HOW TO
SHOOT
VIDEO
THAT
DOESN'T
SUCK

BY STEVE STOCKMAN

Have you had this experience? You assign your class a video project, but the resulting videos are torture to sit through. Too long, not well shot, or just plain boring.

Sound familiar?

It turns out that shooting video, like writing, painting, or getting your homework in on time, is an art in itself. Students who are expected to perform without any instruction in the art can be counted on to perform...um...unevenly.

Fortunately, my five-hour boot camp will dramatically improve the quality of your students' video in five easy classroom lessons. Don't have five hours to devote to video? Try the first one or two exercises and you'll still see a change. Almost any amount of high-quality classroom video instruction makes a HUGE difference!

Do you want more video lessons? Are you perhaps teaching a video class? *How to Shoot Video That Doesn't Suck* has 248 pages of simple concepts and easy exercises you can share with your class. It's being used now as a text in middle schools, high schools, and colleges across the country. See the last page for a bulk order form and big discounts.

No budget for a book (yet)? You and your students can get more free tips, tricks, sample videos, and lessons at SteveStockman.com.

How to Conduct Your Own Video Boot Camp

Lessons are in priority order. If you can teach only one, start with hour one, and so on. Even one or two lessons will help. Heck, even reading the concepts and exercises to the class will help. Practicing your drill sergeant moves in front of the mirror at home is optional.

Notes Before We Begin

1) All of these exercises are SILENT.
Worrying about pictures and what people say at the same time is too much for the beginning filmmaker. And since kids already know how to talk, these exercises focus on telling a story through pictures. It will be easy enough for them to add words later.

2) Encourage students to keep their video short.
You'll get better video when you assign students short films between 90 and 120 SECONDS long and stick strictly to that limit. The shorter films will be more watchable because (by definition) when you cut the garbage, only the good stuff is left. And if they're not better, at least they'll be shorter.

3) Materials:
Hour 1: Requires NO additional materials.
Hours 2, 3, and 4: You'll want to have video cameras—one for every two or three students. Older tape-driven cameras are fine (and because they are now worthless relics, may be easy to borrow from homes or obtained as donations). Still cameras that shoot video or cell phones work, too. Are you sensing a theme? These lessons are not about equipment. They're about how to shoot great video.

You'll want to be able to play back at least some of the videos on a monitor so that the rest of the class can see and discuss, which means you may need cables and/or a computer. For small group discussion, playback on the cameras themselves will be sufficient.

Hour 5: An unedited movie (perhaps from an earlier lesson) and a computer equipped with iMovie, Quicktime, or other simple editing program. Whatever comes free with your operating system will be fine. You'll need to practice with it enough to be able to CUT, COPY, and PASTE footage fluidly.

Telling a Story

Lesson Objective: Almost all great videos tell a story, which means they have a Hero, a Beginning, a Middle, and an End.

Stripped to its essentials, a story has four elements: a hero, a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning of any story introduces us to the hero and what situation he's in. The middle tells what happens to the hero next. The end is how it all turns out.

Story structure makes video easier to understand. You don't have to work it all out in detail, and the result doesn't have to be a feature film script. Without any extra work, practicing with the rhythm of story will help you shoot better video.

The Comic Strip Exercise will get your group used to thinking about stories in terms of the hero and the beginning, middle, and end.

Divide your group into teams of two to six people. You'll want to end up with no more than four or five groups, since the exercise takes a little time.

You're going to give the teams a series of setups—everyone gets the same setup at once (for example, "First-Date Disaster"). Each team will make up its own story using that setup and then present it to the entire group.

The goal is to tell a complete story—with a hero, beginning, middle, and end—in three sequential tableaus, or "freeze-frames," like a comic strip.

There's no movement in each frame and no talking. They're just making "pictures." Each group starts in "Frame 1" frozen position, then moves to "Frame 2," and then to "Frame 3." When each group has presented its story, you give the entire group a new setup.

Here are the rules:
1) You give all the groups the same setup, at the same time. Setups should be simple and open-ended but imply a place and some sort of action. Here are a few to get you started:
  • The world's worst doctor
  • Trouble at a birthday party
  • A chance meeting
  • The not-so-great outdoors
  • First-date disaster
  • Kids at play

2) Everyone must play. Not all players need to be in every frame, but in each presentation, everyone in the group must be in at least one frame.

3) Give the groups about 15 minutes to plan and rehearse their first story. It gets easier the more they do this, so you can reduce the time as the groups get the hang of it.

4) At the end of planning, all the groups come together. You designate a "stage" area and have each group present its comic strip.

5) After all groups have presented, you may want to invite feedback. If one or two were especially good, why did we like them so much? Have any of the groups done a particularly good job establishing the hero?

What groups made the beginning, middle, or end work best? Why?

6) Repeat. By the end of an hour, your class will be masters of the basic story form. This will dramatically improve their ability to not bore others with their video.

Think in Shots

Lesson Objective: Understanding that film is made up of little bitty pieces cut together.

You never see a TV show that's one continuous "roll." Instead, TV and movies are put together in "shots"—short clips of film that tell one part of the story.

A detective yells at the bad guy. CUT to a shot of the bad guy in the interrogation room, trying not to look guilty. CUT to the lieutenant watching from behind the one-way glass, grimacing as the criminal lies. Three shots, each under 10 seconds, each telling part of a story.

Shots are like sentences, with a noun and a verb. "Sarah" is not a shot—it's a photograph of a person named Sarah. "Sarah pours coffee" is a shot. A woman is in motion, taking an action. Noun and verb. When the action is over, we CUT the shot.

Divide the class into teams of two or three, each with a camera. Have them switch off shooting shots. One person works for about five minutes, then the next, and so on.

Review shots with the group to see if they have a noun and verb in them.

It's OK if some of the shots run a little long, as long as the students can identify the part they'd keep in a real video.

TRY THIS

Subject + Action = Shot

Start thinking of your shots in a complete sentence—noun, verb—just like your English teacher taught you in fourth grade. The noun is the hero of the shot, the action verb is the story.

Treat Your Video Camera Like a Still Camera

Lesson Objective: Don't move the camera while you're shooting. Stay close to your subjects.

Again the group will work in pairs. One is the subject, one the shooter. Set a watch or cell phone to time five minutes.

In that time, the shooter shoots as many different three- to five-second static shots of her subject as she can. See this video as an example. The subject can move, the camera can't.

As your students frame their shots, have them think about—and change—things like distance, height, framing, angle of the camera (what if you slant it?), detail (what if you shot just one leaf?), and point of view (where would the camera be if you were the subject, or a dog, or a fly, etc.).

Have them get into the habit of thinking angles and feeling what they mean. This will be hard at first. Remind them there are no "wrong" shots—if they find one that doesn't work they should move! Not all the shots in the example video are great. But they're all less boring than another straight-on, eye-level shot.

**See this sample video at:
stevestockman.com/filming-angle-improves-video/**

LESSON 4

The Three-Shot Movie

Lesson Objective: Learning to tell a story on film.

This is a repeat of Lesson 1. Only instead of doing the exercise as a freeze-frame, we're going to shoot three-shot movies. Each group gets a camera, and this time there is movement in each shot.

Review each three-shot movie with the class for story elements (hero, beginning, middle, and end) camera angles, and noun/verb in each shot.

LESSON 5

Editing 101: Cut, Copy, Paste

Lesson Objective: Cutting bad shots makes video better. Always.

Set up a demonstration in the classroom using iMovie or similarly simple editing software.

You'll need to bring in a five-minute documentary video you've shot recently. (By "documentary," I mean stuff you shot at a real-life event, not something staged. Something around school, perhaps, or you could shoot your class learning the other exercises!) You'll want this footage to be loose and unedited, with many overlong or simply lame shots.

Using your handy computer-editing program, cut each shot in your video into a short shot as follows:

Every time the camera focuses our attention on a new hero and action, consider that a new shot—even if the camera never cuts. If you're on two people talking for 45 seconds, that's one shot. If you're on one person while he talks for 25 seconds then move to the other one while she talks, that's two shots.

Find in each shot some sort of definite action on the part of the subject (i.e., "A baby smiles" or "Jerry opens the door").

Cut each shot to be less than 10 seconds long. Cut so that the action is clear, then get out. If the action is "Jim takes a sip," make sure Jim doesn't also put the cup down and scratch his ear.

Make sure each shot is interesting to you.

Once you've cut all your shots, trim the whole video to two minutes or less by reviewing and then deleting your least-favorite shots.

Like magic, a boring five-minute video becomes a more "professional"-looking 90-second video that keeps your interest. Discuss with the class.

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.

Steve tweets wittily about video @stevestockman.

His website for lots of cool free video stuff: stevestockman.com.

You can even find him on Facebook, although he's not sure why you would care when you can find him everywhere else too: facebook.com/stevestockmanauthor.

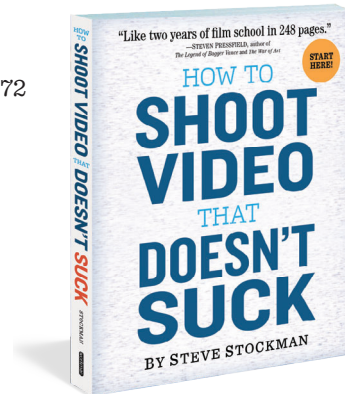Steve speaks and conducts video workshops at conferences, schools, and companies. Contact: Speakersbureau@workman.com.

To order, contact:

Michael Rockliff
phone: (212) 614-7572 or (800) 722-7202, x7572
fax: (800) 344-3482
email: mrockliff@workman.com

Special terms, if any:

1–9 assorted books 20%
10–23 assorted books 30%
24 & up 46%
In all cases, we pay the freight.

"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

workman