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# *8 Tips For Making a Stellar First Video*

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Produced by **Videomaker**

# 8 Tips For Making a Stellar First Video

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## Introduction

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Just about every video producer, rank and file, from first time beginner to award-winning professional likes to grab the camera and run, shooting whatever inspiration has seized the moment.

There are times when serendipity plays a role in our productions but more often than not we need to be a bit more prepared when we want to create a quality production. Otherwise, we tend to overlook or forget something crucial. Having a plan more often than not works better than guerrilla-style run-and-gun, especially if you're taking your video beyond the "reality show" environment, into a more polished presentation.

Maybe you've been thinking about trying your hand at video for a while; maybe you've just gotten the bug recently. Either way, video can seem overwhelming to someone without any experience in the field, but the truth is, creating quality, professional-level video productions are a piece of cake if you can follow eight simple little rules. Even a first time movie maker can make a video that can pass for the work of a seasoned industry professional and we're going to show you how!

These eight steps will take you from inspiration to "it's a wrap" without interrupting your creative flow. You might in fact find yourself better able to take advantage of a "serendipitous or inspired moment" with a solid outline that guides you through your production day or days. Read on and learn how you can make stellar videos the first time you pick up a camera!

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## Tip 1. *Plan it Out*

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In our minds we often “see the whole thing” from opening title to closing credits. We play and replay the whole scenario like a Star Wars, Titanic or Avatar production and think we can keep all those wonderful shots in our minds - right there, when the camera starts rolling. In reality, we need to be more practical. Taking the time to simply jot down, if nothing more, a list of inspired shots helps us as the practical part of our inspiration moves front and center.

So, you first need to establish what you want to do and separate that from what you can do. Being practical about the possibilities will help you avoid disappointment and carry you to a finished production of which you can be proud.

Ask yourself key questions:

- Can I actually pull this off?
- Can I afford it?
- Do I have the level of inspiration and commitment necessary to carry it through?
- Can I find the right talent? Locations?
- What are my goals for this video production
- Is it for fun? Will it be basically a learning tool?
- Do I want to create something that will go viral on YouTube?
- Is this going to be a commercial production? A film festival entry?
- Will this become my demo show-piece?

Knowing your project expectations, writing them down and making decisions at the beginning will give you a sense of purpose and direction, not to mention the confidence, to take it all the way. Yes, be inspired but force yourself to be practical as well. You will need both in the face of possible upcoming adversity and all those Murphy's Law moments.

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You also need to know how you plan to present your subject before rolling tape; you need to decide if your production is based on action, dialogue or a combination of the two. Determine if a talent behind a desk or sitting in a chair - your basic talking head approach - is sufficient or if you want to include reenactments, graphics or other titling in your production to enforce its audio and visual impact.

Are you going to go for a documentary approach, using interviews, archival images with Ken Burns-style movement, on- and or off-camera narrative (voice over)? Will it be casual or highly scripted with a need for complex dialogue? You might be going for strictly entertainment with lots of action, comedy, “dramedy” (comedy-drama) or bodacious special effects. On the other hand, much of your production could be created in the computer with a host of CG elements.

Knowing the primary style you want to use doesn’t mean you can’t mix it up. You just have to be aware of what you want before the shooting starts and plan for that. While you’re rolling tape you can bounce from one improvisational act to another at your heart’s desire. Mixing it up might not endear you with any purists out there but you could become the next Matt Reeves, Rodriguez or Tarantino with your avant-garde approach.



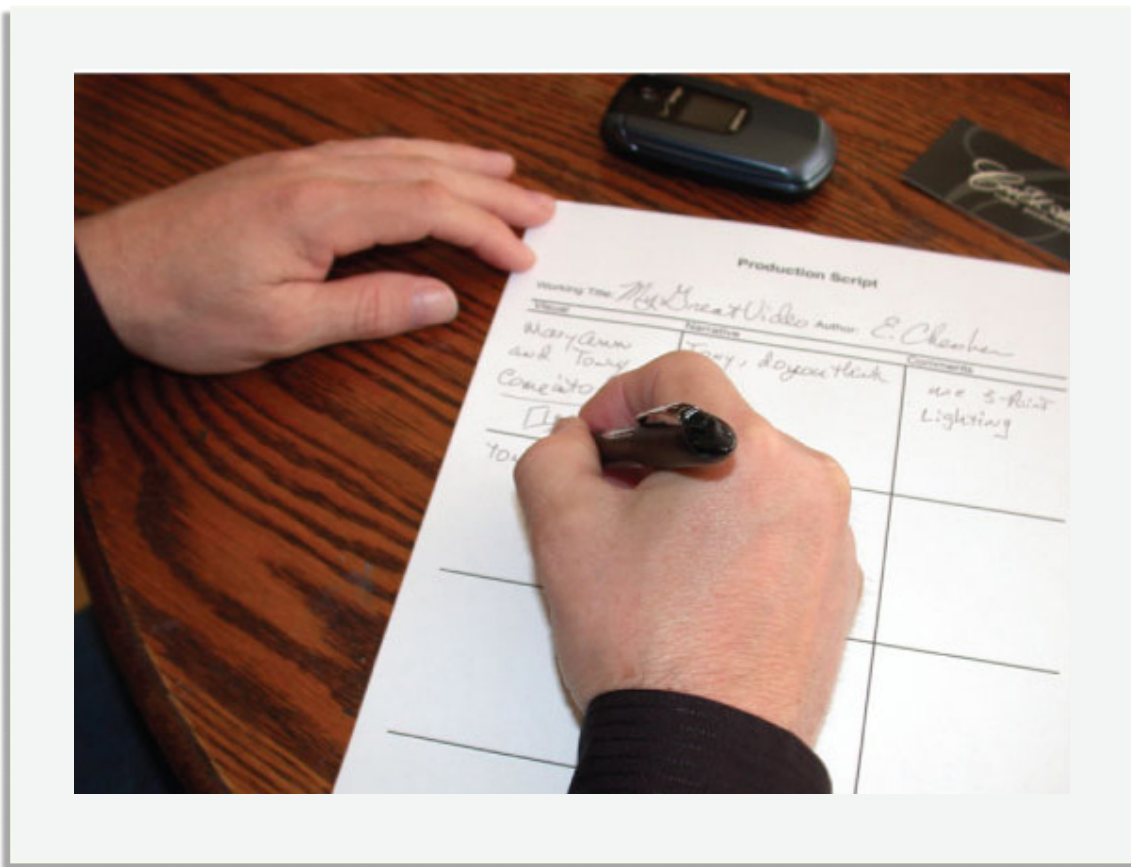
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## Tip 2. *Write a Script*

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Once you've asked yourself some basic questions, you might feel impatient to get started shooting. Not so fast! Before you hit the ground running, there's one last thing to take care of: your script.

If you have serious dialogue and want to follow a tight production path for content and narrative you will need a script. Your script doesn't have to be formal or perfectly formatted, though that can help others in your production crew who might be more familiar with standard script terminology. A simple basic outline of what needs to happen when and will keep your production focused.

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If you're shooting a real life event rather than a fictional story, you obviously won't be able to write out your script in advance. But you'll still be able to jot down a few basic notes about what you expect to find and how you want to capture it. This will help keep you on track and ensure that you don't miss anything important. That's especially vital if you're shooting some event - such as a wedding or a parade - where you won't have a second chance to get it right.

Your script makes possible another important production/directing element: your shot sheet. This is a list of what has to be videotaped with or without audio to accomplish your vision and to satisfy your inspiration. Without a list - definitive or not - you will miss must-have shots and not recognize areas during production where you need to improvise.

Adding shots that establish a script and shot sheet can be mission critical. It can also come in earlier in the planning and development of your Great Video Production but I've found that following my inspiration, determining what I will need to make it happen and deciding what approach I want to take, what format, helps me better establish a script and the shots I will need to make it all come together.

You need to recognize situations like time of day, outdoors or in, daylight or night-time, camera placement, location availability, weather conditions and a host of variables that will affect what you capture. These notes are easily placed alongside your described shots and will keep you alert to necessary improvisational changes. The production "big boys" have all this and more going into actual production but still discover the need for script additions, deletions or changes and have re-writes done mid-shoot. This isn't cost effective and can be way counter-productive, but it happens. The more prepared you are going in, the more satisfied you will be with your production going out.

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### Tip 3. *Keep Your Composition in Mind*

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While many people are content simply to point the camcorder at something and start rolling tape, students of composition know there is a rhyme and reason to shot selection. Good shooters position their subjects carefully in the frame. There are several guidelines you can apply to help you compose more attractive shots.

It has been widely held among classical artists throughout history that painting objects on a rectangular canvas at certain predictable points causes the eye to flow more easily across the canvas, resulting in greater harmony among the painting's visual elements. As a result, artists devised mathematical ways of segmenting the canvas so that they would know exactly where to place their images for greatest effect. The result was called "The Golden Mean." Videographers and filmmakers have adopted a modified version called "the rule of thirds."

Essentially, the rule states that if you mentally divide your frame into thirds, both horizontally and vertically, and then place the important elements in your shot along these horizontal and vertical lines, you create visual images that please the eye of the viewer.

To illustrate, you can move your camcorder so that your subject is on one side of the frame, resting at an intersection of the horizontal and vertical lines. With larger elements, such as people or buildings, which are vertically oriented, you can also position them on one of the verticals so that they occupy the space where one vertical intersects both horizontal lines.

The horizon, if you have it visible in your shot, can also be manipulated by the rule of thirds. You'll want to place it on one of the two horizontal lines. Typically the horizon will look best if placed along the lower line.



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When the elements of a shot are composed in this way, they tend to form geometric patterns that guide the viewer's eye. Some elements might form a virtual circle, for example, causing the eye to move in a circular motion around the frame. You can form other geometric patterns with your visual elements, as well--perhaps a "Z" shape, or a simple diagonal line.

The rule of thirds, however, generally dictates that simply centering your subject in the shot will create an "unbalanced" image--one that will not lead your eye naturally to any of the other elements of the shot.

While the rule of thirds can be applied to any subject, whether animal, vegetable or mineral, the reality is that you will spend a lot of time shooting people. You can apply the rule of thirds to shots of people to make sure they are well balanced, but you can also apply some other people-shooting guidelines.

Let's begin by evaluating the talking head. How do you frame this shot? You will probably have no choice but to position your subject more or less in the center of the frame. This may appear to run counter to the rule of thirds, but it isn't necessarily so. You can still apply the rule of thirds in this case and at the same time deal with another people-shooting issue--headroom.

Headroom is the space between the top of your subject's head and the top of the frame. Apply too much headroom and your subject appears to be sinking. Too little headroom appears to chop your subject's head off just above the eyes.

To get headroom just right, tilt up or down until your subject's eyes fall along that topmost horizontal line. Because your subject's eyes are one of the most important features on his face, the rule of thirds says that it makes sense to align the eyes with that top third line, rather than putting the eyes smack in the center of the frame. Keeping your subject's eyes on that top horizontal line will insure proper headroom in close, medium and wide shots.

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## Tip 4. *Learn Video Time Travel*

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Why are amateur videos of birthday parties so often stupefying? Easy: they're too long and too dull. So it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out how to fix them: make them shorter by showing just the good stuff. As the venerable cliché puts it, movies are life with the boring parts cut out.

As we experience it, real-world time has several traits that are utterly unchangeable: It's continuous, steady, sequential, and singular. In video, however, these traits are as flexible as hot silly putty. To make a watchable program you absolutely must control time's continuity.

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For example, let's say that at her birthday party, little Rachel starts to open her second birthday present while you videotape the process. She lifts the package, but then puts it down again to eat some more cake and ice cream before picking the box up and resuming opening it. Watching Rachel inhale chocolate cake is as numbing as watching the hands on a schoolroom clock, so here's how to cut that part out and leave an invisible incision.

First, get a brand new camera angle. While she scarfs a bit of cake, move around to the side of her and zoom closer. Later, you will edit out the eating by cutting directly from the front angle as she picks up the box to the side angle as she begins opening it. The angle change will distract the viewer's attention from the fact that you've dropped that part of the action.

Then, when Rachel dips into the cake, keep right on shooting. In editing, you'll replace 60 boring seconds of eating with five exciting seconds of guest reaction, then return to your original shot. The missing 55 seconds will go completely unnoticed.

Both methods exploit the key idea that video time is not continuous; you can cut parts you don't want.

As we just saw, cutting stuff out can speed things up, but there are also places where you want to slow the pace of time, often to create suspense. Imagine: at Rachel's birthday party, we're down to the very last shiny package. Rachel says wistfully, "Oh, I hope this is a Dolly Dumpster Diver! I want that doll more than anything!!"

That's your cue that you'll want to increase the screen time devoted to opening that last package. You're already changing camera positions to record the action from varying angles, and you're getting numerous cutaways of the other children's expectant faces. To obtain the last key shots, you'll pull one more trick: fake it.

Yes, fake it. Later, maybe even after the party's over, put Dolly Dumpster Diver back in her box and drape the paper loosely over it. Then give the box to Rachel and set up a shot from behind her, looking over her shoulder to frame just the package and her hands. Rachel pulls off the paper, opens the lid, and, ta-daa! there's the coveted doll.

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Keep in mind that you're not operating a convenience-store surveillance camera here. That is, you're not documenting a space in time from A to Z but synthesizing a presentation of events. This principle operates even more strongly with vacation videos. If you're touring the land by car or RV, for instance, geography controls the order of events. Starting from Dallas, it's Grand Canyon, Las Vegas, San Francisco, in that order.

But look at the effect of starting with the serene, esthetic Bay city, then contrasting it with the spastic extravagance of Vegas and finally commenting on both works of humankind with the humbling grandeur of nature's indifferent vastness.

The moral: if you want a trip record, keep a diary; but if you want an exciting, memorable video, re-sequence real-time events to deliver more dramatic impact.

### Tip 5. *You Control Space*

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Despite the fact that television screens are increasingly larger these days, your video programs represent small windows into a world that you have chosen to portray. And since these windows are actually television screens, unlike the real universe, they are finite in size. As such, videography is all about determining what to show in that space, and how it should be shown.

While your audience can certainly imagine things about your universe, it is primarily concerned with the part of your world that you show at any given time. Your viewers rely on you to effectively establish the setting for your world. This can be a challenge,



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given the relative size and shape of a television screen. After all, it certainly is a tall task to try to cram the magnificent world of the Rocky Mountains into a flat, glass rectangle. You can actually use this to your advantage, though, because video is a medium of movement. Your camcorder is a window through which your viewers peek at your world. You can move that window through and around your world to show your them as much or as little as you want.

Imagine, for example, that you're looking at the beautiful Rocky Mountains. Your eye can take in so much more than your camcorder. To show the entire scene to your viewers, you'll need to move the window that they look through by moving your camcorder. Why not start by opening the window to your universe as wide as possible by zooming out as wide as you can? The pros call this an establishing shot. It gives your audience a sense of place and dimension. Fill your window with as much of the splendor as possible.

Then get creative! Use slow, purposeful camera moves to walk your audience through your world. Show the foothills. Move to some of the lower peaks. Pan slowly across the highest mountaintops, pausing at each one to provide a good impression. Let your viewers see the breadth and scope of your universe.

When building your universe's space, there are few, if any rules. Just remember that since you may have to use a lot of camera moves, use them judiciously. You'd probably hate for your world to be a place of nausea and motion sickness! It's a good idea to stop recording while you change shots.

You not only control the space your world occupies, but also everything that exists within that space. Essentially this means that if your viewer doesn't see it or hear it, then it doesn't exist.

To understand the impact of this fully, let's go back to the Rockies, for a moment. What if you chose not to walk your audience through your world and decided instead, to pick a single shot, perhaps of a foothill, to show them? Imagine, then, trying to tell your viewers about this impressive mountain that stood just to the right, off camera. Sure, your viewers would try to imagine that mountain but without actually seeing it,

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they wouldn't know whether it had snow-capped peaks or if it was massive or not. In fact, they wouldn't even know of its existence if you didn't mention it to them.

Not showing things can be a good idea sometimes. You may choose to exclude the dumpsters in the parking lot of the convenience store that you are shooting from. If you don't show them, your audience will never know they existed. In fact, in the universe of your video, they won't exist at all. What you capture on screen determines what exists for them and what doesn't. The narrow focus of your lens and microphone can be used to your advantage, as you build your universe.

Videographers and professional filmmakers do this all the time; they call it building sets. Because your viewers can't see beyond the edges of the TV screen, they have no idea what lies beyond if you don't show them. Only show your audience what you want them to see and that's all they will know about your universe.

### Tip 6. *Keep Your Camera Steady*

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Camcorders used to be so large that they had to rest on a person's shoulder while he or she shot. The newer smaller camcorders are light years ahead of their predecessors in portability, but because they are truly hand-held, the shots they produce are not as steady as those of their bulky forefathers. So how do you keep your shots steady?

One of the most obvious ways to make sure you always have a steady shot is to use a tripod. You may have noticed that your camcorder has a threaded hole on the bottom. This is where you attach your tripod's mounting plate with a bolt. That bolt is a standard 1/4-

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inch diameter. What does this mean to you? It means that you can attach a whole slew of homemade support accessories to your camcorder with a common, 1/4-inch bolt that you can buy at your corner hardware store. You can attach a flat stick or metal rod that will extend back to your shoulder, giving your camcorder the added stability of its older larger ancestors. Attach a bolt to the end of a lightweight pole and you have a makeshift monopod that can rest on the ground while you are shooting. Monopods provide stability to your shot while allowing you to move the camcorder quickly to follow action. Readers have even bolted entire tripod heads to the tops of ladders for shooting over large crowds. Get creative, the possibilities are as endless as your imagination.

If you don't have a tripod handy, one of the popular and effective guerrilla supports is the bean bag. Bean bags make great camera supports because they mold to fit the contours of your camcorder while resting on the ground or other solid surface. Simply get your hands on a bean bag large enough to support your camcorder. Set your camcorder on the bean bag, frame your shot, and the bean bag will hold it in place.

When should you use bean bags? Well, suppose you need to shoot from the top of a wall or other tall object - your tripod proves impractical to use. Simply rest the bean bag on top of the wall and plop your camcorder on the bean bag. Bean bags work especially well for low angle shots. Most tripods cannot hold the camcorder lower than a foot off the ground. A bean bag will provide a rock-solid platform inches from the ground.

Don't have an actual bean bag? You can adapt this technique to a myriad of soft items: pillows, blankets, sandbags, a sack of leaves, even your camcorder bag. They'll all work just fine.

Just because you didn't buy, build or bring a camera support doesn't mean you are doomed to have shaky shots. The attentive shooter can find camcorder supports all around. You might set your camcorder on a picnic table to get a shot of your daughter playing at the park, or you could rest your camera on a fence post to get a better shot of the zebras at the zoo. Anything is fair game. Creative shooters have been known to steady their camcorders on garbage cans, mailboxes, curbs, benches and truck tailgates. When you start to look for them, camera supports are plentiful and practically everywhere to be found.

### Tip 7. *Stay in Focus*

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One of the most common problems among video greenhorns is an inability to effectively control the camcorder's focus. Proper focusing techniques will ensure that your audience sees precisely what you want them to see at all times, while giving your video polish and style.

All camcorders are equipped with an autofocus feature. Autofocus uses electronics to determine when a subject is in focus and when it is not. You may not know that many camcorders allow you to override this feature and focus the camcorder manually.

To begin making use of focal effects, you must understand a fundamental property of focus manipulation: depth of field. Put simply, depth of field refers to the range in



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front of your lens that will be in sharp focus when you shoot. Depth of field is important because it allows you to precisely control the elements in your image that are in or out of focus.

Many things impact the depth of field; the three primary variables are the focal length of your lens (wide angle or telephoto setting), the distance from the lens to your subject and the iris diameter:

- Depth of Field is compressed as you zoom in on your subject and expanded as you zoom out.
- Depth of Field increases as the distance between your subject and the lens increases.
- Depth of Field increases as iris diameter decreases.

You can learn to direct these variables to achieve the desired focal result. For example, you will no doubt shoot a lot of footage in which you want everything in the shot to be in sharp focus. As such, you want the depth of field to be as long as possible, extending from your lens all the way back to the horizon. Because depth of field increases as the distance between your subject and the lens increases, you can achieve your desired focal result if you position your camcorder at a generous distance from your subject. Then, when you focus your shot, or when your camcorder's autofocus takes over, all components foreground, your subject and the background should be in sharp focus.

You can also adjust depth of field by manipulating the diameter of your camera's iris, either by reducing or increasing the brightness of the light on your shot so that you can decrease or increase iris diameter to increase or decrease depth of field. Be careful not to reduce light too much. Your shot will end up nicely focused, but dark and grainy.

If you have trouble getting everything in your shot into focus, try zooming in first on your background as tightly as you can. Get the background in focus, and then zoom out. The rest of the shot should then be in sharp focus.

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# Tip 8. *Avoid Common Camcorder Mistakes*

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All the preparation in the world won't do you any good if you still fall victim to the tiny little mistakes that trip up so many starting videographers. Here are some things to be on the look out for!

- **Conserve your Battery Energy!**

A camcorder is an electric appliance. You can either plug it into a wall outlet using an adapter or attach a battery to the unit. Batteries make for more mobile operation, as outlets can be rather scarce at the zoo or the park. The battery that came with your camcorder will last for only one or two hours of continuous use, at best; some only deliver a half-hour or so. That's why it's important to conserve energy whenever you can. Your camcorder may have a standby feature that puts it into a power-saving mode when the camcorder is left on for a time without being used. Regardless of this feature, the best way to conserve power is by turning the camcorder off.

- **Pause when you're not shooting!**

How many times have you gotten a roll of film developed only to find an embarrassing photo when you accidentally took a picture of your foot? The same thing can happen with your camcorder. If you don't remember to pause it after shooting, you might find yourself back at home reviewing fifteen minutes of excellent pavement footage, or even worse, a documentary about the inside of your camera bag.

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- **Unpause when you're ready to shoot!**

This problem has a flip side, as well. You may think you've got your granddaughter's entire dance recital down on tape, only to get home and discover that you were in pause mode when you thought you were recording and vice versa. The good news is that camcorder manufacturers know how easy it is to make these mistakes. That's why they gave you a viewfinder.

- **Listen to Your Viewfinder!**

The viewfinder is not just for aiming the camcorder. Your viewfinder speaks volumes about the status of your unit. For example, you can easily tell whether or not you are recording just by looking in the viewfinder where, in many cases, you will see either "PAUSE" or "RECORD."

- **Resist the Zooming Temptation!**

Having a camcorder can sometimes make you feel like Spielberg. You don't want to just shoot Cousin Wayne's birthday party; you want drama, action and suspense. In your zeal, you may try to add action to otherwise "boring" shots by zooming in and out. Being creative in your camerawork can make for interesting video. But there's also a lot to be said for the KISS philosophy: Keep It Simple, Stupid.

- **Think Before You Shoot**

Sound like a lot to think about? It really isn't. Today's camcorders and accessories really try to be as easy to use as possible. In reality, most of the mistakes you'll make while you're learning will probably not be earth--or camcorder--shattering. Read your manual. Force yourself to pay attention to your equipment. Learn to avoid the snafus. Before long, your video will improve and your camcorder will become less a toy and more a tool.

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### *Tip 8 1/2. Have Fun!*

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This is probably the biggest tip of all: Don't forget to have fun! After all, we all know that when you enjoy your work, you come out with a better end product. These tips might seem a little overwhelming at first (You mean I have to remember EIGHT whole tips?), but with a little work and common sense, you'll find that these video production fundamentals become second nature in no time. Shooting video can be a lot of fun, especially when you get to show your finished movie to friends and family and find that you've created something that they can genuinely enjoy. Remember these eight tips will get you well on your way to creating that first video that you've been thinking about. Good luck and happy shooting!

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