



A Director's Guide to Being On Camera

The *Take*

Where to look, what to do with your hands, and how to tell
a usable take from a stiff one. Nothing about what to say.

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START HERE

The gap nobody teaches.

You can frame a shot properly and light it properly and still produce something nobody watches, because the person in it looks like they would rather be somewhere else.

Everything in here happens between pressing record and pressing stop. It is the part a director handles on a set, and it is the part almost nobody covers, because it is not marketing and it is not gear. It is performance, and performance is a craft with rules.

The good news is that being watchable is mostly mechanical. Eye line, hands, pace, stillness and knowing when to stop. Five things, each of which can be fixed deliberately. None of them require confidence, which is fortunate, because confidence is the output and not the input.

WHAT THIS GUIDE WILL NOT DO

It will not tell you what to say. Not a hook, not a structure, not a subject. That is a different problem with its own system, and it is not in a craft guide. Everything here works regardless of the words, which is exactly why it can be given away.

The five things

In the order they are worth fixing. The first one is worth more than the other four together.

WHAT	THE PROBLEM	HOW LONG TO FIX
Eye line	You watch yourself, so you read as looking down	One session
The start	The keeper take begins cold, because you began cold	One session
Hands	Held still, or held each other, both read as braced	A few sessions
Pace	Room energy arrives on camera as flat	A few sessions
Nerves	Adrenaline reaches the recording	Repetition, mostly

Who it is for

Anybody who has to be the person on screen. It assumes you are filming yourself, alone, with nobody behind the camera to tell you that your shoulders are up around your ears. That absence is the whole difficulty: on a set, somebody would simply say so.

How to use it

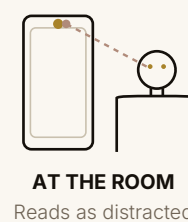
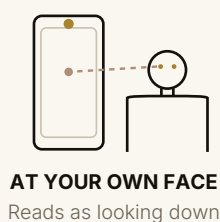
Read it once, then keep it open beside you for the first few sessions. The five drills at the back are the useful part. Each takes under ten minutes and fixes one specific thing, and none of them are meant to be posted.

ONE OF FIVE · EYE LINE

Look at the lens, not at yourself.

This is the fastest single improvement available to you, and almost everyone gets it wrong for the same reason.

When you film yourself, your own face appears on the screen. The screen sits below the lens. So you watch yourself, your eyes settle an inch or two low, and every video you make reads as very slightly downcast. Nobody watching can name it. They just trust you a little less.



Three eye lines, and what each one reads as to somebody watching.

The gap is worse on a phone than on a camera, because the screen is large and close and your own face is on it, moving. A camera gives you nothing to look at but the lens. A phone gives you the single most distracting thing in the room and puts it two inches below the place you are supposed to be looking.

Distance changes the maths. At arm's length the angle between lens and screen is wide enough to be obvious. Three metres away, the same physical gap is a fraction of a degree and nobody could see it even if they were looking for it. If you can get the phone further away and still be framed properly, most of this problem solves itself.

EYE LINE

Making it automatic

Willpower does not fix this, because the pull to check yourself is stronger than the intention not to. Remove the temptation instead.

- Put a mark by the lens. A small sticker or a dot of tape beside the front camera. You are not looking at a black dot on a phone, you are looking at the mark.
- Turn the preview off, or cover it. If your camera app allows it, hide the preview. If not, a strip of paper taped over the lower two thirds of the screen works and costs nothing.
- Move the phone further away. At arm's length the gap between lens and screen is a large angle. At two metres it is a small one. Distance forgives a lot.
- Use the rear camera. Better glass, and there is no preview to look at. Frame it once, then leave it.

Which setup, and what each one costs

SETUP	EYE LINE	THE TRADE
Handheld, arm's length	Worst. Wide angle between lens and screen.	Fastest to set up, and the shot moves with you
Propped, one metre	Better. The angle halves.	You have to frame it once and stay in frame
Tripod, two to three metres	Best. The gap is negligible.	Needs space, and the audio needs thought
Rear camera, any distance	Solved. There is no preview to look at.	You cannot check framing while recording

THE ONE EXCEPTION

Looking away is not always wrong. People genuinely look away when they are thinking, and holding the lens without a single break for ninety seconds reads as intense rather than warm. Break the gaze when you are recalling something, then come back. What you are avoiding is looking away out of discomfort, which is a different thing and looks like it.

If you are on a laptop

The same problem, worse. The camera sits at the top of a large screen and whatever you are looking at is somewhere in the middle of it, which is a long way down. Move the window you are reading to the very top of the display, directly under the camera, and the error shrinks to almost nothing. If you are on a call and want to look at the person, accept that you cannot do both and pick one.

TWO OF FIVE · THE START

Start in motion.

Most unusable takes are unusable because of the first two seconds, not the content.

The standard sequence is: press record, walk back, settle, compose your face, take a breath, begin. All of that is on the recording, and all of it has to be cut. Worse, the beginning that survives is the one where you are still arriving.

The fix

Be talking before you are ready. Press record, then say the first line two or three times over, as though rehearsing it. Keep going into the take. The version you keep will be the third or fourth attempt, by which point your face has caught up with you and the energy is already running.

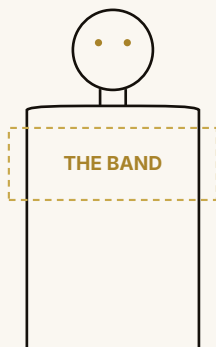
INSTEAD OF	DO THIS	WHY
Record, settle, begin	Record, say the line three times, keep going	The keeper is a warm start, not a cold one
A held breath before the first word	Breathe out, then speak	An inheld breath tightens the voice
Starting with your mouth closed	Start mid gesture, already moving	Motion at the cut hides the join
Deciding the first line on camera	Know the first line only, then improvise	One memorised line removes the worst hesitation

Four swaps at the top of a take. Each removes one thing you would have had to fix later.

THREE OF FIVE · HANDS

Hands, and the band they live in.

The instruction to relax your hands is useless. The instruction to keep them in a specific rectangle is not.



- **INSIDE THIS BAND**
Gestures read as natural emphasis.
- **ABOVE THE SHOULDERS**
Reads as frantic. It also leaves frame.
- **BELOW THE WAIST**
Invisible. You look stiff for no reason.
- **GRIPPING EACH OTHER**
The tell everyone recognises.

Between the sternum and the waist, roughly shoulder width. Inside this band, gesture freely.

You do not need to plan gestures. You need to remove the ones that read as nervous, and gesturing inside the band is what your hands do naturally the moment they are not being held still.

The band is not arbitrary. It is the area a mid shot actually contains, so anything inside it is visible and anything outside it is either cropped off or halfway out of frame. It also happens to be where hands sit when the shoulders are relaxed, which is why it looks natural: you are not being asked to hold a position, you are being asked to stop holding one.

IF YOU ARE HOLDING SOMETHING

A pen, a mug, a notebook. This is a legitimate fix and not a crutch, because it gives the grip reflex somewhere to go. Two rules: hold it loosely, and do not fiddle with it. A pen being clicked is worse than nothing at all.

HANDS

The three habits that read as nervous

THE HABIT	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	THE REPLACEMENT
Hands clasped together	Braced, as though waiting for bad news	Hold a pen loosely in one hand. It occupies the grip.
Touching your face or neck	Self soothing, and viewers read it instantly	Sit slightly forward. It is harder to reach up.
Repeating one gesture	Metronomic, and it starts to distract	Rest between points. Stillness is a gesture too.

If you are standing

Weight on both feet, not on one hip. Standing on one leg reads as casual for about four seconds and as unsteady after that. If you drift, put a mark on the floor and return to it.

If you are sitting

Sit forward of the backrest. Leaning back opens a gap between you and the camera that reads as disinterest, and it collapses your chest, which takes the support out of your voice. Forward, feet down, shoulders loose.

If one hand is holding the phone

This is the hardest case, because you have one hand available and it will feel conspicuous on its own. Two options that both work. Either commit to one hand and gesture with it normally, which looks fine and is more common than people think. Or put the phone down and take the constraint away, which is almost always the better answer and is the reason a ten pound tripod improves a lot of people's footage more than any app.

A NOTE ON MIRRORING

Most front cameras show you a mirrored preview and then save the file unmirrored, so the version you watch back has your gestures on the opposite side from the one you rehearsed. This is disorienting the first few times and it is not a fault. Nobody else will ever see the mirrored version, so the unmirrored one is the truth.

FOUR OF FIVE · PACE

Slightly too much is about right.

A camera flattens energy. The level that feels natural in a quiet room arrives on screen as flat, and the level that feels slightly excessive arrives as normal.



This is not an instruction to shout or to perform enthusiasm you do not have. It is an instruction to add roughly fifteen per cent to whatever feels natural, and to accept that it will feel wrong while you are doing it and look right when you watch it back. Almost everyone finds this uncomfortable for the first few sessions, and almost everyone stops noticing after that.

Speed is a separate dial

Energy up does not mean fast. Nervousness makes people speed up, and speeding up makes them harder to follow. Raise the energy and keep the tempo, then put deliberate stops at the end of sentences. A full stop you actually land on is worth more than any amount of pace.

THE PAUSE NOBODY TAKES

Silence feels much longer to the person in it than to the person watching. A pause that feels like an awkward eternity to you reads as composure to a viewer. If you are not sure, hold it one beat longer than is comfortable, then continue.

Volume is not energy either

Getting louder is the most common wrong turn, and it is the one that makes people sound like they are selling something. Energy lives in variation: where you put emphasis, where you speed up slightly, where you drop to almost nothing because the point deserves it. A line delivered quietly can carry more energy than a line delivered loudly, and it will always sound more like you.

On smiling

Do not hold one. A held smile decays into something strained within about four seconds and everybody can see it happening. Smile when there is a reason to, and let your face rest the remainder of the time. A neutral face is not an unfriendly face, and it reads far better than a maintained one.

FIVE OF FIVE · NERVES

What nerves actually are.

Being nervous on camera is not a character flaw and it does not go away by being told to relax. It is a physical response, so it responds to physical things.

Adrenaline does three specific things that matter here. It shortens your breath, which thins the voice. It speeds you up, which makes you harder to follow. And it pushes blood away from your hands, which is why they feel like they belong to someone else. Each of those has a mechanical answer.

WHAT IT DOES	WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT
Shortens the breath, thins the voice	Breathe out fully before the first word, not in. An empty exhale resets the tension.
Speeds up your delivery	Land the full stops deliberately. Pace follows punctuation more than intention.
Makes your hands feel foreign	Give them one job. A pen, or a gesture you make on purpose at the first point.
Raises your shoulders	Roll them back once before you record. It also opens the chest, which supports the voice.
Makes the room feel like an audience	Talk to one person you know, by name, in your head. Not to a camera and not to everyone.

None of this removes the nerves. It stops the nerves from reaching the recording, which is the only part that matters. Confidence on camera is almost entirely a function of how many takes you have shot, and the people who look natural are people who have done it a great many times.

The thing nobody says out loud

Most of the discomfort is not fear of the camera. It is watching yourself back afterwards, which almost everybody finds unpleasant the first several times. You are seeing a version of your face and voice you have never had to look at directly, and the instinct is to conclude that something is wrong with it. Nothing is wrong with it. It is unfamiliarity, and it fades with repetition faster than you would expect.

If you take one thing from this page: the discomfort is not a signal that you should not be doing this. It is the ordinary cost of the first few dozen takes, and it is charged to everybody.

THE TAKE

How many, and which one.

Two takes is not enough to get a good one. Fifteen is enough to lose the thing that made the first one worth watching.

There is a curve. The first take is stiff. Somewhere around the third to fifth, you stop performing and start talking, and that is the zone worth keeping. Past about the eighth, you begin reciting, and reciting is obvious to everybody watching even when the words are identical.

SHOOT

Four to six takes. Stop there. If none of them work, the problem is not the performance, it is that you have not worked out what you are saying. Stop recording and go and sort that out instead.

DO NOT

Review between takes. It breaks the run and moves you from talking to judging. Shoot the set, then watch them all at once. You will pick better and you will pick faster.

The curve

TAKE	WHAT IT USUALLY IS	KEEP IT?
First	Stiff. You are still finding the shape of it.	Rarely
Second	Better, usually still careful.	Sometimes
Third to fifth	You stop performing and start talking.	Usually the one
Sixth to eighth	Tightening up. Sometimes sharper, sometimes flatter.	Occasionally
Ninth onward	Reciting. Word perfect and visibly dead.	Almost never

The curve moves earlier as you get more practised. It does not go away.

Choosing the keeper

Watch them with the sound off first. The one that holds your attention with no audio is almost always the right one, because you are seeing presence rather than judging your own wording. Then check it against these.

- Did the first three seconds start already moving, or did they start cold?
- Are the eyes on the lens for most of it, with breaks that look like thinking?
- Do the hands move inside the band, or are they gripping each other?
- Does it end on a landed full stop, or does it trail off and then stop?
- Would you keep watching if it were not you?

The last one is the only test that reliably matters, and it is the hardest to answer honestly about your own face. Give it a day if you can.

REFERENCE

The tells, and what they are really telling you.

Symptoms on the left, cause in the middle. The cause is almost never the thing you notice.

WHAT YOU SEE	WHAT IS ACTUALLY WRONG	THE FIX
You look tired	Light is above and behind, not in front	Face the window. See The First Frame.
You look shift	Eyes on the preview, not the lens	Mark the lens, cover the screen
You sound flat	Room energy, not camera energy	Add fifteen per cent, keep the tempo
You sound rushed	Full stops are not landing	Stop properly at each one
You look stiff	Hands are held below frame	Bring them into the band
It feels like a recital	Too many takes, or a memorised script	Memorise the first line only
The ending is weak	You stopped rather than finished	Decide the last line before recording
You look braced	Hands clasped, or shoulders raised	Roll the shoulders back once before recording
You look uninterested	Sitting back against the chair	Sit forward of the backrest
The smile looks forced	It is being held rather than happening	Let the face rest between reasons to smile
You sound thin	Breath held, chest collapsed	Exhale fully, sit up, then speak
You keep restarting	You have not decided the first line	Memorise the opening sentence only

IF ONLY ONE THING IS WRONG, CHECK THESE FIRST

Eye line, then light, then hands. In that order. Those three account for most of the difference between footage that looks amateur and footage that does not, and all three are free to fix. Nothing on this page requires equipment you do not already own.

PRACTICE

Five drills.

None of these are for posting. They are for building the habit somewhere the stakes are zero.

01

The lens drill

EYE LINE • 5 MINUTES

Talk about what you did yesterday for sixty seconds, eyes on the lens the whole time. Boring on purpose: the subject does not matter, the eye line does.

SETUP Phone at eye height, screen covered or preview off

LENGTH Three takes of sixty seconds

WATCH FOR How often you want to look at yourself

YOU HAVE IT WHEN You forget the screen is there at all

The mistake everyone makes: Uncovering the screen to check how you look, which restarts the habit you are trying to break.

RUN IT IN ONE SITTING

02

The warm start

THE FIRST THREE SECONDS • 5 MINUTES

Press record and say the same opening line five times in a row without stopping. Watch it back and find the take where your face caught up with your voice.

SETUP Any framing, it does not matter here

LENGTH One recording, five repeats

WATCH FOR The moment the delivery stops being careful

YOU HAVE IT WHEN Repeat three sounds like repeat five

The mistake everyone makes: Stopping between repeats, which resets you to cold every time and defeats the whole exercise.

RUN IT IN ONE SITTING

03

Hands in the band

HANDS · 10 MINUTES

Explain something you know well and gesture deliberately at every point you make. Overdo it. Then watch it back and see how little of it reads as too much.

SETUP Mid shot, waist up, so hands are in frame

LENGTH Two takes of ninety seconds

WATCH FOR Gestures leaving the top of the frame

YOU HAVE IT WHEN Hands move without you deciding to move them

The mistake everyone makes: Planning specific gestures for specific words, which reads as choreography and is worse than stillness.

RUN IT IN ONE SITTING

04

The fifteen per cent

PACE · 10 MINUTES

Record the same forty seconds three times: once at normal energy, once slightly raised, once at a level that feels absurd. Watch all three back and pick the one that reads as normal.

SETUP Anything, framing is irrelevant

LENGTH Three takes of forty seconds

WATCH FOR How wrong the correct one felt to record

YOU HAVE IT WHEN You can find that level on the first take

The mistake everyone makes: Confusing energy with speed, and simply talking faster in each take.

RUN IT IN ONE SITTING

05

Sound off

CHOOSING · 10 MINUTES

Take any five takes you have already shot and watch them muted. Rank them. Then watch with sound and see whether the ranking holds.

SETUP Footage you already have

LENGTH As long as the takes

WATCH FOR Which one you keep watching without meaning to

YOU HAVE IT WHEN The muted pick and the sound pick agree

The mistake everyone makes: Judging your own wording instead of your presence, which is the thing the mute is there to prevent.

RUN IT IN ONE SITTING



The line this guide will not cross

This is how to say it.

Not what to say.

Everything in this guide works no matter what comes out of your mouth. Eye line, hands, pace and takes are mechanics, and mechanics can be written down and handed over, which is why they have been.

What to actually say is the other half, and it does not fit in a craft guide. It depends on what you have built, who you are trying to reach, and what you have earned the right to claim. That part needs a system for working it out, and ideally somebody building it with you and telling you the truth about it.

There are two ways to get it. The Feature is the whole system without me: positioning, planning, filming, carousels and an AI setup, in one playbook and a Notion workspace. It opens soon, and because you downloaded this, you will hear first.

The ninety day mentorship is that system built with me, one to one. A filmmaker and creative director in your corner for ninety days: shaping your positioning with you, building your content with you, reviewing your work before it goes out, holding you to the standard and the schedule, answering whatever comes up, and changing course with you when the numbers say so. It is at cinematicauthoritysystem.com. If you want neither, everything above still works.



The Take

Guide two of three.

The First Frame comes before it. The Cut comes after.

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