



Practice Makes Perfect Videos

How to prepare for your first video project
by Nadira Jamal

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About Nadira

Nadira is a professional performer and teacher based in Boston, Massachusetts. She is the hostess of Taktaba, the video podcast on dance composition for belly dancers, and the creator of the Improvisation Toolkit DVD series.

Nadira specializes in resourceful video production, which has allowed her to produce two professional-quality DVDs with an upfront investment of less than \$100 each.



Why You Need to Practice Before You Make Your Video

Imagine You Were About to Do the Biggest Show of Your Life

Maybe you were hired to perform for royalty. Maybe you were asked to audition for a high-profile dance company. Maybe you were competing for a national title.

With the stakes that high, you'd do everything you could to prepare, wouldn't you? You'd practice your choreography until you could do it in your sleep. Or you'd improvise to your song over and over again. And you'd practice in your costume to make sure there were no snagged earrings, high-flying skirts, or loose hooks.

A Video is a High-Stakes Production Too

When you release a video, you're putting yourself out there and stepping into the spotlight. This can be terrifying, especially if you're not already a well-known dancer. So you need to practice the skills that will allow you to make a great video, so you can make a great first impression.

And you need to do it *before* you start your project.

Why Do I Need to Practice Before I Start My Project?

Producing a video is a lot of work. There are a lot of things to get done, everything is unfamiliar, and you're usually working under a deadline. So you can easily get overwhelmed. And when you inevitably run into problems, you panic, which makes it harder to focus and solve them.

But if you practice your video production skills beforehand, you do your learning in a safe zone. You can take your time getting familiar with the steps and processes. And you can make your mistakes when there's nothing to lose.

So when you run into the same issues on your real project, you can handle them calmly and confidently.

How Can I Practice Video Production?

The best way to practice your video production skills is to do a small project. This could be a promotional video for your studio, or a short drills video for your students, or even a home movie.

As you film your project, edit it, and create a DVD, you'll become much more comfortable with the process, and build some important skills.

(Don't worry; we'll talk about how to do that later in this report.)

But I Don't Want to Waste Time On a Test Project

A test project is an excellent use of your time. Just like rehearsing for a big show, practicing your video skills will help make sure that your real shoot goes smoothly.

Plus, it doesn't take as long as you think. If you choose an appropriate project, you can easily complete it in less than a week.

Dos and Don'ts

Do: Keep it short.

My first project was my video podcast, Taktaba. The first episode was 30 minutes long, and that was just long enough to feel overwhelming. I'd recommend 10-20 minutes for a drills video or home movie, or 5-10 minutes for a promo video.

Do: Make something you can use.

Your test project doesn't have to be a throwaway. Even a short project can be useful. For example, a quickie drills video makes a great class registration bonus or holiday gift for your students.

Don't: Pick a project that's too important to you.

Remember, we need to practice in a safe zone, where the stakes are low. So save your pet projects for later.

Summary

When you release a video, you are creating a first impression. To make the best video you can, you need to practice your video production skills in a safe zone. You can do this by filming, editing, and creating a DVD for a short project. Be sure to pick a project that is short and useable, but not too important to you.

Once you get some practice, you'll arrive at your first shoot as well prepared as for a show.

Next Steps

Choose your test project, and write a quick outline of what you'll cover. (If it takes more than 10 minutes, you're thinking too hard!)

How to Overcome Camera Shyness

As you sit down to record your video, you're cool, confident, and prepared.

But when that little red "record" light goes on, your shoulders tense up. Your face stiffens into a mask. You trip over your words and forget your lines.

And the footage is painful to watch.

Why Do We Get More Nervous On Camera Than In Person?

When we speak to someone in person, there is give-and-take. Even if we're doing all the talking, the other person is constantly responding through their body language and facial expressions. These non-verbal cues tell us where we stand and make us more comfortable.

But the camera can't give us those cues. We can't see our conversation partner, so we're in the dark. We don't know if our words are making our listener happy or angry. We don't know if they are engaged, bored, or confused. That uncertainty makes us second-guess ourselves, so we can't relax and be ourselves.

Luckily, you can overcome camera shyness. It just takes a bit of practice in the safe zone.

How can I get comfortable on camera?

The best way to get comfortable on camera is to work up to it gradually.

Before you jump into your practice project, record a daily video journal for at least a week. It doesn't have to be anything fancy - just sit down in front of the camera, and talk for about ten minutes.

After a week or two, talking to the camera should feel less awkward. Then you'll be ready to film your practice project.

But I Can't Think of Anything to Say!

It doesn't matter what you say; just talk. Whatever comes to mind is good enough. No matter what you talk about, you're still making progress.

Here are some questions to get you started:

- How was your day?
- What did you do today?
- What did you dream about last night?
- What's on your mind?
- What are your plans for tomorrow/this weekend?
- How has the weather been?
- How is your spouse / best friend / boss / kids / cat doing?
- Are you reading any good books?
- Who was your best friend growing up?
- How did you get started in belly dance?
- What's your favorite belly dance venue, and why?
- If you won the lottery tomorrow, what would you change?
- If you could have more free time or more money, which would you choose?
- Talk about your last vacation.
- Tell a bedtime story.

Dos and Don'ts

Do: come as you are.

Nobody is going to see this, so you don't need to put on makeup or worry about how you look.

Don't: stop and start over, or correct yourself as you speak.

Just let the words flow, even if they aren't flowing well. You don't stop and start over in a real conversation.

Do: pretend you're talking to a person.

Choose someone warm and supportive, like your best friend or most eager student, or even a fictional character. If you're having trouble pretending, print out a photo and place it right next to the camera. Then talk to the picture, not the lens.

Don't: watch your video journal.

The point of this exercise is *just* to practice speaking to the camera. How the footage comes out is irrelevant. If you watch it now, you'll be tempted to critique your performance, and that will sabotage your efforts.

Do: record it.

It's tempting to just talk without actually recording yourself, but resist! Even if you sit in front of a camera, you'll know you're not "on". So you'll be practicing talking to yourself, not to the camera. That will improve your speaking, but it won't make the rolling camera any less intimidating.

Summary

Many people get camera shy, even those who are very comfortable with public speaking. Speaking to a camera is harder because we don't have the listener's body language to tell us how we're doing. But camera shyness can ruin your video footage, so it's important to get over it.

The best cure for camera shyness is practice. Spend 10 minutes each day recording a video journal. It doesn't matter what you say; just get in 10 minutes of practice every day talking to the camera.

Just don't watch your footage too soon or try to practice without recording yourself. These will sabotage your efforts!

With a bit of practice, speaking to that little red light will feel like catching up with an old friend.

Next Steps

1. Set up your camera
2. Decide what time you are going to record your video journal each day.

Tip: Camera Options

The best way to practice is to sit in front of an actual camera. That is the closest experience to a real shoot. But you don't go out and buy one just for practicing.

Here are a few free or low-cost alternatives:

Your laptop

Most recent laptop models (and even some desktops) come with a built-in webcam. If yours is less than 4 years old, it probably has one. Check your laptop's documentation if you're not sure.

Buy a webcam

If your computer did not come with a built-in webcam, you can buy one for less than \$10.

Your digital camera

Some digital cameras can record video as well. The picture quality is usually not that great, and it may only be able to record a few minutes, but that's good enough for your video journal.

How to Troubleshoot On-Screen Habits

Have you ever been in a movie theater with someone who had a cough? You're lost in the film and you're having a great time, but as soon as you hear that little sound, your concentration is broken. You just can't help it - that tiny noise in a dark, quiet theater grabs your attention. Once or twice is not so bad, but if it happens throughout the film, it can ruin the whole movie.

Your On-Screen Habits Distract Your Audience

Just like coughing in a movie, your on-screen habits can distract your viewer. Even tiny things like speaking too fast, fidgeting, or "ums" can create major distractions. And many of these are nervous habits, so even if you don't normally do them, they may rear their ugly heads when you step in front of the camera.

It doesn't matter how great your content is: the viewer can't learn what you have to teach if something is distracting them. So it's important to identify and fix any distracting habits before they can ruin your project. Luckily, your practice project gives you the perfect opportunity to do that.

Why Can't I Troubleshoot in my Video Journal?

Think of the video journal as a warm-up. Its purpose is to prepare your mind and body for the real work. If you try to troubleshoot during your warm-up, you'll have trouble relaxing into it, and not get the full benefit.

Besides, your video journal is just sitting and talking, while your final project is likely to also have demonstrating, drilling, and/or performing. Your practice project will probably also have some of those things, so it makes a better test case.

How Do I Troubleshoot My Habits?

The easiest way to identify your on-screen habits is to film yourself and watch the footage. So jump right in and shoot your test project. This is a preliminary shoot, so don't over-think it – try to get each scene within a few "takes".

Next, watch through the footage, and make a list of anything that might distract the viewer. Keep in mind that you are already familiar with your test project, so what seems fine to you may distract someone who is watching for the first time. So try to watch it with fresh eyes.

Then shoot your test project again, and try to remove the distractions you noted on your list. It may take several tries, and that's okay. (That's why I told you to choose a short test project!) But with every reshoot, you're polishing your skills and refining your delivery, so your real project will be distraction-free.

But I Fidget in Person and Nobody Cares

Watching a video and having a live conversation are very different things. It's easier to overlook small habits in a conversation, when you're making a personal connection with someone. But video is impersonal, so we're more likely to notice and judge any annoyances.

What Should I Be Looking For?

Here are the most common distracting habits to watch out for:

Pacing

- Speaking too quickly
- Not including a pause between ideas (5 seconds is ideal)

Movements

- Tossing your head
- Playing with your hair
- Fidgeting (especially hands)
- Shifty eyes (or looking at the ceiling or floor)

Sounds

- "Um"
- "Like"
- "You know"
- Inhaling loudly before you speak
- Plosive "ps" (when your "p"s sound like you're popping a bubble)

Dos and Don'ts

Don't: stress about the production values.

This is a small, low-key project for a small audience, not your national debut. Do what you can to get clear picture and sound, but don't let that stall your project. For now, just focus on getting the footage.

(I'll share a great resource for getting professional production values at very low cost at the MECDA Professional Dance Conference and Retreat.)

Do: cut yourself some slack.

If you have some of these habits, don't feel bad! I have done *everything* on this list myself. And they all get better with practice.

Don't: expect perfection.

Your footage doesn't have to be flawless. It just has to be good enough that the viewer doesn't get distracted.

Summary

Even small distractions can interfere with your viewer's learning. It's important to identify and fix any on-screen habits you may have before you shoot your real project. To do that, do a preliminary shoot of your test project, and audit it for distractions. Then reshoot, trying to remove those issues.

It may take several tries, but every attempt will help refine your on-screen presentation so your real project will be distraction-free.

Next Step:

Do a preliminary shoot of your test project.

Why You Need to Practice Basic Video Editing

Imagine that you were driving in your neighborhood, and realized that you needed to stop at the post office. You'd have no trouble getting there, right?

Now imagine that you're driving through an unfamiliar city, one hand groping for your map, the other clutching the wheel for dear life. Do you think you could manage that little detour then?

Probably not, and for two reasons:

- 1) You don't know city well enough to navigate on your own
- 2) If you think about it too hard, you could get distracted and crash your car.

Editing Your Pet Project is Like Driving in an Unfamiliar City

Once you're familiar with it, editing is actually pretty easy, but until you get used to it, it can seem overwhelming. So even though you only need to learn a few basic tasks, it's best to practice them when your dream project isn't on the line.

If These Tasks Are So Basic, Why Do I Have to Practice Them?

The editing tasks you'll be using are pretty straightforward, but even a simple process takes some getting used to. I guarantee that you will run into quirks in your software, or gaps in your understanding. It's better to work through those when you're relaxed and fresh, not when a mistake could ruin your important project, and your deadline is looming.

So How Do I Practice Editing?

The best way to practice is to edit your test project. You can practice importing, cutting, transitions, titles, adding music, and burning to DVD – all the same skills you'll be using on your larger project.

Let's look at that process in more detail

The exact instructions are different in each video editing software package, but here's an overview of the steps you'll need to take. I've included some tips on where to find more detailed instructions at the end of this chapter.

Import

This is when you transfer your footage from your video camera into your editing software.

Cut

Next, you'll decide which parts of your footage you want to include in your project, and trim away the rest.

If you shot your project in one take (all the way through without mistakes or pauses that need to be removed), you'll end up with one clip. But it's more likely that you'll have 5-10, or even more clips.

Transition

Transitions link your clips together. Without them, the viewer will see a jarring "jump" when one clip ends and the other starts. There are many types of transitions, but it's best to stick with fades or cross-dissolves.

There are several transitions in the cross-dissolve family; depending on your software, you may see them called cross-dissolve, cross-fade, or overlap.

Title

A title is just some text displayed on the screen. These can be shown over a black background, over a photograph, or over your footage. These are helpful for creating your opening titles, splash screens to introduce a new section, and the final credits.

Add Music

You'll use this feature to add music to your opening titles and credits. Depending on your project, you may also overlay music over your footage, or add voice-over.

Create the DVD

Once you're done with this process, you'll have a nice video file, but not a DVD to play on your DVD player. In the DVD authoring phase, you'll add chapters to your project, create menus, and burn your project to a DVD.

Depending on your project, you may also want to practice adding photos and subtitles, but that's not required.

But That Looks Like a Lot of Work!

Any skill takes some time and practice to learn, but editing a video is actually no harder than making a scrapbook: you cut out the pieces you want, assemble them, add some text, add some decoration, then glue it all into a book.

Video editing used to be the realm of experts, but this is no longer the case. There has been an explosion of consumer-level editing software in the last several years, and they're much easier to use than you think. In fact, most computers ship with

either iMovie (part of the iLife suite for mac) or Windows Movie Maker (part of the Windows Life package for PC), so you may already have what you need.

Note: if you have iLife '08, you'll need to upgrade to a newer version. iMovie '08 does not allow you to set your own DVD chapter locations, which is a deal-breaker for a commercial DVD. This only applies to '08; older and newer versions are fine.

Do's and Don'ts

This “do” is so important that I'm only including one.

Do: ignore the bells and whistles

Even basic video editing software comes with lots of cool features like star wipes, sepia tone, and speed adjustments. You don't need any of these things. (In fact, unless you use them judiciously, they'll make your video look amateurish).

So don't let the fancy features distract you: focus on just the tasks that will help your video be clear, understandable, and polished.

Summary

You only need basic editing skills to create a great video, but even though they're basic, it takes practice to get comfortable with them. If you try to do your learning while editing your pet project, you'll get stressed out at best, or maybe even make a mistake that diminishes your project. Instead, start by editing your practice project: import the footage, cut out the parts you don't want, add transitions, create titles, add music, and burn it to a DVD.

Once you've completed that process, editing your real project will be no more intimidating than driving to the post office.

Next Steps:

Fire up your editing software, and start importing the footage for your test project.

Tip:

Most video editing software comes with clear, easy-to-follow tutorials, so you can learn the basics in an afternoon. The tutorial may come as part of the product documentation or user guide, or you may have to go to the vendor's web site to get it.

You can also find affordable training for many different software packages on lynda.com.

If you prefer live instruction, check out your local adult education center. They often have affordable, hands-on classes on topics like this.

How To Build Relationships that Pay Off

There's an African* saying: If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go in a group. Your video deserves to go far, so you're going to need the help of others.

The Dance Community is the Best Video Production Resource

The dance community, including the dancers, students, musicians, and audiences, can provide a tremendous amount of help with your video.

Input

Most dancers produce the video they want to make, not the video their viewers need. But if you bother to ask, the dance community will tell you exactly what their questions and problems are, as well as what they do and don't like in a dance video. Listening to that input can make the difference between a so-so DVD and a hit.

Media

The dance community can also help you find free or low-cost media, such as music or photos.

Referrals

While it's possible to make your video entirely by yourself, you may want or need to outsource some parts of the production. For example, I'm not very good at graphic design, so my sister designs my DVD covers. Other dancers can refer you to people and services that have helped them with their own projects.

Why You Need To Build Relationships Now

The cardinal rule of relationships is that you have to give before you can get.

Let me say that one more time: *you have to give before you can get.*

Before you start asking people for anything (whether it's input, or permission to use their music), you need to build a relationship, and be helpful to them in some way first.

That process takes time, so you need to start long before you begin your pet project.

* I hate citing it as "an African saying". Africa is a big place, and it feels wrong to lump all the different countries and peoples together. But unfortunately, I couldn't find any information on who, specifically, deserves the credit for this wonderful quote.

How to Get Connected

So how do you get connected with your community?

Local Connections

Supporting your local dance community is great networking. So go to your local events and dance venues. And don't just go, talk to people! Introduce yourself to the band, schmooze with other dancers, and thank the organizer for a great event.

Online Connections

The Internet is a great way to get in touch with other dancers. Social media outlets like Facebook, Tribe.net, and Twitter, and web sites like Bhuz.com and OrientalDancer.net give you excellent opportunities to start conversations with dancers you might never otherwise meet.

I also highly recommend joining the bellydancevideos Yahoo group, which is devoted to sharing reviews and other information about belly dance videos. It's members-only, but you can ask to join at:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/bellydancevideos/>

Meeting People is One Thing - How Do I Build a Relationship?

Building a relationship is about two things: keeping in touch, and being helpful. Here's how you might go about building a relationship with a local band:

1. Go to one of their shows (either a dance show or a music concert)
2. Introduce yourself afterwards, and compliment them on their performance
3. Ask if they have a mailing list, and if so, join it
4. Ask if they have a CD, and if so, buy it
5. Recommend the CD to your students and friends
6. Email the band, and tell them how much you're enjoying the CD, and that you recommended it to others.
7. Go to another of their shows, and tell them again in person
8. Lather, rinse, repeat

Just Don't Be a Slime Ball!

Relationships only pay off if they're genuine. "I loved your CD, and I told my students to buy it" is a wonderful compliment if it's genuine. But anybody can see through fake praise. So don't praise the CD unless you sincerely like it, and only recommend it to your students if they'd actually enjoy it too. Besides, if you don't like the CD, it's not a great choice for your video.

By the same token, don't just join a new web forum and start talking about your project. Introduce yourself, ask some questions, and help out the other members. You can only benefit from the community once you're a part of it.

But I Don't Want to Get Sucked in to Facebook!

This process only takes a few thoughtful emails or posts, so it's not really that much work. But it's easy to get distracted and waste a lot of time in online forums and social media. If you tend to get lost in the "online vortex", set a timer for 15 minutes each time you log on. That will give you an incentive to get the most important tasks done first, *and* set limits on how much time you spend there.

And if you're still worried about getting sucked in, you can skip social media entirely. You can do all of this in person or by email.

Summary

The dance community can provide a lot of help with your video in the form of input, help finding media, and referrals to reliable services. But you need to build relationships now, before you need them. You can do that in person, by participating in your local dance community, or online via forums and social media. Just be sincere; only real relationships pay off.

If you take the time to build relationships based on honest appreciation, your community will help your video go far.

Next Step

Write down two actions you can take in the next week to start building your relationships. (Buy a ticket to a local event, send a fan email to a band, join an online forum and introduce yourself, etc.) Then go do them!

So What Now?

Once you've completed these steps, you should be comfortable speaking on camera, have reduced any distracting habits, have a completed test project on DVD, and have starting building relationships in the dance community. So where do you go from here?

Put Your Test Project to Work

You've put hours of work into your test project, so don't just leave it on the shelf! Take a few minutes right now to plan how you're going to use it:

- Sell it to your students
- Give it away as a bonus with class registration
- Give it away as an incentive to join your newsletter
- Share it as a promotional video

Start Planning Your Dream Project

Now that you've got some experience under your belt, it's time to start thinking bigger. So grab a pen and outline your dream project. Then start fleshing that out into your script. This process can take anywhere from a few days to a few months, so get started right away.

Meet Me at MECDA

Will you be attending the 2011 MECDA Professional Dance Conference and Retreat? If so, be sure to attend my session "How to Create a Low-Cost Instructional Video". Don't forget to bring your questions and your bathing suit!

Get Resourceful

Are you excited to start your dream project, but don't know where to go from here? The Resourceful Video Production Guide can help!

In this program, you'll learn how to:

- Get professional production values without spending thousands
- Get music for your video without breaking the law (or the bank)
- Sell your videos without lots of trips to the post office
- Design the video your customers need, not the one you *think* they need
- Avoid mistakes on the set

The program includes helpful videos, resource guides, handy checklists, and even a timeline of tasks, to make sure that you stay on track and out of overwhelm.

For more details, visit:

<http://www.nadirajamal.com/resourcefulvideo.html>

Don't Be a Stranger!

Stay in Touch

Email me:

nadira@nadirajamal.com

Visit my website:

<http://www.taktaba.com/>

Tweet me:

<https://twitter.com/NadiraJamal>

Say hi on Facebook:

<http://facebook.com/NadiraJamalBellyDance>

Learn About Dance Composition

Check out my free video podcast, Taktaba:

<http://taktaba.blogspot.com>

Improve Your Improv

Learn to improvise with confidence with The Improvisation Toolkit DVD series:

<http://www.nadirajamal.com/improvtoolkit.html>

