is simply a technical shortcoming of compact video cameras and it's a challenge to try to use focus in a creative way.

How can I achieve this with my small video camera?

In this case, shallow DoF can be fashioned, partly by the iris setting and partly by magnification of the image. These two parameters work as a clever tag team to get you the best results. Try this:

1. Frame a subject standing close to the camera and make a note of what is in focus behind
2. Move to a position much further away from your subject – back say, ten metres
3. Use your zoom lens to tighten the angle of view, and frame an exact same composition as when the camera was close to the subject

Notice how the background slips nicely out of focus. Notice how the things in the scene appear to compress, seemingly drawing the foreground and background towards each other.

You have just created shallow Depth-of-Field and a far more engaging video image.



Tip 8: Tripod Panning Tip

This is an easy way to get incredibly smooth pans when using the telephoto portion of your zoom. Compose your shot and lock the up & down (tilt) lever of the fluid tripod head. Leave the tripod's panning lever unlocked so that the head is free to turn horizontally.

Instead of using the pan/tilt handle on the tripod head to move the camera, grip both hands around the collar of the fluid head and use it as a fulcrum to turn the camera.



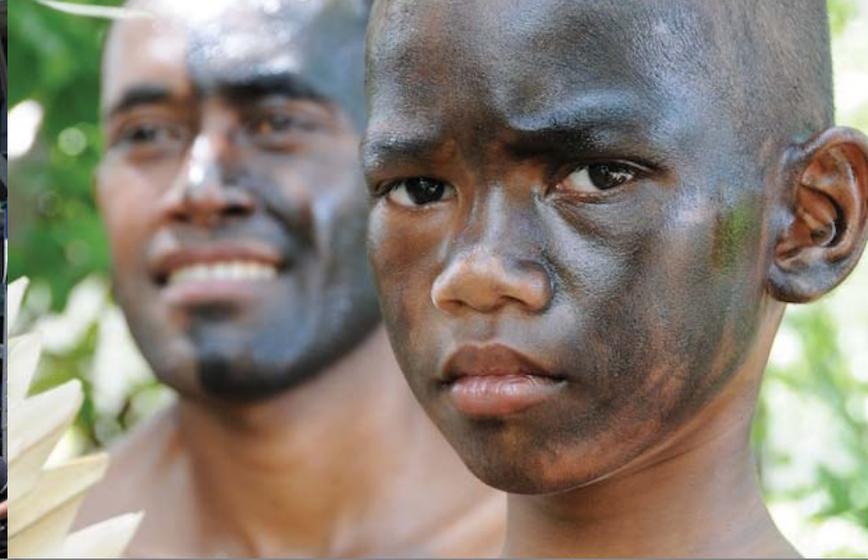
Grip both hands around the collar of the tripod head to turn the camera

Using the tripod head as the fulcrum point takes out the lumps and bumps as you turn the head, making a super smooth professional looking pan. You should be able to bring the move to a steady finish, regardless of the magnification of the image.

Tip 9: Why & When to Change Shutter Settings

In the fully Auto mode the camera circuitry takes care of almost everything - this includes the adjustment of the shutter speed.

A quick shutter speed would be a setting that is faster than 1/50 of a second. Shutter settings faster or slower than 1/50 of a second (the PAL standard) setting can add



Above left: Each video frame is a frozen moment and not always best for video. Above right: Use manual focus to direct the attention of your audience

to your sequences but these speeds will also draw attention to the mechanism of the video camera.

There are, however, times to experiment. Use different shutter speeds to:

- introduce motion blurring using a slow setting (1/12, 1\6 second)
- prepare footage for SloMo shots made in the edit using fast speeds
- add an “edge” or tension to a sequence with very a fast shutter

Bright sunlight & fast shutter speed:

Shooting on a beach, in the snow or in very bright sunshine provides a good example of what can happen when the camcorder is left to do the thinking for you.

In bright conditions cameras automatically close down the iris to reduce the amount of light falling on the sensor. When this alone is not enough, it then automatically selects a faster shutter speed to help achieve this. You may not be aware of it, but when this happens, movement in the frame will appear to have a jerky, staccato look.

Fast shutter: The reason for the appearance of these motion artefacts is that the shutter may have been boosted up to more than 1/1000 of a second so that each video field/frame is captured far more quickly and there is no motion blur to blend the video frames.

Fast shutter speeds are settings that are faster than 1/50 of a second and can be used for an interesting effect so it is best to experiment. The reason for taking control of the shutter speed in manual mode is to keep it fixed at 1/50 of a second.

Slow shutter: Setting the shutter speed to settings below 1/50th of a second delivers an out of the ordinary streaked effect. It’s perfect for portraying some surreal situation

for example, but when over-used in my opinion, it’s just plain irritating.

The slower the shutter speed, the more obvious the effect. Speeds of 1/12th and 1/6th of a second work particularly well but again, use it sparingly.

Tip 10: Focus

Get your hands around the focus ring

Like Auto iris, there are times when using the Auto Focus setting will work just fine. Wide-angle shots using Auto focus are not really that tricky – almost everything from the front glass to the horizon is in focus.

Focus “Hunting”: Auto focus sensors in the camera react in an unpredictable way and attempt to lock-on to closer or more distant objects if they happen to pass through the frame.

This situation causes the lens mechanism to continually shift focus away from the intended subject – a kind of focusing “hunting expedition”, in search of anything to focus on.

By focusing manually, you can now compose shots from positions where people or objects move through the foreground, without having any effect on the parts of the frame that you want to remain locked in sharp focus.

Setting up great edit points: This provides some useful edit points by letting you take advantage of wipes – vehicles, people or any object that briefly “blocks” the frame during a shot.

A technique that pros use is to compose an interesting shot on the telephoto lens and then allow things to pass through the foreground. These soft-focused foreground objects can reveal an ideal moment in your pre-framed shot – you’ll be impressed with how good this can look.



The electronics in the lens are turned off and simply ignore these incidental objects passing through the frame.

Use Auto + Manual: There is an easy way to set focus manually:

1. Zoom in to your subject and allow the lens to focus using Auto Focus.
2. Once it finds correct focus, switch back to manual focus. This ensures that focus is now locked on the subject.
3. Start recording and feel free to let incidental foreground objects move through the frame.

Conclusion

These are the practices that many professionals use every day. Trying out a few of these tips, just a few at a time, will improve your video shooting, even if it’s just a hobby.

Pieter de Vries is one of Australia’s most experienced and well known cameramen. Having worked with his camera in many locations worldwide, he enjoys an international reputation and has photographed many acclaimed television series over his career. .

Pieter continues to develop new training ideas in line with developments in digital technologies.

He holds the industry recognized Certificate 4 qualification in Training and Assessment. To find out about his training courses please visit the training website

<http://www.pieterdevries.com.au>