

Videoconference Tips



Learn the videoconferencing system

It is important to feel comfortable with the videoconferencing system, so take time to experiment and practice with the videoconferencing system before you conference until it becomes second nature to operate. If you have student volunteers that are interested in learning the system, solicit their help. Schedule a short rehearsal. Rehearsals will alleviate any misconceptions about videoconferencing and allow time to become more comfortable and familiar with the technology and the room. The goal is for the system to appear as transparent as possible so you and the students can focus on learning.

What to do during a videoconference

- Begin on time. Open by introducing all participants at each video site.
- Review the conference objectives and the time allotted. Most video rooms are tightly booked, so you may not be able to extend the time for your room.
- Encourage participants by asking questions.
- Ask that each site mute its microphone when no one at that site is speaking.
- Use camera presets and change the camera position frequently for a more dynamic and effective meeting.

Maintain eye contact

To help remote learners participate and feel included, relate directly to them by looking directly at the participants on the remote monitor. If the video camera is placed either directly above or to the side of the monitor, it will transmit a direct line of sight without having to look directly into it. The speaker must be at an adequate distance from the monitor also. If the participants do not have direct eye contact, they will feel as though they are just watching, not participating in the class. Envision the monitor as one of the students in the class.

Show interest in all participants

Since videoconferencing participants are spread across distances, facilitators must make a point of communicating with remote participants by name and/or location. Most people feel awkward talking to a TV monitor and will likely lapse into passivity if not specifically addressed. Two-way compressed video systems usually exhibit an audio delay, so double your usual wait time after asking a question or soliciting comments. Lastly, bring students into each interaction by repeating every question or comment a student makes, ensuring that the other sites can hear.

Clothing Matters

- Wear solid colored clothing rather than bold, complex patterns. Stripes, plaids, prints, or busy patterns will cause the camera's focus to oscillate and destroy picture clarity.
- Wear dark or neutral colors.
- Pastel clothing is better than white, which may glare as a result of the lighting in the room.
- If you do wear white, keep a jacket or sweater on to give contrast.

Move and gesture slowly and smoothly

The compressed video system cannot transmit rapid movements without some loss of picture quality, so move in a fluid, non-distracting way. Move and gesture normally, but avoid swaying, rocking or pacing. If you like to walk around, go ahead, but make sure you know the parameters of the camera range. You can tape off your spot so you know exactly how far you can go.

Maintain appropriate on-camera positioning

Position yourself on-camera according to the elbows and wrists rule: when you stretch out your arms, the edge of the screen falls between your elbows and wrists. Use close-ups shots judiciously. It is important that participants see you or another speaker's facial expressions, but remember that the camera is very sensitive to movement and will exaggerate blinking eyes, moving hands, or shifting in chairs. Use group shots when appropriate, and make sure the camera's line of sight is not obstructed.

Maintain enthusiasm toward the technology and the subject matter

Videoconferencing participants will find it difficult to pay attention if the subject is not presented in an interesting way or if the facilitator is tense or bored. Get beyond the "talking head" model and make the session as interactive as possible.

- Vary the message frequently. Group together certain complex ideas and concepts and support them with other stimuli, such as visuals and videotapes.
- Plan activities that involve interaction between participants at all locations, such as case studies, brainstorming, and simulations.
- Schedule frequent question-and-answer periods, roughly every fifteen to thirty minutes during your presentation. Simply asking, "Are there any questions?" is insufficient in distance learning. Instead, check in with each site to establish whether the participants have any feedback or questions for you.

Speak in a strong, clear voice

Take advantage of the system to communicate naturally, using tone inflection and body language. You'll notice a small time delay for audio transmission, so continue your full thought once you begin speaking and avoid interrupting another speaker. Utilize the "preview-present-review" format. First, preview the material that will be covered, either in a written outline or verbally. Then, present it. Following this, include a period for review and final questions-and-answers.

Use audio-visual aids

As in any instructional setting, effective use of audio-visual aids can greatly enhance distance learning. You can use images, objects, and audio or video clips much as you would in a normal class with a few caveats to guide you:

- Pay attention to the screen's aspect ratio. A TV monitor has a different shape than 8.5 X 11 paper or overhead transparencies, so make sure printed visuals fit within a 3 X 4 ratio. It's also safe to use a "landscape" orientation with a 2 inch, text-free boundary.
- Use large, bold text for instructional "slates." Use fonts without serifs, such as Helvetica or Arial at 30-point type size or larger (bigger is better). Remote viewers will thank you if they don't have to squint to see text. They'll also appreciate simple fonts and concise, bulleted information.
- Keep a minimum of information to a page. Use graphics and PowerPoint to reinforce key points and concepts, not to provide the bulk of information in your presentation. Provide hard copies of any charts and dense information to the students at all sites for referral.
- Use colors in the middle of the color spectrum. Next time the television news is on, pay attention to the colors chosen for graphics. You won't see a lot of black on white, because it just doesn't look good on a screen. Yellow on blue is common, however, because it presents a clear, readable image. For most people, color printing is not feasible, so black print on pastel paper should be adequate. For on-the-fly writing, use a bold color ink pen on pastel paper.
- Allow time for viewing graphics. Display text material (i.e. chart or list) long enough for a slower reader to read. Non-text material often requires less time (3-4 seconds).
- Use video carefully. Many videoconferencing systems allow transmission of video from an auxiliary source such as a VCR or camcorder, but transmitted video is likely to appear jerky or fuzzy to remote viewers. In general, it's best to keep video segments brief. To show a lengthy segment, send a videotape to the remote facilitator.
- Obtain written authorization before you use copyrighted materials. Use of copyrighted material in a distance learning situation requires permission, so obtain clearance before broadcasting audio-visuals.

Finishing touches

- Give yourself five minutes at the end of your meeting to allow participants the time to say their good-byes and to arrange for the next session.
- If you sense you are going to run out of time and need to extend your conference, contact the room coordinator 15 minutes before the end of your scheduled time to see whether the room and bridging can be extended.
- Push your chairs back under the table and remove any papers, garbage or padboarded notes. Another user may be using the room right after your conference.

Other

- You will notice that there is a delay when using video. Give each person plenty of time to respond to questions or comments, and be sure he or she has finished before you speak.
- Announce your name when you start speaking. This will allow time for the camera to shift to your location and for people at other sites to prepare to see you.
- Be yourself! Speak naturally and think of the participants at the other sites as being across the table from you.
- Keep the camera on you when you are speaking, unless you have a graphic or slide to present.
- Pause occasionally to allow for questions and comments.
- Keep your microphone muted if no one is speaking. Coughing, shuffling papers and even drumming of fingers will shift the camera to your site!
- Avoid rocking in your chair or jumpy movements. The video may seem "jumpy" if you are constantly moving.
- Minimize distractions behind the presenter/staff, such as clocks, plants and busy walls.
- When you send slides or graphics, announce this beforehand so that other sites will not try to send slides or graphics at the same time.
- If your videoconference is more than one hour, allow for a break after the first hour and a half.