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How to Prepare for an Online Video Meeting

During the recent lockdowns due to COVID-19, meetings, conferences, and court hearings have moved online. In this online environment, presenting at meetings poses new challenges and creates new opportunities. This paper addresses how to prepare for an online meeting and considers:

- Choosing your space
- Choosing your camera
- Choosing your microphone
- Dressing for success
- How to use Zoom, and
- How to use Microsoft Teams

Think of a video meeting as a TV show—you are the director, producer, writer, actor, and stagehand. You get to choose everything, and by the time you finish reading this paper, your set and presentation are going to look amazing.

Choose your space

The first factor to consider when preparing for an online meeting is your space. Where are you going to be presenting from? Whether it is at home, work, or some other location, you need to find a room that is:

- presentable
- quiet, and
- well lit

When you choose your space, you want a room that is presentable. By that, I mean that you need a room that is clean, organized, and presents the image you want. A common example we currently see in the news media is a home office or library; but if you don't have a room you can dedicate, that's alright. You just need a space that looks good on camera. It doesn't need to be a whole room—just a wall and a few feet around you. Think of this space as your stage.

This brings up the first advantage to presenting online. Just as in a theater, you get to build the set and choose what people see. For example, think about what will appear behind you on the wall. Do you want the framed photo of the 1993 Dallas Cowboys behind you? If you're a sportscaster in Dallas, then you may. If you are an attorney appearing in court in Philadelphia, you probably don't. Instead of showing up to a conference room or hotel ballroom for a seminar, where you have zero input into the layout, when you present from home you get to choose exactly what

will appear on camera. Arrange art on the wall behind you, move a bookshelf to create a library feel, hang up your degrees. You get to set the stage—use it to your advantage.

Do not present from a messy bedroom, with an unmade bed, and a pile of laundry in the corner. While most of us actually live like that, you don't have to show it on camera. Shove the mess in a corner and clear out a 10-foot square for your stage. Also, don't use virtual backgrounds. Zoom, Teams, Facetime, and other programs allow you to project an image behind you. Don't do it. It not only looks fake, the green screen effect is of poor quality and will glitch as you move.

Make sure the room is quiet. A room with a lot of windows may be good for lighting, but it is not good for sound quality (not only because of outside noise, but sound bounces off glass and creates an echo). The ideal room is small, carpeted, with window coverings that allow you to control the light, pictures on the wall to absorb sound, and a door that locks. If you live on a busy road, move to the other side of the house or apartment where it's quieter. If you have children and pets, make sure they can't walk in and disrupt your presentation (i.e. lock the door).

You want a room that is well lit, but with the light coming from the right location. Think of a TV show or newsroom set—the lights are behind the camera and face the speaker. If there is a window in the room, face the window and put the camera between you and the window. If you have the window behind you, you will appear washed out and in shadow. If the light in the room is poor, consider using a lamp and put it behind the camera. Try different types of light bulbs and see if a softer light is better or maybe you need a yellow or white light. Light bulbs are cheap, and you can get a lot of options for \$20. The key is to test the lighting beforehand so you can make adjustments.

Choose your camera

The second factor to consider is your camera. Most people have a laptop/tablet with a built-in webcam, a phone with a camera, or an external webcam. At the moment, external webcams are difficult to find because everyone bought all the webcams when they had to start presenting in meetings online. Take an inventory of your options. Call work and see what they have. Ask your friends and family if they have something you can borrow. But if you're like me, you don't own a webcam and all you have is either equipment at work or your personal devices.

Once you know your options, research each device and find out the video quality. A decent webcam shoots video at 1080p. For example, my iPhone 6 camera shoots video at 1080p, but my laptop camera is 720p (despite the laptop being many years newer). An iPhone X has an even better camera that can shoot video in Ultra HD 4k (or 4,000p). If you have the budget, [for around \\$400 plus](#) you can buy a DSLR camera, which can create the "bokeh effect." This is where the front image (you) appears in focus and the background is slightly blurred. Next time you watch TV, look at how the people in the frame are in focus while the background is out of focus. That is what you get with a high-end, bokeh effect look. Newer phones are capable of creating this effect as well.

If you don't have an external HD webcam or DSLR camera, the next best option will be your phone or laptop camera. It is likely that your phone has a higher quality camera than your laptop. If so, you can download an app that allows you to use your phone as an external webcam ([EpocCam HD](#) is a good example (it has both free and pay options), but there are other options as well). The advantage of using your phone as a webcam, besides the superior resolution, is that it allows you to have your camera in one location and your laptop screen in another.

We have all seen examples of people looking down at their laptop while on a video call, and it's not a flattering effect. Because a laptop cannot be more than an arm's length away in order to use it, you are limited in how far away the camera can be. The result is that the camera can only capture your face and maybe your shoulders. Even worse, if the laptop is below eye level, you look down at it and create that unflattering look. Built in laptop cameras also limit your ability to look away from the computer without looking like you're distracted or disinterested.

Using your phone on a tripod, however, is a great, cheap option that allows you a lot of flexibility in how you frame your shot. Think back to our TV show example. Your phone is the camera. Your laptop can now be anywhere you want, and you can move the camera far enough back that you can show your desk or table instead of just your face. You can also adjust the height of the tripod, so the camera is at eye level. A [\\$30 tripod](#) will dramatically improve the look of your setup and give you more options for how you frame your shot.

Choose your microphone

The third factor is your microphone. Most webcams (and all cell phones) have a built-in microphone, but if you are 10 feet away it sounds like a bad speaker phone. And if people can't hear or understand you, they will not listen to you.

As with the camera options, there are a lot of expensive microphones you can purchase. The more high-end microphones range from \$100 up and look similar to an [old timey radio microphone](#). Depending on what you are presenting, and how often, an expensive microphone may be worth the money. But the cheap solution is a [clip-on microphone](#) that costs about \$25. It connects to your computer via a USB plug and clips onto your shirt or coat lapel. The sound quality is far superior to whatever built-in microphone came with your device and is well worth the cost. This allows you to be more than a few feet from the camera, so you can sit behind a table or podium and frame your shot better, and still be heard by the audience.

Another option is a headset or headphones. Apple AirPods connect via Bluetooth and the sound quality is decent. In a pinch, the free headphones that come with most cell phones also have a built-in microphone that you can use. Finally, you can go full aviator with a headset/microphone combination. This is really a matter of personal preference, but I think the clip-on microphone looks the most professional and is by far the cheapest option. It also has some of the best sound quality, aside from the more expensive, professional microphones.

Thoughts on pants

The fourth factor is to dress appropriately. We've all been told that people judge how we dress, and that is no less a truism in a video meeting. There are examples abound of people not wearing pants during a video meeting (or even on [national television](#)) and suddenly they need to stand up and we see they are wearing workout shorts. So please, wear pants. You may not need to wear shoes, but you must wear pants. Putting on pants is not any harder than putting on gym shorts. Just because you're presenting from home doesn't mean you get to dress like you're taking the dog for a walk (even though you just did). Whether you need a suit and tie or jeans and button-down depends on your audience. But wear pants.

Program options

Now that your stage is set, you have the camera, lighting and sound setup, the kids don't have a key to the door, and you're wearing pants, the next step is doing the actual presenting. You need to know what program you are going to use. Zoom and Microsoft Teams are the two most common online video programs I have encountered, and I will give you tips for each one.

Zoom:

Zoom is a very basic video conference program. When you first log on, Zoom will prompt you to test your equipment. Do this. Test the speaker, microphone, and camera. If you are using an external device (i.e. a clip-on microphone and webcam), you may need to switch to these devices because Zoom will automatically use your built-in microphone and camera. There are a handful of options on Zoom and you should go through them and test what works best for you.

Zoom has limited ways to present information via video. The most basic way is to share your screen, which is the green button on the bottom of the Zoom window. The other option is under the Advanced tab of Share Screen. The Advanced tab allows you to share a portion of your screen, which, when selected, brings up an outlined box. You can adjust the size and shape of the box and move it around your screen. If you only want to show a portion of a PDF document or zoom in and out, this is a great option. It allows you a lot more control than sharing your whole screen and is great for PDFs.

Microsoft Teams:

While Zoom is only a video chat program, Teams has a whole range of functions, incorporates other Microsoft Office products, and is designed for people to collaborate on a project. Like Zoom, Teams has a "share screen" option that is straight forward. Teams also allows you to open Office programs within Teams. However, Teams has a glitch. If you open a slideshow via Teams (i.e. within the Teams program you can open Power Point) it can change the formatting of the slides. The better option is to open Power Point on its own and share your screen. Unfortunately, Teams does not have an option to share a portion of your screen like Zoom.

Conclusion

The key to a great online meeting is spending the time setting up your space and testing your equipment. You need to give yourself time to test your setup, make sure it works, and that it looks presentable. While you can easily spend \$1,000 on equipment, you don't need to have the fanciest technology to look professional. A new microphone, a good camera, and a clean room will put you on top. And you're wearing pants, which is the real victory.