

“Like two years of film school in 248 pages.”

—STEVEN PRESSFIELD, author of
The Legend of Bagger Vance and *The War of Art*

**START
HERE!**

HOW TO
**SHOOT
VIDEO**
THAT
**DOESN'T
SUCK**

BY STEVE STOCKMAN

*For Debbie, who by now probably deserves
something more like a statue*

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The Opposite of “Good” Is “Off”

Great video is a communication tool of unparalleled impact. It can change history, inspire movements, share and amplify emotions, and build community.

Bad video gets turned off.

Nobody watches bad video. Not your employees, even if you tell them to. Not your parents, even if you send them “the cutest” videos of your kids.

Faced with the choice of watching your terrible video or something good they can get with the touch of a button or mouse, no reasonable person will watch yours—unless you’re standing over them going, “Watch this. You’ll love it!” Then they’ll grit their teeth and mumble, “Oh. Yeah, this is great.” But trust me, if you’d sent them a link, they’d have been gone in under 20 seconds. Admit it—you would too.

Even mediocre video doesn’t stand a chance, because we live in a world of *great* video. From Hollywood to Bollywood, pros crank out video that’s technically perfect and reasonably entertaining. When you scan YouTube, the most-viewed videos are the best of more than one billion served by

Nobody watches bad video unless you’re standing over them going, “watch this!”

the site every day. The ones that float to the top of that enormous pile have to be pretty damn good.

That's why the opposite of "Good" is "Off."

If your video's not Good, it's gone. And so is all your effort (and time and money). Like an unheard falling tree, it makes no sound—except the sound of you whining that nobody watched your video. Which is why I suggest that the first and highest principle of creating video is to make one that doesn't suck. Like any Hollywood director worth her paycheck, your most important job is to entertain your audience.

"But . . . but . . . but . . ." Yes, I can hear you gasping from here. "But," you want to say, "what about the ideas? What about training my employees? What about promoting my business? What about my daughter's birthday party? I'm making this video for a *reason*, not just to *entertain!*"

If your video's not Good, it's gone. And so is all your effort (and time and money). Like an unheard falling tree, it makes no sound—except the sound of you whining.

Of course you are. Films are made out of passion for the story or the subject matter. We shoot our daughter's birthday party because we love her and want a record of when she was young; we record a speech because we're moved by the speaker; we create a Web video about stamps because it's our passion; we put together a funny video about work

to help build a stronger team; we shoot our friend who did the marathon in a wheelchair because we want to inspire; we interview our 100-year-old grandmother because we want to remember.

Those are the reasons we start a video project. But at some point, once begun, we have to consider our audience. They need to be intrigued, led, and taken care of. A poorly done video, one that bores people to the point of ejection, is worse than no video at all.

If your video doesn't get watched, you have no chance to inspire. No chance to inform, or build your team, or share your passion. In fact, you may *uninspire* people. Want proof? Check out a YouTube video that's been up for a while but has less than 100 views. They are, universally, horrible. They may have been born out of passion, but they were executed ineptly. Nobody will watch them except guilt-ridden family and friends—and maybe not even them. You don't want that to happen to you.

Luckily, stories about inspiration, success, nostalgia, humor, and passion *are* entertaining—as long as you don't push your audience away by giving them video that sucks! You're inspired. That's a great start. To serve that inspiration, you have to tell your story well. You have to entertain.

Video as a Second Language

Video is the new language, and most of us are illiterate. It's not that we don't understand video. We've spent years watching movies, television, and YouTube. We know how the camera angles should look and, at least unconsciously, what they mean. We know how the stories go, whether the guy and girl belong together, or when the monster will jump out.

We *understand* video better than any humans that have ever lived. Most of us just don't *speak* it very well.

Learning how to make really effective video is like learning to speak a second language: You have to learn not just what to say but how what you say will be received by others. When visiting France, you don't want to say something you think means "Can you tell me what tonight's dessert is?" and find out you just asked the waiter why his clothes are so ugly.

In the language of video, camera angles and movement have meaning. You don't want to playback an interview with your 100-year-old great-aunt and discover that by hand-holding the camera and positioning her by the window so she was looking up at you past the lens, you made her look like a creepy, silhouetted serial killer.

Some people think that having great equipment will save them. And it's true that today's cameras do more, better, than any video cameras in history. But like your computer, your video camera is a tool, not a storyteller. It only speaks video as well as you do.

Knowing how to work a video camera doesn't make you a filmmaker any more than knowing how to cut with a scalpel makes you a brain surgeon. As in the PowerPoint Revolution before it—and the Desktop Publishing Revolution before that—good equipment is helpful but not sufficient to create good output. Some people focus on the equipment, not what they do with it. They're so busy worrying about wires and pixels and computer software that they never think about how to make something an audience will want to watch.

Here's the good news: You already understand video language. Learning to speak it just takes awareness, a little thought, and some practice. And here's the really good news: The people we're trying to communicate with are a lot like us. If we can create video *we* really like, odds are they'll like it too. And vice versa.

As a bona fide Hollywood director (don't be too impressed; you can't swing a cat without hitting one where I live in L.A.), I see a lot of bad video. Friends send me their stuff, looking for ways to improve. I've even been hired by companies to watch somebody else shoot a video and consult on how they can make it better. I've taught hundreds of people how to shoot better video. Now I'm going to teach you.

How to Use This Book

How to Shoot Video That Doesn't Suck shows you how to think about your video communication in terms of how the audience will respond. You'll learn how to plan, shoot, and edit with the story in mind, and how each small decision you make impacts your finished video.

All the chapters are short, and each focuses on a single, self-contained concept. You can open the book anywhere and find one idea that will make a big difference in the quality of your video. The more you try, the better you get. It's okay to skip around, but you may want to

Making great video is an art, but it's also a craft. Remember that everyone's videos suck when they first start out. Mine did. I bet Steven Spielberg's did too.

KICKING CASUAL VIDEO UP A NOTCH

You and three friends have Super Bowl tickets. It's the morning of. You point the camera and say something cool like, "Yo, Jerry! You're going to the Super Bowl!" To which Jerry, already on his third beer, smiles and says, "Dude!" And fist-bumps the camera.

Congratulations. You've just created today's equivalent of the squinty wave in 1950s home movies. You know, the shot where Aunt Betty would walk right up to the 8mm windup film camera, squint into the incredibly bright lights mounted on it, show her teeth, and wave like she hadn't seen another human being in a decade.

Back then, being able to make your own film—to see yourself on the silver screen—was astonishing. The kind of astonishing thing you'd see at the "GE Future Living" Pavilion at the 1954 State Fair. Merely being captured on film was enough to entertain.

That quaint time when just being on video was thrill enough is now long past. As a

culture, we have officially grown out of lingering by electronics store display windows because there—THERE!—was us, on TV via closed-circuit camera! Now we give monitors the same quick glance we'd give a mirror as we go by.

We expect to be captured on video. We know that there are cameras in the elevator. We're unsurprised when a friend whips out a smart phone and starts shooting. While you can still hold people's attention with videos of themselves, even that fascination won't last as long as it used to if your video is dull.

If you're the one who finds herself behind the camera at most events, it's time to grow out of "look at the camera and wave" videography. Ask yourself—how interesting is this, really?

If what you're pointing at doesn't rise above "look and wave," keep it short. Practice hitting that "stop" button as soon as you realize that all Jerry's going to say is "Dude!"

read straight through. If you do, you'll get a complete course on how to make better video.

Reading is one thing, doing is another. You'll find a "Try This" section in most chapters with tips or exercises you can use to make your next video better. You can also go to the book's website, www.VideoThatDoesntSuck.com, for more information and links to videos. You can ask questions, which I'll answer on the site's blog, and look for tips from fellow videographers.

Making great video is an art, but it's also a craft. The more you practice, the better you get. Remember that everyone's videos suck when they first start out. Mine did. I bet Steven Spielberg's did too. A little reading, a little practice, and you may never suck again.

What's *Not* in This Book

This book is not about equipment. It includes nothing about how cameras and computers work. No lines of resolution, 1080i or 1080p, disk drive or tape, Sony or Panasonic, Final Cut or Avid. No technical knowledge is required, nor is it provided. Nothing we'll talk about requires jargon, special equipment, or mastery of computer minutiae.

Today, almost any video camera on the market does the work of an entire film crew: lighting, sound, focus, steady movement—even editing. This book assumes that you have a camera—whether it's a pocket video camera, a cell phone, or a high-end HD video cam—and you know how to get it to record pictures and possibly sound. It also assumes that if you want to, you'll find a way to edit—or at least cut out the bad parts.

Great video comes from thinking humans, not equipment. This book will show you how to shift your focus to how the video *works*. What story do you have to tell? How do you make it speak to your audience? How do you suck them in and give them an experience they'll remember?

You don't need to learn how to make your camera shoot in "poster-vision." You need to learn how to make your video entertain.

12 Easy Ways to Make Your Video Better Now

If you're pulling out your video camera now and don't have time to read the whole book before you shoot, here are 12 tips that will instantly improve your video. For more detail, flip to the complete chapter for each topic. More quick tips for special kinds of videos (like vacation and business videos) start on page 157.

1. Think in shots.

There was a man sitting near me at my kids' cello recital last month. He had his camera on a tripod in front of him. At the start of the recital, he pressed record. For the next 45 minutes, he swung his camera back and forth, back and forth across the assembled cellists. Back and forth as they played their various solo and ensemble pieces, as they changed chairs, as the audience applauded. There are problems with this approach to video, not least of which is motion sickness for viewers.

When you're physically present at a concert, you can look anywhere you want. You can look at audience members. You can look up at the carvings on the ceiling. You can read the program or the *Sports Illustrated* you snuck in or, if it's

not too dark and your wife won't notice, your iPhone. In short, there's an entire world of visual excitement to be sought out.

Watching a video, you can look only where the camera looks. If the camera looks at the same thing for too long or doesn't look where *you'd* want to, you're bored. That's why they cover the Super Bowl with 27 different cameras—every few seconds, BANG, a different shot. And each shot focuses on a new piece of information: Here's the snap, here's who has the ball now, here's a defender coming in from the right, here's the quarterback pulling back to throw, and CUT to a wide receiver catching it on the first-down line. Each shot has a point, and cutting between them gives you a lot of information without boring you.

From now on, think in shots. Shoot deliberately. Every time you point the camera, who are you pointing it at? What are they doing? Is it interesting? When it's not, cut and find something else to shoot. Don't run the camera nonstop. Even if you're going to edit later, it's a bad habit that will only cost you time when you have to watch tons of thoughtless, unusable footage.

For more on this, see "Think in Shots," page 41.

2. Don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes.

In the movies, on the big screen, we're impressed by giant vistas. The stunning Old West, where cacti and cowboys roam, or a panorama of stars and planets as we float through the vacuum of space. These amazing landscapes look great in IMAX, okay on our 52-inch plasma screens, and like tiny, blurry garbage on a Droid.

Best you skip more than a second or two of big, wide shots. Which is okay, because here on planet video, we're more likely to be shooting people anyway. People who communicate half of everything they're saying with their mouths and the other half with their eyes. Miss the eyes, and you miss half the message.

A Soccer Game in Short Shots



Parents on the sidelines watching the game, and CUT to:



Your daughter as the ref drops the ball and CUT to:



A shot of her making the big play.

Think about the shifty lawyer on the news whose mouth proclaims his client's innocence but whose demeanor somehow makes you feel he isn't. It's in his eyes. Or in a drama, when she says, "Yes, of course I love you," but you and the hero know she doesn't—it's the eyes again. That's why TV (and Web video even more so) is a medium of close-ups.

The subtle facial patterns that make up more than half of the communication between humans vanish if you're too far away. Your video will improve 200 percent instantly if you always stay close enough to your subjects to clearly see the whites of their eyes.

For more on this, read the aptly titled "Don't Shoot Until You See the Whites of Their Eyes," page 109.

3. Keep your shots under 10 seconds long.

If you watch great videos, movies, or television, you'll notice that, with some deliberate exceptions, nobody uses shots that are more than 10 seconds long. Most are much shorter. These short shots are part of modern film language.

Shooting shorter shots gives your video more impact. At your daughter's next soccer

game, instead of turning on the camera and leaving it running, try this: A shot of the crowd of parents watching the game, and CUT. The team taking the field, and CUT. Your daughter as the ref drops the ball, and CUT. A quick shot of her making a play, and CUT. Continue for 20 more shots.

In 20 years, when you play the footage at her wedding, the three minutes of short shots you've compiled will richly recall a time and a place with more information and feeling than if you had let the shot drag on.

For more on keeping your shots short as you shoot them, see "Keep Your Shots Short," page 105. For more on editing, see "Editing 101," page 196.

4. Zoom with your feet.

Networks cover baseball with cameras all over the ballpark. The cameras have huge lenses that can zoom in on the pitcher's nostrils from high above home plate. It looks great. And all of these long-zooming cameras are attached to huge platforms by the smoothest system of ball bearings and gears modern engineering can design. That's because a little jostle or bump on a camera with a huge zoom lens looks like an earthquake on TV. If the cameras weren't bolted down, shaking would make the game unwatchable. I could draw you a complicated diagram showing that the width of an angle increases over distance, but all you really need to know is $10\times$ zoom = $10\times$ shakier.

To keep your camera from shaking, you could put it on a tripod instead of holding it. But for better video, don't use the zoom on your camera at all.

To get a great close-up, set your lens all the way wide (i.e., no zoom), walk yourself physically closer to your subject, then shoot. When you stay on the wide end of the zoom lens, minor shaking becomes virtually invisible.

Note regarding the "digital zoom": Don't. Ever. Use. It. So-called digital zooms don't see more than the camera's lens normally does. Instead, a computer chip in your camera blows up the picture, reducing its quality. The more you blow it up, the worse it looks.

For more on this, see "Zoom with Your Feet," page 107.

5. Stand still! Stop fidgeting! And no zooming during shots!

Pros get to move the camera. You will too after you become a pro—or even after you’ve practiced enough to reach “skilled amateur” status.

Until then, treat your video camera like a still camera. Point the lens, take your finger off the zoom button, look at the LCD screen to make sure your picture is good, and press “start.” Stop when you’ve got the shot, and repeat. The rhythm you’re going for is Move, Point, Shoot, Stop—Move, Point, Shoot, Stop.

The result will be a series of well-framed shots in which the motion of the subject catches and holds our attention, without the distraction of the frame careening all over the place.

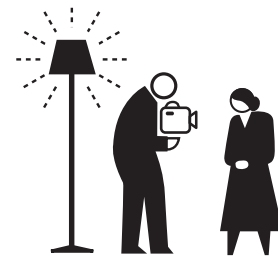
For more about moving the camera (or not), see “Set the Shot and Hold It,” page 111.

6. Keep the light behind you.

Modern video cameras, from cell phones to HD, adjust automatically for light. If the light’s too bright, they close down the lens to let less in. Normally, no problem for you or the video camera. Your outdoor shots in bright light look great, and so do your indoor shots by candlelight.

The camera gets confused when it has to deal with multiple light levels in the same shot, though. It has only one lens—if it closes that lens to keep out light that’s too bright, something else in the frame that was darker to begin with gets really dark. Most video cameras expose for the biggest, brightest thing in the frame. If you put your grandmother in front of a window at 2 P.M., the camera will show you the beautiful scene outside the window and only a black cutout silhouette of grandma.

To prevent her from looking like a refugee from the witness protection program,



Light the subject’s face, not yours.

keep the light at your back, or as I like to say, KTLAYB. (Just kidding. No acronyms will be used in this book [or “NAWBUITB”].) If the light is in front of the lens, it’s always brighter than the person you’re shooting, and they’ll be dark. If you keep the light behind you, it will fall on your subject, and they’ll be the brightest thing in the frame. And we’ll be able to see them.

If you’re outside in the daytime and your subjects are squinting, try moving so that the sun hits them at an angle instead of straight on. That will help.

For more on this, proceed to “See the Light,” page 118.

7. Turn off the camera’s digital effects.

There is no digital video effect that your camera can do that you should allow it to do. Ever. If you shoot nice clean video, you can always add a dorky effect like posterization later with one of many computer editing programs designed to do it. But if you shoot posterized video, you can never take it off. You’re stuck with it forever. Did I mention it was dorky?

Despite what the box at the store would have you believe, digital effects don’t give your camera special powers. Instead they take the high-quality picture your camera is capable of at its best and degrade it with digital zoom or “night-vision” or some other ghastly thing they thought up in marketing to make their list of features look longer.

Shoot all your footage normally, always. If you feel the need to “night-vision,” “night-vision” it in your computer’s editing program. That way, you’ll still have the original, nice-looking footage just in case.

For more on this, see “Turn Off Your Camera’s Digital Effects,” page 104.

8. Focus on what interests you. Really interests you.

I recently watched a video blog post that featured an orchestra whose only instruments were iPhones. The players—it looked like there were about 20 of

them—had special gloves with speakers on their wrists. Pretty cool idea, no? And very visual—a big circle of musicians playing iPhones.

The problem was the video. It started with a very wide shot of the group and then wavered, as if unsure where to look. Occasionally it veered off to one part of the group, then another, with no apparent motivating goal. I felt adrift. There were things I wanted to see—like a close-up of the glove speakers, or what the players were doing on their iPhone screens. But that never happened. I felt like the author of the video had no real interest in the subject, so he didn't know what to film. I wanted to be taken on a tour, shown what was so interesting about the orchestra. Instead, my curiosity went unrequited as the shots moved from moment to moment without any real intent.

Every video gets better when you apply an organizing principle, and it almost doesn't matter what that principle is. Suppose the shooter of this video had become very interested in one player and showed us everything about her: the concentration on her face, how she moved her arms, what she was doing on her screen. Or suppose the video had focused on the audience's reaction, showing their faces as they listened, what amazed them, and interviewed them after the show. Or the video could have focused on the music and how it's made—what do the scores look like for an iPhone symphony? Who is the conductor, and what is he doing while they play? How does the music get played?

Find something to focus on—a person or an angle of interest—and your video will improve instantly.

For more on this, see “Show Us Your Passion, and We Will Be Fascinated,” page 26.

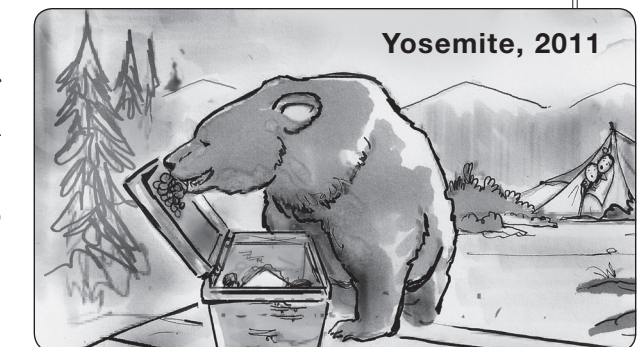
9. Don't use amateurish titles.

Unless you have a real design sense (you'll know because everyone in middle school wanted to work with you on group projects involving posters), stay away from titles unless they're really necessary.

When you *do* use titles, keep them both short and simple in wording. Use an attractive, plain font—perhaps a nice Helvetica. Keep the title as small as can be easily read. Put it on the top or bottom third of the screen. Use white over dark backgrounds or black over light—no shadows, no outline, no underline, no motion, no glows. No poster-vision. If your background is too mid-bright for the type to read in either black or white, try putting a simple gray bar behind it.

Keep titles on screen just a beat longer than it takes you to read them out loud. As in all things video, strive for simple but elegant.

For more on graphics for your video, go to “Easy on the Graphics,” page 223.



10. Keep your video short.

When it comes to video, the old show-business expression “Always leave them wanting more” applies. Anything worth saying in video is worth saying shorter. TV commercials tell a complete story, entertain us, and sell us—all in 30 seconds. Benjamin Button lives his entire life on screen, backward, in 2 hours and 46 minutes (not a long time for an entire life, but still some might suggest it could have been done in 2:20).

The record of your mother's second birthday party probably exists as either a grainy two-minute silent home movie or six photographs stuck in an album. Yet if you look at those photos now, you get a real feeling for the time and place. The home movie is short because 8mm film came in two-minute rolls back in those days, but just because you *can* shoot for an hour and a half on your video camera doesn't mean you *should*. You don't need 10 minutes to

show us a birthday party. A sales video longer than three minutes? Unless it's for Victoria's Secret and directed by Martin Scorsese, don't even think about it. And even then, it had better be good.

The best way to make your video shorter is to aim for short when you start. The second best way is to internalize another old showbiz adage: When in doubt, cut it out.

See "Keep It Short: The Rubbermaid Rule" (page 49) and "When in Doubt, Cut It Out" (page 212) for more on this.

11. Use an external microphone.

Most video cameras adjust their own sound levels. That means they take whatever they hear and boost it to a constant, listenable level. Unfortunately, if they hear crowd noise around you, they boost that. Traffic noise, sirens—it all gets boosted.

In fact, if the camera mic hears nothing, it boosts that too. In an interview where the subject is too far from the mic, the camera will crank up every hint of sound between you and them, creating a big, echoey overlay of room noise.

If you're as close to your subject as you should be, this is less of a problem. To make it no problem at all, head to Best Buy and plunk down \$25 for a terrific clip-on mic. Plug the wire end into your camera, clip the mic end to your subject's shirt, and your sound problems are over.

You can also buy a boom mic, which requires an assistant's help. The assistant holds the mic very close to the subject, just outside of your camera's shot. Noise problem solved.

Further ruminations on sound quality are featured in "Make Sound Decisions" (page 152).

12. Take the quality pledge.

Please rise, raise your right hand, and read aloud in front of witnesses:

"I, [state your name], promise not to inflict lame video on my friends, relatives, customers, or complete strangers who might find it on YouTube because I put something about sex in the title.

I hereby promise that I will always keep the microphone very close to the people talking or use an external mic if I'm too far away. If the picture is too dark to see, I won't use it. If I left my thumb in front of the lens, I won't use that shot.

If the person I'm shooting is so far away you can't even see them, I promise not to make anyone watch—not even my mother—for more than 10 seconds.

Unless it's footage I accidentally took of a once-in-a-lifetime thing, like my son catching Alex Rodriguez's record-breaking 610th home run or a thief breaking into my car, I promise to keep jerky, hard-to-follow video entirely to myself, erasing it where possible.

I pledge to conform to a higher technical standard, realizing that making someone watch bad video is disrespectful, that in most cases they would chew off their leg to get away from it, and that technical problems will keep them from appreciating the funny/cute/beneficial/talented/shocking thing I'm trying to share with them in the first place.

In short, I pledge to think about how to make quality video for my audience at the same time as I'm thinking about getting my point across. I won't make anyone watch anything so crappy-looking that I wouldn't watch it voluntarily if they handed it to me."

You may be seated.

“Stockman skips past all the technical crap and cuts right to the chase:
How do you shoot a video somebody else will want to watch?”

—**DAVID A. GOODMAN**, executive producer/head writer of *Family Guy*

“Steve is one of the smartest media minds in the game.
This book is the perfect gift for any would-be filmmaker.”

—**ROB BARNETT**, founder/CEO of
www.MyDamnChannel.com

Whether you're filming a child's birthday party, business promo, video for your college or job application, or the next (you can hope) YouTube sensation, here is how to make your video not just better, but great. Even with a cellphone. Packed with techniques, tips, exercises, and insights, this lively book will help you develop the critical skill of entertaining a viewer. **Because today, nobody has time to watch bad video—if it's not good, it's “off.”**

STEVE STOCKMAN is a writer and director of hundreds of commercials, and a slew of short films, music videos, and TV shows. He wrote and directed the award-winning 2007 MGM feature film *Two Weeks*, starring Sally Field and Ben Chaplin. His website is www.stevestockman.com.

77 Ways to Make Your Video Better NOW!

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- Entertain or die, **PAGE 20**
- Make every picture tell the story, **PAGE 46**
- Why a bit of planning makes all the difference, **PAGE 69**
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- Don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes, **PAGE 109**
- Amateurs move aimlessly, pros stand still, **PAGE 115**
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