

Four tips for more professional looking—and better sounding—video calls

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Blue Microphones "Snowball" Credit: Blue Microphones

Many people are spending more of the workday on video calls, and most of us want to look better, sound better—and have the polished poise of a professional.

As many as three-fourths of adults now work remotely. Since [video calls](#) are part of the new work-at-home paradigm, we have four tips to help improve your game.

Let's begin with sound, because if your clients, friends and co-workers can't hear you very well,

you're not going to get very far.

New microphone: A sound decision

Do what pros do. Buy a good microphone to amplify your sound, and knock out the [background noise](#). The good news is, you don't have to spend a fortune. You can start as little as \$25.

The Blue Microphones desktop Snowball microphone has long been a popular option, and sells for just under \$50. It's a USB microphone, so it connects directly to the computer.

What if you don't want to connect the mic to the computer, and want to use your phone or tablet instead?

The \$99 iRig Mic Cast HD connects to laptops and desktops, iOS and Android devices, and comes with Lightning, USB-C and USB-A cables to fit onto mobile and computing devices.

This mic also has a magnetic backing that lets it click to the back of your smartphone, tablet or computer.

Check the settings of your favorite video conferencing service, and look for the audio/video section. You are allowed to switch from using the internal computer mic to an external one like the Snowball.



IK Multimedia iRig MicCast HD Credit: IK Multimedia

Lighting

The first tip is free—it won't cost you a cent. Your camera of choice for your video call is probably a webcam, and consider that it has far lower resolution than your smartphone, but is incredibly convenient, as it's either built into the computer or attached to the top of your computer as an accessory.

A really good camera can't make you look fabulous if you're sitting in a dark corner, without any [light](#). And a really bad camera, (hello webcam) really can't do it either. You need lighting to change the equation.

These puppies need to be fed, with lots of light.

So tip #1 in this department: find a window, and have it light you up. Do not, and we repeat, do not, sit with your back to the window. The webcam will render you as a silhouette. Face the window, with the camera looking at you, and you'll have the best free, soft and flattering light there is.

What if you don't have windows to work with?

Buy a lamp. I picked up two \$7 LED lamps from Target. They helped, although they were so bright, I needed to move them back a good distance from the laptop.

This was good, but even better was a Ring light, of which there are many now available from Amazon.com and other retailers. A Ring light will eliminate shadows and illuminate your face—especially around your eyes—so you don't look like a raccoon.

How big a deal is a Ring light? Consider this: for the season finale of "American Idol," the contestants are under lockdown, so producers sent out iPhone 11 Pros, a tripod and a Ring light so they could shoot themselves, in the best most flattering light, and submit their performance videos.

Ring lights sell from about \$50 to \$150. This model from Aixpi pictured would work well for laptop users. I recommend stacking it on top of books so that the light is not eclipsed by the computer, and meets you eye level.



This Ring light from Aixpi sells for \$50 Credit: AIXPI

One more lighting tip:

Remember when I said those Target lamps were too bright? When they shined in my face, I found myself squinting, and looked over-exposed on the webcam.

A \$10 fix made all the difference in the world. Photographers call them bounce cards. You reflect the light from a white surface back to the subject, and end up with soft, window like light.

Schools and businesses have another name for them: whiteboards. They are used to mark up an agenda or serve as a venue for a book report or photo collage.

The Elmer's Foam Boards (\$15) open up, like a vanity mirror. Place directly behind the [computer](#), bounce either the harsh Target lamps or another type of lamp onto the card, and have it reflect back on you.

And unlike the Ring light, you don't have to worry about a power source or batteries.

Backgrounds

Are you tired of seeing everyone you know sitting in front of a bookshelf?

Or, how do you feel about looking at someone with so many knick-knacks in the background? Do you focus on the person or the knick-knacks?

People, it's time to clean up. According to Larry Becker, the author of *Great on Camera*, a new book about how to present your best self on video, a good, solid background without distractions makes the most sense.

Get in front of a solid wall, if you can, or use the Elmer's foam board as a background. Place it directly behind you, perhaps propped up on a card table, and you now have a solid background without distractions.

One final alternative: Yes, you can blur your background, or add a background image to put yourself in front of in some programs. But both

have a habit of making you look like an alien—about 80% of the image looks good, but that other 20% leaves a lot to be desired.

Trust us, the Elmer's technique will be way more flattering.

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