

Workshop: Using digital video in the Modern Languages classroom



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The FAQs of Filming

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This is an introduction to the skills and tricks you'll need to make a video, using some very common, easy-to-work equipment and software. Video production can be a complex process, but with thought, ingenuity and plenty of planning, great results can be achieved on basic equipment and in a short amount of time.

There are many things you will need to consider when shooting and editing your own video. These FAQs may not be able to answer your questions precisely, but we hope that they are a good place to start. We plan to add information, examples and useful links to these pages as they arise – it's a working document

Production

How do I start?

The main thing to consider when planning your movie production is the end result. If you can envisage how the video will look, who will be in it, what they will be saying and doing, what the viewer will be seeing, what locations and so on, then the production process will be a straightforward sequence of events that can be formulated as a checklist.

You should work towards a set of clearly-defined goals that will inform your every step when making your video, so that you have a clear focus of what is required and what isn't.

Work within the criteria set by your tutor, or set yourself some do's and don'ts which you have to abide by.

What's a storyboard?

A storyboard is where you write out your video's structure, with an expected order, including shots, participants and any specific comments, required images, sounds or text etc, and an accompanying script. Follow this storyboard as a kind of shopping list, ticking off each requirement as you collect it. The script is advisory only; if you are interviewing contributors, then write what you expect them or would like them to say; this script may evolve and mutate as you progress.

How should I decide on my video's style?

There are many ways you can tell a story. You could have an on-camera or off-camera reporter; you could use interviews (with or without an onscreen interviewer); you could use text or specific images or sounds. Quite often the nature of the video and the degree to which you want to be seen as the author of the video will determine the style. In order to tell a story through your shots, you should think about the editing you'll need to do, before you shoot anything. This will serve to make you think about the shots you'll need to make your video, and plan for how you're going to get them.

How do I make my video look like a proper programme?

Watch some telly or online programmes on YouTube, BBC iPlayer or other sites that host videos, especially documentaries, and note their techniques for illustrating information or interviewing people. You'd be amazed at how much you already know about the grammar, conventions and codes of television, based on a lifetime of TV watching, but sometimes practice and trial and error are the only ways to solve problems or to achieve desired effects, so in order to make something come out right, you may have to practise it in advance.

Filming

What equipment should I use?

Media & Learning Technologies at Aston University recommends that students use Flip Digital Cameras. These record images in 4:3 aspect ratio (not widescreen), in AVI format video files (high quality, though a specific codec is required to play the files on your pc), at 30 frames per second, offer no possibility of changing the auto settings and come with a basic editing software package pre-loaded. It does have a zoom facility, though it is not very useful or effective. To record, point the camera towards your subject and press the red button.

How does it record?

The camera is operated like a cameraphone. It should be held out and the lens pointed towards your subject; the image can be seen on the LCD screen on the opposite side of the camera. We advise that the zoom function is not used; if you want to zoom in, move the camera closer; to zoom out, move it further away. The camera has an in-built onboard microphone next to the lens, which is good at picking up all sounds from its immediate environment, so the loudest sounds should be the one you want to record. If the camera is far away from the action, then the recorded sound will be of the general environment, not of the action. To ensure that the camera is recording what you want it to, then you should trial the intended set-up or stop and check the recording after a few seconds before proceeding with the actual recording. We recommend that if possible you make use of the scene recording feature of the Flip cameras by starting the camera when you are ready for action and stopping it immediately afterwards. This way every take will be recorded as a separate file which will help you a lot with the editing process. There is not the facility to connect an external microphone. The video clips are recorded as digital files; connect the camera to your pc via its USB connector, and copy the clips from the drive. If you do decide to use the included Flipshare software it will guide you through the file importing process.

How can I get steady shots?

Use the camera on a tripod whenever possible; it keeps the camera steady and safely fixed for better looking shots. If you want to hold the camera, brace your arm steadily by gripping it with your other arm. Handheld shots can and do work when trying to convey energy, immediacy or 'amateur' footage but a small portable camera can wobble and drift when held out, even after just a minute or two.

How good is the camera?

We think that the Flip camera is a good piece of kit and one which can be used easily and to great effect. The camera has its pros and cons but these will not stop you from making good quality videos, as long as you are aware of the limitations and allow for them when filming.

I want to record a group discussion. How should I go about this?

Consider the limitations of the camera and the dynamics of a group. Some members may have their backs to the camera. The camera may have to be quite far back to accommodate everyone. Conversations may overlap and become indistinguishable. Recording handheld in the midst of the action may be disruptive and intimidating, plus you may still miss the relevant contributions if you are pointing the camera the opposite way. One solution is to record it for the action but to note valuable contributions that you definitely want to use, then get the relevant contributor to re-record their line immediately after the event. You could also film a mock version of the group discussion to get close-ups of each individual contributor, which you can then intercut with your wider shot to create a better sequence.

I need a contributor to say a certain phrase or talk about a specific point or do something in a certain way but can't be sure that they will do it in a way that will help my video. What can I do?

Too many edits in an interview implies that you have made the contributor say something that they actually didn't during the interview, thus reducing the interview's credibility. If you feel that the contributor could say something better, then inform them what you'd like them to say and ask if they'd be happy to repeat it closer to how you imagined it. Retakes are not to be avoided and can be very useful in getting close to your vision. Even walking down a corridor can be done again and again, until you're happy that the shot you have is the shot you want.

I want to use someone else's material. Can I?

There are certain allowances within the copyright laws of the UK that allow you to use other people's videos, stills, music, sound effects, words, in your video, but as a general rule, we advise that if you are going to use somebody else's academic work, then you credit the source. Any other third party material can only be used if you accept that it cannot be shown anywhere public (like YouTube) but only within the confines of the University's VLE.

I can't hear my interviewee. What could I have done better?

First ensure that the location you selected for the interview is not too noisy. Move the camera closer to the subject and assess the volume of the interviewee's voice. Direct them to speak up, if necessary. Remember to do a test recording, then playback that test to check the quality of the recording.

I want to put text or subtitles on my video. What should I do?

Make sure that the text is legible (crazy fonts can be irritating and unreadable), stays on screen up for long enough to read and doesn't clash with the images it's on top of. Text can be very effective when used to explain (extra information or data onscreen adding to the existing information) or clarify (subtitling a muffled audio). Subtitles obviously also work if translating the audio into another language. You should also consider what credits you will want to, or need to, include.

I want to film in public spaces – do I need anyone's permission?

You may well need someone's permission to film in certain places, even with a small and unobtrusive camera like the Flip. Think "if it's not the public highway, then I will need permission from someone to be filming here". Even on public property, you should consider that when you record.

Editing

What can I use to edit my movies?

Media & Learning Technologies at Aston University recommends that students use Windows Movie Maker, to be found in any PC in the university running the Windows Operating System. The Flip cameras also have their own inbuilt editing software called Flipshare, which can be copied onto your own pc's hard drive. There are other free video editing software packages that can be used (though they are unsupported by the University), the best of which are Video Pad, Jaycut and iMovie (for the Mac).

Can I use still images and photos?

As long as you can justify the editorial use of the image, then yes, stills can be very useful and effective. Think about the part of the picture you need to draw the viewer's attention to, and how you might highlight or emphasise it. Ensure that it's on screen for long enough so that the viewer can take in the image and appreciate its context.

There's a video I want to use but it's in a different format from what my editing software accepts. Can I convert it?

There are plenty of free file format conversion software packages available online that can take your file and change it to a useable format; however the university does not support any of these on its PCs. The best formats to use on Windows Movie Maker are WMV and AVI, though this might require the correct codec to play the file satisfactorily.

Something I've filmed doesn't quite work (or doesn't make sense?). What can I do?

Consider what you need your clip to do for the video to work, then evaluate if the best solution is to edit the clip, or to re-record it, or to put in explanatory text or commentary.

I want to record a voiceover. How should I do this?

First, write your script and record it directly into the Flip camera in a quiet location where you are unlikely to be disturbed. Import the sound only and edit out the unnecessary sounds, then finalise your rough cut edit to the pacing of the voiceover. Remember that the voiceover can be cut up into small pieces and spaced out to match the images, allow the music to breathe or give the video real pace.

How do I export my finished video in a format that I'll be able to play?

Click on 'Save to my computer', then name your movie file and set where it is to be saved. You may wish to adjust the standard quality settings (though this can be a little advanced), then click Next to complete the encoding. The Flipshare software will also guide you through this process when you are ready to export your movie.

General Advice

Keep your video short; the briefer the better. Say your piece and no more.

A video should be lean and rewarding to the viewer, without trying their durability or their patience. It should not outstay its welcome. Review the production and the script at every stage to ensure that you are only recording what you need, and including what you want to say.

Planning is everything. Know what you want to film, before you start filming it.

Work to a definite script. The more detailed the script (and the happier you are with it), the easier the filming and editing processes will be. Storyboarding helps to focus the production process. Include everything you want to capture; note down what you **don't** want, too. Make firm and comprehensive arrangements to record with your interviewees or subjects, and as far as possible, prepare them with what you'd like them to do or say. Think location, setting, staging, timings...

Decide on the style of video you want to make.

It's better to know what you're making before you start than just film and try to piece it together in the edit. Base your video on others that you have seen. Breakdown the envisaged final video into its component parts, and then ensure that you have planned for and recorded all parts to your satisfaction.

Get to know how the camera works.

Do plenty of test filming to gauge its limitations for sound and video, in different lighting settings and locations. Ensure that you know how to tell if the camera is recording or not.

Use a tripod as much as possible and leave the zoom alone.

Tripods are invaluable in getting a steady shot and they free you up from controlling the camera, allowing you to move around and maybe participate in the filming yourself. The zoom function is not very useful as it degrades the image, the closer it zooms in. Stick to moving the camera in or out for a better quality image.

Get close enough so you can see and hear the action.

The microphone is housed on the front of the camera, so naturally the nearer the camera is to the sound you want to record, the better. Likewise, if you can't see what is going on, then neither can the camera.

Sound is as important as vision.

Sometimes it's better to get good sound than images. Take plenty of time setting up and ensuring that the sound recording is good; don't just think that because it looks good, then it will sound good. Our ears naturally filter out background noises; these microphones do not – make sure that you stop and play back the recording every so often to check what you're picking up.

Light works best when it's pointing towards the subject.

If you shoot into a window, the light coming towards you will ensure that any thing in the way will be silhouetted against it. Use the light from the window to illuminate your subject by filming with the window or other strong light source behind you.

Make the most of your location.

Think beautiful compositions, unusual angles, multi uses (turn the camera round and there's an entirely different view straightaway), and don't be afraid to move furniture around to get the set-up you want.

Plan for the amount of time you think you'll need, then double it.

This whole process can take a lot of time. Things won't always go right first time; you'll be at the mercy of the weather, the general public, traffic, nerves, and just everyday life.

Get consent from everyone you film with.

At least let them know why you're filming them and what you'd like to use the videos for and where it will end up being shown. Keep a record of who you filmed with for quite a while afterwards. Also ensure that you have permission to do your filming in each location – again written permission if possible but at least establish with someone in charge that you are not breaking any rules by filming on location.

Rehearse beforehand. Testing highlights potential problems.

There's nothing worse than making an exciting recording that captures everything you were after, then finding out when you have returned to your PC for editing that the sound was not captured, or the lens had a big smear across it, or that you've walked out of shot and all the action's taking place off-camera. Make sure you know what you're going to capture by doing a test record or stopping periodically to verify the recording.

Make sure you have the right to use other people's material in your video.

It is preferable that you can establish that you have the appropriate permissions to use a third party's material; otherwise you can still use it but in a much more closed setting like the VLE. YouTube is very good at spotting copyrighted material and alerting you to its use, and potentially taking your video down without needing your permission.

Links: Cameras and editing

- How to use a Flip Camera (YouTube)
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mh6s9gNoFro>
- Making a video on a Flip Camera (YouTube)
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zeicx9pDrsc>
- Using a Flip Camera (YouTube)
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TCEIWWa8ORY>
- Video Toolbox (YouTube)
- http://www.youtube.com/video_toolbox
- The YouTube Reporters' Centre
- <http://www.youtube.com/reporterscenter>
- VideoPad Video Editor Software
- <http://www.nchsoftware.com/videopad/index.html>
- Flipshare
- <http://www.theflip.com/en-gb/products/flipshare.aspx>
- Windows Movie Maker
- <http://www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/using/moviemaker/default.mspx>
- Movie Maker Video Editing Tutorial
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZXK68NS7gU>
- Windows Live Movie Maker
- <http://explore.live.com/windows-live-movie-maker>
- JayCut
- <http://www.jaycut.com>
- iMovie
- <http://www.apple.com/ilife/imovie/>