



A Manual for Shooting Video

A few technical specifications, followed by aesthetic guidelines for those less familiar with shooting street interviews.

I. TECHNICAL SPECS

In brief:

- 1280x720, 29.97, mp4
- Double-headed lavalier, and sometimes a handheld mic (never the built-in camera mic)
- One file per interview if at all possible
- Change filenames to match project name & number
- Upload videos to YouTube
- Update demographics sheet
- Mail files on USB thumb drive

In full - video:

Set your camera to shoot a frame size of 1280x720.

Shoot 30 frames per second, or 29.97 if that's the option. Please do not shoot 60 fps.

Record the files in an mp4 format. Please do not use .mov or any other format.

Almost always, each interview will be a single camera-start to camera-stop. Sometimes the interview gets interrupted, and you can stop recording and then resume with a new camera file. Other times, the interview will run longer than the mp4 format's 30-minute limit, in which case you'll need to restart. But the standard would be one file for one interview.

In full - audio:

Always use a camera with an audio input (or else record sound with a separate device and sync it up before sending it to us).

Almost always use lavaliers (lapel mics with their own power source) - either two lavs plugged into the left and right channels, or a double-headed lav plugged into the stereo input of your camera.

In some cases you'll need to switch to a shotgun or handheld mic. Have it ready.

In no case should you ever use the built-in microphone on the camera. It's not close enough to the speaker's voice, and too close to the researcher's voice in comparison, and picks up too much background noise.

File management:

Copy the files from the camera's SD card onto a USB drive every night after you return from the field.

Change the filenames on the computer, following this pattern:

- Always start the filename with a number. Number your interviews sequentially beginning with 01 (or in some cases you'll be instructed to pick up numbering from where another research team left off). If the interview spans more than one file, give them the same number, then a hyphen, then their order number, e.g. 90-1, 90-2, 90-3.
- When the camera rolls on someone who doesn't want to be photographed but has agreed to be audiotaped, and you've pointed the camera away, put a lower-case letter "a" after the number to signify it's an audio-only interview.
- Next, use a word or abbreviation to identify the project. Sometimes it's the client, sometimes the topic.
- Then, use some kind of identifier to separate your work from that of others working on the same job - usually we write the location we're in.
- Sometimes the type of protocol might be noted - EFT for Ethnographic Field Testing, or any other code your research lead might tell you about.

Here are some examples:

64 TNC Washington EFT

90-2 Hub OH

39a AARP Chicago

40 Appal Williamson WV (*This was for a project on Appalachia*)

You'll be invited to upload video on a YouTube brand account called "Research Video" as a manager. Once you accept the invitation, you should be able to log into your own Google account on YouTube and then "switch account" to Research Video.

Upload the videos with their new filenames, marking them Unlisted. Don't use the default Public setting.

The researcher will ordinarily have a spreadsheet in progress for demographic info. Put the filenames and their YouTube URLs on the sheet each night.

After the shooting trip is complete, copy all the video files onto USB thumb drives and mail to Andy the Director of Research in Rhode Island.

2. AESTHETIC SPECS

These are mainly for novice video shooters, but include useful points for experts as well.

In brief:

- 1: Keep your eye on the light***
- 2: Tell everyone where to stand***
- 3: Don't be fooled by viewfinder data displays***
- 4: Put the microphone close to their mouth***
- 5: Always use a windscreen***
- 6: Review your footage daily***
- 7: Shoot some relevant B-roll***

In full:

Point #1: Keep your eye on the light

These videos are for presentation to the clients, to show them what real people in the world think and say about the subject they are interested in. It is of vital importance that we see the subject's face clearly.

Every time someone agrees to stop for an interview, your job is to look for the light source. Is it the direct sun? The reflection off a bright wall? The light coming off the street? If you're indoors, is it the glow from a nearby window or lamp? Use the existing light source as the lamp that will illuminate the subject's face.

Turn everyone around to orient them in the direction that best lights up the subject's face. Never put the bright light source in the picture.

Don't film someone with their back to a bright window, because when you look at their face, you'll see that the window is lighting up the back of their head, not their face. Don't sit them beside a bright lamp, because only half their face will be lit up - unless there's another lamp filling them in from the other side.

A dark-skinned person will be harder to light than a light-skinned person, and your eye will adjust while the camera will not. You'll have to arrange the setup so that the contrast between dark skin and the background favors the dark skin.

You might also have to manually adjust the exposure setting. Make sure you have a camera that allows you to do this, and watch for the need to do it. The point is we want to see the subject's face clearly.

Point #2: Tell everyone where to stand

Ask the subject to please turn around this way or that so you can see their face better.

The researcher who's paying attention will get that they need to move as well, so they're always standing next to the camera, never off to the side. If the researcher doesn't do this,

tell him or her to come over to where you are and stand right next to you. If they move away during the interview, bring them back, subtly but firmly.

The point is, it's never a good presentation to the client to show them a picture of someone's ear. When the researcher stands next to the camera, the subject naturally looks toward the camera. And it's the researcher who needs to move, not the camera - you've already aligned camera and subject for best light.

Sometimes at odds with best light requirements is the additional need to make sure there's no egregiously distracting background content, and at the same time that there is background content that shows some context - it's important to demonstrate to the client that we're talking with real people in real places, in cities, towns, homes and offices across the country. So it's best if we can see contextual background whenever possible.

On that note, you should also frequently change the background. Don't just set up a tripod and leave it standing where the background will always be the same. Usually you and the researcher are moving around a city or neighborhood, but even if you stay in one location for a while, be sure to vary the backgrounds. Optimally you would never repeat exactly. Often you can just move a few feet over to get something new.

The best way to be mobile, both in terms of varying the background and also maintaining good composition while the subject moves around during the interview, is to forego the clunky static tripod and use a monopod.

It's not always possible to hit all the points, and sometimes standing a person up against a brick wall is what you have to do. The primary importance is on seeing the person's face clearly, from the front.

If the interview gets going and you realize the setup is bad and you can see what to do to improve it, you have the authority to interrupt and reset the arrangement. Obviously it's best not to need to, but it's worse to have bad or unusable video. "I just need to make an adjustment, sorry - could you just take a half step this way? There's a shadow / flashing sign / bright spot in the background - thanks, go ahead now."

Point #3: Don't be fooled by viewfinder data displays

It's easy for the beginner to frame the picture so the subject's face is clearly displayed in the viewfinder, only to discover later that the numbers and info arranged around the viewfinder don't show up in the final image, and you've got a badly framed picture, with too much headroom or too far off to the left or right. Be aware that oftentimes the subject will need to be partially covered by the numbers in-camera. This is why it's important to look at your footage each day on a computer or TV screen.

Emulate television news. You're doing just what a TV news crew would do. Frame the person with the kind of headroom you see on TV.

Point #4: Put the microphone close to their mouth

It's a noisy world out there, and even more important than seeing someone's face clearly is hearing their voice clearly. This is why we always use a lavalier microphone, and clip it close.

Note which way the person will be facing while they talk to the researcher - clip the microphone to that side of their collar. You don't want them spending the whole interview turned away from the microphone.

Best practice is to use a double-headed lavalier, clipping one mic to the researcher, for two reasons: So the transcribers can hear the questions being asked, which makes for clearer reading by the analysts later; and so we can have the option of including the question in the final video if we want, which sometimes makes for clearer understanding by the client.

An alternative to the double lav is two lavs plugged into a mono-to-stereo Y-adapter.

Occasionally you'll talk to two subjects at once. If it's noisy enough, you might decide to give each of them a mic, and let the researcher's voice get lost in the noise.

If it's not terribly noisy, you can get away with clipping the mic to one person's sleeve or shoulder, and it will pick up both voices adequately.

In many cases, you'll talk to more than two people, or to someone who won't want a lav attached, or to someone who's moving around so that a lav is impractical. In those cases, it's important to have a handheld shotgun mic handy that you can switch to quickly and easily.

Be aware of intrusive background noise like construction or music. Music in the vicinity can be a serious distraction from the interview. Best move away from it.

Under no circumstances should you rely on the built-in camera mic. It's too far from the subject, too close to the researcher by comparison, picks up too much handling noise, and is never adequately wind-proofed.

It's important to always listen with earbuds or earphones so you know what you're getting.

Point #5: Always use a windscreen

Always use at least a foam windscreen on your lavs. Even better, and essential in a windy location, would be fuzzy windjammers. They're expensive, so you'll want to keep track of them, but they make many a Topos interview actually usable. Nothing ruins sound like a breeze.

And again, even more important than seeing the subject's face clearly is hearing their voice clearly.

Point #6: Review your footage daily

Optimally on the big screen TV in your hotel room, but at least on your computer screen - not just on the camera's viewfinder.

See what it looks like without the data readouts. See what the exposure looks like. See what the framing looks like. Listen to the sound you got, both the voice and the background.

You'll get beaten by circumstances sometimes. It happens. Each and every interview is a new game. But you can improve your odds by reviewing what you got in relation to what you did to get it.

Point #7: Shoot some relevant B-roll

Sometimes a subject won't want to be on camera, but they'll let you record audio, so you'll point the camera away while you tape. For those interviews, it will be necessary to shoot video of other things to watch while we listen to them.

Sometimes you can shoot relevant pictures right while they're talking. But mostly you've got to do it in between interviews.

Also, it's often requested that we include B-roll even when there aren't any audio-only interviews.

It would be hard to have too much B-roll. It would be very easy to have not nearly enough.

Take video of where you are. Hold for at least 20 seconds, or 30. Take pictures that relate in some way to the subject of the study.

Take pictures of random people on the sidewalks, and try to include the kind of people who relate to the study. We did a project on ageism in the workplace - I took video of older people, and people on the job. We did a project on prostitution - I took video of couples, and of solo women, just to provide food for thought while listening to the talk. We did a study on a carbon tax - I took pictures of hordes of cars in parking lots, and people getting gas, and blue skies and mountains. Often our studies are about the role of government - I take pictures of the flag, and skyscrapers, and random city commerce. Listen to what people are saying in the interviews, and find things in the environment that thematically reflect their ideas. Take good long clips of those things. The interviewer will wait for you if you're efficient about it.

Also take video of the place you're in, to illustrate the point that these are people from this particular part of the country. You're hearing from the people of this particular city, this particular region, who live in this particular environment.

Finally, be sure occasionally to take some video from a few steps back to observe the interaction between interviewer and subject. This can be done after the interview is completed, the mic removed and a bit of post-interview chatting is taking place.