

## The Ultimate Guide To Self-Taping

All right! Let's get right into the HOW of self-taping like the ninja you are, all the while showing the buyers that you *\*are\** a booker!

First, let's get through the scary stuff: equipment (and then we'll adjust into what the buyer is looking for, in your self-taped goodness).

Now, before you glaze over and decide that it's just way too expensive to have your own home studio, let's actually crunch some numbers (keeping in mind that the second I publish this PDF, there's gonna be some new piece of equipment, some huge sale, some big price break on what I talk about here because the cool new thing is now OUT and everyone wants it).

### Camera

Yup. You need one. Sure, some folks use their webcam or iPhone camera, and that's an option—especially because the current-era webcam and smart phone camera are finer cameras than what used to cost \$1000 in "standalone camera" land—but if you're self-taping more than once in a blue moon, investing in a better camera than what lives within your laptop or phone is just smart money. You'll look better, have more control over the output, and you'll just feel like a pro because you have a real camera for running your career like the business it is. Also, using your webcam can sometimes trip on a fan in your computer that drowns out your sound. So, even if you look great, you may be sacrificing your sound by sticking with a webcam.

Look at cameras that record onto SD cards rather than on any sort of tape. Having an external mic is not required but is definitely encouraged (see below), and I recommend the Canon EOS Rebel T5i family of cameras, as they are reasonably priced (\$500 or so) for some really gorgeous footage, give you a port for that external mic, and a cool flip-screen monitor so that you can check out how you're looking as you shoot! Woo hoo!

If you're down with running an app like Screenflow and using an external mic (again, see below) to capture audio, consider a Logitech c920, which works with both Mac and PC, using your USB port. The quality is HD-level (not that that's a requirement for self-taped auditions, of course) and the cost is under \$100. NOTE: It does not record audio on its own! That's why this is one to use if you also run Screenflow to capture audio through your computer's microphone or use an external mic.

### Tripod

Assuming you're not running your webcam or the camera in your smart phone, you'll need a tripod for your camera (heck, even if you *\*are\** using your smart phone, you need something to steady the gadget). I've heard the Ravelli 65" ball-head tripod is good (and it's about \$40). I use a Joby Gorilla-pod (\$20), and while

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it's not sturdy enough for the heartier cameras out there, it's a great mount for my mini light kit (see below) and my lighter lenses.

## Microphone

Okay, so if you're using a camera with an on-board microphone, you're cool without having an external mic. But if you're in a "ponies for everyone" money situation and you think you may expand your empire into podcasting and such, external mics are the bomb.

My favorite is the Audio-Technica AT 2020 USB mic (under \$100), but I also use the MXL 2100 (\$150) when I'm having others over for a podcast and doing interviews. I'm also told the Audio-Technica ATR 3350 Omnidirectional Condenser mic is a great lav option (\$25), if you prefer a clip-on mini for your self-taped auditions. If you're looking for something that pops into your iPhone, the Mikey mic by Blue (\$50) is the current fave among almost everyone.

## Lighting

Now, while bad sound is the unforgivable sin among self-taping, bad lighting is pretty distracting, and you want us focused on your acting, so that means you want to be shot in flattering conditions. Lighting helps with that. First off, I recommend that you do a Google IMAGE search for "three-point lighting." Boom. There's your layout for some lights you can buy at Lowe's or Home Depot, along with a few little clamps.

Heck, you could even use existing lamps in your home, if you point 'em in the right direction. When I need a really fab fill light, I use an adorable Dynex battery-powered LED light that cost me \$15 at Best Buy. But honestly, the best light source I've ever used for self-taped \*anything\* is the sun. A great window with the curtains pulled back will flatter you like nothing else.

## Backdrop

Okay, I've heard about folks running out and buying backdrops, photo studio paper, blue sheets, and all that jazz. Really, as long as what's behind you isn't in focus and isn't distracting, you're almost always okay, even in your home. Sure, you can hang a sheet (no patterns, please) behind you, or even shoot in front of your shower curtain (be sure your acoustics aren't distracting in that echo-y bathroom, though), but you can also find a blank wall that isn't too stark white or filled with windows that back-light you and you'll be fine.

Remember, you're not trying to show us how well you can dress a set! You're just showing us the ONE thing we can't take care of via some other department, on this shoot: The acting! As long as we're not distracted by things you include in your shot composition, our eyes and ears are on your acting, and that's what you want!

## Editing

Be careful here. If you look over-edited, we'll wonder what you left out. We'll wonder how well you can do in a single take. We'll (see above) be distracted from your acting because we're watching your editing. A single take uploaded for us to watch start to finish is sufficient and leaves us asking no questions about why editing needed to take place!

However, if you want to add a title card with your name and contact information (a \*great\* idea, since the info can never be misplaced), getting down with iMovie (for a Mac) or Movie Maker (for a PC) is a good idea. I love the free tutorials on using these tools at YouTube. Seriously, Google whatever it is you want to learn to do on your computer; you'll almost always find a vid tutorial to walk you through the whole dang thing!

## File Format

Ah... the standard file formats (because they're generally what can be uploaded easily to YouTube—check your favorite upload space for updates on file formats, of course) are .mov, .mp4, .avi, .wmv, .flv, and .m4v. Is it safe to send those raw files via email to the casting directors requesting your self-taped audition? Not always. If you send me an .flv, I have to use a converter to watch it, because I'm on a Mac. So... if the buyer doesn't tell you what format she prefers, your best bet is to upload to YouTube (unlisted; not private with a password—that's too much work for the recipients) or Vimeo, as both sites will take care of the conversion and allow the buyers to watch via link (and that's cool, because you can track how many times your vid has been viewed).

If you're doing a lot of uploading of confidential audition footage, you may consider investing in an Amazon S3 account, which has a free level, and then is charged on a sliding scale based on bandwidth. This way, you're in total control of your footage and there is zero chance that you're falling into the trap of "The Price of Free," which exists with sites like YouTube and Vimeo, at the non-pro (read: paid) levels, and which could mean your footage is out there beyond the scope of where you'd like to see it available. This also fills producers with confidence that their material (as acted out by you) is not "out there" on the web, where they may not want it.

Of course, the same is true for uploads to Eco-Cast or any other casting site platform at which you're able to attach footage from your read to your casting profile. At these closed sites, you're exactly where the casting folks have invited you to show up. You've given everyone less work by making sure you're in the mix at the place they're hoping to see most contenders.

If you're given the option of aspect ratio, go for 16x9. 4x3 is also okay. If you're not prompted for these settings, don't stress. They're probably what's already being chosen for you, based on the camera you're using.

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## Your Read

Okay, here's where I want you to remember the ONLY thing we're hoping to discern, in watching your self-taped audition: Are you *right* for the role and are you *talented* enough to pull it off? That has nothing to do with your lighting, sound, backdrop, or file format. BUT... all of that stuff could distract us, if you let it. So, put what is within your control in its best shape, so that we can stay totally engaged with your acting, your work, your type, and your talent. THAT is what we want to see.

Dress for success, just like you would at the audition if you were invited into the room. That means no bright colors, patterns, or logos that distract us. Be in character without going into full costume. Seriously, treat this just like you were going in for a pre-read.

Should you slate? Well, if the casting director asked you to do so, then yes. If not, maybe that iMovie edit mentioned above would suffice. Should you give us more than one take? Only if asked to do so. Frame yourself well (don't put your head in the center of the shot—frame yourself fully in the shot). Keep your reader off-camera but be sure your mic is set to pick YOU up (and whatever you do, do NOT have your camera mic doing the work for sound, with the sound option turned to "auto focus," as that will cause the focus of the camera to go \*off\* you as it tries to find your reader, during his or her cue lines).

If you are meant to interact with two different characters in your read, or reference someone/something other than the reader, choose sight lines that are off to the side of the camera. Just like when you come in to read for us, live, you'll agree with an audition partner on "where the artwork is" when you're supposed to reference the work of art on the wall in the museum during the scene, for example, you should plan this sort of thing out, before you start self-taping your audition. Cheat out and be sure we can see your face (or most of it) for most of your scene. Keep your hair out of your face (unless that's *sooo* on-brand)!

Include space before and after you start and finish the read so you can edit as needed or so we can feel the impact of the button and then read your title card (see above) in which you remind us of your name and contact information. Again, it's just like you're in the room with us! Give your audition space to land. We love that!

Do several takes as you're playing with the material and then send in your best. Whatever you do, be sure you've had someone test out your footage! If casting cannot watch what you've sent in, they're not likely to reach out to you to let you know you've set the file on Private at YouTube and not given them the password... they'll just move on to the next actor in the pack. They're not likely to reach out to say the file type you uploaded is unwatchable. They'll just assume it's not worth their time. So, please, until you're a ninja at self-taping, make SURE others can view the goods!

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## How To Look Like a Booker

This is awesome. You look like a booker in self-taped auditions the same way you look like a booker in the room. You've prepared, you're confident of what you're delivering, you've done your homework (downloading sides for all other characters to see what they're saying about YOUR character which could inform your choices for your read—better yet, downloading the entire script, if available), you've made your choices, and you trust that they will redirect you (by inviting you in for a read based on your awesome first read) if there's something else they want to see.

Your confidence WILL read in your taped audition. Really enjoy this process and be excited that you've been invited in this way. If you have \*any\* stress about self-taping, practice, practice, practice so that you become as good at self-taped auditions as you are at in-person auditions. It's just a muscle to build. The stronger you are, the more like a booker you look. Of course, you still have to be right for the role, but at least you can control that you are happy with the work you're presenting to the buyers. And hey, if you're NOT happy with what you've created, \*do not\* send it off! Just because you've been asked to self-tape, you're not required to turn in what you've created... same as in-person auditions! You don't have to be there, if you know you're not on your game.

NOTE: This is \*not\* an excuse to flake out! I really do want you to build your muscle for this. And I assume you do too, or you wouldn't be here with me, on this page, at this time, right now. :)

## Is It an Insult To Be Asked To Self-Tape?

I've been working in casting since February of 2003 and my area of specialty is low-budget indies. That now also means webseries, but it started out with a \$25K SAG feature film as my first full casting project, and goes all the way up to Machinima's *Bite Me*, which was a nonunion webseries season one, then acquired by Lionsgate and distributed to television, now union, with a \$2.5M budget, which is huge for a "little webseries" that started out indie.

Most projects I've cast live in the \$1M range. So, I work with a LOT of actors at the beginning of their game. I work with a lot of nonunion or union-eligible actors and I work with a lot of un-repped or starter-repped actors, as well as working with agents and managers of top-tier actors whose names you'd recognize. Obviously, many of the latter actors are "offer only" or "meeting only" status, but still... that's my cred for this topic, for context.

In one of my first Actors Access articles about self-taped auditions, I talked about a very smart Philadelphia-based actor who grabbed the sides from Showfax for an indie film I was casting, self-taped, put the footage on YouTube, and emailed me a link. I thought that was a very clever way for him to be seen for the role (perhaps for us to consider as a local hire on a smaller role; I was not doing local casting, which is typical for another CD to cover), and I saw the footage, the director saw the footage, even two of the producers saw the footage.

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To be fair, it was due to the novelty factor that it got so much attention back then, I'd say (the first call for self-taped auditions I put out for a young actor to play Ernest Borgnine's grandson received 35 self-taped submissions), but also, we were like, "Hey! Free audition!" since we didn't have to rent space, bring together equipment, hire day crew, copy sides, and bring together sessions... but could still consider him for a role.

For us, it was like a shortcut to callbacks. A "pre-preread." If the actor got invited into the room on the project, it would be because he was absolutely a candidate, vs. the status of many pre-reading actors, who are called in off headshots that look nothing like them or from pitches or favors that get 'em a slot that really doesn't help them on that particular project.

Ever since this savvy actor sent through a link to his audition at YouTube (a site I actually thought was \*his\* website, as it was the first time I visited the site, and it was only a few months old, at the time of this experience), I've offered up the option for actors to self-tape and submit themselves on almost every project I've cast. No matter what budget level, union status, location for casting... whatever! I offer it up whenever the production team will okay it.

Which means any time \*I\* offer it up, producers, the director, SOMEONE on the team above me is watching the footage. We wouldn't have asked for it, otherwise. Do I have the same finger on the pulse of the casting community that I did 1999 to 2003, when I interviewed hundreds of CDs for my "Casting Qs" column in *Backstage*? Of course not. Do I still keep up with what dozens of CD friends are doing when it comes to self-taped footage (or other issues, frankly)? Absolutely.

So, you're asked to self-tape. Great! Not busy, otherwise? Cool. Self-tape. Do it well. Make it great. When you're given the opportunity to guarantee that you're showing buyers your best take (and not doing your best take in the car on the way home from the audition, after having gotten a parking ticket for how far behind they were running, and playing waiting room games with all the other actors who want to screw with your head), DO IT.

Consider that the real opportunity could be that you're learning how to get comfortable with self-taping (which is only happening more and more, these days), you're developing your audition skills more frequently than you may be getting called in lately (HUGE bonus), you are showing your agent (who is actively involved in your career... something that many actors would kill for) that you're ON it, and, yes, maybe this is a real opportunity for which you have as much a shot as anyone who went IN the room that day. Yay, you!

The truth is, not all \*session\* auditions are watched by the decision-makers! Yup. Often, there's a very small list of selects that go to the upper-level folks, and that's true WHEREVER the auditions originate.

Take the "just do it" attitude about self-taping, rather than trying to figure out what it all means, whether the agent couldn't get you in or the casting director is actually looking at self-tapes or whether they've exhausted all repped talent from sessions and are now opening the search wider or whatever. None of that really

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matters. An attitude of, "Yay! Another chance to self-tape!" should become your mantra, since self-taped opportunities aren't going away. :)

If you have actor friends who feel being asked to self-tape is not as cool as being asked to come into the room, offer them a paradigm shift: Maybe all the others were called in because they \*need\* direction and you can NAIL IT without any direction. Perhaps it's a privilege to not have to schlep across town, sit in a crowded waiting room, deal with all the drama, and all that.

Building the muscle that says, "Ooh! A chance to tape! Great! Let's make it amazing!" will serve you very, very well. :)

As always, please submit your questions for our follow-up MP3 immediately, so we can get you covered before we wrap up this month's interactive module! We're excited to hear what questions you may have about becoming ninja at self-taping. Send your email to: [ninjaassistant@cricketfeet.com](mailto:ninjaassistant@cricketfeet.com) with the subject line: **Self-Taping Question**, so we can easily get you in the queue to help out with your questions, before we head into next month's awesome interactive **SMFA Essentials** module. Yay!

I really hope you're feeling stronger and more badass every day, beautiful people! Next month's interactive module is called **An Actor's Business Plan**, and it's filled with awesome. There is no one recipe for success, but if you're looking for structure in your creative career, this is where we'll begin to build it and fall in love with it. Let's rock, ninjas! :)

We are ridiculously lucky to have a life in which we get to live our dreams, every day. Being blissed out, confident, and capable of achieving your every goal along the way is totally do-able. Unless you're SURE it's impossible, folks, every little dream you hear whispering to you is absolutely, totally attainable. The *Self-Management for Actors* principles **work**. **Bonnie Gillespie is living her dreams by helping others figure out how to live theirs.** She casts SAG-AFTRA indie projects such as the zombie smash hit *BITE ME*, which made the leap from web to TV with Lionsgate in 2012. Bonnie's weekly column, **The Actors Voice**, runs at Actors Access and her podcast, **The Work**, is available on iTunes. Her books include *Casting Qs: A Collection of Casting Director Interviews*, *Acting Qs: Conversations with Working Actors*, *SMFA: The Ninja Within*, and *Self-Management for Actors: Getting Down to (Show) Business*, which has been named one of **The Top Ten Best Books on Acting Ever Written** and featured at the Tom Cruise actor resource blog. Bonnie regularly facilitates seminars based on this top-selling book and has traveled internationally—to demystify the casting process and the business side of pursuing an artistic career—as a guest instructor at colleges, universities, actors' unions, and private acting studios. Bonnie has been featured on *Good Morning America*, *BBC Breakfast*, UTV-Ireland, ARD-1 Germany, *Sunrise* Australia, CBC Radio One, BBC Radio 5, E! Online, and in the *LA Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. To hop on Bonnie's mailing list, visit [BonnieGillespie.com](http://BonnieGillespie.com).



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