

Part 3: Operating in the Video Environment

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The NCIH facility is a unique resource that offers all the advantages of the traditional learning environment while challenging presenters to exceed the parameters of how presentations can be delivered. The dynamic qualities of interactive video will enhance whatever style you wish to use in employing them. The purpose of this section is not to define what should or should not be done in the room, but to enable you to adapt your delivery style with greater confidence.

3A. Presentation Dynamics

3A-1. The essentials of successful communication are no different in video sessions than they are during any other kind of group discussions. Because of the wide variety of presentation styles, no single methodology can be defined. However, as in ordinary presentations, your audience needs to know the objectives of the meeting, the forms of interaction that are desirable, and your expectations for the participants. The following guidelines should be helpful regardless of the nature of the conference or your level of experience in public speaking.

3A-2. Use Set-Up Time Effectively. The NCIH scheduler allows you to program scaleable set-up time depending on the number of sites in your session. If time allows, always program as much set-up time as possible. Sites should connect to the network and test their cameras and microphones during the set-up period. This is also a good opportunity to discuss procedural issues with the support staff.

3A-3. Help Your Audience Feel at Home. Participants may not have experienced a video session before. Take a few moments at the start of the session to familiarize everyone with the operation of the facility. Explain the purpose and operation of the cameras and microphones. If the microphone system is live at all times, remind everyone that extraneous personal comments may be heard across the network along with noises such as pencil tapping or paper shuffling. If time and numbers permit, let participants introduce themselves and say a few words. Effective “warm-up” activities incorporated into your preparation will start off your program with a high energy level and eager participants.

3A-4. Make the Facility Conducive to Dialogue. Have guests remove back packs, handbags, or other bulky materials from the desks to ensure an unobstructed view and to minimize the chance of covering up or rubbing against microphones. Unless the room is full, encourage people to sit close together at the front of the room rather than at the side or rear. Regroup the audience if necessary to facilitate cohesiveness.

- Room cameras should be used creatively to support the interactive environment. Do not allow the outgoing video signal to remain static for long periods of time.
- Changes in camera angles add visual variety. Cut away from the presenter at frequent intervals. A slow pan across the audience enhances inclusiveness.
- Use the cameras to identify participants who want to ask questions. When members of the audience are speaking, shift to them and zoom in for close-ups.

3A-5. Encourage Interaction. The purpose of this environment is to interact. Your own attitude toward the program will influence the audience. If you are uncomfortable as a presenter, the participants will be uncomfortable too. The many strategies that can establish a supportive milieu include:

- Describe the purpose and goals of the presentation to increase audience understanding and improve the discussion.
- Guide the discussion so that participants always know its focus. Periodically evaluate the process, reframing it or directing it back to your original goals.
- Prepare for interaction and instill in the audience that it is expected and supported.
- Encourage participants to speak up freely and provide frequent opportunities to do so. Be proactive rather than reactive in soliciting comments and opinions.
- Support the spontaneous exchange of ideas, allowing new voices and perspectives to be added to the discussion. Encourage disagreement and debate, but set limits.
- Listen to the dialogue carefully, probing for new information and building on previous comments while keeping the flow of ideas pertinent.
- Limit conversations. Several short interactions are better than one long discourse. Intervene tactfully to prevent individuals from monopolizing the discussion.
- Be fair and professional in dealing with everyone.

It should be noted that effective interaction does not imply the absence of ground rules. Depending on the size and nature of your session, it may be appropriate to structure the response process in certain ways in order to control it. In general, people will interact more freely in an informal environment, but it is certainly undesirable to have everyone talking at once or interrupting speakers at will. Severe technical switching problems may result if several sites try to talk simultaneously in voice activation mode. If protocols for discussion are needed, make certain that the audience understands them in advance. Do not hesitate to insist that they be followed.

3A-6. Keep Distant Sites Involved. Your virtual audience may begin to feel disengaged if not made part of the action. There are many ways to ensure that distant sites remain equal partners in your sessions.

- Video sessions can be set up several ways. The network is designed to provide different functionalities for different purposes. Learn how to use these configurations to your advantage.
- Use name cards and seating charts to help identify participants. If your program is recurring, learn their names and call on them frequently. Posting pictures on a web site is one innovative tactic for helping people get to know one another.
- Maintain a sense of community. Be alert to attitudes, even language, that might reinforce a feeling of otherness. For example, if you refer to another site as *remote*, you may inadvertently be sending it a signal that you consider it less important.
- Set up interaction among sites across the network, not just with the host site. Techniques such as chain-questioning or game playing can be utilized if appropriate.
- If support materials are required, see to it that they are delivered in time and that arrangements have been worked out for their distribution. Try to avoid last-minute changes or other situations that would put virtual participants at a disadvantage.
- Plan for off-line interaction through voice or e-mail contact.
- Distance constraints may make visiting other sites difficult. However, if it can be done, it is a good idea to rotate the host site occasionally during recurring programs. This simple technique reduces the distant audience's potential sense of isolation. It is also likely to give you a different perspective.

3A-7. Maintain Momentum. Disorganization is especially noticeable in an interactive environment. You should not try to “wing it.” If displays or multi-media materials are components of the presentation, have them readily at hand and test them in advance to make certain that they can be integrated smoothly at the right moment. If you have a facilitator present, work out verbal cues and directions before the session begins so that you can work smoothly together. Prepare handouts, registration sheets, or other textual items in advance so that they can be made available as needed.

3A-8. Budget Time Effectively. Unless it is extended while it is underway, the session will end at the specified time regardless of whether or not you are finished – a great cure for long-windedness, but a potential embarrassment to someone who is speaking. Be sure to leave enough time at the end of your conference to wrap things up. It is also a good idea to warn people that the session will be ending shortly. Bear in mind that your watch or clock may not be precisely accurate. Network time is synchronized to the atomic clock at the U.S. Naval Observatory in Washington, D.C.

3A-9. Be Flexible. Working with different sites increases the possibility that something might go wrong. While such problems may be beyond your ability to control, you can minimize their impact. Try to remain flexible and have an alternative plan ready in the event of an unexpected contingency. Participants at distant sites can be prepared with materials or activities in advance. A videotaped record of an individual session is a good way to make information available to a site that is temporarily rendered inactive.

Local technical support staff should be available whenever sessions are in progress. Presenters also should be familiar with network troubleshooting resources and should have contact names and numbers readily at hand.

3B. Presentation Suggestions

3B-1. The prospect of appearing “on television” may be daunting even to experienced speakers. The goal of effective video conferencing is not to turn you into a television personality. Nor should you feel pressured to perform to the standards of the entertainment industry. The camera is merely another tool whose purpose is to improve your ability to deliver information to your audience. Understanding its characteristics will enable you to employ it more productively.

3B-2. The camera sees and conveys information differently from the human eye. What it captures will be transmitted to observers on a television monitor. To communicate successfully with this audience, you will need to acquire the ability to envision programs as distant viewers will see them. Objective planning and a critical eye are needed to maintain a quality message on the network.

3B-3. Think Horizontally. The monitor presents material in a horizontal rather than a vertical format. Graphic designers frequently use the terms “landscape” and “portrait” to refer to these formats. Although the aspect ratio of television screens varies (and will change further as high-definition sets are introduced), it is most commonly three units high by four units wide. Keep this perspective in mind whenever you choose a camera angle, select a shot, or format graphic materials. Remember that the distant site sees only what you send on the outgoing video signal.

3B-4. Clothing. As it would in any context, appearance helps set the tone of your presentation. You do not need a special wardrobe for the camera. Everyday workplace dress is sufficient. However, try to avoid busy patterns or multiple colors that might confuse the camera. Weaves such as herringbone can “shimmer” when viewed on a screen. Too much white could create a halo effect. It is also better to avoid necklaces and bracelets that can reflect light or add distracting noises. If you have questions about the suitability of any of your clothes, inspect them on local video before wearing them for a session. Do not forget to consider the background. If you wear makeup, apply it as you would ordinarily.

3B-5. Movement. While movement is a dynamic part of an interactive presentation, it is important to understand that the camera has limitations responding to it.

- Sudden motion tends to appear exaggerated on screen, particularly in close-ups, and may momentarily distort the video signal. A facilitator may not be prepared to follow an unexpected movement.
- A change of location from time to time adds variety, but continual roaming or pacing back and forth is distracting, especially if it requires the camera to move constantly. If the camera swings too much, viewers may actually experience the symptoms of motion sickness. If you ignore the panning range, you may walk out of the picture.

Generally speaking, it is preferable to strike a balance between too little motion and too much. With practice, you can incorporate movement into your session appropriately. Knowledge of the requirements of the camera will result in a smoother performance.

3B-6. Posture and Body Language. These two components of your appearance are easy to take for granted but have considerable impact on the way people relate to you. Posture is a clear indicator of attitude. Body language constantly conveys nonverbal information to your audience. Make certain you are sending out appropriate messages. A good way to improve self-awareness is to make a practice videotape of yourself. As you gain confidence in front of the camera, your effectiveness will be enhanced.

3B-7. Eye Contact. Direct eye contact encourages participation and helps create a sense of virtual proximity. Cheerful, animated facial expressions and appropriate gestures also contribute to making your points more effectively. These qualities are especially important in relating to distant sites. Ideally, your facility has been set up so that one camera is on or just above the front monitor, allowing you to make eye contact with distant viewers simply by looking at the screen. Otherwise, you may have to train yourself to look at the camera rather than the monitor. Some facilities put a “smiley face” on the camera to remind presenters where to look -- and to remember to smile!

3B-8. Vocal Projection. Speak directly and clearly, facing your listeners as you would in conversation. Avoid talking into the table top. No one should have to shout into the microphones. Outgoing audio and speaker levels are set at each site. If people are having difficulty hearing, consult with your site manager to reset the levels. Good articulation and varied speech patterns will add interest to your delivery. A common annoyance to avoid is the “smacking” sound some people make prior to speaking. Presenters sometimes raise their voices when speaking to distant sites because the monitors create the visual perception that they are farther away. This is unnecessary – the people at the other end can hear you just as well as your own audience can.

3B-9. Have Fun! One rule applies regardless of the situation: enjoy yourself. Video session evaluations constantly emphasize that the most important factor in putting your audience at ease is being cheerful yourself. If you view your programs as an invitation to be innovative, you can create a truly memorable experience for everyone concerned.

3C. Guidelines for Visuals and Graphics

3C-1. Depending on its equipment, your NCIH facility can support a wide variety of multi-media materials. It may be possible to visually transmit standard software files or programs over the network, to use presentation templates such as PowerPoint, to download information from the Internet, or to add a hardware peripheral to the codec. With options such as a graphics camera or VCR, other functionalities will be available. Many facilities are designed for video production or similar specialized uses. Consult with the site manager regarding the options available in your room and the different ways a multi-media component can be integrated into your programs. Be sure to obtain approval for any copyrighted material that you use.

3C-2. Visuals. The components of winning graphics are identical for visuals and text. *Composition* is the arrangement of elements to create visual interest. *Contrast* creates definition and visual clarity. *Size* allows viewers to view information without effort. *Color* adds drama and visual excitement to your presentation. Always test your materials against these criteria when preparing them for use over the network.

- If possible, visual materials should be formatted to fit the television monitor properly. Previously prepared slides, transparencies, and artwork may not have the right aspect ratio even if they are already in landscape format. For example, the ratio of a 35mm photograph is 2-to-3, while that of a typical television set is 3-to-4, and a digital projection screen is substantially wider. Conversion of visual material to a digital file may require the use of a scan converter.
- If your site has a graphics camera, three-dimensional objects may be placed on the viewing screen for closer examination.
- Many presenters keep a small whiteboard, markers, and an eraser handy to use with their graphics camera. An ordinary sheet of paper can be employed instead of a whiteboard. Whatever you write on, it is helpful to have a 3-to-4 ratio outline border marked on it. Space outside the border can be used to make notes to yourself.

3C-3. Text. Simplicity is the principal rule for word charts. They should support, but not overshadow, your message. By keeping them short, you allow your audience to absorb information while continuing to listen to the discussion. Charts should be left on screen long enough for the participants to copy the information. Some suggestions:

- Limit each chart to a single topic and brief message. When properly spaced, about six lines of text can be successfully displayed on a monitor without overlapping the screen. Video monitors differ considerably in *resolution*, the quality of making optical images distinguishable. If you have set up your chart in PowerPoint or a similar graphics template, the image that appears on your computer screen may be quite

different in size or scale from what the audience is seeing on its television set. To avoid problems, leave generous borders at the top, bottom, and sides.

- Text should be large enough to see clearly on a 25-inch monitor at a distance of 30 feet. This is the equivalent of lettering approximately one inch high (40-point type) on an 8½x11 inch sheet of paper. When in doubt, experiment with different sizes of type on your room monitor.
- Use easy-to-read type faces with clean contours such as Arial or Helvetica. Avoid fancy fonts such as script or Old English.
- Use a maximum of three type styles per chart: one for title, one for text, and one for emphasis.
- It is easier to read text set in upper and lower case than in capital letters. Bold has better clarity than plain type. Italics tend to bleed together and should be avoided.
- Highlights (color, boxes, or underlining) are helpful for emphasizing main points, but use them sparingly. No more than 10% of your message should be highlighted.
- Two colors are preferable unless you want to use a third to single out one key term. Be consistent and stick with one color scheme throughout your presentation.
- For backgrounds, light earth tones, blue, or grey are easier on the eye than white. Dark text on a light background is more visible than light text on a dark background. If you are using a graphics template, choose a design with a solid background rather than a patterned or textured one.
- Evaluate all colors in advance. A scheme that looks good on paper may not translate well to a monitor, especially one that lacks proper color balance.

3C-4. Charts and Graphs. Charts and graphs help audiences absorb the significance of data more readily. Although it may be possible to view computer files over the network using standard software programs such as Access, Excel or Project, formatting and text size will not be optimal for viewers. If you need to share tables of statistics or spreadsheets, handouts may be preferable. When preparing data charts:

- Keep the material as simple as possible. Do not try to graph all of your information together. Select subsets that illustrate the individual points you want to make.
- Use horizontal rather than vertical labels for easy reading.
- Label each element directly. Keys and legends are hard to read on a monitor.
- Use a subdued color for axes, grids, and tick marks so that less important elements do not detract from the data.

- For ease of interpretation, divide axes into units that are multiples of two, five, or ten. Begin axes at zero or show a break in the axis to indicate a non-zero baseline.
- Maintain consistent measurements. For example, do not switch from thousands to millions in a series of related charts.
- Use color consistently and conservatively. Too much color is confusing and will overwhelm your message. As a general rule, limit the colors in a single chart to five, including those used to identify the title, axes, and drop shadows. Stick with one color scheme throughout the presentation.
- Use light earth tones, blue, or grey for the background. These colors are easier on the eye than white and will not steal attention from the graphics.

3C-5. Although the preparation of a successful video conference requires hard work and careful attention to detail, the results are well worth the effort. The NCIH is a powerful tool that will contribute to whatever institutional objectives you are endeavoring to achieve. In all probability, it will become increasingly vital to your agency's ability to meet the challenges of the information age as North Carolina enters the 21st century.

On behalf of everyone associated with network operations, the NCIH staff wishes you the best of luck. We encourage you to contact us with your questions and comments.