

## *Do's & Don'ts of Video Conferencing*

Since the explosion of the use of video conferencing and webinars with the COVID-19 pandemic, I am getting weary of seeing all the mistakes being made using this technology. Whether it is *Zoom*, *Cisco Webex*, *Google Hangouts*, *Skype*, or *Microsoft Teams*, users can be much more effective if they learn how to use them better. This confusion is to be expected, as most are not trained in their use, as we are in field of distance education. We use more sophisticated tools designed for learning like *Blackboard Collaborate*, but the principles are mostly the same for both.

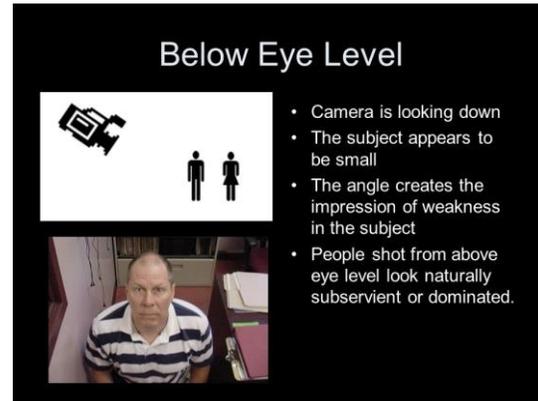
There are a lot of factors that need to be considered to present yourself well online, and while this is not an exhaustive article, it will keep you from making the major mistakes.

### *Webcam*

We see all kind camera angles in use. On most laptops, the camera is looking up (so you see a lot of ceiling). This is good if you don't mind people looking up your nose and examining your dental work.



The other poor position is the webcam looking down upon the subject (presenter) from some shelf, which minimizes their stature ([watch](#) Dr. Fauci's testimony from above). He cannot easily make eye contact with that angle.



Positioning webcams on top of the monitor is OK in most instances, as long as the camera is at **eye level** when you are seated. If you are using a laptop you may have to put some books or a small box under it to get up to that level.

Webcams have different resolutions and many now have High Definition (HD) (1280 x 720 pixels) as a standard feature, which is fine for most purposes. FULL HD (1920 x 1080p) cams which are more expensive are for more professional uses. Higher resolutions use more bandwidth, though. Going below HD 720, you may get a grainier image, poor color, or focus. Use your webcam's settings to fine tune its options for your purposes.

### *Background*

We see all kinds of backgrounds behind the presenter, the most common being bookshelves or framed artwork or photos, and different rooms are used, from the study, living room, kitchen, porch etc. The rule here is the same as in public speaking, do not to let anything distract from the presenter, or else the viewer will be studying the background and not be fully listening to the presenter's message. Whatever background you use, make sure it is neat and clean. Too often we see files and paperwork strewn over a desk, collage of unrelated objects on the bookshelf, or a living room with cushions out of place. All of this attracts the viewer's attention.

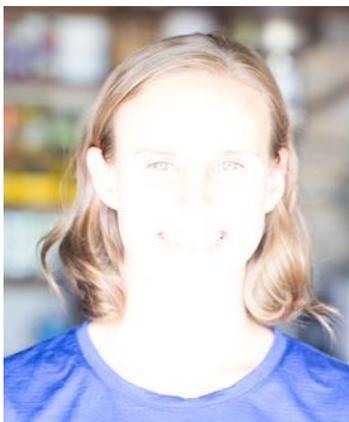
The background also includes others in your household including kids coming running into your space for attention or barking dogs. See that these potential interruptions are addressed before going on air.

### Lighting

We have all seen poorly lit or shadowy subjects or super bright backgrounds like sun-filled windows that eclipse the presenter, as in the image below.



The time of day makes a difference and whether you are using natural or artificial light. Natural light always gives truer colors, as fluorescent lights, for instance, tend to give a greenish tint. The principle here is the proper illumination of the subject's facial features. Single light sources should never be used behind, above, or to the side of a presenter, as they will overexpose the camera (making the face too dark), or cast distracting shadows, respectfully. You don't want to go to the other extreme, either, of bleaching them out (too much light).



At night you can use a lamp directly *behind* the camera to make sure your face is fully visible but not so much that you squint. You can make your computer screen white to act as a soft lamp (see instructions [here](#) for *Windows 10*). You can also control brightness with the software settings that came with your webcam.

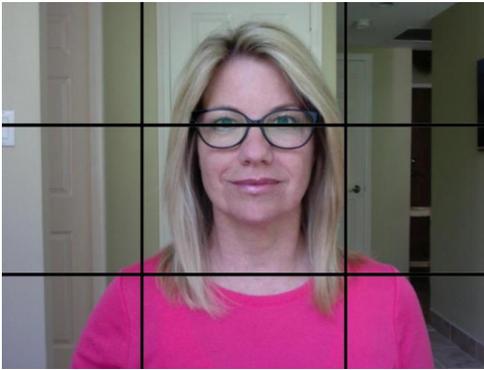
After you have made your adjustments, look at your preview box to see if illumination is adequate before you go live.

### Presenter

There are a few areas for presenters to consider, starting with where to sit. Many times, we see subjects too close to the camera and, like looking into a Christmas tree bulb, the features closest to the camera become exaggerated, especially, one's nose.



The rule here is the same as the ergo dynamic principle for how far to sit away from the monitor screen, so as not to strain your eyes. Make a fist and straighten and extend your arm until it touches the camera—that is the best distance and where your shoulders should be visible. Going too far away can diminish the sense of intimacy needed for good communication and make it harder to pick up your audio. Use the tic-tac-toe diagram below to position your body correctly, with the eyes in the top line and a little space above your head.



Now, where should you be looking? We see people looking all over the place, but mostly at the screen, as if they are talking to it because that is where they see the other participants. We see this same behavior in a *PowerPoint* presentation in a classroom where the teacher talks to screen instead of the audience—very impersonal. Only actors in a movie are not allowed to look at the camera. **Look directly into the camera lens.** Watch the newscasters on TV—they always do this. To remind you, you can make a little paper face and put it around your webcam.

Another consideration is that people do not always dress appropriately for the situation. If you are having a board meeting you may not have to wear a suite, but certainly business attire including a tie for men would be appropriate, as would a salesman making an online pitch. In other more familiar business situations, dress can be less formal, but, of course, not pajamas or shirtless. The principle here is that is OK to dress down one level than you would face-to-face. Don't forget to comb your hair and make sure your glasses are not crooked.

Keep your talking points nearby so you can glance down at them and back up again like the nightly newscaster does on TV to keep your presentation fluid and coherent, without having to read a script to your listeners.

When you are not speaking switch off your video feed so as to not distract others or have them catching you not paying attention—like checking your smartphone messages.

### *Audio*

Audio quality can vary widely and some so poor you can't understand what the person is saying, or it sounds like they are in a deep well producing echoes. So, if you can pick your room, use one with curtains, rugs, and fabric furniture to absorb sound. Hard floors and bare walls are echo chambers.

Laptops and some webcams generally have poor microphones that sound tinny. If you can't afford a standalone microphone, it is best to use a headset with its boom mic. Remember, some headsets have a mute button that may be on, if you are wondering why people are not hearing you.

Check your audio levels before you go into your session to make sure it is loud enough. Count to ten into the mic and watch the volume bar which should be around half way or more on the scale, like the example below.



Keep your mic on mute when you are not speaking so it does not pick up distracting noises like dogs, kids, passing vehicles, and sirens. Put your phone in 'airplane mode' so it doesn't ring.

### *Shared Presentation Materials*

Often, we need to share a document, diagram, image, or *PowerPoint* slides. Make sure these materials are prepared and opened (or in a handy folder) so you do not have to fumble or waste time searching for them. For *PowerPoint* slides make sure all text is at least 24 font size so viewers can read them easily. Use your cursor to point to the area you are speaking about so people can follow you. Too many times, I see a presenter whose cursor is not near what s/he is speaking about which causes confusion.

If you emailed the files to the participants beforehand, make sure you tell them what page/section you are on so they can follow along, or highlight the passage you are referring to.

When you are sharing your desktop and materials, make sure that all documents and images that are **not** related to your presentation are closed or hidden. Just like physical backgrounds, viewers will start reading your desktop collage.

### *Application Features*

If you are a moderator, make sure that you familiarize yourself with the application features and how to operate them *before* going live, including handing over presentation rights to other participants (and taking them back).

Set some ground rules about how participants can communicate including using the sidebar chat and 'raising their hand' protocols. Beforehand, you could even email them or link them to a quick-guide/handout to show them the application's user features and how to operate them. While they are similar in different applications, they are not all in the same place or opened in the same way.

If the meeting starts at 11:00 am, don't access the session at 10:58 am. Get in around ten minutes before, as many times you may need to download something, or something is not working properly (video or audio) and you can get help before the session starts.

### *Other Participants*

If there are more than four or so participants, then anyone not speaking should shut off their videos (and mute their mics) or else they could become distractions to the main presenter. There is no reason that you *must* use video at all for your meeting, but many times it helps us follow the speaker better--if they are not causing any distractions by doing so.

Now that you have become sensitized to the many *faux pas* of video conferencing--if they are jumping out at you as you watch your next webinar—you will know that you have learned something from this piece. Even Dr. Fauci has become more professional in his John Hopkins University [commencement speech](#).

*Be an attraction—not a distraction.*

