

*American High Teacher's Guide*  
Lesson Three: Putting it Together (Making Great Video Diaries)

**Target Audience:** High School Students

**Subject Area:** Media Arts Production

**Objective:** Students will apply the basic concepts in the previous two lessons to produce great video diaries that they can treasure for years to come.

**Equipment:** Video camera (with Flip-out screen if possible)  
Tri-pod for Video Camera  
Video monitor with playback cable attached to Video Camera  
Videotape stock that is compatible with selected Video Camera

**Concepts:**

- a. To whom are you speaking when you do a video diary? We have found that video diaries are much more personal and intimate when students create relationships with their cameras. They should personify the camera—make it a close friend with whom students can share their secrets. As such, students should feel free to be informal with the camera: in your bedroom, sitting on the floor, lounging in bed, looking directly at the lens. Get close to the camera. We've found that the best shot scale is head and shoulders, or tighter. Examples: Kiwi diary about football and girlfriend on *American High Show #1* ("You Only Live Once") 14:02—14:14 and Sarah talking about Robby going away to college 21:35—21:51. Also Suzy on *American High* website talking about her insecurities.
- b. When is the best time to do video diaries? Every day. That's what the word "diary" implies—a daily activity. If you do a ten or fifteen minute diary every day, you will create a body of work over a semester or year that best describes your life and personality. Don't just do a lot of assignments once a week, when you're in the mood. Do them when you're happy, and particularly when you're sad. When you need to vent. Keep the video camera set up and ready to go—loaded with tape, batteries charged, microphone attached. So you can do a diary whenever the mood strikes you. The only exception to this rule: Don't do a diary when you're so tired that you can't think straight, concentrate, you be verbal.
- c. Narrative and philosophy. We have found that the best diaries have both story-telling as well as a sense of values in them. Try asking yourself with every diary entry the following questions which are central to story sense: (a) What do I want? (b) What's in my way to achieving what I want? (c) What am I going to do to achieve my goal(s)? In terms of values, ask yourself these questions with every diary you do: (a) Why does it matter? (b) Why do I care? (c) What does it

mean to me? Great examples: Tiffany diary about Drew in (*American High* Show #8 – “Winter Formalities) – 14:36-15:02 and Robby diary about Brad coming out on *American High* website.

- d. Mix it up a little if it gets boring or if you feel self-conscious. Try to be yourself. Do something while you do your diary. Prepare a meal, put on make up. Shave. Do it in a different place—in your car, on the roof of your house, in your favorite secret spot. As long as it’s relatively private and quiet (remember your source:ambience ratio!). Have a friend ask you questions. They can be in the room with you or speaking to you on the phone. Great examples: Kiwi brushing Rachel’s hair as they talk about kissing on *American High* website and Anna skipping stones at the beach in her diary about leaving home (*American High* Show #6—“Bustin’ Out”) 3:04—4:34.
- e. Technical Quality Control. Check your audio from time to time. Listen with headphones. Better yet: Play back a couple of minutes at the beginning of each diary. You don’t want to do a fabulous, once in a lifetime diary only to realize later that the microphone wasn’t plugged in. Starting and Stopping: Make sure you don’t miss anything at the beginning or end of each diary. So count to ten after you hit the record button before you start to speak. Also, let the tape run in record mode for ten seconds after you finish speaking. If you are really concerned about time code discontinuities for editing, then “black” each tape before you record on it. That means record black image on the entire length of the tape (recording with the lens cap on), and then rewind the tape to the beginning before doing video diaries.

### **Class Procedure:**

#### **(1) Interview someone in class.**

- a. A great interview comes from making the interviewee most comfortable. Sit close. Let the interviewee sit in a comfortable chair or on the floor. Say something funny, flattering, or charming to put the interviewee at ease right from the start. Maintain eye contact with the interviewee and nod your head in agreement with what they say. Even if you disagree! Go easy on the interviewee at first. Ask easy, factual questions that don’t threaten. Save the sensitive topics, the controversial matters, the abstract or emotional material for last. It will only work if they’ve been adequately warmed up.
- b. Try to ask open-ended questions that motivate the interviewee to respond expansively. In other words, try asking “Tell me about your college education,” instead of “Where did you go to college?” The latter approach will result in the one-word response, “Columbia.” But the former approach may yield a fuller response like, “I attended Columbia University in the late sixties, a time of great foment.”
- c. Don’t interrupt. Let the interviewee come to a complete halt at the end of each response. Nod a little more. They may summarize beautifully at this point. Keep

the camera recording even after you've agreed that the interview has ended. The interviewee will probably add something important and surprising.

- (2) **Critique Student Video Diaries in Class.** Ask each student for talk for ten minutes without stopping. What's on his or her mind? How does it feel to be doing the first video diary? What does the student hope to get out of this experience? Play the diary back in class and talk about it. To minimize potential embarrassment, screen diaries in small groups – three or four students who agree to work together because they are friends. If you sense the student might prefer, give him or her the option of screening the diary with the volume off for the first one or two diaries. Here are some things to discuss:
- d. Sound. How are the source:ambience and signal:noise ratios? What can be done to improve the situation?
  - e. Visuals. Are the images stable? Balanced? Asymmetrical? Deep? Well lit? Interesting? What can be done to improve the situation?
  - f. Intimacy. Is the place private? Quiet? Is the student comfortable? Relaxed? Real? Honest? Does it feel like he or she is talking to a good friend? What can be done to improve the situation?
  - g. Story and Value. Do we have a sense of the student's goal(s) and obstacle(s)? What is the student going to do about it? Do we sense that the student cares? (If she doesn't, why should we?) Do we get a sense of why it matters?
- (3) **Have students interview someone on their own, at home.** It could be a good friend, a parent, a boy/girlfriend. Some fantastic student directed interviews include Anna and her mom (end of episode 107), Robby and Sarah (Episode 101), Suzy and her Dad (Episode 105). Have each student play the best five minutes in class. These can be critiqued using the same criteria as applied to the video diaries. Additional questions may include: Did the interviewer interrupt? Did the interviewer ask questions in a way that yielded interesting answers?
- (4) **Assign additional Video Diaries to Your Students.** Of course, give the students ample opportunity to address whatever subjects matter to them. But when they are stumped, here are some topics that seem to get great results.
- a. Talk about an activity that you're good at (a sport, an art, a hobby). E.g. Brad on dance show in *American High Show #3* ("Boogie Nights") – 02:24 – 03:40.
  - b. Talk about the romance in your life. Is there someone special in your life? If not, is there someone who interests you? Talk about what's special about this person. E.g. Anna talking about boyfriends on *American High* website.
  - c. Who are you? What makes you unique? Morgan in *American High Show #2* ("Who Am I?") -- 03:50 – 5:05 and Robby in *American High Show #1* ("You Only Live Once") – 2:10- 2:25.
  - d. Describe your family. What do you love/hate about them? E.g. Suzy in *American High Show #3* ("Boogie Nights") -- 09:01 – 10:00
  - e. Describe your biggest fear. E.g. Kiwi in *American High Show #1* ("You Only Live Once") --18:47, Sarah talking about how she is torn between wanting Robby to go off to college and the desire to keep him at home (21:35).

- f. What does it mean to be a kid? E.g. Morgan in *American High Show #1* (“You Only Live Once”) – 6:02 – 6:36.
- g. Describe your life in ten years. E.g. Suzy in *American High Show #8* (“Winter Formalities”) --
- h. Talk about money and your life.
- i. Talk about honesty. E.g. Kiwi on *American High Website*.
- j. If you could change one thing in your life, what would it be? E.g. Suzy in *American High Show #3* (“Boogie Nights”) – 10:12 - 10:58
- k. Talk about money and your life.
- l. Talk about your ambitions. E.g. Morgan in *American High Show #1* (“You Only Live Once”) -- 16:34 – 17:00.
- m. [Event-oriented]. E.g. Talk about Homecoming, your involvement in the dance show, sexual assault prevention week, whatever you’ve got an opinion about.

### **Evaluation Checklist:**

Evaluate each video diary in terms of the story-telling potential by addressing what the students did...

1. Does the student seem comfortable?
2. Is the student confiding in a person, creating a character out of the camera?
3. Does the student pick a good time to do diaries?
4. Does the student tell stories as well as communicate their attitude about the story he or she’s telling?
5. Is the student self-conscious?
6. Is the student engaged in an activity while doing the diary?
7. Is the location for the diary ideal? Private, intimate, personal?

### **Recommended Reading and Reference Links:**

Schroepel, Tom. *The Bare Bones Camera Course for Film and Video* available from <TomSchroepel@worldnet.att.net>

The Digital Filmmaker's Resource Site: <http://www.2-pop.com/>

Exposure: The Internet Resource for Low Budget Filmmakers:  
<http://www.exposure.co.uk/>

Adita Video, Inc. Links to Video Resources: <http://www.adita.com/links.htm>

Videomaker Magazine’s Website: <http://www.videomaker.com/scripts/index.cfm>

**About the Author:** Jonathan Mednick is both an award-winning filmmaker and an experienced educator in the fields of film/television production and media studies. This

past year, Mednick was a producer and director on the critically acclaimed PBS TV series *American High*. Mednick's role on *American High* included teaching video production to the students at Highland Park High School and supervising the making of the student-produced video diaries that are featured so prominently in the show. Mednick's latest film, *Dita and the Family Business* -- a personal documentary about the family behind New York City's fabled Bergdorf-Goodman Department Store -- will begin its theatrical run in New York's Film Forum in September 2001. Jonathan Mednick is currently teaches film directing and producing at the University of Central Florida. He has also taught media production at New York University, Wesleyan University, and at the University of Iowa.