

Camtasia Techniques, Tricks, and Best Practices

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So you want to create an online tutorial? This can be a very helpful training tool working for you. Whether it's how to use an online curriculum system or just the workflow of your office, an online tutorial can be a useful guide for newcomers.

There are several things to think about when creating an online tutorial, but the most important is to have a clear picture of what you want to present. The better idea you have of the material, the better you can get this information across. In the case of Camtasia this all starts with a script.

#1 Develop a script of your training before using Camtasia

The script is the roadmap for your training video. You create this by stepping through the process you are presenting to get familiar with what the user will experience. Try to have fresh eyes, as if you are attempting this for the first time. You'll be able to spot any problem areas and find the best approach to the work.

When working with video you need to think visually: how will this come across? what will the user be seeing as the script is being read? In movies they use storyboards to show how the action will progress. This might be helpful to lineup what will be happening on the screen along with your text. Or better yet you can read the script aloud as you step through the process on screen.

Who's your audience? This is the most important question you can ask yourself. It will direct your script. Is this for a first time user? Someone who's familiar with the basics? Someone with background knowledge that can be assumed (like someone familiar with curriculum in a curriculum management system)? You can leave out the unnecessary bits and focus on what they need to know to follow your process.

#2 Create the audio track first and use that to create the timeline

Trying to record the audio and video at the same time can be problematic. Your attention is split between two different tasks and the resulting video can be frustrating to make and to watch. Recording your audio on a separate track allows you to edit the audio and video separately in Camtasia, which makes changes down the road much easier.

The audio can be recorded in Camtasia itself or into any audio recording program and imported later. Even a handheld recorder can be used, as long as you have a way of getting the audio on your computer. Digital recorders would probably be best for this. The simplest way of course would be to hook up a microphone to your PC. I would experiment with microphones to see what works best for you. Headset microphones may be easy to use, but may not give the best sound quality, though they do make it easier to record consistent audio levels since you can have the microphone in a fixed position.

A few things to keep in mind when recording audio. The first thing you want to do is find a quiet place to record the audio that's free from loud distractions like ringing phones. You want to avoid spoiling a good take with unexpected noise. And if you're recording another person make sure to make them as comfortable as possible. It may take a few tries to get over the performance anxiety.

Certain sounds in the English language involve puffs of air that can hit the microphone and cause a jarring blast on the recording. Mostly "p"s and "f"s can give you this problem. There are several ways to handle this problem. The simplest may be to go through your script and minimize how many of these sounds there are by replacing these words. This may fix most of the problem, but some of these words are unavoidable.

While it may be tempting to reuse bits of audio, audio quality may change day to day even with the same recording setup. Experiment with the microphone and room you're using to find the best consistency you can, so a series of videos will have a similar sound. The latest versions of Camtasia have audio adjustments that can help: you can filter out background noise, normalize audio levels and optimize for a male or female voice.

#3 Develop the video portion to fit the audio timeline

Recording the audio first allows you to capture a natural speaking pace that you can then match the video to. With some practice you can learn to follow along to the audio track and get a smoother, more efficient presentation. Oftentimes tutorials can be long and a struggle to get through. You're viewers will appreciate a concise video.

One way to accomplish this is to export the audio as a separate audio file and play it in Windows Media Player or similar program. The challenge is to start the audio and synchronize this with the video capture in Camtasia. The countdown feature in the new Camtasia helps to give you time get these in sync.

That annoying puff of air

Screens are used in professional recording studios to minimize this sound, but most of us don't have access to these. So one solution is to alter the angle you're speaking into the microphone, so the air flows over the mic instead of directly into it. Also you can try altering your mouth to redirect the air or minimize it. This could take some practice, but just be patient with yourself and experiment with different ideas.

Getting familiar with the keyboard shortcuts for starting and stopping the Camtasia recorder will help you when you run into hiccups. Otherwise the video will show your cursor moving down off the frame to hit the pause or stop button. One application of this is to pause the video (and audio) to paste text into a field that you don't want to show being typed. Since you have to go off screen to copy this, it's better to pause, copy the text, unpause and then paste it into the field. The new Camtasia automatically moves the cursor to its last position, so it will look seamless.

#4 Other Camtasia features

Callouts and zoom and pan effects are a good way to add clarity to your video. Callouts can highlight part of the screen or add a helpful note to backup the audio. These can also be helpful for little reminders you may have forgotten or didn't account for in the script. By default Camtasia creates zoom and pan effects for your video automatically, but may want to adjust these to fit your preferences. Often there are things you don't realize you need until you see the final video.

If you intend to create a Flash video, you can take advantage of Camtasia's closed captioning and markers to enhance the video. The easiest way to input the captions is to copy and paste your script then play the video back set the break points in the text to line up with the audio. Markers can be placed at the beginning of each section of your video to allow viewers to skip ahead and find what they need in a larger video.

Captions and markers can be adjusted as needed, but be careful if you go back and edit the video after you place these since they will shift with the video and may be lost. It's best to add the captions and markers last when you have all the audio and video edited to avoid this issue.

#5 Publish the video online

Knowing where the final video is going to be viewed will help determine what format and size you need. Camtasia does allow some flexibility to change this when you create the final video, but it's best to have a consistent resolution through the whole process, producing smaller, higher-quality files.

An online video these days can be viewed in many different formats. For maximum compatibility creating the video in Flash is usually the best way to go. Flash is also a good compromise between quality and file size for storage and bandwidth requirements. If you expect your audience may be viewing your video on a smaller screen like an iPhone or iPod, you can make your presentation easier to read by using the zoom and pan effects built into Camtasia.

To create a Flash version of your video, you want to choose the ExpressShow option under Custom production settings. This also allows you to choose the availability of closed captioning and shortcut markers you created in your video.

Before you finally publish the video online, it's a good idea to get some feedback from other people familiar with the process. Also you can add a feedback link into the end of your video so you can continually improve it. This can be a callout that links to a short survey or simply a phone number they can call if they have any questions. This can supplement a helpdesk line and reduce the number of calls.