

THE PERFECT SELF-TAPE SETUP

A COMPLETE HOME
AUDITION GUIDE





THEACTORSYARD.COM

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A COMPLETE HOME AUDITION GUIDE

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1. INTRODUCTION



Welcome to The Perfect Self-Tape Setup! If you're an actor or aspiring actor, you've probably noticed that self-taped auditions have become the industry standard for most auditions. Casting directors often receive hundreds of tapes for a single role, which means standing out has never been more important. But how do you make your self-tape rise above the rest?

First, let's talk about why your tape's technical quality matters. No matter how brilliant your performance is, if casting directors can't clearly see or hear you, they won't fully appreciate your talent. Industry professionals emphasize the importance of a clear, professional-looking self-tape - not because they expect a Hollywood-level production, but because eliminating distractions helps showcase your skills most effectively. Every element of your self-tape (camera, lighting, sound, backdrop) sends a message about who you are as a professional and what you're capable of.

As an acting coach who's worked with actors at every stage of their careers, I often remind my clients that a self-tape is more than just an audition - it's your

only chance at a first impression both as the character and as a professional. A poorly executed tape (say, a cluttered background or an awkward camera angle) can inadvertently signal that you don't take your work seriously!

The good news is, you don't need a big budget or fancy gear to produce a great looking self-tape. Casting directors aren't expecting you to use expensive cameras or cinematic lighting; they simply want to see and hear you clearly, with nothing distracting them from your performance. A polished tape shows you care about the audition and that you respect the casting team and the project as a whole.

In this guide, I'll walk you through each component of creating the perfect self-tape. Drawing on my experience (and insights from casting pros), we'll cover everything from choosing the right camera setup and tripod (with some DIY tricks), to framing, lighting, sound, backdrops, and editing. Each chapter includes practical tips for every budget – whether you're working with just your smartphone and a window, or investing in some cool new gear. I'll also share bonus pointers to help you avoid common pitfalls.



By the end of this guide, you'll know exactly how to create professional, high-quality self-tapes that show off your talent at its best. Remember, even a mind-blowing performance can be overlooked if it's poorly presented. And while a great self-tape alone won't book the job (that comes down to your acting skill and preparation!), it will **maximize** your chances by allowing casting directors to fully appreciate your work without any technical distractions.

Let's dive in, get you set up for success, and make sure your next self-tape audition is your best one yet!

Dean
The Actors Yard Academy



2. CAMERA SETUP

The foundation of a great self-tape is your camera. But don't worry – this doesn't mean you need expensive professional gear; most actors use their smartphones. Some may opt for a DSLR or a mirrorless camera for higher image quality, but that's not strictly necessary. What we're looking for is a camera that gives you a clear video image and is easy for you to operate.

Smartphone vs. Camera

If you own a recent smartphone, you're already equipped with a powerful filming tool. Modern smartphones typically shoot excellent video (HD or even 4K), and industry folks confirm that smartphone footage is perfectly acceptable for auditions as long as you record horizontally (landscape mode). Vertical video might be fine for TikTok, but not for casting. Also, whenever possible, use the **rear camera** on your phone rather than the front (selfie) camera – the rear camera is almost always higher quality.

A DSLR or mirrorless camera can offer extra control over things like focus, exposure, and depth of field, giving you a crisp image and a nice blurred background. But remember that an expensive camera alone won't get you the role; it's how you use the equipment that counts. Plenty of actors book jobs with just an iPhone, so don't feel pressure to buy a fancy camera!



Avoiding Low-Quality Options

Try not to use your laptop's built-in webcam – those often produce grainy, low-quality video (especially in low light) and are hard to position correctly. If a webcam is all you have, you can make it work with great lighting, but a phone or basic camera will usually yield better results. Also, avoid recording in apps that filter or mirror your image. So, no Snapchat filters on your audition (...I really hope that's an obvious point!).

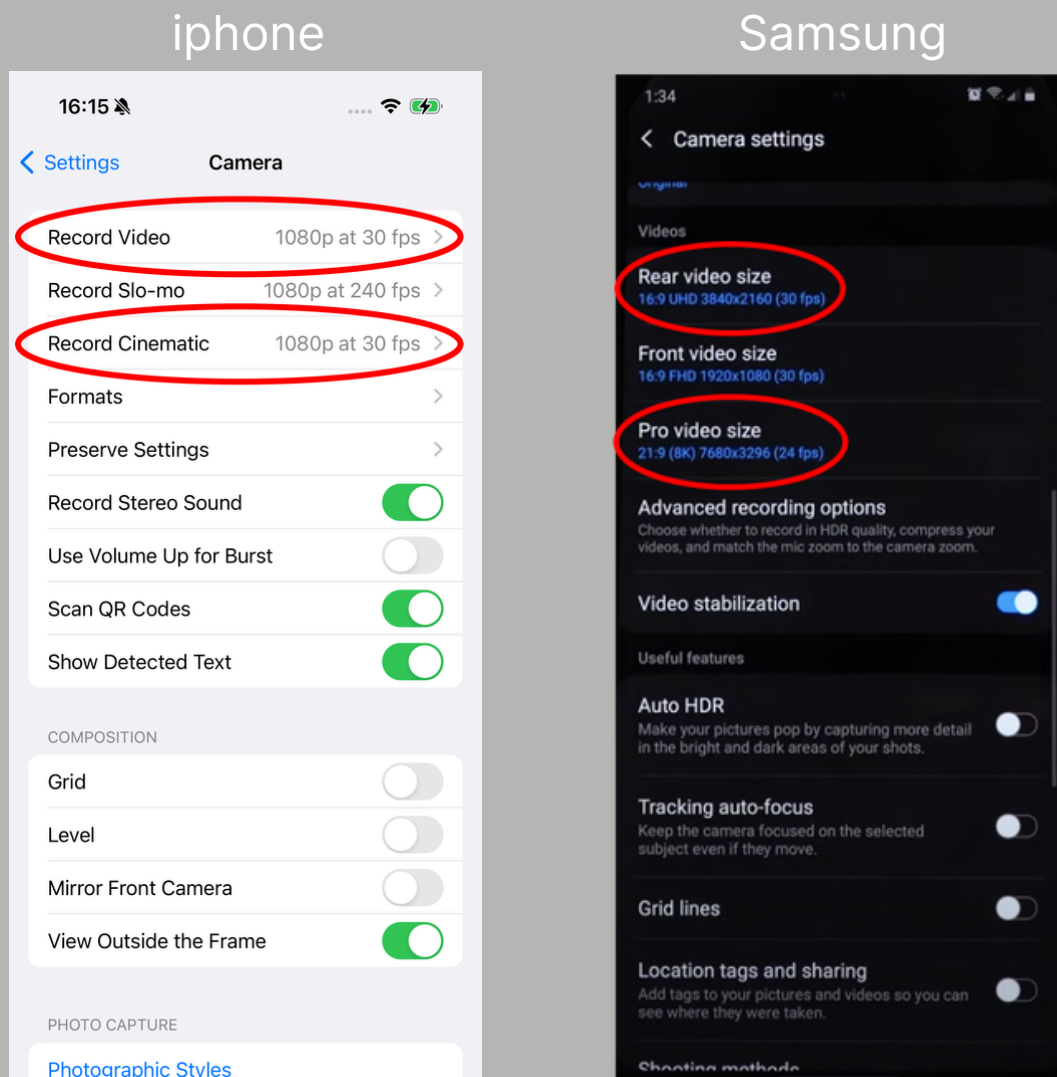
Camera Settings & Prep

Whatever device you use, set it to record at least **1080p HD** resolution. Make sure you have enough storage space and battery life before you start filming – you don't want the camera dying or stopping mid-scene. If your camera or app has an option to lock focus and exposure, use it. Autofocus can wobble (focus hunting) if you move around, so it's often best to lock focus on the spot where you'll be performing. On many smartphones, you can tap and hold on your face on the screen to lock the focus/exposure. And clean your lens with a microfiber cloth – a smudgy lens can make the footage look foggy.

For more advanced settings: a standard frame rate (24 or 30 fps) is ideal. Don't use any weird "beauty" filters or dramatic color presets

– keep it natural. Also, if your phone has an “auto HDR” or similar feature, it can sometimes cause flickering, so consider turning that off for consistent lighting.

Here is an example of where you can access these settings and what they look like on an iPhone and on a Samsung device:



You even have options here for a grid and a stabiliser to make sure your shot is well composed and perfectly level. But we’ll get more into that in subsequent sections.

If you’re using a dedicated DSLR or mirrorless camera, choose a lens with a moderate focal length (around 35–50mm) to achieve a natural, flattering look. Again, at least 1080p resolution, and 24 or 30 fps for smooth motion. Select a neutral or standard picture profile—no extreme filters or ultra-flat profiles unless you plan on color-correcting later. There’s no need to overcomplicate here.

When to upgrade your phone

If you're planning on using your smartphone for your self-tapes and your phone's release date was pre-2016, it might be worth considering an upgrade as the video quality probably won't be doing you any favours.

CAMERA BUDGETS

Low-Budget Setup

Free - Whatever camera you have access to such as your current smartphone (best option). You can use a webcam, but beware of low-resolution - aim to use a device that records at at least 1080p.

If you don't have anything available, or your phone's not great, you could try borrowing a friend's camera/smartphone (just make sure you look after it!).

Mid-Budget Setup

\$200 - \$300 for an older Samsung or iPhone device with minimum specs.

\$700 - \$900 for an entry level DSLR or mirrorless camera.

Head over to the [PSTS buyers guide](#) for our best product picks.

Higher-Budget Setup

\$1200 - \$2000 for the highest spec Samsung and iPhone models.

\$1800 - \$4000+ for a studio worthy DSLR or mirrorless camera setup.

Head over to the [PSTS buyers guide](#) for our best product picks.

One of the simplest ways to instantly improve your self-tape quality is to **stabilize your camera**. Shaky footage is distracting and looks unprofessional. The solution is to use a tripod or other stable support. This chapter is all about keeping your shot rock-steady – whether you use a proper tripod or a creative DIY setup.

Why is stability so important? If your camera is wobbling or continually adjusting, it pulls focus away from your performance. Even minor hand shakes can be noticeable. A

stable, “locked-off” frame looks professional and allows the viewer to focus on you, not the camera movement.



Using a Tripod

The ideal tool for stability is a tripod. After a good camera or phone, a tripod is one of the best investments for your self-tape setup. Tripods come in various sizes and price ranges. On the budget end, you can get a lightweight mini-tripod (even a tabletop one). On the higher end, there are heavy-duty tripods with fluid heads that allow super-smooth movement (though for self-tapes you usually won't be panning or tilting the camera at all). If you're using a phone as your camera, make sure you have a phone mount that attaches to the tripod – these are usually just a few dollars and often come with the tripod. Attach your phone securely so there's no risk of it slipping.

Set the tripod at about **eye level**. This usually means extending the legs fully, or if it's a shorter tripod, placing it on a table or stack of books to achieve the right height when you're acting standing up. This

3. TRIPODS

also means reducing the height of the tripod when you're shooting scenes where you're sitting down - don't just tilt the camera down while it's fully extended. A level, eye-level shot creates the most natural and direct connection with the viewer.

Once your camera is mounted and aligned correctly with your eyes, lock the tripod head so it doesn't drift or tilt. Many tripods have knobs or levers - tighten those up. You definitely don't want your camera slowly drooping to one side during your big dramatic moment!

No Tripod? *No problem.* If you haven't gotten a tripod yet or it's not available to you, you can improvise. Actors have balanced their phones on stacks of books, on shelves, against wall hangings - whatever it takes to get the right height. Use a stack of sturdy books, a chair, a shelf, even a pile of shoe boxes - anything to hold the camera at eye level and keep it steady. You can use tape (like painter's tape or gaffer tape) or even tack to secure the phone in place if needed. The key is to keep it steady and eliminate shake: prop your recording device against something solid and make sure it won't slide.

I've seen very creative DIY rigs - a phone taped to a wall, or tied between two upright lamps! Feel free to get creative with household items to support your camera. Just **be careful** that whatever you rig up is stable (the last thing you need is your phone crashing to the floor mid-take). You might spend a few minutes adjusting and testing, but it can work in a pinch.

Of course, long-term it's worth getting a tripod - it will save you a lot of hassle in future auditions (and decent ones aren't too expensive). There are even compact tripods that fold up small enough to fit in luggage, which is great for when you have to tape on the road.

A lot of tripods come with a spirit



level to check that everything is level. Make sure you use it or the stabilization bar on your device. Having a slight tilt to the side can make your tape feel unnatural to watch.

PRO TIP: If you're buying a tripod for a heavy camera (like a DSLR), choose one that can support the weight. A big camera can be several times heavier than a phone. Check the tripod's load capacity so your camera stays secure.

By making sure your camera is steady, you're telling casting directors "I've got this under control." It's a subtle professionalism signal. They won't consciously think, "Ah, great, a tripod," but they *will* notice that nothing distracting is pulling focus from your performance.

TRIPOD BUDGETS

Low-Budget Setup

Stack of Books
Bookshelf
Tin cans etc.
Blu-tac, string, scotch tape etc.
\$10-\$40 tabletop tripod
\$20-\$40 full size tripod

Head over to the [PSTS buyers guide](#) for our best product picks.

Mid-Budget Setup

\$50-\$150 high quality tripod

Head over to the [PSTS buyers guide](#) for our best product picks.

Higher-Budget Setup

\$200-\$35,000+ industry standard tripod system

This is overkill for what we're trying to achieve, so unless you're planning to be a professional videographer stick to low and mid-budget options!

4. FRAMING

Now that your camera is stable, let's talk about **framing** - how you position yourself in the shot. Framing can make a huge difference in how professional and engaging your self-tape looks. The goal is to compose the shot so that you, the actor, are clearly the focus and are captured from the best angle to showcase your performance.

The Ideal Framing for Self-Tapes

The typical framing for audition self-tapes is a **medium close-up (MCU)**: roughly from the middle of your chest up to just above the top of your head.

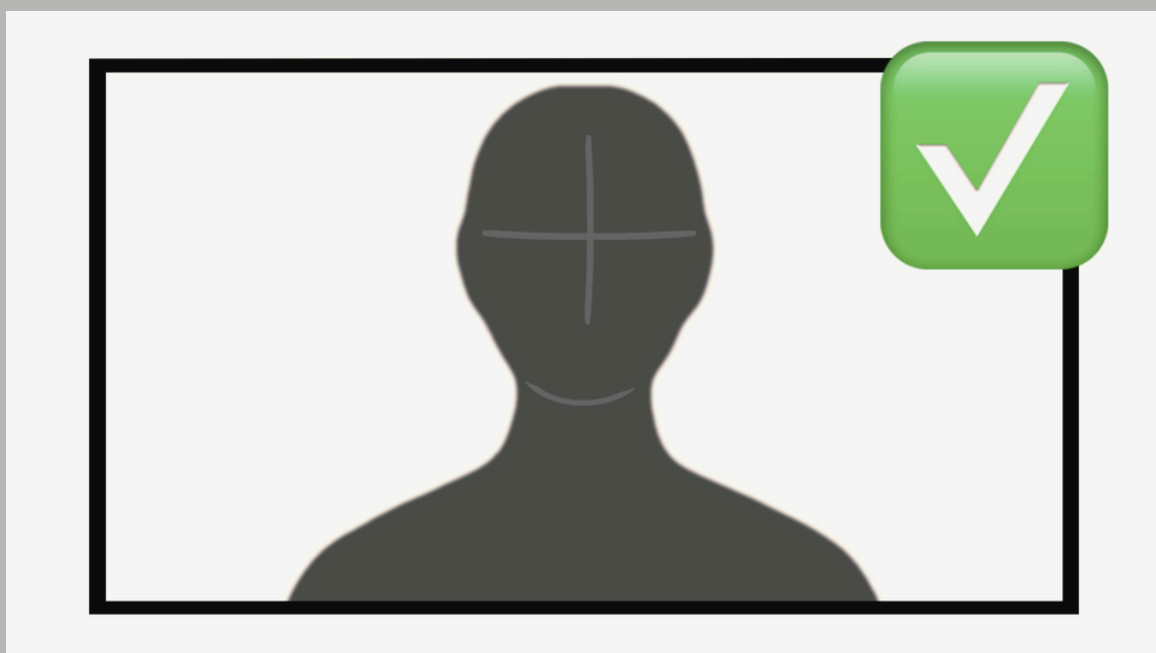
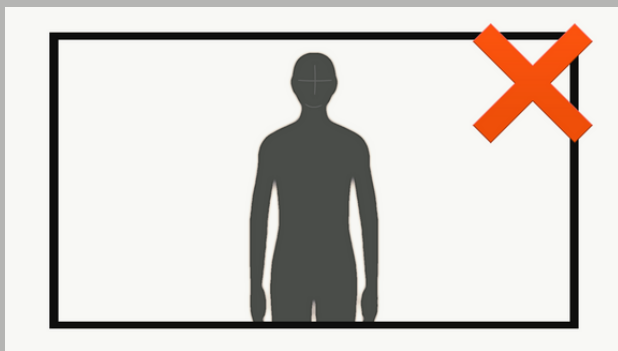
This framing shows your face and eyes clearly (where the nuances



of your performance live) while still giving a bit of your upper body. We get to see some gestures and physicality without the frame being so wide that your facial expressions are lost.

Make sure you're not cropping too tightly. There should be a small gap (an inch or two) between the top of your head and the top of the frame - don't cut off the top of your head or your chin. Conversely, avoid *too much* empty space above your head (excessive "headroom"), which can make you look small in the frame. Aim for a balanced composition with your eyes around the upper third of the frame.

Also, ensure the frame isn't overly wide (far away). Unless specifically requested, a self-tape shouldn't be a full-body shot. If it's too wide, the casting director might have to squint to see your face. Mid-chest or shoulder level is a safe bet unless instructions say otherwise. Fill the frame nicely with yourself - *you* are the star of this video.



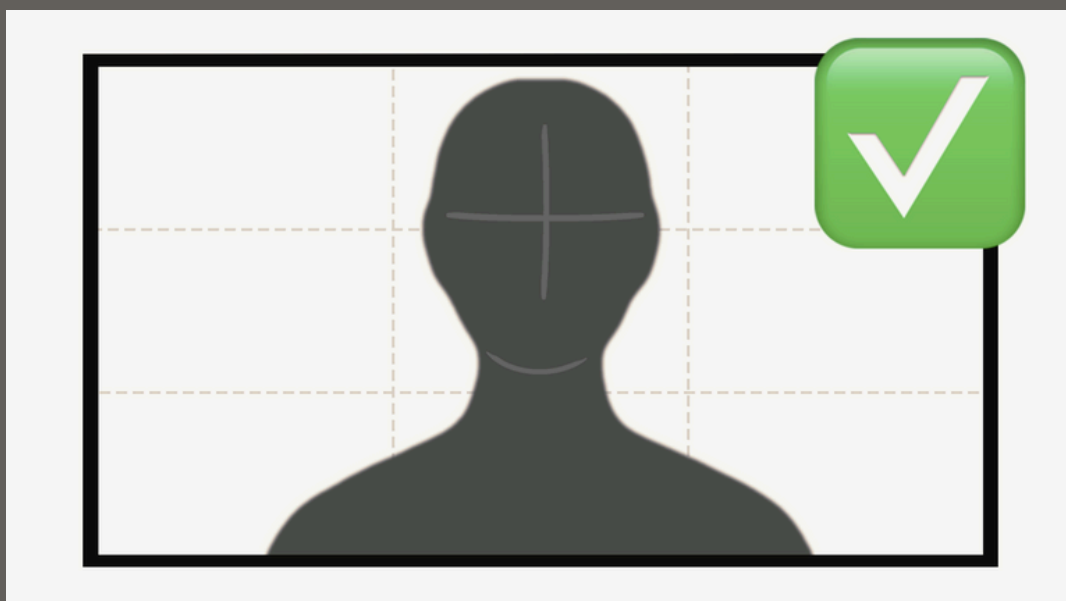
There are a few exceptions to the rules here. A medium shot or a medium wide shot where we can see your full torso might be good for a presenter tape or something where they specifically want to see some physical activity. The most common exception is if they ask you to provide a “Full-length Slate”.

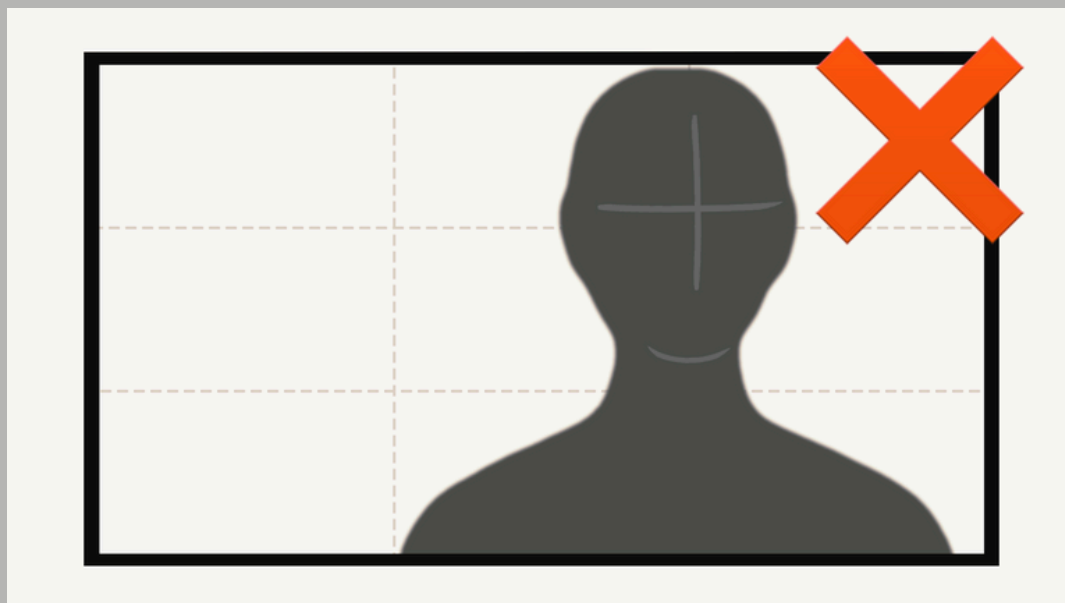
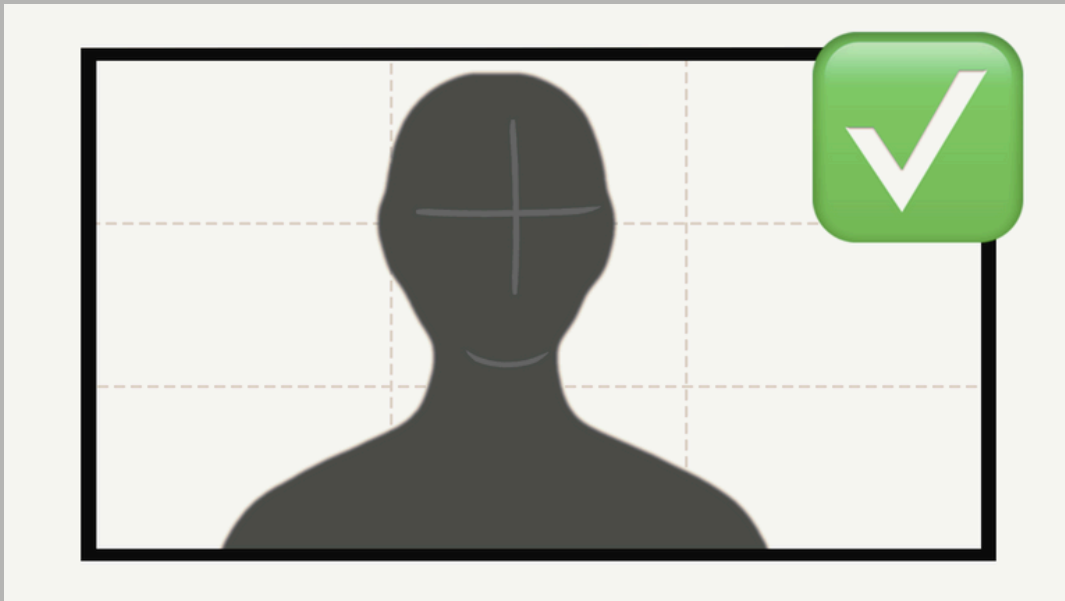
WHAT IS A SLATE?

A **slate** (or **ident**) is a short video introduction filmed as part of a self-tape audition. Typically, you state your name, agent (if you have one), location, height, or whatever the casting team asks for. Sometimes they’ll also ask you to demonstrate your profiles by standing side-on to the camera on each side. It’s a quick way for casting to identify you and get a sense of your look, voice, character and professionalism before they see the scene. Most self-tape auditions don’t require these so it’s a safe bet not to provide them unless requested.

Centered or not?

Center yourself (horizontally) in the frame, OR **very slightly off-center**. Some filmmakers use the “rule of thirds” for artsy composition, but in an audition it’s usually best to be centered so the focus is squarely on you. The only reason to be a bit off-center is if you have a strong eyeline to one side – for example, if the other character is implied to be on your far right, you might cheat yourself a little to the left of frame so that you’re looking across the space. But typically, centered is a safe bet.





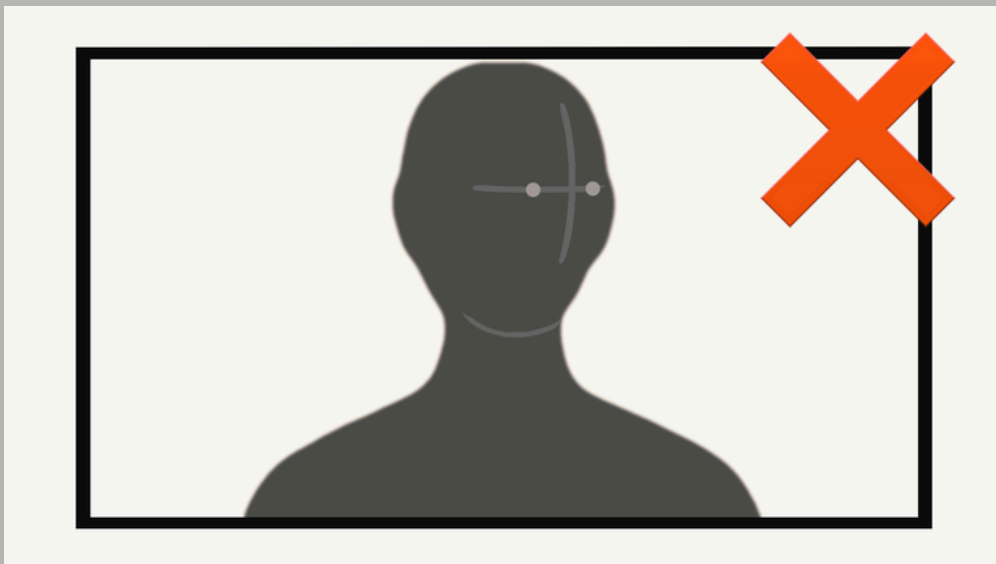
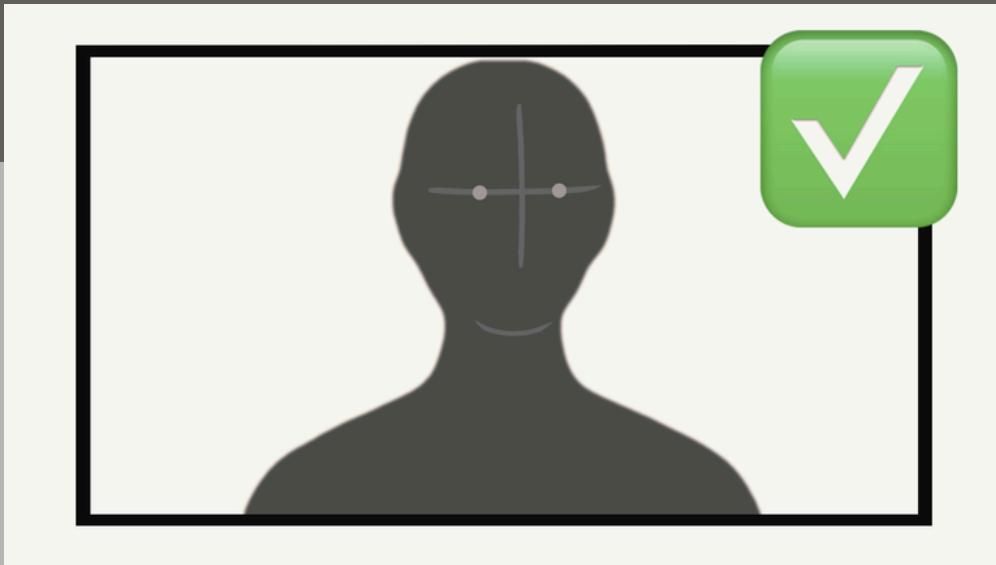
PRO TIP: Sometimes you can find an opportunity to move into a close-up (CU) during a take if you leave yourself enough head room when framing up your initial medium close-up. This might happen during a particularly intense moment in a scene and allows us a more detailed insight into the character's emotional state.

Eyelines

Now, where do you look? Generally, **do not look into the camera lens** *unless* you are instructed to do so (for instance, if the audition requires you to deliver lines directly to camera, or when you slate).

In a scene, you'll usually be looking just off-camera. Place your

reader or just your eyeline next to the camera, just slightly to one side of the lens. This way, when you speak to the other character, your gaze is only slightly off-center – we can still see your face and, importantly, your eyes. If your reader stands too far off to the side, you'll end up in profile and we lose a lot of your facial expression. So keep your eyeline close to the camera. You might even put a piece of tape or a sticker near the lens to mark where you'll look, ensuring your focus stays in the right spot.



To sum up good framing: we want to see **you, clearly** and **neatly** in the **center of the frame**. Your face and eyes visible, prominent and looking forward, with a little breathing room around your head and shoulders. Get this framing right and the viewer can settle in and focus on your performance instead of adjusting their screen to try and see you better!

5. LIGHTING



Once you've got your camera stabilized and you've framed up correctly, the next element we're going to perfect is how *well* we can see you.

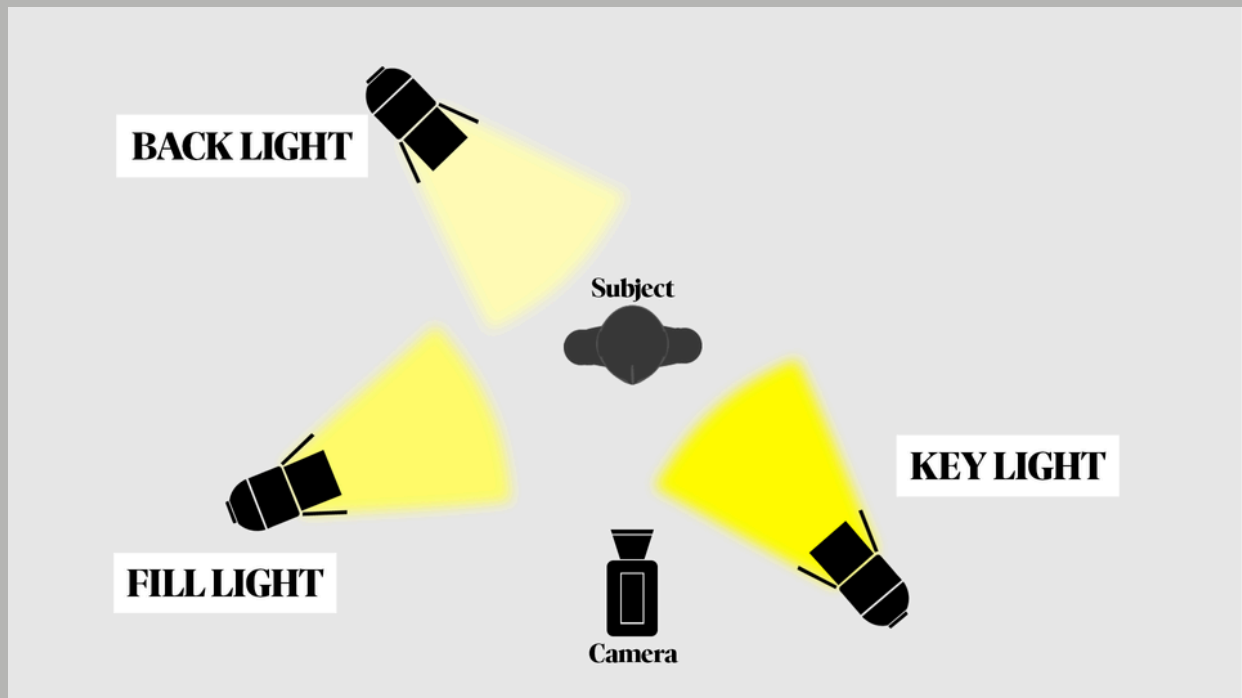
Lighting is absolutely critical! It might seem obvious, but if casting can't **see** you, they can't cast you! The goal is simple: make sure you are clearly visible on camera, with an evenly lit face and eyes. But the way that you achieve this can have a significant impact on how attention-grabbing you can be to the eye of the casting director.

In filmmaking, you'll often hear about **3-point lighting** setups. This is a classic technique involving a **key light**, a **fill light**, and a **back light**. Don't worry, it's nowhere near as complicated as it sounds, but it is a technique that's worth getting your head around. Understanding 3-point lighting will equip you with the ability to manipulate light in order to best present yourself on screen.

In a nutshell, the **key light** is your main light source shining on your face (usually placed slightly to one side of the camera). The **fill light** is a softer light on the opposite side to fill in shadows the key light creates, and the **back light** (sometimes referred to as hair light/rim light/edge light) comes from behind you, giving a little glow on your hair/shoulders to separate you from the background and really makes you pop!

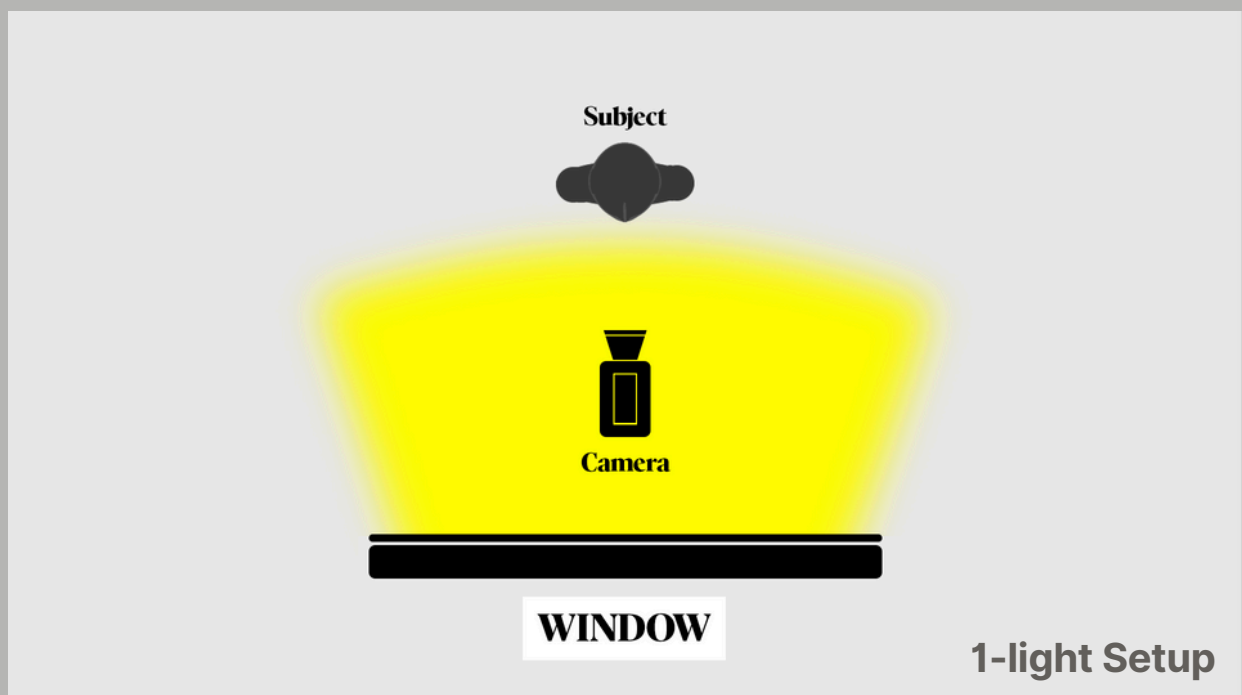
For self-taping, having all three is great, but it's not absolutely necessary. Understanding how 3-point lighting works, however, will

help you make better choices when it comes to using whatever lights that you *do* have available.



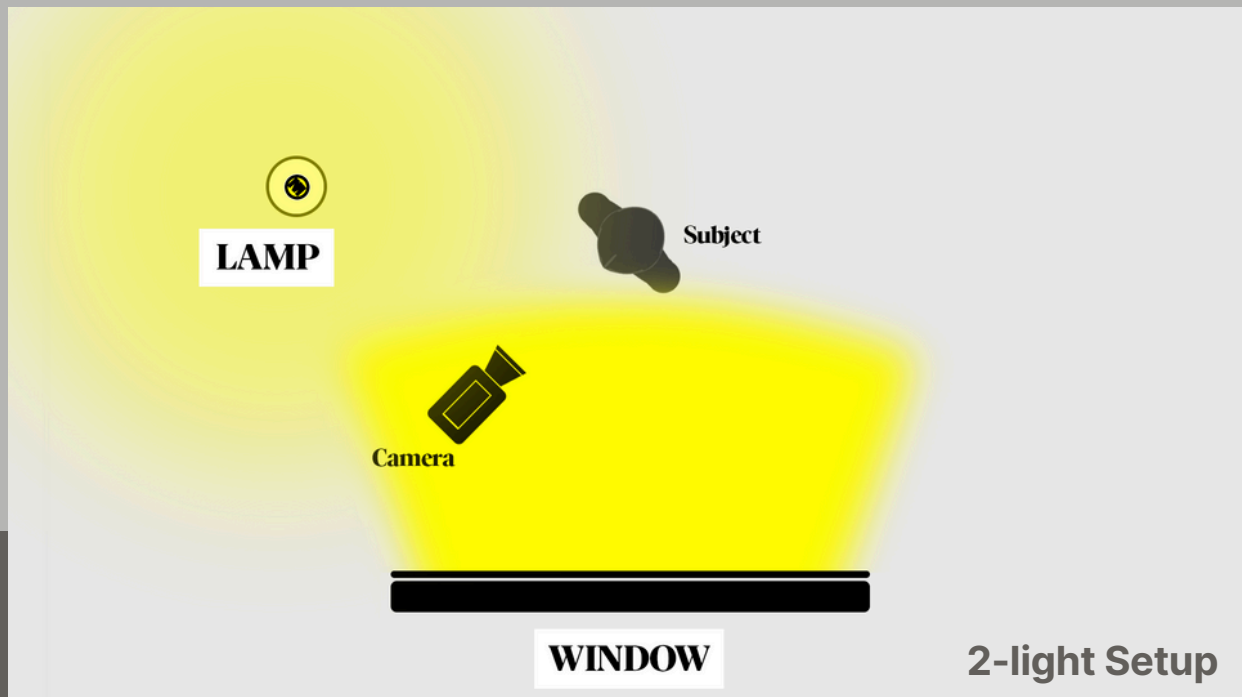
1-light, 2-light and 3-light Setups

For example, if we only have **one light** (a key light) available we want to make sure that it's not casting any significant shadows on the face or on the backdrop. This will generally mean that the light needs to be **above** and **behind** the camera so that you're getting a nice even wash. An ideal choice for this is near a window.



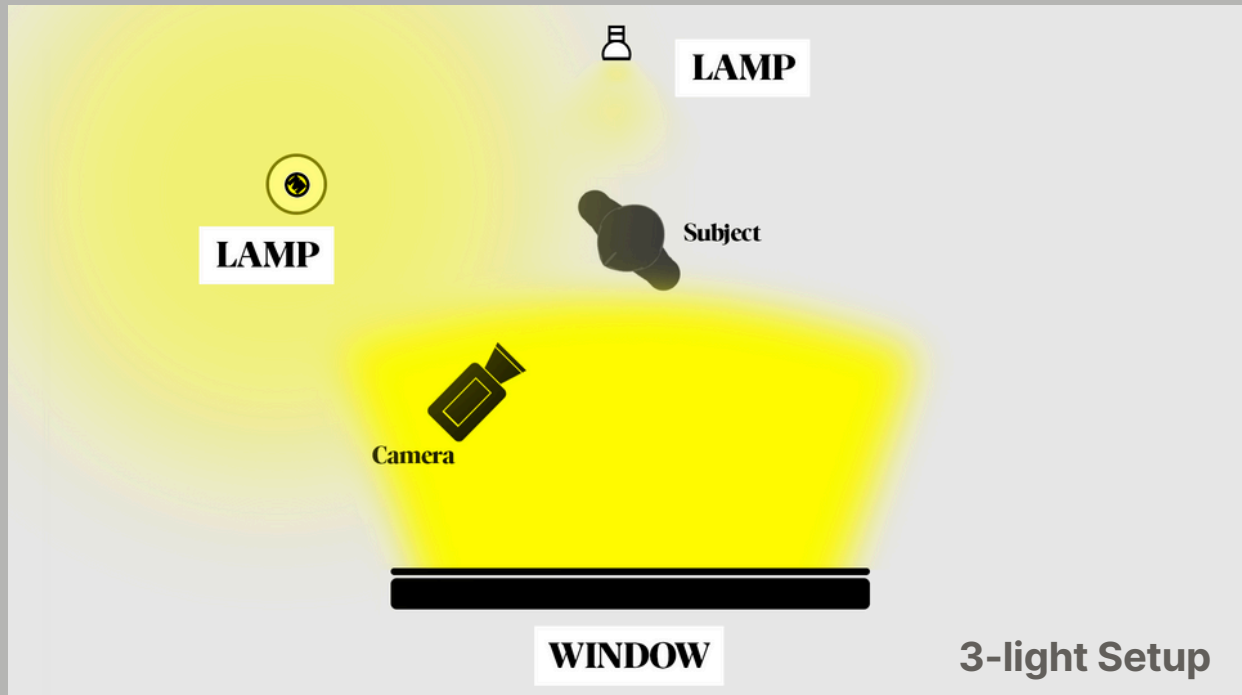
The issue with this is that with only one light coming from directly in front of you, you tend to lose a lot of definition and the image becomes quite **flat and undynamic**. This is by no means the worst thing in the world - we can see you at the end of the day, which is the most important thing - but having a second light can make a huge difference to how satisfying our eye finds the subject of the image: you!

If we have a **second light** (a fill light) we can place the key light at a slight angle to us, so that it highlights **most** of our face. Then we can place the fill light to the opposite side of the camera. When we do this, we want to make sure the fill light is **dimmer (or further away)** than the first light, so that it's just *improving* the visibility of any areas that the key light misses, or where the key light creates shadow. In the window example, we might do this by standing at an angle to the window and adding in a floor lamp on the opposite side of the camera.



If we have a **third light** (back light), we want to make sure it's **dimmer still** than both the first and second light, so that it's just adding a little more illumination to the edges of us, and distinguishing us clearly from the backdrop.

Back in the window example, we might do this by adding a clip-on reading light, suspending a small lamp, or raising up another floor lamp above and behind us to give us that extra pop!



Three-Point Lighting (simplified)

If key and fill and back lighting is still going a little over your head, here's a visual demonstration of what it might look like if you turned each light on, sequentially (key light then fill light then back light) illuminating a subject.



Here we've got just the **key light** on, and we can see most of the subject's features. But there are some heavy shadows that might be distracting to the casting director watching, unless this was meant to be a particularly moody scene or a darker character. Even then it's a bit of a risk; they want to see all your features!



Here we've added in a **fill light**, which is picking up the detail that the key light has missed. It's keeping the composition dynamic by maintaining lower light levels in the darker areas, but makes sure all of the subject can be clearly seen.



Finally, we've added in the **back light** which distinguishes the subject from the background, ensuring they are the sole focus of our attention, and are leaping out of the screen at us!

Hard Light vs. Soft Light

To put it simply, when it comes to self-tapes, **soft light is your best friend**. Soft light is essentially indirect or **diffused** light that's spread evenly and reduces shadows - think **daylight on a cloudy day** (the light is diffused by the clouds which makes it softer). Soft light creates gentle, flattering shadows and smooths out facial features -

ideal for self-tapes as it keeps your face evenly lit and your eyes clearly visible.

Hard light on the other hand comes from a **direct** source, creating **harsh shadows** - like the midday sun or a bare bulb.

When it comes to self-taping, these harder edges can be distracting or obscure expressions. As a general rule we **never** want to use hard light as a **key light** or a **fill light**. Avoid direct sunlight (be near the window, not directly in front of it), use light fabrics or thin white paper to diffuse lamp light, or bounce it off walls or other flat surfaces so that the light is indirect (and therefore softer).

A little bit of hard light or direct light can be used, however, for a **back light**. This is often very effective. Since the back light doesn't illuminate your face directly, a harder source can help create **separation** between you and the background. It adds depth by highlighting edges like your shoulders or hair. So a direct lamp light can be appropriate here - just make sure it's **not too bright or spilling onto your face**, which can cause unwanted highlights or glare.

If in doubt, just remember this mantra: **soft light flatters; hard light defines.**

PRO TIP: Turn off any overhead ceiling lights – those often cast unflattering shadows (like making your eyes look shadowed). You want the light coming at you, not from directly above.

If you want to be able to control your soft light sources more easily, a good investment might be a pair of **softboxes**. You can dim them or place one further away than the other to create a proper key and fill.

Avoid ring lights

Ring lights are super popular right now (and you might already own one), but use them with caution for self-tapes. They can create a noticeable ring-shaped reflection in your eyes that can be distracting, and they tend to “flatten” your face with very frontal, shadow-less light.

They even out your skin tone, which is a huge draw, but we lose a lot of the dynamics of your face in the process. This can be great for a presenter tape or even certain commercial tapes but for drama I don't advise it. Stick with a lighting set up which places you in the scene as the character, and doesn't make you look like a vlogger!

Once you have your lights set up, do a **test video**. Record a few seconds of yourself in position and then watch it back on a decent screen. Ask: Can I see my eyes clearly? Is my face evenly lit and true-to-life in color? Are there any distracting shadows or bright spots (like a lamp shining on the wall behind me)? If something looks off, adjust your lights. Sometimes just raising a lamp a bit, or moving it a little more to one side, can eliminate a glare on your forehead or remove a shadow under your chin. Small tweaks can make a big difference.

PRO TIP: Once you find a lighting setup that works well, take note of it. Mark your light positions or snap a quick photo of the arrangement. This way, you can easily recreate the same good lighting for future self-tapes without reinventing the wheel.

Common Lights

Here are a few of the most common and most useful lights for self-taping:



1. Softboxes

A softbox is a lamp with a big diffuser that spreads light evenly. They do exactly what they say on the tin - they give you soft light.

2. LED panels

These are really useful dynamic lights that are often adjustable in brightness and color. They can sometimes be a bit hard (especially for a key light) but when diffused or bounced properly they can be a lifesaver. They're great for back lights too!

3. COB light and Octobox

If you want to go all out you can get a video light with a soft box

attachment. If you have the budget for this you can get great results, but I would only recommend this if you're also going to be making professional videos.

You'll need a more robust stand, such as a **C-stand**, and a decent amount of space to set it up in. I use one in my studio for self-tape sessions and screen acting classes but for the everyday self-taper, this is probably a bit overkill!

LIGHTING BUDGETS

Low-Budget Setup

Free - Natural Light

Low cost - Household lamps: floor lamps, desk lamps, table lamps, clip on reading lamps - pretty much anything you can find.

\$40 - \$80 - Single softbox light kit - even just one of these when you're starting out can go a long way - it's a great replacement for natural light.

Head over to the [PSTS buyers guide](#) for our best product picks.

Mid-Budget Setup

\$80-\$150 LED Panel Lights (per panel)

\$100-\$200 Softbox Twin Lighting Kit.

Head over to the [PSTS buyers guide](#) for our best product picks.

Higher-Budget Setup

\$300-\$800+ Studio Grade COB Light with Octobox Softbox and C-Stand.

This setup is probably going to be overkill for your self-tape needs!



6. SOUND

Clear audio is just as important as clear video. In fact, many casting directors will forgive a video that's not super sharp if the performance and **sound** are clear. So we need to make sure your voice comes through loud and clear, and without any distracting noises.

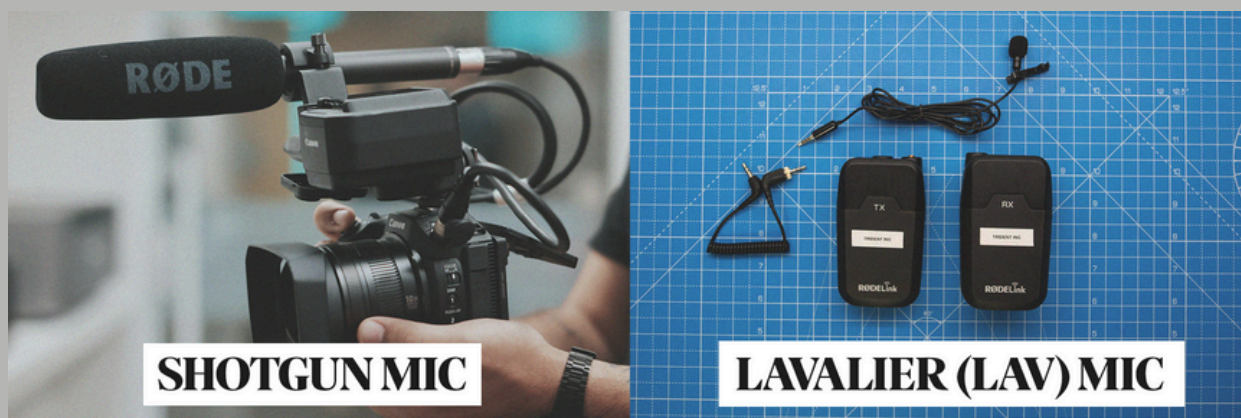
Environment

Choose the quietest location you can for recording. Turn off any noisy appliances (air conditioner, fan, TV...obviously!) and close windows to block out any street noise. Listen for subtle sounds too – a ticking clock, a running dishwasher in the next room, even a pet's collar jingling. Try to eliminate or minimize these noises while you tape. Even an echoey voice can be distracting - soft furnishings like curtains, rugs, and cushions can help absorb reverb in a room with hard floors or bare walls. Bring in some blankets or pillows just outside the frame to dampen the sound.

Microphone & Setup

Your phone's built-in microphone is usually fine if you're fairly close to it. The camera framing (MCU) means the phone will be a few feet from you, which typically yields decent audio. If you happen to have an external mic, you can certainly use it for a boost in quality. A **shotgun mic** (the kind that mounts on top of a

camera) can focus the sound on you and reduce room noise. A **lavalier mic** (clip-on lapel mic) can capture your voice nicely as well. If you use a lav, hide it under your clothing (between layers or use medical tape to stick it just below your collarbone) so it's invisible. Make sure to do a test to be sure your clothing doesn't rub noisily on it. But again, if you don't have an external mic, a phone placed a few feet away in a quiet space can do a perfectly good job.



No matter what mic you use, **mic placement** is key. You want the microphone relatively close to you. If you're using the phone's mic, that just means stay within a few feet of the phone (which you will for framing anyway). If you're using an external mic on a stand, position it just out of frame, aimed at your face. Always do a quick sound test: record a bit of dialogue and play it back with headphones to ensure you're clearly audible, not too quiet, and not distorted.

PRO TIP: If you're using your phone microphone and you move into a close-up in your scene (like we discussed in Framing) make sure to speak more quietly. The microphone will pick you up at a similar volume to when you were further away and it adds nicely to the intensity of the moment you're playing.

Reader volume

Make sure your reader's voice (if you have a reader) isn't overpowering yours. Your reader should stand a bit back from the mic or speak slightly softer so that you remain the focal voice. The reader is there to support you, not steal focus with loud off-screen lines.

No reader available? If you don't have someone to read with you, get creative. You might have a friend read the other lines over a

phone call or Zoom (put them on speaker near the camera), or pre-record the other character's lines and play them softly during your take. This gives you something to react to instead of pausing awkwardly. Whichever method you choose, make sure **your** voice remains the clearest in the final video.

Other noise

Watch out for noises you might inadvertently make – avoid wearing loud, **jingly jewelry**, or any clothes that make loud **squeaks or whooshing noises** when you move. If your scene requires handling objects (like shuffling papers or putting down a cup), be aware of the peaks in sound these might create.



If your scene has moments of **extreme volume** – for example, yelling or whispering – plan for that. For a shout, you might take a small step back from the camera/mic to avoid overloading the microphone (you can even adjust input levels if your device allows). For a whisper, you might step a tad closer (as discussed above) or ensure the environment is dead quiet so you're still picked up clearly. The key is to capture every line so the casting team doesn't miss any of your performance.

You can make small tweaks in post-production (when you're

editing your tape) if you're using more advanced software, but we'll get to that later.

Finally, **listen to your completed take**. After you film a scene, play the video back with earphones. Can you hear every word



without straining? Is there any weird hum or buzz? If you notice a sudden noise in an otherwise great take (say, a dog bark or a car honk), it's often worth redoing the take. You want the final tape to be as **clean as possible**. Crisp, clean sound allows the casting team to focus on your acting – which is exactly what you want.

SOUND BUDGETS

Low-Budget Setup

Free - In-built microphone on smartphone or DSLR.

Mid-Budget Setup

\$15-\$40 Lavalier Mic

\$40-\$70 Small camera-mountable shotgun mic

Head over to the [PSTS buyers guide](#) for our best product picks.

Higher-Budget Setup

\$150-\$300+ Professional wireless mic systems

\$250-\$500+ Professional XLR shotgun mics

Again, these pro options are probably overkill for your self-tape needs!

7. BACKDROPS



Imagine delivering a powerful audition, but behind you there's a messy bookshelf, a bright poster, or yesterday's laundry in view. Not good, right? Your backdrop is literally the background of your video, and its job is to be **neutral and non-distracting**. In a perfect self-tape, the backdrop directs all the focus to you.

The safest choice is a **plain, solid color** background. A solid wall works great. If your walls are covered in artwork or have a busy pattern, use a solid-colored sheet or curtain to cover the background. Medium-gray or light-blue backdrops

are very popular in the industry because they flatter most skin tones and don't draw attention. A plain off-white or neutral beige can work too. The key is that it's a single, flat color with no wild patterns.

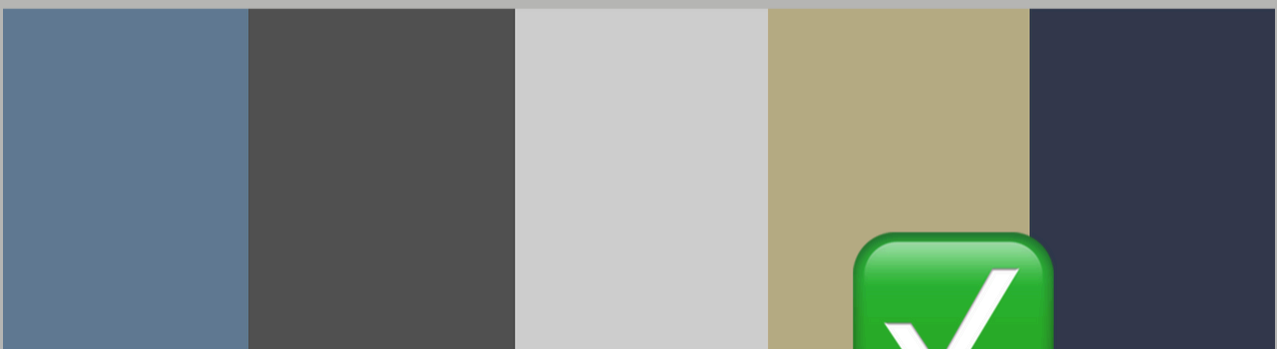
Some actors invest in a **collapsible pop-up backdrop** or a photography stand to hang different backdrops. These can give you flexibility, in that they can turn any wall into a neutral backdrop. Pop-up backdrops are reversible so come with two options. Getting a blue/gray one is a pretty safe bet, but you can definitely get by with a neutral wall or a sheet - just make sure the sheet is taut and clean as wrinkles and stains in your backdrop can also be very distracting!

Backdrops and Skin Tone

If you have the option to choose your backdrop (if you're going to paint a wall or invest in pop-up or photography backdrops) consider how the backdrop complements you. For instance, if you have dark hair or a dark skin tone, a medium-gray or light-blue backdrop will help separate you from the background. If you have very light hair or skin, a backdrop that's a bit darker (gray/blue) will provide more contrast.

PRO TIP: If you have a few pop-up backdrops, photography backdrops or sheets, you can choose a backdrop to not only suit your hair and skin tone but also to match the mood of the project you're auditioning for - darker colours for dramas, lighter colours for comedies and commercials.

Keep your backdrop color **neutral**. Bold reds, greens, or blacks are generally not recommended. Bright red can reflect a red tone onto your skin (and it's just distracting), bright green is unnatural (like a "green screen") and can cast a green tint, and pure black can make the whole video look too dark and shadowy. Stick to blues, grays, or soft neutrals if you can.



Remove distraction

If you're just going to record against a wall, remove any clutter. Clear the area behind you of any furniture, decorations, or personal items that don't need to be there. Even a tasteful painting or a tidy bookshelf can draw the viewer's gaze - even a light switch can momentarily take the focus away from you! The ideal backdrop is basically boring: just a solid color or very plain surface.

Certain small elements are forgivable, if the plainest wall in your house also happens to have a door in it the same colour as the rest of the wall, you might be able to get away with it, but in the long run don't take the risk. Try and find a dedicated wall, use a taut sheet, or invest in a professional backdrop.

Positioning & Costume Options

If you can, position yourself a couple of feet in front of your backdrop, rather than standing right against it. This small separation can help prevent shadows on the background and also give a tiny bit of depth to the shot. If space is tight, don't stress - just do your best with what you have.

Also, avoid wearing the same color as your backdrop, so you don't blend in and look like a floating head!

And of course, make sure your backdrop is securely hung and won't fall down mid-performance!

Texture or no texture

The big debate as to whether you should use a textured backdrop or not is ongoing. The contention being that the texture of the backdrop might in itself be distracting and steal focus from your performance.

My personal feeling is a textured backdrop adds subtle visual depth and makes your tape look more polished or cinematic. Some also have a gentle vignette (darker edges), which can help draw focus to your face.

I like them, I use them in my studio, but if you're going to invest in one, just make sure the texture isn't too bold or patterned - we don't want it to steal the scene! We want to keep the focus on *you*.



In summary, treat the backdrop as part of your presentation. The general rule is casting shouldn't really notice it at all – their attention should be on you. A neutral, uncluttered background sets the stage for your performance to shine.

BACKDROP BUDGETS

Low-Budget Setup

Free - Blank walls, sheets, blankets, beach towels.

Low cost - Painting a designated wall in your house. You get to choose a colour that really compliments your skintone. You could even texture it.

Mid-Budget Setup

\$40-\$70 Basic Pop-up Backdrop

\$25-\$100 Backdrop Stand

\$50-\$80 Seamless Paper Backdrop

\$70-\$150 Muslin Fabric

Head over to the [PSTS buyers guide](#) for our best product picks.

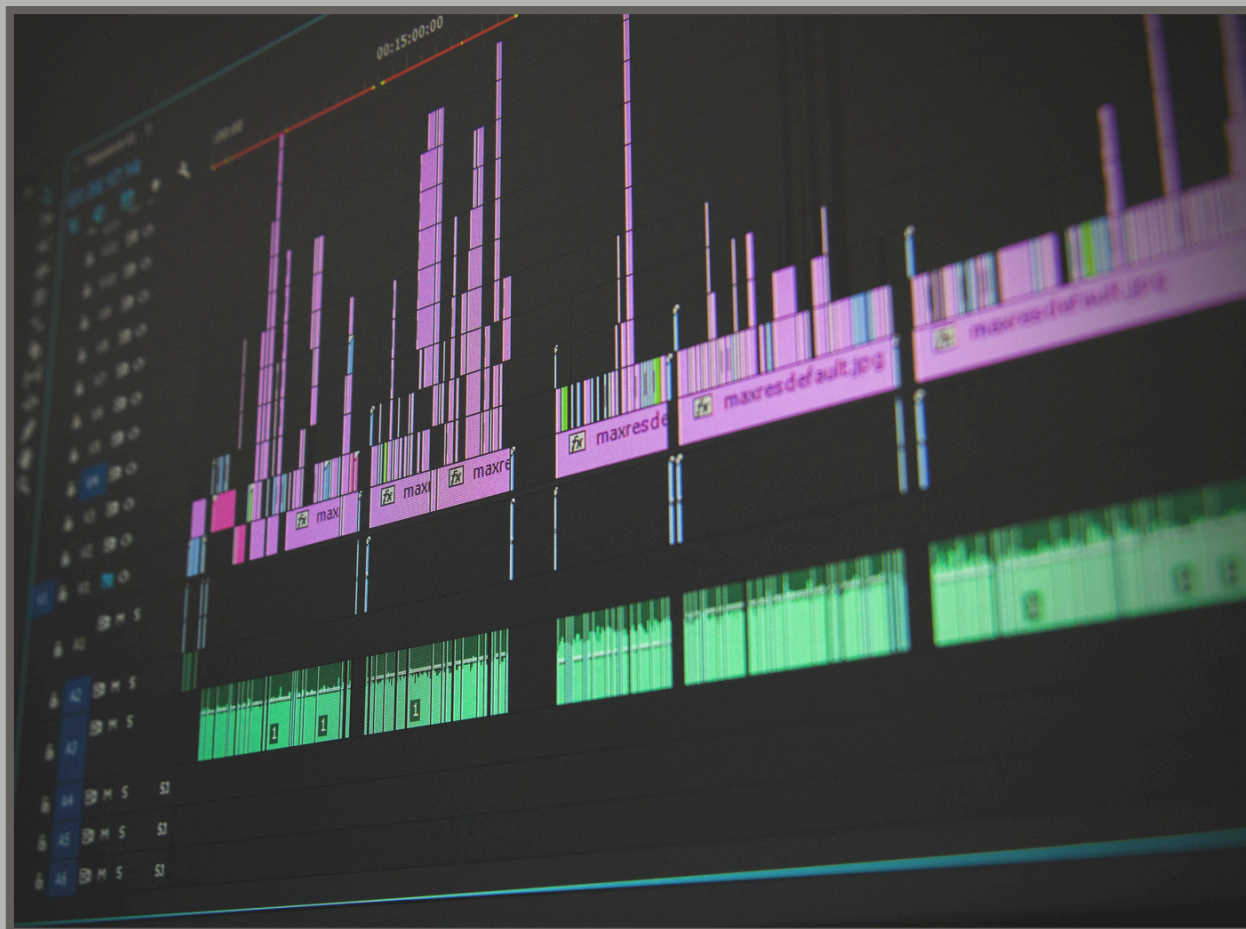
Higher-Budget Setup

\$120-\$200+ Premium Pop-up Backdrop

\$120-\$200+ Heavy Duty Backdrop Stand

\$100-\$250 Vinyl Backdrops

Head over to the [PSTS buyers guide](#) for our best product picks.



Congrats – you’ve filmed your self-tape with a solid setup! Now it’s time to assemble those clips into a polished final video. **Editing** in the self-tape context isn’t about adding special effects or anything fancy. It’s mostly about **trimming** and **combining** your footage so that it’s clean and professional and meets the submission guidelines.

At the very least, you should **trim the start and end** of your clips. Casting directors don’t need to see you reaching over to hit the record button or getting yourself into character. The video should start with you **in position, in character, and ready to begin the scene**. Similarly, once you finish the last line of your scene, you can allow a beat (to let the moment land), but then end the clip. They don’t want to see you break character and ask your reader what they thought. Cut it! You want the first and last impression (and everything in between!) to be of you in the role that you’re trying to book!

If the audition requires multiple scenes or a slate (or ident) in addition to the scene, follow their

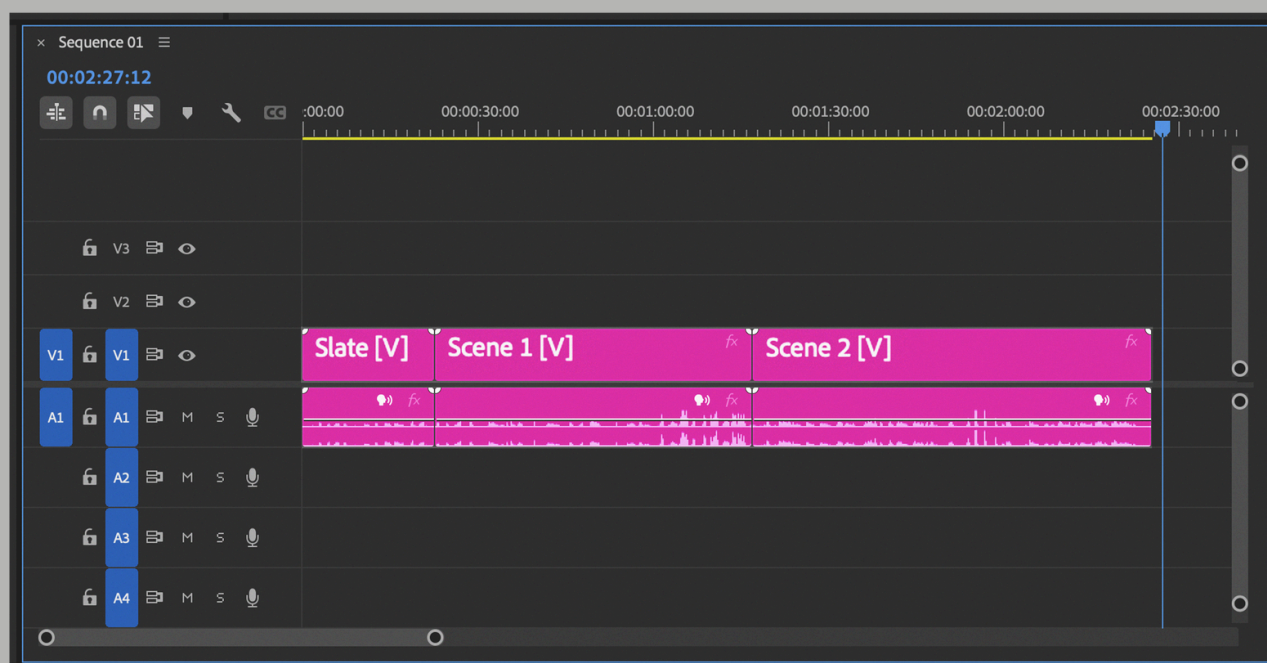
8. EDITING

instructions on how to organize these. You might need to combine clips. Often, they'll say **"Slate followed by the scene in one video"** – in that case, you'll edit your slate clip and scene clip together back-to-back.

Other times, they might request separate files for each scene and for the slate – so you'd just trim each and not combine them. Always double-check what they want. If it's not specified, the common default is slate first (if required), then your scene(s) all in one file.

Keep the editing **simple and clean**. You generally don't need any title screens or fancy transitions between clips. Remember the casting director has limited time - don't waste any of it! As soon as they press play they want to see you in character or delivering your slate.

Most times your editing timeline should look as boring as this:



Definitely don't add any music, goofy effects, or graphics – those will distract from your performance. A straight cut from one piece to the next is usually best. If you have to put two scenes in one video, a brief fade or just a quick cut to black in between is fine so long as it's just a beat. You're not trying to show off your editing skills; you're showcasing acting and professionalism. **One exception:** if they ASK for a title card with your name or a slate card, you can include that as instructed – otherwise, no text.

Make sure your final video is in a **common format**, usually **.mp4** or **.mov**, which almost all devices can play. Use a standard resolution like **1080p HD**. 4K is not necessary (and will create huge files). Check the file size – many casting platforms have an **upper limit (often 50–500 MB)**. A two-minute 1080p video will usually be well under 200 MB, so you should be fine. If your file is very large (say you shot in 4K and it's over a gigabyte), you may need to compress it or export at a smaller size. There are free apps and online tools to do this – just ensure the quality still looks good. To avoid this in future, drop your shooting resolution down to 1080p on your camera (see Camera section).



Also, **label your file** correctly. Follow any naming convention given in the instructions (for example, they might ask for *Role_FirstNameLastName.mp4*). If none is specified, a good format is *YourName_Role.mp4* or *YourName_SelfTape.mp4*. The goal is that when they download or view the file, they can instantly identify it as yours. **Never** send a file named something like “IMG_1234.mov” – that looks unprofessional and could get lost in the shuffle.

One big rule for editing your performance: **do not over-edit the acting itself**. Each scene should play out as one continuous take. Don't try to splice together the best pieces from multiple takes into one super-cut – that's tempting, but

casting directors can spot the cuts, and it's usually not allowed unless specified. They want to see that you can deliver the scene from start to finish. So choose your best whole take for each scene. (If the scene is really long and they allow cuts, they'll mention it – otherwise, assume it should be one uninterrupted performance per scene.)

After you've put your video together, **watch it back** in full before sending it. It's usually best to do this in fullscreen on a desktop, not

on your phone, because this is how the casting director will see it.

Make sure the picture and sound are in **sync** (sometimes weird glitches can happen – if your audio is even slightly off, it will be very distracting). Check that the audio levels are consistent (if your slate is much louder than your scene, for example, you might lower that volume a bit).



If you are using professional software you can make little tweaks to the image and audio if you wish - but if you've followed all the steps in this guide so far this should generally be unnecessary.

See that there aren't any odd flashes or black frames between edits. And verify that you trimmed what you meant to trim (no accidentally leaving five seconds of dead air at the end, for instance).

Essentially, QA your video like a casting director would: it should **start promptly, look and sound good throughout, and end cleanly.**

What software you use to you edit your scenes is going to be down to your technical prowess and your budget. Professional grade editing software is not generally necessary for the purpose of self-taping. There are some great free softwares out there that are considerably more user friendly because they're less feature-heavy.

EDITING BUDGETS

Low-Budget Setup

OpenShot: completely free open source editing software.

iMovie: Free editing software on Mac and iPhone. Generally user friendly but with pretty basic features.

CapCut: Super popular right now - especially among tiktokers! Offers a great free version. Monthly subscription on premium features but these are generally unnecessary.

DaVinci Resolve: Free version offers professional grade tools. One time purchase to upgrade to pro version but again the features are way beyond the scope of what we're trying to achieve with self-taping.

Mid-Higher-Budget Setup

Adobe Premiere Pro: - Professional grade editing software starts at \$22.99 per month.

Final Cut Pro: - Professional grade editing software exclusively for Mac. Currently \$299.99 for a perpetual license.

PRO TIP: Once you've chosen which editing software you want to use, search for "[name of software] beginners guide" on YouTube. There are tons of amazing creators who've broken down how to navigate your new video editing software into really simple language. This makes them way less daunting to start using.



BONUS TIPS

You've covered the technical aspects – camera, sound, lighting, backdrop, framing, editing. Now here are a few extra tips to elevate your self-tape (and avoid some common mistakes):

1. Wardrobe and Appearance

Dress appropriately for the role, but **don't overdo costuming**. A hint of the character is often enough – for example, a blazer for a lawyer role, or a plaid shirt for a country character. Avoid loud patterns, logos, or anything that blends into your backdrop. Solid colors are your friend, preferably in tones that contrast your background and flatter you.

Keep your hair out of your face – we want to see your eyes. If you wear makeup, go for a natural look that evens you out but isn't heavy (unless the role calls for something specific). Basically, look like **your best self** who could fit the part.

2. Be Off-Book (or close to)

Being off-book means having your lines memorized. It's strongly recommended to memorize your audition lines so you're not reading off a page during the tape. Casting can usually tell if you're glancing at a script, and it can break the flow and take them out of the scene.

That said, we know sometimes you get the material just a day before – so do your best. If you do need to peek at lines, here are tricks: Post the lines just next to the camera lens (tape a sheet of paper to the tripod or use an ipad mount) so that when you glance, your eyes aren't darting far from the camera.

Ideally, rehearse your lines enough that you only need minimal reference. The more off-book you are, the more free and connected you can be in your performance. Casting notices when an actor is fully memorized – it's a plus, but they won't necessarily penalise you if it's a short turnaround and your performance is great.

If you want to know how to take total control of your lines faster and in a way that improves your acting then check out our line-learning course, [LineMaster: Master the Art of Line-Learning](#).

3. Performance Framing

Remember that putting all this technical stuff in place is one thing, but you still need to keep your performance genuine and appropriate for the camera - and more often than not, for the Medium Close-Up. This usually means dialing it into a natural, believable level. We can see small nuances at this shot depth, but not as much as we might see in a close-up or extreme close-up.

Use that framing to your advantage – eyes and some subtle facial changes will read well, but you can still commit to bold choices. A bold, fully committed acting choice will stand out (in a good way) as long as it's grounded in the story.

4. Follow Casting Instructions to a T

The quickest way to get eliminated is to ignore instructions. If they asked for a slate with specific info (“name, height, location”) or wanted each scene in separate files, or asked for you to clap at the start for sync – whatever it is, do it exactly. It shows you're professional and can follow directions. So always read the audition notice carefully before you film, and again

before you finalize and send files.

Also, check if they specify any technical specs: sometimes they might say “against a plain background” or “no larger than 100 MB” or “label files as Role_LastName.mp4”. Comply with all of it. It might seem nitpicky, but casting appreciates when you make their job easier by giving them what they asked for.

5. Practice and Rehearse

One benefit of self-tapes is you can do multiple takes. However, you don't want to be doing 50 takes in a row! A smarter approach is to **rehearse** a bunch before you film it. Run lines with a friend or by yourself. Do this until you feel you could probably do the scene in just one take - then roll the camera!

Only do a few takes at most and pick the best. Overdoing it can actually exhaust your ability to be organic and playful in the moment and will blunt down your results. Trust yourself once you've got a solid one or two takes that capture your choices then pick the best one and send it - don't overthink it!

If you're in the acting game for the long-haul, you'll be taping a lot so try and live by this rule: if you haven't got it in three takes you haven't done enough work beforehand. You might think “I've got a quick turnaround I need to tape as soon as possible”, but it's actually far more time-efficient to do your prep and get the tape done in two takes.

The self-tape sessions that I run with clients are much more focussed on rehearsal: script analysis, making strong choices, and playing. When we commit to tape we end up with nearly all sendable options... then the challenge is which one to pick!

10. CONCLUSION

Congratulations on making it through this comprehensive guide to self-taping! By now, you've learned that creating the perfect self-tape setup is absolutely within your reach, regardless of your budget or technical background. The modern casting process might have added a lot of new responsibilities for actors – suddenly you have to be your own camera operator, lighting technician, sound engineer, and director – but with the tips we've covered, you're now equipped to handle it like a pro.

Always remember: the heart of any self-tape is **your performance**. All the gear and technique exists just to make sure that your acting can shine without unnecessary distractions. Casting directors ultimately want to discover that truthful, compelling actor on the screen. A professional-looking tape is simply the vehicle that delivers you to them in the best light (both literally and figuratively).

If you're on a shoestring budget, don't be discouraged – you can achieve a lot with very little. Many actors book roles using just a smartphone, a clip lamp, and a neutral wall or sheet as a backdrop. It's the understanding of how to use those tools that counts, not how fancy they are. This guide has given you industry-backed pointers (and a few battle-tested hacks) to maximize whatever setup you're working with. And if you're able to invest in better equipment down the line, you now know what to look for and how to make it work for you.

I encourage you to keep this guide handy as a reference. The next time you get an audition invitation, you can skim the checklist in the next section to make sure you're set. Over time, setting up a self-tape will become second nature. What feels like a lot of steps now will soon be routine – a routine that saves you stress and lets you perform at your best. You might even start to enjoy the process as you fine-tune your personal setup.

Most importantly, **stay focused on what matters: your acting**. Don't let the technical aspects intimidate you or dampen your creativity. Every modern actor – even those big stars – have had to figure out how to self-tape at some point, and they learned by doing.

With each tape you create, you'll get more comfortable and efficient. Allow yourself to experiment and improve with each opportunity.

If you focus on these **two questions** when you're addressing your camera, stabilisation, framing, lighting, sound and editing you won't go far wrong: 1) "have I removed ALL distractions from my performance?" and 2) "am I presenting my performance in the most effective way?".

All of the elements that we've talked about in this ebook can provide little 1% improvements that can add up to having a huge impact on the quality of the tape that you submit.

As a coach, I've seen actors transform their audition outcomes by applying these improvements to their self-tapes. It's incredibly rewarding when a student tells me a casting director complimented the quality of their tape (even if they didn't book that role). That means the casting team was able to focus on the performance – which is a victory in itself. With consistency, those small wins turn into bigger wins: callbacks, bookings, and a reputation for professionalism.

So go forth and tape with confidence! Whether you're using an iPhone stacked on books or a full-fledged home studio setup, you now have the knowledge to make it work. Focus on the story you're telling and let your self-tape setup showcase your talent. **You've got this!**

Happy self-taping, break a leg, and may your next booking be just one perfect self-tape away.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dean x." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dean & The Actors Yard Team

THE PERFECT SELF-TAPE CHECKLIST

Before you hit “submit,” run through this practical checklist to ensure your self-tape is truly casting-ready. This will help you catch any issues and give you peace of mind that you’ve covered all the bases:

- **Camera & Framing:** Device is steady (on a tripod or solid surface). Framing is set (medium close-up, about chest up). Camera at eye level and horizontal orientation (not vertical). Focus is locked on your face (no autofocus jitters). Lens is clean.
- **Lighting:** Your face is clearly lit and evenly illuminated. No heavy shadows obscuring your eyes. No overexposure or silhouette (avoid bright windows directly behind you). If using multiple lights, check that one side isn’t too shadowy or that you don’t have strange shadows on the wall. Eyes are visible – we need to see those eyes!
- **Sound:** Microphone is picking up your voice clearly. Do a test playback: your voice should be easily heard, not too quiet and not distorted. Background noise is minimal (turn off appliances, close windows, etc.). Your reader’s voice (if any) is audible but softer than yours. Phone notifications are off (nothing worse than a text ding in the middle of a great take).
- **Backdrop:** Background is plain and neutral (solid wall, sheet, or photo backdrop). No distracting items visible (remove posters, clutter, mirrors, moving objects). If using a sheet/curtain, it’s smooth enough (no big distracting wrinkles) and definitely not stained! You are a few steps away from the backdrop to avoid casting strong shadows on it. The backdrop is securely in place.
- **Appearance:** You and your wardrobe stand out against the backdrop (e.g. not wearing a blue shirt on a blue background). Costume suggests the character but isn’t a full costume. No super shiny or noisy jewelry. Hair is groomed and kept out of your face/eyes. Makeup (if any) looks natural and camera-friendly (no extreme shine or distracting makeup unless character-appropriate).

- **Slate:** If a slate is requested, you've recorded it as instructed (full body shot, profiles, or just speaking name – whatever they asked for). You look into the camera for the slate and speak clearly. Slate is either appended to the main clip or in a separate clip, as per instructions.
- **Editing & File:** All clips are trimmed to start and end at the right spots (no accidental dead air). Multiple scenes are combined into one file if required (or separated if they asked for separate files). The video file is in a common format like .mp4 or .mov. It plays back properly on different devices and there are no glitches. The file name follows their naming convention (or at least includes your name clearly).
- **Submission Instructions:** You followed the submission instructions to the letter. (For example: uploaded to the correct portal, or emailed to the right address, or shared via the requested link, etc.) If they asked for a specific subject line or message with your submission, you've done that. Essentially, you've packaged the self-tape exactly as requested.