

Look for visually interesting material

When you arrive to the location of the Real Person, first go in **without** your camera.

Walk around and *look*, with just your eyes. Talk to people. Ask questions. Don't record anything, don't stick a microphone in anyone's face. You might take some handwritten notes about what you see or what you learn, but that's all. What you're looking for is the action and activity that will make interesting video images. **Remember, this is not breaking news — this is a story.** People will be doing these things later; it's not a one-time action that you are going to miss without your camera.

Talk to people as much as possible and ask a lot of “Why?” and “How?” questions. This is not the interview for tape. This is your legwork. This is the foundation of your story.

Before you go back to the car to get your camera, or take it out of the bag, you need to know what the story is.

Don't expect the camera to find the story for you. It won't.

Shoot first, interview after

I also learned this from Rosenblum, and I find that it runs against the grain for most TV reporters and many print journalists who have learned to shoot video. To me, however, the logic is simple: If you first shoot what's interesting, then you'll ask questions about it later in the interview. If you interview first, you're likely to only go around “shooting to cover” — that is, you will point your camera at stuff your interview subject spoke about.

But your interview subject speaks about *what you ask questions about*.

If you allow your curiosity to be your true guide, you are more likely to ask unexpected questions — and thus to get interesting, revealing answers. If you have gathered the visuals with an innocent eye, an uninformed eye — the eye of a curious child who always asks “Why?” — you are more likely to have a fresh story, a memorable story, a story that's worth watching.

Say you shot some footage of a boy at the farmers market, sitting on the ground behind the sales table, trimming the broccoli stalks with a knife. Then you interview his mom, who's standing at the table, selling the vegetables. Knowing that you have some nice shots of the boy, you're sure to ask about him. If you have no shots of him, you're likely to be focused on just the woman and the table.

I've seen a dozen or more very boring stories about local farmers markets, where all I hear is completely expected stuff about being a farmer, coming to the market, selling produce. There's no point in doing those stories if everything the audience sees and hears is *exactly* what they can already see and hear when they call up their own past impressions of and assumptions about farmers.

Shoot action, emotion, and the third thing

The boy trimming broccoli stalks is action, activity. The woman standing at the table is not. Even when she's selling, bagging vegetables, and taking cash from a customer, that's pretty damned dull.

I recently saw some student footage of a woman choosing a cantaloupe in a supermarket. It was actually pretty interesting, because the camera position was very close to her hands as she wrapped them around one cantaloupe and then another. It was close to her face as she held a melon up to her ear and shook it a little. Then there was a high shot from behind her that gave us a good view of the array of piled-high cantaloupes. She appeared to be rather intent on her task too. Not bad.

I got this handy trio of *things that work well* in video [from Angela Grant](#), who shot video for a newspaper in Texas for several years. She called them “lots of movement and action”; emotion; and “something people just want to see.” I like to call them “action or activity”; emotion; and “you’ve got to see it to believe it.” Angela is also the person who pointed me to the best example ever of the third category, from The Spokesman-Review newspaper in Spokane, Washington: [the paraplegic dog video](#), by Dan Pelle. In fact, that video is really a hat trick, because it’s got all three goals covered.

Choosing a cantaloupe at the supermarket is not very exciting action — but you can make it interesting, visually, if you shoot with care.

The five-shot method

So you’ve identified an activity that’s worth recording with video. Great! Now be sure to get five different shots of that one activity:

1. Extreme close-up of action detail, e.g. hands fondling a cantaloupe
2. Close-up of the face of the person doing the action
3. Medium shot, face and action together
4. Over-the-shoulder view of the action (point of view of the person doing the action)
5. One more different angle — be creative!

It’s not that you will necessarily use all five shots in the final edit, but if you’ve got them, you’ll find that editing is immensely simplified. You always have enough shot variety to put together something decent. (See [a BBC training video](#) that illustrates the five-shot method.)

Colin Mulvany’s [post about shooting sequences](#) spells out why this method makes your video story better.

If you’re shooting one event, such as “Sarah buys ingredients for fruit salad” (part of a longer story, such as “Sarah takes fresh food to the homeless”), you will shoot several five-shot sequences. Cantaloupe is one; buying bananas might be another; loading the grocery sacks onto her bicycle might be another. Another event is making the fruit salad (peeling, chopping,

assembling). A third event is taking the paper cups of fruit salad to where the homeless people congregate.

Camera movement

It's quite important to frame the shot carefully before you press the Record button to start shooting. If you're moving around, you'll find the footage very hard to edit later. Train yourself to frame the action, then freeze solid. Press the button. Count silently to 10, at least (this ensures that you have enough to allow clean cutting) — and then press the Record button again to STOP RECORDING. *Never* swing the camera around to the next thing. *Always* stop the recording.

These rules are particularly important for Web video, but also, they are really good for helping a beginner to progress and learn how to shoot well. When you're vastly experienced at shooting, then you can break the rules (because then you'll know when it's okay to do so).

1. Don't pan (don't move the camera horizontally)
2. Don't tilt (don't move the camera vertically)
3. Don't zoom
4. Press the "Record Off" button — often

You can see an example of this shooting method (albeit with some camera movement) in this video from the Detroit Free Press: [More than a mailman to struggling customers](#). Pay attention to how short the shots are and how much shot variety there is.

NEVER ask the subject to perform actions for you. You'll need to learn how to anticipate the action and run ahead to get these shots.

How? Practice, practice, practice.