Coursera Best Practices - Presenting on Video

Unless you are a trained actor, being in front of a camera is awkward, scary, and generally uncomfortable. It's an artificial environment where you must work hard to look, sound, and feel natural. Even the most seasoned classroom instructor can feel artificial when the lens is trained upon her.

The biggest difference between teaching your classes in person and teaching an on-camera course is that you lose the crucial element of real-time feedback from an engaged audience. Looking in a camera lens will never give you the same energy as looking into the eyes of an eager student. The tips below are intended to help you overcome this while keeping your energy high and making a remote learner feel as if you are speaking directly to him and his needs.

Practice Is Essential

This can not be stressed enough. Shooting videos is an arduous process. If you haven't practiced your material that you developed specifically for your Coursera course ahead of time, it can easily take twice as long as you anticipate to finish the recordings.

Preparation (aka pre-production)

Make sure you're familiar with your talking points or script so you sound as natural as possible and not unsure or halting. Remember, memorized content often sounds stiff. Try to sound conversational whether you do scripts or talking points.

- Scripts can be good to help you think through each point you want to make. However, it can feel constraining. If you prefer to use them, be sure to read each sentence out loud as you are writing it so that you can flag any potential pitfalls like alliteration, hard-to-pronounce names, or long sentences. Don't be afraid to veer from your script in the moment if it feels natural.

- If you prefer using talking points, make sure you have enough prompts to keep your flow clear and your structure solid. Off-topic digressions can often leave the learner confused or frustrated.

Do a video practice session if at all possible. Standing in front of a camera is a naturally intimidating situation. Taking an hour to practice in a real situation, and then reviewing your performance with a critical eye, can help improve your course.

If you can't schedule a separate practice session for logistical reasons, try reshooting your first segments at the end of the day. For example, if your goal is to complete 5 videos in one day, plan to shoot 1 through 5 as normal, and then reshoot 1 and 2 as you will have naturally relaxed a bit and gotten more comfortable with the camera.

Expect that some lectures will require a few recording takes, and plan for this extra time in the shooting schedule.

Makeup & Wardrobe

We all know the camera adds pounds. However, now that high-definition has become standard the camera is now also picking up many of our flaws and imperfections. Ultimately, the biggest takeaway in this section is that you should do what feels most comfortable to you.

Makeup

Whether to wear makeup or not is a personal choice. Some people feel uncomfortable with it, and some feel that they need it to feel confident. Wearing makeup is not a requirement, but below we offer some suggestions on ways to minimize shine and create a neutral palette.

- It's a good idea to wear some kind of powder or primer on hand to avoid shininess, which can happen if you have a tendency to perspire. There are many types available in a range of price points. Be sure to consult a professional if you have questions or skin sensitivities or allergies.

Sample Primers

Sample Powder

- If makeup makes you uncomfortable, you can also use blotting papers to help absorb excess oil and moisture.

Sample Blotting Papers

Wardrobe

Wear what makes you feel comfortable and confident! This should be about you as a teacher; you shouldn't feel like you are in a costume that doesn't reflect who you truly are.

Try wearing vibrant solid colors - everyone looks good in blue on camera!

- Jewel tones and pastels work nicely; neons can sometimes translate oddly on camera.

- Stay away from solid black or solid white, as it can tend to blend into the background.

- If you are using a green screen or similar technique, be sure to avoid any clothes that have the same hue, as it will be distracting.

- Avoid tight patterns (like tiny stripes, polka dots, checks), as they can cause a "moire" (or buzzing) effect on the camera. An example of moire is below.

- Large patterns such as paisleys, large florals, bolder stripes, etc. are ok.

- If you aren't sure whether your shirt will moire, do a camera test prior to your shooting day if possible. If that isn't possible, bring a few changes of clothes and test on the day.

Be mindful of the kind of jewelry you wear.

- Avoid wearing big necklaces as they have a tendency to bump against the microphone. This tends to be truer for longer necklaces; some shorter, collar area necklaces can be ok.

- Jangly bracelets will also be picked up on the microphone if you are moving your hands around causing the bracelets to clink together.

- Best practice is to put the microphone on first to optimize for audio, determine where that microphone sits, and adjust your accessories accordingly.

- Avoid wearing shirts with prominent logos (unless they are the logo of your university/department) to avoid any potential legal issues.

Production & Performance

- Be yourself! You are among the top instructors in the world. Don't be afraid to let your personality shine through.

- It is ok, and even highly encouraged, that you show enthusiasm for your topics. Take a look at some of these examples to see professors who visibly demonstrate their love of their subject. Examples: New Models of Business in Society, Learning How to Learn, How Things Work, Calculus One

- Look directly at the camera to create a connection with the learner, increasing their feelings of engagement. Reading off of notes in your lap, looking off to the side at a separate teleprompter, or otherwise skewing your eyeline can be distracting to the viewer. We have seen higher engagement ratings on courses where the instructor is looking directly at the camera.

- Consider posting pictures of real students in the recording room, at eye level and behind the camera, or even recruiting a small live audience, as a reminder to speak directly to learners.

- Create a high-quality welcome video for the course, and an introductory video for each module or section. The goal of these videos should be to generate excitement, rather than to teach specific concepts. You can share personal experiences, provide examples of real world applications, and highlight key learning objectives to pique learner interest and motivation.

- Consider filming welcome and introductory videos in a special location (e.g., an outdoor location, or a lab or other workspace relevant to the course content). This can help enliven the video content, breaking up the monotony of a single location.

- If the lesson includes dynamic writing on a tablet or slides, plan and rehearse carefully to ensure proper use of space, clear labels, and legible text.

- Use first and second-person pronouns in lieu of third-person or passive expressions (e.g., replace The first step is... with Your first step should be... or As a first step, I will...).

- Try shooting your videos standing up instead of sitting down. In addition to providing a more flattering silhouette, it can inject more energy into your voice and personality, particularly towards the end of a long day.

- If you sneeze, cough, misspeak, etc. at any point, pause and then restart the sentence right before the issue occurred to create a clean edit point.

- If you feel your energy flagging, take a short break. Have a snack, drink some water, do some jumping jacks, walk around the block, etc. Taking your mind off the intensity of the process, even for a moment, can do wonders for your performance.

Screensharing

Many of our instructors share their screens during their courses, to show slides, graphics, websites, product interfaces, etc. It is important to keep in mind a few things when doing this:

- As you click through, be sure to keep the pace at a rate that allows the viewer to see everything you are doing.

- Consider turning on an app like Mousepose to make your arrow/pointer more prominent.

- Always screen capture on the biggest monitor you have access to; doing screen capture on a laptop can result in poor-quality visuals that are difficult to see.

- Camtasia is a good product to use when recording anything on your computer screen.

- Camtasia's canvas settings should be set to the highest quality. Do this by going to: Edit -->Adjust Canvas. Make sure the Preset is at 1080p HD (1920x1080) under the Widescreen setting.

- To export, go to Share-->Export and be sure it is exporting as a .mp4 file.

Using a Teleprompter

Teleprompters are occasionally helpful if you have a lot of specific facts or data you need to remember. If you are uncomfortable in front of the camera, they can be a lifeline. However, they can be tricky to use in a way that feels natural and not forced.

- Write your script and practice it extensively, as noted above. This will help you feel less rote or memorized when reading from the teleprompter.

- Practice with the teleprompter extensively before shooting your final videos to determine the correct speed adjustment to your specific speaking pace. Also, practice using different font sizes and review the videos to determine the correct one for you.

- Be sure the teleprompter is adjusted correctly to create a direct eyeline for you in the camera.

- When reviewing the practice videos, look closely at your eye movement to evaluate what speed and font size minimizes the fact that you are reading.

- Teleprompters can be expensive. This one is an example that is relatively inexpensive, integrates with Android or Apple tablets, can attach to many tripods, and works with a wide variety of cameras.

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