Essentials of Producing Audio/visual Interviews

The follow guide introduces some of the key processes in producing professional standard audio/visual material, with a focus on shooting or recording one-on-one interviews. You will find a mixture of tips for you to read here, and links to useful websites or videos. We strongly encourage you to follow up with these links.

Be aware that many of the sites refer to professional equipment, such as tripods and lighting. The principles we have highlighted still apply even if you don’t have professional equipment. We have also included some tips for creating quality audio/visual material with personal electronic devices, such as smartphones or tablets, throughout this resource.

Planning the Elements of your Interview Piece

After you have secured a person to interview, and before any recording takes place, you should have a clear idea of what the final product will look or sound like.

The major elements of an audio/visual interview are: an introduction and a sign-off, the body containing the actual interview, context audio and footage, and extra audio and/or music.

Include a Brief Introduction

This will provide context for the audience. Cover: who you are interviewing (“the talent”), the location of your interview, and what the interview covers.

By recording your talent introducing themselves, and the work they do, you will know exactly what to include in your introductory narration. Be sure as well to get the spelling and pronunciation of the information correct before you leave.

The introduction should be no more than 30 seconds, including your voice and any background music or ambient noise – but more on that soon.

Include a Sign-off

Similarly, a sign-off will help provide closure and structure for your interview. This does not need to be more than a few seconds, and can even be incorporated into your interview when you thank your talent for their time. No more than 5 seconds needs to be spent on a sign-off.

If you are including any narration in your piece, it is important to write your script “for the ear”, rather than as you would for a purely written communication. Write the introduction to your talent, and then read it aloud. How does it sound? How easy was it to say? Chances are if you’ve written for the “eye” and not for a listening audience, it will sound unnatural even to you. You can make your content sound better by:

- Using a conversational tone
- Writing short sentences and avoiding a lot of commas
- Using simple terminology, rather than very formal or ‘academic’ style wording
- Writing in the active voice
• Using contractions, again so the tone is less formal
• Describing or referring to things using simple language

Context Material

Don’t forget to allot some time for collecting context material, either before or after the interview. This extra audio and video will help add context to your interview, and as you will see, can be useful when it comes to editing.

Ambient Noise

Collect some ambient noise, or the noise you hear normally at the location of your interview – even if this is an empty office. Any other audio you record should be relevant to your talent and the location. For more on ambient audio, read the information in the link below:

Ambient noise link: http://www.mediacollege.com/audio/ambient/

You might like to add some ambient noise to the background of your introductory narration, or include some at the end of your piece.

Cutaway Footage

While it’s ok to shoot an interview with the talent in the frame for the entire duration, using some related context shots of the talent or the location of your interview will create interest and help you during the editing phase.

This footage can include the talent working in their job, the location of the interview, or anything else that might help set the scene.

The link below explains how to capture this type of footage, called ‘cutaway shots’.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8pqMVXbEf0

Background Music and Short Audio Segments

As an alternative to ambient noise, you might consider using some background music for different parts of your finished piece, such as the introduction, the sign-off, and if there are different segments requiring a transition.

Podcasts and radio shows have specific terminology for the different types of short audio segments they use; sweepers, stingers, bumpers, and drops. Find out more about these here:

Next time you listen to your favourite podcast, pay attention to the background audio used. You might notice the presenter uses background music under their introductory narration, and you might also notice shorter bursts of sound at the start of a new section.

Aim for background audio-only sections to be less than 10 seconds. If you are using music under some narration, allow a couple of seconds of overhang at the start and end of your introduction. Experiment with different durations for your music track – you might be surprised how short you need to make them, and how annoying it can sound when the music track goes on for too long.
Don’t include background music behind the entire interview; it will distract from what your talent has to say. This applies to any sounds used underneath narration; make sure you can hear yourself clearly, and that the music is not distracting.

The music you choose should be appropriate for the setting, the tone of the interview, and it should not be distracting. This means, generally, avoiding tracks with vocals and a complex melody or structure. Choose something that has a repeating beat or melody that will fade nicely into the background behind someone speaking.

This link includes more detail on choosing background music, and some links to example tracks you might like to use: https://wistia.com/library/choosing-music-for-your-video

Avoiding Copyright Problems

You need to be a bit careful about the material you use in your videos and audio files. Unless you want to worry about royalty fees it’s best to use material that has a Creative Commons (CC) license. You can find items with a CC license here: http://search.creativecommons.org

Putting it together in a Run Sheet

Now you’ve considered the different elements you need for your interview piece, you should plan what the final product will look and sound like before you start shooting. A Run sheet should contain:

- The order of different elements
- The timing of each element – though this may change once you’ve recorded and edited your interview
- Narration script
- Transitions between segments, if applicable
- A plan for the different ambient sounds and cutaway footage you want to record, including location, if the talent is needed, and how long you want to spend recording these elements

Recording your Interview

Audio

Audio is the most important part of your recording to get right, especially if you are producing an audio-only interview. In this case, the look of the interview location won’t matter, but the background noises will definitely impact the quality of your final product. The same applies for video footage.

If possible, organise to visit the location of your interview before the scheduled day at the same time the interview will take place. Note any sounds in the space, especially those that might be distracting on the final track.

Record yourself speaking in this space, or bring a friend to stand in for your talent. Consider where you will position yourself and the talent during the interview. Practice having a conversation and listen back to your recording. If something doesn’t sound right – there’s an echo, annoying background noise, or the ‘talent’ is too quiet or loud – change your set up.

Don’t panic if you don’t get a chance to test your audio recording before the interview. Ask your talent if you can spend 5-10 mins with them before the interview, making sure the sound quality is right. This
might also give them a chance to feel comfortable with being recorded, and allow them to sound more natural on tape.

If possible, use a separate device (out of frame) to record the audio of the interview. If nothing else, this will provide you with a back-up if anything happens to your original footage.

Video
The following resources cover different aspects of shooting quality video footage – or “getting the shot” for an interview. The tips below apply whether or not you have professional equipment, and we’ve also included tips for shooting with a personal electronic device (phone or tablet) throughout. Much of the following information comes from http://www.mediacollege.com/, a website worth looking at for more detail and tips for interviewing and shooting video and recording audio.

Setting the Scene: Background and Lighting
The background, like the location of your interview, should be relevant to your talent and the interview. You might like to ask your talent if you can move some of the objects around them into the background shot. Just check that there is nothing in the background that will distract from them, and that they clearly stand out against the background.

Use natural lighting when possible; as this is also the best type of light for a phone or tablet. Make sure the light is in front, and shining onto, your talent – never behind them! Avoid very harsh light, such as direct sunlight. Be mindful of the changes in light over time.

Finally, make sure there is nothing in the frame that would detract from what your talent is saying – this means no funny or inappropriate content in the background, nothing that makes the talent look silly like a shadow or a stray leaf sticking out from behind them. Check this again once you’ve positioned them in the frame.

Getting the Shot: Positioning your Talent
The best way to position your talent, when they are the only one in the shot, is

- at eye-line with the camera
- off-centre in the frame (according to the Rule of Thirds)
- showing their whole face
- but ensuring they are looking off to the side of the camera, not into it
- some or all of the talent’s torso in the shot, avoiding extreme close-ups
- ensuring their head has a little space above it

Consider whether you’d like to include yourself, the interviewer, in the final product. The information on this page will provide some ideas for editing interviews, but consider the feasibility of each style - particularly the section on ‘Noddies’: http://www.mediacollege.com/video/interviews/editing.html

When using a phone or tablet, turn it so you are filming in landscape – never in portrait! If you want to get a closer shot of your talent, physically move yourself closer to them, as the zoom on your device will distort the image.

If you want to change something about the shot, stop the interview and make an adjustment – don’t move the camera when the talent is speaking.
Keeping your shot steady is also important, so if you don’t have a tripod, hold your device with both hands and brace your arms closely against yourself. This technique might be worth practicing with a friend.

The Rule of Thirds
The right shows a ‘frame’, divided into thirds lengthways and vertically. The blue rectangle provides some idea of where the eye-line of the talent should be. The yellow dots show places where the dividing lines intersect, and these are good places for focusing on your talent. Avoid putting them directly in the centre.

For more on how the Rule of Thirds can improve your film shots, watch this video: https://vimeo.com/14315821. You can also read the information from Media College: http://www.mediacollege.com/video/shots/rule-of-thirds.html.

Further Information – Overview of Best Practices for Filming Interviews
The following videos cover the above tips and best practices in greater detail, and include some extra information you might find useful.

Watchmaps: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oaQ5Xq4CjISU
- This short video takes you through the essentials for getting the right background, framing the shot, getting a good camera angle, and lighting your subject.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hhr3_Gx0mK8
- This short video exemplifies why getting the correct location, lighting, framing, and sound is essential for a good interview.
- The presenters give solutions to some common problems – just note that they use professional equipment.
- The video also provides tips for getting a good interview from your talent.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9FKKU5ROFI
- This video covers advice for setting up a quality shot, covering background, and ‘depth’ in the shot.
- Tips for conducting the interview are also given, including asking questions.
- This video gets into the more technical side of filming, but includes some great tips for setting up and recording a professional looking interview.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oPqu-QQ11VgY
- This video focusses on assessing the suitability of your location and setting up the best shot.
- Also covers things like gaining permission to film, though this goes into a level of detail unlikely to be relevant unless you are a professional film-maker.

Media College also has a series of tutorials on filming interviews, which you may find useful to read: http://www.mediacollege.com/video/interviews/