How to Look and Sound Great on a Webcam

by DR. GARY GOULD @garygouldphd https://bit.ly/2W9NFwb

✔ THE EASY STUFF

1. POSITION YOUR LAPTOP PROPERLY: Put your Camera at Eye Level

   This is as simple as putting your laptop on some books. By raising the camera, you get a more flattering angle. This will also help you avoid shooting any ceiling lights that might be behind you.

   Looking Down = Unflattering angle and can put lights behind your head

   Eye Level = Much nicer angle and has a more conversational look.

2. POSITION YOURSELF PROPERLY: Make sure your background is not overly busy or distracting

   Whenever you are on camera, you should always be aware of what your background looks like. People will not just look at your face the whole time; they will definitely look at your surroundings. They will look at what books are on your shelf, what art is on your walls, and everything in the shot. If there is a TV in the background make sure it is turned off. Is there a door in the shot that someone might come through, surprising both of you? If there is, tape a note on the outside warning people you are on camera. Are their items you would not want people to see? Check and then double check.

   Do not shoot too close to a wall either – make sure there is space behind you so that your video does not end up looking like a passport photo. This is more important if you aim at light at yourself because you will get shadows on the wall.
Here is an example from CBC’s THE NATIONAL:

![Example Image](image_url)

The brick is a great background, but sitting further from the wall would get rid of that shadow. By moving a few feet from your background, any shadows from lights aimed at you will fall further down the wall and out of the shot. As a side note, this person’s jacket is a great colour to wear on camera and the lighting on their face is nice.

3. **POSITION YOUR LIGHT PROPERLY:** Make sure your main light is directed towards your face

Avoid having a window (or any light) in the shot behind you, as this will create exposure problems. The camera will try to compensate for the backlighting (it sees a lot of light) and in doing so it will make your face too dark. You will also get terrible shadows on your face and eyes. The shots below were taken in the exact same spot a few minutes apart. **The image on the left is backlight, but simply turning the camera around 180 degrees corrected the issue.** The main light is now on my face.
LIGHTING TIPS

Lighting is important for great looking images because it makes your face look fabulous, and it improves the colour in the shot (look at the shirt in the example above) and the overall resolution. Any camera has to compensate for underexposed images will start to make them look grainy. More light = more vibrant colour and better resolution!

There are two types of lighting: HARD (direct) and SOFT (diffused) light. Here are examples:

- Hard (direct) lighting creates harsh shadows and dull eyes, making you look unfabulous.
- Soft (diffused) lighting improves the colour and overall resolution, making your face look fabulous.

HARD LIGHT SET UP

Hard light is what you get with direct sunlight or if you shine light directly on your face. This type of lighting is NOT flattering to your face, and it is hard to sit with lights pointed at your face for very long. It also usually requires two lights to make this look fabulous.

Direct sunlight is probably the easiest way to get hard lighting, but in the above photo (the one on the left), you can see some of the problems. Direct light creates hard, unflattering shadows. To eliminate this, you need a second light source. The easiest, most consistent way to get a fabulous direct lighting set up is to use house lamps. Of course, if you were doing this for a living you might buy a basic lighting set up (check Amazon), but even with simple house lights, you can drastically improve your images.

- USE TWO DESK OR TABLE LIGHTS – one light on each side of your face will give you a nice balanced light. Make sure that the lights are placed higher than your eyes.
- THE TYPE OF BULB YOU USE MATTERS – First, try to make sure the light bulbs are the same colour. Yes, light bulbs come in different colours and colour temperature is rated in degrees Kelvin (see the chart below). Second, you want to use bulbs that are in...
the range of 2700K to 3200K. This will provide a warm, flattering light for your face. Light bulbs also come in a cool colour (sometimes sold as “Daylight” bulbs) and these are rated at about 5000K, which is more of a bluish tone (see chart below). Bluish light is not flattering. LED bulbs are preferred because they do not get as hot and save on electricity.

**LOOK FOR BULBS IN THIS COLOUR RANGE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1500°K</th>
<th>2200°K</th>
<th>2700°K</th>
<th>3000°K</th>
<th>3200°K</th>
<th>4200°K</th>
<th>5500°K</th>
<th>8000°K</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Standard Incandescent</td>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>Warm Metal Halide</td>
<td>Cool White Fluorescent</td>
<td>Daylight</td>
<td>Blue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Below is an example of a hard lighting set up using two household lamps. Note the placement and angle of the light. You will also see some sound dampening, an external microphone, a second webcam and of course, the laptop set to eye level.
MAKE SURE THE LIGHT IS ABOVE EYE LEVEL – In the example above, you will note that both lights are higher up than the subject is. The lampshade is also tilted to make sure the light shines directly on the face.

Make sure your lights are placed higher than your eyes

SOFT LIGHT SET UP

Soft lighting is more flattering and easier on your eyes if you are on camera for long periods. The easy way to set up soft lighting is to bounce a light off a WHITE surface. It must be white because when the light bounces off the wall it will pick up the colour of the surface. If your desk is up against a white wall, you can simply aim a desk lamp at the wall and it will bounce a nice soft light on your face. If you do not have a white wall, you can tape large sheets of white paper on your wall and bounce the light off that. Soft light does not throw far so you have to be closer to the light for best results.

Another way to create a soft light set up is to tape WHITE foam board together, or buy WHITE project display boards (which are $1.25 at Dollar Tree) to bounce the light off. In the example below, I am using four of them – three for the wrap around wall (which is also done for privacy and sound reasons), and one I laid across the top to give me more light bounce (and again to help with sound). You now have a semi-private, well-lit workspace that you can take down in less than a minute when it is time for dinner.
**Since we are bouncing light off cardboard, an LED light bulb gives off less heat and is safer to use. As mentioned, look for a warm 2700K-3200K light for a more flattering look.

Another easy way to get soft diffused light on your face is to turn up the brightness on your laptop and then open a blank WORD document. This light will look best if it is eye-level or higher. You can also use an iPad, large mobile phone or tablet, in the same way to supplement your lighting.

💡 **A FINAL NOTE ON LIGHTING**

You will find **you look your best if the brightest thing on the screen is your face.** This means, you want the light aimed towards your face – not at the top of your head (from an overhead light) or the side of your face (from a side window light). So, your best lighting may result from **TURNING OFF** the overhead light and/or closing a window blind (black garbage bags on a window also work) so the main source of light is on your face and not the background. Fabulous lighting is not just about the **AMOUNT** of light, but instead, the **DIRECTION** of the light. To look great on camera, the light needs to be directed **TOWARDS** your face.

Let’s look again at the two picture we saw earlier. These photos were taken a few minutes apart in the exact same spot in the kitchen. The only difference, is that I changed the direction the chair was facing. In the image on the left, the sunlight from the window is coming from **BEHIND** me and the overhead ceiling light is coming **DOWN** on my face which created a dark, horribly shadowy, unflattering look. For the photo on the right, taken just a few minutes later, I simply turned the chair **TOWARDS** the window light. Now I am working **WITH** the sunlight and not **COMPETING** against it. The results are, well, FABULOUS! You will also see that the overhead ceiling light is now casting a nice warm light on my hair and back of my shoulders that help separate me from the background.

![Two pictures of a man facing the camera, one with sunlight coming from behind and the other with the chair turned towards the window light]

**ZOOM NOTE:** If you have window or overhead light making you background brighter than your face, there is a good chance that the Virtual background feature will not work. Turn off your background lights and insure you are properly lit, and you should be fine.
FRAMING
When you are on camera, you should keep a video window open on your computer with your image on it so that you can see how you are framed. You do not want to be too low in the frame (see the example below). This is a common problem. Put your head at the top of the frame.

INCORRECT FRAMING
PROPER FRAMING

It also helps if you sit back from the screen so your face is not huge. However, when you move back from your computer, your sound will not be as good. The solution is an external microphone that will allow you to back up from the camera and still have great sound.

AUDIO
Audio is critical to your webcast and it is highly recommended that you purchase an external microphone (more on that in the “Stuff that will cost you Money” section below), but there are some free things you can do to immediately improve the sound.

Find a quiet place. Eliminate as many environmental noises as you can – turn off TVs or music players, close windows, turn off fans or heaters. Listen carefully to a room to discover any potentially distracting sounds. Warn the people you live with that you are going on camera. Put a note on the door to your room as a helpful reminder so no one bursts in on your webcast. Finally, make sure you turn off your phone ringer.

NOTE: If you are doing an audio only podcast or web conference, recording in your clothing closet will give you outstanding acoustics.

Build a Pillow Fort. Sound is like a rubber ball that will bounce off every hard surface in your room and this might make your webcast sound very hollow. Placing couch cushions, pillows, winter jackets, blankets or other sound muffling material around your work area will make a large difference to the overall sound. Try to make a 3 sided sound wall with a roof.

Earlier, I mentioned buying project display cardboard (Dollar Tree - $1.25) for lighting but I also use them to help control sound. When you are working at home around other people, they don’t want to hear you on camera all day and you don’t want them on your video call. The hard cardboard helps to diminish SOME of that sound. I also use pillows and thick cloth material as you can see in the example below. A bonus with building some kind of sound...
surround is that you are also creating a small portable office that is semi-private and which helps to eliminate some household distractions. It can be set up or taken down quickly.

Here is an example of a setup using things that you may have around the house:

CLOTHING

TVs, smartphones, laptops and desktop displays love three colours – red, green and blue. The final step to looking FABULOUS is to wear one of those colours on camera (NOT light or dark versions of these colours). Think of how vibrant colours, cartoon colours, jump off the screen. Look at how great these colours look on your screen now:

If you choose not to wear these colours, then wear a colour where you will stand out from the background. In other words, if your background is dark, then wear a lighter coloured top.
(although try to avoid wearing white). If your background is light, then wear a darker coloured top (although try to avoid wearing black). If you wear the same colour as the background you will blend in when you are on camera. Try to pick a colour that compliments your hair colour. Again, if you have lighter hair – then go with a darker background etc. **Also, wearing your hair down almost always looks better on camera then wearing your hair up.**

![Dark Top with Dark Background](image1)

![Light Top with Dark Background](image2)

![Light Top with Dark Background that has a lamp turned on behind](image3)

You will see in the photos above how a dark shirt/top/hair will blend into a dark background. To correct this, simply change your shirt/top or the background. Often just turning on a table lamp will do wonders for the background (just try to avoid having the light in the shot). In the above example with the lamp (far right), the table lamp is on the floor behind the subject.

☑️ When you are on camera, people will only see your shoulders and neck, so watch for stray straps, collars, etc. Leaving a video window open where you can see yourself on camera is a good way to check that everything is in place and that your framing is perfect.

☑️ If possible, **plug in your computer directly to your internet connection** with an ethernet cable. Wi-Fi can be unreliable and plugging in gives you a more stable connection.

☑️ **Plug your laptop into power** so that your battery will not fail part way through your webcast. If you are on location where you can’t plug in your laptop, make sure your computer is fully charged.

☑️ **Get a lens cover for your webcam.** It is helpful to have a hard cover for your camera so you don’t accidently webcast yourself after you think you are off air. Having a lens cover is also a quick way to go off camera for a minute during your online meeting. You can buy these but be aware some laptops close so tightly there is no room for a lens cover. In this case, use a bandage or Post-it note. Here is an example of a free webcam cover:

![Webcam Cover](image4)

☑️ **Always assume the mic is on** when you are webcasting even if you think it is muted. You might have accidently turned on the mic at some point.

☑️ **Stay hydrated.** Always have water or a cold/hot beverage close at hand.
EXTERNAL MICROPHONE

A great looking image is worthless if people cannot hear what you are saying. So, the number one recommendation for purchase is an external microphone for your computer. Snowball mics are well rated and reasonably priced and come in a variety of models and price points. Pricing is similar on both Amazon and Best Buy’s websites but these are solid performers to consider as they will make an immediate difference to your web presence:


https://www.bestbuy.ca/en-ca/search?search=snowball+mic

Why? Most built in mics on laptops are not adequate for long conversations or interviews. They are hollow sounding and require you to sit pretty close to the computer to have decent sound. By sitting closer to the camera your head will become uncomfortably large on screen.

You could wear the ear bud headphones and microphone that come with smartphones. However, most of these are white and when you wear them during interviews they really stand out and look awkward – almost like you have a stethoscope in your ears. Do they really need BOTH earpieces in? The wireless earbuds, also white, aren’t much better as you now have these things sticking out of you ear making you look like a character on Star Trek.

Here is a example from CBC’s THE NATIONAL:
Wearing a visible mic and earphones look awkward and constantly remind your audience that you’re wired up. You can see in the above example that the microphone on the host is “dressed” (hidden on your subject). Doesn’t this look so much more professional?

You can also see the different video quality of the cameras in the example above because of the variety of lighting used. One shot looks really grainy, and one person has a big shadow behind them because they are too close to the wall (although the brick is very nice). In addition, if you see again that if you have dark hair, wear a dark jacket, and put yourself against a dark background, you will blend in. All of these issues are easily avoided.

**EXTERNAL CAMERA**

There are many reasons you might want to buy an external camera and some of them are obvious – like wanting to use a desktop computer that has no camera, or if you want to use an external camera as a document camera when using Zoom. Some people have found that their built in cameras are not very good (especially in low light). A good external camera will definitely make a difference to the overall look of your video stream. This is where external cameras come in. Logitech is a popular brand that makes cameras that are well rated, and come in a variety of models and price points. Here are some examples:

https://www.bestbuy.ca/en-ca/search?search=logitech+webcams

**OTHER IDEAS FOR AN EXTERNAL CAMERA**

You might also just consider using your phone, or tablet, instead if you need a device with a decent webcam. If you do this, all of the same tips apply (eye level, etc.) and you will need some kind of stand to hold the phone. It is also highly recommended if you use your phone that you shoot with the phone in the horizontal position and NOT vertical.

**One option for a free external webcam is to use your smartphone as a webcam.** This involves some work, but below are some links where you can explore this option:

For Mac: https://www.makeuseof.com/tag/use-your-iphone-as-a-webcam-heres-how-ios/
For PC: https://www.digitalcitizen.life/turn-android-smartphone-webcam-windows

**MAKE UP**

Once you start to light yourself, you might notice that your face starts to look shiny. Using an inexpensive matting powder (under $10) will help. Here is one that is recommended:


So there you go. A few things you can do to make yourself look and sound FABULOUS!